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Towards a Socially Conscious Start-up Brand: EDI in Entrepreneurial Branding

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Abstract: Successful start-ups are those capable of evoking customer loyalty. To achieve this, a well-crafted brand with a clear brand message that resonates with the target audience is needed. The pandemic, and its aftermath, has led to heightened scrutiny of brands by audiences, with consumers spending more time and money online. Purchase decisions and brand loyalty are increasingly influenced by what brands stand for, with a preference for those that believably prioritise people over profits. Nearly two-thirds of UK consumers expect brands to address societal issues. This trend is particularly pronounced among Generation Z, the fastest-growing demographic in the UK and other advanced economies in terms of spending power. This age cohort differs in several respects from preceding generations, showing a distinct hunger for social causes relating to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). This paper presents findings from an investigation into Generation Z's perception of EDI as part of entrepreneurial market communications. Our research aims to explore the target audience's awareness and attitude toward the inclusion of EDI elements in start-up brands and to ideate tangible recommendations for entrepreneurs in terms of embracing EDI as part of their brand's activities. Guided by Design Thinking, a total of 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young adults in Greater London, UK. Through inductive Thematic Analysis, four key themes emerged: (i) There is currently limited visibility and awareness of start-ups with EDI branding; (ii) there is a desire for authenticity alongside distrust of brands delivering on this; (iii) there is an expectation of intersectional diversity; and (iv) there is a limited risk of 'cancel culture' for start-ups. Based on these insights, four tangible recommendations were formulated for crafting socially conscious start-up brands: (i) embrace intersectional diversity internally and externally; (ii) cultivate a community to co-create EDI initiatives; (iii) utilising/collaborate with existing EDI associations; and (iv) prioritise EDI efforts in branded communications.

Keywords: Equity, Diversity and inclusion (EDI), Branding, Start-up, Entrepreneurial marketing, Design thinking

1. Introduction

The rise of start-ups and their impact on the global economy is well established, but so is their high failure rate. According to Chaudhri, Pridmore and Mauck (2022), the latter is largely due to many start-ups not focusing enough on building a strong brand. It might sound obvious, almost too basic even, but in order to build a business that survives in the market, a start-up needs customers. This, however, poses a real challenge for many entrepreneurs. Research by CB Insight (2021) indicates that not understanding customer wants and needs, and thus not connecting with consumers, is one of the most common reasons that lead to start-ups failing. Knowing the market, and one's target audience, is key to building a successful business.

A long-standing mantra in the business world is the Pareto principle, according to which 80% of sales are generated by 20% of customers (Lavinsky, 2014). Successful start-ups are, therefore, those that can evoke customer loyalty. To achieve this, a well-crafted brand with a clear brand message that resonates with the target audience is needed. According to Lam and colleagues (2010), establishing a robust and healthy brand is essential for achieving a sustainable competitive advantage.

The pandemic, and its aftermath, has led to heightened scrutiny of brands by target audiences, with consumers spending additional time and money online. Purchase decisions, and decisions to stay with a company, are increasingly influenced by what brands stand for, favouring those that put people before profits (Edelman Trust, 2020). Almost two-thirds of UK customers expect brands to focus on values that address societal 'we' issues (Edelman Trust, 2021). This is particularly true among Generation Z, those born loosely between 1995 and 2010; Generation Z is currently the fastest growing demographic in the UK and other advanced economies in terms of spending power (Brodzik et al., 2022). This age group differs in several respects from preceding generations, with a distinct hunger for social causes relating to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). No previous generation has 'championed diversity and inclusion quite like Gen Z' (Germano, 2020, para 2).

Because of this valuable audience's focus, it is essential that start-ups targeting this consumer group embrace authentic models for EDI, and incorporate these into their entrepreneurial market communications in order to relate to their audiences (Naylor, Lamberton and West, 2012). Realising any form of authenticity in branding

requires the full involvement of stakeholders, whose perception and expectations need to be matched and/or adjusted (Stengel, 2017). According to Jahns (2023), there is a need for more culture-centric approaches, emphasising genuine connections, active participation and (co-brand) partnerships, as well as a meaningful brand purpose. This sense of purpose is tied to brand identity, which can be expressed in various forms such as a name, logo, symbol, packaging design, or certain performances and actions (Belch and Belch, 2009).

Generation Z is often associated with 'woke consumerism' and 'cancel culture'—the former labelling an increasing intolerance of transgressions, particularly in relation to social justice, and the latter referring to the public boycott of brands and people, often fuelled by social media movements. Both have been considered growing threats to existing and emerging brands (Amed et al., 2019; Forbes, 2020). Aligned values between consumers and brands can help overcome these risks and are a key reason why people are drawn to certain brands (Lim, 2019). Aligned values undeniably contribute to 'brand love', the degree of emotional and passionate affection that a satisfied consumer has toward a particular brand. In contrast, brands that do not align with the consumer's mindset and expectations are running the risk of losing them (Forrester, 2022). This appears particularly relevant in the context of EDI, as inclusive policies (e.g., LGBTQ+ or ethnic equity) might help increase the appeal of a brand amongst a variety of audiences and might even help grow a brand's market share (Cunningham and Melton, 2014; Brodzik et al., 2022).

Consumers ascribe a central role to businesses in transforming societies and pursuing social causes. In a recent survey, over two-thirds of UK consumers voiced that 'brands are expected to solve both societal and personal problems' (Edelman Trust, 2020, p.12). For Generation Z, this number is even as high as nine in ten consumers (Amed et al., 2019). Entrepreneurs therefore ought to craft a socially conscious start-up brand that positively resonates with generational concerns, such as those revolving around EDI, which, in turn, should inform their business decisions. Emerging brands need to pay close attention to changes within consumption behaviour. As consumers seek to build their identity through brands and products, not providing adequate means to 'forge feelings of social solidarity' (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p.873) may lead consumers into the welcoming arms of competitor brands that are more in line with current social attitudes. An authentic approach beyond tokenism is needed to avoid being perceived as and/or criticised for 'piggybacking' off current social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, or chasing the 'pink pound'—a reference to the disposable income of LGBTQ+ consumers (Dhal, 2020).

A recent study on consumers' perceptions of LGBTQ+ brand activism by Tressoldi, Espartel and Rohden (2023), based on eleven in-depth interviews based in Brazil, revealed that outwardly supporting diversity can help brands win over consumers if the activism is perceived positively in terms of the brand's representativeness and social impact. However, inauthentic activism perceived as inconsistent and insincere can significantly harm a brand's image and bottom line, potentially leading to consumer backlash and boycotts. Similarly, a study on co-brand partnerships supporting minority entrepreneurs in the US by Smiths, James, and Griffiths (2023) highlighted that a mismatch between brands and what consumers perceived these brands stand for could result in consumer backlash.

These studies highlight the importance of a considered implementation of social activism when constructing a start-up's brand. However, as Shi and Miles (2020) point out, evidence-based knowledge regarding start-up brand identity construction—as part of entrepreneurial marketing—is still in its infancy and requires more insights before a robust theory can be developed. In other words, there is still a lack of clear guidance to date on how entrepreneurs can effectively build their brand identity. This is where our research comes in.

This paper presents results from an investigation into Generation Z's perception of EDI as part of entrepreneurial branding in the UK. The objectives of this research project are twofold:

- To explore the target audience's awareness of and attitude towards the inclusion of EDI elements in a start-up's brand; and
- to ideate tangible recommendations for entrepreneurs in terms of embracing EDI as part of their brand's activities.

By addressing real-world challenges for brands, this research is applied and practice-oriented, making it particularly valuable in the discourse on brand management, as noted by Baumgarth and colleagues (2020). Additionally, it contributes valuable new data points for the on-going conceptualisation of a theoretical framework on brand identity construction (Shi and Miles, 2020).

2. Study Design: Design Thinking

This project is framed by Design Thinking (figure 1), a research approach that focuses on understanding and addressing complex problems through a human-centred and iterative process (Meinel and Leifer, 2012). Design Thinking lends itself to the investigation and development of branding, due to its emphasis on continuous user feedback which facilitates co-creation. Customer co-creation has been shown to positively impact brand value (Merz, He and Vargo, 2009; France et al., 2020), experiencing increasing popularity amongst brand managers due to the progressive empowerment of stakeholders in digital environments that require changes to the ways in which brands are created and managed (Siano, Vollero and Bertolini, 2020). The results presented in this paper reflect the Design Thinking process up to, and including, prototyping; thus, covering all stages dedicated to *understanding* and *exploring* the topic at hand. According to recent literature, this is a suitable point for sharing research outcomes with broader audiences to further enhance the feedback loop (Micheli et al., 2019).



Figure 1: The Design Thinking process

In addition to a literature review, $N = 35$ semi-structured interviews were conducted with Generation Z consumers based in Greater London, England, as part of the *empathise* stage. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling was employed to recruit suitable participants. The initial convenience sampling was conducted among the student population at the University of West London, with the sole selection criterion being that they were born between 1995 and 2010 and currently lived within Greater London. In the subsequent snowball sampling procedure, the selection criterion of location was added—that is, recommended participants needed to live in a different borough within Greater London. This approach aimed to diversify the socio-cultural and socio-economic makeup of the sample. Each interview lasted between 46 and 71 minutes, and took place in person between November 2022 and February 2023. Participants were aged between 18 and 25 years, and included 20 women, 14 men and one non-binary interviewee from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds.

Stimulus material for the consumer interviews derived from two start-ups that have tailored their brand values and messages around aspects of EDI. The two start-ups, both from the fashion sector, were part of the London School of Film, Media and Design's Creative Entrepreneurship Suite throughout 2020 and 2021. Both crafted their branding around a founder's story, emphasising the aspect of LGBTQ+ and black ownership of their fashion brands, as well as the aspect of giving back to their respective communities. Data collection was concluded once a desired level of understanding and saturation was reached (Fugard and Potts, 2015; Saunders et al., 2018). All interviews were subsequently transcribed and analysed using inductive Thematic Analysis (Kiger and Varpio, 2020) in order to define key consumer problems (Design Thinking: *define* stage). Data analysis was facilitated by

NVivo, which documented and structured key themes. To ensure anonymity, each participant was assigned a number from one to thirty-five (the corresponding participant number, e.g., P1, P2, P3, etc., is indicated after each quotation). Finally, tangible recommendations were *ideated* and *prototyped* for creative start-ups to better embrace EDI as part of their entrepreneurial branding.

3. Empathising: Consumer Insight

The analysis of the consumer interviews resulted in a total of four key themes: theme one addresses a lack of visibility and awareness of start-ups with EDI branding amongst participants; theme two lays out the consumer group's desire for authenticity, paired with distrust of brands delivering on this; theme three looks at the importance of intersectional diversity; and, finally, theme four provides insight on the limited danger of cancel culture for start-ups.

Theme one: (in)visibility

A key theme identified addresses a *lack of visibility and awareness* of start-ups embracing EDI in the UK market amongst participants. This was both the case for black owned start-ups, as well as for those embracing LGBTQ+ as part of their branding. Participants raised concern about a lack of easily accessible information and transparent messaging that would help them identify relevant start-ups. *'Where to begin, where do I start to find these brands?' (P14) 'It's hard to find UK based black owned fashion brands.'* (P5) Suggestions to overcome this included *'bold'* (P7) and more *'transparent'* (P1) brand communication on behalf of the start-up that *'should hit me with what it stands for right when I encounter the brand for the first time'* (P20).

Theme two: authenticity

Closely connected to this is the second theme of *authenticity and distrust*. Participants expressed a desire to see start-ups adopt an authentic approach to EDI—that is, something rooted in more than just promotional efforts, but that permeates the brand's values and actions. *'Everyone can say they support equality, but that doesn't mean they actually do it.'* (P15) *'Actions speak louder than just random promises.'* (P18) It appears that the target audience puts brands under considerable scrutiny and reflects on whether activities might be opportunistic in nature. *'During the BLM [Black Lives Matter] protests, many fashion brands pandered to the trend of supporting diversity. This felt rather fake.'* (P29) *'Are you really here for us, or just yourself?'* (P2)

Just like with the previous theme, transparency and clarity appear to be key to overcoming distrust and to back up any authentic approach to EDI. *'As a brand, you've got to make it clear what you're about.'* (P11) Suggestions from participants for start-ups included presenting tangible *'proof'* (P9) as part of their communications, such as, featuring easy-to-find testimonials or examples for any EDI claims on their website and social media. In addition, start-ups should ensure that, if they commence their genuine EDI efforts, these do not coincide with bigger movements or heritage months. *'Just avoid pride month, at least at the beginning.'* (P4) *'If all you do is just happening during a themed month, be it black history or pride month, or because there are protests going on, you can just stop doing it right away. No one will believe that you are genuine.'* (P13) Several participants also indicated that their trust in an authentic approach would improve if independent third parties featured and/or backed the brand and their activities.

Theme three: intersectionality

Theme three revolves around the importance of *intersectionality* when it comes to EDI as part of a start-up's branding. Participants showed a distinct awareness that *'just ticking one box'* (P13) with regard to equity, diversity and inclusion was not enough. *'Really, the changes we're talking about making should be the bare minimum anyway.'* (P16) The plurality and intersections of diversity characteristics ought to be kept in mind when crafting brand values and messages, as not meeting the target audience's expectations might negatively impact brand trust. *'It would make me question whether they know what they are doing if they say they are all about diversity and inclusion but then only care about one group. I wouldn't buy from someone who seems clueless.'* (P24) *'I'd buy more often from a brand if I could trust that they honestly stand for diverse-diversity, yeah.'* (P21)

Theme four: cancel culture

The final theme challenges the idea of a growing threat of *cancel culture* from this consumer group. Most participants stated that they would not publicly boycott a brand based on controversial EDI business practises, due to the personal efforts associated and the potential danger of ending up helping the brand. *'I don't feed into cancel culture, because it's too exhausting carrying all that fire and anger for brands who use our rage for*

publicity.' (P6) This appears to hold particularly true for start-ups, which appear to enjoy an additional level of goodwill in case of a misstep. *'If it is a small business that just started, I'd give them another chance if they mess up once.'* (P19) *'As long as they are honest about it and learn their lesson, I'd not cancel a start-up.'* (P4) Nevertheless, bad EDI practice might still negatively impact brand love, with participants being less attracted to brands with questionable EDI practices. *'I would probably care less about the brand, but if I needed something specific, I'd probably still buy from there.'* (P33) *'I might lose some interest in it [the brand], yes. Completely cancel it? No, I wouldn't.'* (P21)

4. Defining the Existing Issues

The apparent lack of public awareness amongst participants regarding start-ups embracing EDI does not come as a surprise. The first half of 2023 saw almost half a million new companies registered every hour in the UK, with an unprecedented number of new brands entering the already saturated fashion market since the start of the pandemic (Chen, 2021; Young, 2022; Miles, 2024). The confusion and lack of direction among participants is an understandable consequence. It is difficult for consumers to keep track of all market players and would require an undue amount of time and consumer effort to research every new start-up brand. A lack of transparent guidance regarding brands embracing EDI more holistically—that is, beyond promotional efforts—impedes easy navigation of the market.

The importance of authenticity in terms of EDI, expressed by participants in this study, is in line with what previous researchers have found to be a crucial component for the success of emerging brands (Jahns, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki, 2022). Generation Z, more than any previous generation, requires authenticity and truthfulness from brands to be encouraged in their consumption (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). Brand authenticity contributes to the development of brand trust (Portal, Abratt and Bendixen, 2019).

Consequently, actions driven by tokenism can damage this crucial trust, which appears to impact the perception of brands overall and consumers' decision making more specifically, thus supporting what, *inter alia*, Tressoldi, Espartel and Rohden (2023), Smith, James and Griffiths (2023) and Cunningham and Melton (2014) have highlighted for Brazil and the US. In this context, it is also unsurprising to see a heightened expectation for brands to embrace the plurality and intersection of EDI characteristics. As Generation Z have grown up digitally immersed, they have had opportunities to engage regularly with diverse people online, resulting in more than half of Generation Z believing that it is natural to belong to various social groups or communities at any given point in time (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). The expectation of intersectionality as part of branding is thus simply a reflection of this generation's own lived experience and reality.

Although the apparent low willingness of participants to publicly boycott brands that infringe on consumer expectations regarding good EDI practice does not echo the warnings expressed by some authors for other countries (i.a., Amed et al., 2019; Forbes, 2020; Tressoldi, Espartel and Rohden, 2023), the findings are in line with recent research by Forrester (2022, para 2), which states that 'cancel culture impacts personal brands more than company brands'. Whilst on the surface, this appears to be positive news for start-ups, further research is needed as to how this might affect businesses where the lines between personal brand and company brand are blurred; this is often the case in entrepreneurial market communications, with start-ups crafting their brands around origin and founder's stories.

Also, although most participants would not cancel a brand for a lack of EDI, they indicate a decreased engagement with and attraction to these brands. This might result in a strategic disadvantage; research has shown that customers must 'feel' a brand and know what is happening with it to develop love for the brand and to become advocates or influencers for it (Stengel, 2017; Coelho, Bairrada and Peres, 2019).

5. Ideating and Prototyping Recommendations for Start-Ups

Based on the findings within this study, four tangible recommendations for start-ups targeting Generation Z and wanting to embrace EDI were derived:

Recommendation one: Embrace intersectional diversity internally and externally

A focus on one single diversity characteristic should be avoided when crafting a brand. Rather, a brand that embraces the plurality of EDI characteristics is appreciated. On this basis, crafting effective brand storytelling that encompasses the range of diversity within an organisation (be that the founder, team, etc.) would likely demonstrate a good understanding of the matter. Furthermore, demonstrating this externally through

partnerships, such as with contractors, manufacturers, marketing agencies, etc. would highlight practical action on EDI commitments.

Recommendation two: Build and foster a community

Engaging with the target audience beyond selling products/services and attempting to forge genuine communication will give brands greater authenticity in relation to the brand's values and identity. This rapport with the target audience should be utilised to co-create EDI strategies, aiding in transparency from a brand's position. This can strengthen consumer trust and brand love, as well as loyalty, as there is a more meaningful reason to return to the brand.

Recommendation three: Sign up to existing associations working in EDI

Aligning with an organisation that already offers education, training and/or resources may make it easier to form EDI policies based on research and social awareness that already exists. There is also value in being a part of an organisation that has a proven track record in EDI, such as *My Runway Group* (<https://www.myrunwaygroup.com/>) and/or *Consortium* (<https://www.consortium.lgbt/>), as well as being recognisable with the target audience. This recognition can be utilised to demonstrate a brand's values, but should not be conducted in isolation to avoid the appearance of opportunism and/or tokenism. Start-ups should only sign up and join organisations that truly align with their own values and mission to ensure an authentic approach to EDI.

Recommendation four: Put EDI efforts front and centre of branded communications

Bold and clear messaging can increase transparency as to what the start-up embraces in terms of EDI, which is appreciated by the target audience. Making it easier for interested audiences to find the information is key. For example, on the brand's website, messages on EDI should be featured in several places—and optimised for search engines—as well as featured in the profile section of social media accounts.

However, brands can take it one step further by producing material that is interesting to the target audience. Creating content that is engaging branded material can also be a vital educational tool. The presence of informative, compelling content means that there is greater chance consumers will engage with a brand; sharing through socials, offline word of mouth, etc. are all ways that consumers become active participants in demonstrating social proof of a brand's strategy.

6. Concluding Remarks

Generation Z has a distinct hunger for brands that authentically embrace social causes relating to EDI. They want to see brands reflect their lived experience and reality in order to identify and connect with these brands. Start-ups that cater to Generation Z might therefore want to consider EDI as a core part of their entrepreneurial branding.

This paper derived four tangible recommendations worth considering when crafting or redesigning their branding, but most importantly, start-ups should think about EDI as part of the customer experience rather than a tick-box exercise. Activities and actions that feel organic and complement the customer journey will likely resonate well with the target audience. The aim should always be to build a community of loyal customers by staying authentic to the brand's identity.

EDI elements as part of entrepreneurial market communications appear to have the potential for gains in terms of, *inter alia*, brand love and brand loyalty. Our research also showed that start-ups that might have been hesitant to broach this topic in the past may not need to be too worried about negative impact. Consumer goodwill appears to lower the risk of business damage caused by missteps. Co-creation with the target audience, and transparent communications, might further mitigate the risk.

Contribution and outlook

This study delved into a critical aspect of contemporary branding—the incorporation of EDI elements to resonate with Generation Z consumers. Our research methodology, guided by Design Thinking, emphasises a human-centred and iterative approach—putting the stakeholders front and centre in the creation of socially conscious start-up branding, thus aligning to calls for stakeholder involvement (*i.a.*, Stengel, 2017; Jahns, 2023). Our exploration of how brands can move beyond tokenism to embrace the plurality and intersectionality of EDI characteristics is crucial for long-term brand sustainability and consumer engagement, and delivers much needed additional insights for the on-going journey towards more robust theories for entrepreneurial branding

(Shi and Miles, 2020). We want to emphasise, however, that there is still a lot that needs to be done. The authors of this paper agree with Chaudhri, Pridmore and Mauck (2022) that entrepreneurial brand building is not a one-size-fits-all process and lacks a linear pathway. Although our prototyped framework does not guarantee success, it suggests a new approach for using strategic communication to develop a socially conscious start-up brand that integrates equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) into its branding efforts.

What are the next steps for this project? For the final stages of the Design Thinking process, collaborations with creative start-ups across Greater London are pursued. Guided by the recommendations put forward in this paper, both strategy and creative assets tailored to the participating start-up brands will be developed and tested (A/B testing) with existing Generation Z customers. Results from the testing phase are expected to be available by early 2025, with the final implementation expected to take place later that year.

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