

COOL BY ASSOCIATION: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF INFLUENCERS ON BRAND COOLNESS

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**Author: Jenna-Juulia Rekiö
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Supervisor: Vilma Luoma-Aho**



**JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ**

ABSTRACT

Author Jenna-Juulia Rekiö	
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<p>Abstract</p> <p>In this master's thesis, the components of brand coolness and the significance of social media influencers in perceived brand coolness were investigated. The aim was to enhance understanding of the meanings brand coolness and influencer-brand relationships hold from the consumers' perspective.</p> <p>The goal of the study was to depict the potential impacts that social media influencers have on the perceived brand coolness of the brands associated with them. Additionally, the study aimed to describe the defining characteristics and factors influencing perceived brand coolness. The target organization of the study was Vitunleija Oy, and the research was conducted as a qualitative interview study. Semi-structured interviews with 19 participants who were customers of Vitunleija Oy were conducted in late 2023 and early 2024. Content analysis was employed as the method of analysis.</p> <p>The study highlights authenticity, popularity, aesthetic appeal, and originality as the key defining characteristics of cool brands. Participants described cool influencers similarly, emphasizing authenticity and distinctive content. The study emphasizes the significance of social media influencers in shaping brand coolness, highlighting both positive impacts on brands such as increased coolness and visibility, and negative effects due to for example the mis-alignment between influencers and brands and influencer controversies. Furthermore, the study suggests that some components of brand coolness transfer more easily from influencers to brands than others. Participants underscored the importance of alignment and consistency between influencers and brands as criteria for enhancing brand coolness. Additionally, the study suggests that brand coolness itself is perceived as an important value that positively influences consumer engagement and purchase decisions.</p>	
Key words Brands, coolness, brand perception, brand influencer collaboration, influencer marketing	
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TIIVISTELMÄ

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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa tutkittiin brändicooleuden osatekijöitä sekä sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien merkitystä koettuun brändicooleuteen. Tarkoituksena oli lisätä ymmärrystä siitä, millaisia merkityksiä brändicooleus ja vaikuttajabrändisuhteet saavat kuluttajien näkökulmasta.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli kuvata mahdollisia vaikutuksia, joita sosiaalisen median vaikuttajilla on heihin yhdistettäviin brändeihin koettuun brändicooleuteen. Lisäksi tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli kuvata niitä määritteleviä ominaisuuksia ja osatekijöitä, jotka vaikuttavat koettuun brändicooleuteen. Tutkimuksen kohdeorganisaationa toimi Vitunleija Oy, ja tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena haastattelututkimuksena. Loppuvuonna 2023 ja alkuvuonna 2024 toteutettiin puolistrukturoidut haastattelut 19 osallistujan kanssa, jotka olivat Vitunleija Oy:n asiakkaita. Analyysimenetelmänä toimi sisällönanalyysi.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa nousee esiin keskeisinä cooleja brändejä määrittelevinä ominaisuuksina alkuperäisyys, suosio, visuaalinen vetovoima sekä aitous. Tutkimuksen osallistajat kuvasivat cooleja vaikuttajia samankaltaisesti, korostaen aitoutta ja erottuvaa sisältöä. Tutkimuksessa korostuu sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien merkitys brändin cooleuden rakentumisessa, korostaen sekä positiivisia vaikutuksia, kuten lisääntynyttä cooleutta ja näkyvyyttä, että negatiivisia vaikutuksia, johtuen esimerkiksi vaikuttajien ja brändin välisestä sopimattomuudesta ja vaikuttajien osallistumisesta kiistanalaisiin aktiviteetteihin. Tutkimuksessa nousee lisäksi esiin, että osa brändicooleuden osatekijöistä siirtyy helpommin vaikuttajista brändeihin kuin toiset. Tutkimuksen osallistajat korostavat vaikuttajien ja brändien välisen soveltuvuuden ja sidosteisuuden merkitystä brändicooleuden parantumisen kriteerinä. Tutkimuksessa nousee lisäksi esiin, että brändicooleus itsessään nähdään tärkeänä arvona, joka vaikuttaa positiivisesti kuluttajien sitoutumiseen ja ostopäätöksiin.</p>	
Asiasanat Brändit, cooleus, brändimielikuva, vaikuttajayhteistyö, vaikuttajamarkkinointi	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Besides an adjective in teenage vocabulary, cool is often used to describe a broader phenomenon by marketing and communication practitioners alike (Rahman, 2013, p.620). Major brands such as Apple and Instagram, among many others, have thrived, owing a part of their success to their perceived coolness. Conversely, being uncool may undermine even well-established brands. (Warren, Batra, Loureiro & Bagozzi, 2019, p.36.) Due to the marketplace valuing cool brands (Warren & Campbell, 2014, p.543), organizations seek for new ways to position themselves as cool in the eyes of consumers. Influencers, having the power to shape brand narratives and perceptions (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021, p.231), have opened up new ways for brands to capitalize on coolness. By associating themselves with certain figures that consumers regard as embodying cool characteristics, brands are able to enhance their own perceived coolness in the eyes of consumers. Through a brands alignment with individuals who already possess a desirable aura of coolness, they are able to leverage the coolness of influencers. (Belk, Tian & Paavola. 2010, p.202.)

Brand coolness, as discussed by Warren et al. (2019, p.37), can be viewed as a multifaceted construct that resonates with a brand's appeal, unique identity, and the capacity to evoke positive emotions among consumers. Warren et al. (2019, p.39) have dissected the anatomy of coolness, identifying ten salient characteristics that collectively define this attribute. These encompass traits such as authenticity, originality and subculturality. One of the primary motivations for social marketers to comprehend coolness is their need to effectively communicate with a key target audience in a way that resonates with them (Bird and Tapp, 2008, p.23).

In the digital age, the trend of brands collaborating with influencers is increasingly common, aiming not only to attract new customers and drive sales, but also to build a brands image. Influencers, through their tailored content, play a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes towards the brands they endorse (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021, p.231). A brand's perception is highly malleable and can be significantly influenced by external affiliations (Lay-Hwa Bowden, Conduit, Hollebeek, Luoma-Aho & Apenes Solem, 2017, p.878), such as influencer endorsements. Reinikainen, Tan, Luoma-Aho and Salo (2021) have observed that both positive and negative associations may spill over from influencers to the brands they endorse, a phenomenon termed the “influencer

spillover effect". In contemporary marketing, both influencers and brand coolness play a significant role in shaping brand perceptions and influencing consumer behaviour (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021; Warren et al., 2019), which makes the topic relevant and timely.

The construction of brand coolness as well as the concept of brand coolness in itself is a relatively understudied but important marketing phenomenon (Warren et al., 2019, p.36). There is also limited research on the topic that considers the possibility of imparted coolness from influencers to brands, and a lack of theoretical approaches that could be used to study the effects influencer associations have on brand perceptions among consumers. Due to limited studies and literature, it can be argued that there is a research gap regarding brand coolness and the phenomenon of influencer spillover effect regarding coolness.

As cool brands are highly valued in contemporary marketing (Warren & Campbell, 2014, p.543), the significance of examining brand coolness as well as the potential consequences of an influencer spillover effect on brand coolness is valuable to brand managers and marketers alike. Firstly, it informs the development of more effective marketing strategies by increasing understanding on enhancing the specific characteristics contributing to a brand's perceived coolness. Secondly, it adds understanding to how an influencer's coolness can transfer to a brand, possibly enhancing its appeal to consumers. Thirdly, it sheds light on the ways brands may leverage influencer partnerships in building a brand's cool image. By studying these phenomenon's, the research aims to provide empirical knowledge and to contribute to the existing body of knowledge around brand coolness and influencer marketing.

This thesis aims to increase understanding about Finnish consumers' perceptions on brand coolness and the impact of influencers on brand coolness. Conducting research in the Finnish market can provide several benefits, including filling the gap in research for this region. As coolness at its nature is socially constructed (Warren & Campbell, 2014, p. 544), this study can provide insights into the unique cultural context of brand coolness in Finland, which can be valuable for Finnish brands looking to enhance their perceived coolness or appeal. Moreover, by examining the effects of collaboration between brands and influencers on brand coolness in the Finnish market, the research can help to broaden the scope of research on the subject and contribute to a more global understanding of the phenomenon.

This qualitative study centers its focus on a single case organization in the Finnish fashion industry. The case organization, Vitunleija Oy, was chosen as the brand under examination due to its unique setting. Being founded by an influencer and having conducted numerous collaborations with celebrities and influencers, the brand offers an intriguing context for an examination of brand coolness and the potential effects arising from the close proximity of influencers on a brand. The study's methodology involves conducting interviews with customers and repeat buyers of Vitunleija Oy, exploring their perceptions of the brand's image and marketing initiatives. This thesis builds upon previous research related to brand coolness, brand perception, influencer marketing, and the impact of influencers on consumer behavior. It aims to extend the literature by examining the specific phenomenon of the influencer spillover effect and its

relationship with brand coolness within the context of Vitunleija Oy. The reasearch questions can be specified as follows:

RQ1. How do individuals perceive the brand coolness of Vitunleija Oy?

RQ2. Based on the case of the case of the study, what themes or characteristics contribute to brand and influencer coolness?

RQ3. Based on the case of the study, how are influencers impacting brand coolness?

These questions are relevant to current discussions around branding as well as influencer marketing. Examining consumer perceptions of coolness and the impact of influencers on brand coolness sheds light on how consumers are responding to these trends in the marketing landscape. This master's thesis is structured as follows: Chapters from two to five, present and discuss the main theoretical concepts concerning this thesis. First, the definition, construction and implications of brand coolness are discussed. Second, the concept and influence of influencers in branding is examined and finally, chapter four investigates the interplay of these two concepts followed by a conclusion of the theoretical framework. After the theoretical framework has been established, the case organization of this study is introduced. Later, the data and methodology are provided, including a description of the selection of respondents, data collection method and data analysis method, along with a justification for the selected methods. Finally, the study's findings are discussed, analyzed, and concluded together with a discussion of the implications of this research as well as the study's limits and potential directions for further research.

In this thesis an AI-based tool, more specifically ChatGPT 3.5, was employed to enhance the coherence and readability of the thesis. AI was used in improving the structure and coherence of the text, as well as paraphrasing the text to be more understandable. AI was utilized in enhancing the coherence of individual paragraphs, as well as in identifying areas of the text where improvement to the text was needed in order to remain a logical continuation of ideas. AI was also used in identifying possible spelling and grammar mistakes. Additionally, AI was utilized in summarizing academic articles in order to determine whether an article was relevant to the topic of this research. If based on the summary, the article or other academic text seemed relevant to the topic, the researcher would then read the whole article. In analyzing the collected data of the research, the help of AI was used in translating some highly colloquial words from the Finnish interview answers to English.

2 COOLNESS AS A BRAND ATTRIBUTE

“Coolness” emerges as an influential attribute in determining brand preferences and customer loyalty (Warren et al., 2019, p.36). But what defines coolness, and how does it influence consumer behavior and brand perceptions? This chapter focuses on the concept of brand coolness, with the aim of understanding its roots, significance, and the characteristics and themes that define it. Through academic explorations, this chapters objective is also to look into the relationship between brand coolness and brand personality, and examine its influence on consumer perceptions.

2.1 Defining brand coolness

The concept of contemporary cool is widely believed to originate from African American culture. It has long been a part of consumer culture, shaping brand perceptions, consumer decisions, and broader market trends. Even tough cool brands are highly valued in contemporary marketing (Warren & Campbell, 2014, p.543), the exact nature and definition of coolness remains without a widely acknowledged definition. Warren et al. (2019) delve into this by exploring the complex nature of brand coolness.

Coolness embodies a blend of characteristics that give a brand a competitive advantage by setting it apart from others. Coolness can be viewed as a trait that resonates with a brand’s appeal, unique identity, and ability to evoke positive emotions among consumers (Warren et al., 2019, p.47). The coolness of a brand has an impact on consumer attitudes, loyalty, and word-of-mouth endorsements (Kumar, 2021, p.35). At its nature, coolness is subjective and dynamic. The perceptions of coolness evolve over time and vary in between consumers and audiences. Coolness is a trait that is socially constructed, meaning that people for example are only as cool as other people perceive them. (Warren & Campbell, 2014, p. 544.) In other words, the meaning and significance of coolness is influenced by cultures, norms, values and beliefs, which can vary across different cultures and time periods.

In contemporary popular culture, coolness is described as an admired aesthetic that includes look, style, attitude and behaviour. Because coolness is a subjective concept with developing and varying meanings, its definition is dependent on the interpreter as well as the surrounding environment. In popular culture, coolness is frequently associated with confidence, carefreeness and self-control. When used in discourse, it usually expresses appreciation or acceptance for subjects as well as people. Despite its widespread use in slang, the term “cool” is not widely classified and is used in a variety of social contexts. Its importance in popular culture is highlighted by its continued use throughout generations. (Cool (aesthetic), 2023.)

Understanding brand coolness and its significance is central in branding. Kumar (2021, p.45) proposes that the perception of a brand’s coolness significantly influences its emotional connection with consumers. Specifically, according to the writer, the coolness of a brand has the potential to elicit feelings of brand love, through brand attitude. This underscores the impact of coolness in shaping brand relationships and loyalty. Coolness also differs from liking in that it indicates that the presence of a desire for autonomy influences a consumers preference for cool brands. (Warren & Campbell, 2014, p. 543).

Brand coolness goes beyond the traditional measures of brand value. According to Kumar’s research (2021), coolness has a significant impact on the consumer-brand relationship. Kumar (2021, p.45) further states, that unlike other brand attributes, coolness speaks directly to the emotions, evoking stronger ties and a deeper sense of attachment between the consumer and the brand. According to Kumar (2021, p.45), the mere perception of a brand being ‘cool’ can evoke feelings of love among consumers.

2.2 Factors contributing to brand coolness

Mohiuddin, Gordon, Magee and Lee (2016), defined a theoretical framework of cool for social marketing, consisting of seven dimensions: deviating from norm, self-expressive, indicative of maturity, subversive, pro-social, evasive and attractive. Several factors contribute to the formation and perception of brand coolness. For instance, brands that are defined by characteristics such as being original, energetic, iconic or rebellious as suggested by Warren et al. (2019, p.36) and cited by Kumar (2021, p.45), are more likely to be perceived as cool. This suggests that in order for a brand to be perceived as cool, it should strive to encompass and enhance the distinctive qualities defining cool brands.

Warren et al. (2019) have identified ten salient characteristics that collectively define coolness. In their work (2019, p. 39-40), they identify these traits as authenticity, originality, subculturality, energy, rebelliousness, high status, iconicity, aesthetic appeal, popularity, and extraordinariness/usefulness. While not all of these characteristics are essential for each brand and consumer segment, enhancing any of these attributes generally enhances the perception of a brand’s coolness (Warren et al., 2019, p.52). Some of these traits, such as authenticity and subculturality have received more academic attention compared to others. The study of coolness is frequently

situated within the same study of specific youth subcultures, particularly within the field of cultural studies. (Belk et al., 2010, p.184.) Authenticity, a more largely studied trait, has gained significant scholarly interest. Nancarrow, C. & Nancarrow, P. (2002, p.314) for example state that within popular culture, authenticity is a prevailing ideological dialogue, consistently utilized to express elevated preferences and a sense of superiority over mass-produced goods.

Next a table is presented, structured based on the findings of Warren et al. (2019). The table provides a definition for each of these ten characteristics, presented side by side with illustrative examples drawn from pertinent literature sources on coolness, as well as the implications these characteristics have on brands that aim to be perceived as cool.

TABLE 1. Characteristics of brand coolness, corresponding literature on coolness and implications for brands.

Characteristic of coolness defined by Warren et al. (2019)	Definition by Warren et al. (2019)	Supporting citations	Implications for brands aiming to be perceived as cool
Authentic	Authenticity underscores a brand's genuineness and its commitment to staying true to its roots. A brand that showcases genuine passion, steadfastness to its principles, and an unwavering dedication to its ethos is perceived as more authentic, and by extension, cooler.	<p>Cool can be transformative, value providing, unique, different from the crowd, aesthetic, useful, genuine and subcultural/counter-cultural (Farnsworth, Holtzblatt, Held & Pai, 2014, p.232-233).</p> <p>Regardless of the different nuances of the term cool, the idea of distinctiveness and authenticity appears to be omnipresent (Murthy, 2009, p.14).</p> <p>“For example, after the above research, the realisation of the importance of black culture to cool resulted in a very successful campaign for Morgan’s Spiced Rum featuring black artists, writers, actors and musicians, groups identified as particularly cool and, crucially, as relevant to the Caribbean roots of the rum. The connection was a natural one, not forced, and therefore the advertising itself was considered ‘authentic’; it was cool” (Nancarrow et al., 2002, p.321).</p>	Brands should prioritize sincere demonstrations of passion and dedication to values.

Original	Originality is a crucial factor in the perception of coolness. Brands that can claim to be the first of their kind, or that introduce novel concepts and creativity, tend to be viewed as cooler.	Cool can be transformative, value providing, unique, different from the crowd, aesthetic, useful, genuine and subcultural/counter-cultural (Farnsworth et al., 2014, p.232-233). “It (cool) involves originality, self-confidence and must be apparently effortless. It is often transgressive and anti-establishment” (Nancarrow & Nancarrow, 2007, p.135).	Companies that want to be seen as cool should focus on being innovative and differentiating in both their products and services.
Subcultural	Some brands are rooted in specific subcultures, and their association with these niche groups can boost their coolness factor. This is particularly true if the subculture itself is deemed cool or trendy.	Cool can be transformative, value providing, unique, different from the crowd, aesthetic, useful, genuine and subcultural/counter-cultural (Farnsworth et al., 2014, p.232-233). “Coolness is a set of shared meanings (e.g. language, self-presentation, artistic expression, values, attitudes) within a peer group which signify group affiliation.” (O’Donnell & Wardlow, 2000, p. 13). A brand may become cool without any effort on its part, if a subculture happens to adopt it. This has been the case for brands such as Dr. Martens and Adidas. (Belk et al., 2010, p. 194.) “Each teenage tribe will have its own idea of what is and what is not cool” (Bird & Tapp, 2008, p.27). “Cool includes a perceived ability to see the flipside or alternative side of things; an ability that multicultural-perspective people or ethnic minorities are uniquely believed to possess” (Maher, 2005, p.83).	Building relationships with particular subcultures and the adoption of a brand by a specific subculture can increase a brand's coolness factor but doing so necessitates a thorough comprehension of and compatibility with those subcultures' ideals.
Energetic	Brands that evoke a sense of energy, dynamism, youth or excitement can be seen as cool. This energy can manifest in various ways, from advertising campaigns to the nature of the product or service itself.	A few academic papers, such one by Sriramachandramurthy and Hodis (2010), demonstrate a connection between perceived coolness and excitement, and some researchers have stated that coolness is connected with similar attributes than energetic, including youth (O’Donnell & Wardlow, 2000, p. 13).	By adding vigor and enthusiasm to their branding, marketing, and overall presentation, brands may elevate coolness.
Aesthetically	A brand that boasts a	“hip, fashionable, attractive,	Perceptions of

Appealing	visually pleasing design or aesthetic has a better chance of being perceived as cool. This could relate to product design, logo design, packaging, or any other visual element associated with the brand.	desirable, or excellent” (Mohiuddin, Gordon, Magee & Lee, 2016, p. 121). Cool can be transformative, value providing, unique, different from the crowd, aesthetic, useful, genuine and subcultural/counter-cultural (Farnsworth et al., 2014, p.232-233).	coolness are greatly influenced by visual attractiveness, which includes branding and product design.
Useful/ Extraordinary	This pertains to a brand offering something unique or of great utility to consumers. Brands that present innovative solutions or services tend to be perceived as cooler than their more ordinary counterparts.	Cool can be transformative, value providing, unique, different from the crowd, aesthetic, useful, genuine and subcultural/counter-cultural (Farnsworth et al., 2014, p.232-233). “We define cool as an attitude or belief about a product (in this case, clothing), which is either hedonic or utilitarian in nature” (Runyan, Noh & Mosier, 2013, p. 323).	To be cool, brands should concentrate on providing exceptional, unusual, or very practical goods or services.
High Status	Brands that are associated with prestige or exclusivity often garner a cool reputation. This could be due to high price points, limited availability, or any other factor that bestows a sense of luxury or elite status upon the brand.	Coolness requires validation by others (Belk et al. 2010, p.184). “Cool is not something you can set out to acquire; it is something that is acknowledged in you by others” (Nancarrow & Nancarrow, 2007, p.135). “elusive, exclusive quality that makes behaviors and objects so hip, desirable and symbolic of ‘being in the know” (Bird & Tapp, 2008, p.3).	A brand's coolness can be enhanced by projecting an image of prestige or exclusivity, but maintaining this image requires constant management.
Rebellious	Sometimes, brands that go against the grain or challenge the status quo are perceived as cool. This rebel image can be rooted in the brand's origins, its marketing campaigns, or the nature of the product or service.	"Cool is an oppositional attitude adopted by individuals or small groups to express defiance of authority” (Pountain & Robins, 2000, p. 19) “Cool is a rebellious attitude, an expression of a belief that the mainstream mores of society have no legitimacy and do not apply to you" (Pountain & Robins, 2000, p. 23) “a subjective and dynamic, socially constructed positive trait attributed to cultural objects (people, brands, products, trends, etc.) inferred to be appropriately autonomous." (Warren & Campbell, 2014, p. 544).	By adopting a rebellious persona that defies convention and sets them apart from other brands, brands can foster coolness.

		<p>Cool can be transformative, value providing, unique, different from the crowd, aesthetic, useful, genuine and subcultural/counter-cultural (Farnsworth et al., 2014, p.232-233).</p> <p>“It (cool) involves originality, self-confidence and must be apparently effortless. It is often transgressive and anti-establishment” (Nancarrow & Nancarrow, 2007, p.135).</p>	
Iconic	<p>Iconic brands that are recognized as cultural symbols, have stood the test of time and have a certain timeless appeal. Their legacy, history, and continued relevance contribute to their cool perception.</p>	<p>Iconic brands share ground with coolness, signifying that these brands carry a particularly robust and esteemed significance for consumers (Holt 2004). There exists a convergence between brands recognized as cool and those categorized by Holt (2004) as cultural icons.</p>	<p>Creating a brand that is iconic and ageless can help retain coolness and devoted customers throughout time.</p>
Popular	<p>Sometimes, sheer popularity can make a brand cool. A brand that many people love and talk about can gain a reputation for coolness simply by virtue of its widespread appeal.</p>	<p>Coolness requires validation by others (Belk et al. 2010, p.184).</p> <p>“Cool is not something you can set out to acquire; it is something that is acknowledged in you by others” (Nancarrow & Nancarrow, 2007, p.135).</p>	<p>A brand's image of coolness can be enhanced by widespread popularity, underscoring the need of building a diverse and active customer base.</p>

These ten attributes defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 39-40), provide a framework for understanding the nature of brand coolness, and they can be used by marketers and brand managers to enhance the perceived coolness of their brands. The characteristics of coolness encompass being authentic, original, subcultural, energetic, aesthetically appealing, useful or extraordinary, having a high status, being rebellious, iconic and popular.

Authenticity emphasizes a brand's genuineness, and brands that showcase strong principals as well as a passion for their line of work, are perceived as more authentic, and consequently, cooler. Originality is also an important factor in shaping perceptions of coolness. Brands that for example introduce new concepts tend to be viewed as cooler for their new ideas and approaches. (Warren et al., 2019, p. 39-40.)

A brand's coolness can also be greatly impacted by its integration into a subculture, such as skateboarders, rappers, surfers or dancers. This is especially true, if the subculture in question is generally deemed cool by the masses. Furthermore, brands that

emanate energy, excitement or youthfulness through marketing efforts, visuals or product designs are also often perceived as cool. (Warren et al., 2019, p. 39-40.)

A brand's likelihood of being viewed as cool is increased by an aesthetically pleasing design or aesthetic. This could mean visually pleasing packaging, logo design, product design, or any other aspect of the brand's visual identity. Moreover, brands that offer something unique or very practical, such cutting-edge products or services, are usually seen as cooler than their more conventional rivals. Additionally, prestige or exclusivity-driven brands might cultivate a cool reputation, which may be the result of expensive prices, restricted supply, fostering a sense of luxury or exclusivity. (Warren et al., 2019, p. 39-40.)

Another trait related to coolness is rebelliousness in defying convention or going against the grain. Brands that challenge expectations through the brand's history, advertising strategies, or the characteristics of the goods or services they offer are often seen as cool. In addition, well-known companies that have endured the test of time and are regarded as cultural icons have an appeal that adds to their perceived coolness, with their history, heritage, and ongoing significance being major contributors. (Warren et al., 2019, p. 39-40.) Finally, having widespread popularity can make a brand seem cool. Simply due to their vast appeal and popularity among customers, brands may establish a reputation for coolness. (Warren et al., 2019, p. 39-40.)

The writers suggest that, if a brand is lacking in one or more component characteristics of brand coolness, the brand's image on the lacking characteristics would need to be reinforced. However, the specific approach to accomplish this is dependent on the brand's history, industry, and target customers. (Warren et al., 2019, p.53.) Each of these characteristics play a distinct role in shaping consumer perceptions about a brand's "cool" factor, however, coolness is not static, but dynamic. As consumer perceptions evolve, so does the concept of what is considered cool (Warren & Campbell, 2014, p.557). This aspect of the nature of coolness is emphasized by Warren et al. (2019, p.37), who states that the very traits that define coolness may change over time, highlighting the necessity for brands to remain sensitive to changing customer perceptions.

2.3 Brand personality and brand coolness

Brands, much like individuals, possess personalities that are human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker, 1997, p.347). These personalities play a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions, impacting brand love, influencing purchase decisions, and fostering brand loyalty (Bairrada, Coelho & Lizanets, 2019, p.30). Since brands, just as individuals, might be perceived as charismatic or trendy, could coolness be viewed as an extension of a brand's broader personality? According to Warren et al. (2019, p.45), one could suggest that perceptions of brand personality have the potential to either increase or decrease the brand's coolness, and therefore, they act as factors influencing the overall perception of brand coolness. The writers also state, that various marketing and sociocultural factors, which impact the perceptions of a brands

personality, should also impact brand's perceived coolness. Warren et al. (2019, p.45) further touch upon this connection between brand coolness and brand personality, elucidating how the two constructs influence one another.

Warren et al. (2019, p.45) suggest, that while brand coolness shares some overlapping features with traditional brand personality traits, they are also two distinctive concepts. The overlap with coolness and brand personality is specifically shared with certain characteristics of coolness, that are energetic, high status and useful/extraordinary. The most closely these characteristics that contribute to the perception of brand coolness are related to the sophisticated, competent, and exciting dimensions of brand personality. (Warren et al., 2019, p.45.) However, the other key characteristics contributing to brand coolness, identified by Warren et al. (2019), showcase a distinction to the dimensions of brand personality. The overlap between the dimensions of brand personality identified by Aaker (1997, p.351) and the characteristics of coolness defined by Warren et al. (2019, p.39-40), is demonstrated in figure 1 below.

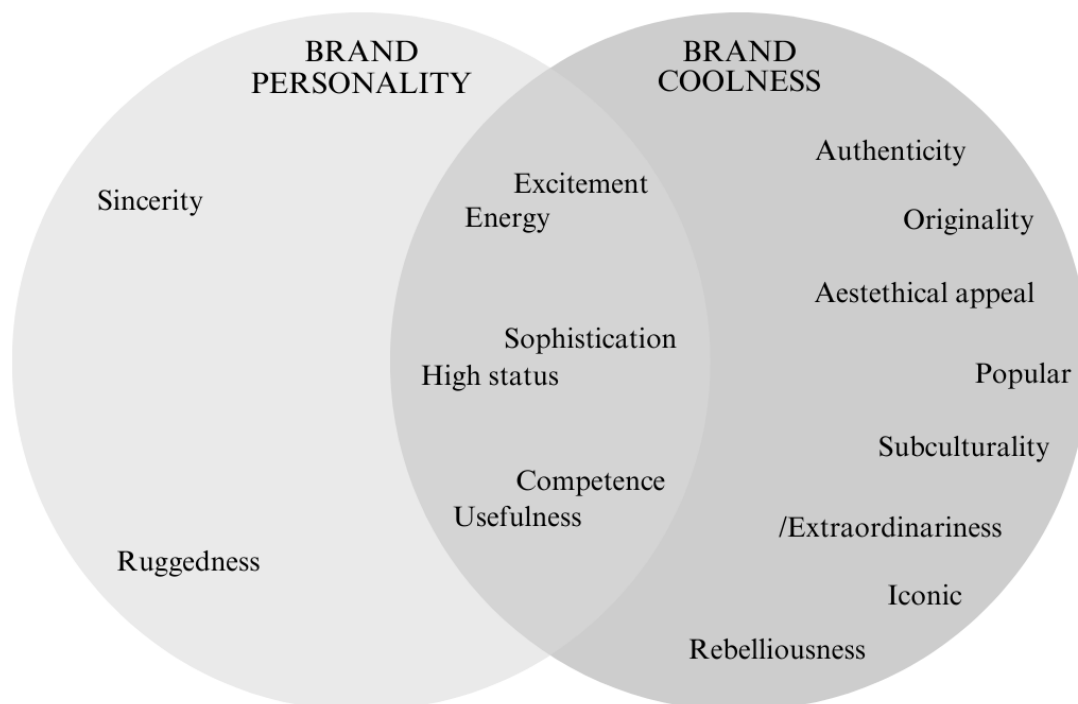


FIGURE 1. Brand personality and brand coolness overlap based on Warren et al. (2019, p.45)

As discussed by Warren and Campbell (2014, p.544), coolness should be considered as a distinct concept from brand attitudes. However, according to a literature review performed by Pantin-Sohier G, Sohier R, Sohier A, Hofmann and Billot (2023, p.2), brand personality presents itself as the primary factor influencing brand image, while brand coolness emerges as the primary determinant of brand attitude.

2.4 The evolution of brand coolness: from niche to mass cool

Warren et al. (2019, p.41) introduced the concept of the life cycle of brand coolness (FIGURE 2). The writers discussed how the characteristics of brands change over time as they transition from being uncool into niche cool and then to mass cool, and finally face the risk of becoming uncool once more.

Initially, coolness often emerges within a specific subculture or niche. Brands such as Supreme have originally resonated with particular groups such as rappers and skateboarders. These brands are perceived as rebellious, autonomous, desirable, and high-status. (Warren et al., 2019, p.41.)

Some niche cool brands manage to become cool to the masses. Expanding their reach from subcultures to the masses. These brands might lose some of their original rebelliousness and authenticity, however, they gain wider popularity and are able to charge higher prices. (Warren et al., 2019, p.41.)

In order not to become uncool and lose their defining features, brands that have attained mass cool status should actively try to preserve the characteristics that initially made them cool. Large brands such as Apple, that have attained the mass cool status serve as an example of these types of brands. While many consumers still perceive them as cool, some are beginning to question their coolness because they no longer see them as rebellious or as embodying the qualities that originally set them apart. (Warren et al., 2019, p.41.)

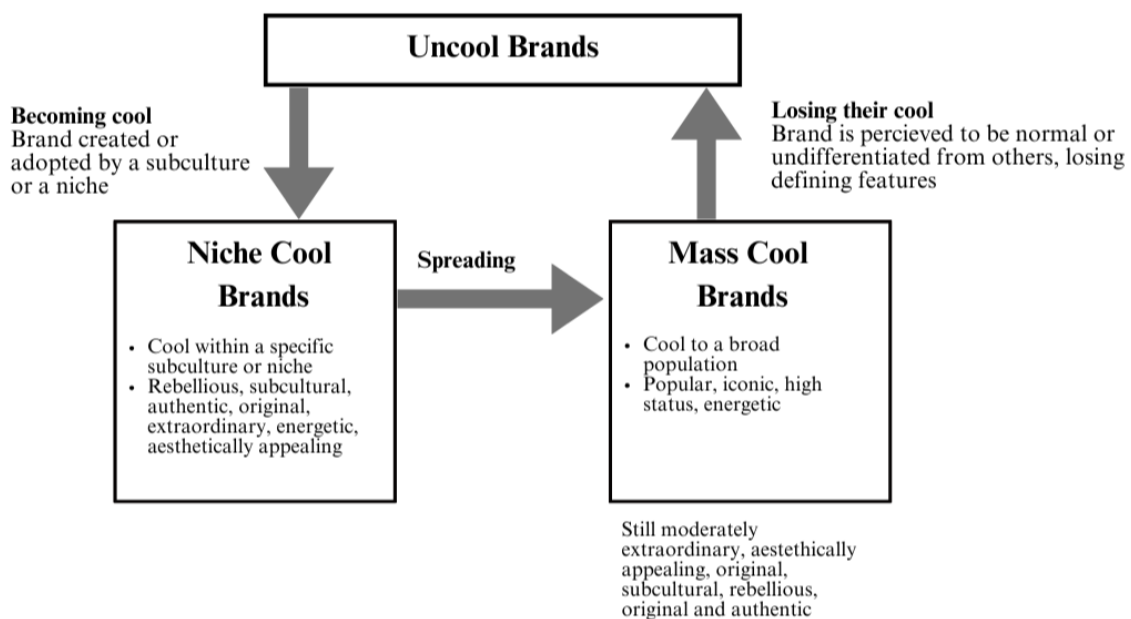


FIGURE 2. Life cycle of brand coolness (modified from Warren et al., 2019, p. 41)

2.5 Relationship between brand coolness and consumer perceptions

In relation to consumer perceptions, brand coolness is considered to be able to affect consumer preferences. Brand coolness is stated to influence attitudes towards the brand, consumers' word-of-mouth intentions, and their willingness to pay. (Warren et al., 2019, p.36-37.) Warren et al. (2019) discuss the ways in which coolness impacts brand perceptions and, subsequently, consumer behavior. Two important factors, brand love and self-brand connection, emerge in this context. According to Warren et al. (2019, p.45) these should be responses and consequences of brand coolness.

Brand love signifies a consumers deep affection and attachment develop towards a brand. Brand love includes a sense of customer loyalty that goes beyond transactional interactions. (Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi, 2012, p.7.) When a brand is perceived as cool, it is more likely to evoke these strong feelings of affection, in other words, brand love. The coolness of a brand can intensify the bond between a consumer and a brand, making the consumer more likely to advocate for the brand and demonstrate higher levels of loyalty. (Warren et al., 2019, p.46.) Kumar (2021, p.45) found that enhanced brand coolness positively influences brand love both directly and indirectly, with brand attitude serving as a mediating variable. The direct and indirect effects of brand coolness on brand love, as presented by Kumar (2021, p.45), highlight the impact of brand coolness on consumer perceptions.

Self-brand connection, on the other hand, delves into the ways in which consumers see a reflection of themselves in a brand. It is about identification and the alignment of one's personal identity with the brand's values, ethos, and characteristics. (Escalas, 2004, p.176.) Coolness can make this connection stronger. When a brand is seen as cool, consumers might feel that associating with it enhances their self-image or social standing. This can in turn lead to stronger brand loyalty and advocacy. (Warren et al., 2019, p.49.)

Furthermore, Warren et al. (2019, p.45) state that in turn, these mediators, brand love and self-brand connection, influence outcomes such as positive word-of-mouth and willingness to pay. Through brand love and self-brand connection, a cool brand can foster more positive recommendations and improve consumers' willingness to pay (Warren et al., 2019, p.46).

2.6 Measuring coolness

Several researchers have sought to define and operationalize the concept of cool by developing scales for measuring coolness in different contexts many involving an examination on the different characteristics defining brand coolness (Runyan et al., 2013; Warren et al., 2019). For example, Runyan et al. (2013) examined the meaning of cool to Generation Y consumers of apparel by conceptualizing cool as having five separate dimensions: esthetic, singular, and personal cool, all part of hedonic cool; and quality and functional cool, both part of utilitarian cool. They further conducted a quantitative study involving college students to validate a measurement scale for coolness in apparel. Runyan et al. (2013) started out by defining coolness, identifying two underlying dimensions of coolness: hedonic cool relating to pleasure and enjoyment, and utilitarian cool relating to usefulness and functionality. They followed a systematic scale development approach and generated a list of potential characteristics that could represent coolness in clothing. The study was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire, and the responses were analyzed using statistical techniques, such as factor analysis.

Warren et al. (2019) have expanded the research on coolness by examining brand coolness broadly, researching the overall structure of brand coolness and its relations with related constructs. Similarly, they began their research by identifying characteristics of coolness. By conducting eight survey studies, the researchers employed a comprehensive approach to measure brand coolness. Depending on the study in question, the participants were asked to nominate brands they found cool or uncool. The brands were then rated on a series of “agree-disagree” scale items based on the characteristics of coolness identified by the researchers. The data were analyzed using factor analysis.

3 INFLUENCERS IN BRANDING

This chapter aims to provide a definition for social media influencers and influencer marketing and to explore their impact on brand perceptions. Additionally, this chapter will explore the alignment and its significance in the collaborations between brands and their endorsers. Furthermore, the distinctive position artists of today occupy within the influencer spectrum is discussed.

3.1 Defining influencers

The term “influencer” has gained significant interest over the past decade. Similar characteristics to those of opinion leaders form the foundation of influencer study. As opinion leaders were established long before social media, it appears that in some instances, the term influencer is just a more technologically advanced continuation for opinion leader. However, today influencers are perceived as more than just opinion leaders; they are brand representatives, trendsetters, and, at times, a bridge between businesses and consumers influencing brand value perception, establishing brand engagement, and encouraging consumers purchase intentions. (Fitriati & Siwi, 2023, p.359.)

The origins of digital influencers can be mapped to personal blogs where individuals started sharing their interests, experiences, and opinions. As social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok gained momentum, these bloggers expanded their reach, building robust online identities. (Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman, 2021, p.327.) This shift was pivotal as it added layers of intimacy, personal touch, and visual appeal to their content, making it more relatable and engaging. Their role evolved from being mere content creators to social media influencers or even “micro-celebrities” who document their everyday lives while shaping public opinions through a sense of relatability (Abidin & Ots, 2015, p.3).

While the term “influencer” may sound self-explanatory, its academic definition has many layers. Freberg, K., Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, L., (2011, p.90) describe social media influencers as independent third-party endorsers who use various platforms like blogs and tweets to shape audience perceptions. This definition highlights influencers’ autonomy and their ability to influence audience beliefs and behaviors. Furthermore, the definition is enhanced when the personality traits and roles of influencers are considered. Wiedmann, Hennigs and Langner (2010, p.146) identified specific traits like innovative nature, risk-aversion, and even machiavellianism in influencers, shedding light on their personas. Today influencers are often defined as using their personal brands, in order to build trust and commitment with their followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019, p.5).

As influencers gained larger audiences, businesses quickly realized their potential for commercial pursuits. The concept of “influencer marketing” emerged, where businesses approach influencers for endorsements on their social platforms. (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017, p.801.) Earlier, brand messages were more frequently one-sided, predominantly delivered through media like TV commercials, billboards, and radio (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021, p.221). Today, with influencers, brand messages have the potential to be more interactive and engaging. Businesses have realized that influencers hold a unique position in the relationships between consumers and brands. Their position is somewhere between friends and traditional celebrities (Chae, 2017, p. 249). This unique stance enables them to craft personal stories, often blending paid content with authentic experiences, mixing advertisements and genuine endorsements.

The parasocial relationships forming between influencers and their followers, have been studied extensively in the recent years (Daniel, Jackson & Westerman, 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Donald Horton and Richard Wohl first introduced the concepts of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships in 1956. Parasocial relationships find their roots in the phenomenon of parasocial interaction, which involves the creation of an illusion of interaction, often described as a simulated form of conversational engagement (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). According to Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 215), the defining characteristic of parasocial interaction is that the interaction is typically one-sided. Reinikainen et al. (2020, p.279) found that establishing a parasocial relationship with the influencer enhances the perceived credibility of the influencer.

With new technological advancements, influencers have become an important channel for brands. Firstly, if the collaboration between a brand and an influencer is successful, they have the potential to bring a degree of authenticity, establishing trust with their followers. Secondly, their ability to tailor content according to their audience’s preferences makes the information flow more need-based, enhancing consumer engagement. (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021, p.221-222.) In the realm of digital media, influencers have carved a niche for themselves, redefining the way brands communicate and engage. Their rise brings along challenges and opportunities. As the digital world continues to evolve, the role and definition of influencers will likely undergo further transformations.

3.2 Impact of influencer endorsements on brand perceptions

In recent years, the realm of influencer marketing has evolved, significantly influencing consumer perceptions of brands. According to Van Gelder (2005, p.90), brand perception can be defined as “the total impression that consumers have of a brand, based on their exposure to the brand. This consists of both the image that consumers form of the brand and their experience with the brand”. Influencers play a pivotal role in the comprehensive marketing landscape, utilizing platforms amplifying brand visibility with the ability to shape customer attitudes through their tailored content, thereby developing associations with a brand (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021, p.231).

Influencers shape brand perceptions by fostering interactions between customers and brands, consequently possibly boosting the brand’s profitability (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021, p.232). Whether it is through engaging posts, captivating images, or innovative videos, influencers may employ a range of tools to attract and persuade their audience. The perceived value of the content, both in terms of information and entertainment, is critical in shaping brand perceptions (Lou & Yuan, 2019, p.67). Notably, the unique content influencers generate can often snowball, with engaged audiences amplifying the brand message further (Childers, Lemon & Hoy, 2019, p.268).

Influencers employ various strategies to enhance their impact on brand perception. For instance, the genuine promoting of brands to both their followers and a broader audience is often perceived more as authentic electronic Word Of Mouth (eWOM) rather than blatant advertising and brand-generated messages (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020, p. 98). This allows the influencers to shape their followers’ opinions, creating specific perceptions for brands (De Veirman et al., 2017, p.813). Moreover, by subtly integrating sponsored content without overtly displaying commercial relationships, influencers can mitigate resistance from their audience and avoid ad skepticism (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020, p.98) enhancing persuasion and engagement.

Some scholars argue, that influencers have nurtured their following by developing genuine connections, sharing personal anecdotes, and maintaining open dialogues with their audience. This “real” relationship between influencers and their followers can be instrumental in brand messaging, with influencers leveraging the rapport they have built to endorse brands or products effectively. Such endorsements may resonate more with consumers than traditional advertisements, given the trust already placed in the influencer. These types of recommendations allow them to also build trust towards a brand from a third-party position. (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021, p.221).

While a massive follower count might seem like an influencer’s primary asset, De Veirman et al. (2017, p.813) argue that an overemphasis on sheer numbers could inadvertently dilute a brand's perceived uniqueness. Instead of focusing solely on the number of followers, brands should prioritize influencers whose audience aligns closely with their product or service in terms of interests and activities. By doing so, brands can preserve a sense of exclusivity and uniqueness, ultimately fostering a positive perception among consumers (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021, p.231).

In literature, credibility is identified as another pivotal factor influencing the efficacy of influencer marketing and its impact on brand perception. Factors such as trustworthiness, expertise, likeness, and even physical attractiveness play into this credibility (Lou & Yuan, 2019, p.61). However, influencer marketing is not without its challenges. Many recent scholars argue, that while influencers have the ability to positively affect a brand, they also might negatively affect a brand's image or reputation, particularly if their behavior contradict the brand's values or the expectations of the target audience (Reinikainen et al., 2021). Hence, it is important to note that a perceived lack of expertise, especially when an influencer endorses a product outside their typical realm, can harm brand perception and negatively affect purchase intentions (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017, p.29-30). Thus, congruency between the influencer's image and the brand becomes pivotal. When consumers admire or identify with an influencer, the association can strengthen the brand's perception (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021, p.231). Additionally, through experience, people have become more adept at identifying persuasive communication and using coping mechanisms to protect themselves from being persuaded. When they recognize that the content is advertising, they employ strategies like increased skepticism, resistance, and counterarguments. These strategies, in turn, can have adverse effects on their attitudes towards the brand and the advertising, as well as their behavioral intentions. (Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017, p.139-140.)

According to Warren et al. (2019, p.47), the selection of endorsers influences brand perceptions, as well as the perceived coolness of the brand. The congruence between a brand and its endorser has been deemed important by many scholars, since the alignment between a brand and its endorser impacts advertisement efficiency, brand beliefs and purchase intentions (Fleck, Korchia & Le Roy, 2012, p.658). A study conducted by Park and Yim (2020, p.5) emphasized that the perceived alignment between a brand and its endorser is also crucial in enhancing the brand's perceived luxury. In regards of social media influencers, Dhun & Dangi (2023, p.58) stated that the similarity and alignment between a brand and an influencer has a positive relationship with brand attitude. The alignment between a brand and an influencer not only has favorable effects on the brand, but on the influencer's image as well (Breves, Liebers, Abt & Kunze, 2019, p.440).

3.3 Artists' as influencers

The concept of influencers builds upon the foundation of traditional celebrity endorsements (De Veirman et al., 2017, p.802). In the digital age, artists have embraced the role of influencers by finding new ways to engage with their audiences. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have become vital tools for artists to promote their work such as new songs and connect with their audiences. Within these platforms, artists have gained substantial followings and they have started to include promotional brand deals on their social media platforms. Scholars such as Enke and Brochers (2019), have expanded their examination of influencers to encompass a

broader spectrum, which includes celebrities, by the means that they too leverage their platforms to endorse specific ideas or products.

Dhanesh & Duthler (2019, p.3) state, that social media influencers share many similarities with celebrity endorsers. However, some scholars argue, that compared to traditional celebrities, influencers have exhibited stronger ability to impact consumer purchase intentions (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p.3). However, since the main focus of this study is on the effect influencers have on brand perception, rather than the impact on consumer purchasing intentions, this paper views artists with a large following on social media to be within the spectrum of influencers.

4 THE INTERPLAY OF INFLUENCERS AND BRAND COOLNESS

As stated, cool brands are valued in the marketplace and brands seek ways to enhance their image with this impactful trait. Having the power to shape brand narratives and perceptions (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021, p.231), influencers have opened up new ways for brands to position themselves as cool. This chapter aims to examine the interplay between influencers and brand coolness, including the concept of influencer coolness, influencer spillover effect, the ways coolness may part from influencers to brands, and finally, the implications influencer endorsements have on brand coolness.

4.1 Influencer spillover effect

This chapter discusses the impact of influencers on the brands they are affiliated with, through the theory of spillover effect. In marketing, spillover as an effect can be found in many different activities (Wang & Korschun, 2015, p.598). Lay-Hwa Bowden et al. (2017, p.878) stated that a brand's perception is highly influenced by external factors and it can be easily affected by external affiliations. Their study illustrated that in online brand communities, both positive and negative engagement between consumers regarding a brand can extend to impact the brand itself, even when there is no direct engagement between the brand and the consumer. In the case of influencers, Reinikainen et al. (2020, p.290) have found that positive emotions can spill over from influencers to brands. In this paper, an influencer spillover effect refers to the phenomenon where the associations, traits, attributes and in the case of this paper the perceived coolness, associated with influencers spill over to the brands they endorse or collaborate with as demonstrated in figure 3.

Positive emotions have been found to spill over from influencers to brands (Reinikainen et al., 2020, p. 290). A consumers positive association to an influencer can create positive associations to a brand the influencer is collaborating or otherwise in close

affiliation with. According to Jaitly & Gautam (2021, p.221), influencers have gained their followers trust, which brands may use in their advantage in delivering their brand messages through the influencers in question. The writers state that through parasocial relationships between influencers and consumers, influencers are able to create trust towards brands as third-party endorsers. (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021 p.221.) Reinikainen et al. (2020, p.284-285) also state that by affecting brand attitudes, influencers are able to create trust, which in turn affects consumers purchase intentions towards the brands. However, as discussed in chapter 3.2, a perceived lack of expertise, especially when an influencer endorses a product outside their typical realm, can harm brand perception and negatively affect purchase intentions (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017, p.29-30).

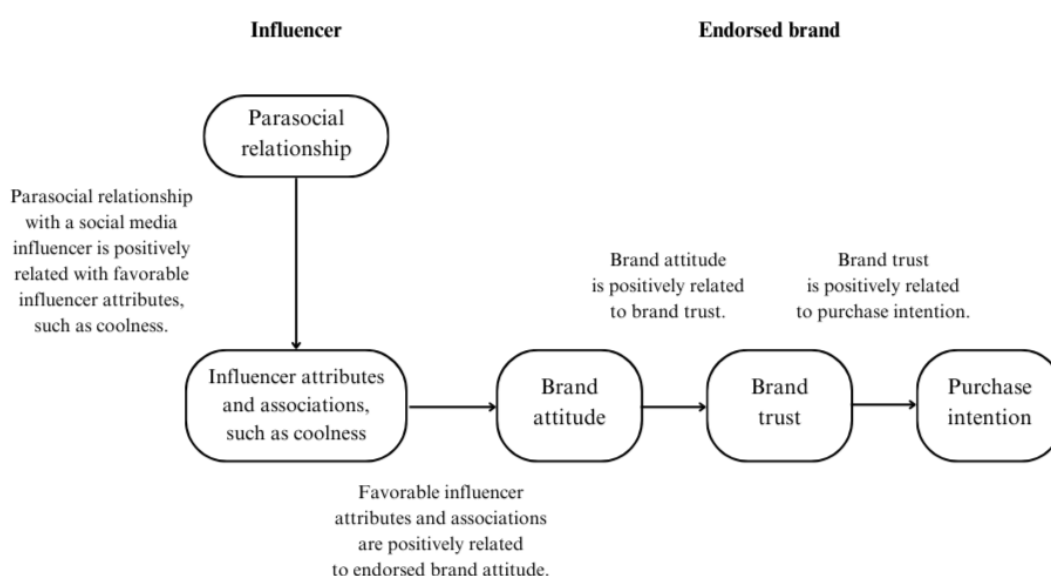


FIGURE 3. Spillover effect from influencer to brand (modified from Reinikainen et al., 2021, p.4; Reinikainen et al., 2020, p.284).

While the influencer spillover effect can potentially result in positive outcomes, it is by no means guaranteed. Reinikainen et al. (2021, p.4) findings indicate that an influencers transgressions can negatively affect a brand it is affiliated with. If a social media influencer is perceived to have betrayed their audience, it can have negative effects on brand perceptions, attitudes, trust, and purchase intentions towards the brand they have endorsed. Consequently, when a brand is perceived to have betrayed its audience, it can have negative consequences on how followers perceive the coolness of the social media influencer who endorsed the brand. This also affects the parasocial relationships between the influencer and their followers. Hence, for both the influencer and the brand, careful consideration when selecting partners for collaboration is advised. (Reinikainen et al., 2021, p.2.)

On the contrary, Carrillat, O'Rourke and Plourde (2019, p.1208) encourage brands to embrace controversial celebrities as endorsers. They suggest that a celebrity who may be considered provocative or even outrageous, could be advantageous for the brand endorsed, especially if the endorsers persona aligns with the brand's intended image. According to the Warren et al. (2019, p.39), rebellious brands that go against the grain or challenge the status quo are perceived as cool. This is supported by a study conducted by Pantin-Sohier et al. (2023, p.14), that found that in terms of brand coolness, using moderately incongruent rap artists as endorses, the endorsed brands were seen as more rebellious. The writers also suggest that if young consumers value the characteristic of rebelliousness, then brands should select endorsers who embody this characteristic.

4.2 Influencer coolness

This chapter introduces the concept of influencer coolness, defined by Reinikainen et al. (2021, p.2), as a desirable success factor for social media influencers. Linked to brand trust and parasocial relationships, influencer coolness contributes significantly to their attractiveness and effectiveness. Besides attracting followers, the coolness of an influencer also makes them potential partners for brands looking to align themselves with cool endorsers. (Reinikainen et al., 2021, p.3.)

Coolness, as discovered, is a complex trait, affected by levels of being perceived as authentic, original, subcultural, energetic, appealing, iconic, popular, high of status, rebellious, extraordinary or useful (Warren et al., 2019, p.39). Different brands, such as Apple, and celebrities, such as Beyoncé and Jay-Z have been deemed cool (Warren et al., 2019, p.36). Interest lies in determining how influencers, sometimes considered as "human brands", embody coolness (Reinikainen et al., 2021, p.3). Reinikainen et al. (2021, p.2) introduced the concept of influencer coolness, suggesting that the traits that make a brand cool can also be extended to personal brands, such as influencers. Given the subjectivity of coolness, an influencers coolness is dependent upon the followers views and opinions. Consequently, any disparities or betrayals by the influencer can severely hinder an influencers coolness in the eyes of their followers. (Cocker, Mardon & Daunt, 2021, p.1844.) As discussed in the previous chapter, influencer coolness can be endangered through the influencers betrayals as well as betrayals of a brand the influencer is endorsing (Reinikainen et al., 2021, p.1).

4.3 Implications of endorsement on brand coolness

In relation to the spillover effect, Belk et al. (2010, p.202) introduce the concept of imparted coolness. According to the writers, when consumers regard certain individuals embodying coolness, their association with a brand impacts the consumers' brand perceptions, causing the consumers to view the brand through the lens of the individual's coolness (Belk et al., 2010, p.203). So, as highlighted by the writers, the

ability of a brand to be perceived as cool can often be impacted by people who already possess a cool aura. When cool influencers align themselves with a brand, it reflects back to customers, conveying to them the brand's intrinsic coolness. Warren et al. (2019, p.40) also postulate, that brands that maintain connections with subcultures stand a higher chance of being perceived as cool. Brands that embed themselves within relevant and cool subcultures by choosing their endorsers and collaborators strategically, resonate more deeply with their target demographics.

However, as covered in the earlier chapters, in addition to affecting brand personality perceptions, the choice of endorsers affects the perceived coolness of a brand (Warren et al., 2019, p. 47). As previously mentioned, scholars have emphasized the cruciality of the alignment between a brand and its endorser. However, the question of whether coolness transfers from influencer to brand or from brand to influencer when there is a lack of congruence between the two remains unanswered in previous literature.

As stated, Belk et al. (2010, p.202) suggest that brands may capitalize on the imparted coolness of individuals deemed cool by the masses. Furthermore, Reinikainen et al. (2020, p.290) have found that positive emotions can spill over from influencers to brands. According to Kumar (2021, p.41), brand coolness indirectly impacts brand love through brand attitude. This empirical model offers a theoretical framework that can be expanded by integrating influencers. Drawing on Kumar's (2021), Belk et al.'s (2010), and Reinikainen et al.'s (2020) findings, it can be theorized that influencers known for their coolness might enhance the perceived coolness of a brand. This, in turn, might lead to increased brand attitude and love, leveraging the influencer's "spillover cool effect".

5 CONCLUDING THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter concludes the theoretical framework for the study, aiming to explore the perceptions and characteristics of brand coolness as well as the effect of influencer proximity in the context of a specific brand, Vitunleija Oy. The framework outlines the essential theories, concepts, variables and relationships that are used when addressing the research questions introduced earlier. Aiming to answer the defined research questions, the study will leverage several theoretical constructs introduced in the previous chapters, encompassing brand coolness, influencer marketing and influencer spillover effect. Important theoretical concepts have been discussed, providing insights into what constitutes coolness, how influencers and influencer marketing shape brand perceptions, and the mechanisms behind the transfer of coolness. The framework establishes the groundwork for comprehending the research's scope, guiding the processes of data collection and analysis as well as interpreting the findings.

The previous chapters have pointed out some gaps in the current literature regarding coolness and its transmission. Notably, there is a recognized need for a more in-depth comprehension of the influencer spillover effect within specific organizational contexts. Additionally, the subjective nature of coolness perception poses a challenge in quantifying the extent to which coolness transfers from influencers to brands, and while existing research has touched upon this issue, a more refined approach is deemed necessary. To address these gaps, the theoretical framework tailored to the unique context of Vitunleija Oy is proposed. The theoretical framework is built upon the theories and empirical models by Warren et al. (2021), Reinikainen et al. (2021), Belk (2010) and Kumar (2021).

Incorporating influencer spillover effect, the characteristics of coolness and the effects coolness has on brand attitude and brand love into a singular framework creates a comprehensive model that delves into the relationship between these branding elements. Drawing insights from Belk et al. (2010) and Reinikainen et al. (2021), it is theorized that influencers renowned for their coolness can enhance the perception of brand coolness, which in this study this will be called the "spillover cool effect". Consequently, this may lead to a rise in brand attitude and love, capitalizing on the influencer's "spillover cool effect". The Brand Coolness Characteristics, as outlined by Warren et al. (2019, p.39), encompass attributes like authenticity, originality,

subcultural appeal, and rebelliousness, delineating the essence of brand coolness. These characteristics serve as a guiding framework for the data collection process, facilitating the identification of aspects of coolness most pertinent to Vitunleija Oy and brands and influencers in general. Moreover, they aid in discerning the characteristics that can be transferred from influencers to the brand.

The theoretical framework will serve as a lens through which the research findings will be interpreted. It allows for contextualizing the results within existing knowledge about brand coolness, influencer marketing, imparted coolness and the specific characteristics that define coolness. By examining how the defined brand coolness characteristics are perceived by the customers and repeat buyers of Vitunleija Oy, the study will evaluate the extent to which the brand aligns with these characteristics. The study will explore the role of influencers in shaping brand coolness and examine whether the proximity of influencers leads to distinctive perceptions of the brand. The transfer of coolness from influencers to brands will be assessed by identifying which characteristics of brand coolness are influenced by the proximity of influencers. The research will seek to examine whether influencer-brand associations lead to the improvement of coolness characteristics and how these characteristics affect the brand's image. The theoretical framework also serves as a foundation for communicating and sharing knowledge when presenting the research findings. The theoretical framework guiding the data collection is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

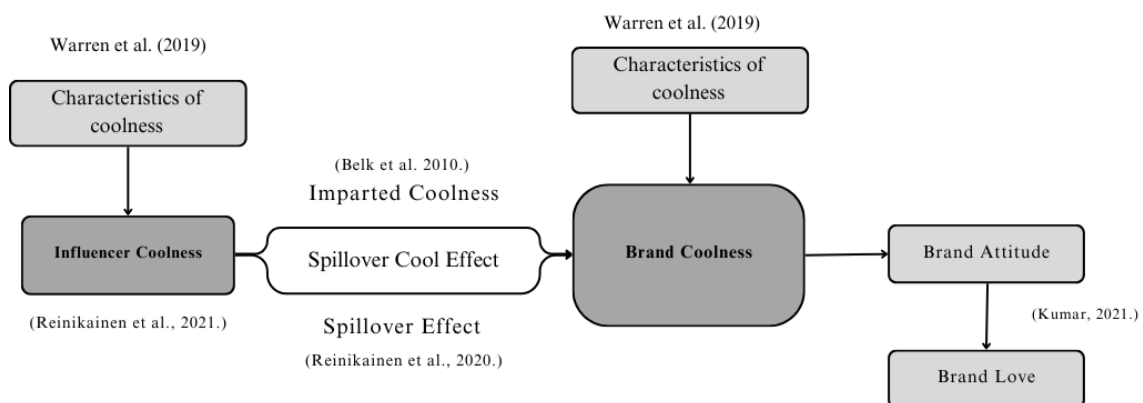


FIGURE 4. Theoretical framework of the study

The figure illustrates the interplay between the key constructs of the theoretical background: characteristics of coolness, influencer proximity, transfer of coolness and the indirect implications it has on brand love. Arrows depict the relationships and interactions between these constructs, highlighting their role in addressing the research questions. Distinct boxes are positioned above both brand and 'influencer coolness' (Reinikainen et al., 2021, p.2), indicating that both influencer and brand coolness construct of specific characteristics of coolness, introduced by Warren et al. (2019, p.39). Arrow emanating from influencer coolness to brand coolness is based on the

concepts of imparted coolness (Belk et al., 2010, p.202) and influencer spillover effect (Reinikainen et al., 2020, p.290), which denote the transfer of coolness from an influencer to a brand – “spillover cool effect”. This also indicates the potential transfer of specific coolness characteristics from influencers to brands. The research attempts to discern which characteristics undergo this transfer within the context of the case of the study. Further an arrow extending from brand coolness to brand attitude and subsequently to brand love, indicates an indirect effect that brand coolness has on brand love by shaping brand attitude (Kumar, 2021, p.45). The visual representation of the framework illustrates the connections between key elements, enhancing the comprehension of their relationships within the research context.

With the theoretical foundation laid, the move towards the practical research part of this thesis is initiated. Following chapters, will explore the case organization’s background, discuss the methods of data collection and analysis, with the goal of narrowing the gap between theory and practice.

6 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research philosophy and methodology, as well as the data sources employed for this thesis, accompanied by a rationale for the chosen methods. Qualitative research was used as the research approach and semi-structured interviews were used in gathering the data. The interviews were conducted with individuals who are customers and repeat buyers of the Finnish brand Vitunleija. Furthermore, the research philosophies guiding this study and the methods of analysis will be discussed in this chapter, as well as the ethical aspects related to data collection.

6.1 Research approach

Within the wide array of research methodologies, the decision to utilize qualitative or quantitative methods is influenced by many factors, such as the research philosophy, specific research inquiries, the subject's characteristics, and the depth of understanding sought. In the context of this study, seeking to delve into the nuanced dynamics of influencer spillover effects and brand coolness, the selection leaned towards a qualitative approach as the most suitable.

Research philosophy refers to the beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge, including ontological assumptions and epistemological assumptions. Ontological assumptions mean the assumptions about the realities the researcher encounters, whereas the epistemological assumptions refer to assumptions of human knowledge. The researchers' assumptions shape and influence the research process, the methods chosen and the way the findings are interpreted. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019, p.130.) The research philosophy underlying this research aligns with interpretivism. Interpretivism emphasizes the subjectivity of humans and the importance of individually created meanings, formed in differentiating times and circumstances, such as cultural backgrounds. In the context of this research, this means acknowledging that individuals create meanings based on their own realities and experiences. (Saunders et al., 2019, p.148-149.)

Qualitative research places a premium on depth and detail, striving to comprehensively grasp the essence and attributes of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Hirsijärvi, Remes & Sajavaara, 2009; Alasuutari, 2011). This strategy accentuates the perspectives and experiences of participants, exerting an influence on the study's outcomes. The purpose of qualitative research is to obtain in-depth knowledge about the subject under investigation and to depict real-life situations (Kananen, 2017, p. 33), and given the study's intent to explore the nuanced relationship between influencers and brand perceptions, the depth that qualitative research offers is invaluable. Qualitative research provides a framework that appreciates the complexities of real-life scenarios, enabling the capturing of the richness of individual experiences (Rich & Ginsburg 1999, p.372) and the multifaceted nature of brand-influencer dynamics. Qualitative research seeks to uncover the 'why' and 'how' behind behaviors, perceptions, and decisions. The best and most dependable responses to the more specific queries of 'what', 'when', 'whether or not', and 'how many' occurrences occur are typically provided by quantitative methods. However, it is not always obvious 'what' to explore in the early phases of research. In that situation, problems can be found, and hypotheses can be produced through qualitative research. The ability of quantitative research to characterize individuals is constrained. Quantitative research can show what happens to individuals from different demographic groups, but it is limited in examining the intricate interactions between variables that result in a person's decision or behaviour. (Rich & Ginsburg 1999, p.371-372.) Although qualitative research often involves a limited sample size, an exhaustive analysis is pursued, acknowledging the potential limitations in generalizability (Alasuutari, 2011).

Qualitative methodologies, such as semi-structured interviews, provide a level of flexibility not typically available in quantitative approaches. They allow researchers to probe further, adjust questions based on responses, and explore unanticipated avenues that might arise during the research process. (Alasuutari, 2011.) This adaptability is particularly beneficial when delving into a topic as subjective and dynamic as brand coolness. Rather than just confirming existing hypotheses, qualitative research often aims to generate new ideas and theories (Rich & Ginsburg 1999, p.372). Given that the realm of influencer-brand interactions and brand coolness is still relatively understudied, the exploratory nature of qualitative research can bring forward new insights and perspectives.

Qualitative research prioritizes the holistic understanding of subjects and prioritize the voice of the participant (Rich & Ginsburg 1999, p.372). By engaging directly with customers and repeat buyers of the case organization, an attempt is made to piece together a comprehensive narrative that elucidates the brand's positioning and perception. In a study such as this, where individual perceptions and experiences are paramount, it is essential that participants are given a platform where their views can be expressed openly.

A challenge in qualitative research is how the researcher understands the subject and, conversely, how the subject perceives the researcher and the posed questions. Each interviewee interprets the researcher and questions in their own way, and different researchers may interpret the interviewee's responses differently. It is crucial to recognize that the researcher can only interpret what the interviewee shares and says,

without knowing the underlying thoughts behind the answers. The researcher's presence may also influence the interviewee and their responses. Thus, the researcher cannot definitively know the accuracy of the responses but can only interpret what the interviewees choose to disclose. (Kallinen & Kinnunen, 2021.) The researcher in qualitative research must strive to be as neutral and objective as possible. The researcher's beliefs and attitudes should not influence or interfere with the research subject. (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998.)

6.2 Research method

In exploring the complex relationship between influencers and brand coolness, the chosen research method is crucial. Due to the intricate and subjective nature of coolness, a flexible, in-depth, and nuanced research approach is essential. For this study, the chosen method for collecting data and further attempting to answer the proposed research questions was semi-structured interviews. Interview as a data collection method is flexible and during interviews, questions can be repeated and clarified, in order to avoid misunderstandings. The purpose of interviews is to gather as much information as possible about the subject under investigation. Interview questions or themes may be provided to the interviewees in advance so that they can orient themselves to the topic. This ensures that interviews yield comprehensive answers. (Sarajärvi & Hurme, 2018; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009.) Qualitative interview research aims to understand people's perspectives and understanding of a topic, which is also the purpose of this study. (Alasuutari, 2011.)

The data collection method chosen for this study was semi-structured interviews because they allow for both consistency across interviews and flexibility for participants to provide insights that might not have been anticipated. Unlike structured interviews, which are strictly regulated by pre-determined questions, semi-structured interviews provide the leeway to explore responses in depth. If a respondent mentions an intriguing point, the interviewer has the freedom to probe further, possibly uncovering richer and more detailed insights. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008.) Every interviewee has a unique perspective and experience. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows the interviewer to tailor questions to the specific context and experiences of each respondent (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), thus ensuring that the data collected is both relevant and profound. This is especially crucial when delving into subjective topics like coolness, where participants' perceptions are nuanced and often influenced by external and internal factors. While the interviewer has a set of guiding questions, the semi-structured format ensures they do not steer respondents into specific answers. While maintaining the core objectives of the research, semi-structured interviews strike a balance. They offer a framework to ensure all vital areas are covered while leaving room for unexpected but valuable insights to emerge. Given the subject's novelty – the intersection of influencers and brand coolness – a semi-structured interview allows for the unexpected and the novel to emerge. This format facilitates a two-way conversation,

enabling the interviewer to clarify, rephrase, or delve deeper based on the interviewee's feedback. (Hopf, 2004, p.204.)

Preparation for and the conduct of interviews is influenced by the need to avoid certain data quality issues, such as issues of bias, associated with semi-structured interviews (Hopf, 2004, p.207-208). Establishing an interview protocol is important in order to maintain uniformity and consistency during data collection. This protocol not only encompasses the set of questions but also includes a brief summary on the research topic, an overview of the interview procedure, an opportunity for participants to seek clarifications about the research or interview, and necessary consents. (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012.) Additionally, in the pursuit of clarity, interviewers should employ straightforward language and maintain an impartial tone throughout the interview process, ensuring that participants can grasp the intent and meaning of the questions. Furthermore, it is important that the interview questions align with the theoretical framework underpinning the study and with the research objectives. This alignment serves as an essential requirement for the successful gathering of data and the achievement of research objectives. (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012.)

6.3 Empirical context

In this chapter, the background of the case organization is introduced. Studying a single case organization was selected as a methodological approach for this thesis since the aim was to add understanding of the perceived coolness of a particular organization within its social context and with its unique influencer endorsements. A single case study was chosen in order to gain in-depth understanding by exploring a single organization comprehensively. The case organization in question also offers contextual relevance, due to its unique setting of being deeply embedded with influencers, starting from the brand founder. Furthermore, one goal was to be able to provide practical insights for the case organization and its managers, besides solely academic purposes of the thesis.

The organization in question was chosen as the case organization of this thesis due to its growing popularity among young Finnish consumers, as well as the very unique setting of having an influencer as the founder of company. The case organization is a clothing company called Vitunleija, the name loosely translated as “fucking fly”. Consequently, according to Urban Dictionary, to be “fly” is to be cool (“Fly”, 2011). The unique setting and marketplace of the organization, being driven by their cool image and influencers, provides a great opportunity to explore how branding, influencer support, and the idea of being cool manifest together.

Founded in 2020, Vitunleija Oy, referred to as vitunleija or vitunleija®, has made a significant mark in the Finnish clothing industry from its base in Helsinki. The brand distinguishes itself by marketing its products through pop-up events as well as its dedicated online platform, with almost 50 thousand Instagram followers as of today. The brand's founder started the company by first selling used and customed clothes on

Instagram, and later ventured into designing original clothing. The brand's founder is a well-known social media influencer, who has been described as a multitalented celebrity. (Vitunleija, 2023.) The brand founder has a popular personal TikTok account with over 138 thousand followers, that they frequently use in advertising vitunleija and its products.

The brand is known for organizing popular pop-up events featuring current artists, giving away custom-designed t-shirts and shooting them into the crowds using a shirt cannon (Mattila & Nousiainen, 2022). Vitunleija's association with the music industry also provides it with a distinct identity. In 2022 the brand signed a record deal with Warner's subsidiary, Babyface. Shortly after the announcement, Vitunleija released its first single, "Make-up", which featured Finnish rap artists DAVI, Cledos, and william. The brand has also toured clubs and even hosted its own Vitunleija festival in April 2023. The events curated by Vitunleija feature various rappers and DJs. (Vitunleija, 2023.)

Vitunleija targets a demographic primarily consisting of young individuals around the ages between 13 to 25 (Mattila & Nousiainen, 2022). The brand's identity and its edgy image is deeply rooted in the idea of coolness. With its relations to the music industry, creating sold-out events, and collaborating with the most popular artists, the brand is very culturally relevant and timely. Vitunleija uses a variety of strategies to maintain its image of coolness, such as provocative product designs. The brand's social media and other marketing campaigns often showcase advertisements featuring well-known Finnish rappers and influencers, further amplifying the brand's reach and credibility.

Vitunleija has a strong online presence on social media, especially on Instagram, with almost 50 000 followers. The brand uses this channel to display its items and clothing drops. Vitunleija's Instagram account has high engagement rates, averaging around 5,000 likes each post. This high degree of interaction shows the level of which the brand resonates with its target audience. Additionally, the brand's usage of emojis and slang in communication adds to its relevance within the target market, fostering a sense of authenticity and relatability. From the brand's social media, it can be detected that the brand has implemented a strategy aimed at cultivating a feeling of exclusivity and stimulating a fear of missing out in its customers. This strategy is manifested through limited-edition clothing releases, where in the majority of their clothing items are made available in small batches. Furthermore, the brand occasionally employs a practice of password protection on its website, restricting access to its products to individuals possessing the required password.

6.4 Data collection

Such a subjective concept, as coolness, requires a deep understanding and the need for insights from those who interact with the brand under examination. In this study, answers to the research questions were sought through a qualitative research method,

and the data was collected through individual, semi-structured interviews. This chapter outlines the collection of data, the method of choosing the participants and conducting the interviews.

Diverse strategies can be used in qualitative research to find and recruit participants who willingly provide the data needed for a study (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 141). Since one focus of this research was specifically on the brand Vitunleija and its customers, it made sense to interview those consumers, who interact and are familiar with the brand. The brand's boutique in Helsinki was chosen as the location for the participant recruitment. It was anticipated that this would allow the participation of frequent and occasional customers, as well as for example older demographics shopping for other people before Christmas.

At the store, a notice was displayed, inviting customers of legal age to participate in the study. This notice detailed the scope of the research, the expected time commitment, the interview format, and an incentive—a chance to win a 100€ gift card to Vitunleija. The rationale for providing an incentive was multifaceted. By incorporating an incentive, it was aimed to acknowledge and appreciate the time and contribution of participants and to encourage a more diverse pool of applicants, ensuring a comprehensive and diverse collection of experiences and perceptions. The notice left to the store can be found in the appendices (Appendix 1).

Twenty individuals signed up for the interview, and out of them, 19 were interviewed. One of the registrants mentioned being a minor in the email exchange, so they were not interviewed. The interviews were conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams between December 2023 and February 2024. The interview times were arranged via email with the participants. Before the interviews, all participants were sent an email containing information about the study, a privacy notice, and a link for the online meeting. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission, and the transcription of the initial recordings began in early January. The duration of the interviews ranged between 10 and 20 minutes. Table 2, shows the age of the participants. The participant's ID is marked in front of the quotes in the results section of the study.

Table 2. Background information of the participants

Participant:	Age:
P1	18
P2	18
P3	18
P4	19
P5	20
P6	20
P7	18
P8	19
P9	18
P10	19

P11	20
P12	26
P13	22
P14	18
P15	18
P16	21
P17	19
P18	23
P19	18

The interview structure was designed to discover the participants' perceptions about brand and influencer coolness in general, the coolness factors specific to Vitunleija, and the influence of the personalities associated with the brand. The interviews aimed to uncover the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that shape their perceptions of brand and influencer coolness and the effect influencers may have on brands. Moreover, in designing the interview structures, care was taken to ensure flexibility. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, there was room for participants to diverge and introduce new themes or insights that had not been anticipated. Furthermore, the importance of neutrality was taken into consideration. The phrasing of questions was crafted with the aim to avoid leading the participants. This was meant to ensure that the responses obtained were more genuine and unbiased, thus providing a more accurate representation of the participants' true perceptions and beliefs. The interview structure can be found in the appendices (Appendix 2).

Each interview started out with seeking permission to record the interview, a reassurance regarding confidentiality of their responses and a brief introduction about the study's intent. This not only built trust but set the stage for an open conversation. The interview framework consisted of predetermined questions. Each interviewee went through all the questions, but the emphasis between them varied depending on the interviewee. Additional clarifying questions were asked based on the answers, and questions were repeated as needed. The additional questions were deemed relevant to the study, providing deeper insights into the topic. This approach helped bring out the interviewees' own perspectives on the subject, and also allowed for different, yet valuable perspectives that deviated from the predetermined questions to emerge, benefitting the study.

The interview questions were based on the theoretical framework, as well as the research questions of the study. The questions aimed to extract participants' perceptions of Vitunleija Oy as a brand, delve into their understanding of coolness, and assess the influence of associated influencers on the brand's coolness. Additionally, the interview sought insights into participants' views on the alignment between influencers and the brand, instances of positive or negative impact influencers have on brand coolness, and actions of influencers that could harm a brand's coolness. The participants were also prompted to select and discuss characteristics from predefined lists and express any additional thoughts or considerations not covered by the structured questions. One question regarding brand attitude and brand love affected by coolness was inquired by

asking if the coolness of a brand affects the likelihood of a consumers' likelihood to follow a brand on social media. This structured yet flexible approach ensured consistency across interviews while allowing individual experiences to stand out. The base of the customer interview and its linkage to the different parts of the theoretical framework can be found in table below.

TABLE 3. Semi-structured interview questions and their linkage to the theoretical framework

Concept of the Theoretical Framework	Corresponding Parts of the Semi-Structured Interview
Brand coolness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characteristics that define a cool brand and characteristics that enhance brand coolness • Strategies or ways for brands to become cool • Do all brands want to be perceived as cool
Influencer coolness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characteristics that define a cool influencer and characteristics that enhance influencer coolness
Spillover cool effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of influencer coolness on brands • Characteristics that travel and do not travel from influencers to brands • Positive and negative impacts of influencers on brand coolness
Coolness and brand perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of coolness in brands followed on social media
Questions specific to the case organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General perceptions of Vitunleija Oy • Characteristics that define Vitunleija Oy • Impact of influencers on Vitunleija Oy • Alignment of Vitunleija Oy and its influencers

The interviews were scheduled at times suitable for the participants, with sufficient time allocated to ensure an unhurried discourse. The interview format underwent a pre-test involving a representative from the target stakeholder group, an individual aged 18 or older, and acquainted with the case organization. The pre-test results indicated a requirement to refine the structure of two questions to enhance specificity and comprehension.

6.5 Methods of analysis

The data gathered from the interviews was analyzed by following the steps of qualitative content analysis. Content analysis is a flexible approach that can be applied in various qualitative studies (White & Marsh, 2006, p.22). In content analysis, the key is to identify consistent and recurring themes and content in the material. The researcher analyzes the text in content analysis and draws conclusions that provide answers to the

research questions posed. In qualitative content analysis, new themes relevant to the study may also emerge, which were not anticipated. In such a situation, the researcher can adjust their research questions to align with the discovered content. The questions can be modified to better align with the results and their emphases. (White & Marsh, 2006, p.34.) In this research, the research questions were reshaped multiple times, and they achieved their final form at the very end of the writing process.

Transcription serves as the initial phase of data analysis, allowing the researcher to make initial observations and interpretations of the material (Kallinen & Kinnunen, 2021). The interviews were transcribed verbatim, excluding unnecessary repetitions, pauses, intonation, or the interviewee's tone, as they were not essential to the study. The transcribed text totaled 48 pages. The interview answers were mainly translated manually, with exception of some highly colloquial words, that were translated with the assistance of AI. Some highly colloquial words were adjusted for better understanding, and certain English words used by the interviewees were translated into Finnish as well. The results section of the study includes direct quotes from the interviews, illustrating and substantiating the drawn conclusions. Direct quotes have been translated into English, with the original Finnish version also included.

Numerous approaches to analyzing qualitative research draw upon initial steps akin to content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). Initially, the thesis focused on determining the specific components of the collected data that were of primary interest. In the study, content analysis is theory-driven. In theory-driven content analysis, the analysis is guided by theory, and the results are formulated based on both the collected data and the theoretical framework. The goal of content analysis is to condense the collected diverse material into a simplified form, ensuring that the information it contains is not lost. The purpose of condensation is to make the material clear and highlight observations crucial to the research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

After transcription, the gathered data from the interviews was coded. Coding can be viewed as a tool within content analysis; however, it serves as the initial phase in handling qualitative research data. This phase involves organizing and categorizing the material, laying the groundwork for the subsequent analysis. Coding functions as a means to both simplify intricate and abundant raw data and to bring it into a structured form. Coding is not merely a technical classification task; it actively contributes to the creation of categories, subcategories, and material summaries. (Juhila, Ed.) In the case of this study, coding involved combining and differentiating shorter segments of transcribed interviews based on their characteristics.

In the beginning of content analysis, the material undergoes classification and thematic organization. Classification is the process of identifying specific groups within the collected data and noting the frequency of different categories in the material (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). This categorization involves breaking down, exploring, and organizing the data to identify the most relevant contents for the research. Examples illustrating the phenomenon under investigation are extracted from the material. The analysis remained inclusive, implying that responses were encompassed in multiple categories whenever deemed appropriate. Subsequently, the material was scrutinized, and elements within

the defined area of interest were identified. These components were then extracted and differentiated from other materials using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software.

Moving into the second phase of content analysis, the material is grouped or clustered. Here, it is crucial to compare, combine, and differentiate the contents found in the material, creating subcategories. In the final stage of content analysis, the material is conceptualized, and theory is integrated into the analysis. The subcategories are then formed into categories. Findings are then synthesized, observations are explained and justified, and the results are compared with previous studies (Alasuutari, 2011; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

During content analysis, it was attempted to proceed according to the process mentioned above. After transcribing, the material was carefully examined by reading through the transcribed text. Subsequently, with the help of Atlas.ti, those parts of the transcribed text that were particularly relevant to the research were isolated, thus condensing the material. Following this, the extracted contents from the material were grouped and compared, using color codes to mark contents belonging to the same category. The formation of subcategories was facilitated by the use of color codes, providing a clearer overview of the whole. Contents describing the same aspect were grouped into the same subcategories and labeled with a title describing the category. Various contents were revealed by the material, highlighting the subjectivity of coolness.

In the final stage of content analysis, subcategories were combined, and overarching categories were formed based on existing literature. Thematic patterns were identified in this research, guided by the pre-established theoretical framework, organizing the results cohesively. The first main theme of the study was about how coolness is understood in brands and influencers. The characteristics of coolness were also explored under this main theme, under which several subcategories emerged. The second main theme explored the impact of influencers on brand coolness and the transferability of coolness characteristics from influencer to brands. Finally, the third main theme focused on the impacts coolness has on brand perceptions. At the end of the content analysis, the findings from the data were integrated with the existing literature and reflected on the identified themes in relation to theory. Using previous literature, the aim was also to explain and justify the conclusions drawn from the data. The themes are presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Main and sub-themes formed from the collected data

Main and Sub-themes Formed from the Collected Data
The Participant's Perspectives on Brand and Influencer Coolness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions and characteristics of brand coolness • Strategies to achieve brand coolness • Characteristics of Vitunleija Oy • Definitions and characteristics of influencer coolness
Impact of Influencers on Brand Coolness: Spillover Cool Effect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive impacts of influencers on brand coolness

- Negative impacts of influencers on brand coolness
- Impact of influencers on Vitunleija Oy
- Transferring characteristics of coolness

Coolness and Brand Perceptions

7 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the results are presented and examined. The results section is based on the data collected through the semi-structured interviews. The data formed three main themes, as presented earlier in chapter 7.4. The research findings progress according to these themes. The first theme provides a general understanding of how the participants perceived the coolness of the case organization, as well as the coolness of brands and influencers in general. Furthermore, this theme delves into the participants' perspectives on the common strategies brands may adopt to enhance their perceived coolness. The second theme presents and scrutinizes the findings related to the impact of influencers on brand coolness. In this theme, the positive as well as negative impacts of influencers on brand coolness are examined, as well as the impact influencers have on the case organization. Moreover, this theme highlights the characteristics that are more and less likely to transfer from influencers to brands they are affiliated with. The third theme focuses on the connection and importance of brand coolness in forming brand perceptions.

7.1 The participants' perspectives on brand and influencer coolness

From previous literature, there is no direct and universal definition for the term cool, which is why, before being presented with the coolness characteristics defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 39), the participants were asked to define what coolness means to them and what traits, in their opinion, define a cool brand. The participants in the study approached coolness from various perspectives, and the concept revealed several different meanings to them.

On one hand, coolness was seen as the ability to stand out from the crowd, but on the other hand, it was also considered essential that in order to be cool, one needs to follow and recognize all current trends. Important characteristics of coolness were perceived to include trendiness, distinctiveness, visibility, youthfulness, credibility and authenticity. Popularity also emerged in the data as one element of coolness, albeit to a lesser extent than other traits.

The data highlights that coolness is an important factor and is also seen significant regarding organizational success. Based on the material, coolness is understood as a somewhat different but closely related concept concerning brands compared to when it concerns a social media influencer. The interviewees were also asked what they think are the common ways or strategies that brands follow to become cool, which provides more insight into how customers view and understand the tactics used by brands to project coolness. The data from the interviews helps to provide an understanding of the elements that appeal and shape consumers' opinions of a brand's coolness as well as the coolness of the case organization Vitunleija.

Next, the identified themes of the interviewees' perspectives on brand coolness, influencer coolness, and Vitunleija's coolness, along with the frequency of these themes in the data, will be presented. Additionally, the strategies mentioned by the interviewees for achieving a cool status will be discussed.

7.1.1 Definitions and characteristics of brand coolness

Literature has not been able to provide a definitive definition for the concept of coolness, nor has it been able to systematically identify the characteristics differentiating cool from uncool brands (Warren et al., 2019 p. 36). The participants were asked to define coolness in their own words and to spontaneously list characteristics that they thought made a brand cool. The study's participants addressed coolness from a variety of angles, identifying several contributors to brand coolness. In the interviews, coolness was mostly perceived to mean standing out from others, trendiness, strong visibility and youthfulness. These traits are now discussed.

Distinctiveness

Various factors emerge from the data that are seen as important from the perspective of coolness. In this study, coolness, more specifically brand coolness, is strongly associated with the ability to stand out from the crowd. In the interviews, there is a strong emphasis on the connection between coolness, independence, and the idea of displaying a disregard for external influences.

P8: *“Not caring about others' opinions, doing what you want, and not imitating others.”* (“No ei kiinnosta muiden mielipiteet tekee niinku ite haluaa ja ei matki muita.”)

P11: *“There is some kind of a unique thing that just attracts people and sets them apart from others.”* (“Siin on joku semmonen oma semmonen juttu mikä just sillein houkkutelee ihmisiä ja erottaa muista.”)

P4: *“also, that stands out from the crowd and is not just the same mass but somehow special”* (“sit kans se, et erottuu joukosta eikä oo vaan sitä samaa massaa vaan jotenki spessu”)

Distinctiveness strongly correlates with the attribute of originality, as defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 37). According to the authors, originality signifies being the first of its

kind or introducing new concepts and creativity, and they view this characteristic as an essential aspect of coolness. Furthermore, this characteristic also correlates with authenticity, another attribute defined by the authors, which underscores a brand's genuineness and its commitment to staying true to its roots.

P13: *“Also, the fact that one genuinely does their own thing is, in my opinion, important for coolness; you can add it somewhere there.” “(Niin sit kans se et tekee aidosti sitä omaa juttuunsa on mun mielestä tärkeetä cooleudes; voit lisää sen sinne jonnekki”*

Trendiness

Further on, another element that emerged from the data concerning what coolness is and what characteristics define a cool brand was trendiness. The focus of this characteristic emphasized keeping up with the latest trends and developments and knowing what is in style at the moment. This characteristic strongly aligns with the characteristic of popularity, that according to Warren et al. (2019, p. 39), can be defined as a something fashionable, trendy, and liked by most people.

P9: *“like, being in and knowing all the latest trends and stuff” (“sillein in ja tiit kaikki uusimmat trendit sun muut”)*

P5: *“At least, knowing the current trends well, being on the cutting edge.” (“No ainaki et tietää just hyvin ne tän hetken trendit et on sillee aallonharjalla.”)*

P14: *“Being on trend and kind of in the loop, knowing what's happening.” (“Olla pinnalla ja sillein niinku inessä jutuissa, et tietää mitä tapahtuu.”)*

P2: *“Well, just that the brand is like, it knows what's hot right now.” (“No just sillein et se brändi on semmone et se tietää mikä poppaa täl hetkel.”)*

P6: *“Trendiness” (“Trendikkyys”)*

P18: *“Well, being cool naturally forms based on other people's perceptions and also from trends, like what trends are in the air, and maybe even being ahead of those trends.” (“No se että on cool niin tottakai muotoutuu niinku muiden ihmisten silmissä ja kans trendeistä et mitä trendei on ilmassa ja se et ehk on viel kans niitä trendejä edellä.”)*

Visibility

Another crucial aspect of what coolness is and what it consists of emerging in the interviews was visibility, particularly on social media.

P9: *“and probably a good social media game as well”* (“ja varmaa hyvä somegeimi myös”)

P4: *“Visibility”* (“Näkyvyys”)

P8: *“Is very clearly visible on social media.”* (“On somessa esillä hyvin selkeesti.”)

P1: *“At least being active and having a significant presence, especially on Instagram and TikTok.”* (“Ainakin et on aktiivinen ja iso somessa etenki Instagramis ja TikTakis.”)

Participants also highlighted the characteristic of popularity, as Warren et al. (2019, p.37) defines as being a brand that many love and talk about.

P2: *“Like cool and so that many people know who they are, and are like, “oh man, that’s them” and so on”* (“Semmonen siisti ja et tosi moni tietää sen ja sillein “ei vitsi että toi on toi” ja tällein”)

P10: *“Maybe something like being well-known and in the spotlight.”* (“No ehkä tommonen et on tunnettu ja sillein pinnalla.”)

P6: *“To be in the spotlight”* (“Olla pinnalla”)

P19: *“Well the type that everyone knows it”* (“No sellanen et kaikki tietää sen”)

Youthfulness

Based on the data, youthfulness is one of the characteristics strongly associated with coolness. According to Warren et al. (2019, p. 39), brands that evoke a sense of energy, dynamism, youth or excitement can be seen as cool. This energy can manifest in various ways, from advertising campaigns to the nature of the product or service itself. O’Donnell and Wardlow (2000, p.13), have also stated that coolness is connected with similar attributes than energetic, including youth, which was a prominent characteristic in the interviews.

P16: *“Well, I associate it at least with young people or in general, maybe knowing what young people like, for example my mom is not cool you know.”* (“No mä yhdistän sen ainaki nuoriin tai ylipäättään ehk et tietää mist nuoret tykkää, tai esim. mun mutsi ei oo cool tiäks”)

P6: *“Youthfulness”* (“Nuorekkuus”)

P7: *“Something that is popular among young people.”* (“Jotain mikä on suosittuu nuorten keskuudes.”)

P13: *“Well that you are credible among young people.” (“No et on uskottava nuorten parissa.”)*

Other Characteristics

An additional characteristic mentioned by more than one participant, was admiration.

P12: *“The kind of traits that are admired in my circle of influence.” (“No semmoset piirteet, mitkä on niinku mun vaikutuspiirissä ihailtuja piirteitä”)*

P13: *“The type that it is somehow admired and wanted.” (“No semmonen et se on jotenki ihailtu ja haluttu.”)*

Another characteristic of brand coolness mentioned was credibility. Three participants highlighted, that in order for a brand to be cool, it should pose as convincing and believable.

P1: *“Well that is is credible among young people.” (“No et on uskottava nuorten parissa.”)*

P10: *“Credibility.” (“Uskottavuus.”)*

P19: *“At least it is believable and like well cool, I dunno” (“Ainakin on uskottava ja semmonen no cool, emmätiä”)*

One participant also brought out the aspect of ethics in shaping perceptions of brand coolness, as well as the importance of brand values.

P18: *“I also think about everything like ethics, or if you are like Shein, you are not cool, or if you have your values in place, but maybe most of all, how the brand looks visually and also what kind of people work there.” (“Mul tulee myös mieleen kaikki ninku et on niinku eettisyys tai jos sä oot joku Shein sä et oo cool tai se niinku et sul on arvot kohallaan, mut ehkä eniten se milt se brändi näyttää visuaalisesti ja kans mimmosii ihmisii siel työskentelee.”)*

The different characteristics that spawned from the spontaneous questions regarding coolness, their frequency in the data, as well as a corresponding characteristic of coolness defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 39), are presented in table 5.

TABLE 5. Characteristics of brand coolness described in the data

Characteristic Described in the Data	Corresponding Characteristic of Coolness Defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 39)	Occurrence
Distinctiveness	Original, Authentic	8
Trendiness	Popular	7
Visibility	Popular	5
Youthfulness	Energetic	5
Popularity	Popular	5
Admiration		3
Credibility		3
Authenticity	Authentic	2
Ethicality		1

In order to be able to compare the defining characteristics between influencer and brand coolness, the participants were asked to pick three from the ten brand coolness characteristics defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 36), that in their opinion were the most crucial in enhancing brand coolness. The interviewees were also asked to share their insights on any additional characteristics they found crucial for enhancing brand coolness. The mentioned characteristics and their frequency can be seen in table 6. Other important enhancing characteristics mentioned, was trendiness and humor.

TABLE 6. Characteristics enhancing brand coolness

Characteristic of coolness	Occurrence
Authentic	7
Original	11
Subcultural	6
Energetic	2
Aesthetically Appealing	9
Useful / Extraordinary	4
High Status	1
Rebellious	4
Iconic	4
Popular	9
Additional characteristic mentioned:	
Trendy	1
Humoristic	1

The most frequently mentioned characteristics were “original”, “popular”, and “aesthetically appealing”, while the least mentioned characteristics were “energetic” and “high status”.

7.1.2 Strategies to achieve brand coolness

The participants were asked what they believed are the common ways or strategies that brands follow to become cool. Based on the data, one of the most important ways or strategies is enhancing the characteristics associated with brand coolness. According to the interviews, brands strive to improve the coolness attributes mentioned in the previous chapter, thereby aiming to become cool themselves. This same method is encapsulated by Warren et al. (2019, p. 53) who suggest that, if a brand is lacking in one or more component characteristics of brand coolness, the brand's image on the lacking characteristics would need to be reinforced. Most of the emerging themes were related to the following characteristics; visibility, trendiness, distinctiveness and energy.

P12: *“Well, just like the use of various social media channels, especially TikTok and Instagram, probably have the best hype right now.” (“No just se niinku noitten eri somekanavien käyttö erityisesti täl hetkel varmaa just Tiktok, Instagram varmaa kovimmas nostees täl hetkel.”)*

P5: *“At least, having a very active presence everywhere and on all different platforms.” (“No ainaki semmonen tosi aktiivinen näkyvyys kaikiällä ja kaikissa eri kanavissa.”)*

P17: *“Well, I have a bit of a conflicting response, but it seems to me that they are trying to either follow certain trends that exist or alternatively, they are trying to stand out and be specifically different from others.” (“No mulla on ehk vähän ristiriitanen vastaus, mutta musta tuntuu että ne yrittää noudattaa jotain trendejä mitä on tai sit vaihtoehtosesti ne yrittää erottua ja olla nimenomaa tosi erilaisia ku muut.”)*

P6: *“Well, they might do something trendy on TikTok or Instagram, using, for example, those sounds and songs that are trending right now.” (“No tekee vaikka just TikToki tai Instagramis jotai trendaavii trendei tai käyttää just esim niit ääni ja biisei mitkä trendaa täl hetkel.”)*

P4: *“Well, diversity and perhaps unpredictability, with some stunts and such, and also being active on various social media channels.” (“No semmonen monipuolisuus ja ehk yllätyksellisyys jotkut tempaukset ja semmoset ja sit kans aktiivisuus eri somekanavis.”)*

P18: *“Probably at least try to follow what young people are doing and then also copy some trends, for example, from the United States and overall investigate its target group.” (“Varmaan ainakin koittaa seurata mitä nuoret tekee ja sit kans kopioi jotai trendei esim. Jenkeistä ja ylipäätään tutkii sitä kohderyhmää.”)*

Apart from enhancing the characteristics of coolness, the data unveiled a few additional interesting ways or strategies that brands might utilize to achieve the cool status. Based on the interviews, one noteworthy strategy, that is discussed later in the paper, is using

cool people for marketing purposes. Promoting engagement and using humor in the brand's operations are two more emphasized themes.

P8: *“Using cool faces in their marketing.”* (“*Käyttää cooleja kasvoja niiden markkinoinnis.*”)

P19: *“Well, at least many clothing brands and some department stores or something like that take different influencers for their advertisements and pay them for some commercial collaborations.”* (“*No ainaki monet vaatemerkit ja jotkut tavaratalot tai tämmöset ottaa eri influencersit niiden mainoksii ja maksaa niille jostai kaupallisist yhteistöist.*”)

P13: *“Well, at least responding to comments humorously and doing things a bit differently than others.”* (“*No ainakin vastaa kommentteihin hausvasti ja tekee asiat vähän eri tavalla ku muut.*”)

7.1.3 Characteristics of Vitunleija Oy

In order to add understanding to the perceived coolness of the case organization, within its social context, and to provide practical insights for the case organization, the participants were presented with questions specific to Vitunleija. The participants were asked to share their general perceptions about Vitunleija Oy as a brand and later to describe the brand using three adjectives. Vitunleija evoked various associations among the participants, but reoccurring themes in the data were, the influencers and artists associated with the brand, relevance among young consumers and their curated events. Especially highlighted in the answers, was the association made between the brand and its founder.

P1: *“I immediately think of Baka.”* (“*No mulla tulee Baka heti ensimmäisenä mieleen.*”)

P5: *“Um, what comes to mind is a really youthful brand, which is currently very popular among young people, and for example, the name Vitunleija is suitable for them or they have a very clear target group there.”* (“*Öö mulle tulee mieleen tämmönen tosi nuorekas brändi, joka on niinku tällä hetkellä tosi pinnalla nuorten keskuudessa ja esim toi vitunleija nimi on sillei nuorille sopiva tai niil on must tosi selkee kohderyhmä siinki just.*”)

P7: *“What comes to mind for me are different events and Baka.”* (“*Mulle tulee mieleen erilaiset tapahtumat ja Baka.*”)

P14: *“Well, what comes to mind for me are all the rappers, for example, Cledos and then the Vitunleija song.”* (“*No mulle tulee mieleen kaikki räppärit esimerkiks Cledos ja sitten se vitunleija-biisi.*”)

When asked to describe Vitunleija using three adjectives, the most commonly cited adjectives underscored the brand being fun, youthful, original, distinctive, energetic,

colourful, trendy, surprising and cool. Out of the characteristics of coolness defined in previous literature by Warren et al. (2019, p.39), the spontaneous adjectives given regarding Vitunleija most correlated with the characteristics of “energetic”, “popular” and “original”.

P1: “Cool, fun, distinctive.” (“Cool, hauska, erottuva.”)

P3: “Youthful, different, cool.” (“Nuorekas, erilainen, siisti.”)

P6: “Fun, surprising, inventive.” (“Hauska, yllätyksellinen, kekseliäs.”)

P7: “Fly, trendy, bold.” (“Leija, trendikäs, rohkea.”)

P11: “Original, fun, colorful.” (“Omaperänen, hauska, värikäs.”)

The participants were also asked to pick three from the ten brand coolness characteristics defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 36), that in their opinion were the most suitable for Vitunleija. The mentioned characteristics and their frequency can be seen in figure 5 below. The characteristic of coolness that associated the most with Vitunleija, was rebellious. According to Warren et al. (2019, p.40), a brand characterized as rebellious, is defined as controversial, rule breaking or revolutionary. Other strongly associated characteristics with Vitunleija were popular, as well as subcultural. Characteristics that were not at all chosen to best describe Vitunleija, were useful/extraordinary, high status and iconic.

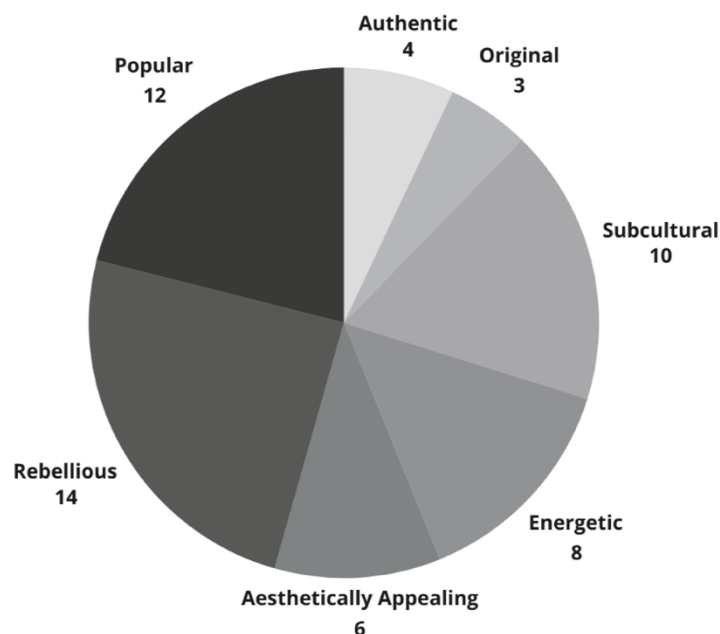


FIGURE 5. Defining characteristics of Vitunleija

7.1.4 Definitions and characteristics of influencer coolness

Reinikainen et al. (2021, p.2), define influencer coolness as a desirable success factor for social media influencers and suggest that the attributes that render a brand cool can also be germane to personal brands, such as influencers. Being positively related to brand trust as well as parasocial relationships, influencer coolness partly explains their desirability and effectiveness (Reinikainen et al., 2021, p.3). Given the dynamism of influencers and well as the subjectivity of coolness, the coolness of an influencers is dependent upon the followers perceptions. In order to map out the interviewees views about influencer coolness, they were asked to describe characteristics that define a cool influencer. From the data, several characteristics were the kind to emerge multiple times. According to the interviewees a cool influencer is characterized as someone who;

dares to be themselves;

P10: *“Well, perhaps it is just about daring to be oneself and being different, not conforming to the same mass but standing out, doing one’s own thing.” (“No ehkä just se et uskaltaa olla oma ittensä ja erilainen et ei oo sitä samaa massaa vaan erottuu niinku muista, tekee sitä omaa juttua.”)*

P16: *“Daring to be oneself and usually, for example, the courage to share everything, such as on social media, that people would not normally share.” (“No ehkä just se et uskaltaa olla oma ittensä ja erilainen et ei oo sitä samaa massaa vaan erottuu niinku muista, tekee sitä omaa juttua.”)*

is authentic;

P12: *“Well, for influencers, it is even more crucial what your target audience is and then that you are authentic and create genuine content.” (“No vaikuttajis on viel enemmänä väliä sillä, mikä sun kohderyhmä on ja sit et oot autenttinen ja tekee aitoo sisältöä.”)*

In alignment with authenticity, one of the answers also highlighted the importance of having the created content and the influencers image aligned in order to be cool. This emphasizes that authenticity underscores more than the posted content, but also the overall image the influencer portrays. Furthermore, the influencers coolness may be diminished by an incongruence between the content and the actions of a social media influencer.

P13: *“Perhaps it is about being genuine, and so that your content and your brand is aligned. For example, like if you are a wellness influencer, but then people see you partying/drinking every weekend.” (“Ehkä semmone et on aito ja sillein et sun sisältö ja sun brändi on sillei linjassa. Esim tyylit et jos oot joku hyvinvointivaikuttajam mut sit sen kuitenkin näkee dokaamassa joka viikonloppu.”)*

has a good or unique sense of style;

P3: *“Cool photos and a sense of style.”* (“Siistit kuvat ja tyyli.”)

P7: *“Unique style.”* (“Omanlainen tyyli.”)

creates personalized or distinctive content;

P5: *“There is something unique about it, a reason why it is enjoyable to follow, maybe there is an idea in its social media presence, and then there is being personal and creating personalized content.”* (“Sil on joku oma erityinen juttu, miks sitä on kiva seurata, tai siinä on vähäniinku joku idea siinä sen somessa ja sitte semmone et on persoonallinen ja on persoonallista sisältö.”)

P18: *“and that they create content that reflects their own style, and it depends a lot on who they are creating it for.”* (“ja se että tekee omannäköstä sisältöä ja riippuu paljon siitä kenelle se sitä tekee.”)

From the spontaneous answers, certain features such as authenticity, daringness to be oneself, distinctive content, and cool photos can be paralleled with the characteristics of brand coolness—authenticity, originality, and aesthetic appeal—as defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 36). In order to be able to compare the defining characteristics between influencer and brand coolness, the participants were also asked to pick three from the ten brand coolness characteristics defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 36), that in their opinion were the most crucial in enhancing influencer coolness. The participants were also asked to share their insights on any additional characteristics they found crucial for enhancing influencer coolness. The mentioned characteristics and their frequency can be seen in table 7 below. Other important enhancing characteristics mentioned, were bravery, trendiness, humor and intelligence.

TABLE 7. Characteristics enhancing influencer coolness

Characteristic of coolness	Occurrence
Authentic	16
Original	8
Subcultural	1
Energetic	6
Aesthetically Appealing	13
Useful / Extraordinary	0
High Status	1
Rebellious	5
Iconic	3
Popular	4
Additional characteristics mentioned:	
Brave	1
Trendy	1
Intelligent	1
Humoristic	2

In the “Discussion and Implications” -chapter, the frequency of the characteristics enhancing influencer coolness will be compared to ones given about enhancing brand coolness.

7.2 Impact of influencers on brand coolness: spillover cool effect

In order to find out, how brand coolness is affected by influencers, the participants were asked to describe how influencers impact the coolness of the brands they are associated with, for example, through collaborations. In previous literature, positive emotions have been found to spill over from influencers to brands (Reinikainen et al., 2020, p. 290), and the influencer’s personal brand and values can create positive associations for the endorsed brand. The same theme reflected on the answers in the interviews regarding brand coolness. The analyzed data is categorized into three sections: positive effects, negative effects, and data specific to Vitunleija Oy.

7.2.1 Positive impacts of influencers on brand coolness

The ability of a brand to be perceived as cool can often be impacted by people who already possess a cool aura (Belk et al. 2010, p.202). The writers refer to this as imparted coolness, meaning that when consumers regard certain figures as embodiments of cool, their association with a brand influences consumers’ perceptions, leading them

to view the brand through the lens of the associated coolness. When influencers who are deemed cool associate themselves with a brand, it signals the consumers of the brand's inherent coolness. Warren et al. (2019, p.47) also address this, stating that selection of brand endorsers not only influences brand personality perceptions but also the perceived coolness of the brand (Warren et al., 2019, p.47).

The participants were asked to share insights from their experiences regarding how an influencer's coolness affects brands they are affiliated with through for example collaborations, and provide examples of these situations. The participants answers provided valuable insights on the impacts the coolness of influencers have on brands, aligning closely with existing literature. According to the data, these impacts may manifest in several ways, identified into four main themes: imparted coolness, gained visibility, strengthened brand image and heightened purchase intentions. The frequency of these themes is presented in table 8 below.

TABLE 8. Positive impacts of influencer coolness on brands

Impact of Influencer Coolness on Brands	Example	Occurrence
Imparted Coolness	P10: <i>“Well, then the brand kind of gains that coolness as well.”</i> (“No sit se brändi vähäniinku saa sitä cooleutta siinä myös.”)	7
Gained Visibility	P4: <i>“At least on social media, as cool people are followed a lot, it does gain more visibility and the positive kind.”</i> (“No ainaki somessa kun coolei ihmisiä paljon seurataan nii kyl se sit saa enemmän myös näkyvyyttä ja hyvää sellasta.”)	7
Strengthened Brand Image	P13: <i>“It definitely reinforces the brand image, or it is important that the influencer genuinely uses those products and serves as the face for those products in advertisements.”</i> (“No kyllä se vahvistaa sitä brändimielikuvaa tai se on tärkeätä et se vaikuttaja niinku oikeesti autenttisesti niinku käyttäis niit tuotteita ja on mainoskasvo niille tuotteille.”)	6
Heightened Purchase Intentions	P2: <i>“It has a big impact, like if a cool influencer, whom I personally follow, posts a picture with a certain piece of clothing, then I also think, ‘wow, that's cool, and that brand must also be really cool’, so I need to own something like that too.”</i> (“Kyl sil on iso vaikutus tai jos joku siisti vaikuttaja, jota vaikka ite seuraa ja se postaa vaik jonku vaateen kanssa vaikka kuvan, nii sit tulee itekki sillein ei vitsi toi on siisti että toi brändiki on varmaan tosi siisti et mun pitää nyt kans omistaa tommonen juttu.”)	3

As stated in the previous chapter, the alignment between a brand and its endorser critically impacts advertisement efficacy, which further influences brand beliefs and purchase intentions (Fleck, Korchia & Le Roy, 2012, p.658). The importance of this alignment was also highlighted in the answers concerning the impacts of influencer coolness on a brand. The adverse effects that will be addressed in the following chapter were also brought out in the answers, highlighting that the brand would only benefit from the influencer's coolness if the influencer is in fact cooler than the brand itself. However, if the influencer is deemed less cool than the brand it is endorsing, the influencer has the power to diminish the perceived coolness of the brand.

P6: *“Well, in my opinion, quite significantly because it indicates the kind of people that like that brand. So, if the person endorsing it is not cool or the right fit, then the brand might not get the visibility for the company as desired.”* (“No tosi isosti mun mielestä koska kyl se kertoo et minkälaiset ihmiset niinku tykkää siit brändistä niin jos se ei oo yhtään cool se tyyppi tai sopiva tyyppi niin ei se saa sillon myöskään sillein samanlailla sitä näkyvyyttä ehkä sille yritykselle ku mitä halutaan.”)

P12: *“Well, if the influencer is genuinely similar in style to the brand, then the target audience of that company should also perceive the influencer positively. But if the target audience considers the influencer less cool than the brand, it negatively impacts the perception of the brand's coolness as well.”* (“No jos se on tosi niinku samantyyline ku se brändi et sen yrityksen kohderyhmä myös pitäis sitä vaikuttajaa siistinä, mut sit jos se kohderyhmä pitää sitä vaikuttajaa epäcoolimpina ku sitä yritystä nii sit se huonontaa myös sitä mielikuvaa sen brändin cooleudest.”)

P18: *“Has a big impact if the influencer genuinely likes it or if you notice from the collaboration that they really enjoy it, and then it might make something that's kind of uncool seem really cool.”* (“Vaikuttaa isosti jos se influencer oikeesti tai jos siitä yhteistyöstä huomaa et se oikeesti tykkää siitä ja sillon se saattaa saada jonkun ns. epäcoolin jutun vaikuttamaan tosi cooleilta.”)

P18: *“Mm well, it made me think, for example, when some influencers advertise outdoor clothing like outdoor pants, it might not be such a cool thing in itself, but then when you see someone with a pair, then you might also start wanting them and thinking that they are cool.”* (“Mm no mulle tuli mieleen esim siis ku jotkut influencerit mainostaa vaikka jotain ulkoiluvaatteita vaikka jotain ulkohousuja, niin sit sekin voi olla semmonen et se ei oo itessään niin semmonen cool juttu, mut sitku sä näät et jollain on jonkinlaiset niin sitte sä voit niinku itekki alka haluamaan ja ajatella et ne on coolit.”)

7.2.2 Negative impacts of influencers on brand coolness

According to Reinikainen et al. (2021, p.4), while the influencer spillover effect can potentially result in positive outcomes, it is not guaranteed. The writers found that an influencers transgressions can negatively affect a brand. If a social media influencer is perceived to have betrayed their audience, it can have adverse effects on attitudes, brand perceptions, trust, and purchase intentions towards the brand they have endorsed. In this research, in order to find out if influencers may also have adverse effects on brand coolness, the participants were asked to recall instances where an influencer had negatively impacted a brand's coolness. The participants were also asked about specific actions of an influencer that would be harmful to a brand's coolness.

The participants identified several instances, where an influencer had negatively affected the perceived coolness of a certain brand. In the various scenarios the participants cited, many included the use or simply the affiliation with a certain influencer. In numerous cases, the influencer did not have to act in a certain way to cause negative effects on the brand coolness, but the answers had more to do with the influencers personal image.

P12: *“DJ Pauly D and Von Dutch. So, it was a really cool brand, but then he used it, and that guy was on some Jersey Shore show. Then Von Dutch said, or they like banned him from using the brand because it diminished its coolness.”* (*“DJ Pauly D ja Von Dutch. Siis se oli tosi cool merkki, mut sit se käytti sitä ja se äijä oli jossain Jersey Shoressa. Sit se Von Dutch sano, tai sitä tyylä kiellettiin käyttää sitä merkkiä ku se huononti sen cooleutta.”*)

P5: *“Well, if there is an influencer I do not like, and they promote something, it reflects on my thoughts about it.”* (*“No jos vaa on joku vaikuttaja kenest mä en tykkää ja sit se mainostaa jotain nii se hejastuu sillein mun ajatuksiin sit siitä niinku.”*)

P6: *“I feel like there are certain influencers whom I have a negative image of, and it really affects whether I would use a product. Even if the product is not bad, if it is promoted by someone I do not like or who is very controversial and divides people's opinions, so then I would not use that influencer, at least.”* (*“Musta tuntuu et on jotain tiettyjä vaikuttajia, joista on sillei negatiivinen kuva ittellä niin se vaikuttaa tosi paljon siihen et vaikka se tuote ei ois huono mut sit ku sitä mainostaa semmonen tyyppi josta sä et tykkää tai joka on tosi ristiriitanen ja jakaa ihmisten mielipiteitä niin sit ite en ehkä käyttäis semmosta vaikuttajaa ainakaa.”*)

P16: *“Um, I can't think of a specific case, but generally, if someone I do not like promotes something, it has a negative impact.”* (*“Öö mul ei tuu mitään tapausta mieleen mut yleisesti jos joku kenest en tykkää mainostaa jotai nii sit se vaikuttaa negatiivisesti.”*)

For confidentiality and privacy reasons, the names of the influencers mentioned in the following quotations have been replaced with 'X'.

P10: *“Well, I will say that if someone like X promotes something, I probably would not get involved in that.”* (“No kyl mä sanon et jos vaikka joku X mainostaa jotain niin mä en kyl ehkä lähe siihen mukaan.”)

P19: *“Yeah, for example, it annoys me when I keep getting ads from X on TikTok, so then I start getting annoyed with those brands too.”* (“No joo mua esim ärsyttää kun TikToki mul tulee koko ajan X tekemii mainoksii, nii sit mua alkaa ärsyttää ne bränditki.”)

When asked about the specific actions of an influencer that would be harmful to a brand’s coolness, five main themes were identified from the data; influencer controversies, unfitting collaborations, conflict of values, ingenuine collaborations, and involvement in illegal activities. The frequency of these themes is presented in table 9 below.

TABLE 9. Influencer actions impacting brand coolness negatively

Theme	Examples	Occurence
Influencer Controversies	<p>P6: <i>“Well, just these scandalous things, if there are any scandals or if some influencer has been, for example, racist or behaved in a discriminatory manner.”</i> (“No just tämmöset kohujutut jos on jotain kohuja tai jos joku vaikuttaja on ollu esim rasistinen tai muuten käyttäytyny syrjivästi.”)</p> <p>P16: <i>“Well, if a male influencer for example comments something misogynistic on social media or someone says something racist.”</i> (“No jos joku miespuolinen vaikuttaja vaik kommentoi jotain misogynistä somessa tai joku sanoo jotai rasistista.”)</p> <p>P13: <i>“Well, propably anything that could get you cancelled like saying something stupid or using bad language in public. Like I would say so if someone uses the n-word or otherwise behaves unethically”</i> (“No varmaa mitä vaa mist voi get cancelled just sanoo jotain tyhmää tai käyttää huonoii ilmasui julkisesti. Tiiäks jos joku vaik käyttää n-sanaa tai muuten käyttäytyy epäeettisesti”)</p>	9

Unfitting Collaborations	<p>P1: "if an influencer is very childish, the brand would not be so cool either" ("jos joku vaikuttaja on tosi lapsellinen niin se brändikää ei ois niin cool")</p> <p>P8: "also, if I just do not think the influencer is cool" ("ja jos se influencer ei vaan musta oo cool")</p> <p>P4: "Well, someone who is not cool, if the influencer is, for example, fake" ("No semmonen joku joka ei oo cool, jos se vaikuttaja on vaikka feikki")</p>	7
Conflict of Values	<p>P12: "Well, if they are just really in conflict, the influencer and the product they are promoting, in a way that you can tell their values do not align, and it is very transparent." ("No jos ne just on tosi ristiriidassa se vaikuttaja ja se tuote mitä se vaikka niinku mainostaa sillein et tietää et ne arvot ei kohtaa ja se on tosi läpinäkyvä.")</p> <p>P5: "and if an influencer is in collaboration with a certain brand, and they have some ethical value conflicts." ("ja jos joku vaikuttaja on yhteistyös vaik jonku brändinkaa jonkakaan sil on jotkut eettiset arvoristiriidat.")</p>	3
Ingenuine Collaborations	<p>P5: "If a collaboration is really sloppy, feels very fake, or there has not been much effort put into it" ("Jos joku yhteistyö on tosi hutastu tai tuntuu tosi feikille tai ei oo nähty vaivaa niinku sen eteen")</p> <p>P19: "Like if the collaboration feels somehow fake." ("No jos se yhteistyö tuntuu jotenki feikiltä.")</p>	2
Involvement in Illegal Activities	<p>P7: "Well, some illegal stuff or if you have a criminal record." (No jotkut laittomat jutut tai jos on tyylit rikosrekisteri")</p> <p>P4: "and well, some advertise, for example, those games and other illegal stuff on Snapchat." ("ja no jotkut mainostaa esim. niit pelei ja muuta laitonta snäpissä.")</p>	2

From the answers, it can be observed that the participants expressed a strong connection between a worsened image of brand coolness and influencer transgressions particularly when influencers engage in actions that are perceived as controversial or unethical. In the data, an emphasis was placed on controversies dealing with racism.

7.2.3 Impact of influencers on the coolness of Vitunleija Oy

Vitunleija Oy, offers an especially interesting context for investigation, being founded by an influencer and being surrounded by many popular influencers as well as artists. In the beginning of the interviews, the participants were asked to share their general perceptions that first come to mind about Vitunleija Oy as a brand, and nine participants mentioned the founding person of the brand, who is a social media influencer themselves.

P1: *“I immediately think of Baka.” (“No mulla tulee Baka heti ensimmäisenä mieleen.”)*

Later in the interviews, the participants were asked to share if and how they believed the influencers they associated with Vitunleija, impacted the coolness of the brand. The responses emphasized that influencers associated with the brand have a significant impact on the coolness of the case organization. A theme that was highlighted from the interviews, was the increasing presence of subcultural traits within the brand. Specifically, rappers were strongly associated with Vitunleija, owing to the influencers surrounding the brand.

P6: *“Influences. For example, Ibe and Cledos. When you see them wearing clothes or when it shows on their social media, or when they release music, and for example, when they were together at Ruisrock, it adds to the coolness.” (“Vaikuttaa, esim. ibe ja Cledos. Ku niitten pääl näkyy vaatteit tai somes näkyy tai sit ku niil on tullu kans musaa ja esim. ku ne oli Ruississa yhes nii se lisää cooleutta.”)*

P13: *“Yeah, like, for instance, I follow Elastinen, and when I saw on his Instagram that he was endorsing those shoes, it was really nice; it enhances the coolness.” (“Joo tai ite vaikka jotai Elastista seuraan ja katoin et sen instassa nii oli ku se mainosti niit kenkii nii se oli tosi kiva se lisää kyl sitä cooleutta.”)*

P14: *“Yes influences. They themselves are cool, at least someone like Ibe at the moment and others, so they give that approval and set an example for others that this is cool.” (“Vaikuttaa. Ne on itekki cooleja ainaki joku Ibe täl hetkel ja muut, nii ne antaa semmosen hyväksynnän ja näyttää muille esimerkkiä et tää on cool.”)*

The participants were asked to evaluate how well they thought the influencers related to Vitunleija match the brand itself, and to identify factors contributing to this alignment, as well as those that do not. As stated by multiple scholars, the alignment between a brand and its endorser critically impacts advertisement efficacy, as well as brand attitude (Fleck, Korchia & Le Roy, 2012, p.658; Dhun & Dangi, 2023, p.58). It was thought, that the influencers associated with Vitunleija, align with brand seamlessly. In

their responses, the participants highlighted the congruence between the brand and the influencers. The most significant contributors to this were shared styles, aligned images, the natural feel of the collaborations and a shared industry. The clothes were also said to be very fitting for rappers, who based on the answers on the previous question, are strongly related to the brand as influencers.

P6: *“Well, they fit; they have a style that feels very natural, so it does not come off as forced because they already wear such clothes and create similar content. For example, when Baka himself makes music, he has collaborated a lot with those artists and, in general, with other influencers as well.”* (“No siis sopii, ne on tosi sillein sen tyylisiä, et se ei vaikuta pakotetulta ku ne muutenki käyttää semmosia vaatteita ja tekee samantyylistä sisältöä ja esim ku Baka itekki tekee musiikkia niin se on tehny paljon niiden artistienkaa ja ylipäätään muidenkin vaikuttajienkaa muutakin.”)

P10: *“They fit, or I feel that Cledos, Fuge, and all the other rappers and their girlfriends who are promoting are pretty much part of the same friend group, so it comes off quite naturally.”* (“Sopii tai must tuntuu et cledos ja fuge ja ne kaikki muut räppärit ja niiden tyttöystävät mitä sitä paljon esimerkiks mainostaa on sillein aika samaa kaveriporukkaa, niin se tulee sillein aika luonnollisesti.”)

P13: *“In my opinion, they align well. In my opinion, because around that brand, there are people in the entertainment industry, in music, fashion, and other areas, so the overall essence formed by that group is very specific. Even though they do different things, in my opinion, there is the same vibe in all their doing, whether it is music, fashion, TV, or TikTok.”* (“Siis mun mielestä vastaa hyvin. Mun mielest koska sen brändin ympäril on viihdemaailmas olevii ja niinku musan ja muodin ja muiden asioiden saral, niin sit se kokonaisuus mikä siit porukasta muodostuu on tosi spesifi. Vaik ne tekee eri asioita niin mun mielestä kaikkien niiden niinku kaikessa tekemisessä on se sama vibra oli se sit esim. musa tai muoti tai TV tai TikTok.”)

P14: *“Yes, they are just alike, those influencers, young and trendy.”* (“Kyllä ne on just samanlaisia ne vaikuttajat semmosii nuorii ja trendikkäitä.”)

P18: *“I think they fit really well. Well, in my opinion, their overall aesthetic is quite similar.”* (“Musta ne sopii tosi hyvin. No mun mielestä niiden semmonen yleinen estetiikka on aika samanlainen.”)

7.2.4 Transferring characteristics of coolness

When asked about characteristics of coolness that the participants thought could travel from an influencer to a brand through a collaboration or otherwise close connection, a rather clear division formed between transferring and more inherent characteristics. According to the interviews, it is very clear that there are certain characteristics of coolness that are able to transfer from an influencer to a brand and characteristics that do not transfer as likely. The frequency the participants referred to the characteristics being transferable, is presented in the table below. In the table, characteristics mentioned as transferable by over half of the participants are labeled as such, while those mentioned as transferable by fewer than 10 participants are labeled as non-transferable.

According to the data, the most transferable characteristics from influencers to brand, were popular, subcultural, rebellious and energetic. High status and iconic were also a part of the commonly seen as transferring features. The most unanimous answers about the non-transferable characteristics were about the characteristics; authentic and original. One participant mentioned;

P6: *“You can’t really ride on anyone in order to be authentic and original” (“Sitä ei oikeee voi raidaa kellään et ois aito ja omaperänen.”)*

In the context, meaning that, those are the type of characteristics one has or does not have, and you are not able to characterize as such with the help of others. Besides those characteristics, the features aesthetically appealing and useful/extraordinary were also seen as not transferring.

TABLE 10. Transferable and non-transferable characteristics from influencers to brands and their frequency mentioned as transferable in the data

Characteristics of coolness defined by Warren et al. (2019)	Transferability from influencers to brands through collaboration or other close affiliations.	Transferable	Popular
			Rebellious
			Subcultural
			Energetic
			High Status
			Iconic
		Non-transferable	Aesthetically Appealing
			Useful / Extraordinary
			Authentic
			Original

The characteristics popular, rebellious, and subcultural were all mentioned as transferable by all 19 participants. Among the clearly transferable characteristics, energetic was mentioned by 18 participants, and high status and iconic were mentioned by 15 participants. Aesthetically appealing divided opinions among the participants, being mentioned 9 times, while useful/extraordinary was mentioned 6 times. In contrast, authentic and original were clearly the most non-transferable characteristics, with 2 participants mentioning them as transferable and 17 participants considering them non-transferable.

The other characteristics that the participants mentioned as important in enhancing influencer coolness, were bravery, trendiness, humor and intelligence. These newly introduced characteristics are not included in the table, since they were brought up by the interviewees and hence they were not introduced to all participants. However, the participants who mentioned them included brave, trendy into transferring, and intelligent into non-transferable characteristics. Humorous was mentioned as both transferring and non-transferable.

7.3 Brand perceptions and coolness

A part of the theoretical framework of this study was the connection between brand coolness and brand perceptions. According to literature, brand coolness influences consumers' word-of-mouth intentions, their willingness to pay, their attitudes towards the brand and through that eventually brand love (Kumar, 2021, p.45; Warren et al., 2019, p.36-37). Coolness of a brand can intensify the bond between a consumer and a brand, making the consumer more likely to advocate for the brand and demonstrate higher levels of loyalty (Warren et al., 2019, p.46). In this research, the participants were asked to share their thoughts on the importance of brand coolness regarding the brands they follow on social media. The participants rated the importance of coolness in the brands they follow on social media on a scale from one to ten, and were asked to justify their opinions on why or why not coolness is important in this context. The interviewees rated the importance high, with an average of 8,3. From the data, it emerged that coolness is seen as an important attribute concerning the brands the participants follow on social media. In their responses, the interviewees shared that coolness influences not only the brands they follow but also their purchase intentions, as Warren et al. (2019, p.36-37) postulated.

P9: *“It is quite important, like a nine or a significant part of it, because otherwise, I would not also buy those things.” (“On aika tärkeitä kyllä, tyylisiin yksi tai se on iso osa sitä, koska emmä muuten myöskään ostais niitä juttuja.”)*

P14: *“Probably around a nine. It is important for the same reason as why I buy from cool brands.” (“Salee joku nine. Se on tärkeitä samasta syystä ku miks ostanki cooleilta brändeiltä.”)*

In a survey performed by Sprout Social in 2020, 32% of the 1028 consumers said that they followed brands on social media in order to be inspired (Lashbrook, 2020). In this study, the participants also considered brand coolness as a significant reason to follow brands on social media because the coolness of the brand was felt to correlate with their ability to inspire the participants with their content.

P6: *“Nine, I want it to be, or I want it to be inspirational content that I follow.” (“Ysi, niistä tulee, tai niin haluun et se on inspiroivaa sisältöä, mitä seuraan.”)*

P8: *“Nine. I want my feed to have inspirational things.” (“Yheksän. Haluun et mun feediin tulee inspiroivia asioita.”)*

P13: *“Nine or ten, so really high up, because I do not follow things that are not cool at all. Well, it depends on the theme of the company; for example, I follow news companies when I want information. But if I am looking for inspiration, like for clothes, appearance, or interior design, then coolness largely determines what I follow in that sense.” (“Ysi tai kymmenen eli tosi niinku high up, ku emmä nyt kyl seuraa ollenkaa semmosii mitkä ei oo cool. Tai no riippuu siitä minkä teemanen se yritys on, esim mä seuraan uutislafkoi ku mä haluun saada infoo mut sit jos mä etin inspiraatioo vaik vaatteisiin tai ulkonäköön tai vaik sisustukseen, niin kyl se cooleus määrittää pitkälti mitä seuraan siin mieles.”)*

Another emerging theme in the data was the connection made by the interviewees between coolness and interesting and captivating social media content. Many of the interviewees felt that cool brands create more engaging and compelling content, and therefore provide a more positive user experience.

P1: *“I would say 8 ½ because I feel like I would not bother following it if it was somehow boring or uninteresting.” (“No mä sanoisin 8 ½, koska musta tuntuu et mä en jaksais seurata sitä, jos se ois jotenki tylsä tai ei kiinnostava.”)*

P4: *“Maybe like a 9, because it is important to be on top of things and know what people are talking about so you can create interesting content.” (“No ehkä semmone 9, et onhan se tärkeätä et sä oot niinku pinnalla asioista ja sillein tiiät mistä ihmiset puhuu et voit tehdä mielenkiintosta sisältöä.”)*

P19: *“10. Well, I do not feel that brands that are not cool would create content that I would want to watch.” (“10. No emmä koe et brändit mitkä ei ois cooleja tekis semmosta sisältöä mitä sit haluisin kattoo.”)*

On the other hand, another emerging theme in the data was that the participants felt that the importance of the coolness of a specific product itself is more significant, than the coolness of the brand behind the product. These answers suggest that for them, the appeal of the product outweighs the attachment to a specific brand.

P5: *“Quite difficult. I do not know, if I like those products, I do not know, maybe I think more about those products whether they are cool than the brand, but maybe like an 8.” (“Aika vaikee. Emmätiiä jos mä tykkään niistä tuotteista nii emmätiiä, ehkä mä ajattelen enemmän niitä tuotteita et onkse cooleja kun sitä brändii, mut ehkä semmone kaheksan.”)*

P12: *“Uh, well, maybe the coolness of the brand itself is like a 5, even though, in a way, I want the product itself to be cool, but it is not really that important to me that it is from a specific brand. I do not follow companies much, and I can buy a product from a thrift store, and it does not matter to me which brand it is. So, it is important that the product is cool, but the brand not so much.” (“Öö no ehkä itse brändin cooleus lopulta joku 5, vaikka tavallaan mä haluun et itse se tuote on cool, mutta se et se ois jonkun tietyn brändin ei oo mulle oikeestaan niin tärkeitä. Mä en kauheesti seuraa yrityksiä ja mä voin ostaa vaikka kirpparilta jonkun tuotteen, eikä mulle oo niin väliä minkä brändin se on. Eli on tärkeitä et se tuote on cool, mut brändi ei niin paljo.”)*

When asked if the participants believe whether or not all brands aspire to be seen as cool, nearly all of the respondents answered in the negative. Many of the respondents highlighted the different aspirations of brands, regarding the brand image they wish to portray. According to Warren et al. (2019, p.39), brands associated with prestige, exclusivity and brands that are recognized as cultural symbols and have stood the test of time, have cool status. However, in this research, the interviewees viewed that specifically brands that wish to characterize as high end, or prestigious, are not attempting to be perceived as cool. Another theme in the data was the described misalignment between brands that act as sources of information and the want to be perceived as cool. The participants felt that for example news companies prioritize being informative rather than projecting a cool image.

P4: *“Not necessarily, like some so-called prestigious ones such as Fazer or, I do not know, Paulig and others, they do not need to.” (“Ei halua, esim jotkut ns. arvokkaammat tyylit Fazer tai emmätiiä Paulig sun muut niin ei niiden tarvii”.)*

P1: *“I do not, or rather, I associate it more with younger brands or products aimed at young people, like some older brands.” (“En tai enemmän mä yhistan sen nuoriin brändeihin tai niinku tuotteisiin mitkä on nuorille ku sillei vaik jotkut vanhemmat brändit.”)*

P16: *“Certainly not, or it does not fit everyone, like someone like YLE.” (“Ei varmastikaa tai ei se sovi kaikille, tyylit joku YLE.”)*

P13: *“I do not believe that BBC or CNN or something like WWF, for example, news or charity organizations, those supporting a cause or wanting to be neutral. But then if we're talking about fashion or the event or the beauty industry, I believe they all have a common goal to be cool.”*
(“Emmä usko et joku BBC tai CNN tai joku WWF esim. uutis- tai hyväntekeväisyysyritykset, jotkut jotka tukee jotain cause tai halua olla ns. Neutraaleja. Mut sit jos ollaan vaik fashion tai tapahtuma tai meikit alalla, nii uskon et niil kaikil on yhteistä tavoitteen olla cool.”)

However, some participants felt that all brands do aspire to be seen as cool, but in their own dedicated way among their specific target audience. It was described that all brands, regardless of the industry, wish to be perceived as cool in order to resonate with their target audience.

P5: *“I believe that all brands, in some way, want to be cool, but of course, all brands have a different target audience, so everyone, in some way, wants to be cool. However, for everyone, it probably is not a priority.”*
(“Uskon et kaikki brändit jollain taval halua olla cool mut toki kaikil brändeil on eri kohderyhmä, et kaikki jollain tapaa halua olla cool. Tosin kaikilla se ei varmastikkaa oo mikää prioriteetti.”)

P17: *“Um, yeah. I do believe, yes. Or it seems to me that it can mean so many different things to different people, but I believe that all brands want to be cool for their own customers.”* (*“Öö joo. Kyl mä uskon joo. Tai must tuntuu et se voi tarkoittaa niin eri asioita eri ihmisille, mut kyl mä uskon et kaikki brändit just niinku omille asiakkaille.”*)

Here the participants highlighted the subjective nature of coolness and its interpretations, as well as the fact that its significance varies depending on the target market and brand objectives.

8 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The objective of this study was to gain insight into the impact of social media influencers on the perceived coolness of the brands they are affiliated with and to explore the impact influencers have on the coolness of the case organization, Vitunleija. Given that coolness is a highly subjective matter, the goal was to investigate how it manifests in the context of the case organization and how coolness potentially impacts brand perceptions. Additionally, the different themes and characteristics contributing to brand and influencer coolness, were also examined. Hence, the following research questions were set at the beginning of the study:

RQ1: “How do individuals perceive the brand coolness of Vitunleija Oy?”

RQ2: “Based on the case of the case of the study, what themes or characteristics contribute to brand and influencer coolness?”

RQ3. “Based on the case of the study, how are influencers impacting brand coolness?”

Through a content analysis of qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews, several key themes and categories emerged shedding light on the participants’ perspectives, the current research serving as a complimentary study to the existing literature of brand coolness and influencer and brand relations. In this concluding chapter, the study’s findings will be analyzed in light of the previously provided theoretical framework on brand and influencer coolness, imparted coolness and spillover effect as well as the characteristics of coolness. The research questions posed will be answered based on the analyzed data, and the degree to which the study’s findings align with the previous theory will be evaluated. Lastly, a critical evaluation of the study’s methodology and findings will be conducted, along with some suggestions for directions for future research.

8.1 How individuals perceive the coolness of Vitunleija Oy

Due to the highly subjective nature of coolness, one objective of this study was to explore how coolness manifests in the context of Vitunleija and how influencers affiliated with the brand impact its perceived coolness. Based on the gathered data, the participants characterized Vitunleija as an especially cool brand. The brand was described to be “youthful”, “fun”, “trendy” and “distinctive”, characteristics associated with coolness, particularly with the traits “energetic”, “popular” and “original”, as identified by Warren et al. (2019, p. 39). Other key themes contributing to the coolness of the brand included, the relevance among young consumers as well as its association with influencers. The participants frequent reference to influencers, including the brand’s founder, and their affiliation with the brand highlights the influence they have in shaping Vitunleija’s image and perceived coolness. Based on the data gathered in the study, it can be concluded that within the characteristics of coolness defined by Warren et al. (2019, p.39), Vitunleija was best described as rebellious, popular, and subcultural.

The participants acknowledged the impact of influencers, especially rappers, have on Vitunleija’s coolness. The participants expressed that the influencers associated with the brand position it into a certain subcultural group, rappers, and that the brand inherits coolness as well as a public approval from these endorsements. This aligns with literature stating that a brand’s coolness can be greatly impacted by its integration into a specific subculture, such as rappers, especially if the subculture in question enjoys widespread popularity. However, in order to maintain coolness in such contexts, they must uphold an image consistent with the subculture’s, which might require a deep understanding of the subculture. (Warren et al., 2019, p. 39-40.)

The close alignment of the brand and the influencers associated with it through shared styles and similar images, was recognized as a key factor in reinforcing the brand’s coolness. As stated by multiple scholars, the alignment between a brand and its endorser critically impacts advertisement efficacy, which further influences brand beliefs and purchase intentions (Fleck, Korchia & Le Roy, 2012, p.658). Dhun & Dangi (2023, p.58) stated that congruence and similarity between a brand and an influencer has a positive relationship with brand attitude. These findings highlight the importance of alignment and synergy between Vitunleija and its endorses.

8.2 Themes and characteristics contributing to brand and influencer coolness

As Warren and Campbell (2014, p.544) highlight, coolness is a very complex, subjective and dynamic concept. The attributes perceived as cool by consumers are subject to evolution over time and may vary among different consumers and while different characteristics contribute to brand coolness, they are not synonyms. This study aimed to examine the themes and characteristics contributing to brand, as well as influencer coolness. Several themes emerged from the data regarding traits

characterizing cool brands. These included distinctiveness, trendiness, visibility, youthfulness as well as popularity.

The participants characterized cool brands as being able to stand out from the crowd and to display a disregard for external influences. With minor differences, this echoes previous studies where cool brands are characterized to introduce novel concepts, to have the ability to reinvent themselves as well as be the kind to stay true to their roots, in other words as articulated by Warren et al. (2019, p.39) to be original and authentic. Another key factor that emerged from the data was trendiness. According to Warren et al. (2019, p.39), cool brands are popular, including that they are trendy and well liked. However, in this case, the key factor of trendiness expressed by the participants, referred to not only following trends, but also creating them on social media, mostly referring to trends on TikTok.

The participants expressed that cool brands are well visible. Visibility referred to a brands presence within its relevant social sphere, which in this case as highlighted by the participants, especially referred to social media and more specifically Instagram and TikTok. Visibility encompassed exposure as well as engagement across these platforms. The characteristic of visibility that surfaced in the data, perhaps due to the novelty of the rise of social media, does not directly align with any previously defined feature of coolness outlined in the theoretical section. However, a few interviewees also highlighted the characteristic of popularity, as Warren et al. (2019, p.37) defines as being a brand that many love and talk about. This type of widespread appeal can be associated with the concept of visibility.

The traits from the ten characteristics defined by Warren et al. (2019, p.39), that the participants emphasized as the most important in enhancing a brands coolness, were originality, popularity, aesthetical appeal and authenticity. Of the ten characteristics defined by Warren et al. (2019, p.39), the participants placed the least amount of emphasis on the characteristics energetic and high status, which implies that consumers may not prioritize these traits as strongly when considering brand coolness.

The participants characterized cool influencers with comparable characteristics as cool brands. They described cool influencers as daring to be oneself, authentic, and as someone who has a good or a unique sense of style and creates personalized content. The features identified from the spontaneous answers can be paralleled with the characteristics of brand coolness—authenticity, originality, and aesthetic appeal—as defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 36). From the ten characteristics identified by Warren et al. (2019, p. 39), the most prominent in enhancing influencer coolness were authenticity, aesthetical appeal and energy. Bravery, as well as intelligence were also mentioned as characterizing cool influencers. Based on the gathered data, the participants found the defining coolness characteristics of influencers to differ from the characteristics of brand coolness. Both shared authenticity as a defining characteristic when improving coolness, but besides authenticity influencer coolness particularly emphasizes aesthetic appeal. While aesthetic appeal was an important characteristic in improving brand coolness, brand coolness was particularly seen to be enhanced from characteristics originality and popularity. Meanwhile, popularity was one of the least defining features for influencers. Another distinction was the attribute of

useful/extraordinary, which held minimal importance for influencer coolness but was lightly accentuated in brand coolness.

The importance of the characteristic aesthetic appeal in enhancing influencer coolness, may be explained by the fact that influencers' activities are centered around social media, so it makes sense that visual appeal in the form of pictures and clothing for example, holds significant value. Additionally, influencer coolness emphasizes energy, a quality that by the participants was not deemed to play a defining role for enhancing brand coolness. In both, brand and influencer coolness, an additional crucial coolness enhancing characteristic mentioned was trendiness.

8.3 How influencers are impacting brand coolness

By employing qualitative research methods, the study was able to delve deep into the participants' perceptions in examining how brand coolness is impacted by influencers. The study focused on the positive and negative effects of influencer associations as well as the transferability of coolness characteristics from influencers to brands. From the data shared by the participants in this study, four main themes were identified in the ways influencer's coolness affects brands they are affiliated with. These themes were imparted coolness, gained visibility, strengthened brand image and heightened purchase intentions. These echoes previous studies where the ability of a brand to be perceived as cool can often be impacted by imparted coolness from people who already possess a cool aura and that influencers renowned for their coolness can enhance the perception of brand coolness (Belk et al. 2010; Reinikainen et al. 2021).

The participants expressed that brand coolness is improved with influencers only with specific requirements. Aligning with previous research (Fleck, Korchia & Le Roy, 2012; Dhun & Dangi, 2023), the study found that the influencers must align with the brands they are working with. The study also found, that if the influencer is deemed less cool than the brand it is endorsing, the influencer has the power to diminish the perceived coolness of the brand. The study also found, that certain influencer actions may have adverse effects on the perceived coolness of a brand. Reinikainen et al. (2021, p.2), found that if an influencer is perceived to have betrayed their audience, it can have adverse effects on attitudes, brand perceptions, trust, and purchase intentions towards the brand they have endorsed. In line with this previous research, the study found five main themes of influencer actions that are harmful to a brand's coolness; influencer controversies, unfitting collaborations, conflict of values, ingenuine collaborations, and involvement in illegal activities.

Participants expressed that the main factor negatively impacting a brands coolness, was an influencers involvement in controversial or scandalous activities, whether it was instances of racism, discriminatory, or other controversial behavior. They also highlighted the adverse effects of collaborations on brand coolness, in instances where an influencer's persona or image clashed with the brand's identity, a misalignment of values between influencers and the brands they endorsed was detected, the

collaborations felt insincere or forced, and situations where the influencer associated with the brand had been involved in illegal activities, such as endorsing illegal products. The study found, that there was a strong connection between a worsened image of brand coolness and influencer transgressions and them engaging in actions that are perceived as controversial, unethical, or inconsistent with the promoted brands values. A special emphasis was placed on controversies dealing with racism. Carrillat, O'Rourke and Plourde (2019, p.1208) encouraged brands to embrace controversial celebrities as endorsers. However, this was not the case in this specific research.

The study found that certain characteristics of coolness can transfer more easily from influencers to brands than others. The findings suggest that strongly transferable characteristics include popularity, subculturality, rebellion, energy, iconism, and high status. In contrast, authenticity, originality, and usefulness/extraordinariness are deemed non-transferable, while the participants opinions on aesthetic appeal were divided. Based on the perceptions of the participants, it could be said that the characteristics popular, rebellious, energetic, subcultural, iconic, and high status typically refer to traits associated with status and external perceptions, whereas authentic and original are traits more closely associated with internal attributes and intentions.

8.4 Theoretical contributions

Through the analysis of qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews, this study contributes to the existing literature on brand coolness and influencer-brand relations. Specifically, it examines the characteristics of cool brands and investigates how influencers impact the perceived coolness of brands. The study also considers the characteristics of a cool influencer. This alternative perspective adds a novel aspect to existing literature, which has mainly focused on the characteristics of cool brands (Warren et al., 2019). Additionally, by examining the Finnish brand context, the study provides insights specific to the social and cultural dynamics of Finland in a field that has predominantly focused on the brand contexts of other cultures.

In this study, the results show that certain characteristics define cool brands. The participants characterized cool brands as distinctive, trendy, visible, youthful, and popular. Many of these characteristics align with the ten characteristics of coolness defined in previous literature by Warren et al. (2019, p. 39). Among the ten characteristics defined by Warren et al., the study found that the most important in enhancing brand coolness were originality, popularity, aesthetic appeal, and authenticity. The participants in this study implied that enhancing these characteristics is the most common strategy for brands to improve their coolness. This aligns with earlier research by Warren et al. (2019, p. 52), which suggests that enhancing any of the ten characteristics of coolness generally enhances the perception of a brand's coolness.

Influencer coolness has been defined as a desirable success factor for social media influencers that is positively related to brand trust as well as parasocial relationships (Reinikainen et al., 2021, p. 2). However, earlier studies did not discuss characteristics

defining cool influencers. This study found that similar characteristics defining cool brands also define cool influencers. Participants described cool influencers as daring to be themselves, authentic, and having distinctive content and cool photos. These traits can be paralleled with the characteristics of brand coolness—authenticity, originality, and aesthetic appeal—as defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 36). However, participants expressed that the most important characteristics for enhancing the coolness of an influencer may differ from those for a brand. While authenticity was emphasized as a character enhancing both influencer and brand coolness, aesthetic appeal was particularly emphasized in influencer coolness. In contrast, while popularity held immense importance in enhancing brand coolness, it was the least defining characteristic in influencer coolness.

Reinikainen et al. (2021) have observed that both positive and negative associations may spill over from influencers to the brands they endorse, a phenomenon called the influencer spillover effect. This study highlights the effects influencers have on brand coolness, and several ways influencers are able to impact brand coolness were identified by the participants. Four main themes in which these impacts may manifest were identified: imparted coolness, gained visibility, strengthened brand image, and heightened purchase intentions. The findings are in line with previous literature stating that the ability of a brand to be perceived as cool can often be impacted when people who are already deemed cool associate themselves with the brand (Belk et al., 2010, p. 203). The findings of the study suggest that through association, certain characteristics of coolness defined by Warren et al. (2019, p. 39), are more transferable from influencers to brands than others. Transferable characteristics included popularity, rebelliousness, subculturality, energy, high status, and iconicity, whereas non-transferable characteristics included usefulness/extraordinariness, authenticity, and originality, with aesthetic appeal falling in the middle.

In line with previous research provided by Reinikainen et al. (2021), the study found that besides positive effects, influencers can also have negative effects on a brand's coolness. The findings suggest that simply choosing the wrong persona to endorse a brand may have adverse effects on brand coolness. The study found several other instances and influencer actions that would lead to a worsened perceived coolness for brands. The identified instances were influencer controversies, unfitting collaborations, conflict of values, ingenuine collaborations, and involvement in illegal activities. This aligns with previous literature stating that if a social media influencer is perceived to have betrayed their audience, it can have adverse effects on attitudes, brand perceptions, trust, and purchase intentions toward the brand they have endorsed (Reinikainen et al., 2021, p. 2). In the study, an emphasis was placed on the alignment between the influencer and the brand they are endorsing. The congruence between a brand and its endorser has been deemed important by many scholars in previous literature, and it has been stated that the alignment between a brand and its endorser critically impacts brand perceptions and purchase intentions (Fleck, Korchia & Le Roy, 2012, p. 658).

This study found that a brand's coolness has a positive influence on the tendency for consumers to follow a brand on social media. The participants expressed that they viewed cool brands as more likely to create more engaging, compelling, and inspiring social media content. The study also found that participants associated brand coolness

with increased purchase intentions. These findings align with previous studies, which have indicated that brand coolness influences attitudes toward the brand, consumers' word-of-mouth intentions, and their willingness to pay (Warren et al., 2019, p. 36-37). Additionally, enhanced brand coolness has been found to positively influence brand love both directly and indirectly, with brand attitude serving as a mediating variable (Kumar, 2021, p. 45).

8.5 Managerial implications

Beyond theoretical contributions, this study provides valuable findings for managers and marketers as well. One objective of this study was to gain insight into the characteristics of brand coolness as well as to examine the strategies for brands to enhance their perceived coolness. The traits emphasized as the most important in enhancing a brand's coolness by the participants of the study, were originality, popularity, aesthetic appeal, and authenticity. Among these, the frequently mentioned aesthetic appeal is one that managers can enhance by focusing on the overall presentation, aesthetics, logos, and designs of a brand if they wish for it to be perceived as cool. The study also shed light on how coolness potentially influences brand perceptions, providing further practical implications for managers and marketers. Another objective of the study, was to explore the impact of social media influencers on the perceived coolness of the brands they are affiliated with. The findings of this study show, that influencers have the potential to enhance brand coolness, however, this impact depends on several factors, including alignment, authenticity, and the transferability of particular characteristics. By understanding these insights, managers are more likely to succeed in gaining positive benefits from influencer reinforcements, especially if the target demographic of the brand is of such that values coolness. Additionally, they can utilize the recognized strategies to enhance brand coolness, hence improving brand perceptions.

The study reinforced the theoretical findings stating that the coolness of a brand can amplify the bond between a consumer and a brand, making the consumer more likely to advocate for the brand, leading to heightened purchase intentions (Warren et al., 2019, p.36-46). According to the findings of the study, brand coolness affects consumers' intentions to follow a brand on social media, suggesting that companies should pay attention to emphasizing the coolness value of their brand. The insights from this study indicate that companies can employ certain tactics and strategies to enhance their perceived coolness. These strategies not only aim to enhance the characteristics associated with cool brands, but also explore additional methods that contribute to achieving a cool status. The primary strategy identified by the participants was enhancing the characteristics related to cool brands, consistent with Warren et al.'s (2019, p. 53) suggestion that brands lacking in certain traits of coolness must reinforce those aspects. Warren et al. (2019, p.53), stated that the specific approach to accomplish this is dependent on the brand's history, industry, and target audience. In this research, the data emphasized the importance of utilizing various social media channels, especially Instagram and TikTok, to increase brand visibility and capitalize on emerging

trends. According to the data, to remain relevant, brands should actively engage on social media. Moreover, it was highlighted that increasing engagement, particularly on social media, and infusing humor and wit into brand communications can further enhance a sense of relatability, thereby improving the brand's cool image.

In addition to enhancing coolness characteristics, the data indicated that brands may benefit from the "spillover cool effect" by collaborating and featuring individuals perceived as cool in their marketing campaigns. Due to the rising popularity of social media influencers in recent years, influencer marketing has become a well-known and often used business approach (Farivar & Wang, 2021, p. 201). Managers should however acknowledge that while influencers may improve the perceived coolness of a brand, certain conditions must be met. The study underscores the significance of alignment between the influencer and the brand, as well as the influencer's personal image. Based on the findings, managers should avoid influencers who appear mismatched with the brand, leading to poor product-endorser fit and an ingenuine collaboration. Additionally, influencers involved in controversies, engaging in illegal activities, or conflicting with the brand's values should be avoided.

Managers should also consider that, in seeking to enhance brand coolness, certain characteristics are more effectively conveyed from influencers to brands. If a brand aims to boost its popularity, subculturality, rebelliousness, or energy, leveraging influencers who already embody these traits can be advantageous. Conversely, if a brand seeks to cultivate authenticity or originality, alternative strategies should be pursued, as according to the data, these traits are not commonly perceived to transfer from influencers to brands.

8.6 Evaluations and limitations of the study

It is important to acknowledge that as all research does, this study has certain limitations and challenges. The study was conducted within the context of a single case organization, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the subjective nature of coolness perception poses challenges in quantifying the extent of its transfer as well as the generalizability. Despite these limitations, it is essential to acknowledge them without diminishing the study's significance. In this subsection, the reliability, credibility and quality of this research are critically examined.

The nature of the subject presents a challenge in terms of both generalizability and quantifying the results. Coolness, by its very nature, is subjective and dynamic. The qualities deemed cool by consumers can undergo changes over time and may differ among individuals. It is a socially constructed concept, meaning that an individual's level of coolness is contingent on how others perceive them (Warren & Campbell, 2014, p. 544). Interpretation of coolness are influenced by societal beliefs, norms, and cultural contexts, resulting in varied definitions across different cultures and time periods. The subjective aspect of coolness perception presents challenges when trying to measure its extent and generalizability between individuals as well as different populations.

Kumar's (2021, p.41) empirical model, where brand coolness indirectly impacts brand love through brand attitude, was a part of the theoretical framework of this research. However, due to resource constraints, this aspect was very briefly touched upon through a single interview question. The research had a specific interview question regarding the connection between brand coolness and brand following. However, more research on the reasons behind following brands on social media needs to be conducted in order to draw further conclusions. It is also unclear, whether customers follow brands on social media because they are cool, or whether they follow a brand that makes inspirational or captivating content, and hence perceive the brand as cool.

The research involved interviews with nineteen voluntary participants familiar with the brand, all aged 18 or older. Therefore, when interpreting the results, it is important to consider that they cannot be directly generalized to all Finnish customers of the brand due to the small sample size. Increasing the number of interviewees or approaching the topic with a quantitative research design could provide more widely applicable information on the research subject. Additionally, according to Polkinghorne (2005, p. 142-143), one-time interviews often do not suffice to produce comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation. In Polkinghorne's article, (2005, p. 142-143) it is suggested that one interviewee should be interviewed three times to obtain sufficiently diverse and in-depth information about the research topic. In this study, there was only the opportunity to conduct a single round of interviews. Due to the limited scope of the master's thesis, resources did not allow for multiple interviews per participant. However, it should be noted that the number of interviews can be seen as affecting the reliability of the study.

In qualitative research, the reliability of the entire research process is assessed. Both the chosen methods and the researcher, along with the research results, are subject to evaluation (Eskola & Suoranta, 2014). The researcher's role and their neutrality should be assessed when considering the reliability of the research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). It was deemed important for ample space to be provided for interviewees' own views during interviews in this study, and for the questions asked to be as objective as possible. Before the first interview, a pilot interview was conducted to ensure that the questions were understandable and would elicit comprehensive responses. By presenting questions according to the interview script, attempts were made not to steer participants' responses or thoughts. However, due to the limited time, the concept of coolness was brought up rather early in the interviews, potentially steering the responses of the participants.

During the analysis phase, efforts were made to be aware of any preconceptions about the topic so that they would not guide the interpretation of the research results. The aim is to interpret the results and write about them genuinely and truthfully in the conclusions. However, a researcher cannot be considered a completely objective interpreter, as the researcher's own views always influence the interpretation of the results. Therefore, understanding one's own subjectivity as a researcher is crucial (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). It should also be noted that the researcher is relatively inexperienced, which may affect the reliability of the study, especially the analysis of the data. For the benefit of reviewers and others who would apply the findings to their activities, the production process of the data must be open and transparent

(Polkinghorne, 2005, p.144). Efforts were made to develop knowledge and skills by familiarizing with the literature and seeking assistance from a supervisor during the research process.

The reliability of the research also includes the ethicality of the study. The researcher must adhere to ethical principles throughout the research process (Puusa et al., 2020). Informing the participants is part of the research's ethics. Participants were sent an information sheet about the study and a privacy notice, which included information about the handling of data and personal information. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were briefly informed about the study, the progression of the interview, and permission to record the interviews was sought. When producing qualitative data, the participants' well-being must come first, and their privacy must be protected (Polkinghorne, 2005, p.144). The identifiability of the participants is a crucial ethical issue in research. By anonymizing the data, the identifiability of the participants can be eliminated (Kuula, 2011). In this study, the interviewees remained anonymous, and participants were informed about this both in the privacy notice and verbally. During transcription, identifying information was removed from the data, and individual participants cannot be identified from the results of the study. Anonymity aimed to enable participants to respond without feeling pressure to answer in a certain way, ensuring that the responses remained as genuine and open as possible. However, for the reliability of the research, it should be considered that participants, despite anonymity, may feel the need to respond in a certain way, and the preconceived notions and knowledge of the participants about the subject may also affect the responses and, thus, the reliability of the research results.

8.7 Implications for future research

Considering future research, there are many interesting aspects of brand coolness to yet be studied. While in this study, the focus was on how influencers impact a brands' coolness, another interesting avenue for future research would be, how collaborating with different types of brands impacts an influencers coolness. Kumar's (2021, p.41) empirical model, where brand coolness indirectly impacts brand love through brand attitude, was also a part of the theoretical framework of this research. However, due to resource constraints, this aspect was very briefly touched upon through a single interview question. Future studies could center on investigating the effect of brand coolness on brands further, by for example examining its impact on brand loyalty, as well as the effect brand coolness may have on consumer behaviors, such as purchase intentions. Brand coolness and its importance could also be studied across different demographics as well as different stakeholder groups. This could provide valuable insights, as understanding the long-term effects of perceived coolness on customer loyalty is crucial for brands striving for success. There is also a compelling narrative of brand coolness for other stakeholder groups than consumers. The strategies and the expedience behind brand coolness from the perspective of brand managers for example would offer an interesting subject for future research.

Given the inherently subjective and dynamic nature of coolness (Warren & Campbell, 2014, p. 544), it presents an intriguing avenue for future research. For instance, exploring the evolution of brand coolness through longitudinal studies or conducting cross-cultural examinations to investigate diverse cultural interpretations of brand coolness could offer valuable insights. Such studies would contribute to the understanding on whether coolness exhibits universality or cultural specificity, influencing brand perceptions.

Reflecting on the research, it would have been very beneficial to incorporate a quantitative study on the characteristics of coolness. In regard to future studies, this would complement qualitative insights by providing a more comprehensive understanding on the distinctions among these characteristics, elucidating which ones hold greater significance for brands aspiring to exude a cool image. Additionally, according to Warren and Campbell (2014, p.544), the easiest way to operationalize coolness is by using a consensual evaluation technique. One interesting avenue of research would be to include a quantitative research by asking a group of customers the extent they think something, or someone is cool or uncool. This could offer a systematic and measurable approach to understanding coolness in brands between different industries and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in a quantifiable manner.

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APPENDIX 1 NOTICE

Osallistu tutkimukseen, niin voit voittaa 100€ lahjakortin vitunleijajaan!

Tutkimus on osa pro gradu -tutkielmaa, jossa selvitetään, mistä piirteistä brändin ”cooleus” rakentuu.

Mitä tutkimuksessa tehdään?

Osallistut etänä toteutettavaan kertahaastatteluun, jonka kesto on noin 10-15 minuuttia. Haastattelu on yksilöhaastattelu, ja etsimme noin 20-25 osallistujaa. Haastattelun vastaukset käsitellään ehdottoman luottamuksellisesti, eikä yksittäisen henkilön vastauksia voida erottaa tuloksista. Ennen haastattelua, saat lisäinfoa tutkimuksen tietosuojasta.

Kuka voi osallistua tutkimukseen?

Osallistuminen edellyttää, että olet täysi-ikäinen eli yli 18-vuotias.

Missä ja milloin?

Haastattelut toteutetaan etänä sinulle sopivana aikana joko Microsoft Teamsin tai Zoomin välityksellä.

Miten ilmoittaudun?

Ilmoittaudu haastatteluun lähettämällä päivämäärä ja kellonaika, jolloin voisit osallistua haastatteluun osoitteeseen: jviinika@student.jyu.fi.

Jos sinulla herää kysyttävää, voit olla yhteydessä Jenna-Juulia Rekiöön sähköpostitse: jviinika@student.jyu.fi tai puhelimitse: +358 407255615.

APPENDIX 2 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

Brief explanation of the purpose of the interview.

Ensuring confidentiality and asking for recording permission. Introduction and background information. Age:

- Can you share your general perceptions that first come to mind about Vitunleija Oy as a brand? / Voitko kertoa mitä sinulle ensimmäisenä tulee mieleen Vitunleija Oy:stä brändinä?
- Can you describe Vitunleija Oy as a brand using three adjectives? / Voitko kuvailla Vitunleija Oy:tä brändinä kolmella adjektiivilla?
- In your opinion, what does it mean to be “cool”? / Mitä sinun mielestäsi tarkoittaa “olla cool”?
- From your perspective, what characteristics define a "cool" brand? / Mitkä ominaisuudet määrittelevät sinun näkökulmastasi "coolin" brändin?
- Thinking about the brands you follow on social media, how important is the concept of 'coolness' is to you from a scale of 1-10? Why is it / why is it not important? / Ajatellessasi brändejä, joita seuraat sosiaalisessa mediassa, kuinka tärkeäksi koet brändien “cooleuden” asteikolla yhdestä kymmeneen? Miksi / miksi se ei ole tärkeää?
- From your perspective, what are the common ways or strategies that brands follow to become cool? / Mitkä ovat sinun näkökulmastasi yleiset tavat tai strategiat, joita brändit noudattavat tullakseen cooleiksi?
- Do you believe all brands aspire to be seen as cool? / Uskotko, että kaikki brändit haluavat olla cooleja?
- From your perspective, what characteristics define a "cool" influencer? / Mitkä ominaisuudet määrittelevät sinun näkökulmastasi "coolin" sosiaalisen median vaikuttajan?
- From your experience, how does the coolness of an influencer impact a brand it is connected to? / Miten vaikuttajan cooleus mielestäsi vaikuttaa brändiin, johon se on sidoksissa?
- Do you think the influencers you relate to Vitunleija affect the coolness of the brand? If so, how? / Vaikuttaako mielestäsi vaikuttajat, jotka yhdistät Vitunleijaan brändin cooleuteen? Jos kyllä, miten?
- How well do you think the influencers related to Vitunleija match the brand? What contributes to this and what does not? / Kuinka hyvin Vitunleijaan

yhdistettävät vaikuttajat mielestäsi vastaavat brändiä? Mikä tähän vaikuttaa ja mikä ei?

- Can you recall any instances where an influencer positively impacted a brand's coolness? / Tuleeko mieleen tapauksia, joissa vaikuttaja olisi vaikuttanut positiivisesti jonkin brändin cooleuteen?
- Can you recall any instances where an influencer negatively impacted a brand's coolness? / Tuleeko mieleen tapauksia, joissa vaikuttaja olisi vaikuttanut negatiivisesti jonkin brändin cooleuteen?
- What actions of an influencer would be harmful to a brand's coolness? / Millaiset vaikuttajan toimet olisivat haitallisia brändin cooleudelle
- From this list of ten characteristics, please pick the top three that you believe are most suited for Vitunleija Oy. / Valitse kymmenen ominaisuuden listasta kolme parasta, jotka mielestäsi sopivat Vitunleijalle.
- From this list of ten characteristics, choose the top three you think are most crucial for enhancing general brand coolness. / Valitse kymmenen ominaisuuden luettelosta kolme parasta, jotka ovat mielestäsi yleisesti tärkeimpiä brändin cooleuden kannalta.
- Can you think of any additional characteristics you think are important for enhancing brand coolness? / Tuleeko sinulle mieleen muita ominaisuuksia, jotka ovat mielestäsi tärkeitä brändin cooleuden parantamiseksi?
- From this list of ten characteristics, choose the top three you think are most crucial for enhancing an influencer's coolness. / Valitse kymmenen ominaisuuden luettelosta kolme parasta, jotka ovat mielestäsi yleisesti tärkeimpiä influencerin cooleuden kannalta.
- Can you think of any additional characteristics you think are important for enhancing influencer coolness? / Tuleeko sinulle mieleen muita ominaisuuksia, jotka ovat mielestäsi tärkeitä influencerin cooleuden parantamiseksi?
- Which of these ten (+additional) characteristics do you think can travel from an influencer to a brand and which do not? / Mitkä näistä kymmenestä (+muut mainitut) piirteestä voivat mielestäsi siirtyä vaikuttajasta brändiin ja mitkä eivät?
- Is there something I haven't asked you that you would like to add? / Onko jotain, mitä tahtoisit lisätä, mitä en ole kysynyt?

LIST OF CHARACTERISTICS / OMINAISUUDET

AUTENTTISUUS / AUTHENTIC

- Genuine

- Committed to staying true to its roots
- Strong principles
- Genuine passion for the work /

- Aito
- Sitoutunut pysymään uskollisena juurilleen
- Vahvat periaatteet
- Aito intohimo tekemiseen

OMAPERÄSYY / ORIGINALITY

- The first of its kind
- Known for introducing new concepts
- Creative

- Ensimmäinen laatuaan
- Tuo uusia konsepteja
- Luova

SUBKULTTUURILLISUUS / SUBCULTURALITY

- Associated with specific subcultures
- For example, skateboarders, surfers, rappers... /

- Yhdistettävissä tiettyihin alakulttuureihin
- Esimerkiksi skeittarit, surffaajat, räppärit...

ENERGISYYS / ENERGETIC

- Energetic or exciting /
- Energinen tai jännittävä

VISUAALINEN VIEHÄTYS / AESTHETIC APPEAL

- Visually pleasing
- For example, logo, product packaging, design, Instagram feed.../
- Visuaalisesti miellyttävä
- Esim. Logo, tuotepakkaus, design, Instagram-feed...

HYÖDYLLISYYS TAI POIKKEUKSELLISUUS / USEFUL OR EXTRAORDINARY

- Provides something unique or highly useful
- Innovative solutions /
- Tarjoaa jotain ainutlaatuista tai erittäin hyödyllistä

-Innovatiivisia ratkaisuja

KORKEA ASEMA / HIGH STATUS

- Prestigious, luxurious, or exclusive /

-Arvokas, ylellinen tai eksklusiivinen

KAPINALLISUUS / REBELLIOUS

- Challenges the status quo, does things in its own way /

-Haastavat status quon, tekee asiat omalla tavallaan

IKONISUUS / ICONIC

- Iconic, symbolic

- Timeless, with a long history /

-Ikoninen, symboli

-Ajaton, pitkä historia

SUOSIO / POPULARITY

- Popular

- A talking point with broad appeal /

-Suosittu

-Monen puheen aihe, laaja vetovoima