

# Employing netnography approach to describe brand image from customers' perspectives - The case of coolmate

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## ABSTRACT

As internet users continue to grow rapidly, online platforms have become increasingly popular for brands to promote, sell, and market their products. This trend is particularly evident in the fashion industry, where digital channels offer significant opportunities for reaching and engaging consumers. With the proliferation of online social media, brands in the fashion sector are leveraging these platforms to build their brand image and connect closely with their customers. In this context, this study aims to delve into various aspects of Coolmate's brand image as perceived by its customers. In this study, a combination of in-depth interviews and netnographic data collection methods were employed to gather comprehensive insight. These methods help the study to achieve a robust and multifaceted understanding of the brand image from the customers' perspective. In total, 05 online communities with 42 posts and 342 comments are studied. The online communities are selected based on 05 criteria, including their relevance to the study, high "traffic" of postings, high numbers of discrete message posters, rich data, and having many between-member interactions. The research findings show that there are 18 main aspects of Coolmate perceived and discussed by customers in online communities, which can be grouped into four categories, including: Intrinsic, Extrinsic, Appearance and Performance attributes. Among these 18 aspects, there are 06 characteristics of Coolmate discussed in all 05 communities with high frequencies, including Durability, Hand-feel, Size, Promotion activities, Customer service, and Price. Based on the findings of this study, several managerial implications are proposed for Coolmate and other similar fashion brands to enhance and solidify their brand image in the minds of their customers.

**Key words:** brand image, fashion brand, Netnography, online communities

## 1 INTRODUCTION

2 According to Statista, as of October 2023, the num-  
 3 bers of internet users and social media users world-  
 4 wide are 5.3 billion and 4.95, respectively. Social on-  
 5 line platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, are now  
 6 very popular for users to connect, communicate,  
 7 search and share information. Using digital platforms  
 8 as a credible source is now popular among customers  
 9 in some specific sectors, such as fashion and beauty,  
 10 health and fitness, or travel<sup>1</sup>. In particular, social plat-  
 11 forms are perceived as inexpensive and effective chan-  
 12 nels for firms and customers to communicate, review,  
 13 and share viewpoints,..., not only in Vietnam but also  
 14 around the world<sup>2</sup>. There are many topics that cus-  
 15 tomers have been discussing on social media such as  
 16 fashion, skincare, travelling and food reviews<sup>3</sup>. These  
 17 discussions play a significant role in purchasing deci-  
 18 sion for many customers, because these create many  
 19 online brand communities on these platforms to pro-  
 20 vide customers new format of communication (many-  
 21 to-many)<sup>4</sup>. In these platforms, with the new format  
 22 of communication, customers not only can increase

and extend their experiences but also can share their  
 brand experiences with other customers. Conduct-  
 ing brand research, especially brand image, on online  
 platforms can help businesses to understand how cus-  
 tomers think and discuss their brands and know what  
 need to pay attention to<sup>1,5</sup>. In addition, the number  
 of studies around the globe conducted on social me-  
 dia is increasing, but still limited in Vietnam<sup>3</sup>. To  
 address these issues, Netnography, originating from  
 ethnography, serves as a research tool to collect cus-  
 tomers' opinions on online platforms<sup>1</sup>. This method  
 can be employed to investigate "the customer behav-  
 ior of cultures and communities present on the Inter-  
 net" [6, p. 336].

Netnography, originating from ethnography, is em-  
 ployed in many research contexts including market-  
 ing<sup>1</sup>, management<sup>2</sup>, political science<sup>3</sup>, and public re-  
 lations<sup>4</sup>. However, according to Villegas<sup>5</sup>, studies in  
 the marketing discipline employing netnography are  
 still limited. Meanwhile, social online platforms, such  
 as Facebook, TikTok, are now very popular for users  
 to connect, communicate, search and share informa-  
 tion. According to Plumeyer et al.<sup>6</sup>, more studies on

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46 brand image with user-generated content should be  
 47 encouraged in different brands. They also stated that  
 48 new data sources should be used in brand image stud-  
 49 ies. It can be seen that qualitative studies, which em-  
 50 ploy new types of data sources, are needed to research  
 51 brand image in digital contexts.

52 The fashion market in Vietnam become more compet-  
 53 itive as there are many international fashion brands,  
 54 such as H&M, Zara, Uniqlo, etc. joining in and  
 55 making the competition in the industry more in-  
 56 tense for local ones. On the one hand, the issues  
 57 that Vietnamese fashion brands have to face now in-  
 58 clude a lack of materials that depend much on im-  
 59 ports, lacking professionalism, poorly-designed styles  
 60 that are not appropriate for young customers, and no  
 61 long-term strategic branding<sup>7</sup>. In addition, the eco-  
 62 nomic crisis after COVID-19 led to increased infla-  
 63 tion, increased unemployment, and decreased shop-  
 64 ping/consumption, and fashion is one of the indus-  
 65 tries most impacted. The current business context re-  
 66 quires local fashion brands to have to increase their  
 67 competitive competencies by attracting customer at-  
 68 tention. On the other hand, online stores, online dis-  
 69 tribution channels, and online shopping are now be-  
 70 coming more popular with customers. In response,  
 71 local brands have increased online channels for com-  
 72 municating with customers<sup>7</sup>. Investigating the brand  
 73 image from customers' perspectives in the fashion in-  
 74 dustry is an important and meaningful topic in this  
 75 fast-changing business context.

76 To fill the gaps in understanding customers' percep-  
 77 tions of local fashion brands, and to respond to the call  
 78 from previous studies in researching on social media  
 79 to employ new types of data in qualitative research,  
 80 the present study employs Netnography and netno-  
 81 graphic data (user-generated content) to describe the  
 82 brand image of a fashion brand from customers' per-  
 83 spectives. To address this purpose, the following re-  
 84 search objectives include: (i) explore and describe im-  
 85 ages of fashion brands in customers' minds, and (ii)  
 86 propose suggestions for local fashion firms to enhance  
 87 their competitive capabilities in the market. Netno-  
 88 graphic data from online fashion communities and in-  
 89 depth interviews are collected to address the research  
 90 objectives.

## 91 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 92 Brand community and online brand com- 93 munity

94 Community is the construct in social thought that has  
 95 been studied for the last centuries; and based on this

concept, brand community is introduced and stud- 96  
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ied. A brand community is defined as “a special-  
 ized, non-geographically bound community, based  
 on a structured set of social relationships among ad-  
 mirers of a brand” [8, p. 412]. Hence, it can be  
 seen that the relationships in brand communities are  
 complex between the customers and the brand, with  
 the firm, and with other customers. Lee et al.<sup>9</sup> also  
 identify that geographical limitations become obsta-  
 cles to preventing customers from communicating ef-  
 fectively. These findings and the increase in internet  
 users are good reasons to explain the emergence of on-  
 line brand communities.  
 In their study, Brogi et al. [10, p. 2] defined on-  
 line brand communities (OBC) as “specialized brand  
 communities that take place in a virtual setting where  
 members' interaction is primarily Internet-mediated”.  
 The interactions of customers about a brand may be  
 logical, and/or emotional, positive and/or negative  
 in online brand communities, where customers are  
 passive in consuming the discussed content<sup>11</sup>. The  
 findings from studies on the OBC show benefits for  
 firms if management processes are well-designed to  
 utilize their effects. The typical benefits are explored  
 in the study of Essamri et al.<sup>12</sup>, including (a) nurtur-  
 ing brand passion, (b) bridging, facilitated via negoti-  
 ating brand identity, plus legitimizing the brand iden-  
 tity, (c) partnering, closely working with the commu-  
 nity. Hence, brands should be aware of the existence  
 of these OBCs to get customers' viewpoints, so that  
 they can employ appropriate marketing activities to  
 support a new product launch, enable social interac-  
 tions, to facilitate brand relationship and long-term  
 loyalty<sup>13</sup>.

In their study, Gupta et al.<sup>14</sup> stated that customer  
 behaviors keep changing, so developing OBCs and  
 exploring customers' motivation to engage in OBCs  
 should be continuously invested. Moreover, fashion  
 is fast-changed products. Therefore, studying cus-  
 tomers' reflections on brand images in OBCs is vital  
 for fashion brands.

### Brand image and Studies in fashion brands 137

Brand image is defined in the study of Koubaa<sup>15</sup> as 138  
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147 perception of customers in their mind that they as- 200  
 148 sociate to form a certain image of the brand. To be 201  
 149 short, brand image is what customers memorize about 202  
 150 a brand. This memory, consisting of physical factors 203  
 151 and psychological factors, links to customers' brand 204  
 152 choice. Notably, the more positive the brand image 205  
 153 is, the more clearly a customer understands the prod- 206  
 154 uct, and the higher the customer's purchase intention 207  
 155 of customer is <sup>17</sup>.

156 However, Murphy <sup>18</sup> stated that to be successful, 208  
 157 brands must differ. Customers have no reason to 209  
 158 switch to another (new) brand if there are no differ- 210  
 159 ences. In the early step of launching, a brand must 211  
 160 bombard customers to set up their brand awareness 212  
 161 and then increase their brand knowledge <sup>16</sup>. Conse- 213  
 162 quently, customers will have a particular perception 214  
 163 of the brand in their mind, which can be called brand 215  
 164 image. These steps are crucial so that firms must pri- 216  
 165 oritize creating a positive brand image in customers' 217  
 166 minds, which can inspire customers to love brands 218  
 167 [6]. Although the brand image is self-interpreted by 219  
 168 customers, it may be logical or emotional, positive or 220  
 169 negative. Hence, businesses have to pay much atten- 221  
 170 tion to it. 222

171 The literature review on brand image shows that 223  
 172 scholars describe and study aspects of brand images 224  
 173 differently <sup>19,20</sup>. For example, Riaz <sup>21</sup> explains brand 225  
 174 image in three aspects, including Uniqueness of brand 226  
 175 association, Strength of brand association, and Favor- 227  
 176 ability of brand association. Brand image in the study 228  
 177 of Wijaya <sup>16</sup> covers brand identity, brand personal- 229  
 178 ity, brand association, brand behavior and attitudes, 230  
 179 brand competence and benefits. Meanwhile, Lee et 231  
 180 al. <sup>9</sup> explain that brand image contains customers' in- 232  
 181 formation, ideas, and product features. Even though 233  
 182 it is described differently, brand image is defined as 234  
 183 part of the process, in which the image is based on 235  
 184 customers' emotions associated and the information 236  
 185 disseminated by the organization <sup>19</sup>. In short, there 237  
 186 are some crucial notes from reviewing previous stud- 238  
 187 ies on brand image. Firstly, brand image, generated 239  
 188 from consumers' perceptions, is the key factor in re- 240  
 189 flecting customers' feelings about a brand. Secondly, 241  
 190 aspects of brand image (in customers' memories) in- 242  
 191 clude brand association, brand (functional and emo- 243  
 192 tional) attributes, and information perceived by cus- 244  
 193 tomers. 245

194 There is not much literature on brand image in the 246  
 195 fashion sector found. Most of studies having the fash- 247  
 196 ion sector as the research context focused on cloth 248  
 197 quality <sup>22-24</sup>, one aspect of cloth (such as associations 249  
 198 of a sustainable fashion brand) <sup>25</sup>, and building brand 250  
 199 image through designing stores <sup>26</sup>. In the study of.

Ren et al. <sup>24</sup>, the aspect of (perceived) quality of cloth 200  
 includes the product (Comfort, Durability, Fineness, 201  
 Protection, Certification, Appearance, External) and 202  
 service. In that of Claussen et al <sup>23</sup>, which employed 203  
 qualitative methods, the cloth quality framework con- 204  
 sists of 04 clusters: Durability and Processing, Usabil- 205  
 ity, Aesthetic and Extrinsic. Similarly, Swinker and 206  
 Hines <sup>22</sup> based on 4 aspects of cloth quality (Intrin- 207  
 sic, Extrinsic, Appearance and Performance) to con- 208  
 duct survey to measure consumers' evaluations. It can 209  
 be seen that fashion brand image has not been much 210  
 studied to provide a theoretical foundation, and it is 211  
 necessary to explore this issue. 212

To measure brand image, the discussion about ap- 213  
 proaches and scales of brand image is still on the 214  
 move. Researchers are continuing discussing, em- 215  
 ploying previous scales and designing their own 216  
 scales <sup>20</sup>. This fact shows that there is no widely- 217  
 agreed scale to study brand image. In a review pa- 218  
 per in brand image published in 2023, Parris and 219  
 Guzmán <sup>20</sup> conclude that there is a necessity to let 220  
 stakeholders describe a brand based on their percep- 221  
 tions. Similarly, many techniques to measure brand 222  
 image have been found in a systematic review con- 223  
 ducted by Plumeyer et al. <sup>6</sup>. From this research find- 224  
 ing, Plumeyer et al. [ <sup>6</sup>, p. 249] suggested several di- 225  
 rections for future research in brand image, and one of 226  
 them is "using new data sources for brand image mea- 227  
 surement techniques". Therefore, in the present study, 228  
 data collected in OBCs by netnography is to respond 229  
 to this call. 230

## METHODOLOGY 231

### An overview of Netnography 232

In response to the fast development in using the Inter- 233  
 net, in 1998, Kozinets generated the term "Netnogra- 234  
 phy" to refer to the ethnographic study conducted 235  
 completely online <sup>3</sup>. The first online study was con- 236  
 ducted by U.S. researchers in 1995 in which elec- 237  
 tronic media was employed <sup>3</sup>. Netnography is a com- 238  
 pletely different approach to help researchers to un- 239  
 derstand online interactions <sup>1</sup>. It is defined as "a spe- 240  
 cialized form of ethnography research that has been 241  
 adapted to the unique contingencies of various types 242  
 of computer-mediated social interaction" [ <sup>1</sup>, p. 39]. 243  
 In his study, Kozinets <sup>27</sup> proposed Netnography as 244  
 an online marketing research technique to identify 245  
 and understand the needs and decision influences 246  
 of relevant online customer groups. Yet, the way to 247  
 define Netnography has changed with the times 248  
 [28]. Kozinets also revised and proposed new defini- 249  
 tions of netnography in 2010, 2012, and 2020 <sup>28</sup>, and 250

251 netnography can be employed in different areas, such  
 252 as sociology, psychology, business, political science,  
 253 medicine or nutrition and health management<sup>29,30</sup>.  
 254 Netnography, as a research method, offers many ben-  
 255 efits, such as its unobtrusive nature, a more rapid and  
 256 cost-effective research method, being well-suited to  
 257 dealing with personally or politically sensitive top-  
 258 ics or illegal acts, etc.<sup>29</sup>. In particular, Netnography  
 259 is valuable to provide rich market research data in  
 260 the stage of product innovation, or to identify mar-  
 261 ket trends to understand customer satisfaction/ dis-  
 262 satisfaction with products/ services<sup>29</sup>. In general,  
 263 there are 02 types of Netnography, active and pas-  
 264 sive netnography, in which the researchers actively  
 265 participate in online communities as members, or  
 266 passively lurk and observe the communities. Even  
 267 though ethnography evolved from ethnography, pas-  
 268 sive netnography has been adopted in many studies.  
 269 Many researchers believe that lurking in online com-  
 270 munities with a ‘purely observational’ can help them  
 271 to collect naturalistic data and to avoid their bias<sup>29</sup>.  
 272 The review of previous studies shows that netnog-  
 273 raphy can be conducted solely, can be multiphased,  
 274 or can be part of a more extensive study, in which  
 275 netnographic data can be combined with other data  
 276 sources, such as in-depth interviews with community  
 277 members, participant, and non-participant observa-  
 278 tions<sup>29</sup>.  
 279 Kozinets<sup>31</sup>, in his book, presents four types of  
 280 Netnography studies representing four different re-  
 281 search directions. The four types of netnographies in-  
 282 clude auto-Netnography, symbolic Netnography, dig-  
 283 ital Netnography, and humanist Netnography. Auto-  
 284 Netnography is about writing, vulnerability, art and  
 285 sacrifice from a mainly “local” site: one’s own iden-  
 286 tity and story. Symbolic Netnography is conducted  
 287 on sites to study online social experiences and in-  
 288 teractions of particular people’s groups, cultures, na-  
 289 tions, and languages in text-sharings. Digital Netnog-  
 290 raphy helps people understand cultures based on data  
 291 analytic techniques from social media. Humanist  
 292 Netnography focuses on the changing nature of hu-  
 293 man social existence and is guided by social issues  
 294 of great importance. Among these types, the present  
 295 study employed passive and symbolic ethnography.  
 296 This method was used to study groups of people in  
 297 specific sites/online communities through computer-  
 298 mediated communications<sup>31</sup>.  
 299 About netnographic data, there are 03 forms of data:  
 300 archival data, co-created data, and fieldnote data<sup>31</sup>.  
 301 The present study will collect archival data because  
 302 of characteristics of archival data. As mentioned  
 303 above, brand image is self-interpreted by customers.

Hence, archival data is the most suitable as this type  
 of data does not involve researchers’ involvement in  
 co-creating data. It can help to reflect the original cus-  
 tomers’ perceptions of a brand.

### Netnography in the present study

Coolmate, a local fashion brand for men, was founded  
 in 2019 and has its revenue increasing continuously  
 from 137 bil. VND to 290 bil. VND in 2021  
 and 2022, respectively<sup>32</sup>. Not following traditional  
 models, Coolmate has no physical stores, and online  
 direct-to-customer (online D2C) platforms are cho-  
 sen to reduce the cost of trade intermediaries. Mul-  
 tiple online channels, such as e-commerce platforms,  
 and websites, are selected to approach customers 24/7  
 to save their time finding information and buying ap-  
 propriate products. As a result, customers also review,  
 and share their experiences about Coolmate’s prod-  
 ucts in OBCs. These reviews can explain customers’  
 satisfaction and significantly impact Coolmate’s rep-  
 utation. Therefore, a study of Coolmate’s customers’  
 viewpoints on its brand image is essential. To explore  
 customers’ perspectives on Coolmate’s brand image,  
 the present study was conducted in two main stages  
 consisting of netnography data and in-depth inter-  
 views with community members.

In the first stage, five online communities (Table 1)  
 were selected to collect the netnographic data based  
 on five criteria proposed by Kozinets<sup>27</sup> including (i)  
 being relevant to research questions; (ii) having high  
 “traffic” of postings, (iii) having large numbers of dis-  
 crete message posters; (iv) having detailed or descrip-  
 tively rich data; (v) having many between-member in-  
 teractions of the type required by the research ques-  
 tion. Specifically, this study chose fashion commu-  
 nities having many discussions (including posts and  
 comments) on the experiences of Coolmate’s prod-  
 ucts. In the selected communities, there have been  
 2 million to 36 thousand members from different  
 regions or cities/provinces in Vietnam. This point  
 matches well with the business model of Coolmate –  
 an online D2C platforms.

Another significant point is that posts about Cool-  
 mate in these communities have a critical mass of  
 members who discussed/commented. The netnog-  
 raphic data in the current study is archival, and  
 data was produced, found, gathered, and captured  
 by researchers from selected online communities<sup>31</sup>.  
 Netnographic data is collected from August 2022 to  
 December 2023, and all posts about Coolmates are  
 collected. After each post with all comments was

collected<sup>33</sup>, the data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method to identify, categorize, and describe in detail each theme and sub-theme covered in the netnographic data<sup>34</sup>. These themes and sub-themes represented Coolmate’s brand image aspects from customer perspectives.

After analyzing netnographic data and having the result of Coolmate’s brand image, in the second stage, 05 in-depth interviews are conducted to seek a better explanation of all aspects. The interviewees are customers and members of selected online communities with Coolmate products experience. During the interview, the interviewees are asked to express their thoughts and opinions toward every aspect of Coolmate’s brand image to provide more insights about netnographic data and explain the importance of these aspects from customers’ perspectives.

### 371 RESULT

372 In total, 42 posts consisting of 342 comments about  
 373 experiences with Coolmate’s products were collected  
 374 from five selected online communities (Table 1).  
 375 There are 18 aspects of Coolmate’s products discussed  
 376 in these posts (Figure 1). Customers provide feedback  
 377 about Coolmate products in each aspect, summarized  
 378 in keywords. The frequency shows the number  
 379 of times that customers commented on Coolmate’s  
 380 products as the keywords mentioned. The higher the  
 381 frequency, the more prominent Coolmate’s brand image  
 382 is from those customers’ points of view. After all  
 383 aspects were defined, five in-depth interviews were  
 384 conducted to ask customers of Coolmate (and they  
 385 are also members of the selected communities) about  
 386 these aspects. Among issues about Coolmate collected,  
 387 there are six aspects discussed in all five communities  
 388 and in most of the posts, including: *Durability*,  
 389 *Hand-feel*, *Size*, *Promotion activities*, *Customer service*  
 390 and *Price* with the frequencies of 96, 83, 81, 56, 46  
 391 and 46, respectively. The other aspects are mentioned  
 392 and discussed less than 30 times in all communities.

#### 393 Durability (with 96 times mentioned in 394 comments) :

395 Among aspects discussed in the five online communities,  
 396 the discussion on *Durability* was dominant, with  
 397 96 out of 147 comments. *Durability* is described as a  
 398 fabric or garment that retains its original shape and  
 399 smoothness and sharpness of crease through wearing  
 400 and repeated laundering. Most of the comments indicated  
 401 that Coolmate products were not durable. A customer  
 402 commented “*After only twice of laundry, the shirt was torn*”  
 403 (Netno C5, 2023). Others agreed that

Coolmate’s products were worn-out after washing and  
 404 wearing them for only a few months. In the same vein,  
 405 several customers provided feedback that the color of  
 406 Coolmate’s product quickly faded and the fabric easily  
 407 pilled. A comment mentioned this issue: “*Color easily  
 408 fades away after a few times of laundry...*” (Netno C1,  
 409 2023). Besides, the customers also complained about  
 410 pilling after only 2-3 times doing the laundry, which  
 411 cannot keep the fabric as smooth as the new product.  
 412 The comment reflects it, “*The underwear appears  
 413 pillings after just 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> laundry*” (Netno C1, 2023).  
 414 One cause of low durability may derive from fabric  
 415 thickness. Most of the comments agreed that Cool-  
 416 mate products were fragile. For example, a customer  
 417 commented, “*My (Coolmate) T-shirt is non-durable  
 418 and extremely thin so it tore very quickly*”.  
 419

The result from the in-depth interview is to explain  
 420 why *Durability* is important and mentioned in many  
 421 comments. As an explanation, this aspect is important  
 422 because “... *whether I have to repurchase (the new  
 423 one)...*” (Interview 3, 2023), or “...*whether the prod-  
 424 uct’s shape is kept after the laundry...*” (Interview 2,  
 425 2023).  
 426

#### 427 Size (with 81 times mentioned in comments 428 )

429 Customers also discussed a lot about *Size* which has  
 430 been mentioned 81 times by customers in the com-  
 431 munities. Coolmate is a Vietnamese menswear fash-  
 432 ion brand which based on the Vietnamese size guide  
 433 for measuring their product. However, there are 70  
 434 times that customers mentioned the “size is not stan-  
 435 dardized” which mainly said the size of Coolmate’s  
 436 products is unsuitable for Vietnamese men and not  
 437 standardized. All those perspectives are recognized  
 438 through customers’ comments in the communities.  
 439 One of them stated that “*Different colors of pants (in  
 440 the same design ) have different measurements, which  
 441 do not base on the size guide*” (Netno C2, 2023).  
 442

To explain why *Size* is frequently mentioned, inter-  
 443 viewees shared “*The form -fitting decides the frequency  
 444 that customers wear the product and the customer re-  
 445 tention*” (Interview 5, 2023). Despite having mainly  
 446 negative perceptions, *Size* needs to be taken heed of  
 447 because it’s also distinguished in customers minds.

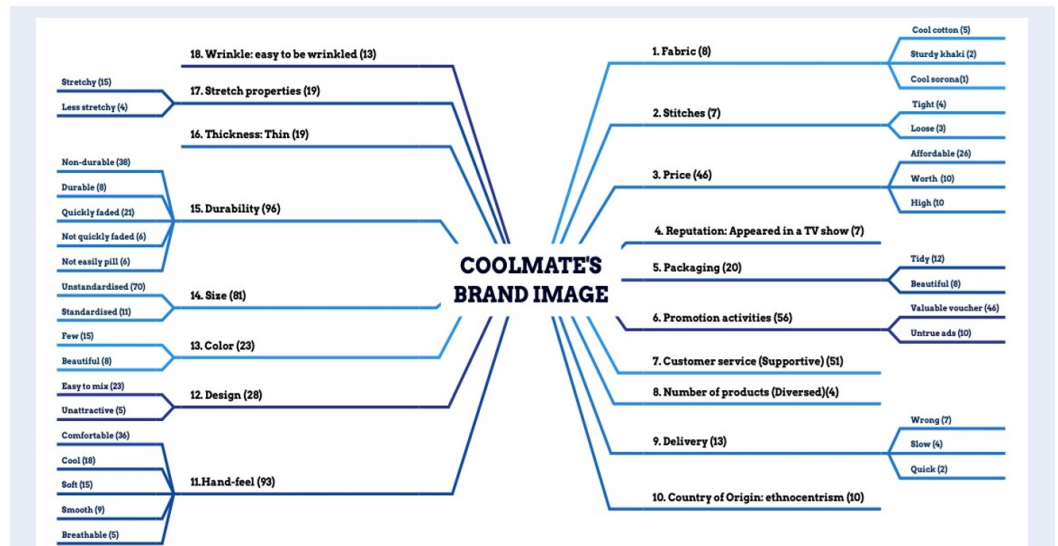
#### 448 Promotion activities (with 56 times men- 449 tioned in comments )

450 Regarding *Promotion*, two activities are mentioned  
 451 in online communities, including Valuable vouchers  
 452 and Untrue advertisements. Several customers men-  
 453 tioned receiving vouchers from Coolmate with good

**Table 1: The selected online communities**

| No.   | Community name                                 | Code | No. of members | Proximately duration (year) | No. of selected post about Coolmate | No. of comments in posts about Coolmate |
|-------|--|------|----------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1     | Tinh tế forum                                  | C1   | 2,000,000      | 16                          | 7                                   | 70                                      |
| 2     | Mặc đẹp sống chất                              | C2   | 36,000         | 3                           | 11                                  | 71                                      |
| 3     | Biết thì thừa thốt, không biết thì đọc REVIEW! | C3   | 706,800        | 1                           | 10                                  | 85                                      |
| 4     | Tâm sự con sen                                 | C4   | 460,900        | 3                           | 6                                   | 42                                      |
| 5     | Thánh Riviu                                    | C5   | 2,100,000      | 4                           | 8                                   | 74                                      |
| Total |  |      |                |                             | 42                                  | 342                                     |

Source: The researcher's data analysis



**Figure 1:** Aspects of Coolmate's brand image with the frequencies in posts/comments<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Source: The researcher's data analysis

454 discounts, at about 100,000 Vietnam dong (Netno C1,  
 455 2023). Customers think that Coolmate's voucher is  
 456 appealing and effective as they can buy cheaper prod-  
 457 ucts. An interviewee considered "... the voucher and  
 458 promotion are important to customers when thinking  
 459 of an apparel brand as it can help them to buy the prod-  
 460 ucts at a very good price" (Interviewee 5, 2023) as one  
 461 important factor to retain customers. Hence, he also  
 462 concluded, "I think because the customer service and  
 463 promotion (such as voucher, discount ) of the brand is  
 464 one of the things deciding the customer retention" (In-  
 465 terview 5, 2023). Another thing in Promotion activ-  
 466 ities is advertisements. In this regard, Coolmate re-  
 467 ceived a negative evaluation. Most of the comments

468 are to compare the products received with those in  
 469 advertisements. For instance, there was a comment  
 470 that "The real product didn't match the advertisement"  
 471 (Netno C2, 2023). An in-depth interview can help to  
 472 summarise the significance of Promotion activities as  
 473 he shared "... it is important because the promotion of  
 474 the brand is one of the factors making me decide to buy  
 475 clothes..." (Interviewee 1, 2023).

**Customer service (with 46 times mentioned in comments)**

Customer services is mentioned and discussed in many posts and comments. Customers' experiences are var-

480 ied. However, the standard issue is positive feedback  
 481 about Coolmate’s customer services. Many customers  
 482 commented that Coolmate’s customer service sup-  
 483 ported consulting products for customers and help-  
 484 ing them solve their problems on time such as or-  
 485 dering the wrong size or returning the product. For  
 486 example, one customer gave feedback on a post: “It  
 487 has to admit that customer service of Coolmate is ex-  
 488 cellent, ... supporting customer is really good, messages  
 489 in page is responded very fast...” (Netno C2, 2023);  
 490 or “...customer service team of Coolmate is outstand-  
 491 ing...” (Netno C3, 2023). These judgments show that  
 492 customers have positive perspectives about the Cool-  
 493 mate’s customer service, which is also one of the most  
 494 prominent and important things in customers’ minds  
 495 when discussing on Coolmate. Interviewees also con-  
 496 firm this positive feedback and provide their explana-  
 497 tions such as: “It makes me decide to buy clothes” (In-  
 498 terviewee 1, 2023); or “Customer service of the brand  
 499 are factors deciding customer retention” (Interviewee  
 500 2, 2023).

501 **Price (with 46 times mentioned in com-**  
 502 **ments )**

503 With 46 times counted, *Price* is one aspect mentioned  
 504 in many community posts and comments. Cus-  
 505 tomers’ opinions of Coolmate’s price differ, with some  
 506 customers’ thinking it is high, while others think it is  
 507 affordable or worth it. A customer wrote that “Com-  
 508 pared to another local brand, Coolmate’s price is af-  
 509 fordable” (Netno C1, 2023). Similarly, another user  
 510 agreed that “Coolmate products are worth their price”  
 511 (Netno C3, 2023). Even so, some customers thought  
 512 the price of Coolmate products was expensive. Price  
 513 is one of the critical factors considered by customers  
 514 as an interviewer shared “rice is really important when  
 515 I decide to buy clothes” (Interview 2, 2023) and “I pre-  
 516 fer an affordable price. Yet, if a product is too cheap the  
 517 quality might not good” (Interview 4, 2023). Based on  
 518 the above feedback, it can be concluded that most of  
 519 customers agreed that Coolmate offered a reasonable  
 520 price. More than that, customers also compared the  
 521 amount of money spent with the quality of products  
 522 they received. In this case, it’s clear that customers  
 523 prefer a product that is worth its price to a cheaper  
 524 one.

525 **DISCUSSION**

526 A study by Swinker & Hines<sup>22</sup> figured out four cate-  
 527 gories of informational cues used by customers to per-  
 528 ceive a garment, including: Intrinsic cues (changing  
 529 these characteristics would change the product, e.g.,

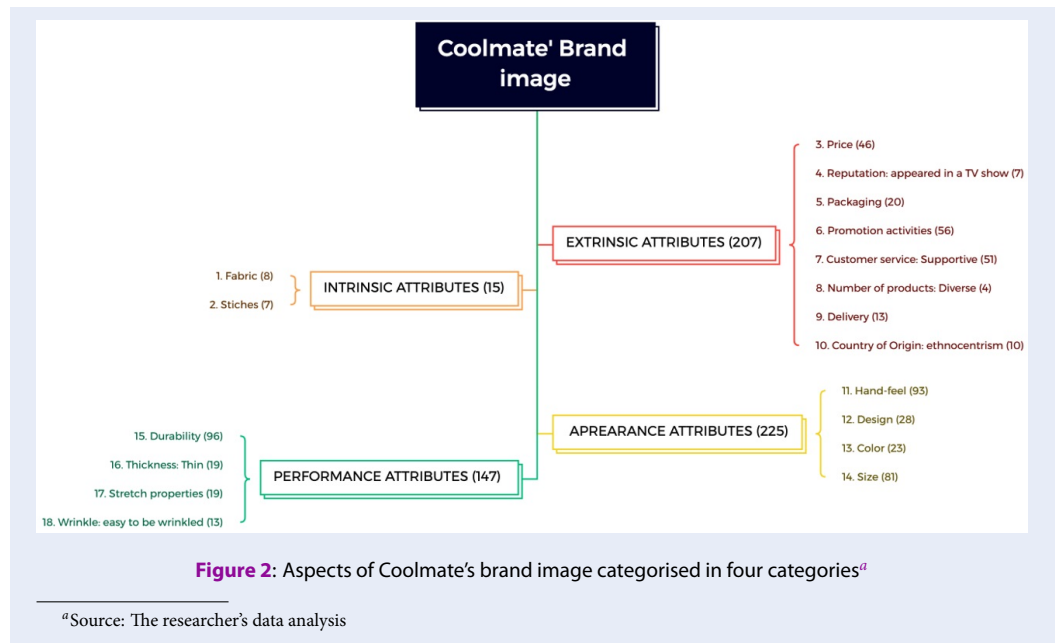
530 fabric and workmanship), Extrinsic cues (character- 530  
 531 istics that can be changed without altering the struc- 531  
 532 ture of the product, e.g., country of origin and price), 532  
 533 Appearance cues (characteristics that affect how the 533  
 534 product looks, e.g., style and color) and Performance 534  
 535 cues (characteristics that affect how the product func- 535  
 536 tions, e.g., durability and wrinkle resistance). These 536  
 537 categories provide a basis for 18 aspects of Coolmate’s 537  
 538 brand image, which can be grouped into four themes 538  
 539 (Figure 2). Specifically, *Intrinsic attributes*, including 539  
 540 fabric and stitches, are used to describe the basic char- 540  
 541 acteristics of the product. *Extrinsic attributes* include 541  
 542 8 aspects of Coolmate’s brand image: Price, Reputa- 542  
 543 tion, Packaging, Promotion, Customer service, Num- 543  
 544 ber of products, Delivery, and Country of Origin. 544  
 545 *Appearance attributes* consist of Hand-feel, Design, 545  
 546 Color and Size. The last category is *Performance at-* 546  
 547 *tributes*, which include 4 aspects: Durability, Thick- 547  
 548 ness, Stretch properties, and Wrinkle. 548

549 In the four categories, *Appearance attributes* are the 549  
 550 most-discussed aspect by customers in the online 550  
 551 communities, with 225 times in the present study. The 551  
 552 next aspect that attracted a considerable number of 552  
 553 discussions (207 times) was *Extrinsic attributes*. The 553  
 554 following place belongs to *erformance attributes* with 554  
 555 147 times, and the aspect receiving the most minor 555  
 556 comments (15 times) was *Intrinsic attributes*. Some 556  
 557 insightful findings should be highlighted from the 557  
 558 data analyzed. 558

559 Regarding *Appearance attributes*, Coolmate’s strength 559  
 560 is that it brings an excellent feeling to customers when 560  
 561 they wear its products. All found comments acknowl- 561  
 562 edged the excellent hand-feel of Coolmate products, 562  
 563 which are fantastic, soft, smooth, and breathable. This 563  
 564 is a positive point that this brand has succeeded in im- 564  
 565 printing in customers’ minds. In addition, the basic 565  
 566 design of Coolmate products makes them flexible to 566  
 567 mix with many items. This also received a lot of com- 567  
 568 pliments from customers. However, the design itself 568  
 569 creates a limitation for Coolmate. Specifically, several 569  
 570 customers said that Coolmate’s design was unattrac- 570  
 571 tive because of its simplicity. 571

572 Nevertheless, the biggest issue about the appearance 572  
 573 aspect is size, which was considered unstandardized. 573  
 574 This problem results in much inconvenience for cus- 574  
 575 tomers. In the clothing sector, aspects of Appearance 575  
 576 attributes are also discussed in previous studies about 576  
 577 cloth quality<sup>22-24</sup>. 577

578 *Extrinsic attributes* are also discussed a lot by cus- 578  
 579 tomers in online communities. Among these char- 579  
 580 acteristics, price is one of the most topic mentioned. 580  
 581 For some customer, the price shows the value of a 581  
 582 product and its worth is equivalent to the perceived 582



583 quality as per the paid price<sup>35</sup>. This is also considered  
 584 customers' most significant factors of brand attribute  
 585 by customers<sup>36</sup>. In short, when many local brands  
 586 are exaggerating their product prices, most customers  
 587 still think that the prices of the products provided by  
 588 Coolmate are very worthwhile. It is a positive point  
 589 in customers' perception of Coolmate's brand image.  
 590 Another point in extrinsic aspect is the voucher that  
 591 Coolmate offers to customer . Many people said that  
 592 this policy about giving voucher with valuable disc-  
 593 ount is very effective. However, while voucher dis-  
 594 counting may increase traffic in a retail store, such dis-  
 595 counting may negatively influence the brand's quality.  
 596 Consequently, it can hurt an overall brand image<sup>37</sup>.  
 597 On another point, the customer service of Coolmate  
 598 receives a lot of good judgments. Customer service  
 599 plays an important role in making a good impression  
 600 and creating a positive image in customers' eyes.  
 601 Regarding *erformance attributes*, almost all concerns  
 602 emphasized the durability of products. Many com-  
 603 plaints mentioned that Coolmate products have low  
 604 durability and quickly fade after washing. Besides, the  
 605 fabric that is too thin and easily pill is another issue for  
 606 customers' low evaluation of the durability of Cool-  
 607 mate products. Not only that, the wrinkles that ap-  
 608 pear a lot on the fabric when moving are also an issue  
 609 that Coolmate is worth paying attention to improve.  
 610 Aspects in Performance attributes are echoing with  
 611 clothing quality discussed in the studies of Claussen  
 612 et al.<sup>23</sup>, Ren et al.<sup>24</sup>.  
 613 Finally, compared to the other aspects, it can be seen  
 614 that there is a limited number of comments discussing

*Intrinsic attributes*, including *Fabric* and *titches*, on  
 social platforms. This is aligned with the data analysis  
 results in the research by Swinker & Hines<sup>22</sup>, which  
 indicated tahtno customer participating in their sur-  
 vey mentioned aspects in Intrinsic cues when consid-  
 ering the quality of a garment. They also emphasized  
 that manufacturers, retailers, as well as clothing and  
 textiles specialists use these indicators to evaluate ap-  
 parel quality. Meanwhile, in the study of Claussen  
 et al. customer and market feedback show that *Fab-*  
*ric* and *Stitchingmethods* (which are categorised in the  
 cluster 'Durability processing') are important to them.  
 Nevertheless, in the present study, it appears that con-  
 sumers do not really take into account the importance  
 of *Intrinsic attributes* of a clothing brand image.

## THEORETIAL AND MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The research findings identify 18 aspects of Cool-  
 mate's brand image. Six aspects which are discussed  
 many times in online communities, including: *Dura-*  
*bility*, *Hand-feel*, *Size*, *Promotion activities*, *Customer*  
*service*, and *Price*. The research findings have some  
 contributions, theoretically and practically.  
 In response to the future research directions proposed  
 by Plumeyer et al.<sup>6</sup>, the present study offers two sig-  
 nificant theoretical contributions. Firstly, this study  
 employs data collected through passive and symbolic  
 netnography. This method allows for an in-depth un-  
 derstanding of user interactions and content creation  
 related to brand image, leveraging the rich, naturally



645 occurring data from social media platforms and on-  
646 line communities. Secondly, the study confirms that  
647 in the realm of brand image research, fashion brands  
648 are particularly well-suited for analyses based on user-  
649 generated content (UGC) in online social communi-  
650 ties. The fashion industry, characterized by its highly  
651 visual and trend-driven nature, generates substantial  
652 amounts of UGC across various social media chan-  
653 nels. This makes it an ideal sector for exploring brand  
654 perception through UGC.

655 Regarding practical contributions, the research find-  
656 ings provide Coolmate and other local fashion brands  
657 with some managerial implications to improve their  
658 images in customers' minds (Figure 3). Firstly, among  
659 the 18 aspects identified from online communities,  
660 the *Size* of Coolmate's products is reviewed as unstan-  
661 dardised (70 out of 80 times), and does not fit well  
662 with Vietnamese customers. Hence, to improve cus-  
663 tomers' perceptions of the image, fashion brands need  
664 to pay attention to the sizes of products. It is obvious  
665 to realise that Vietnamese people have smaller fashion  
666 sizes than customers from other countries. Coolmate  
667 should re-analyze their product's size guide chart to  
668 adapt to the Vietnamese sizes. Coolmate's customers  
669 are primarily concerned about the size and size guide  
670 chart of clothes which is complaint not standardized.  
671 To make the standardized size and size guide chart,  
672 fashion brand should focus on the product manufac-  
673 turing process. Each product model should have sizes  
674 and color matching relatively.

675 Secondly, in comments about the *Durability* of  
676 Coolmate, negative customer reviews include non-  
677 durable, quickly-faded, and easily-pill, with 38, 21  
678 and 17 times mentioned, respectively. These negative  
679 comments count 76 out of 96 times of the *Durabil-*  
680 *ity*. It can be seen that, to customers, the durability of  
681 a fashion product is significant. To improve this as-  
682 pect, and to be a sustainable fashion brand, Coolmate  
683 should look for other fabric sources. With the ten-  
684 dency of a minimalist lifestyle, the durability of fash-  
685 ion products is a significant aspect.

686 Thirdly, *Promotion activities* are discussed regarding  
687 Valuable voucher and Untrue advertisement. Even  
688 though customer reviews about vouchers are positive,  
689 Coolmate and other fashion brands must consider of-  
690 fering them. Frequently giving vouchers or giving  
691 high-value vouchers can make customers doubt about  
692 the quality of products and decrease the value of the  
693 brand image. Moreover, to attract and retain cus-  
694 tomers, messages sent in advertisements and the qual-  
695 ity of the products customers receive must be un-  
696 doubtedly similar. An attractive advertisement can

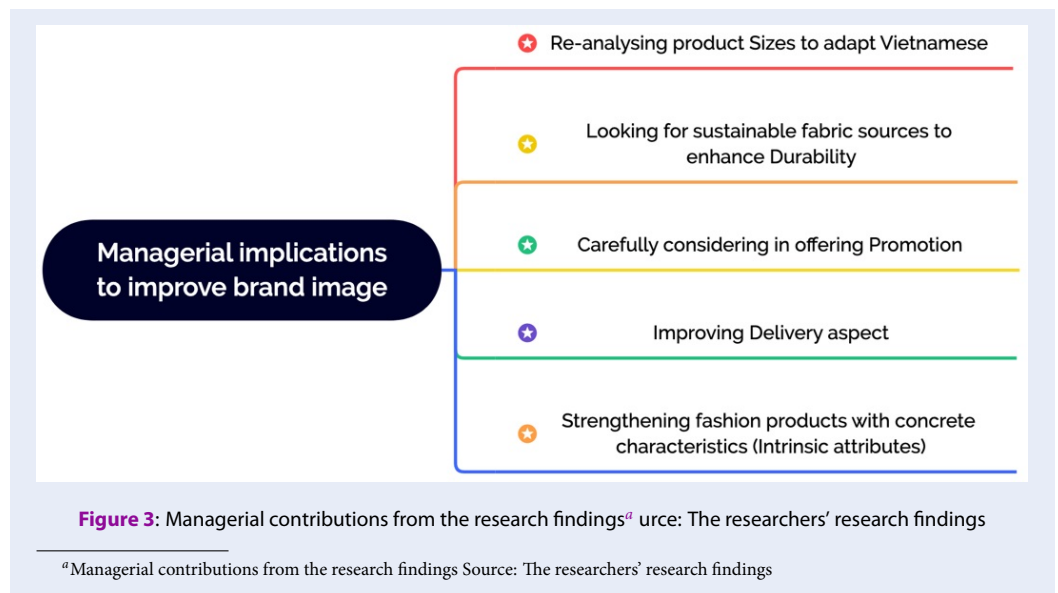
697 only be effective at the beginning, but cannot be in  
698 the long run.

699 Fourthly, in reviews about Coolmate, *Delivery* is one  
700 aspect that can be improved quickly to increase cus-  
701 tomer satisfaction. *Delivery* is a new sub-aspect which  
702 is classified in *Extrinsic cues*<sup>22</sup>. Coolmate customers  
703 experienced wrong size products delivered, which is  
704 considered a human mistake. Coolmate and other  
705 fashion brands must improve the order management  
706 system to avoid such mistakes.

707 Fifthly, in the 04 categorised aspects: *Intrinsic, Ex-*  
708 *trinsic, Appearance and Performance attributes, Intrin-*  
709 *sic attributes* are least discussed or reviewed in on-  
710 line communities (15 out of 342 comments). This fact  
711 shows customers that *intrinsic attributes* are unimpor-  
712 tant in evaluating the brand image. Conventionally,  
713 many people may think that fashion brands do not  
714 have to focus on *Intrinsic attributes* (such as *fabric*  
715 *and stitches*). However, changing *intrinsic attributes*  
716 would change the product, its quality, and obviously,  
717 its image in customers' minds. Coolmate and other  
718 fashion brands need to strengthen their product with  
719 concrete characteristics because they play significant  
720 roles in cloth quality, even though customers do not  
721 review much about it.

## 722 CONCLUSION

723 The current study utilized Netnography as its research  
724 methodology, involving two phases of data collection:  
725 netnographic data and in-depth interviews, to inves-  
726 tigate how customers perceive Coolmate's brand im-  
727 age. Despite offering several theoretical and practical  
728 contributions, the research still has some limitations.  
729 The first limitation is the narrow study focusing on  
730 netnographic data of Coolmate, a fashion brand for  
731 young men. With a specific brand, the findings can-  
732 not be generalised to other fashion brands, especially  
733 fashion brands for women. Other fashion brand mar-  
734 keters who wish to employ netnography to explore  
735 their brand images must carefully evaluate the re-  
736 search process carefully to adjust appropriately. An-  
737 other limitation of the present study is about the na-  
738 ture of online qualitative research. Not all customers  
739 are available online and participating in online com-  
740 munities. Moreover, netnographic data is collected  
741 during a limited duration of the study. Hence, not  
742 all customers' opinions are shared. Further studies  
743 should employ many methods to collect data to have  
744 more comprehensive customers' opinions. The last  
745 limitation is that the data of the present study's data  
746 is collected from online Facebook communities only.  
747 Meanwhile, currently, there are many online plat-  
748 forms for customers to share their consumption expe-  
749 riences. Further studies should extend data collection



750 to other online communities, such as TikTok, Zalo,  
751 etc. to improve the quality of netnographic data.

752 **ABBREVIATIONS**

- 753 OCB: online brand communities
- 754 U.S.: United States
- 755 VND: Vietnam Dong
- 756 D2C: direct-to-customer

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760 **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

761 The authors declare that they have no conflicts of in-  
762 terest.

763 **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION**

764 Ms. Le Thi Thanh Xuan was responsible for writing  
765 the introduction to the study, as well as key sections  
766 like the literature review, research methodology, the-  
767 oretical and managerial contributions, and the con-  
768 clusion.

769 Ms. Le Hoai Kieu Giang was in charge of present-  
770 ing the research findings, analyzing the results, and  
771 formatting the manuscript according to the journal's  
772 guidelines.

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# Sử dụng phương pháp netnography để mô tả hình ảnh thương hiệu từ quan điểm của khách hàng – Trường hợp của nhãn hàng coolmate

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## TÓM TẮT

Số lượng người dùng internet tiếp tục tăng nhanh chóng khiến các nền tảng trực tuyến trở nên phổ biến để các thương hiệu quảng bá, bán và tiếp thị sản phẩm. Xu hướng này thể hiện rõ trong ngành thời trang khi mà các nền tảng trực tuyến mang đến nhiều cơ hội để tiếp cận và thu hút khách hàng. Với sự phát triển của các trang truyền thông xã hội, các thương hiệu trong lĩnh vực thời trang đang tận dụng những nền tảng này để xây dựng hình ảnh thương hiệu và kết nối với khách hàng. Trong bối cảnh đó, nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu các khía cạnh khác nhau của hình ảnh thương hiệu của Coolmate từ góc nhìn của khách hàng. Trong nghiên cứu này, phỏng vấn sâu và phương pháp netnography được sử dụng để thu thập dữ liệu một cách toàn diện. Những phương pháp này giúp nghiên cứu đạt được sự hiểu biết sâu sắc và nhiều khía cạnh về hình ảnh thương hiệu từ góc độ khách hàng. Tổng cộng có 05 cộng đồng thương hiệu online với 42 bài đăng và 342 bình luận được thu thập và phân tích. Các cộng đồng online được lựa chọn dựa trên 05 tiêu chí: sự liên quan với chủ đề nghiên cứu, các bài đăng có lưu lượng lớn, có số lượng lớn các poster riêng biệt, dữ liệu dồi dào, và có nhiều tương tác giữa các thành viên. Kết quả nghiên cứu xác định được 18 khía cạnh về hình ảnh thương hiệu của Coolmate được khách hàng thảo luận ở các cộng đồng thương hiệu online. 18 khía cạnh này có thể phân thành 04 nhóm: thuộc tính nội tại, thuộc tính bên ngoài, thuộc tính thể hiện bên ngoài, và thuộc tính hiệu suất. Trong số 18 khía cạnh này, có 06 khía cạnh về hình ảnh thương hiệu Coolmate được khách hàng thảo luận ở cả 5 cộng đồng rất thường xuyên, bao gồm: Độ bền, Cảm giác tay, Kích cỡ, Các hoạt động khuyến mãi, Dịch vụ chăm sóc khách hàng, và Giá. Dựa vào kết quả nghiên cứu, các hàm ý quản trị cho Coolmate và các nhãn hàng thời trang được đề xuất để cải thiện và củng cố hình ảnh thương hiệu trong tâm trí khách hàng.

**Từ khóa:** Hình ảnh thương hiệu, thương hiệu thời trang, Netnography, cộng đồng online

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