



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

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History

- Received: 26-7-2024
- Revised: 11-10-2024
- Accepted: 15-10-2024
- Published Online: 31-12-2024

DOI :

<https://doi.org/10.32508/stdjelm.v8i4.1451>



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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

INTRODUCTION

According to Statista, as of October 2023, the numbers of internet users and social media users worldwide are 5.3 billion and 4.95, respectively. Social online platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, are now very popular for users to connect, communicate, search and share information. Using digital platforms as a credible source is now popular among customers in some specific sectors, such as fashion and beauty, health and fitness, or travel¹. In particular, social platforms are perceived as inexpensive and effective channels for firms and customers to communicate, review, and share viewpoints..., not only in Vietnam but also around the world². There are many topics that customers have been discussing on social media such as fashion, skincare, travelling and food reviews³. These discussions play a significant role in purchasing decision for many customers, because these create many online brand communities on these platforms to provide customers new format of communication (many-to-many)⁴. In these platforms, with the new format of communication, customers not only can increase

and extend their experiences but also can share their brand experiences with other customers. Conducting brand research, especially brand image, on online platforms can help businesses to understand how customers think and discuss their brands and know what need to pay attention to^{1,5}. In addition, the number of studies around the globe conducted on social media is increasing, but still limited in Vietnam³. To address these issues, Netnography, originating from ethnography, serves as a research tool to collect customers' opinions on online platforms¹. This method can be employed to investigate "the customer behavior of cultures and communities present on the Internet" [6, p. 336].

Netnography, originating from ethnography, is employed in many research contexts including marketing¹, management², political science³, and public relations⁴. However, according to Villegas⁵, 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 information. According to Plumeyer et al.⁶, more studies on

Cite this article : Xuan L T T, Giang L H K. **Employing netnography approach to describe brand image from customers' perspectives - The case of coolmate.** *Sci. Tech. Dev. J. - Eco. Law Manag.* 2024; 8(4):5694-5705.

brand image with user-generated content should be encouraged in different brands. They also stated that new data sources should be used in brand image studies. It can be seen that qualitative studies, which employ new types of data sources, are needed to research brand image in digital contexts.

The fashion market in Vietnam become more competitive as there are many international fashion brands, such as H&M, Zara, Uniqlo, etc. joining in and making the competition in the industry more intense for local ones. On the one hand, the issues that Vietnamese fashion brands have to face now include a lack of materials that depend much on imports, lacking professionalism, poorly-designed styles that are not appropriate for young customers, and no long-term strategic branding⁷. In addition, the economic crisis after COVID-19 led to increased inflation, increased unemployment, and decreased shopping/consumption, and fashion is one of the industries most impacted. The current business context requires local fashion brands to have to increase their competitive competencies by attracting customer attention. On the other hand, online stores, online distribution channels, and online shopping are now becoming more popular with customers. In response, local brands have increased online channels for communicating with customers⁷. Investigating the brand image from customers' perspectives in the fashion industry is an important and meaningful topic in this fast-changing business context.

To fill the gaps in understanding customers' perceptions of local fashion brands, and to respond to the call from previous studies in researching on social media to employ new types of data in qualitative research, the present study employs Netnography and netnographic data (user-generated content) to describe the brand image of a fashion brand from customers' perspectives. To address this purpose, the following research objectives include: (i) explore and describe images of fashion brands in customers' minds, and (ii) propose suggestions for local fashion firms to enhance their competitive capabilities in the market. Netnographic data from online fashion communities and in-depth interviews are collected to address the research objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand community and online brand community

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

concept, brand community is introduced and studied. A brand community is defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers 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.⁹ also identify that geographical limitations become obstacles to preventing customers from communicating effectively. These findings and the increase in internet users are good reasons to explain the emergence of online brand communities.

In their study, Brogi et al. [10, p. 2] defined online 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 content¹¹. 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.¹², including (a) nurturing brand passion, (b) bridging, facilitated via negotiating brand identity, plus legitimizing the brand identity, (c) partnering, closely working with the community. 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 interactions, to facilitate brand relationship and long-term loyalty¹³.

In their study, Gupta et al.¹⁴ 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 customers' reflections on brand images in OBCs is vital for fashion brands.

Brand image and Studies in fashion brands

Brand image is defined in the study of Koubaa¹⁵ as consumers' perceptions, which are reasoned or emotional, attached to a specific brand. Consumers' perceptions of a brand consist of functional and symbolic brand beliefs. More simply, Wijaya¹⁶ explain the brand image in the branding hierarchy, which consists of brand awareness, brand knowledge, brand image, brand experience, brand loyalty, and brand spirituality. In this hierarchy, brand image is a particular

perception of customers in their mind that they associate to form a certain image of the brand. To be short, brand image is what customers memorize about a brand. This memory, consisting of physical factors and psychological factors, links to customers' brand choice. Notably, the more positive the brand image is, the more clearly a customer understands the product, and the higher the customer's purchase intention of customer is¹⁷.

However, Murphy¹⁸ stated that to be successful, brands must differ. Customers have no reason to switch to another (new) brand if there are no differences. In the early step of launching, a brand must bombard customers to set up their brand awareness and then increase their brand knowledge¹⁶. Consequently, customers will have a particular perception of the brand in their mind, which can be called brand image. These steps are crucial so that firms must prioritize creating a positive brand image in customers' minds, which can inspire customers to love brands [6]. Although the brand image is self-interpreted by customers, it may be logical or emotional, positive or negative. Hence, businesses have to pay much attention to it.

The literature review on brand image shows that scholars describe and study aspects of brand images differently^{19,20}. For example, Riaz²¹ explains brand image in three aspects, including Uniqueness of brand association, Strength of brand association, and Favorability of brand association. Brand image in the study of Wijaya¹⁶ covers brand identity, brand personality, brand association, brand behavior and attitudes, brand competence and benefits. Meanwhile, Lee et al.⁹ explain that brand image contains customers' information, ideas, and product features. Even though it is described differently, brand image is defined as part of the process, in which the image is based on customers' emotions associated and the information disseminated by the organization¹⁹. In short, there are some crucial notes from reviewing previous studies on brand image. Firstly, brand image, generated from consumers' perceptions, is the key factor in reflecting customers' feelings about a brand. Secondly, aspects of brand image (in customers' memories) include brand association, brand (functional and emotional) attributes, and information perceived by customers.

There is not much literature on brand image in the fashion sector found. Most of studies having the fashion sector as the research context focused on cloth quality²²⁻²⁴, one aspect of cloth (such as associations of a sustainable fashion brand)²⁵, and building brand image through designing stores²⁶. In the study of

Ren et al.²⁴, the aspect of (perceived) quality of cloth includes the product (Comfort, Durability, Fineness, Protection, Certification, Appearance, External) and service. In that of Claussen et al.²³, which employed qualitative methods, the cloth quality framework consists of 04 clusters: Durability and Processing, Usability, Aesthetic and Extrinsic. Similarly, Swinker and Hines²² based on 4 aspects of cloth quality (Intrinsic, Extrinsic, Appearance and Performance) to conduct survey to measure consumers' evaluations. It can be seen that fashion brand image has not been much studied to provide a theoretical foundation, and it is necessary to explore this issue.

To measure brand image, the discussion about approaches and scales of brand image is still on the move. Researchers are continuing discussing, employing previous scales and designing their own scales²⁰. This fact shows that there is no widely-agreed scale to study brand image. In a review paper in brand image published in 2023, Parris and Guzmán²⁰ conclude that there is a necessity to let stakeholders describe a brand based on their perceptions. Similarly, many techniques to measure brand image have been found in a systematic review conducted by Plumeyer et al.⁶. From this research finding, Plumeyer et al. [6, p. 249] suggested several directions for future research in brand image, and one of them is "using new data sources for brand image measurement techniques". Therefore, in the present study, data collected in OBCs by netnography is to respond to this call.

METHODOLOGY

An overview of Netnography

In response to the fast development in using the Internet, in 1998, Kozinets generated the term "Netnography" to refer to the ethnographic study conducted completely online³. The first online study was conducted by U.S. researchers in 1995 in which electronic media was employed³. Netnography is a completely different approach to help researchers to understand online interactions¹. It is defined as "a specialized form of ethnography research that has been adapted to the unique contingencies of various types of computer-mediated social interaction" [1, p. 39]. In his study, Kozinets²⁷ proposed Netnography as an online marketing research technique to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online customer groups. Yet, the way to define Netnography has changed with the times [28]. Kozinets also revised and proposed new definitions of netnography in 2010, 2012, and 2020²⁸, and

netnography can be employed in different areas, such as sociology, psychology, business, political science, medicine or nutrition and health management^{29,30}. Netnography, as a research method, offers many benefits, such as its unobtrusive nature, a more rapid and cost-effective research method, being well-suited to dealing with personally or politically sensitive topics or illegal acts, etc.²⁹. In particular, Netnography is valuable to provide rich market research data in the stage of product innovation, or to identify market trends to understand customer satisfaction/ dissatisfaction with products/ services²⁹. In general, there are 02 types of Netnography, active and passive netnography, in which the researchers actively participate in online communities as members, or passively lurk and observe the communities. Even though netnography evolved from ethnography, passive netnography has been adopted in many studies. Many researchers believe that lurking in online communities with a 'purely observational' can help them to collect naturalistic data and to avoid their bias²⁹. The review of previous studies shows that netnography can be conducted solely, can be multiphased, or can be part of a more extensive study, in which netnographic data can be combined with other data sources, such as in-depth interviews with community members, participant, and non-participant observations²⁹.

Kozinets³¹, in his book, presents four types of Netnography studies representing four different research directions. The four types of netnographies include auto-Netnography, symbolic Netnography, digital Netnography, and humanist Netnography. Auto-Netnography is about writing, vulnerability, art and sacrifice from a mainly "local" site: one's own identity and story. Symbolic Netnography is conducted on sites to study online social experiences and interactions of particular people's groups, cultures, nations, and languages in text-sharings. Digital Netnography helps people understand cultures based on data analytic techniques from social media. Humanist Netnography focuses on the changing nature of human social existence and is guided by social issues of great importance. Among these types, the present study employed passive and symbolic netnography. This method was used to study groups of people in specific sites/online communities through computer-mediated communications³¹.

About netnographic data, there are 03 forms of data: archival data, co-created data, and fieldnote data³¹. The present study will collect archival data because of characteristics of archival data. As mentioned 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 customers' 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, respectively³². Not following traditional models, Coolmate has no physical stores, and online direct-to-customer (online D2C) platforms are chosen to reduce the cost of trade intermediaries. Multiple online channels, such as e-commerce platforms, and websites, are selected to approach customers 24/7 to save their time finding information and buying appropriate products. As a result, customers also review, and share their experiences about Coolmate's products in OBCs. These reviews can explain customers' satisfaction and significantly impact Coolmate's reputation. 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 interviews 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 Kozinets²⁷ including (i) being relevant to research questions; (ii) having high "traffic" of postings, (iii) having large numbers of discrete message posters; (iv) having detailed or descriptively rich data; (v) having many between-member interactions of the type required by the research question. Specifically, this study chose fashion communities having many discussions (including posts and comments) on the experiences of Coolmate's products. 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 platform.

Another significant point is that posts about Coolmate in these communities have a critical mass of members who discussed/commented. The netnographic data in the current study is archival, and data was produced, found, gathered, and captured by researchers from selected online communities³¹. Netnographic data is collected from August 2022 to December 2023, and all posts about Coolmates are collected. After each post with all comments was

collected³³, 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 data³⁴. 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.

RESULT

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

Durability (with 96 times mentioned in comments) :

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

Coolmate's products were worn-out after washing and wearing them for only a few months. In the same vein, several customers provided feedback that the color of Coolmate's product quickly faded and the fabric easily pilled. A comment mentioned this issue: "Color easily fades away after a few times of laundry..." (Netno C1, 2023). Besides, the customers also complained about pilling after only 2-3 times doing the laundry, which cannot keep the fabric as smooth as the new product. The comment reflects it, "The underwear appears pillings after just 2nd or 3rd laundry" (Netno C1, 2023). One cause of low durability may derive from fabric thickness. Most of the comments agreed that Coolmate products were fragile. For example, a customer commented, "My (Coolmate) T-shirt is non-durable and extremely thin so it tore very quickly".

The result from the in-depth interview is to explain why *Durability* is important and mentioned in many comments. As an explanation, this aspect is important because "... whether I have to repurchase (the new one)..." (Interview 3, 2023), or "...whether the product's shape is kept after the laundry..." (Interview 2, 2023).

Size (with 81 times mentioned in comments)

Customers also discussed a lot about *Size* which has been mentioned 81 times by customers in the communities. Coolmate is a Vietnamese menswear fashion brand which based on the Vietnamese size guide for measuring their product. However, there are 70 times that customers mentioned the "size is not standardized" which mainly said the size of Coolmate's products is unsuitable for Vietnamese men and not standardized. All those perspectives are recognized through customers' comments in the communities. One of them stated that "Different colors of pants (in the same design) have different measurements, which do not base on the size guide" (Netno C2, 2023).

To explain why *Size* is frequently mentioned, interviewees shared "The form -fitting decides the frequency that customers wear the product and the customer retention" (Interview 5, 2023). Despite having mainly negative perceptions, *Size* needs to be taken heed of because it's also distinguished in customers' minds.

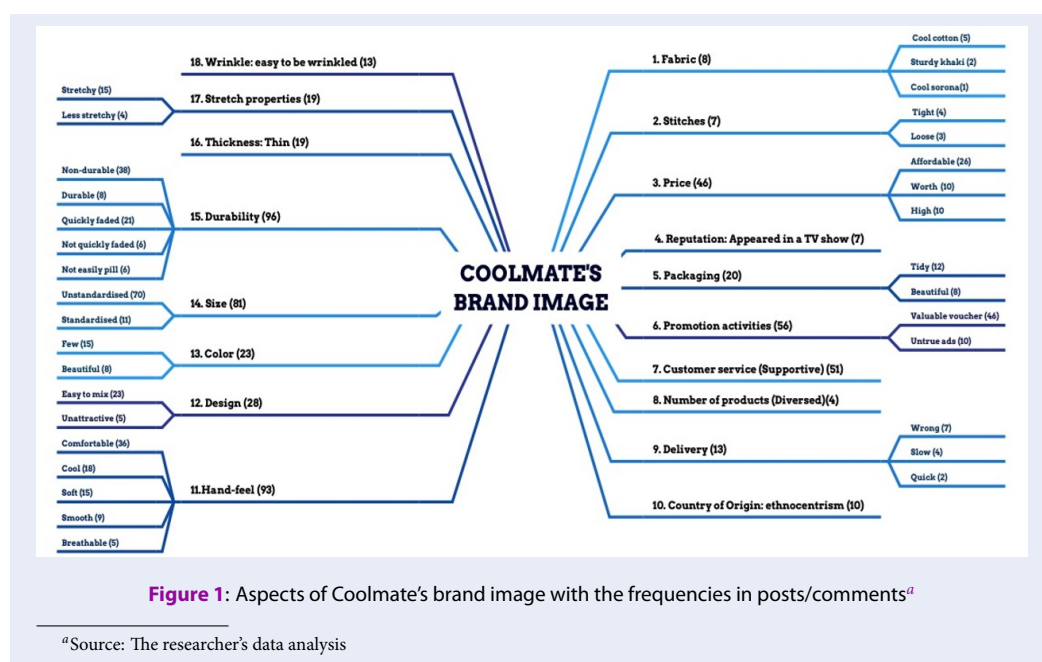
Promotion activities (with 56 times mentioned in comments)

Regarding *Promotion*, two activities are mentioned in online communities, including Valuable vouchers and Untrue advertisements. Several customers mentioned 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 Riviù	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^a^aSource: The researcher's data analysis

discounts, at about 100,000 Vietnam dong (Netno C1, 2023). Customers think that Coolmate's voucher is appealing and effective as they can buy cheaper products. An interviewee considered "... the voucher and promotion are important to customers when thinking of an apparel brand as it can help them to buy the products at a very good price" (Interviewee 5, 2023) as one important factor to retain customers. Hence, he also concluded, "I think because the customer service and promotion (such as voucher, discount) of the brand is one of the things deciding the customer retention" (Interview 5, 2023). Another thing in Promotion activities is advertisements. In this regard, Coolmate received a negative evaluation. Most of the comments

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

ied. However, the standard issue is positive feedback about Coolmate's customer services. Many customers commented that Coolmate's customer service supported consulting products for customers and helping them solve their problems on time such as ordering the wrong size or returning the product. For example, one customer gave feedback on a post: *"It has to admit that customer service of Coolmate is excellent, ... supporting customer is really good, messages in page is responded very fast..."* (Netno C2, 2023); or *"...customer service team of Coolmate is outstanding..."* (Netno C3, 2023). These judgments show that customers have positive perspectives about the Coolmate's customer service, which is also one of the most prominent and important things in customers' minds when discussing on Coolmate. Interviewees also confirm this positive feedback and provide their explanations such as: *"It makes me decide to buy clothes"* (Interviewee 1, 2023); or *"Customer service of the brand are factors deciding customer retention"* (Interviewee 2, 2023).

Price (with 46 times mentioned in comments)

With 46 times counted, *Price* is one aspect mentioned in many community posts and comments. Customers' opinions of Coolmate's price differ, with some customers' thinking it is high, while others think it is affordable or worth it. A customer wrote that *"Compared to another local brand, Coolmate's price is affordable"* (Netno C1, 2023). Similarly, another user agreed that *"Coolmate products are worth their price"* (Netno C3, 2023). Even so, some customers thought the price of Coolmate products was expensive. Price is one of the critical factors considered by customers as an interviewer shared *"rice is really important when I decide to buy clothes"* (Interview 2, 2023) and *"I prefer an affordable price. Yet, if a product is too cheap the quality might not good"* (Interview 4, 2023). Based on the above feedback, it can be concluded that most of customers agreed that Coolmate offered a reasonable price. More than that, customers also compared the amount of money spent with the quality of products they received. In this case, it's clear that customers prefer a product that is worth its price to a cheaper one.

DISCUSSION

A study by Swinker & Hines²² figured out four categories of informational cues used by customers to perceive a garment, including: Intrinsic cues (changing these characteristics would change the product, e.g.,

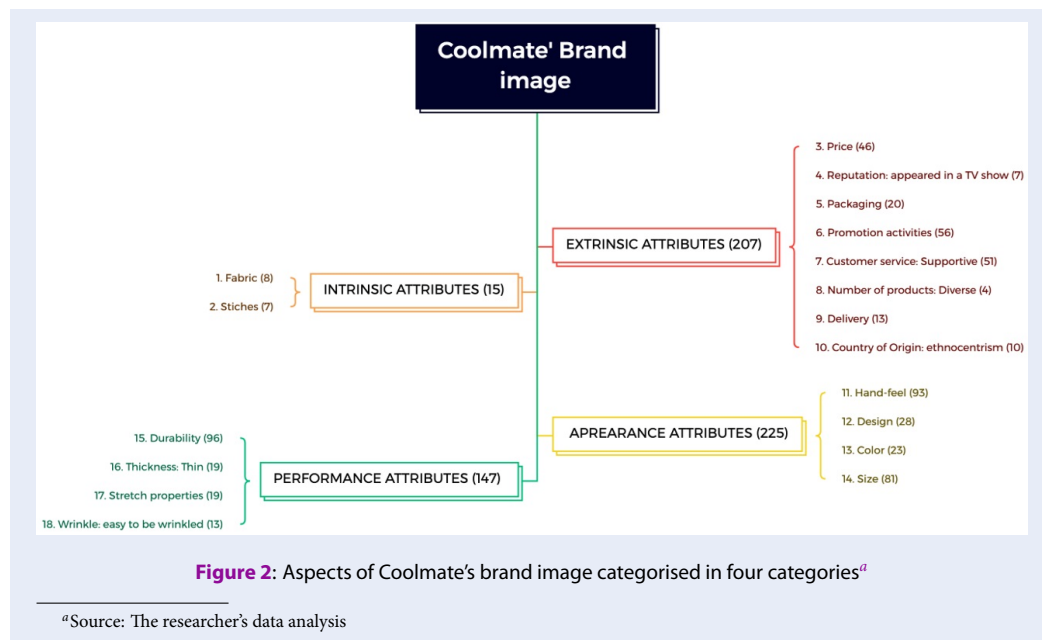
fabric and workmanship), Extrinsic cues (characteristics that can be changed without altering the structure of the product, e.g., country of origin and price), Appearance cues (characteristics that affect how the product looks, e.g., style and color) and Performance cues (characteristics that affect how the product functions, e.g., durability and wrinkle resistance). These categories provide a basis for 18 aspects of Coolmate's brand image, which can be grouped into four themes (Figure 2). Specifically, *Intrinsic attributes*, including fabric and stitches, are used to describe the basic characteristics of the product. *Extrinsic attributes* include 8 aspects of Coolmate's brand image: Price, Reputation, Packaging, Promotion, Customer service, Number of products, Delivery, and Country of Origin. *Appearance attributes* consist of Hand-feel, Design, Color and Size. The last category is *Performance attributes*, which include 4 aspects: Durability, Thickness, Stretch properties, and Wrinkle.

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

Regarding *Appearance attributes*, Coolmate's strength is that it brings an excellent feeling to customers when they wear its products. All found comments acknowledged the excellent hand-feel of Coolmate products, which are fantastic, soft, smooth, and breathable. This is a positive point that this brand has succeeded in imprinting in customers' minds. In addition, the basic design of Coolmate products makes them flexible to mix with many items. This also received a lot of compliments from customers. However, the design itself creates a limitation for Coolmate. Specifically, several customers said that Coolmate's design was unattractive because of its simplicity.

Nevertheless, the biggest issue about the appearance aspect is size, which was considered unstandardized. This problem results in much inconvenience for customers. In the clothing sector, aspects of Appearance attributes are also discussed in previous studies about cloth quality²²⁻²⁴.

Extrinsic attributes are also discussed a lot by customers in online communities. Among these characteristics, price is one of the most topic mentioned. For some customers, the price shows the value of a product and its worth is equivalent to the perceived



quality as per the paid price³⁵. This is also considered customers' most significant factors of brand attribute by customers³⁶. In short, when many local brands are exaggerating their product prices, most customers still think that the prices of the products provided by Coolmate are very worthwhile. It is a positive point in customers' perception of Coolmate's brand image. Another point in extrinsic aspect is the voucher that Coolmate offers to customer. Many people said that this policy about giving voucher with valuable discount is very effective. However, while voucher discounting may increase traffic in a retail store, such discounting may negatively influence the brand's quality. Consequently, it can hurt an overall brand image³⁷. On another point, the customer service of Coolmate receives a lot of good judgments. Customer service plays an important role in making a good impression and creating a positive image in customers' eyes. Regarding *performance attributes*, almost all concerns emphasized the durability of products. Many complaints mentioned that Coolmate products have low durability and quickly fade after washing. Besides, the fabric that is too thin and easily pill is another issue for customers' low evaluation of the durability of Coolmate products. Not only that, the wrinkles that appear a lot on the fabric when moving are also an issue that Coolmate is worth paying attention to improve. Aspects in Performance attributes are echoing with clothing quality discussed in the studies of Claussen et al.²³, Ren et al.²⁴. Finally, compared to the other aspects, it can be seen 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 & Hines²², which indicated that no customer participating in their survey mentioned aspects in Intrinsic cues when considering the quality of a garment. They also emphasized that manufacturers, retailers, as well as clothing and textiles specialists use these indicators to evaluate apparel quality. Meanwhile, in the study of Claussen et al. customer and market feedback show that *Fabric* and *Stitching methods* (which are categorised in the cluster 'Durability processing') are important to them. Nevertheless, in the present study, it appears that consumers do not really take into account the importance of *Intrinsic attributes* of a clothing brand image.

THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The research findings identify 18 aspects of Coolmate's brand image. Six aspects which are discussed many times in online communities, including: *Durability*, *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.⁶, the present study offers two significant theoretical contributions. Firstly, this study employs data collected through passive and symbolic netnography. This method allows for an in-depth understanding of user interactions and content creation related to brand image, leveraging the rich, naturally

occurring data from social media platforms and online communities. Secondly, the study confirms that in the realm of brand image research, fashion brands are particularly well-suited for analyses based on user-generated content (UGC) in online social communities. The fashion industry, characterized by its highly visual and trend-driven nature, generates substantial amounts of UGC across various social media channels. This makes it an ideal sector for exploring brand perception through UGC.

Regarding practical contributions, the research findings provide Coolmate and other local fashion brands with some managerial implications to improve their images in customers' minds (Figure 3). Firstly, among the 18 aspects identified from online communities, the *Size* of Coolmate's products is reviewed as unstandardised (70 out of 80 times), and does not fit well with Vietnamese customers. Hence, to improve customers' perceptions of the image, fashion brands need to pay attention to the sizes of products. It is obvious to realise that Vietnamese people have smaller fashion sizes than customers from other countries. Coolmate should re-analyze their product's size guide chart to adapt to the Vietnamese sizes. Coolmate's customers are primarily concerned about the size and size guide chart of clothes which is complaint not standardized. To make the standardized size and size guide chart, fashion brand should focus on the product manufacturing process. Each product model should have sizes and color matching relatively.

Secondly, in comments about the *Durability* of Coolmate, negative customer reviews include non-durable, quickly-faded, and easily-pill, with 38, 21 and 17 times mentioned, respectively. These negative comments count 76 out of 96 times of the *Durability*. It can be seen that, to customers, the durability of a fashion product is significant. To improve this aspect, and to be a sustainable fashion brand, Coolmate should look for other fabric sources. With the tendency of a minimalist lifestyle, the durability of fashion products is a significant aspect.

Thirdly, *Promotion activities* are discussed regarding Valuable voucher and Untrue advertisement. Even though customer reviews about vouchers are positive, Coolmate and other fashion brands must consider offering them. Frequently giving vouchers or giving high-value vouchers can make customers doubt about the quality of products and decrease the value of the brand image. Moreover, to attract and retain customers, messages sent in advertisements and the quality of the products customers receive must be undoubtedly similar. An attractive advertisement can

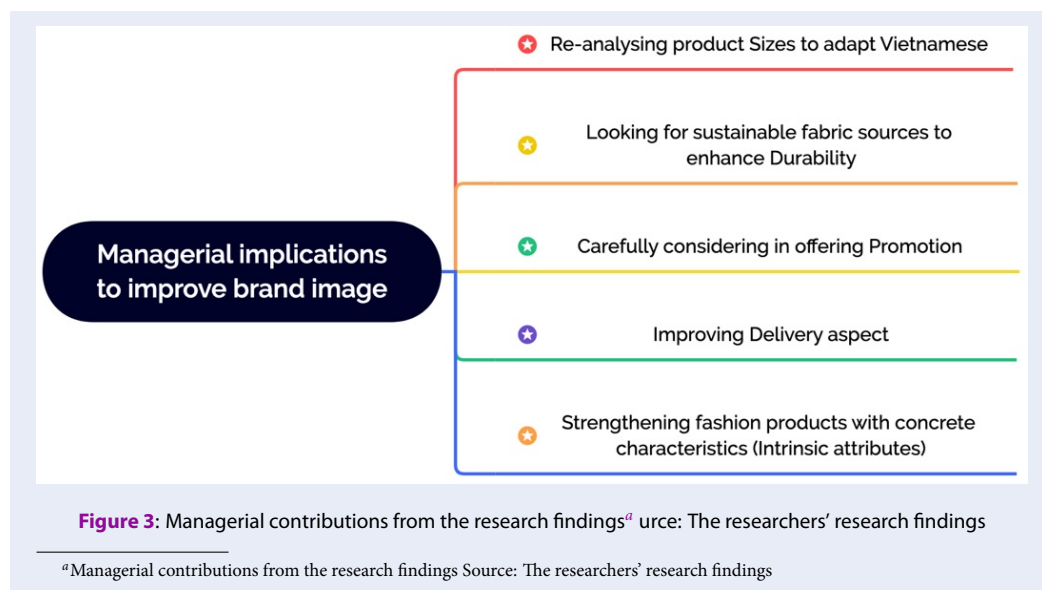
only be effective at the beginning, but cannot be in the long run.

Fourthly, in reviews about Coolmate, *Delivery* is one aspect that can be improved quickly to increase customer satisfaction. *Delivery* is a new sub-aspect which is classified in *Extrinsic cues*²². Coolmate customers experienced wrong size products delivered, which is considered a human mistake. Coolmate and other fashion brands must improve the order management system to avoid such mistakes.

Fifthly, in the 04 categorised aspects: *Intrinsic, Extrinsic, Appearance and Performance attributes*, *Intrinsic attributes* are least discussed or reviewed in online communities (15 out of 342 comments). This fact shows customers that *intrinsic attributes* are unimportant in evaluating the brand image. Conventionally, many people may think that fashion brands do not have to focus on *Intrinsic attributes* (such as *fabric and stitches*). However, changing *intrinsic attributes* would change the product, its quality, and obviously, its image in customers' minds. Coolmate and other fashion brands need to strengthen their product with concrete characteristics because they play significant roles in cloth quality, even though customers do not review much about it.

CONCLUSION

The current study utilized Netnography as its research methodology, involving two phases of data collection: netnographic data and in-depth interviews, to investigate how customers perceive Coolmate's brand image. Despite offering several theoretical and practical contributions, the research still has some limitations. The first limitation is the narrow study focusing on netnographic data of Coolmate, a fashion brand for young men. With a specific brand, the findings cannot be generalised to other fashion brands, especially fashion brands for women. Other fashion brand marketers who wish to employ netnography to explore their brand images must carefully evaluate the research process carefully to adjust appropriately. Another limitation of the present study is about the nature of online qualitative research. Not all customers are available online and participating in online communities. Moreover, netnographic data is collected during a limited duration of the study. Hence, not all customers' opinions are shared. Further studies should employ many methods to collect data to have more comprehensive customers' opinions. The last limitation is that the data of the present study's data is collected from online Facebook communities only. Meanwhile, currently, there are many online platforms for customers to share their consumption experiences. Further studies should extend data collection



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

ABBREVIATIONS

OCB: online brand communities

U.S.: United States

VND: Vietnam Dong

D2C: direct-to-customer

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We sincerely thank Ms. Le Quynh Nhi for assisting with data collection.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Ms. Le Thi Thanh Xuan was responsible for writing the introduction to the study, as well as key sections like the literature review, research methodology, theoretical and managerial contributions, and the conclusion.

Ms. Le Hoai Kieu Giang was in charge of presenting the research findings, analyzing the results, and formatting the manuscript according to the journal's 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

Lê Thị Thanh Xuân, Lê Hoài Kiều Giang*

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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Lịch sử

- Ngày nhận: 26-7-2024
- Ngày sửa đổi: 11-10-2024
- Ngày chấp nhận: 15-10-2024
- Ngày đăng: 31-12-2024

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.32508/stdjelm.v8i4.1451>



Bản quyền

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Trích dẫn bài báo này: Xuân L T T, Giang L H K. Sử dụng phương pháp netnography để mô tả hình ảnh thương hiệu từ quan điểm của khách hàng – Trường hợp của nhãn hàng coolmate. *Sci. Tech. Dev. J. -Eco. Law Manag.* 2024, 8(4):5694-5705.