The Elements of Success

SKIMS Advertising Strategy

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ABSTRACT

In a world where the economy is driven by mass production, advertising plays a key role in allowing the recognizability of brands. Through the use of visual media, a brand can communicate its brand identity, allowing possible consumers to be engaged and charmed. Numerous studies investigated the benefits deriving from the alignment of brand identity and brand image, and how celebrity endorsement and inclusive advertising are powerful tools in this regard. However, the current literature has explored these themes separately, and predominantly through the use of secondary data. This left a gap in understanding how they can work together in real-life brand strategies. This thesis explores the case of SKIMS, an American shapewear brand, co-owned by Kim Kardashian, an international known celebrity. The aim is to understand how a newly founded lingerie brand managed to strike a chord with so many consumers to reach a market value of 4 billion US dollars. Through the study of its advertising strategies, this research investigates how celebrity endorsement and inclusivity played a role in influencing consumer perception. The central question guiding this thesis is: How does SKIMS employ celebrity endorsement and inclusive advertising to influence consumer perception?

By employing a two-pronged approach to analyze 50 ad images through semiotic analysis and conducting a survey-based research I was able to first examined how the brand constructs its identity through visual communication, and then assessed how people perceive that identity. The results showcased that SKIMS employs specific visual elements and choices, such as minimalism aesthetic, body-centric framing, uniform styling to emphasize inclusivity and product functionality, and de-glamorizing celebrity endorsement, to better allow the focus on the product. Through the employment of these elements, the brand is perceived inclusive and appealing, by possible consumers, according to the survey data. Nevertheless, despite the relatively positive perception of the brand, and the effectively positive relation between image perception and purchase intention, the latest remained low, suggesting that brand perception alone may not be sufficient to drive consumer purchasing. This study shed light on both advertising broader trends and societal shifts, while it examines how a brand can use specific marketing choices to shape consumer perception and brand recognizability. This investigation opens pathways for potential future research on advertising and consumer perception.

KEYWORDS: *SKIMS, Advertising, Strategies, Consumer Perception*

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1. Introduction

"Lingerie is not about seducing men, it is about embracing womanhood", says Dita Von Teese, a popular American burlesque dancer. In fact, a research conducted in 2021 by Antal and Ötvös, showed that during their lives, many women collect far more intimate apparel than they actually need (p. 216). Lingerie, however, is more than what it seems. According to a study conducted on Danish women, lingerie is not just a clothing item, but more than that, since it is perceived as a tool to perform femininity and explore different versions of themselves (Jantzen, 2006, pp. 198-200). This explains why women collect so many of these items and why this market is expanding. In fact, in today's world the lingerie market is very big, and it offers a large number of options. As a result it is more difficult for brands, particularly the small ones or the ones just launched to be noted. Especially in a media era where consumers are constantly bombarded with information and advertising is everywhere, from the billboards on the streets to the images or videos on social platforms, visibility becomes a central challenge. In this landscape, one brand launched only a few years ago has managed to break through, reaching an impressive success, and its name is SKIMS.

Usher, Jude Bellingham, Megan Fox, Lana Del Rey, Dolce & Gabbana, The North Face- these are just a few of the high-profile names that have collaborated with SKIMS, the shapewear and clothing brand of Kim Kardashian, Emma Grede and Jens Grede. Besides these collaborations, in 2023 SKIMS secured a partnership with the NBA, WNBA and USA Basketball to become the official underwear provider of these leagues. The brand is known for its "sexy-meets-cozy" approach, and it offers an inclusive range of sizes and skin tones with the aim to provide items for diverse body types and needs (Yuan, 2024, pp. 2-3). The brand was launched in 2019 to fill a gap that for a long time has been neglected by historical brands: the lack of inclusive sizing and nude shades suitable for all skin tones. This is what the brand has leveraged on, contributing to its growth. It is interesting to notice that in a lingerie market that is rapidly expanding, and it is projected to grow at a rate of 6.1% from 2023 to 2030, reaching 88.32 billion US dollars in 2022 (Grand View Research, 2023), SKIMS has achieved an impressive market valuation. In fact, just four years after its founding, SKIMS' market value in 2023 was 4 billion US dollars (Frau, 2023). To contextualize this growth, the most notorious American lingerie brand, Victoria's Secret, brand founded in 1977, was valued at 2.05 billion US dollars in the same year (Companies Market Cap, n.d.). This impressive contrast highlights SKIMS' cultural relevance and commercial success in such competitive industry.

The rise of celebrities' brands, such as SAVAGE X and Fenty Beauty by Rihanna, Rare Beauty by Selena Gomez, Kylie Cosmetics by Kylie Jenner, or Rhode Skin by Hailey Bieber and so on, the list is very long, perfectly illustrates the broader trend taking place lately. Unlike established and traditional brands, they have relied and capitalized on their founder's existing fanbase, maximizing visibility through digital platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok etc. (Yuan, 2024, p.1) to reach a broader audience. Similarly, SKIMS benefits from the co-founder Kim Kardashian, a notorious

global influence. It can be noted how the name recalls her persona. However, the fame of the founders, or co-founders, alone is not an enough strategy to foster long-term success in this competitive market. As a matter of fact, what sets the brand aside from others is the marketing strategy, as studied by Zhang (2024). This includes collaborations, the emphasis on diversity, strategic partnerships, visually striking campaigns, and the use of recognizable faces, direct engagement, direct consumer approach, and global accessibility. Together, these elements have helped SKIMS to reach its current status through a cohesive and effective branding approach (Zhang, 2024, p.1). All of these factors contribute to setting SKIMS apart from the other lingerie brands, and this is what makes it an interesting case of study.

Some of the strategies adopted by the brand, such as celebrity endorsement and inclusivity, have been already explored by previous literature. In the case of celebrity endorsement, existing research has been shown how when employed it increases brand credibility and consumer trust (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014), while inclusivity when displayed in advertising brings to positive brand attitude and increased brand love (Srivastava et al., 2024). However, when these strategies are executed poorly or perceived as inauthentic by the audience then the outcome backfires. For instance, in the case of inclusivity, when consumers perceived it as performative or opportunistic what it generates is a backlash (Campbell et al, 2023, p. 3). Hence, when adopting these strategies certain conditions must be respected in order to achieve positive outcomes.

While prior research has explored the impact of celebrity endorsement on consumer behavior, most studies have focused on identifying the factors that influence its effectiveness using secondary data. For instance, Zipporah and Mberia (2014) investigated how celebrity endorsements affect purchasing behavior, while Silvera and Austad (2003) examined how consumers' evaluation of a product shifts depending on their perception of celebrity's attractiveness, credibility, and affinity with the brand. In the case of inclusivity, existing studies have addressed various dimensions. Aagerup's study (2011) highlighted how in the fashion industry there is a continued preference for slim body ideals, while Srivastava et al. (2024) found that inclusive marketing communication can improve brand attitude and brand love. Campbell et al. (2023), instead, examined how the success or failure of inclusive representation depends on the perception of authenticity felt by consumers. Similarly, Arsel et al. (2022) reviewed how diversity, equity, and inclusion practices influence consumer responses based on factors such as gender, race, body type, age, social class, religion, and culture. Despite this broad body of literature, gaps remain. In the specific, there is limited understanding on how celebrity endorsement is visually employed in advertising to communicate brand identity, and how this influences consumers' perceptions of the brand, especially when tested through primary data such as survey's responses. Similarly, in the case of inclusivity, few studies have examined how diverse representation can visually align with the brand's core message and what effect it has on how consumers actually perceive the brand's image. This gap is particularly relevant in the context of fashion industry, where advertising often relies on imagination, in the sense that

fashion images carry individuals in a dreamlike space where they can play with new identities (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010, p. 371). Additionally, advertising, as a medium and a public method of information, plays an important role in shaping cultural values and social norms and in the case of (Arias, 2019, p. 577).

To address this gap, this research investigates how SKIMS uses celebrity endorsement and inclusive advertising to influence consumer perception of the brand. The central research question guiding this thesis is:

How does SKIMS employ celebrity endorsement and inclusive advertising to influence consumer perception?

From a social perspective, by studying SKIMS's advertising choices, this research provides some insights into advertising broader trends and societal shifts, such as expectations surrounding representation and identity. From an academic point of view, this thesis examines how a brand can use specific marketing choices, in the context of visual media, to shape consumer perception and brand recognizability.

This research is made of two stages. The first one is understanding how SKIMS presents its brand identity through visual advertising, and how it employs the two marketing tools- celebrity endorsement and inclusivity. The second stage analyzes how consumers perceive and respond to these strategies. To do this, a mixed method approach is employed, combining semiotic analysis for the interpretation of the advertising and a survey to assess its effect on consumers' perception. Based on this, several hypotheses are tested to assess the effectiveness of SKIMS' approach, specifically in terms of its impact on brand image and purchase intention. The hypotheses are divided into three main areas: the relationship between perceived brand image and purchase intention, the effects of celebrity endorsement attributes on brand image, and the effects of inclusive advertising features on brand image.

SKIMS is the perfect case of study because, despite being owned by Kim Kardashian, it has crafted its own unique identity through a strategic marketing approach that has earned consumer trust and brand loyalty (Yuan, 2024, pp. 1-3). Unlike other Kardashian businesses, like the failed KKW, SKIMS offers valuable insights into how using effectively marketing strategies since it actually succeed and it keeps doing so. For this reason, it can help new businesses or traditional ones in crafting and using these kinds of marketing strategies in an effective way.

This thesis is structured as follows. The next section explores the existing literature on brand identity, brand image, celebrity endorsement, inclusive advertising, and consumer engagement. Then there is the method section, which outlines the mixed-method approach. Here, there is a justification of the chosen method, along with the several phases and explanation of both the semiotic analysis and the characteristics of the formulated survey. This is followed by the results section, which shows the results derived from the use of the two methods. Finally, the conclusion contains a theoretical

reflection of the research outcomes, a discussion of the implications of this research findings, a reflection on the study limitations, and a suggestion for future research directions.

2. Theoretical Framework

To answer the research question and understand how SKIMS uses advertising strategies, such as celebrity endorsement and inclusivity to influence consumer perception, it is necessary to explore previous research related to these themes. Specifically, this section aims to break down fundamental key concepts such as brand identity and brand image, celebrity endorsement, diversity and inclusiveness in advertising, engagement and emotions. Brand identity represents the strategic image a company wants to project, while brand image refers to how consumers actually perceive the brand (Nandan, 2005). The rope connecting these two concepts is advertising, which translates brand identity into narratives and visuals that shape consumer perceptions. Within this framework, celebrity endorsement and inclusive representation function as two of the advertising tools that brands use to build and communicate their identity. These strategies are designed to ultimately influence purchasing behavior.

2.1 Brand Identity

Brand identity can be explained as the personality of a brand. It refers to the way a company uses specific elements to distinguish itself from others. Some of these elements that are easily visible are name, logo, slogan, icon, symbols, and overall visual appearance (Jain, 2017, pp. 1-2). For instance, Apple's bitten apple logo, McDonald's slogan 'I'm lovin' it', and Fendi's mirrored "F" symbol are all instantly recognizable and tied to their respective brands. When used consistently, these elements help create a unique and memorable brand identity that facilitates brand recognition and differentiation. In addition to visual and verbal elements, Nandan (2005) argues how brands may also rely on producing a standout product or using a specific feature as part of establishing a brand identity (p. 264). Nutella, for instance, is widely associated with Ferrero and exemplifies a product that has become emblematic of the brand. While the iconic beige, black, red, and white check from Burberry is a good example of a brand that uses specific features to reinforce their brand identity and recognizability. All these procedures and elements are employed to set some qualities that the company wants to be known for. However, brand identity does not revolve just around outward expression, but it should reflect what the brand stands for, its unique mission, values and personality while maintaining consistency and adaptability over time (Jain, 2017, p. 2), making a promise to its customers (Jain, 2017, p.1; Srivastava, 2011, p. 341). A strong identity helps a brand to remain relevant in a competitive market. In fact, brand identity can be seen as the center point of a net, from where all the marketing activities unfold (Ianenko et al., 2020, p. 1). This implies the view of brand identity as the starting point of a brand and its development. As per Ianenko et al. (2020), the creation of brand identity involves two stages: first, defining what sets a brand apart through strategic marketing and positioning, and second, shaping how customers should perceive it (pp. 2-3). To do so and make these strategies effective, analysis of both internal and external environment should take place, and among other things, this will allow an understanding of its target audience, and a comparison of products' competition. Various models have been developed to conceptualize brand

identity, such as Kapferer's Brand-Identity Prism and de Chernatony Brand Identity Model. Each offers different perspectives. Relevant to this study is Kapferer's model, which highlights the dual nature of brand identity, the internal essence and external expression (Janonis et al., 2007, p. 73). This model is made of six dimensions, that can be divided in "externalization: physique, relationship and reflection, and internalization: personality, culture, and self-image" (EURIB, 2009, pp. 1-2). If applying five of these dimensions to SKIMS it is possible to see its identity features. The brand is physically recognized for the extended range of products, from bras to dresses, that are inclusive in skin tones and sizes. All of these products, especially the shapewear and underwear, come in very different shades of skin tones, they are available in a range size that goes from XXXS to 4X/5X, and they are cheaper if compared to its main competitor, Spanx (Yuan, 2024, pp. 2-3). The reflection, which refers to the stereotypical brand customer, is mainly millennial or Gen Z women. On the internal side, SKIMS personality is described as "sexy-meets-cozy" (Yuan, 2024, p. 3). Meanwhile, its culture, the values on which it was built, draws from the American ones but with the twist of innovation, diversity and body acceptance, as expressed by its tagline "solutions for every body" (Klein, 2022). The self-image of SKIMS customers, then, is that of individuals who see themselves as embracing body positivity and seeking a balance between sensuality and comfort (Yuan, 2024, p. 3). Given this foundation, it becomes relevant to explore how SKIMS communicates its internal and external expression to the world through the use of advertising, and whether these visuals align with the brand's core values and intended image.

2.2 Brand Image

If brand identity is constructed by the company and it refers to how it wants to be perceived, brand image, on the other hand, refers to how consumers actually perceive the brand. In other words, it corresponds to consumers' perception, and it is shaped by various associations that together form the brand's personality in the consumer's mind (Nandan, 2005, pp. 266-267). Both of them, when in a strong alignment foster and sustain brand loyalty (Srivastava, 2010, p. 342). The advantages of brand loyalty are many, from positively influencing sales, to reducing the risks of the consumer to be charmed and 'stolen by another brand, to fostering positive word-of-mouth (Keller, 1993, p. 8; Jain, 2017, p.4). For this reason, it is essential to convey the desired image the brand wants to be perceived as from the target audience in a very effective way. However, sometimes this can be a complicated route to embark since it includes a process of encoding and decoding (Nandan, 2005, p. 265). This implies that the message the brand communicates (encoding) not always is perceived as intended to from the receivers (decoding), consumers in this case. This happens because, as stated by Nandan (2005), consumers interpret brand messages through their own subjective lens, leading to individual interpretations (p.265). These, as already mentioned, are connected to the associations consumers have regarding the brand. Associations are kept in the memory of the consumer. Three types of associations are linked to brand image: attributes, benefits and attitudes. As explained by Keller (1993), attributes refer to the visible features that define the product or service, benefits refer to the

personal value consumers associate with a product's feature (p.4), while attitudes are the "consumers' overall evaluations of a brand" (Wilkie, 1986, as cited in Keller, 1993, p. 4). Brand attitudes can be based on attributes and benefits, or sometimes, they can be shaped by fortuitous factors such as external signals (Olson and Jacoby, 1972, as cited in Keller, 1993, p. 5), for instance a scent. Therefore, when possible, these elements should be taken into consideration if wanted to form a brand image that instills trust in consumers. The result of these is the play between expectations and experiences, "when customer's experience is better than their expectations, they tend to develop a positive brand image" ad vice versa. Therefore, another important element is the connection that the brand establishes with consumers. To achieve this, according to Patwardhan & Balasubramanian (2013), the brand should aim to a right balance between familiarity and novelty, being able to sustain consumer engagement and loyalty (pp. 75-77). So, the perception takes shape in the mind of consumer by several factors, such as the direct experiences when buying the product, for instance, social influences, media exposure, emotional associations, features of the products, benefits and so on. So, if brand identity shapes the intended brand message, it is actually up to the consumer perception to determine its success (Nandan, 2005).

Based on this theoretical background, the first hypothesis tested in this research (H1), is whether a more favorable perception of KSIMS' brand image is associated with a stronger purchase intention. Since the ultimate aim of marketing strategies and branding decisions is to drive consumer purchase decisions. This relationship offers a valuable indicator of brand effectiveness and success. In the specific, the hypothesis tested is:

H1: Higher brand image perception of SKIMS is associated with a greater chance of purchase intention.

2.3 Celebrity Endorsement

To convey its brand identity, and influence how consumers form a brand image, advertising is one of the tools used by companies to communicate with both current and potential customers (Bendixen, 1993, p.19). A well-crafted advertisement should follow some guidelines: raising brand awareness, informing consumers about product benefits, shaping perceptions, creating preference, and ultimately persuading purchase (Bendixen, 1993, p. 19). To achieve this, advertisements must be visually captivating, well-designed with an appealing aesthetic, entertaining and engaging, and clear for easy comprehension (Zeng et al., 2021, p. 8). Advertising dates back to the late nineteenth century, and with the advent of bulk production, advertising became the key reason for brands to adopt specific identities to allow their recognizability (Sinclair, 2015, p 214). According to Keller (1993), advertising indirectly contributes to the formation of a brand's image by helping consumers visualize who uses the brand (user imagery) and in what context it is used (usage imagery) (p. 4). Meanwhile, Zipporah and Mberia (2014) argue that what actually brings people to act on these

messages is the belief that "they will benefit from doing so" (p. 165). Benefits are also mentioned by Keller (1993), and they refer to what consumers think to gain by buying the product, and they are divided into functional, experiential, and symbolic (p.4). The functional benefit refers to the benefits coming from the use of the product, the experimental from what it feels like to use the product and the symbolic to what it will represent. Hence, a brand should strategically design advertising campaigns to reinforce and underline these benefits and increase appeal. When successful, such campaigns can also associate the brand with luxury, according to Li et al. (2011, p. 1517). However, this is not simple since advertising needs to be constantly devised (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 318). Among the various strategies that brands can implement to achieve the cited goals two of the most commonly used are celebrity endorsement and inclusivity.

Celebrity endorsement is the employment of celebrities in advertising campaigns. It has been shown how this strategy fosters positive associations in consumers' minds (Erdogan, 1999, as cited in Gupta et al., 2017, p. 15), improving brand credibility, recognition, and consumer trust (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014, p. 170). Celebrities became important in advertising when brands started using them as living symbols of their products, making them more desirable (Marwick, 2016, pp. 336-337). This is supported by the idea that famous people are seen as a representation of the right way of living, hence individuals want to imitate and align with them (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014, p. 164), by buying what they are sponsoring, for instance. Therefore, there is a translation of the celebrity's perceived value to the product they sponsor, making it desirable (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014, p. 170), hence fostering positive financial returns. A clear depiction of this is the association between the actress Marilyn Monroe and the Chanel No. 5 perfume, which made it culturally relevant and iconic. However, the mere inclusion of a celebrity in an advertisement does not guarantee its effectiveness. For celebrity endorsements to be successful, certain strategic guidelines must be followed to ensure alignment between the endorser, the brand, and the message being communicated. So, precautions need to be taken into consideration to make the plan work. One is highlighted by Aagerup (2011), who argues that in order to succeed, an advertisement should pay attention in choosing the ideal user for it, who should be both attractive and aligned with the product the brand is advertising (p. 488). This translates also into the case in which celebrities are used as the face of the campaign; in fact, there must be a fit between the celebrity and the product (Silvera & Austad, 2003, p. 1509). This implies that it is not enough to just be famous, but there must be a connection between the celebrity's image and the product promoted. According to previous studies, some of the elements influencing the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements are the trustworthiness and expertise of the chosen individual (Ohanian, 1991; Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999; Lafferty et al., 2002; as cited in Silvera & Austad, 2003, p. 1511). However, Gupta et al. (2017) developed a new scale to assess the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement, identifying five key features of endorser that positively influence consumer attitudes toward a brand and increase purchase intention: attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, popularity, and relevance. By using this scale, the aim is to understand

how celebrity endorsement implied as a strategy by SKIMS positively impacts its brand image. For this reason, the hypotheses that are tested in this research are:

H2: Perceived popularity of celebrities featured in SKIMS advertising is positively related to consumers' perception of SKIMS brand image.

H3: Finding attractive the celebrities featured in SKIMS campaigns is positively associated with SKIMS' brand image.

H4: Perceived trustworthiness of celebrities featured in SKIMS advertising is positively related to consumers' perception of SKIMS brand image

H5: Perceived talent of celebrities featured in SKIMS advertising is positively related to consumers' perception of SKIMS brand image

H6: Admiration for celebrities featured in SKIMS advertising is positively associated with SKIMS' brand image.

2.4 Inclusivity in Advertising

The second branding and communication strategy is inclusion in advertising. As a media, advertising both reflects and shapes societal norms while driving collective changes (Arias, 2019). Previous research indicates that there is a growing demand for diverse representation in marketing (Brodzik et al., 2021, as cited in Campbell, 2023, p. 1). Consumers want to see displayed models from different social and demographic backgrounds- ethnicity to age and body-type- because more reflective of reality, and because more sensitive about these themes (Srivastava et al., 2024). In fact, research has shown that exposure to specific types of models in fashion advertising influences young women, often leading to negative effects on self-esteem and health (Bissell & Rask, 2010, as cited in Aagerup, 2011; Becker & Hamburg, 1996, as cited in Aagerup, 2011; Harrison & Cantor, 1997, as cited in Aagerup, p. 487). This is representative of the importance of advertising and the cultural impact of it. A distinction should be highlighted between diversity and inclusion. Diversity refers to actual or perceived physical and socio-cultural differences among people, while inclusion refers to fostering a culture of belonging and actively preventing exclusion or marginalization (Arsel et al., 2022, p. 920). Therefore, inclusion implies diversity, in the sense that you can not include diverse individuals unless they are present. However, diversity does not automatically imply inclusion. This is why in the context of advertising, for this paper, the focus is on inclusion rather than diversity. However, even if promoting diversity and inclusivity, brands can still fail at meeting consumers' needs, this is because if individuals perceive the brand as unauthentic, lacking sincerity about these thematic, then the result is actually a backlash rather than appreciation (Campbell et al, 2023, p. 3). So, if a brand begins employing models from different backgrounds but it lacks at truly representing them or supporting them then consumers will see this as an instrumentalization rather than an authentic representation. This is supported by Aagerup (2011) research about body representation in advertising, which shows that using models with diverse body types is effective only when it is aligned with the brand's ethics and values (p. 489). Another research based on financial services,

conducted by Bone et al. (2014), showed how racial and ethnic inequalities negatively affect the well-being of customers, harming the consumer's trust. Translated in the context of fashion advertising, this suggests that biases will negatively shape consumers' experiences and brand image. The same happens regarding body types and gender. On the other hand, as found out by Srivastava et al. (2024), inclusive marketing communication positively influences brand attitude and brand love when people see their own identity reflected and respected in brand's communication (p.12). Therefore, inclusion in advertising is a powerful branding strategy, that when used wisely and in alignment with brand's values, can foster positive reactions from consumers. In addition, this would be beneficial for society as well, who will feel more confident in their own skins.

In the context of SKIMS, these principles become relevant as the brand not only employs celebrity endorsements and collaborations, but also diverse representation. This is in aligned with its core message, that declare to "providing solutions for every body" (SKIMS, n.d.). By matching its advertising strategies with evolving cultural and aesthetic expectations, SKIMS ensures its campaigns are both persuasive and culturally resonant. However, it is interesting to explore whether consumers genuinely perceive this inclusivity as authentic, or if they see it as another instance of a brand instrumentalized it. So, the hypothesis that will be tested is based on the previous research about inclusivity, and its effect on consumers, but applying it in this specific research, to the brand SKIMS:

H7: Feeling impressed by SKIMS' inclusive advertising is positively associated with brand image.

H8: Feeling represented in SKIMS' inclusive advertising is positively associated with brand image.

H9: Feeling connected to SKIMS' inclusive advertising is positively associated with brand image.

2.5 Audience Engagement

"Attention" has become a currency, in a world where visual elements in advertising have become more dominant (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 318), and companies fight to catch attention (Corner, 2017, p.3). In this context the word engagement surfaced as a way to survive in a competitive attention economy. Engagement has been defined, in the context of TV advertisement, as a state in which the viewer is both "psychologically and concurrently immersed in and present with a TV advertisement" (Kim et al., 2017, p. 67). Therefore, the aim is to create a mental connection between the viewer and the advertisement during the moment of exposure. However, in the context of other platforms, such as Instagram, the idea of engagement is interpreted in a different way. In their research, Phan et al. (2020), have interpreted it as a behavioral aspect, that can be seen through the interaction between the customer and the brand (Phan et al., 2020, pp. 860-861). Although their relevant results regarding the 4 positive factors promoting engagement on this platform, such as the

interactivity of the message, the timeframe of the post, the attractiveness of the topic, and the format of the post, for this research the focus will be on another definition. The notion given by Hollebeek (2011) is the one employed in this research regarding customer engagement, and it refers to it as "the level of a customer' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in specific brand interaction" (p. 565). Hence, this includes their thoughts, feelings, and actions during those interactions. However, engagement is just one of the four stages, as explained by Corner (2017). The first one is exposure. Exposure can both be passive and active, and it refers to the state of being able to access or encounter a medium content. This is followed by the encounter, an intentional or unintentional moment of attention, the viewer notices the content and the exposure becomes active. If the content captures interest, it leads to engagement, an active phase where the individual consciously looks, listens, and processes its meaning. Finally, involvement takes place, and this is a deeper cognitive and emotional interaction that leaves a lasting impact, whether positive or negative (Corner, 2017, pp 2-3). This implies that the viewer can feel moved or inspired by the content. Engagement not only involves active participation from the audience, meaning that they pay attention, but, as already noted, there is also mental involvement. This is also sustained by Broersma (2019) who argues that engagement involves cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment, affecting brand loyalty, commercial success and stronger civic involvement (pp. 1-4). Therefore, engagement does not only contribute to purchasing intentions, but it is also a key element in fostering brand loyalty. In the context of fashion advertising, engagement is often driven by imaginative and playful interaction, where consumers explore identities and immerse themselves in a world of possibilities simply by looking at clothing and fashion imagery (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010, p. 371). However, based on Ju and Johnson's (2010) study on young women's visual attention, viewers can only process a limited amount of information at a time, and when they do, they focus on specific elements, which sometimes are not the product but the models (pp. 162-170). This is why, as already mentioned in the previous section, inclusivity and celebrity endorsement advertising can be really effective in fostering engagement by sparking feelings or emotions in the audience. For this reason, it is interesting to see how these features play between themselves, with the purpose of promoting consumer purchase. Hence, a very important key element driving consumers is emotion. In fact, Magids et al (2015) based their business strategy on customers' emotions for growth and profitability. They found how consumers are driven by emotions and specific emotional motivators when purchasing items and how these can be used to make customers even more loyal and stick with the brand. These motivators are often unconscious, and the emotional connection pathway is made of four stages: unconnected, highly satisfied, perceiving brand differentiation, and fully connected (p. 69). In the case of SKIMS, by both engagement and emotional connection, the brand can hook up its customers

This dynamic is particularly relevant to brands like SKIMS, since it is a fashion brand, and its advertisements create narratives that not only capture attention but also promote consumer involvement by both using a diverse range of models and engagement tools.

To summarize, the aim of this research is to investigate how SKIMS, a shapewear brand, influences consumer perceptions through the use of two advertising strategies which are celebrity endorsement and inclusiveness. The starting point of this framework is the explanation of brand identity, which is at the heart of everything- from the definition of the brand to the marketing activities (Ianenko et al., 2020, p.1). By using Kapferer's Brand-Identity Prism model to identify the core identity of SKIMS, the goal is to assess whether this aligns with how the brand presents itself through advertising. This alignment is essential, as it makes it easier for customers to perceive the intended message and, as a result, to form a positive impression of the brand, encouraging purchase intention. For this reason, brand image, which corresponds to consumer perception, has also been defined within this theoretical framework. Previous research has shown that brand image is shaped by associations, which are formed through consumers' attributes, benefits, and attitudes related to the brand. Based on this, the first formulated hypothesis (H1) assesses whether a higher brand image perception of SKIMS is associated with a greater chance of purchase intention, as this is the main goal of marketing strategies. Advertising is one of the tools used by companies to influence consumers' brand image, and this usually happens because it helps to visualize who uses the brand and in what context (Keller, 1993, p.4). For instance, through celebrity endorsement there is a translation of values, from the famous person to the product (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014, p. 170). Inclusivity, on the other hand, fosters a sense of belonging and prevents marginalization (Arsel et al., 2022, p. 920), thereby positioning the brand as accessible to everyone and socially conscious. SKIMS relies on both celebrity endorsement and inclusivity, leveraging on both emotional and social level to connect to a broader audience. In fact, audience engagement takes place when consumers feel invested in the message, and emotions drive purchasing intention (Magdis et al., 2015). By portraying an aspirational lifestyle through celebrities and promoting inclusive values, a brand should be able to gain a positive brand image. Hence, this research, which focuses on the specific case of SKIMS, tests whether the brand's use of celebrity endorsement and inclusivity contributes to a more favorable brand image by assessing hypotheses related to these two strategies (H2 to H9).

3. Research Design and Method

3.1 Justification of the method

The aim of this research is to understand how SKIMS advertising strategy employs celebrity marketing and inclusive advertising to influence consumer perception. To explore this topic, which requires an examination of individuals' opinions and preferences, but based on how the brand itself uses these strategies to portray its image, a mixed methods approach has been adopted. This approach allows an in-depth examination by using both qualitative and quantitative analysis, in the specific semiotic analysis and a survey.

Qualitative analysis aligns with the aim of interpreting the visual construction of SKIMS' advertising images, while quantitative analysis is suitable for measuring consumer attitudes and purchasing intentions towards the brand. The use of semiotics analysis offers a key framework for analyzing how signs, in this case images, communicate societal values, norms, and ideologies (Aiello & Parry, 2020, pp. 25-26). In easier words, semiotics helps in the process of uncovering 'hidden messages' in advertising. Meanwhile, the use of surveys allows the measurement of perspectives and orientations among consumers (Babbie, 2014, p. 261) and in this case the goal is to understand the attitudes of respondents regarding the brand. The quantitative part follows deductive logic, which means that general theories are used to derive specific hypotheses, which are then tested (Babbie, 2014, pp. 22-23). In this case, the literature helped identify some specific variables, from which hypotheses came from to be tested through the developed survey. Together, these two approaches offer an in-depth examination of both interpretative and measurable effects of SKIMS' brand strategy on consumers' perception. The following sub-sections of this methodology chapter are structured in two main parts. First, it presents the qualitative method, including the semiotic analysis used to interpret brand identity- how SKIMS communicates itself. Then, it discusses the quantitative method, informing about the survey design and its role in testing the proposed hypotheses and measures consumer perception of the brand through its advertising strategies.

3.2 Qualitative Analysis

Images communicate socially constructed ideas because they are created by humans, who are themselves shaped by the communities and cultures they live in. For instance, the iconic Fraternal Kiss graffiti, in Berlin, does not represent just two elderly men kissing, it stands for something beyond, that is deeply rooted in specific social, political, and historical contexts. To understand its meaning it is pivotal to understand and decode that context in which it was created. This illustrates how images are more than visual content; they convey layered meanings shaped by the society in which they exist. Because of this, semiotics can be used as a method of analysis, since it is the study of signs and meanings (Babbie, 2014, pp. 406- 408). Semiotics helps uncover how visual symbols communicate broader ideas, ideologies, and cultural messages.

In this specific context of SKIMS, a contemporary fashion and shapewear brand, semiotics is

useful to analyze its advertising images. Advertising serves not only to highlight products but also to communicate brand's identity. Knowing that the brand uses both celebrity endorsement and inclusive representation in its images, it is interesting to analyze how these two are employed and visually constructed and whether they align with the brand's identity or not. Through this analysis, it is possible to discover what the brand is communicating and how it does so, while also shedding light on the broader cultural phenomena of the time. As Aiello and Parry (2020) explain, semiotic analysis is used to understand how signs convey cultural norms, ideologies, and emotional associations (pp. 25-26). For this reason, it is employed in this research, and it is built on Barthes's Rhetoric of the Image, which identifies both denotation and connotation. The first one refers to the literal content of the advertisement, while the second one refers to a deeper symbolic or ideological meaning, shaped by cultural, historical, and social contexts (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 25).

3.2.1 Data Collection and Sampling

This section delves into the qualitative data collection and sampling criteria adopted in this research to examine how SKIMS communicates its image in advertising, to answer the bigger question of how it uses celebrity endorsement and inclusivity to influence consumers' perception. SKIMS is known for offering inclusive shapewear in different skin tones, and for employing celebrity figures as a marketing strategy (Yuan, 2024, pp.2-5). Based on these two defining features, celebrity endorsement and inclusiveness, images from its advertising campaigns were selected for semiotic analysis. To ensure relevance, all selected images met at least one of the two core criteria: presence of a celebrity, such as a well-known singer or actress or sport figure, or portraying diversity in body type, skin tone, or physical features. Here, inclusivity is understood as fostering a sense of belonging and preventing marginalization in visual representation (Arsel et al., 2022, p. 920). A total of 50 images were analyzed, deriving from campaigns published on Instagram, American billboard, and official website over the last two years. The time frame was chosen to ensure a more up-to-date reflection of current social norms, since media influence attitudes and social norms (Arias, 2019, p.577). The sampling strategy combined criterion sampling and random sampling. The first one was applied to ensure that all selected images featured at least one of the core features, either celebrity or inclusivity. At the same time, random sampling was used within this criterion to reduce selection bias and allow for a more representative dataset of SKIMS' visual strategies. The images were sourced from three main platforms: SKIMS' official Instagram account, the official website, and one campaign billboard. In the specific, of the 50 images, 48 were obtained from Instagram posts, 1 from the official website and 1 from a billboard campaign. The dominance of Instagram images reflects the greater availability and accessibility of old campaigns on social media, as opposed to the brand's website, which only features current collections and campaigns. Billboard campaigns were less accessible and often undocumented, so only one image was included, which also appears on Instagram. Out of the 50 selected images, 23 featured celebrities, 13 featured two or more

individuals, 2 promoted collaborations, and the remaining 12 were solo shoots of models who showcased diverse identities in terms of skin color, body type, and facial features.

3.2.2 Semiotic Analysis Operationalization

The concepts guiding my operationalization for the semiotic analysis are brand identity, and advertising strategies, in the specific celebrity endorsement and inclusivity. The presence of brand identity is supported by theory. It refers to how brands present themselves (Nandan, 2005, pp. 265-267), and according to Ianenko et al. (2020), brand identity is the center from which marketing strategies emerge (p.1). Hence, both celebrity endorsement and inclusivity are understood as a strategic expression of brand identity, with the ultimate aim to communicate the brand's personality and core message. Advertising is one of the main tools through which a brand can communicate its identity and connect to consumers. Therefore, the semiotic analysis of the 50 SKIMS' campaign images involves the identification of brand values and visual codes, and recurring imagery that together contribute to the construction of a coherent brand identity. In this case, both celebrity endorsement and inclusivity are analyzed in terms of how these choices contribute to crafting a coherent brand identity.

Advertising strategies refer to how brands use celebrity marketing, collaborations, and inclusive representation to influence consumer behavior. In the specific context of this research the focus is on celebrity endorsement and inclusivity. Hence, the operationalization of celebrity endorsement for the semiotic analysis is effectuated through the use of indicators such as: recognizability of the celebrity, their relevance in the social and cultural scene, the general feature of their public image, the visual portrayal in the advertisement, and the degree to which they align with the brand core message. Meanwhile inclusivity, is operationalized through some distinct indicators like the representation of diverse body types, racial and ethnic diversity among models, variety in age, ability, and gender, and the visual equality in their representation. The semiotic analysis involves counting the number of ads featuring celebrities and interpreting the presence of racial, gender, and body diversity across the campaigns.

3.2.3 Method of Analysis

The semiotic analysis employed in this research follows Barthe's Rhetoric of the Image, which distinguishes between denotation and connotation (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 25). As previously discussed, the first one refers to the literal content of the advertisement, while the second one refers to a deeper symbolic or ideological meaning, shaped by cultural, historical, and social contexts (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 25). As argued by Aiello and Parry (2020), advertising serves as a powerful tool for constructing meaning, conveying values and reinforcing ideologies, and for this reason semiotic analysis for a very long time has been employed to understand these messages (pp. 187-

190). Understanding this strong tie between semiotic analysis and advertising, Barthes' framework was applied to analyze the 50 SKIMS advertising images.

All the selected images were collected in a file and individually numbered. A separate document was created in the form of a table with 50 rows and two columns. The first column was labeled 'Denotation', and it contained literal description of each picture. The second column, labeled 'Connotation', recorded interpretation of the deeper symbolic meanings at two levels: brand identity and advertising strategy, see Appendix 7.3. The description of the denotation followed the scheme highlighted by Machin and Mayr (2012). They showcase specific elements to pay attention to such as: the attributes/objects present in the picture, the setting, and the salience, such as the presence of important cultural symbols, size, color, tone, focus, foregrounding, and overlapping (pp. 51-56). An example of this could be:

"Light gray background. Female model at the center of the picture. Some water coming from above. Her skin tone is dark brown, straight wet black hair medium long. She is wearing makeup, a black t-shirt and black panties..."

For the connotative dimension, analysis was divided in two blocks:

Brand Identity: "The wetness of the shirt, showing the contours of the nipple bra signals SKIMS embrace on natural body realism while ensuring sensuality, which aligns with SKIMS identity as a brand that supports all bodies..."

Advertising strategies: "The ad clearly wants to showcase the nipple bra, not the model herself. The wet fabric reveals the characteristic the product in almost a 'natural' way."

After analyzing the connotative columns, several recurring patterns emerged. For instance, the use of a very neutral and bare background in the majority of the pictures. This repetition appears to be a strategic choice in SKIMS' advertising approach with the aim of drawing attention to the product itself rather than distracting consumers with other visual elements. Based on these types of observation, a thematic categorization was introduced to distinguish between images that featured celebrities and those that did not, in order to explore the differences in the portrayal of the two groups and if something changed.

3.2.4 Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Analysis

In qualitative research, reliability and validity are the foundation of quality analysis. Reliability, in this context, refers to the consistency and transparency of the research process (Silverman, 2011, p. 360). Despite semiotic analysis being based on a subjective interpretation, transparency is achieved here by applying an identical, carefully structured analysis, to all fifty SKIMS advertisements, and by documenting each step. The structure, as already mentioned, followed Barthes' (1977) distinction between denotation and connotation, and an example of this can be found in Appendix 7.3. This documentation makes the process transparent and traceable, allowing other researchers to follow the same interpretive logic and understand how the conclusion presented

in this paper were reached. Additionally, the criterion-based sampling, which ensured that only images with specific characteristics were selected in a span of two years, from different media, decreased the chance of bias, supporting consistency and representativeness in the visual dataset. This allowed to what Tracy (2010) defines as rich rigor, another word for reliability. Simultaneously, validity, which refers to the accuracy of the findings (Silverman, 2011, pp. 367-368), was built through thick description and crystallization (Tracy, 2010, p. pp. 842-843). The in-depth illustration of the images, both on the denotative and connotative level, provides the density of evidence required for thick description, while crystallization was achieved by approaching the image both from the angle of brand identity and of advertising strategy. Finally, I acknowledge that my own gender and cultural background inevitably influence somehow the results. However, by admitting this and by employing the tools here explained, the aim is to mitigate the potential bias.

3.3 Quantitative Analysis

   The aim of the quantitative analysis, specifically the survey adopted in this research, is to identify generalizable patterns, and test hypothesis related to SKIMS advertising strategies, based on insights from existing literature. The aim is to answer the bigger question of how the brand influences consumer perception through the use celebrity and inclusivity in a measurable way. Since surveys allow the measurement of individuals' perspectives and orientations (Babbie, 2014, p. 261), this method was selected as the quantitative component of this mix-methods research. This perfectly aligns with the goal of understanding the attitudes of respondents regarding SKIMS, after being exposed to some of the brand's related advertising campaigns, featuring celebrity endorsement and inclusivity.

   The questionnaire, which refers to the list of questions inside of the survey, is a widely used tool in market research to explore people's opinions and consumer preferences (Matthew & Ross, 2010, p. 201). In this academic case, the focus is on how celebrity endorsement and inclusivity, which have been already studied and seen how some components can foster their effectiveness, used in the context of SKIMS advertising affect consumers' purchase intention and perception.

   The survey was created using the platform Qualtrics, and the questionnaire was developed using assessed scale. This research was conducted in accordance with the established ethical standards of scientific inquiry (Babbie, 2014, pp. 63-64). This includes voluntary participation, the avoidance of harm towards the participants, the guarantee of anonymity, and the absence of deception. Ethical considerations were respected through the whole study. In addition, particular attention was given to the minimization of bias during both the analysis and interpretations stages.

3.3.1 Survey's Participants Sampling

   The aim of this research was to gather a broad perspective on how the general population perceives SKIMS advertisements. Therefore, when conducting this research there was no focus on

targeting a specific group. As a result, participation in the constructed survey was open to all individuals aged 18 and above. The chosen age ranged from 18 to 60+, and it was selected to allow the possibility of a diverse and nuanced range of viewpoints across different life stages. For clarity and to make the dataset more manageable and structured, participants were allowed to choose between four age groups: 18-20, 21-39, 40-59, and 60+. This categorization follows the general development division of adulthood, which includes early adulthood (20-39), middle adulthood (40-59), and old age (60+) (Lachman, 2001).

   A snowball sampling method has been employed to collect respondents. To the extent possible within the limits of this method the questionnaire was distributed primarily on three different platforms- Instagram, WhatsApp, and SurveySwap- to recruit as diverse a range of participants as possible. The link for the survey was initially shared on personal Instagram accounts, and various WhatsApp groups with diverse members, with the support of several students who shared the link across multiple networks. In addition, some participants offered to share the survey with their own contacts and posted it on their personal social media profiles, helping broaden the reach. In total 102 responses were collected. However, after cleaning the data, the final and effective number of the valid sample resulted to be 86 (N = 86): 62 identified as women, 23 as men and 1 as other. No responses were recorded from the 60+ age group, while 8.1% of respondents belonged to the 18-20 age group, and 1.2% were aged 40-59. The majority of participants (90.7%) fell within the 21-39 age group. Participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals had the option to withdraw at any point. Completing the questionnaire took around 5 minutes. In terms of nationality, out of the 194 options available in the survey, Italian participants made up the largest share of the sample (22.2%), followed by Dutch (11.1%), and French (8.6%) respondents. The remainder of the sample consisted of individuals from a wide range of nationalities, including American, Australian, Belgian, Brazilian, Costa Rican, Cypriot, Danish, Estonian, Gambian, German, Greek, Hungarian, Indian, Mauritian, Mexican, Nigerian, Pakistani, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Surinamer, Swiss, Taiwanese, and Thai participants, although each of these represented a smaller percentage of the total sample.

Table 3.1. Frequency analysis of participants gender, age and nationality.

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent.
Gender				
Female	62	60.8	72.1	72.1
Male	23	22.5	26.7	98.8
Other (please specify)	1	1.0	1.2	100.0
Age				
18-20	7	6.9	8.1	8.1

21-39	78	76.5	90.7	98.8
40-59	1	1.0	1.2	100.0
Nationality				
American	2	2.0	2.5	2.5
Australian	1	1.0	1.2	3.7
Belgian	2	2.0	2.5	6.2
Brazilian	1	1.0	1.2	7.4
Costa Rican	1	1.0	1.2	8.6
Cypriot	1	1.0	1.2	9.9
Danish	1	1.0	1.2	11.1
Dutch	9	8.9	11.1	22.2
Estonian	1	1.0	1.2	23.5
French	7	6.9	8.6	32.1
Gambian	1	1.0	1.2	33.3
German	4	4.0	4.9	38.3
Greek	1	1.0	1.2	39.5
Hungarian	1	1.0	1.2	40.7
Indian	3	3.0	3.7	44.4
Italian	19	17.8	22.2	66.7
Mauritian	2	2.0	2.5	69.1
Mexican	2	2.0	2.5	71.6
Nigerian	5	5.0	6.2	77.8
Pakistani	1	1.0	1.2	79.0
Polish	1	1.0	1.2	80.2
Portuguese	2	2.0	2.5	82.7
Romanian	2	2.0	2.5	85.2
Russian	1	1.0	1.2	86.4
Serbian	1	1.0	1.2	87.7
Spanish	4	4.0	4.9	92.6
Surinamer	1	1.0	1.2	93.8
Swiss	1	1.0	1.2	95.1
Taiwanese	3	3.0	3.7	98.8
Thai	1	1.0	1.2	100.0

3.3.2 Procedure

Before the survey started, participants were thanked for their time and informed that the goal of the questionnaire was to explore how marketing strategies used by fashion and lingerie brands can influence consumer perception and engagement. They were told that completing the survey would take approximately five minutes and that they would be asked to evaluate some advertising images using a series of statements. In addition, it was also clarified that the data were collected anonymously and used for academic purposes only.

After obtaining the informed consent, participants were presented with a set of general statements about celebrity endorsements, including five items adapted by Srivastava et al. (2024), rated on a Likert Scale. This section was followed by three general statements regarding inclusivity in advertising, still employing Likert Scale. After this, participants were shown a collage of SKIMS advertisements from various years featuring just celebrities. This was followed by several statements designed to assess the perceived effectiveness of celebrity endorsements. A second collage, this time featuring SKIMS advertisements with non-celebrity but with 'regular' models, was then presented, along with a set of statements focused on the perception of inclusivity for those images.

Participants were then asked to evaluate the overall perception of SKIMS based on the images they had seen, as well as their purchase intention. A question assessing the potential bias towards the brand's co-owner, Kim Kardashian, was also included.

In the final part of the questionnaire, demographics information were collected regarding gender, age, and nationality. Participants were once again thanked for their participation, and provided with a code and a link to SurveySwap, in case they wanted to use it for their own research.

3.3.3 Survey Operationalization

To develop a survey appropriate to this research, existing scales have been adapted to ensure more reliable and valid results, since they have already been tested for both reliability e validity. All items were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), unless indicated otherwise. Since the aim of this research is to understand how SKIMS use of celebrity endorsement and inclusivity affect consumer perception and behavior, the three key concepts measured in the survey are: brand image, celebrity endorsement and inclusivity in advertising.

Celebrity endorsement refers to the use of famous people in advertising, and it works by transferring their own perceived qualities to the brand they are sponsoring, as a result consumer attitudes, brand image, and purchase intention are enhanced (Erdogan, 1999, as cited in Gupta et al., 2017; Zipporah & Mberia, 2014). The first section of the survey includes some statements to measure the general effectiveness of celebrity endorsement, based on the five key items proposed by Gupta et al. (2017): attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, popularity, and relevance. Example

items include:

"I am more likely to trust a brand if a popular celebrity appear in its advertising."

"I pay more attention to advertisings that feature celebrities I find attractive."

Inclusivity, on the other hand, refers to the strategic practice of representing diverse identities in a way that fosters a sense of belonging and, when perceived as authentic, can enhance brand image, trust, and emotional connection with consumers (Arsel et al., 2022; Srivastava et al., 2024; Campbell et al., 2023). To measure this concept, the scale adapted derived from Srivastava et al. (2024). However, theirs come from two previous research projects of Kazmi and Khalique (2019) and Eslami (2020). To assess the general attitudes toward inclusivity in advertising three items were used, which focused on positive brand attitude, personal identification, and universal relatability. Some examples of these:

"I feel more positively about brand that feature diverse models in their campaigns."

"When I see people who look like me in ads, I feel more connected to the brand."

In the following sections, participants were shown two collages from SKIMS campaigns. The first collage featured just celebrities, and was followed by statements related to Gupta et al. (2017) dimensions, such as:

"The celebrities featured in SKIMS advertising are popular."

"I find the celebrities used in SKIMS campaigns attractive."

The next collage displayed SKIMS advertisements with non-celebrity models, from diverse backgrounds. This section included four statements based on the inclusivity scale derived from Srivastava et al. (2024), such as:

"I feel impressed by how SKIMS represents diverse body types and backgrounds in their campaigns."

"I feel represented when I see SKIMS advertisements".

Brand image reflects how consumers perceive brands (Nandan, 2005, pp. 265-267), and it is shaped by personal associations, such as attributes, benefits, and attitudes, which are formed through experiences, media, and marketing signals, which may or may not align with the brand's intended identity (Keller, 1993; Nanda, 2005; Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2013). This was measured using two final statements. These involved statements estimating how respondents perceive the brand, based on the shown images and whether they influence their purchasing decisions. The first statement participants had to rate was based on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*unappealing*) to 7 (*appealing*):

"How do you perceive SKIMS as a brand based on these images?"

Meanwhile, for the purchase intention, the scale used was a 5-point scale going from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*):

"How likely are you to buy from SKIMS in the future?"

To detect potential bias, one final question addressed the association of the brand with Kim Kardashian, measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*improve a lot*) to 5 (*worsen a lot*).

"How would your perception of SKIMS change if it were not associated with Kim Kardashian?"

All these items and adapted scales aim to provide reliable data for answering the research question regarding the impact of SKIMS's advertising strategies on consumer perception and behavior. After collecting the data, simple regression analysis and multiple regression analysis were used on SPSS to test the hypothesis. For a full view of the questionnaire, see Appendix 7.2.

3.3.4 Reliability and Validity in Quantitative Analysis

In quantitative research, reliability refers to the consistency and replicability of a measurement, while validity refers to the accuracy with which a tool measures the intended concepts (Silverman, 2011, pp. 360-368). These criteria have been kept in mind while designing the methods employed to ensure quality results. In the first case, reliability was addressed by employing previous validated measures, such as the celebrity endorsement scale from Gupta et al. (2017) and the inclusivity scale adopted from Srivastava et al. (2014). As argued by Babbie (2014), these instruments improve reliability (pp. 152-154). However for validity, as surveys reduce nuanced insights by allowing respondents to choose between a few options, such as an "agree" to "disagree" scale (Babbie, 2014, pp. 294-295), the solution was to carefully operationalize the core concepts- celebrity endorsement, inclusivity, brand image, and purchase intention- based on prior research, and employing a mixed method (Babbie, 2014, p. 295). In fact, semiotic analysis results served as a foundation to understand better and interpret the quantitative results, providing contextual depth.

4. Results

4.1 Qualitative Results

This section presents the findings of the semiotic analysis conducted on 50 advertising images coming from SKIMS Instagram page, official website, and billboards. The aim of this analysis, specifically, is to explore how this brand uses visual communication to construct a coherent brand identity and employ advertising strategies to promote consumer involvement. Through the use of specific elements, from the layout to the background, to visual shapes, brands communicate their identity to consumers in a recognizable way (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 320). Thus, for some advertising, it is easy to associate them with a specific brand. Over the years, and the diverse campaigns, some visual elements stay while others are discarded. During this process it is vital to keep the brand identity message consistent so that consumers can decode the intended meaning without misunderstanding (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 320; Nandan, 2005, p. 265). The results of SKIMS' advertising analysis have been organized into three sections: Visual Construction of Brand Identity, Celebrity Endorsement and Emotional Branding, and Representation and Inclusivity. Each section explores the identified patterns identified across the 50 selected images and interprets their meaning in order to answer the bigger and main question: How does SKIMS employ celebrity endorsement and inclusive advertising to influence consumer perception? All the selected images used for this analysis are presented in appendix A.

4.1.2 Minimalism and Body-Framing

This section delves into how SKIMS employs visual communication, advertising, to identify and understand recurring patterns used by the brand to make its advertising recognizable and coherent to its brand identity. On its official website, SKIMS highlights its brand vision: "We are setting new standards by providing solutions for every-body. From technically constructed shapewear that enhances your curves to underwear that stretches to twice its size, our goal is to consistently innovate on the past and advance our industry for the future" (SKIMS, n.d.). In summary, the goal is to offer innovative, inclusive solutions that adapt and celebrate all body types. This can be considered the core message that the brand wants to communicate and sell. The semiotic analysis applied investigated whether and how this message is reflected in the brand's advertising images.

Through the semiotic analysis of the 50 selected images, 48 of which were sourced from SKIMS' official Instagram profile, what stands out, regarding the adopted visual language of the brand across all these campaigns is the consistent use of minimalism, body-centric framing, inclusivity, uniform styling and product-centered composition. These characteristics are visible through specific semiotic elements. The use of minimalism is signaled by the constant use of neutral tones and bare settings. In the majority of the pictures the background is always light gray or dark gray, white, or red and just in a few cases there is the presence of some props in the scene. However, in these cases, when there is a presence of a more garnished set, compared to the usual shooting,

usually celebrities, special collaboration or limited-edition items are highlighted. Otherwise, for normal advertising the pictures always portray the model/s at the center of the picture, with the focus on the items and how they fit, no accessories, or anything that can distract. One example is the Image 4.1, an Instagram post for a bodysuit, where denotatively the model stands at the center of the picture, with the pink bodysuit on, and a light gray background. The setting is empty, with no text, no garnishment, no landscape. On the connotative level, this evokes a sense of simplicity, minimalism, and a focus, without any distractions, on the product and its fit. This is in line with the marketing mix framework highlighted by Nandan (2005), which explains how some choices, such as the product attributes or surrounding environment help communicate brand identity (p. 265). In this case, such framing highlights the physical feature of the product- the fits, the fabric, the color- reinforcing SKIMS' image as a brand that focuses on simple, body-focused design without anything that takes attention away from the clothes. This perfectly aligns with the study of Ju and Johnson (2010), which argues that viewers can process limited amounts of information at a time (pp. 162-170). Hence, the presence of a minimalist set offers the chance to focus entirely on the product and on the model/s, without any distraction. Additionally, this aesthetic foster consumer engagement, by inviting imaginative identification. In fact, as Phillips & McQuarrie (2010) explain, in fashion advertising, engagement is driven imaginative and playful interaction. (p. 371). In this specific case of SKIMS, the advertising encourages viewers to project themselves into the scene, picturing themselves wearing the product. Overall, the element of visual appearance used by the brand tends to present itself as minimalistic with a focus on the emblematic products (e.g. the different shades of comfy shapewear).

Image 4.1: SKIMS Instagram Post

4.1.3 Inclusive Representation and Uniform Styling

Besides the minimalistic, and product-centered choices and the body-centric framing, the other two characteristics always present in SKIMS campaigns are inclusive representation and uniform styling. These are evident in 23 of the posts (if excluded the ones featuring celebrities), where models with diverse body-types, skin tones, sizes, and features appear. This is even more evident in the group images, where the visual focus remains still on the product, but it is possible to see how the fit can look differently depending on the model. This allows even better imaginative identification, by displaying different body types in which a broader audience can relate to. However, in this case it has been noted how all the models present in the picture have a uniform style. This means that everything, from the nails color to the type and color of heels, to the hairstyle, to the pose is the same, except in very few cases. Some examples can be seen in Image 4.2, Image 4.3, and Image 4.4, where groups of models are portrayed. In the first image, on the denotative level, the six models with different body-types, features, size, and skin color are presented wearing different shades of bra. There is no garnishment, all of the models have the same make-up, and same long straight hairstyle, except the model in the front middle, who has short curly hair. The adopted visual cohesion allows viewers to see the collection's full range immediately, while showing diversity but in an inclusive way. In fact, connotatively, through the use of uniformed style, what is communicated is unity. This not only allows the viewer to understand the full range of collection at glance but also reinforces SKIMS' identity as an inclusive and uniform brand, open to everyone without making distinctions. In fact, inclusion refers to fostering a culture of belonging and actively preventing exclusion or marginalization (Arsel et al., 2022, p. 920), which is perfectly embodied by these pictures. A similar effect can be seen in Image 4.3, where six basketball players are dressed in matching gray tones, holding the same identical poses, and wearing the same type of shoes. This again evokes a sense of unity, of team. These choices to select and show different body-types, features, sizes, and skin-color when it comes to group compositions serve not only as a way to prove the inclusivity of the brand, which perfectly aligns with its core message, but also presents the collection to an audience that is allowed to see themselves in at least one of those models. These findings perfectly align with Campbell et al. (2023), who, in their large-scale review of diversity representation in advertising, observed that while representation regarding body size, gender, age, and race has increased, it remains inconsistent and often superficial. This can lead to negative effects, such as backlashes. Their framework emphasized the importance of authenticity and accurate portrayal, which resonates with the choices adopted by SKIMS in its campaigns. In addition, inclusivity perfectly aligns with the brand's tagline, which, according to Aagerup (2011), is essential for effective communication. In fact, his research highlights how the presence of diverse body types is effective only when such representation aligns with the brand's core values and ethics (p. 489).

Image 4.2: SKIMS Instagram Post

Image 4.3: SKIMS Instagram Post

Maintaining these visual and thematic characteristics is essential, since consistency contributes to build a stronger brand identity, facilitating both recognition and recall among consumers (Nandan, 2005, p. 271). In the case of SKIMS, visual repetition reinforces its identity as minimalistic, body-centric, inclusive, and product-centered.

However, it is important to notice certain patterns within the representation. Most notably, male models are consistently portrayed with defined abs and athletic physiques, whereas female models, despite being diverse in body size, most often appear with straight hair. These patterns suggest that while SKIMS has made considerable progress in diversity representation, certain idealized traits (e.g., muscularity for men, straight hair for women) continue to dominate, pointing to areas where diversity could be expanded further.

4.1.4 Advertising strategies: celebrity endorsement and visual storytelling

This section presents findings on how SKIMS employs celebrity endorsement as an advertising strategy. An additional noteworthy insight emerged from the analysis of the 50 selected images. Beyond celebrity endorsement, SKIMS uses thematic visual storytelling as a strategy to promote consumer involvement. As mentioned earlier, the brand introduces garments in their advertising in connection with specific occasions, such as collaborations, special editions and so on, and on these occasions the campaigns are organized around strong visual themes and narrative strategies.

Out of the 50 images analyzed, 24 featured celebrities from various fields, such as music, sports, and movies, and all of them represent different beauty standards. Hence, celebrity presence is central to SKIMS advertising. However, the brand subverts the traditional representation of celebrities as glamorous by employing, on the denotative level, minimalist, neutral backgrounds and natural body language, as already explored in the previous sub-section. Figures like SZA, Usher, Lana Condor, Nelly Furtado, Neymar and so on follow the same modus operandi, allowing the focus to be on the product, while endorsing celebrities. This approach deliberately shifts attention away from fame and onto the product. For instance, in Image 4.4, the singer SZA is captured in a full shot, standing on tiptoes with an introspective gaze. The setting is the usual light gray background, no crazy garments, perfectly showing the products- bra and thong. On the connotative side, the posture and mise-en-scène suggests almost a natural shot, taken in a moment of everyday life. This approach deconstructs the idea of unattainable stardom and favors a depiction of celebrity as just another human being. Similarly, Image 4.5 presents Nick Bosa, a professional football player, looking directly into the camera while subtly engaging with the fabric of his shirt. His hands stretch the material, emphasizing its texture and strength rather than drawing attention to his body or seductive appeal. In this picture as well, there is no trace of stardom or luxury, just the idea of comfort and simplicity. The star becomes anyone, a body in soft and comfortable clothing, the celebrity is not idolized but normalized, inviting identification.

This aligns with Silvera and Austad's (2003) claim that celebrity endorsements work by transferring the feelings associated with the celebrity to the product to reinforce the brand's value (p. 1521). However, SKIMS avoids emotional pedestalization, rather than elevating the celebrity, the brand encourages an "emotional mirror", where viewers are invited to identify and not simply admire. In addition, as Zipporah and Mberia (2014) explain, these choices benefit the brand not only for attention and recall but also emotional engagement and perceive credibility (p. 168). By avoiding glamorization and the "vampire effect", where the celebrity's fame overshadow the product (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014, p.168), SKIMS promotes the focus on the product. The use of diverse celebrities across different industries and demographics further extends the brand's appeal, not aligning with a single identity, but by tapping into a range of affective and aspirational associations. In doing so, the brand encourages consumers to imitate and align with famous people since for them they represent the right way of living (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014, p. 164).
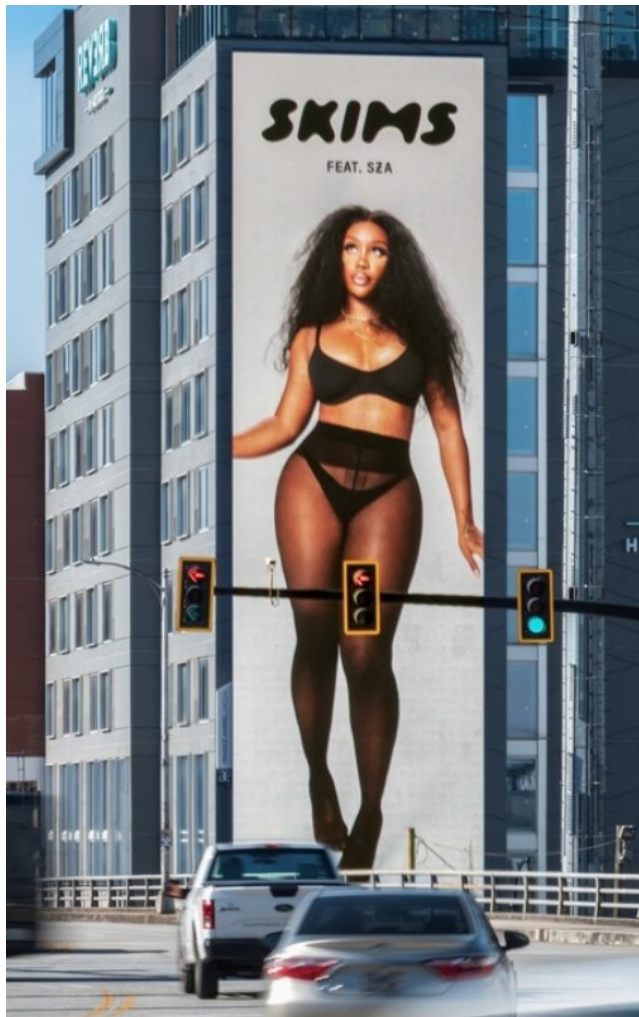
Image 4.4: SKIMS Billboard

Image 4.5: SKIMS Instagram Post

From the semiotic analysis of the 50 pictures, an unexpected insight emerged concerning advertising strategies used by SKIMS for seasonal and special collections. In contrast to the brand's minimalist visual language, collections tied to specific occasions, such as Christmas, Valentine's Day, or bridalwear, often adopt a more colorful and artistic aesthetic. These campaigns use vivid colors, decorative props, and symbolic elements that differentiate them from the standard product promotions. Particularly, for the Valentine's and Christmas collections, each year a high-profile celebrity is selected and employed to promote these products according to a visual storytelling built around holiday themes.

For instance, in Image 4.6 is possible to see the singer Rosé from the band the BLACKPINK, captured in a stylized scene embellished with sequins, heart motifs, and a bow and arrow. The connotative meaning behind this decision is of course the connection between Cupid and Valentine's day. Through this combination of celebrity endorsement and thematic iconography, SKIMS crafts emotional resonant narrative that ties the product to a specific cultural moment. In this case, the celebrity functions as a character within a seasonal mythos. Something similar is also evident in Image 4.7, which depicts the SKIMS x The North Face collaboration. Unlike the Valentine's campaign, this image does not feature a celebrity, but it still relies on contextual setting and symbolic cues to convey its narratives. The models are fully dressed in ski apparel and equipment, posed on snow-covered terrain, with the typical ski facility landscape. Even if they are all covered, their pose

connotatively suggests readiness for action, evoking the energy and dynamism associated with winter sports. This limited-edition collection, launched on December 2024, is close to the winter holiday season. The whole setting and garnishments, which function as visual signifiers, align the product withing a specific cultural context, the winter recreation. Doing so, the brand moves from its typical minimalist aesthetic to embrace a storytelling, wherein the imagery tells a story. The focus this time is on the lifestyle associated with the collection, suggesting that SKIMS is not only about shapewear, but also about adapting to all moments in life.

Image 4.6: SKIMS Instagram Post

Image 4.7: SKIMS Instagram Post

By leveraging on both celebrity endorsements and visual thematic storytelling, SKIMS can aim to improve the effectiveness of its advertising. As discussed, the use of celebrity figures brings many advantages, such as the enhance of a better recall, ensuring attention, reaching different target groups, or broader ones (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014, pp. 168-170), by translating their associated value to the product (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014, p. 170; Silvera & Austad, 2003, p. 1521). Likely the use of visual thematic storytelling plays the same function. These more enriched and artistic, symbolic images likely aim to maximize visibility and consumer engagement during high-sales periods, where competition for attention is intense (ex. Christmas). In this sense, SKIMS adapts visual language not to only communicate brand identity but also to enrich it when needed most.

4.2 Quantitative Analysis

Based on the research question and previous research, descriptive analysis was conducted to summarize respondents' attitudes toward SKIMS' advertising choices (N = 86). This step was essential to understand whether the brand's intended identity- its emphasis on inclusivity- is perceived by consumers. In addition, assessing brand perception and purchase intention provided a foundation for hypothesis testing.

On a 5-point scale ranging from 1= Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree, the item 'I am impressed by how SKIMS represents diverse body types and backgrounds in their campaigns" had a mean (M) of 3.74 (SD = 0.85), indicating moderate agreement with the brand's inclusive portrayal. The item "I feel represented when I see SKIMS advertisements" recorded a mean of 3.19 (SD = 1.01), reflecting neutral to slightly positive sentiment, with variations across responses. Purchase

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intention was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Very unlikely to 5 = very likely. The mean score was 2.68 (SD = 1.10), suggesting that on average, participants were slightly unlikely to consider purchasing SKIMS products. Brand image perception was measured on a 7-point scale, where 1 = unappealing and 7 = Appealing through the item 'How do you perceive SKIMS as a brand based on these images?'. The average score was 4.76 (SD = 1.17), indicating a moderately positive perception of the brand.

4.2.1 Regression Analysis

The first hypothesis (H1) formulated was based on existing literature, which argued that brand image influences purchase intention. To test this, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted on the data coming from the survey, with purchasing intention as the dependent variable and SKIMS brand image as the predictor. The model was found to be significant, $F(1, 84) = 20.29$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .20$, indicating that brand image explains 20% of the variation in brand's purchase intention. SKIMS brand image had a positive significant influence on purchasing intention ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H1 is accepted:

H1: Higher brand image perception of SKIMS is associated with a greater chance of purchase intention.

4.2.2 Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted with SKIMS brand image as the dependent variable and SKIMS celebrities' popularity, attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, and relevance as predictors. Before performing the regression analysis, multicollinearity among the independent variables was assessed. The results indicated that all correlations between predictor variables were below the value of .7 (Pallant, 2020, p.163), suggesting no severe multicollinearity. However, one multivariate outlier was detected by examining the Mahalanobis distance. For five independent variables, according to Pallant (2020) $\chi^2(5) = 20.52$, based on Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) guideline (as cited in Pallant, 2020, p. 165). One case exceeding this value was noticed, and for this removed. After these passages, the final model was found to be significant, $F(5, 78) = 6.25$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .29$. Hence, the 5 variables can account for 29% of the extension to which they influence dispersion or variation in the dependent variable, SKIMS brand image. However, since the sample is less than 90, and for 5 independent variables the minimum is 90 cases (Pallant, 2020, p. 155), it is valuable to report the *Adjusted R²* = .24, which can give a better estimation. With a difference of 5%, both values imply that there are other variables influencing SKIMS brand image, but these 5 can make more accurate predictions related to a brand image rather than none. With the p-value below .05, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The popularity of the celebrities used in the displayed SKIMS advertising did not have a significant impact on SKIMS brand image ($\beta = -.07$, $p = .562$). On the other hand, the attractiveness

of the celebrities used in the shown SKIMS advertising images had a positive significant influence on SKIMS brand image ($\beta = .26$, $p = .034$). Meanwhile, trustworthiness of the celebrities featured in the selected SKIMS advertisings did not have a significant influence on SKIMS brand image ($\beta = .18$, $p = .136$. The same, can be applied for the expertise of the celebrities used in the displayed SKIMS advertising, which had no significant influence on SKIMS brand image ($\beta = .19$, $p = .101$). As well, the relevance of the celebrities featured in the shown SKIMS advertising did not have a significant influence on SKIMS brand image ($\beta = .13$, $p = .372$). Overall, popularity contributed just with a 0,36% to the total R square, while attractiveness 4.28%, trustworthiness 2.07%, expertise 2.53%, and relevance 0.74%. Based on the analysis of these data coming from the survey's respondents, attractiveness contributes the most to SKIMS' brand image, therefore just H3 is accepted.

H2: Perceived popularity of celebrities featured in SKIMS advertising is positively related to consumers' perception of SKIMS brand image.

H3: Finding attractive the celebrities featured in SKIMS campaigns is positively associated with SKIMS' brand image.

H4: Perceived trustworthiness of celebrities featured in SKIMS advertising is positively related to consumers' perception of SKIMS brand image

H5: Perceived talent of celebrities featured in SKIMS advertising is positively related to consumers' perception of SKIMS brand image

H6: Admiration for celebrities featured in SKIMS advertising is positively associated with SKIMS' brand image.

A second multiple linear regression analysis was conducted with SKIMS brand image as the dependent variable and consumers' feelings toward the inclusive advertisings- feeling impressed, represented or connected. Just like in the previous test, before performing the regression analysis, multicollinearity among the independent variables was assessed. In this case, as well, the results indicated that there was no multicollinearity, since all correlations between predictor variables were below the value of .7 (Pallant, 2020, p.163). The presence of possible multivariate outliers was tested by examining the Mahalanobis distance. For three independent variables, according to Pallant (2020) $\chi^2(3) = 16.27$, based on Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) guideline (as cited in Pallant, 2020, p. 165). In this case no exceeding value was noticed, since the maximum value was just slightly bigger than the critical one but not that impactful. After these steps, the final model was found to be significant, $F(3, 82) = 17.74$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .39$. Hence, the 3 variables account for 39% of the extension to which they influence dispersion or variation in the dependent variable, SKIMS brand image. With the p-value below .05, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Feeling impressed by how SKIMS represents diverse body types and backgrounds had a significant impact on SKIMS brand image ($\beta = .31$, $p = .005$). Similarly, the feeling of being represented in SKIMS advertising images had also a positive significant influence on SKIMS brand image ($\beta = .28$, $p = .010$). Meanwhile, feeling connected to SKIMS' inclusive advertising did not have a significant influence on SKIMS brand image ($\beta = .19$, $p = .083$). Overall, feeling impressed contributed with a 6,3% to the total R square, while feeling represented 5,2%, and feeling connected 2,3%. Based on the analysis both feeling impressed and represented contribute to SKIMS brand image, while feeling connected just slightly. Therefore, just hypothesis 7 and hypothesis 8 are accepted.

H7: Feeling impressed by SKIMS' inclusive advertising is positively associated with brand image.

H8: Feeling represented in SKIMS' inclusive advertising is positively associated with brand image.

H9: Feeling connected to SKIMS' inclusive advertising is positively associated with brand image.

These findings align with descriptive results from the item 'SKIMS' inclusive ads make me think more favorably about the brand', measured on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree, (M = 3.51, SD = .92). This implies and confirms that inclusive advertising positively influences brand image.

4.2.2 Kardashian Bias

Fame comes with both admiration and hate. For this reason, in the formulated survey, a question assessing the potential bias related to Kim Kardashian's association with SKIMS was included. Descriptive statistics showed a mean score of 2.41 (SD = 0.85), and a median of 3.00. This suggested a slight overall tendency toward a more favorable perception of KSIMS in the absence of Kim Kardashian association, although the median, the middle value in the distribution of answers, ndicates that the most typical response was that people's opinion of SKIMS would not change if it was not linked to Kim Kardashian. Frequency analysis revealed that 18.8% of respondents said their perception would "improve a lot", 25.9% said it would "improve somewhat", 50.6% reported it would "stay the same", only 4.7% said it would "worsen somewhat", and 0% selected "worsen a lot".

4.3 Results Summary

From the semiotic analysis, the results showed that SKIMS presents its brand identity through a consistent use of visual elements and choices such as minimalism, body-centric framing, inclusive representation, and product-centered composition. These choices emphasize the solution-oriented and product-focused characteristic of the brand, also highlighted in the already cited tagline

"We are setting new standards by providing solutions for every body. From technically constructed shapewear that enhances your curves to underwear that stretches to twice its size, our goal is to consistently innovate on the past and advance our industry for the future" (SKIMS, n.d.). In fact, the campaigns aim to draw attention to the fit and adaptability of the shapewear across diverse bodies, while inclusivity is communicated through the use of uniform styling for the diverse body types and ethnicities, which suggests cohesion and unity. Celebrity endorsement is employed by the deconstruction of glamor, portraying celebrities as 'just another body', following the same setting choices, while still leveraging on their public image. In contrast, in the case of special collections, more symbolic and themed settings take place.

These findings align with the quantitative data collected from survey respondents. In fact, participants moderately agree that SKIMS portrays diverse body types and backgrounds ($M = 3.74$), suggesting that inclusive visual representation seen in the campaigns translates into the audience perception, influencing positively the brand image ($M = 3.51$). Moreover, the brand's approach to celebrity endorsement is reflected in the data as attractiveness being the significant influence on brand image ($\beta = .26$, $p = .034$). Hence, both inclusivity and celebrity endorsement, especially the attractiveness of these, positively influence brand image, the perception consumers have of the brand. However, despite the brand image perception being moderately positive ($M = 4.76$ on a 7-point scale), the average purchase intention was slightly negative ($M = 2.68$). Although, brand image predicts purchase intention ($R^2 = .20$, $\beta = .44$, $p < .001$). This could be a result of the connection between the brand and Kim Kardashian, since the average score ($M = 2.41$) suggests that consumers' opinion would slightly improve if the brand was not related to her.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to delve into advertising strategies by investigating two strategic tools employed by brands: celebrity endorsement and inclusivity. Specifically, this study focused on the case of SKIMS, an American shapewear brand co-owned by a celebrity herself, Kim Kardashian. The question guiding this research was how SKIMS employs celebrity endorsement and inclusive advertising to influence consumer perception. The findings showed that SKIMS, generally, employs a distinctive visual language when it comes to its advertising regarding both celebrity endorsement and inclusivity. This visual language is characterized by minimalism, body-centric framing, uniform styling to emphasize inclusivity and product functionality. As for celebrities, these choices underline the aim of de-glamorizing celebrities, to better allow the focus on the product rather than the persona. Although, an interesting insight emerged. This pattern is broken on some occasions, such as special collections, by adopting a symbolic and themed setting to better display these special campaigns. In these cases, celebrities appear more ornate and serve as the center of the whole mise-en-scène. In essence, the use of these two strategies, celebrity endorsement and inclusivity, results in consumers perceiving the brand positively and considering it inclusive, according to the quantitative analysis. Nevertheless, despite the relatively positive perception of the brand, purchase intention remained low, suggesting that brand image alone may not be sufficient to drive consumer purchasing.

Prior body of literature played an important role in shaping and guiding this research to these results. The concept of brand identity proved very useful in underlining and understanding the way in which brands represent themselves and the characteristics usually used, highlighting how both internal and external elements influence strategic decisions. The use of Kapferer's Prism model helped outlining SKIMS' identity features, capturing both its internal and external expressions. This framework made it possible to summarize the brand's identity so that later it would have been easier to observe how it is portrayed in advertising, with the specific focus on celebrity endorsement and inclusivity as strategic tools. In parallel, the concept of brand image helped to explain how sometimes a brand's self-presentation may not align with how it is perceived by consumers, and how this process of perception is created. This led to the development of the first hypothesis and guided the construction of the survey. Next, the notions of celebrity endorsement and inclusivity were defined and explained to understand how their mechanisms work, why and what are the key elements driving their success. This theoretical background allowed the formulation of new hypotheses to be assessed, testing whether the way these strategies are employed, influence consumer perception of SKIMS. Finally, the exploration of audience engagement helped in showcasing the role of emotions, and how they can impact consumer responses to advertising. This was particularly relevant in the context of fashion advertising, where engagement works through fantasizing, and consumers can see or imagine themselves in those images. This component was very important to some of the hypotheses related to inclusivity, which involved emotional responses, such as feeling impressed,

connected, or represented. Therefore, all together, these concepts provided a solid foundation for this research by offering guidance and insights into the explored topic, and by helping to determine where to focus, how to structure the analysis, and how to interpret the findings.

The mixed method employed in this study, based on semiotic analysis and a quantitative survey, was essential in answering the main question on how SKIMS employs celebrity endorsement and inclusive advertising to influence consumer perception. In the specific, semiotic analysis allowed, first, for a detailed examination on how the brand conveys its identity to consumers through visual media, and how it uses the two marketing tools of celebrity endorsement and inclusivity. Semiotic was the right choice, since its study deals with images and their meaning, what they are saying behind the simple surface. Aligning this with a survey, which allows to record people's opinions, offered insights into consumer perceptions, assessing whether these visual strategies observed through semiotic analysis actually affect consumers' perceptions.

Based on this theoretical framework and the findings of this research, several outcomes emerge. One is that SKIMS' case perfectly aligns with Jain (2017) study on brand identity, which expressed how it should reflect a brand's mission and values, while maintaining consistency, and flexibility (p. 2). In fact, through its consistent use of minimalism, body-centric framing, uniform styling and inclusivity across its advertising campaigns over two years, it shows consistency, while also aligning with the brand's aim of focusing on every-body and on product functionality. At the same time, its way of introducing thematic and symbolic settings on specific occasions highlights its capacity of adaptability over time. This proves how the brand identity can be dynamic without losing coherence. In addition, its mission of innovation, diversity and body acceptance, as expressed by its tagline "solutions for every body" (Klein, 2022) perfectly confirms Ianenko et al. (2020) work, which argues that building brand identity involves defining what distinguishes the brand through strategic marketing and shaping how customers perceive it (pp. 2-3). SKIMS effectively communicates these differentiating features in its advertising, using consistent visual and symbolic strategies to reinforce its values and influence consumer perception accordingly. This is, in fact, confirmed by the survey responses, which showed how inclusive the brand is considered. However, an interesting finding that actually diverges from theoretical background emerged in the quantitative analysis, particularly when testing the hypotheses related to celebrity endorsement, through survey responses as data. Here a discrepancy occurred. Gupta et al. (2017) identified five features that allow effectiveness in the use of celebrity endorsement: attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, popularity, and relevance. However, when assessing these hypotheses related to these dimensions and how they influence SKIMS brand image, the results showed a variance. Contrary to expectations, just attractiveness positively influenced the perception of the brand by consumers. This may suggest that the other dimensions do not play an important role in the specific case of SKIMS, possibly due to its position as a lingerie brand, where physical appeal plays a more important role compared to the rest. For the

hypothesis regarding inclusivity, just two out of the three were accepted. The findings revealed that by looking at SKIMS campaign, consumers felt impressed by SKIMS' inclusive advertising, and felt represented in its campaigns, this positively influenced their perception of the brand. Although these images did not bring a feeling of connection, the results still confirm previous research. Aagerup (2011) showed that body representation in advertising is effective just when it aligns with a brand's core values. In SKIMS' case, inclusivity is a foundational part of its identity, and consumers effectively perceived it, confirming the theory. These findings also align with Srivastava et al. (2024), who found that inclusive marketing improves brand attitude and brand when individuals see their identities reflected and respected (p.12). As already mentioned, consumers did feel represented, and according to the analysis, this positively contributed to a more positive brand image.

5.1 Implications

These findings can be applied in real-world contexts, particularly within the field of strategic brand communication. By exploring the specific case of SKIMS, a lingerie brand that got valued 4$ billion (Frau, 2023) in just 4 years from its launch, what emerged is how the brand's advertising strategy relied on strong visual consistency. Previous research has confirmed how this can reinforce recognizability, and even if in this particular context this element has not been tested the brand's success suggests that this approach is essential to craft a concise brand identity. In addition, the use of occasional symbolic or themed campaigns can be used strategically in particular seasons to win over consumers' attention. These moments of visual deviation serve as a way to differentiate the campaigns without compromising the coherence of the brand identity, showing actually flexibility. Another key strategy is the de-glamorization of celebrities. This approach helps in focusing the attention on the product, while still benefiting from the influence and recognizability of the endorser. In the context of inclusivity, the findings emphasize that when this value is part of the brand's core identity, not just occasionally or superficially, it results in positive consumer perception and feelings of representation. This should encourage brands to stop the tokenistic use of representation, and effectively make inclusivity a consistent element of both the visual identity and the brand's values. By regularly featuring diverse bodies, races, and identities in their campaigns, brands can build deeper trust with consumers. At the same time, this can have beneficial implications, since media shape cultural values and social norms (Arias, 2019, p. 577), and by normalizing inclusivity the feelings of exclusion or body dissatisfaction can decrease.

However, some ethical considerations emerged. Despite SKIMS' inclusive messaging, the brand's massive use of universe styling risks promoting a standardized aesthetic over time. For example, most female models featured straight hair, while the male models included were predominantly young and fit. This allows the reinforcement of some narrow beauty ideals, which remain exclusionary. For this reason, brands that aim at inclusivity must pay attention not just to who is represented, but also how they are styled and portrayed.

Finally, the findings regarding celebrity endorsement challenged the assumptions established by previous studies. While literature argued that there are multiple traits influencing the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement, such as trustworthiness, expertise etc. (Gupta et al., 2017), the data revealed that in the context of lingerie advertising, only physical attractiveness significantly influenced brand perception. This suggests that these characteristics may be related to the brand's product categories. Hence, in a field where visual appeal is central, other celebrity traits rather than attractiveness may play a limited role. This offers a valuable insight for marketers when selecting celebrities to feature in their ad campaigns.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

This research comes with some limitations, due to diverse factors such as methodological choices and data. First, the use of semiotic analysis, while offering in-depth insight into visual strategies and brand identity, remains completely interpretative and subjective. The analysis is influenced by the researcher's cultural lens, which might influence the decoding stage. Moreover, the majority of the analyzed images were sourced from Instagram, creating an overall unbalanced representation between the online platform and the offline ones. Hence, this selection may not fully represent campaigns circulated through other channels, such as physical billboards, or magazines pages, or other alternative digital platforms, such as TikTok, which may feature different visual strategies and styles. Another limitation regarding this context is the time, since these images are part of the last two years' campaigns. While this ensures contemporaneity, it does not allow for a complete perspective of the brand and how it evolved over time. Maybe, older campaigns have employed different visual elements.

For the quantitative aspect, one of the limitations regards the snowball sampling method used for the survey. In fact, this was distributed via platforms, such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and SurveySwap. This sampling method reduced the demographic of the respondents, as it is more inclined to circulate within similar social and demographic circles. In fact, most respondents were aged between 21 and 39, which influenced the generalizability of the findings, by underrepresenting older adults. This age bend probably influenced the results in favor of younger consumers' perceptions and preferences, leaving out how older age groups engage with SKIMS' branding strategies and how they perceive them. In addition, while 102 responses were collected, only 86 were actually valid for the analysis. This relatively small sample size limits the diversity of opinions, reducing the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, despite the respondents had the possibility to choose and select their nationality, cultural context was not explicitly considered in the analysis. As a result, factors such as how different cultures perceive celebrity endorsement, inclusive representation and how they perceive the overall image of the brand were not investigated.

However, these limitations can open the way for future research opportunities. Future studies could address these gaps by exploring how different demographic or cultural groups interpret

SKIMS' advertising, or celebrity endorsement and inclusivity. Some suggestions can be the use of focus groups or interviews, a richer data set including images and videos from diverse platforms, both online and offline. On the quantitative side, future surveys could aim for a more representative sample, and a focus on cultural background. This could help assess how cultural values influence consumers' perceptions, potentially guiding the development of localized and culturally tailored marketing campaigns.

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7. Appendix

7.1 SKIMS' Ad

7.1.1 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.2 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.3 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.4 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post
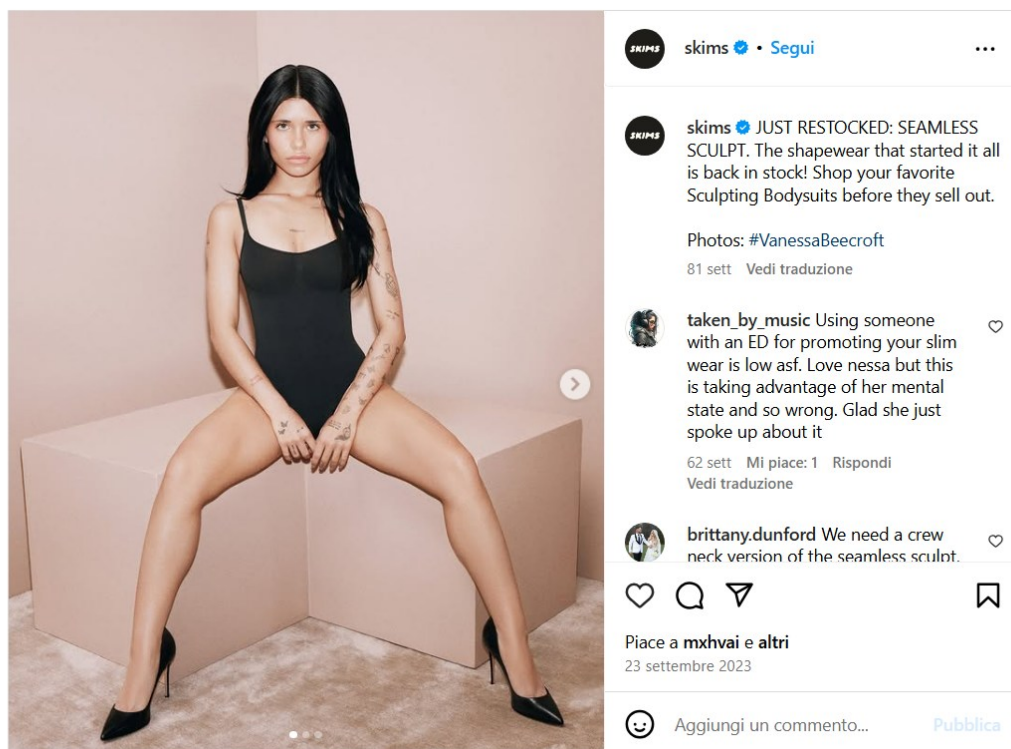
7.1.5 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.6 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post
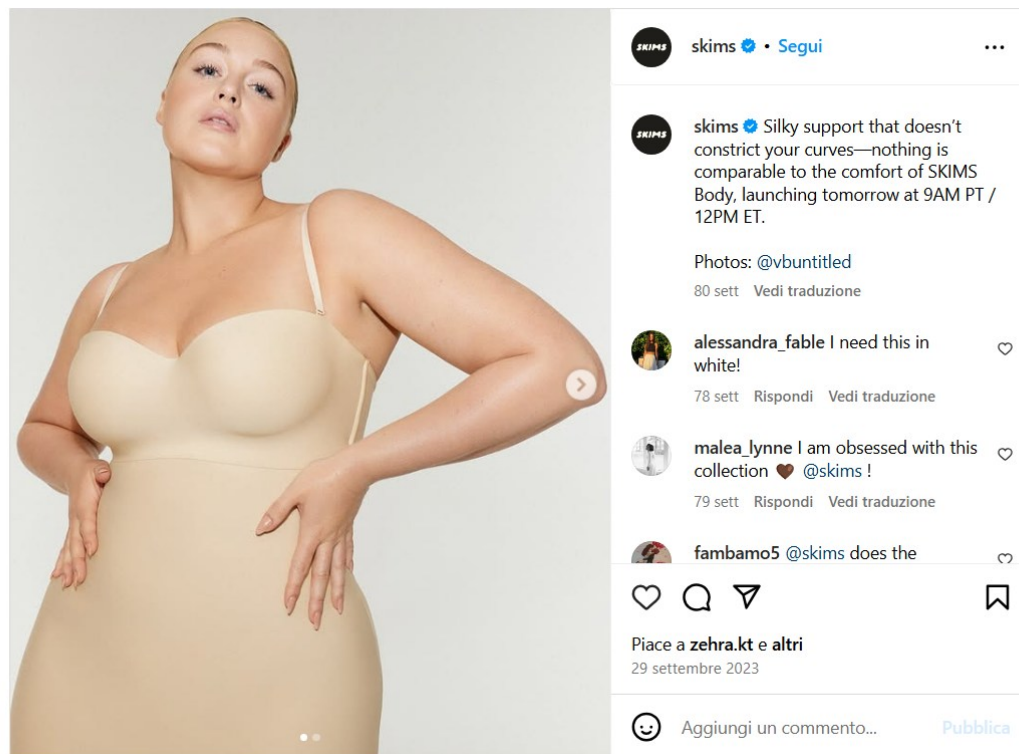
7.1.7 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.8 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post
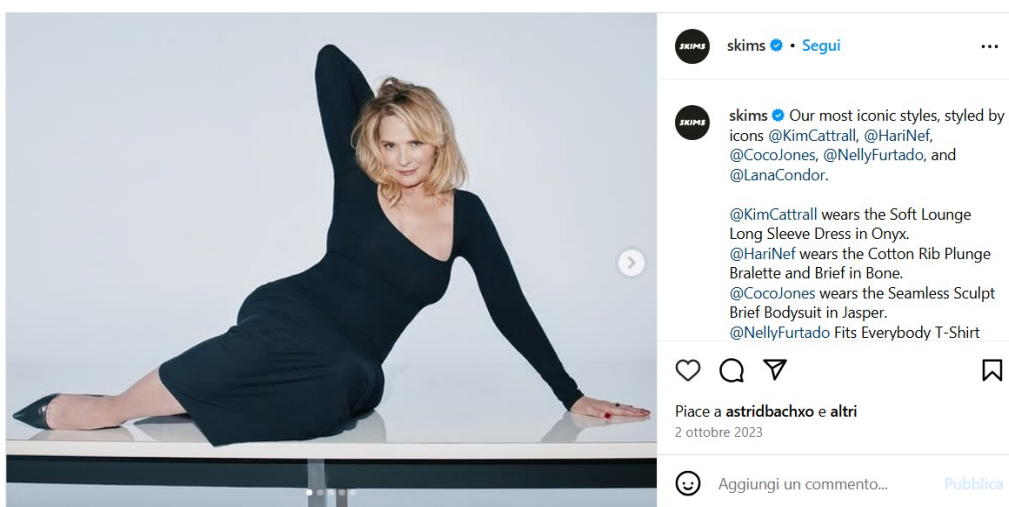
7.1.9 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

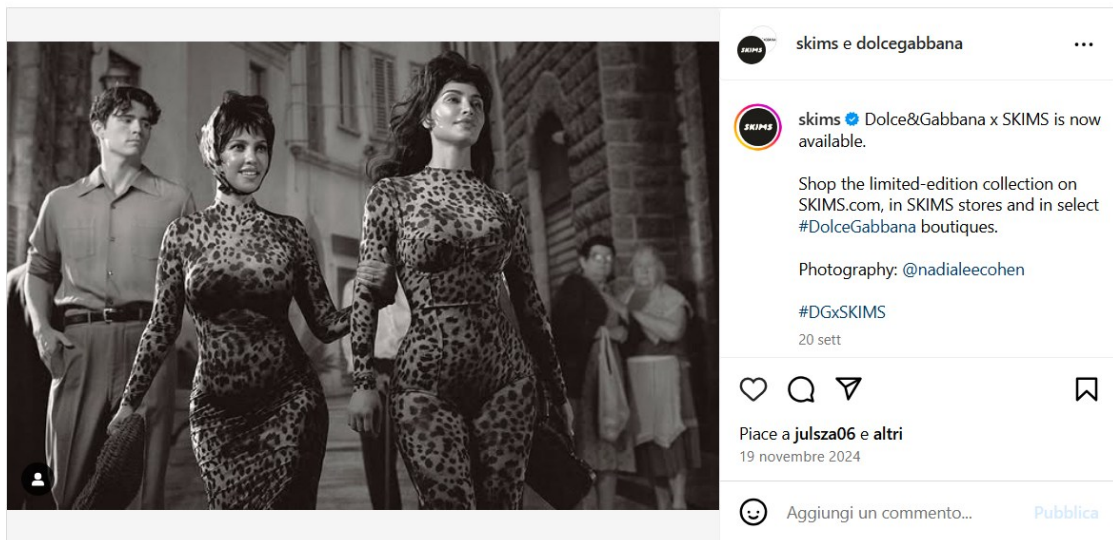### 7.1.10 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post
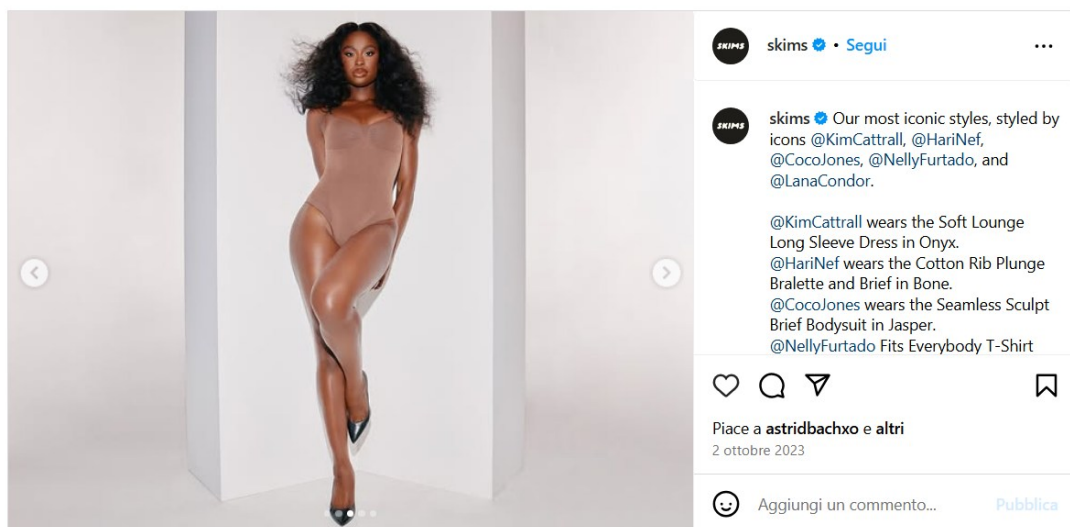
7.1.11 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post
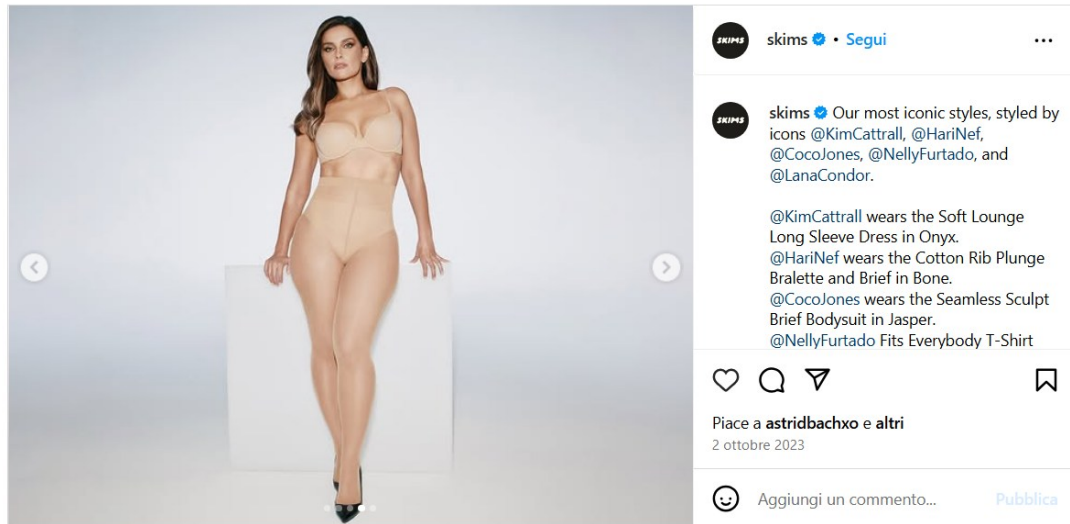
7.1.12 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post
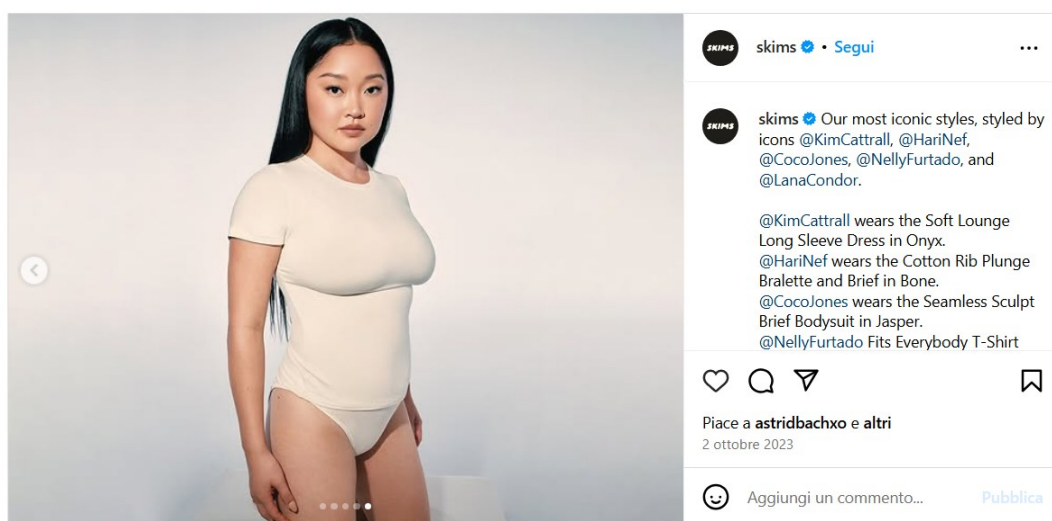
7.1.13 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.14 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post
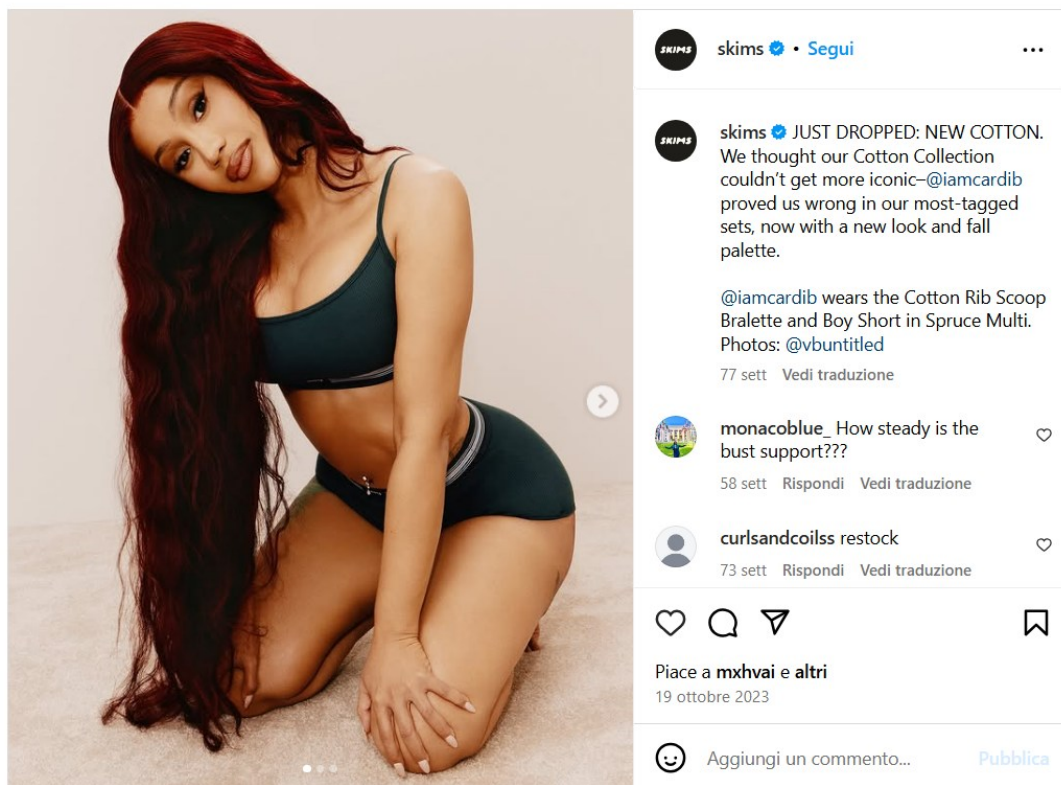
7.1.15 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.16 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post
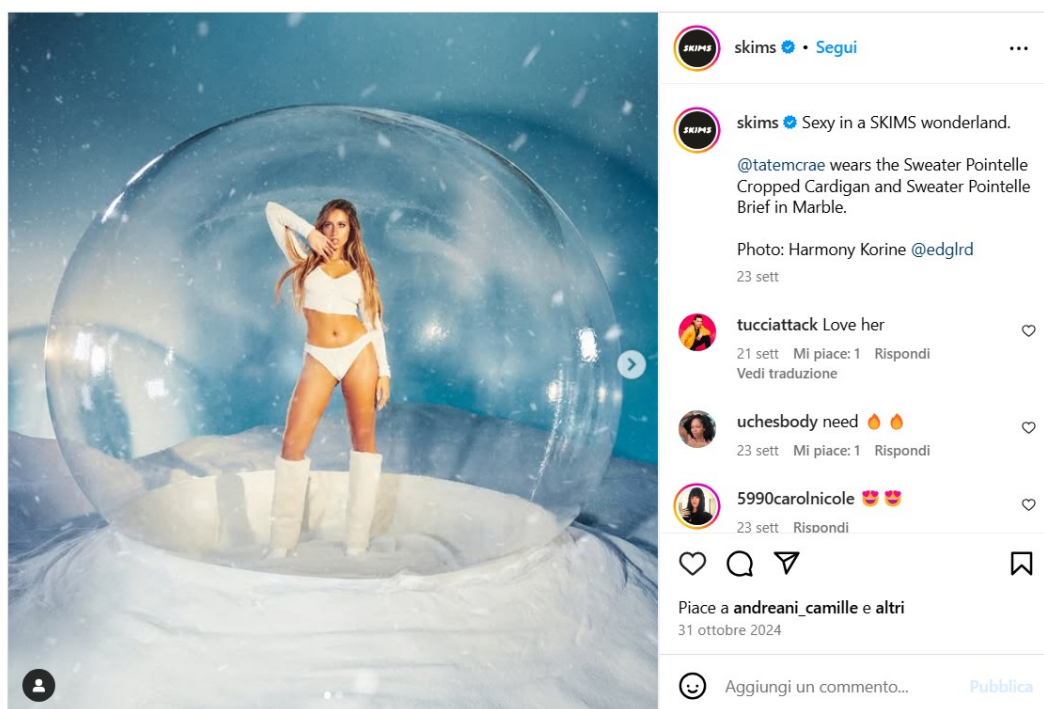
7.1.17 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.18 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.19 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post
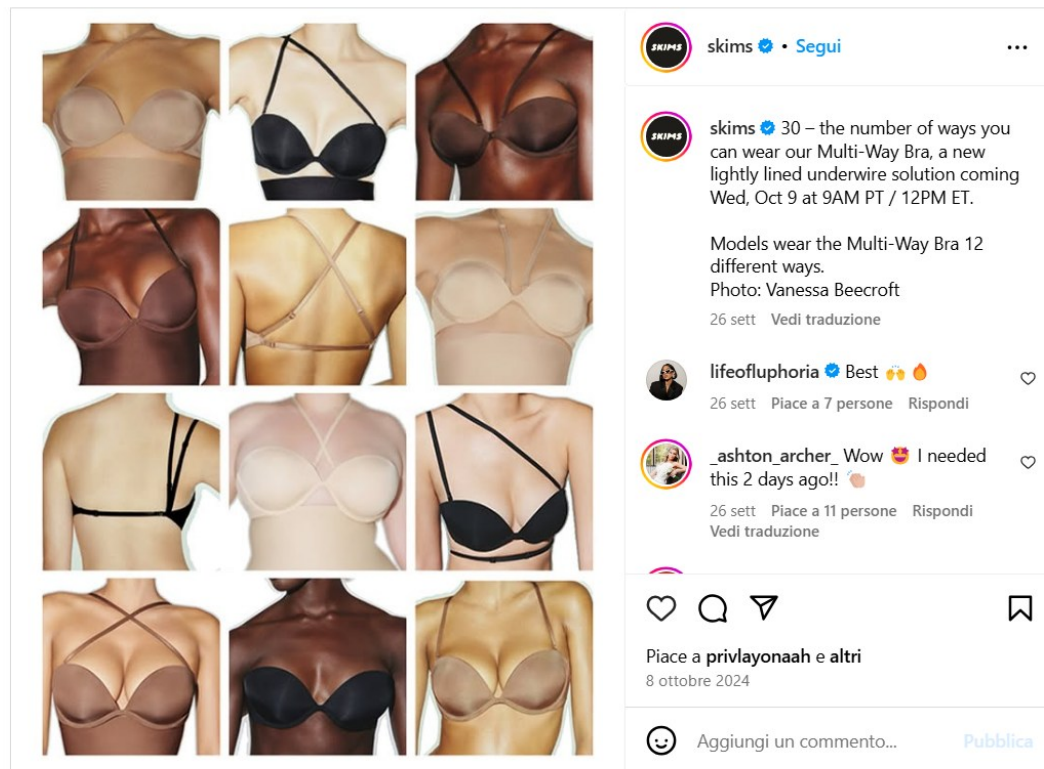

7.1.20 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.21 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.22 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.23 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.24 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.25 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.26 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.27 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.28 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

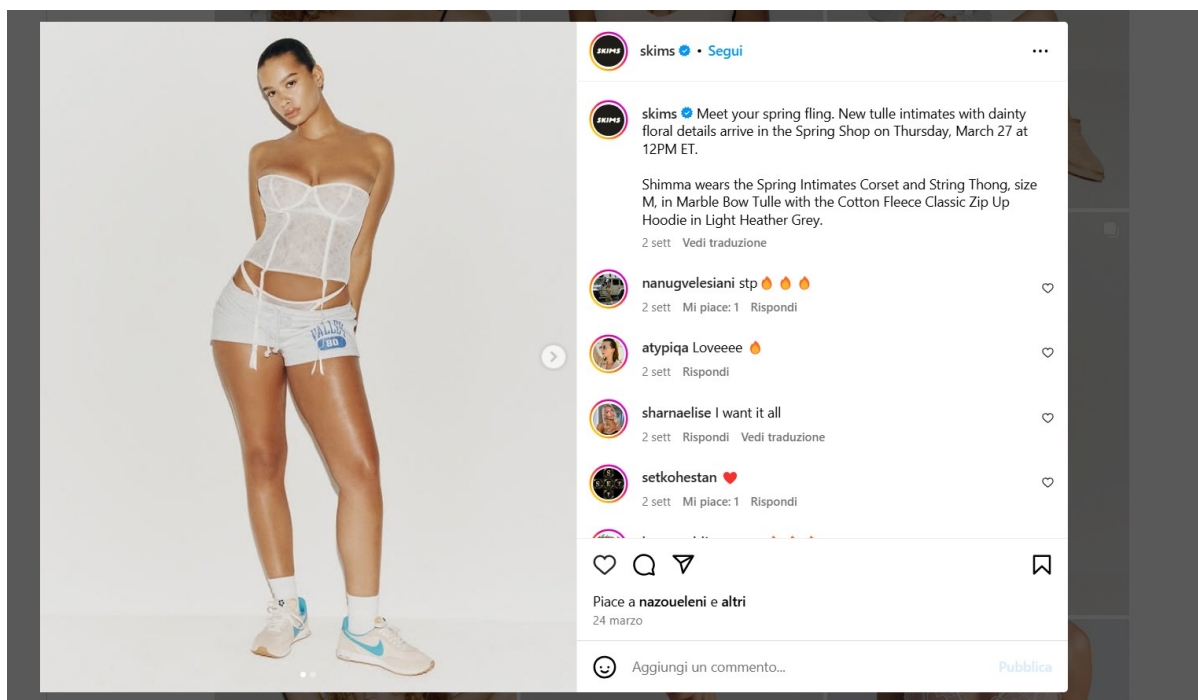**7.1.29 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post**

7.1.30 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.31 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.32 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.33 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.34 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.35 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

### 7.1.36 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.37 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.38 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.39 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.40 SKIMS Billboard

7.1.41 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.42 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.43 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.44 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.45 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.46 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.47 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.48 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.49 SKIMS Ad Instagram Post

7.1.50 SKIMS Official Website 13/04/2025
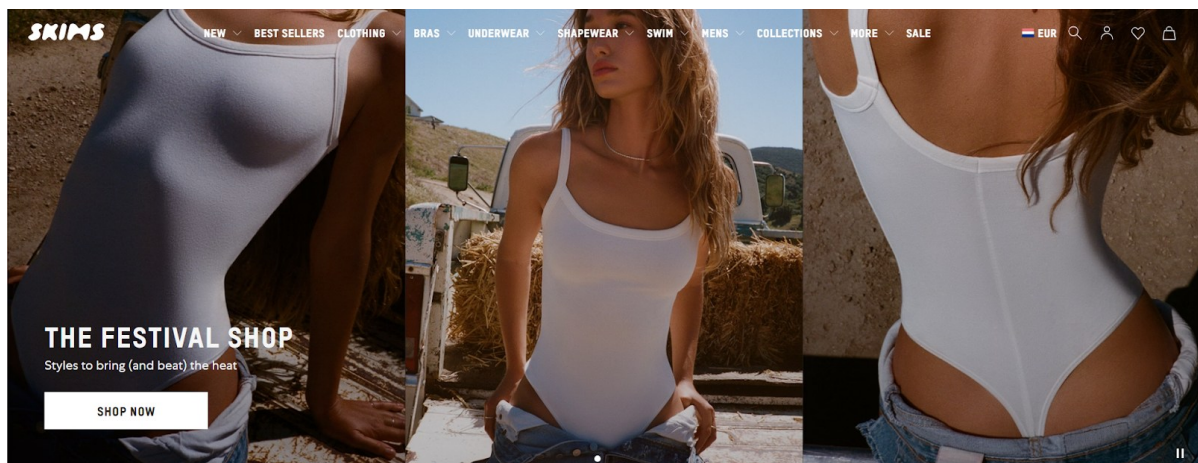
7.2 Survey

Welcome!

Dear respondent,
Thank you for your valuable time and essential interest in this research. I am inviting you to fill in a questionnaire for my Master Thesis project in Media & Creative Industries. The purpose of this study is to explore how marketing strategies used by fashion and lingerie brands can influence consumer perception and engagement.

The questionnaire will take approximately 5 minutes to fill in. In this questionnaire, I will show you different types of advertising images. I would like to ask you to evaluate each image and answer some statements about them.
Please answer each question carefully and honestly; I am are sincerely interested in your personal and essential opinions. There are no right or wrong answers!

All research data remain completely confidential and are collected in anonymous form. I will not be able to identify you. Your responses will be used solely for acdemic purposes. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with participating in this research.Your participation is voluntary, and you can discontinue at any time. So, If you now decide not to participate in this research, this will not affect you. If you decide to cease your cooperation while filling in the questionnaire, this will in no way affect you either. You can cease your cooperation without giving reasons.

Please, complete this survey only if you are at least 18 years old. If you have questions about this research, in advance or afterwards, you can contact Giusy via email:
702087gd@student.eur.nl

P.S. This survey contains Karma to get free survey responses at SurveySwap.io

If you understand the information above and freely consent to participate in this study, click on the "I agree" button below to start the questionnaire.

I agree.   I do not agree.

Core Section: Celebrity Endorsement

Instructions
Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about celebrities in advertising.
Where the response scale is:
1 – Strongly Disagree. 2 – Disagree. 3 – Neutral. 4 – Agree. 5 – Strongly Agree.

I am more likely to trust a brand if a popular celebrity appear in its advertising.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

I pay more attention to advertisings that feature celebrities I find attractive.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

I find advertisings more convincing when the celebrity appearing in them seems honest.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

Advertisings are more believable if the celebrity appearing in them have experience or knowledge in that area.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

It is important that there is a clear connection between the celebrity and the product they advertise.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

Core section- inclusive advertising

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about inclusivity in advertising. Where inclusivity stands for representing all forms of diversity. From race and culture, to gender and appearance, to age and ability, and so on.
The response scale is: 1 – Strongly Disagree. 2 – Disagree. 3 – Neutral. 4 – Agree. 5 – Strongly Agree.

I feel more positively about brands that feature diverse models in their campaigns.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

When I see people who look like me in ads, I feel more connected to the brand.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

Inclusivity in ads makes a brand more relatable, regardless of whether I belong to the group being represented.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

SKIMS-celebrity endorsement adv

Please, look at these pictures from SKIMS advertising and then indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about the brand SKIMS. Where the response scale is: 1 – Strongly Disagree. 2 – Disagree. 3 – Neutral. 4 – Agree. 5 – Strongly Agree.

The celebrities featured in SKIMS advertising are popular.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

I find the celebrities used in SKIMS campaigns attractive.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Stronlgy Agree

I believe the celebrities chosed by SKIMS are trustworthy.

○ 1. Stringly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

The celebrities used in SKIMS are known for their talent.

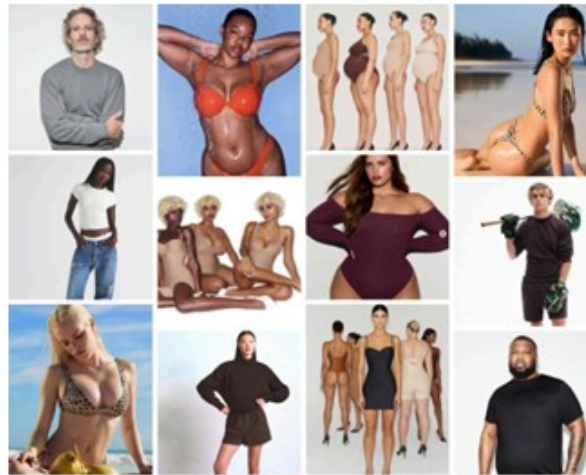○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

I admire the celebrities shown in SKIMS advertising.

○ 1. Strongly Disagre
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

SKIMS- inclusivity adv

Please, look at these pictures from SKIMS advertisings and then indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about the brand SKIMS. Where the response scale is: 1 – Strongly Disagree. 2 – Disagree. 3 – Neutral. 4 – Agree. 5 – Strongly Agree.

I feel impressed by how SKIMS represents diverse body types and backgrounds in their campaigns.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Stronlgy Agree

I feel represented when I see SKIMS advertisements.

○ 1. Strongly Disagree
○ 2. Disagree
○ 3. Neutral
○ 4. Agree
○ 5. Strongly Agree

SKIMS's inclusive advertising makes me feel more connected to the brand.

- ○ 1. Strongly Disagree
- ○ 2. Disagree
- ○ 3. Neutral
- ○ 4. Agree
- ○ 5. Strongly Agree

SKIMS's inclusive ads make me think more favorably about the brand.

- ○ 1. Strongly Disagre
- ○ 2. Disagree
- ○ 3. Neutral
- ○ 4. Agree
- ○ 5. Strongly Agree

General

Now I would like to ask you about your overall impression of the brand SKIMS based on what you've seen or know. Three different scales will be used for the following questions, so please pay attention to them and their order!

How do you perceive SKIMS as a brand based on these images?

1- Unappealing	2	3	4	5	6	7- Appealing
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

How likely are you to buy from SKIMS in the future?

- ○ 1. Very Unlikely
- ○ 2. Unlikely
- ○ 3. Neutral
- ○ 4. Likely
- ○ 5. Very Likely

How would your perception of SKIMS change if it were NOT associated with Kim Kardashian?

○ Improve a lot
○ Improve somewhat
○ Stay the same
○ Worsen somewhat
○ Worsen a lot

Select the gender you identify with

○ Female
○ Male
○ [   ] Other (please specify):
○ Prefer not to say

Select the age range you fit in

○ 18-20
○ 21-39
○ 40-59
○ 60+

Select your nationality

[▾]

7.3 Denotation- Connotation Table, with 1 example

Adv. Image N	Denotation	Connotation
Image 1	Three girls with different heights and skin color and hair color. They all are wearing black hoodies and long black joggers and shorts. The girl on the right has dark brown wavy hair, sunglasses, and olive to medium skin-tone. She is wearing black sunglasses; she has full lips. She is wearing a black hoodie and long joggers. she is holding an ice-cream and a phone case with a cord on her arm. She has short nails. The girl on the left has dark hair hold in a bun. Her skin-tone is the same as the other girl. She is wearing pink glass sunglasses, she has full lips, and she is wearing hoop eariings in gold. she has a black hoodie and black shorts, and she has long nails and she is holding an ice cream as well. In the back there is a tall blonde girl, with her hair in a bun, short nails, while touching her lips in an act of cleaning her mouth. She is wearing a zip black hoodie. She is tanned but paler than the other two, and she is wearing slippers and sunglasses as well,	Brand Identity: • Inclusivity: The ad uses visible diversity in skin tone and hair texture, suggesting SKIMS' identity as an inclusive brand. It aligns with their mission to offer styles for a wide spectrum of women. • Everyday Coolness: The casual vibe (ice cream, phone cord, slippers) and setting (7/11 or similar) imply a "fashion meets real life" message- comfort and fashion that blends with everyday life. • Streetwear meets softness: The black oversized loungewear and sunglasses give a "cool-girl" minimalism vibe, positioning the brand as effortlessly stylish. Advertising Strategy • Inclusive casting: the diversity in

	brown one. The setting is a shop, probably a 7/11 and it is possible to see some of the items but not that clearly to be identified. The picture is taken as they are coming out of the shop.	appearance (skin tone, styling, facial features) functions as a subtle but intentional inclusive strategy, which adds to SKIMS' image as an inclusive brand. • Celebrity aesthetics without actual celebrity: This could be read as "everygirl is an icon"- by using the aesthetic cues of fame (paparazzi-like photo, designer sunglasses).

7.**4 Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis**

Student Information

Name: Giusy De Masi

Student ID: 702087

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5050

Supervisor Name: Luuc Brans

Date: 25/06/2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☐ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.
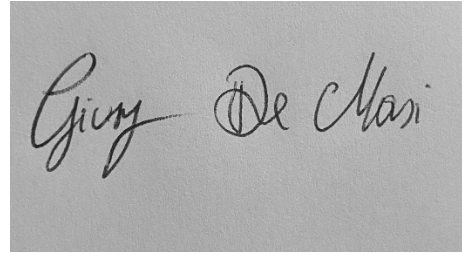
☒ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature:

Extent of AI Usage

☐ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to

aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. <u>I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.</u>

Date of Signature: 25/06/2025

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☐ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]