

Navigating Brand Identity on Instagram

A Thematic Analysis of SKIMS

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ABSTRACT

In today's crowded digital marketplace, brand identity is increasingly built and shared via social media, with Instagram leading the way in visual storytelling. This thesis investigates how SKIMS, the shapewear and lifestyle brand co-founded by Kim Kardashian, strategically constructs and reinforces its brand identity through Instagram campaigns. Drawing on Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008) as the primary theoretical framework, the study critically analyzes 24 Instagram campaigns posted between 2019 and 2024. Each campaign was selected to represent key developments in SKIMS' evolution, including the foundational Debut Campaign (2019), collaborative efforts like SKIMS for Team USA (2021), new product lines such as SKIMS Swim (2022) and the SKIMS Men's Launch (2023), and purpose-driven initiatives like the SKIMS x Olivia Munn Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign (2024).

The analysis explores how the six facets of the Brand Identity Prism (Physique, Personality, Culture, Relationship, Reflection, and Self-Image) are visually and thematically constructed across SKIMS' curated Instagram content. In addition, the thesis incorporates concepts from celebrity branding, influencer marketing, and authenticity literature to examine how Kim Kardashian's persona, as both founder and brand icon, shapes and reinforces the SKIMS brand narrative. Particular attention is paid to visual codes (e.g., lighting, colour palette, diversity of models) and thematic patterns (e.g., empowerment, inclusivity, aspirational aesthetics, and body positivity).

A reflexive thematic analysis of the Instagram content shows the recurring strategies SKIMS employs to position itself as both culturally relevant and emotionally resonant. These include the use of visual vignettes to convey lifestyle and mood, the integration of celebrity and influencer figures to boost aspirational appeal, and a consistent emphasis on inclusivity and body confidence. The thesis argues that SKIMS transcends traditional product marketing by crafting a branded world in which consumers are invited to see themselves reflected.

This study advances social media branding scholarship through its comprehensive visual and narrative analysis of a highly successful celebrity-founded brand. It highlights how Instagram operates not merely as a promotional tool but as an essential storytelling platform where identity is continuously performed and negotiated. Furthermore, it demonstrates the applicability of Kapferer's model to contemporary social media marketing and underscores the role of authenticity in building emotional connections with audiences. By examining how SKIMS blends celebrity influence, community, and distinct aesthetics, this research offers insights into the evolving nature of brand communication in the digital age.

KEYWORDS: Celebrity Branding, Social Media Marketing, Visual Storytelling, Brand Identity, SKIMS Campaign Analysis

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1. Introduction

Kim Kardashian did not merely break the mould of celebrity branding; she shattered it, transforming her personal image into a billion-dollar empire that redefined what a celebrity brand could achieve (Englund, 2023, p.377). Central to this empire is SKIMS, a brand co-founded by Kardashian alongside Emma and Jens Grede. It primarily offers lingerie, loungewear, and shapewear that mixes sexiness with inclusivity (Zhang, 2024, p.2). While SKIMS initially leveraged Kardashian's vast star power to launch its products, it has since grown into a standalone brand with its own identity and market position. This transition from a celebrity-backed label to an influential fashion brand reflects a strategic evolution, rooted heavily in innovative social media marketing and savvy brand management (Zhang, 2024, p.7). Founded in 2019, SKIMS emerged from Kardashian's personal aesthetic, characterized by body hugging, sculpted silhouette. The brand also directly addressed her candid struggles to find shapewear that suited her unique body type. By addressing this gap in the market, Kardashian developed a brand that resonated with a broad spectrum of consumers, particularly younger women who admire her style and influence (Yuan, 2024, p.2). Her immense social media presence has been SKIMS' most powerful endorsement. With millions of followers across Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), Kardashian frequently shares SKIMS content, building a direct connection with consumers and amplifying the brand's visibility.

Instagram's role in SKIMS' marketing strategy goes beyond typical celebrity endorsement (Caan & Lee, 2023, p.15) It functions as a central channel through which the brand constructs a multidimensional identity, blending visual storytelling, influencer partnerships, and authentic engagement to resonate with modern consumers. In a highly competitive and saturated fashion market, SKIMS uses Instagram to position itself distinctively balancing glamour, inclusivity, and cultural relevance. This paper explores this evolution through the research question: How does SKIMS build its brand identity on Instagram? To answer this, the study analyses key components such as the influence of Kardashian's personal brand, SKIMS' targeted influencer marketing strategies, and the brand's consistent efforts to convey authenticity through its social media content. The theoretical framework for this analysis is Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008), which offers a comprehensive model for understanding the facets of brand identity. By applying this prism, the paper aims to demonstrate how Instagram serves as an essential tool in refining SKIMS' brand positioning and sustaining its competitive edge in the digital age.

1.1 Research Design

This research employs a qualitative approach, as it facilitates a deeper understanding of SKIMS' brand identity through rich, detailed insights that quantitative methods might overlook. Given that media content often conveys values and cultural meanings, analysing SKIMS' Instagram posts provides an ideal way to explore how the brand constructs and communicates its identity visually and textually. To address the research question, a reflexive thematic analysis of SKIMS' official Instagram posts is conducted. This method enables the identification of recurring patterns and themes within the content, revealing the underlying messages and branding strategies. The data set comprises 168 posts published over a five-year period, 2019 to 2024. Sensitizing concepts guided the analysis process, particularly the six facets of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008): 'physique,' 'personality,' 'culture,' 'relationship,' 'reflection,' and 'self-image.' These concepts provided a framework to interpret how SKIMS shapes its brand identity on Instagram. Additionally, theories on celebrity branding, influencer marketing, and authenticity informed the analytic lens, enriching the interpretation of SKIMS' visual and textual content. Together, this qualitative thematic approach offers nuanced insights into SKIMS' evolving brand narrative and its strategic use of Instagram as a platform for building a distinctive and socially relevant brand identity.

1.2 Academic and Societal Relevance

The societal relevance of this study is pivotal, as SKIMS embodies broader shifts in contemporary consumer culture driven by social media and influencer phenomena. The rise of platforms like Instagram has brought concepts such as authenticity, relatability, and cultural adaptability to the forefront of marketing practices (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p.3; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p.2). Research shows that consumers, particularly younger demographics, increasingly favour brands that not only reflect their personal values but also engage in meaningful cultural discourse (Marwick, 2015, p.139). SKIMS encapsulates these trends by seamlessly integrating celebrity influence with a genuine commitment to social causes, such as body positivity, inclusivity, and health advocacy, thereby appealing to values increasingly important to consumers today. The brand's engagement with issues like breast cancer awareness and athletic empowerment marks a departure from traditional marketing that focuses solely on product features or star power. Instead, SKIMS positions itself as a brand that participates meaningfully in social conversations, fostering emotional connections that enhance loyalty and trust.

From an academic perspective, this research contributes to a critical yet underexplored intersection: the convergence of celebrity branding (Caan & Lee, 2023; Rojek, 2015), social media

marketing (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Abidin, 2014) and influencer marketing (Sashi, 2012, Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). While each of these areas has been studied extensively on its own, few studies have thoroughly examined how they interact to build and sustain contemporary celebrity-driven brands. Understanding this intersection is crucial as the celebrity brand landscape continues to evolve, with social media platforms like Instagram becoming increasingly central to brand communication and identity formation. Prior research has largely focused on SKIMS' overall marketing strategy or Kardashian's celebrity influence separately (Zhang, 2024; Yang et al., 2022). However, the specific role of Instagram as a platform for brand identity development remains insufficiently explored. This gap presents a valuable opportunity to enrich academic discussions on digital marketing by revealing how Instagram functions not just as a promotional tool but as a strategic site of identity construction.

Furthermore, this study's application of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism adds theoretical rigor to the analysis, enabling a structured exploration of SKIMS' multifaceted brand identity as communicated through Instagram. The prism's six facets (physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image) allow for a nuanced understanding of how SKIMS crafts a coherent and compelling brand narrative that resonates with diverse audiences. By linking theory with contemporary marketing practice, this paper seeks to provide insights that are relevant for both scholars and practitioners. Marketers can gain a deeper understanding of how to leverage social media platforms effectively, while academics can broaden their comprehension of how celebrity brands navigate and negotiate identity in the digital era.

1.3 Thesis Outline

After this chapter, relevant concepts and theories related to brand identity and social media marketing will be explained. The theoretical framework will first explore the general concepts of brand identity and celebrity branding, with a particular focus on Instagram as a visual marketing platform. Next, the framework will introduce the role of influencer marketing and the importance of authenticity in contemporary branding. A special emphasis will be placed on Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008), explaining its six key elements for understanding brand identity. Additionally, influencer marketing theories and the evolving dynamics of celebrity brands on social media will be discussed.

The subsequent chapter focuses on methodology. This chapter details the research design, including data sampling and collection from SKIMS' Instagram account. The thematic analysis method by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) is explained step-by-step, covering the coding process and the development of themes. The six facets of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008), serving as sensitizing, are described to clarify how interpretations were shaped within the analytical framework. Ethical considerations and steps taken to ensure research credibility are also addressed.

The fourth chapter discusses the result of the analysis of all 24 SKIMS campaigns. It highlights the most prominent facets of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008) and identifies recurring thematic patterns that emerge across the visual content.

The final chapter concludes the thesis by answering the research question and summarizing key findings. It reflects on the theoretical contributions of the study, acknowledges limitations, and offers suggestions for future research into the intersection of celebrity branding, social media marketing, and influencer culture.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section presents the key theories and concepts that underpin this research, focusing on how SKIMS builds its brand identity on Instagram. Emphasis is placed on Instagram as a platform for visual marketing strategies, highlighting its contribution to shaping contemporary brand communication. The framework also includes the foundational elements of celebrity branding, the growing importance of influencer marketing, and the significance of authenticity in connecting with consumers. Central to this study is Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008), which provides a comprehensive model for assessing brand identity. Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a structured lens through which SKIMS' Instagram content and branding strategies can be analysed and understood.

2.1 Instagram as a Platform for Visual Marketing Strategies

This chapter lays the foundation for understanding Instagram as a visual marketing platform by outlining its affordances, aesthetic logic, and the dynamics between users and brands. As mobile phones have become dominant "third screens" alongside television and computers, they play a critical role in connecting brands with target audiences (Abidin, 2014, p.121). Research shows that social media advertising can positively influence consumer attitudes, brand recall, and purchase intention (Wood & Burkhalter, 2013, p.132). Social media marketing, broadly defined as the strategic use of platforms to promote products and foster brand engagement, has gained traction for its capacity to create direct, interactive relationships between brands and consumers (Felix et al., 2017, pp.119-120). These evolving practices reflect a shift in marketing goals toward sales growth, brand visibility, and active user participation.

Engagement as a process

Mollen and Wilson (2010, p.5) present brand engagement as a combination of cognitive and emotional commitment to an ongoing, active relationship with the brand. Similarly, Heath (2007, p,7) regards engagement as a conscious state in which the consumer feels emotionally connected to or interacts with media content that holds personal relevance in their daily life. In this thesis, the concept of brand engagement will be applied to analyse how SKIMS' Instagram content presents both glamorous and vulnerable campaigns to build different aspects of its brand identity. In the world of social media research, Sashi (2012, p.260) asserts that the engagement process encompasses seven stages: connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment/loyalty, advocacy and engagement. Connection occurs when a brand and consumer establish initial contact, such as when a consumer follows the brand on Instagram (Sashi, 2012, p.260). SKIMS attracts attention through

celebrity appeal, aesthetically curated visuals, and product teasers. This spark of interest leads to interaction, where consumers actively engage with both the brand and other followers, by liking or commenting on posts (Sashi, 2012, p.261). The satisfaction stage follows, marked by consumers' enjoyment of these interactions and, when applicable, their positive experience with a product or service (Sashi, 2012, p.262). SKIMS frequently reposts positive feedback from customers. Retention reflects a more sustained relationship, demonstrated by continued interest and consistent following of the brand's content (Sashi, 2012, p.262). SKIMS maintains consumer interest through consistent posting, limited edition drops, and exclusive announcements via Instagram. Therefore, consumers who wanted to be first in line for product launches must continue to follow the account. Commitment or loyalty involves both emotional and rational attachment to the brand. This might be seen in a consumer's willingness to consistently welcome brand content in their Instagram feed, rather than ignoring or blocking it (p.263). Loyalty can be fostered by showcasing the brand's values rather than its products, like body inclusivity and celebrity style. Advocacy takes the relationship further, as satisfied consumers begin to promote the brand themselves (p.263). Examples are sharing posts, writing positive reviews, or even creating their own content inspired by the brand. SKIMS fans regularly share outfit photos and unboxings to increase the brand's visibility and trust. The final stage, engagement, represents the deepest connection, as consumers begin to see the brand as part of their identity. At this point, consumers not only remain loyal, but also become co-creators of value, standing by the brand through challenges and contributing to its community (p.264). In addition to these primarily proactive goals, companies also adopt reactive strategies by monitoring and analysing social media conversations to gain insights into consumer perceptions. This shift toward real-time responsiveness reflects broader changes in the digital communication landscape (Felix et al. 2017, p.119).

In today's media environment, the manner in which individuals communicate and consume information has undergone a significant transformation. Technological advancements have diminished the need for traditional text-based content, placing a greater emphasis on visual content (Lee et al., 2010, p.141). This change has not gone unnoticed by marketers, who increasingly focus on utilizing visual strategies within social media platforms. Research shows that visuals are more effective at capturing attention than text (Miniard et al., 1991, p.92), and our brains process images and words differently. According to dual processing theory, images enhance imaginative thinking, while words activate logical thinking (Kim & Lennon, 2008, p.152). Beyond cognitive efficiency, visual storytelling also elicits stronger emotional engagement. Gombrich (1960, as cited in Lim & Childs, 2020, p.35) suggests that visual stories tap into the viewers' memories and life experiences, allowing them to assign personal meaning to images. Therefore, visual content is particularly effective for brands, as

communication has progressed from direct persuasion to immersive brand experiences that foster lasting consumer connections (Chahal and Rani, 2017, p.312). Instead of explaining what a brand does, social media content invites audiences to envision themselves within the brand's world, encouraging personal interpretation. This heightened engagement strengthens the consumer's attachment to the brand, increasing the likelihood of repeat purchases, brand loyalty, recommendation, and even willingness to pay more (Lim & Childs, 2020, p.36).

The Rise of Instagramism

Within this visual economy, Instagram has emerged as a leading platform for brand-audience interaction (Rogers, 2021, p.1). Launched in 2010, Instagram initially distinguished itself through its retro camera logo, square photo format, and a range of filters that made ordinary snapshots look artistic. Users could interact with others by liking, commenting, and sharing posts. Instagram is characterized by its emphasis on images and aesthetic (self) presentation, enabling brands to go beyond standard product promotion. This strategy cultivates immersion and a sense of telepresence (Lim & Childs, 2020, p.45). Instagram's strong visual component is well-suited to fashion businesses, like SKIMS (Yoo, 2023, p.1). As of 2025, Instagram ranks as the third largest social network worldwide, with 2 billion monthly active users (Statista, Dixon, 2025). Instagram's consistent year-on-year growth indicates that its popularity is still on the rise, with an average annual growth rate of approximately 7.8% (Statista, Dixon, 2024). It highlights the enduring appeal, but also its evolving significance within the broader digital ecosystem. To exemplify, 80% of marketers worldwide leveraged Instagram to advertise their businesses. From a marketing perspective, Instagram holds more influence than platforms such as LinkedIn, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok (Statista, Statista Research Department, 2025). This indicates that Instagram is not just a visual-first platform, but has become a central hub for brand visibility, emotional storytelling, and consumer engagement. These attributes have transformed an app that was intended to document everyday organic moments, into the central space for networking and strategic brand communication.

The Aesthetic Logic of Instagram Branding

For brands, maintaining a consistent and recognizable visual identity on Instagram is essential. As Jurišová (2020, p.121) asserts, successful brand communication on the platform requires a clearly defined aesthetic, including a coherent colour palette, distinctive font choices, uniform edit style, and a carefully curated grid layout. Each post contributes to an overarching visual narrative that reinforces brand recognition and communicates brand values through design consistency. This strategy resonates with what Manovich (2016, p.73) coined as "instagramism", where users intentionally construct stylish

and polished images to reflect aspirational lifestyles. Instagramism represents a shift from spontaneous photo sharing to the calculated construction of highly curated content (Rogers, 2021, p.3). This approach to visual branding is closely tied to the emergence of social photography, which frames everyday life as a performative, shareable experience (Budge, 2019, p.4). This shift has been embraced by brands to project lifestyle ideals and emotional resonance. Brands adopt this dynamic by crafting immersive content that positions their products within desirable social settings and turns ordinary consumption into aspirational moments. Crucially, many efficacious brand aesthetics draw from what Veblen (1961, p.59) termed “pecuniary beauty”. This is the idea that visually signalling wealth and exclusivity increases perceived desirability. Public displays of consumption and pecuniary taste, such as working with elite models and designers, serve as markers of social capital and personal networks (Abidin, 2014, p.122). Events, pop-ups, and branded installations are used to amplify a brand’s Instagram and encourage consumers to co-create content that extends the brand’s appeal. These moments are solely about physical presence but being seen within the branded experience. Ultimately, Instagram’s brand aesthetics reflect what Manovich (2016, p.99) calls “design photography”, akin to editorial layouts found in lifestyle magazines. In this context, brands blend commercial messaging with cultural capital, crafting visually striking content that captures attention and promotes emotional resonance. Within this theoretical framework, these concepts provide a basis for analysing how SKIMS builds its brand identity on Instagram by employing visual storytelling and cultural performances that foster social validation. This allows for a systematic examination of how SKIMS’ Instagram campaigns combine curated imagery, aspirational styling, and consumer engagement to create a cohesive and resonant brand narrative.

2.2 The Building Blocks of Celebrity Branding

Defining Branding and Brand Personality

Having established Instagram as a platform that thrives on visual aesthetics, it is fundamental to consider how celebrities’ function within this space, particularly through the lens of celebrity branding. To gain a thorough understanding of this concept, it is useful to first deconstruct the term. The notion of branding is generally more straightforward. As defined by Okonkwo (2007, p.8), a brand refers to a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination thereof, intended to identify a seller’s product and distinguish it from competitors. It serves as a recognizable element of a company’s overall offering, consistently conveying promises of value that shape the consumer experience (Kapferer, 1994, p.10). Beyond its practical role, a brand also represents the sum of all interactions and communications encountered by consumers, ultimately forming a distinct image in their minds. This image is manufactured around both functional and emotional perceptions, making the brand an

intangible construct. While products can be replicated or become outdated, a brand tends to possess a unique and enduring quality (Okonkwo, 2007, p.9). Branding itself is not a new phenomenon; early examples include cattle herders marking livestock with symbols to signify ownership and distinguish their animals from others.

The idea that brands can take on human-like characteristics, commonly referred to as brand personality, was introduced in marketing literature by Aaker (1997). Just as individuals form perceptions of others based on behaviour, appearance, attitudes, and beliefs, they also attribute personality traits to brands. To illustrate, SKIMS would be described as a cool and confident it-girl minimalist. The reason behind this is that human beings are naturally inclined to personify objects to make sense of the intangible world (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2015, p.38). Unlike human personality, brand personality is constructed through any direct or indirect interaction a consumer has with the brand (Plummer, 2000, p.80). These traits can be influenced directly by people associated with the brand, such as typical users, employees, CEOs, or celebrity endorsers. At the same time, brand personality may emerge indirectly through product features, the brand's name, logo, advertising style, and product category (Aaker, 1997, p.348). In this way, both human associations and strategic brand elements work together to shape brand perception, which is especially relevant in the visually curated environment of Instagram. Previous research suggests that individuals prefer brands that match their actual self or their ideal self (Aaker, 1997, p.348). If a consumer identifies as glamorous and fashionable, or desires to have those traits, then they are more likely to be interested in SKIMS. The connection between identity and brand is essential in understanding why some celebrity brands are so powerful.

Defining Celebrity: Fluidity and Cultural Meaning

The second component of celebrity branding is the concept of "celebrity," which is more complex and fluid than branding itself. Contrastive to a brand, a celebrity is not a fixed or easily defined term. Over time, its connotation has evolved and shifted across historical, spiritual, religious, media, social, artistic, and political contexts (Caan & Lee, 2023, p.17). Rooted in the Latin *celebritatem*, meaning "the condition of being famous", the celebrity has historically drawn public fascination - from saints and royals to movie stars and influencers (Rojek, 2001, p.9). While a celebrity is most commonly seen as an individual, it can also apply to groups or major public events (Rojek, 2015, p.71). Generally speaking, celebrities are individuals who exert significant influence in various facets of society (Caan & Lee, 2023, p.14). In the contemporary landscape, celebrity status extends beyond fame to include the ability to command attention and shape cultural discourse. Kim Kardashian exemplifies this: her global

recognition, entrepreneurial ventures, and mastery of media visibility position her as both a celebrity and a brand. Being a celebrity is not a guarantee, as fame can be fleeting. Celebrities are often characterized by excelling in a specific field, thus earning respect and admiration. This makes them aspirational figures and societal archetypes with clearly defined personalities and reputations (Okonkwo, 2007, p.14).

According to O'Neill (2003, as cited in Caan & Lee, 2023, p.17), a celebrity reflects a person's impact on public consciousness and is typically someone well-known in entertainment or public life. As Diener (1999, p.96) puts it, a celebrity is a name once made by news, now making news on its own. Rojek (2001, p.17) offers a more nuanced categorization of celebrity status through five key types: ascribed, achieved, attributed, celestoid, and celestactor. Ascribed celebrities inherit their fame, like royalty or the children of famous individuals (p.17). Achieved celebrities earn recognition through skill or talent (p.18). Attributed celebrities gain fame through media exposure and PR (p.18), while celestoids are short-lived media sensations (p.20). Celestactors are fictional characters who become cultural icons (p.23). These categories are fluid, indicating that celebrities can shift between them, especially in the digital age where fame is volatile. Kim Kardashian, for example, transitioned from ascribed and attributed fame (daughter of Robert Kardashian and reality TV star) to achieved celebrity through business success. Her hyper-curated persona even jibes with the celestactor type, blurring the line between reality and performance.

This transition is measured by tools like the Ulmer Scale, developed by entertainment journalist James Ulmer (2000), which ranks celebrities from A-list (most bankable) to Z-list (least visible or formerly famous). While A-list celebrities like Kardashian dominate the public sphere, B- to D-list celebrities still impact consumer behaviour due to the meanings they carry and the communities they engage (Caan & Lee, 2023, p.23).

Celebrity appeal is sustained in part by gossip, which creates a sense of intimacy and public belonging. According to Marshall (2010, p.37), gossip allows audiences to access parts of celebrities' private lives, enhancing affective connections. This kind of gossip forms a public community and acts as a form of social control. Marshall (p.36) also explains that celebrities serve as pedagogical tools, especially for identity construction. For example, screen icons shaped fashion and gender ideals in the 20th century. Today, social media celebrities teach audiences how to engage with consumer culture to 'make' themselves. Kardashian exemplifies this pedagogical function, because her brand SKIMS is deeply intertwined with her public image and personal narrative. Through social media, she offers glimpse into both her professional and private life, inviting audiences to not only purchase her shapewear, but also adopt the lifestyle and values it represents. Think of values like body confidence

and inclusivity. In doing so, Kardashian teaches her followers how to construct their identities through consumer choices, positioning SKIMS as both a fashion product and a cultural guide.

The Mechanics of Celebrity Branding

Combining the concepts of celebrity and branding, celebrity branding refers to the conscious use of a celebrity's image, personality, and status to endorse or create a brand (McCracken, 1989, p.310). This practice leverages the cultural meanings, media visibility, and aspirational appeal of public figures to shape brand identity and consumer perception (Lee et al., 2022, p.1360). At its core, celebrity branding is inherently commercial. Celebrities have attention-getting, interest-riveting, and profit-generating value (Rein et al., 1987, p.15). It is a function of the media age that individuals are expected to turn fame into revenue. Celebrities do so by building brand equity (name recognition) and then attaching that equity to sellable products or services. This could include books, cosmetics, fashion lines, or even house paint (Pappas, 1999, p.88). Expansion projects are strategically launched to bring in more revenue and increase brand awareness. As a result, the term "celebrity brand" has emerged to describe brands defined by a well-known celebrity name. Consumers are more likely to trust and engage with a brand when it is linked to a public figure whose values mirror their own (Santos et al., 2019, p.243). This concept relates to McCracken's (1989, p.310). Meaning Transfer Model, which outlines how meaning moves from celebrities to products and finally to consumers. This process has three stages. First, celebrities acquire symbolic properties through media appearances, such as confidence, glamour, or authenticity (McCracken, 1989, p.314-315). In the second stage, these symbolic meanings are transferred to products through advertisements (p.316). The third stage involves consumers internalizing those meanings and associating them with the product (p.317). For example, when Kim Kardashian promotes a SKIMS collection, her personal attributes (body confidence, luxury, and modern femininity) are transferred to the products. Consumers then associate those traits with the brand and, by purchasing it, symbolically acquire those traits themselves. The success of such branding depends on the harmony between the celebrity's persona and the product's image (Bogollu & Saravanan, 2023, p.3).

From Endorsements to Empires: The Evolution of Celebrity Branding

Celebrity branding has evolved significantly from basic endorsement deals to the creation of personal brand empires. Celebrities have appeared in advertising since the late 19th century, but television in the 1960s marked a turning point in their promotional power. Initially, the strategy was known as celebrity endorsement, where public figures simply lent their image to promote a product

(McCracken, 1989, p.310). This approach was based on source credibility and attractiveness models. Ohanian (1990, 1991) operationalized these models by assessing the impact of a celebrity's expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. According to this framework, credibility involves perceived knowledge and experience, honesty, and objectivity (Wood & Burkhalter, 2013, p.134). Attractiveness encompasses more than physical beauty; it also includes familiarity and similarity.

The shift from endorsements to brand ownership represents a significant change in celebrity strategy. Celebrities no longer just endorse products, but rather create them (Caan & Lee, 2023, p.15). This new model emphasizes authenticity, control, and narrative. When celebrities like Rihanna (Fenty Beauty), Selena Gomez (Rare Beauty), or Kim Kardashian (SKIMS) launch their own brands, they are not just promoting products; they are promoting a lifestyle and personal philosophy (Rojek, 2015, p.74). These brands are extensions of their public personas, and their success normally rests on how well these narratives resonate with consumers. In this context, Instagram plays a pivotal role. Its visual-first format enables celebrities to curate their image, connect with followers, and promote their products in ways that feel personal and authentic. The platform serves as both a marketing tool and a stage for brand storytelling, allowing celebrities to maintain relevance and control their public image (Abidin, 2014, p.121). In turn, this shapes consumer perceptions and purchasing behaviours in ways that traditional advertising cannot.

In sum, celebrity branding is a multidimensional phenomenon that fuses identity, image, commerce, and culture (Caan & Lee, 2023, p.15). In this thesis, the concept is applied to investigate how SKIMS incorporates Kim Kardashian's persona and collaborations with other celebrities to shape its visual storytelling. Examining these celebrity associations offer insight into how SKIMS constructs a compelling brand identity and navigates a digital landscape where personal expression and commercial promotion increasingly overlap.

2.3 The Role of Influencer Marketing in Brand Strategy

Defining Influencers

This chapter outlines the theoretical concepts of influencer marketing relevant to understanding how SKIMS constructs brand identity on Instagram. At the intersection of social media marketing and celebrity branding sits influencer marketing. As with the previous chapter, it is essential to clarify the term "influencers". The word "influence" is derived from the Latin *influre*, ("to flow in"), and has been used since the 14th century to describe the power to shape or affect others (McMullen et al., 2022, p.560). The idea of influence flowing between people underpins the principle of social proof, which explains how individuals look to others to guide their behaviour (Cialdini, 1993, p.116).

Marketers have long resorted to this principle by featuring celebrities and knowledgeable individuals endorsing products (McMullen et al., 2022, p.560) – whether this is the classic “9 out of 10 dentists recommend this toothpaste” or, more recently, “Kim Kardashian wears this shapewear” in SKIMS campaigns. Such endorsements serve as a stamp of approval, thus boosting brand credibility (Ki & Kim, 2019, p.905).

These are formal examples of Word of Mouth (WOM), a longstanding and highly trusted means of disseminating market information (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p.475) With the advent of digital technology, WOM has evolved into Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), which is defined as “any positive or negative comment made by current, former, or prospective customers about a product or company that is shared online with a wide audience” (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004, p.39). The content that is voluntarily developed by an individual and disseminated through an online platform is coined User Generated Content (McKenzie et al., 2012, p.2). The scalability of eWOM enables individuals or groups to cultivate substantial online audiences by sharing relatable content and personal insights, turning digital influence into a professional pursuit (Adebayo & Omamode, 2023, para. 8). These figures, commonly referred to as social media influencers (SMI’s), function as independent third-party endorsers who publicly showcase aspects of their lives, experiences, and opinions online through texts, pictures, and videos (Ki & Kim, 2019, p.905). Unlike traditional celebrities whose fame is predominantly derived from institutional credentials such as film, music, or sports, SMIs attain popularity through audience engagements in online environments, independent of formal recognition (McQuarrie et al., 2013, p.152). McQuarrie et al. (2013, p.136) draws on Bourdieu’s metaphor (1999) to elucidate how ordinary individuals seize the digital megaphone to broadcast their consumption habits. If their taste and aesthetic are values, the volume of the megaphone grows louder, amplifying their influence and social position (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014, p.17). This phenomenon echoes Senft’s (2008, p.25) micro-celebrity concept, which describes individuals actively constructing fame through self-branding on social media, emphasizing attention economy and visibility over traditional fame metrics. Through this visibility, SMIs monetize their relatable content by partnering with brands, effectively offering a commercialized form of eWOM that sways followers’ opinions and decisions (Adebayo & Omamode, 2023, para.13).

Influencer Typologies in Brand Strategy

Influencers are commonly classified by fame, follower count, and brand alignment (Campbell & Farrell, 2022, p.471). SKIMS purposefully employs all influencer tiers to maximise brand reach, while fostering emotional resonance with diverse audiences, At the top are celebrity influencers like Kim Kardashian, who gained fame outside of social media. Their digital equivalent is called mega

influencers, who built their celebrity status primarily online. Contrasting to celebrities, mega influencers are commonly less popular outside of social media (pp. 471-472). Macro influencers (100k–1M followers) operate in niche areas, like wellness, fashion, or motherhood, making them well-suited to promote targeted SKIMS collections (Lv et al., 2023, p.3019). A case in points is SKIMS collaboration with mega influencer Nessa Barrett (6M followers) for the “Next Generation” campaign, intended to expand brand appeal and signal that SKIMS’ moves with the cultural zeitgeist (SKIMS, 2023). Complementing these high-reach partnerships, micro (10k-100k)- and nano influencers (<10k) play a vital role in building authenticity and trust through community-driven engagement (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p.90). Their relatability and genuine enthusiasm usually translate into higher engagement (Campbell & Farrell, 2022, pp. 471-472). During its 2019 launch, SKIMS implemented a multi-tiered influencer strategy to balance mass exposure with personal connection. To illustrate, micro- and nano influencers such as Anette Marweld (7,913 followers) and Alice Marie Johnson (41.7K followers) were featured to fortify the brand’s commitment to body inclusivity and generational diversity (SKIMS, 2019a; SKIMS, 2019b.).

Influencer Marketing Explained

Recognizing social media’s strategic importance, brands increasingly use electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to bolster their messaging (Adebayo & Omamode, 2023, para.4). According to Brown and Hayes (2008, p.50), influencer marketing refers to the practice whereby an external individual affects consumers’ purchasing decisions. This approach entails brands partnering with carefully selected influencers to produce or endorse (paid) user-generated content directed at both the influencer’s followers and the brand’s target audience (Lou & Yuan, 2019, p.58). Ahmad (2018, as cited in Chen, 2023, p.2312) observes that 94% of marketers find influencer campaigns effective, with returns up to eleven times higher than customary advertising. Due to perceived authenticity of peer recommendations, consumers mostly regard eWOM as more credible than stereotypical corporate communications (Adebayo & Omamode, 2023, para.10). This credibility is grounded in the parasocial relationship influencers develop with their audiences, who perceive influencers as relatable peers rather than distant celebrities (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p.3; De Veirman et al., 2017, p.801). Such relationships are sustained through relational labour, wherein influencers actively engage with their followers through comments, responses, and social interaction (Baym, 2015, p.16). Influencer marketing leverages these parasocial connections and peer trust to influence consumer behaviour more effectively than traditional advertising (Vrontis et al., 2021, p.618). Beauty brands ideally lend themselves to influencer marketing, because it heavily relies on visual appeal (Adebayo & Omamode, 2022, para.25). Relating this to SKIMS, influencer marketing effectively showcases how the products

accommodate diverse body types, helping potential customers to better envision themselves wearing the brand.

Matching the Brand with the Influencer

Whilst influencer marketing has been proven effective (Ahmad, 2018), the success of the campaign critically depends on choosing the right influencer. Influencers are not merely promotional tools, as they have constructed a personal brand with distinct values, aesthetics, and beliefs (Venciute et al., 2023, p.38). A common pitfall brands is prioritising follower count as the primary indicator of imaginable success. While a large follower base may suggest broader reach, it does not necessarily translate into meaningful engagement or persuasive power (De Veirman et al., 2017, p.802). More important is the fit between the influencer's persona and the brand or product, recurrently referred to as the match-up hypothesis (Zak & Hasprova, 2020, p.5; Leung et al., 2022, p.240). This theory posits that endorsement is most persuasive when the influencer's traits are consistent with brand values (Kamins, 1990, p.5). This is evident in SKIMS's use of Nessa Barrett, whose edgy Gen Z aesthetic mirrors the brand's risqué and unapologetically sexy identity. Congruence between influencer and brand boosts credibility and makes the brand message feel authentic and consistent. Consumers (sub)consciously evaluate how well the influencer matches the product category, brand lifestyle, and tone (De Veirman et al., 2017, p.802). If the values misalign or the influencers receive negative publicity, it can damage the brand's reputation. (Zhang, 2024, p.5). To prevent this from happening, Brown and Fiorella (2013, pp.154-167) propose the "4Ms" framework for influencer marketing: make, manage, monitor, and measure. The first step, make, involves identifying potential customers and selecting appropriate influencers to act as brand advocates. This research entails researching demographics, platform use, and engagement history. The second step, manage, refers to overseeing the influence these individuals have on brand perception and ensuring accordance with campaign goals. Monitor is the third step, focusing on tracking interactions between influencers and audiences. This includes awareness (reach, shares), reaction (follower growth), and action (sales, engagement). Finally, measure evaluates overall campaign outcomes to inform and improve future initiatives (Miglé & Karazijienė, 2023, p.375). Ultimately, influencer marketing is more than a promotional tactic. It is an indispensable instrument for brand storytelling and identity construction. As the following chapters will explore, SKIMS applies this instrument to solidify its brand image of inclusivity, desirability, and contemporary relevance.

2.4 The Role of Authenticity in Contemporary Branding

Kim Kardashian has dipped her toes into no less than thirteen different business pools over the years, from a coffee table book (Kardashian, 2015) to fragrances (Yaptangco, 2021). However, these pursuits never became her primary focus, largely because they did not fully align with personal values and interests. Her initial rise to fame was sparked by media attention surrounding her sex tape (Englund, 2023, p.368), which cemented her public image around themes of body visibility, sensuality, and confidence. In that light, the launch of a shapewear brand felt like a natural extension of her persona, allowing her to embrace and market what she knows best: the celebration of the body. This coherence between Kim Kardashian's personal narrative and her brand offering raises a principal concept in the study of celebrity branding and consumer trust: authenticity. While the term has appeared throughout the previous chapters, it has yet to be unpacked in full. This chapter defines and contextualizes authenticity as a key pillar of modern brand identity, especially within the spheres of social media marketing and celebrity entrepreneurship.

Elements of Brand Authenticity

Although authenticity is a widely used concept that people generally understand intuitively, its exact definition often remains elusive and difficult to pinpoint (Morhart et al., 2015, p.201; Haimson et al., 2021; p.3). What makes a brand feel authentic tends to go beyond surface-level attributes. It is shaped by a blend of consistency, credibility, integrity, and symbolic meaning (Morhart et al., 2015, pp.202-203). The consistency involves not just making (moral) claims but also following through with corresponding actions. Goffman (1956, as cited in Forsyth, 2024, p.2) calls this face and face-work, referring to the comparability between what individuals say and what they actually do. This is why SKIMS' Breast Cancer Awareness campaign felt sincere rather than performative, given their history of supporting similar charitable causes. When a brand stays true to its roots, through values, storytelling, or design, it creates a sense of continuity, what Beverland et al. (2008, p.8) call "pure authenticity." This rootedness in tradition and originality helps explain why SKIMS feels like a logical business venture for Kim Kardashian. Authenticity also depends on credibility, defined as a brand's transparency, honesty, and ability to deliver on its promises (Morhart et al., 2015, p.202). As Campagna et al (2023, p.138) put it, true authenticity lies in a brand's ability to stay genuine, transparent, and resilient amid changing trends.

Authenticity in the Experience Economy

According to Gilmore and Pine (2007, p.12), authenticity's ascendance as the buzzword of the 21st century is closely tied to the shift toward the Experience Economy. Rather than simply buying a

product, people now pay for access to memorable, emotionally engaging experiences. Within this landscape, authenticity has overtaken quality as the dominant purchasing criterion, just as quality once surpassed cost (Morhart et al., 2015, p.200).

This evolution signals a growing fatigue with over-commercialized, superficial, and insincere market offers. Social media has gradually converted life itself into a medium, turning individuals performance artists. This fusion of the real and the represented fuels a culture of performance and gives rise to the “mediated person”, referring to someone whose identity is shaped by constant self-presentation for an audience (De Zengotita, 2005, as cited in Gilmore & Pine, p.17). Such insincerity is emblematic of Instagramism (Manovich, 2016, p.73), where brands and individuals construct idealized, curated identities in pursuit of social appeal. Even when posts appear spontaneous, they frequently feel performative due to their calculated nature. Consequently, the boundary between a genuine experience and a visual spectacle becomes blurred, thus undermining the very authenticity people are craving. As a counter-reaction, consumers are turning toward brands that come off as genuine, original, and parallel their personal values. In other words, the more performative and artificial the (digital) environment becomes, the stronger the desire grows for authentic connections and experiences. Purchases are no longer made solely for utility or ownership, but as expression of self-reflections of who consumers are or aspire to be. These decisions incessantly hinge on rapid-fire assessments of what feels “real” versus “fake” (Gilmore & Pine, 2007, p.5).

Types of Brand Authenticity

Scholars have distinguished between several types of authenticity that are relevant for branding. The first type is objectivist authenticity, which treats authenticity as an inherent quality that can be objectively verified. Trilling (1972, p.93) compares it to museum practices, where experts determine whether an item is truly what it claims to be. Similarly, Grayson and Martinec (2004, p.298) describe this as “indexical” authenticity, entailing the belief that an object is “the real thing” based on traceable, physical connects to the world. In branding, this implies that authenticity can be assessed through concrete markers like a brand’s heritage, materials, or performance. To illustrate, SKIMS can evoke indexical authenticity through association with Kim Kardashian’s personal involvement, or through its consistent use of inclusive sizing and diverse product imagery.

Secondly, constructivist and iconic authenticity represent related, yet distinct types of socially constructed authenticity. Both centre on consumer perception of how well a brand aligns with their internalised expectations of what constitutes “authenticity” (Carsana & Jolibert, 2018, p.214). The constructivist perspective emphasizes meaning making, whereby authenticity emerges through coherent narratives, values, and cultural relevance (Morhart et al., 2015, p.201). For example, SKIMS

may strike as authentic by consistently presenting body positivity in its marketing and casting choices. In contrast, iconic authenticity is grounded in visual or sensory resemblance to a culturally recognised original (Carsana & Jolibert, 2018, p.214). SKIMS bodysuits may be considered iconically authentic if their appearances match with consumers' preconceived notions of what body-positive shapewear should look like.

Thirdly, the existentialist perspective conceptualizes authenticity as a subjective state rooted in an individual's sense of being true to oneself (Morhart et al., 2015, p.202). Unlike objectivist views, it does not rely on factual accuracy or visual resemblance, but instead on the emotional and psychological correspondence between the consumer and the brand (Wang, 1999, pp. 359-360). A highly edited SKIMS campaign may still feel authentic if it emotionally connects with audiences through messages of comfort or body confidence. This overlaps with moral authenticity, which refers to a brand's perceived alignment with the consumer's values (Beverland et al., 2008, p.8). When a brand promotes social causes in a way that feels sincere, such as SKIMS Breast Cancer Awareness campaign (2024), it may not only resonate emotionally but also consolidate the belief that the brand embodies ethical integrity. However, such efforts must avoid seeming performative, which risks undermining authenticity.

Lastly, approximate authenticity bridges the gap between constructivist and existential perspective. It helps consumers with achieving self-authentication through symbolic connection to a particular place or moment in time (Beverland et al., 2008, p.8). This form of authenticity is illustrated in the SKIMS Swim campaign (2022), which situates models in beaches and pools. These visuals evoke personal associations with summer and leisure, fostering a sense of authenticity. The emphasis lies not on the brand's historical or material accuracy, but on the atmosphere and mood it successfully creates.

Navigating the Authenticity Paradox

Despite its value, authenticity is not without complications. The authenticity paradox refers to the tension between being perceived as "real" and "genuine", and the deliberate curation required to appear that way (Rose & Wood, 2005, pp.286-287). Projecting authenticity through advertising is challenging, because mass marketing techniques are seen as compromising the credibility of such claims (Beverland et al., 2008, p.5). Nowhere is the authenticity paradox more visible than in the Kardashian playbook. On one hand, they present themselves as ordinary women navigating love, family drama, and everyday chaos. This makes it difficult to remember that they are also hyper-visible celebrities with meticulously curated images, who have turned their so-called "realness" into a multimillion-dollar brand (McDonnell, 2016, p.106). This duality between being accessible and being aspirational exemplifies the core tension at the heart of the authenticity paradox.

In sum, authenticity is a multi-faceted concept that plays a vital role in how SKIMS builds its brand identity on Instagram. There is no single formula for how authenticity is perceived, nor can any brand be entirely or universally seen as authentic. The key takeaway is that authenticity cannot be imitated (Verhaal & Dobrev, 2020, p.252) and that brands should remain true to their original values and identity.

2.5 Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism

In a competitive market, brand identity must be carefully crafted to highlight a brand’s attributes, uniqueness, and value (Janonis et al., 2007, p.70). Kapferer (2008, p.174) differentiates between brand image and brand identity. While brand image lies with the consumer and mirrors how the brand is perceived through its products, services, and communication, brand identity stems from the brand itself. To assess brand identity and answer the research question, Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism (2008, p.183) will be employed. It explores six key facets (physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image) to clarify how brands shape and communicate their identity.

These six aspects are divided into two dimensions. The first contrasts the brand as a constructed source (its traits and personality) and as a constructed receiver (its typical user) (Kapferer, 2009, p.1). The second distinguishes between external signs (e.g. design, packaging, price), and internal values (e.g. culture, personality) (Kapferer, 2008, p.20). Marketers bring identity to life by aligning these facets with the target audience through consistent communication.

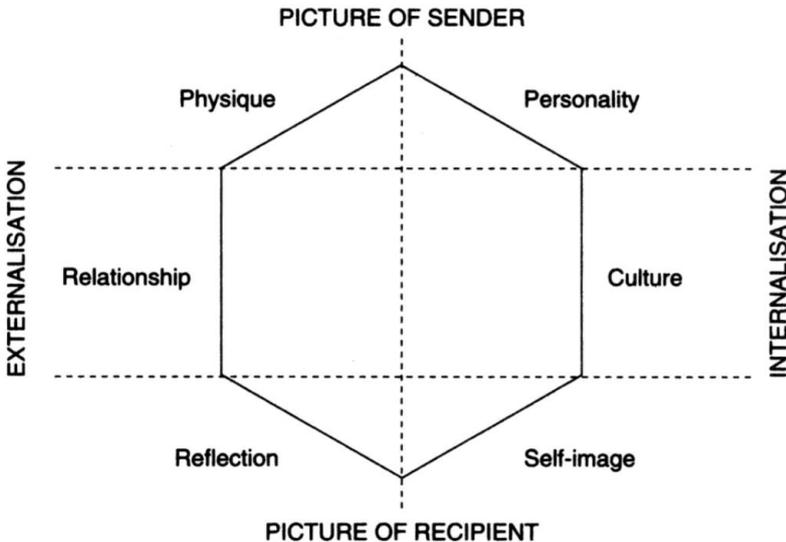


Figure 2.1. Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2008, p.183)

The first facet is physique, which encompasses its physical and tangible characteristics. Therefore, it serves as the cornerstone of its identity and the basis for its added value. This includes

notable features and flagship products that reflect the brand's core qualities, such as its logo, symbols, or colour scheme (Janonis et al., 2007, p.72) For SKIMS, this is embodied in its iconic seamless shapewear and nude-toned palette, which act as visual and material indicators of the brand's essence. While physical appearance is essential, it must combine with functional benefits to deliver value. Even image-driven brands like SKIMS emphasize material qualities to differentiate themselves in competitive markets (Kapferer, 2008, pp.182-183).

Secondly, the brand personality are the human traits associated with a brand, expressed through its communication style, design, tone, and even endorsements (Kapferer, 2008, p.184). It links back to Aaker's brand personality concept (1997), allowing consumer to perceive a brand as if it were a person. For example, SKIMS projects a confident, inclusive, and body-positive personality through its messaging and celebrity endorsements, appealing to diverse consumers. This personal, relatable character helps brands stand out and deepen consumer loyalty beyond physical features.

Thirdly, Kapferer defines culture as the foundational system of values and principles guiding a brand's behaviour and communication (Kapferer, 2008, p.184). It connects the brand to the organization and regularly reflects the brand's country of origin. Culture serves as both the inspiration behind a brand and the expression of its deeper essence, giving it character and soul. For SKIMS, this means championing values of inclusivity, body positivity, and women's health advocacy. Maintaining cultural consistency is crucial in differentiating SKIMS in the crowded shapewear and fashion market.

Fourthly, the relationship facet defines the kind of connection a brand fosters with its consumers. It reflects how the brand behaves, delivers services, and communicates, which is especially vital for service-oriented or retail brands (Kapferer, 2008, p.185). SKIMS cultivates an intimate, empowering relationship rooted in self-care, comfort, and confidence. It positions itself as a supportive partner in consumers' daily lives, reshaping not just bodies but self-perception. Through direct messaging, inclusive campaigns, and customer engagement, SKIMS offers more than skintight undergarments. It builds trust and emotional affinity, reinforcing its relationship as a body-positive, inclusive, and accessible brand.

Fifthly, reflection refers to the stereotypical image of the brand's user, pertaining to how the brand appears through the eyes of the outside world. It is not the actual target group, but rather the idealized version the consumer aspires to (Kapferer, 2008, p.186). In the case of SKIMS, the reflection facet presents a self-assured, stylish, and body-positive woman who confidently embraces her curves and identity. SKIMS projects a vision of modern femininity that is both inclusive and aspirational, allowing consumers to envision themselves as desirable.

Lastly, self-image reflects how consumers see themselves, or aspire to see themselves, when they use a brand. It is the inner mirror, tied to identity, self-esteem, and personal aspirations (Kapferer, 2008, p.186). With SKIMS, consumers often view themselves as empowered, confident, and body-

positive individuals, even if they don't meet traditional beauty standards. Wearing SKIMS allows them to internalize feelings of sexiness and self-love, mirroring founder Kim Kardashian's brand ethos. SKIMS supports how users want to feel inside.

3. Methodology

The methodology chapter outlines the qualitative research design adopted to effectively answer the research question. Using purposive sampling, a total of 168 posts were collected from SKIMS' official Instagram account. The data was analysed using a reflective thematic analysis. This chapter provides a detailed and justified account of the research design, data collection, sampling strategy, and analytical process. Finally, the chapter discusses credibility and ethical concerns

3.1 *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how the shapewear brand SKIMS constructs its brand identity through Instagram. Qualitative research enables a deeper understanding of visual branding by focusing on meaning-making, symbolism, and cultural context. As Castleberry and Nolen (2018, p. 808) explain, qualitative approaches are particularly valuable for uncovering how people and organisations interpret actions, relationships, and media representations. Instagram provides a fertile ground for such analysis, as it is not just a marketing channel but a space where brands visually express values, identities, and aspirations. Through curated content, SKIMS merges product display with lifestyle aesthetics, celebrity associations, and storytelling. This makes the platform ideal for examining how brand identity is constructed and communicated through visual strategies.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was selected as the most appropriate method for this study due to its hallmark flexibility, which extends beyond theoretical orientation to encompass research question, sample size, data collection methods, and approaches to meaning generation (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p.297). This flexibility makes RTA particularly useful for studies that taken an interpretive and constructionist approach, like this one. The present research seeks to explore how SKIMS constructs its brand identity on Instagram by analysing recurring themes in visuals. RTA allows for both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) analysis and supports a combination of semantic and latent coding. This dual capability is especially useful for examining both the explicit branding strategies (e.g., representation of diverse bodies) and the implicit ideological work (e.g., redefining beauty norms) embedded in the campaigns. As such, RTA offers a meaningful way to examine not just what is said or shown, but how meaning is produced across the dataset. Moreover, this method also fits well with the perspective of this research, which looks at both the surface level of content that SKIMS shares (experiential) and how this content might contribute to broader cultural discourses on beauty and identity (critical). This dual lens supports a more nuanced understanding of how the brand showcases their values, like inclusivity and empowerment. Finally, RTA's adaptability to diverse forms

of qualitative data further justifies its selection. While traditionally applied to interviews, its principles have successfully been used to analyse images and social media content as well (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p.298). Therefore, RTA is not only methodologically robust but also epistemologically aligned with the aims of this study.

The analysis began inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the visual and textual material. However, sensitizing concepts from Kapferer's (2008) Brand Identity Prism were used to guide interpretation. Kapferer's six brand identity dimensions were translated into a practical visual cue checklist. This sensitization process enabled abstract branding components to be operationalized into specific, observable elements within the images. To start, Physique was assessed through visual markers like signature products, neutral colour palettes, and body-focused shots that highlight design or fit. Personality was captured through facial expressions, the cultural status of the model, and stylistic editing. The dimension of Culture was identified through representations of inclusivity, empowerment, and social issues, corresponding with the brand's communicated values. Relationship was assessed by identifying imagery that suggests intimacy, storytelling, or an emotional connection, demonstrating how the brand engages with its audience. Reflection was explored through portrayals of the ideal consumer, including glamorous models and aspirational celebrities. Finally, self-image was examined via visuals that project how consumers are meant to feel about themselves (e.g. confident, empowered, and comfortable). This checklist-based approach ensured a systematic and theoretically grounded analysis of SKIMS' brand identity.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

A total of 168 SKIMS Instagram photos were selected for analysis, grouped into 24 distinct campaigns, with an average of seven posts per campaign. Each image entry was systematically documented, noting the photo ID, date posted, campaign title, caption, key visual elements, the relevant dimension(s) from Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008, p.182), and initial codes and emerging themes based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.87) reflexive thematic analysis. The selection of seven photos per campaign was intentional. Some campaigns, like SolutionWear (2019, 68 posts) and Fendi (2021, 42 posts), were highly saturated, while others had more limited options (e.g. Ski Holiday 2023, 14 posts). Choosing seven representative photos allowed for both depth and comparability across campaigns. In cases where content was very similar (e.g. repeated poses or product shots), only unique, meaningful images were included. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure the selected posts notably contributed to the analysis of SKIMS' brand identity. Posts were included if they featured human models, as the presence of bodies (particularly in

interaction with the clothing) was crucial for interpreting brand values such as confidence, comfort, and inclusivity. Posts were also selected based on visual diversity within each campaign. This included variation in composition, such as group versus solo shots, changes in lighting, or differences in camera angles and framing. Images featuring Kim Kardashian were included, when possible, due to her dual role as both founder and symbolic embodiment of the brand.

Conversely, posts were excluded if they depicted garments alone, such as flat lays or product-only shots without human interaction. Posts that repeated the same pose, background, or angle with minimal variation were also omitted to avoid redundancy. The aim was not to provide a comprehensive archive of all SKIMS content, but to select a representative, varied, and thematically rich sample capable of capturing the brand's evolving identity across different campaigns and time periods.

Some exceptions were made in terms of quantity of pictures. The SolutionWear™ (2019) campaign included 14 posts, as it is crucial to establish a clear foundation of the brand. It offers insight into how Kim Kardashian first introduced SKIMS to the public. Additionally, SKIMS' 2022 swimwear collections, SKIMS Swim (5 posts), Metallic Swim (5), and Shaping Swim (4), were analysed separately due to their strategic rollout throughout the year, reflecting a diversification in brand storytelling. Campaigns were chosen to reflect both temporal progression and thematic shifts in SKIMS's branding. For example, foundational basics like Cotton and Cozy (2019) established comfort and minimalism, while 2020 introduced creative risks (Naked Collection), sporty narratives (Stretch Rib), and celebrity collaborations (Velour with Paris Hilton). Later years highlighted international partnerships (Team USA, Fendi), influencer campaigns, gender expansion (Men's Collection 2023), and SKIMS's value-driven positioning through charity involvement and timely celebrity tie-ins (e.g. Charli XCX, WNBA, Breast Cancer Awareness). Each campaign was selected based on its contribution to shaping the SKIMS brand identity.

Coding procedure

All coding and interpretations in this study were based solely on the visual and textual content posted by SKIMS on their official Instagram feed. No other promotional materials, such as interviews, behind-the-scenes content, or third-party platforms, were included in the analysis. The focus remained strictly on SKIMS' brand-curated output to understand how it uses controlled visual storytelling to build its identity. The coding process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis approach. To facilitate consistency in this process, a visual coding framework was developed around several recurring elements. This included lighting and colour palette, where observations focused on distinguishing between bold studio lighting and soft natural light, as well as the use of vibrant versus nude colours. The background was also carefully coded, ranging from minimalistic home interiors to

blank studio spaces or outdoor environments. Regarding the model's pose and gaze, attention was paid to whether poses conveyed confidence or vulnerability, and if models engaged in eye contact or looked away. Combining these elements, the overall mood and narrative tone of the visuals were categorized, identifying feelings ranging from playful and light-hearted to intimate and sensual. Body diversity and inclusivity were crucial aspects, assessing the representation of models across different ethnicities, abilities, sizes, and genders. Finally, the presence of a celebrity was a key indicator, noting appearances by prominent figures like Kim Kardashian, Paris Hilton, and numerous athletes.

Coding was manual and iterative, involving repeated viewings of each campaign, systematic note-taking, and comparative analysis. Emerging patterns were identified over time, and recurring themes (such as authenticity, comfort, aspiration, and inclusivity) were noted both at the campaign level and across the broader brand narrative.

3.3 Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) article introduced thematic analysis (TA) as a flexible method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data in qualitative research. However, they later recognized limitations in their original conceptualization, particularly regarding clarity, consistency, and the influence of positivist notions of validity and reliability. In response, Braun and Clarke presented a clarified and expanded version known as Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). To differentiate between various approaches, Braun et al. (2019, p. 12) outlined three distinct types of thematic analysis: coding reliability TA, codebook approaches, and reflexive TA. In contrast to more structured approaches, RTA places emphasis on the interpretive role of the researcher and prioritizes depth and flexibility over replicability.

In RTA, themes are conceptualized as patterns of shared meaning organized around a central concept, rather than simply topics or summaries of data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 11). This stands in contrast to domain summaries, which often merely describe the dataset in line with interview questions or pre-existing categories (e.g., "benefits of using Instagram") but lack conceptual depth. RTA emphasizes transparency, reflexivity, and researcher subjectivity. The analytic process is non-linear and iterative, meaning researchers frequently move back and forth between stages to refine their understanding and interpretation of the data (Byrne, 2022, p. 1398).

The theoretical foundations of RTA involve situating the research on several epistemological and analytical continuums. First, on a spectrum from essentialist to constructionist epistemology: essentialist approaches view language as reflecting participants' realities, while constructionist approaches see language as constructing those realities (Byrne, 2022, p. 1395). Second, from experiential approaches—focused on participants' own meanings—to critical approaches that

consider how social contexts shape those meanings (Byrne, 2022, p. 1396). Third, the analysis can move between inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) strategies (Byrne, 2022, pp. 1396–1397). Finally, it includes a spectrum between semantic (explicit content) and latent (underlying meaning) coding (Byrne, 2022, pp. 1397–1398). In this study, I adopted a constructionist and experiential perspective, starting with open, inductive coding while remaining open to latent patterns of meaning related to brand identity. To guide this analytical process, Braun and Clarke proposed a six-phase framework (2006, p.87), which serves as a flexible yet structured guide. Though presented sequentially, these phases are recursive, requiring continual movement between them.

This first phase involves immersing oneself in the dataset to become thoroughly familiar with the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87). As Naeem et al. (2023, p. 2) note, it entails reading and re-reading the material while taking preliminary notes. In the context of this study, this meant closely analysing a wide selection of SKIMS Instagram posts, paying attention to visual patterns such as lighting, colour palettes, body types, camera angles, poses, and clothing styles. This immersion helped form a foundational understanding of the brand's recurring visual and thematic strategies.

Next, the researcher systematically codes the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.88). Codes are concise descriptive or interpretive labels applied to data segments that are relevant to the research questions (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 2; Byrne, 2022, p. 1399). In this study, codes included both semantic elements (e.g., “neutral colour palette,” “diverse models,” “minimal backgrounds”) and latent meanings (e.g., “redefining beauty standards,” “comfort as empowerment,” “inclusivity”). These codes served as the basic units from which themes were later developed.

Phase three commences when all data have been coded and the researcher starts identifying broader patterns of shared meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.90). Codes are reviewed and collated to identify conceptual clusters (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 4). For instance, codes related to “body diversity,” “natural lighting,” and “soft tones” were grouped into an initial theme of “Inclusivity as core identity.” Similarly, visual motifs of relaxed poses and intimate framing were grouped under “Confidence from within.” These themes go beyond topical summaries and instead reflect deeper interpretive narratives within the dataset.

In phase four “reviewing themes”, the researcher examines whether the themes accurately reflect the coded data and the broader dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.91). This often involves refining or merging themes, discarding those that lack coherence, or splitting overly broad themes (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 4). For example, in this study, the theme “confidence” was reviewed for consistency: were all posts coded under this theme truly representative? Did this theme overlap with others, such as empowerment or minimalism? Additionally, inclusivity was explored in terms of body

size, racial diversity, and facial anonymity, helping ensure the theme captured a full range of relevant data.

Phase five “defining and naming themes” involves articulating the essence of each theme and how it relates to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92). This stage is about moving from analysis to conceptual clarity. Each theme is defined with a clear scope and named to reflect its core meaning. To illustrate, “Inclusivity as core identity” was defined as SKIMS’ consistent effort to portray diverse bodies as the norm. “Confidence from within” was described as non-sexualized empowerment conveyed through softness, intimacy, and natural aesthetics. These theme names are not just labels but represent interpretive insights into the brand’s identity work.

The final phase involves weaving together the analytic narrative, presenting the themes with illustrative examples, and linking them to existing literature and the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.93; Naeem et al., 2023, p. 5). This includes explaining how the visual elements contribute to SKIMS’ brand identity using theoretical frameworks such as Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism. The report is not merely a presentation of findings, but a crafted narrative that integrates reflexive interpretation and theoretical engagement. Through these six iterative phases, Reflexive Thematic Analysis enabled a nuanced, in-depth understanding of how SKIMS uses Instagram to communicate and construct a distinctive brand identity.

3.4 Credibility and Ethical Considerations

Establishing the credibility of this research required a careful integration of theoretical rigour and methodological transparency, given its interpretative qualitative nature. In qualitative research, credibility is shaped by both reliability and validity. It emerges when claims are well-supported by coherent and consistent evidence (Silverman, 2011, p. 360). Reliability, defined as “the degree to which the findings of a study are independent of accidental circumstances of their production” (Silverman, 2011, p. 360), was ensured through a clearly documented and consistent research process. From sampling strategy and unit of analysis to thematic coding, each step has been explicitly outlined and justified, enhancing the study’s replicability. The theoretical foundation is anchored in established frameworks, particularly Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism (2008) and Braun & Clarke’s (2006, 2019) work on thematic analysis, which guided both interpretation and design. Validity, understood as the degree to which findings truthfully represent the phenomena under study (Silverman, 2011, p. 367), was addressed by aligning interpretations with the reality SKIMS portrays on Instagram. Instead of aiming for broad statistical generalisations, the research prioritizes analytical depth, reflecting the core strength of qualitative inquiry.

Furthermore, the research adheres to proper ethical standards. Only publicly available posts from SKIMS' official Instagram accounts were consulted, with no personal data involved. The sole objective was to answer the research question and understand how the brand constructs its identity, free from personal or commercial interests (Babbie, 2017, p.62).

4. Results

The results chapter presents five key themes that emerged from the analysis of the 168 SKIMS Instagram posts: Reflected Image (via Influencers), Self-Image, Culture, Product and Design (Physique), and Visual Narrative and Mood (Personality). Each theme is examined in relation to the corresponding facets of Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism (2008, p.182).

SKIMS reflected image is shaped by a comprehensive influencer marketing strategy which leverages public figures to build aspirational appeal and credibility. This strategy is reinforced by diverse, inclusive casting, and group compositions that emphasize collective empowerment. The brand’s self-image is constructed through visuals that promote confidence, body acceptance, and a sense of authentic sensuality. In terms of culture, SKIMS aligns itself with broader societal values through its embrace of diversity, relevant cultural trends, and impactful collaborations. The brand’s physique is communicated through form-fitting designs, implied textures via lighting, and distinct styling for each category. Finally, SKIMS’ personality is conveyed through consistent visual storytelling that fuses bold sensuality with intimate comfort. Through emotional cues, aesthetic coherence, and narrative depth, the brand cultivates a connection that extends far beyond the garments themselves. Each theme is discussed in-length within the following sub-sections of this chapter, as further illustrated in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1. *Thematic Coding Tree Aligned with Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism Facets.*

Reflected Image (via Influencers)	Self-Image	Culture	Product and Design (Physique)	Visual Narrative and Mood (Personality)
Recognition and Status	Confidence and Empowerment	Visual Inclusivity and Diversity	Fit and Form	Aesthetic and Artistic Direction
Strategic Casting and Representation	Body Appreciation and Comfort	Societal trends	Materiality and Texture	Emotional and Sensory Appeal
Interaction and Group Dynamics	Sensuality and Allure	Cultural Partnerships and Impact	Product categories and Functionality	Storytelling element
Brand Alignment and Aspiration	Vulnerability and Authenticity			

Note. This table presents the thematic structure derived from the visual analysis of 24 SKIMS Instagram campaigns. Categories were inductively generated using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis method.

4.1 Reflected Image (via Influencers)

The most prominent emergent theme from the data is reflected image, which directly corresponds to Kapferer's (2008, p.186) construct of reflection, the idealized archetype of the brand's consumer. This archetype is distinct from the actual customer base, as it represents the aspirational persona individuals wish to embody. At SKIMS, this reflection is primarily shaped through a multi-tiered influencer strategy. Influencer marketing plays a central role in the brand's identity construction of Instagram, with the platform serving as both a visual showcase and a storytelling space for celebrity-led campaigns (Miglè & Karazijienè, 2023, p.375). Through the use of globally recognizable figures, deliberate casting, group dynamics, and aspirational imagery, SKIMS crafts a layered narrative that blends product visibility with cultural relevance. As interpreted through visual cues, the brand's influencer strategy reveals not only *who* SKIMS selects to represents its image, but also *how* those choices reflect and reinforce its desired identity.

Recognition and Status

Building on this, one of the most visually striking elements in SKIMS' Instagram campaigns is the consistent presence of highly recognizable public figures (A-tier), whose fame often extends beyond the fashion or beauty industries (Caan & Lee, 2023, p.23). Kim Kardashian, as both founder and central brand figure, is omnipresent in early and flagship campaigns (Figure 4.1). She embodies the brand's ethos of confidence, sensuality, and cultural relevance (Zhang, 2024, p.4).



Figure 4.1. Kim Kardashian as an omnipresence in early campaigns, seen in Valentine's Day Campaign (2020). Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from February 14, 2020.

As SKIMS grew more confident in its brand identity, its approach to celebrity endorsements shifted. It began selecting figures in bolder, more unconventional ways, which involved taking calculated risks that significantly expanded the brand's cultural reach. Consequently, these celebrities were not merely featured, but purposely styles to amplify their distinct public personas. One of the earliest and most symbolic choices was Paris Hilton in the 2021 Velour campaign (Figure 4.2), a move that not only invoked nostalgia but also strengthened constructivist authenticity by weaving Kim Kardashian's personal history into the brand narrative (Morhart et al., 2015, p.201). At the same time, iconic authenticity is achieved through visuals that echo early 2000s celebrity culture, inviting audiences to connect with a shared cultural memory (Carsana & Jolibert, 2018, p.214). These layered references lend SKIMS credibility as a brand grounded in Kardashian's lived experience, rather than detached from it (Beverland et al., 2008, p.8; McCracken, 1989, p.310).



Figure 4.2. Socialite Paris Hilton (left) and Kim Kardashian (right) for SKIMS Velour Campaign (2021). Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from February 10, 2021.

Further down the line, SKIMS broadened its roster of celebrity endorsers to include WNBA and Team USA athletes, alongside culturally relevant artists like Ice Spice and Charli XCX. These images rely less on captions and more on instantly recognizable star power of these figures, which serves as a visual shorthand for trust and desirability (Abidin, 2014, p.121). For instance, WNBA athletes are portrayed with props and poses that highlight their athletic identity (like matching basketballs), reinforcing their dual roles as celebrities and elite performers (Figure 4.3). Similarly, Charli XCX's shoot showcases her seductive and rebellious persona (4.4). These high-profile figures act as implicit endorsements, linking SKIMS to cultural prestige. By featuring empowered athletes and sensual artists, the brand defines its ideal consumer as confident, diverse, and authentic. This visual storytelling

encourages consumers to see themselves reflected in these traits or aspire toward them, fostering a sense of belonging to a culturally attuned community that mirrors the SKIMS lifestyle (Abidin, 2014, p.121).

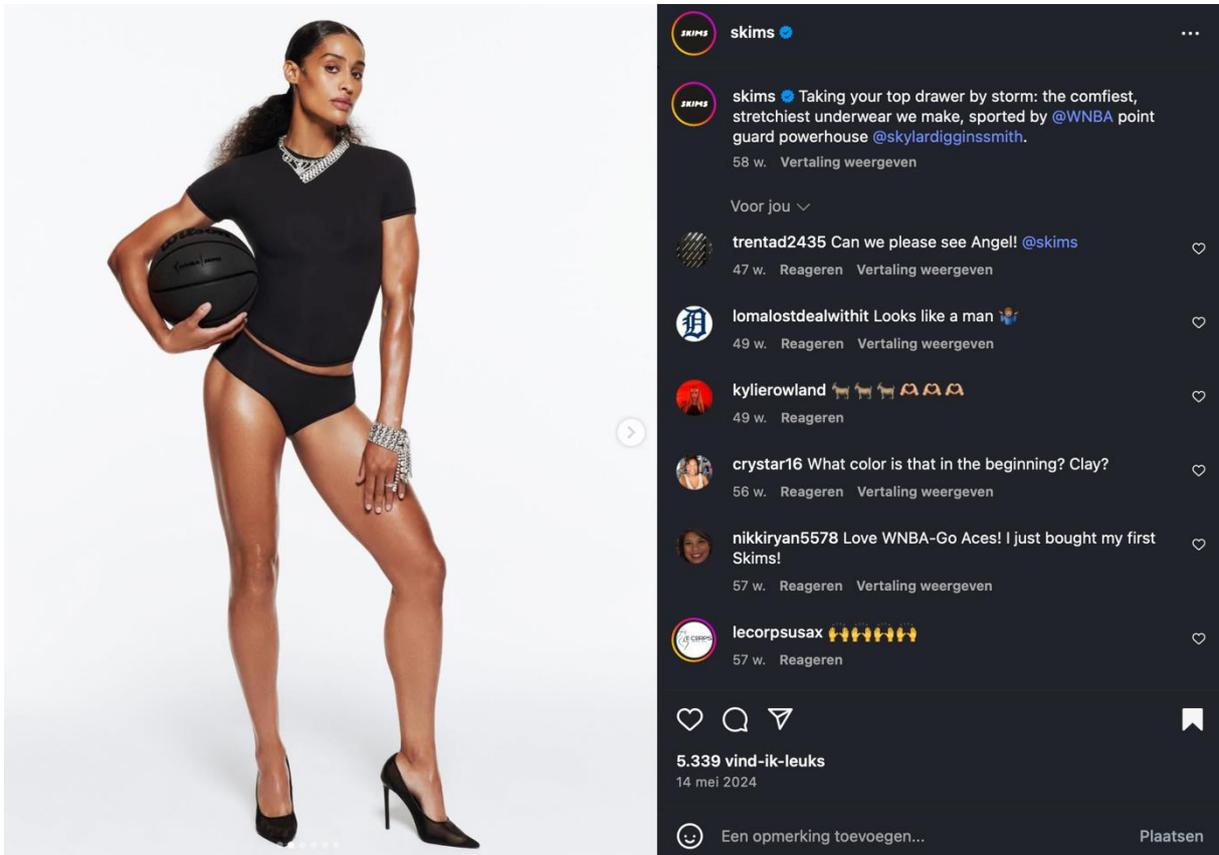


Figure 4.3. WNBA player Skylar Diggins Smith in WNBA Summer 2024 campaign.
Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from May 14, 2024.



Figure 4.4. Singer Charli XCX posing for Charli XCX x SKIMS campaign (2024).
Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from August 21, 2024.

Strategic Casting and Representation

While celebrity presence anchors SKIMS' influencer strategy (Ki & Kim, 2019, p.905), the brand's consistent inclusion of diverse body types, gender expressions, and physical abilities speaks directly to its commitment to authentic representation (Morhart et al., 2015, pp.202-203). SKIMS seamlessly integrates models with visible disabilities and varied identities into campaigns, styling and lighting them on par with celebrity shoots to avoid tokenism. This normalizes diversity as an integral aspect of its identity. For example, the 2022 "Adaptive Collection", features four models with disabilities – using wheelchairs, prosthetic legs, or having visible scars (Figure 4.5). This visual inclusivity resonates with the constructivist view of authenticity, where genuine brand identity arises from coherent narratives and values that align with cultural and consumer expectations (Morhart et al., 2015, p.201). Such integration supports credibility and moral authenticity (Beverland et al., 2008, p.8), as the brand's actions consistently reflect its stated values of inclusivity and empowerment rather than performing diversity superficially. This approach counters the "authenticity paradox" (Rose & Wood, 2005, pp.286–287), where brands struggle to balance curated marketing with being perceived as real and trustworthy. SKIMS overcomes this challenge by naturally integrating diversity, making it a visible component rather than a marketing add-on.



Figure 4.5. SKIMS Adaptive Collection for the Fits Everybody line (2022).

Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from April 29, 2022.

Moreover, presenting professional athletes with distinctive features like tattoos and unique hairstyles further amplifies existential authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015, p.202). This allows consumers to emotionally connect with representations that feel honest and relatable rather than homogenized. An illustrative example is figure 4.6, where footballer Neymar prominently displays his tattoos. SKIMS embraces the individuality of the celebrity, instead of hiding it. Therefore, SKIMS encourages consumers to identify with and trust the brand beyond superficial celebrity glamour.



Figure 4.6. Footballer Neymar posing for SKIMS Mens Collection (2023).
Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from October 24, 2023.

Interaction and Group Dynamics

A recurring visual motif across SKIMS campaigns is the presence of multiple models within a single frame. These compositions can be described as a “squad aesthetic,” a concept popularized by social media that suggests belonging, friendship, and collective empowerment (Crepax, 2020, p.78). The effect is achieved through close physical proximity, relaxed body language, and shared glances or smiles between the models. These group compositions are carefully arranged to express both diversity and harmony. To illustrate, the Victoria’s Secret Angels campaign (Figure 4.7) presents former Angels Heidi Klum, Tyra Banks, Alessandra Ambrosio, and Candace Swanepoel together. The minimalist backdrop, nude-toned outfits, and shared focus accentuate a sense of group cohesion. This collective imagery not only bridges SKIMS’ inclusive “Fits Everybody” collection with the iconic Victoria’s Secret legacy but also marks a cultural shift towards body positivity. It implies that appeals to communities

seeking connection and togetherness. Furthermore, this style of visual storytelling redefines influencer marketing by positioning models not just as individual promoters but as active contributors to a shared brand narrative (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p.156). Through relational labour and co-created brand meaning, these celebrity endorsers build emotional bonds that transcend mere transactional promotion.



Figure 4.7. SKIMS X Former Victoria Secret Angels posing for the Fits Everybody line (2022)
Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from April 6, 2022.

Brand Alignment and Aspiration

Another significant dimension of SKIMS' influencer strategy lies in the deliberate alignment between the lifestyles of its influencers and the aspirational yet accessible identity the brand projects to consumers. This alignment reflects the match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) and is supported by Ki and Kim (2019, p.905), who denote that influencer effectiveness hinges on congruence between influencer persona and brand values. Through visual storytelling, SKIMS situates its products within carefully crafted scenarios that evoke ease, luxury, and empowerment. For example, the Metallic Swim campaign shows an extravagant version of Kim Kardashian lounging by the pool in shimmering swimwear (Figure 4.8). At the same time, SKIMS balances glamour with relatability by depicting models in mundane, everyday activities, fostering parasocial connections that make the lifestyle feel attainable (Abidin, 2014, p.121; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p.3). This fusion aligns with Gilmore and Pine's (2007, p.5) concept of authenticity in the Experience Economy, wherein consumers seek brands that promise not only quality but an emotionally engaging lifestyle they can envision themselves inhabiting. Thus,

SKIMS' influencer strategy subtly promises consumers that they, too, can partake in this curated yet authentic lifestyle.

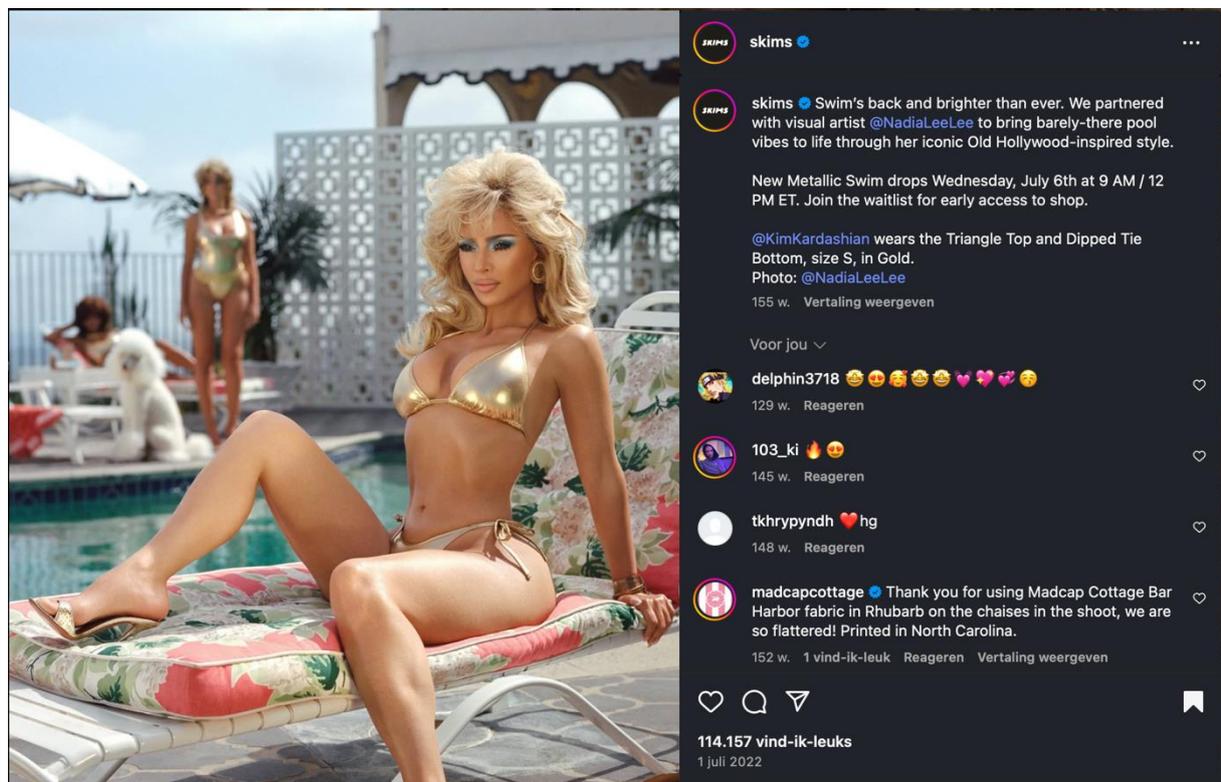


Figure 4.8. Kim Kardashian posing glamorously for the Metallic Swim Collection (2022). Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from July 1, 2022.

In summary, SKIMS Instagram campaigns reveal a nuanced influencer marketing strategy that blends celebrity recognition with inclusivity, dynamic interaction, and aspiration. By carefully selecting and composing its models, the brand communicates an identity that is both exclusive and universally appealing.

4.2 Self-Image

According to Kapferer (2008, p.186), self-image reveals how consumers perceive themselves, or who they aspire to be when engaging with a brand. It acts as a mirror, closely tied to identity, self-esteem, and personal ideals. SKIMS' Instagram campaigns effectively convey this through deliberate visual cues like gaze, posture, and body positioning. These elements primarily underscore the wearer's internal feelings about their body, not merely their outward look. The impact is further refined by the composition, lighting, and styling within the imagery. Consequently, consumers wearing SKIMS can adopt feelings of confidence, comfort, or sensuality, echoing Kim Kardashian's brand ethos of body celebration and self-love (Yuan, 2024, p.2). This section explores how these visual strategies contribute to the self-image facet of the brand identity, focusing on four sub-themes: confidence and

empowerment, body acceptance and comfort, sensuality and allure, and vulnerability and authenticity.

Confidence and Empowerment

Confidence and empowerment are central values consistently conveyed in SKIMS' branding (Yuan, 2024, p.4). Models frequently adopt commanding body language, posing with hands on hips, feet firmly grounded, or in strong athletic stances. These poses suggest stability, control, and pride in one's body. Direct eye contact with the camera solidifies their agency, presenting them as assertive subjects rather than passive objects (Mori & Pell, 2019, p.4). In campaigns for loungewear of everyday basics, SKIMS shifts toward subtler emotional messaging. Here, models are shown reclining, mid-movement, or softly smiling, implying both physical comfort and inner calm (Figure 4.9). These expressions contribute to a visual narrative where wearing SKIMS is not only a fashion statement, but of emotional wellbeing. The use of non-verbal symbolism aligns with semiotic theories that stress how advertisements communicate meaning beyond literal language. Drawing on the work of Agustia and Kurniawan (2020, pp.101-102), non-verbal signs like facial expressions, body positioning, and visual aesthetics can carry powerful cultural and emotional messages when used intentionally. The brand's unwavering depiction of confidence across its diverse cast of models asserts that empowerment is a shared, attainable state of being, not tethered to conventional beauty standards.



Figure 4.9. Showing flexibility and athleticism in the SKIMS Stretch Rib Collection (2020).
Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from April 19, 2020.

Body Appreciation and Comfort

Central to confidence is body appreciation, which Tylka & Wood-Barcalow (2015, p.53) describe as accepting, valuing, and respecting one's body while simultaneously rejecting beauty ideals solely dictated by media. SKIMS proactively champions this idea through visual cues fundamental to its authenticity strategy, presenting the body as fully deserving of acceptance instead of concealing or modifying it. This approach aligns with Morhart et al. (2015, p.201) constructivist perspective on authenticity, which claims that a brand's identity is seen as genuine when it evokes emotional resonance and reflects shared cultural values. As observed, models often strike natural and relaxed poses such as slouching, sitting, or casually leaning, breaking away from the stiff stylization common in traditional fashion imagery (Figure 4.9). These postures inherently communicate comfort both in one's own skin and with the product, affirming SKIMS' commitment to comfort.

A recurring visual motif in SKIMS campaigns is the gentle placement of a hand on the body, on areas like the stomach, thigh, or collarbone, signalling an intimate and nurturing relationship with oneself (Figure 4.10). This gesture expresses affection and self-acceptance instead of criticism. Such subtle, indexical cues boost consumers' belief in the emotional sincerity of the images, rather than seeing them as artificially staged. This corresponds with Abidin's (2014, p. 121) concept of perceived realness. A key aspect of this approach is the inclusive depiction of all body types; all styled, lit, and composed consistently. Scars, prosthetics, and other visible differences are neither edited nor hidden but are integrated seamlessly into the brand's visual language (Figure 4.5). This conscious decision to embrace bodily diversity enhances the indexical authenticity, presenting unfiltered realities that resonate with consumers seeking genuine representation (Gilmore & Pine, 2007, p. 5). Ultimately, SKIMS' strategy goes beyond affirming its comfort-driven designs. It cultivates a cultural narrative where comfort and beauty coexist.

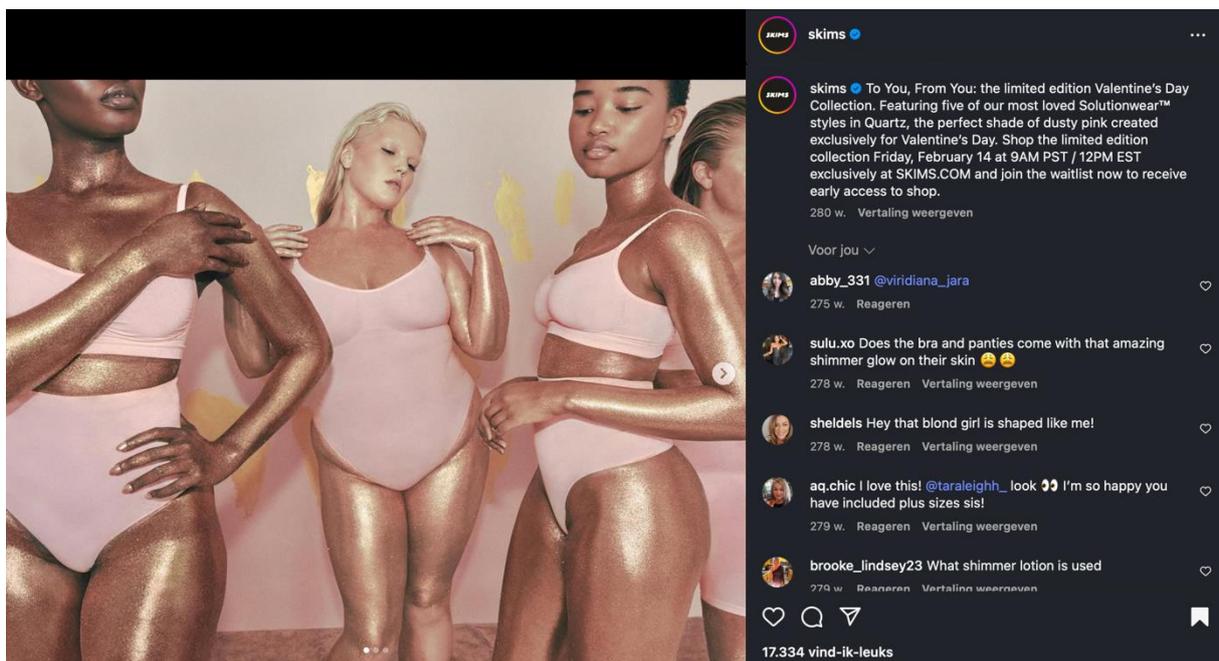


Figure 4.10. Body diversity in the SKIMS Valentine's Day Collection (2020).
Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from February 11, 2020.

Sensuality and Allure

While SKIMS promotes body positivity and comfort, it simultaneously constructs a visual narrative of sensuality and allure. The brand skilfully navigates the line between empowerment and eroticism, presenting sensual imagery that centres agency rather than objectification. This is often achieved through reclining or suggestive poses, illustrated by bodies that are slightly arched, heads tilted, and legs extended. These poses are relaxed rather than performative, communicating control over one's own sexual expression. The use of wet-look hair, minimal clothing, or strategic lingerie positioning suggests intimacy without being overtly provocative. The 2021 Cotton Collection campaign, featuring Megan Fox and Kourtney Kardashian (Figure 4.11) in intimate, relaxed poses offer a compelling example of SKIMS' visual strategy. Soft, glowing light diffuses across their bodies, highlighting curves and contours to evoke softness and warmth, rather than hyper sexualization. This imagery, combined with the aspirational and edgy choice of celebrities, bolsters a message of effortless confidence and everyday sensuality. The implicit message is that sensuality, like confidence, is for the wearer first. This challenges traditional advertising scripts in which women's bodies are sexualized for external consumption. In SKIMS' visual universe, sensuality is internal, self-authored, and intimately tied to how one feels in their own skin.



Figure 4.11. Megan Fox and Kourtney Kardashian posing sensually for SKIMS Valentine's Day Collection (2021).

Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from October 11, 2021.

Vulnerability and Authenticity

Perhaps the most emotionally resonant layer of SKIMS' self-image narrative lies in its portrayal of vulnerability and authenticity. In contrast to the polished glamour of certain campaigns (e.g. Metallic 2022, Figure 4.8), some images opt for close-up, intimate framing that highlights faces, textures, or specific body parts. These compositions draw the viewer closer, creating a sense of human connection. The models often appear with minimal or no makeup, undone hair, and soft or neutral facial expressions. This presentation strips away overt stylization and instead positions the model as a relatable individual. Vulnerability here is portrayed as a strength to be seen without filters or performance rather than a weakness. This aligns with Morhart et al.'s (2015, p. 202) constructivist view of brand authenticity, which emphasizes emotional connection and cultural relevance as central to perceptions of genuineness. Such authenticity is especially powerful in campaigns like the Olivia Munn breast cancer awareness campaign (Figure 4.12), which highlights post-surgical bodies in a way that is both dignified and confident. These images are not segregated as exceptions but are embedded within broader visual narratives, reinforcing that authenticity is not a token gesture but a defining brand value. This mirrors Abidin's (2014, p. 121) concept of perceived realness, where sincerity and emotional intimacy are key to building trust with audiences. By treating vulnerability as part of empowerment, SKIMS extends its brand authenticity beyond aesthetics, illustrating that realness also includes softness, sensitivity, and strength in one's truth.

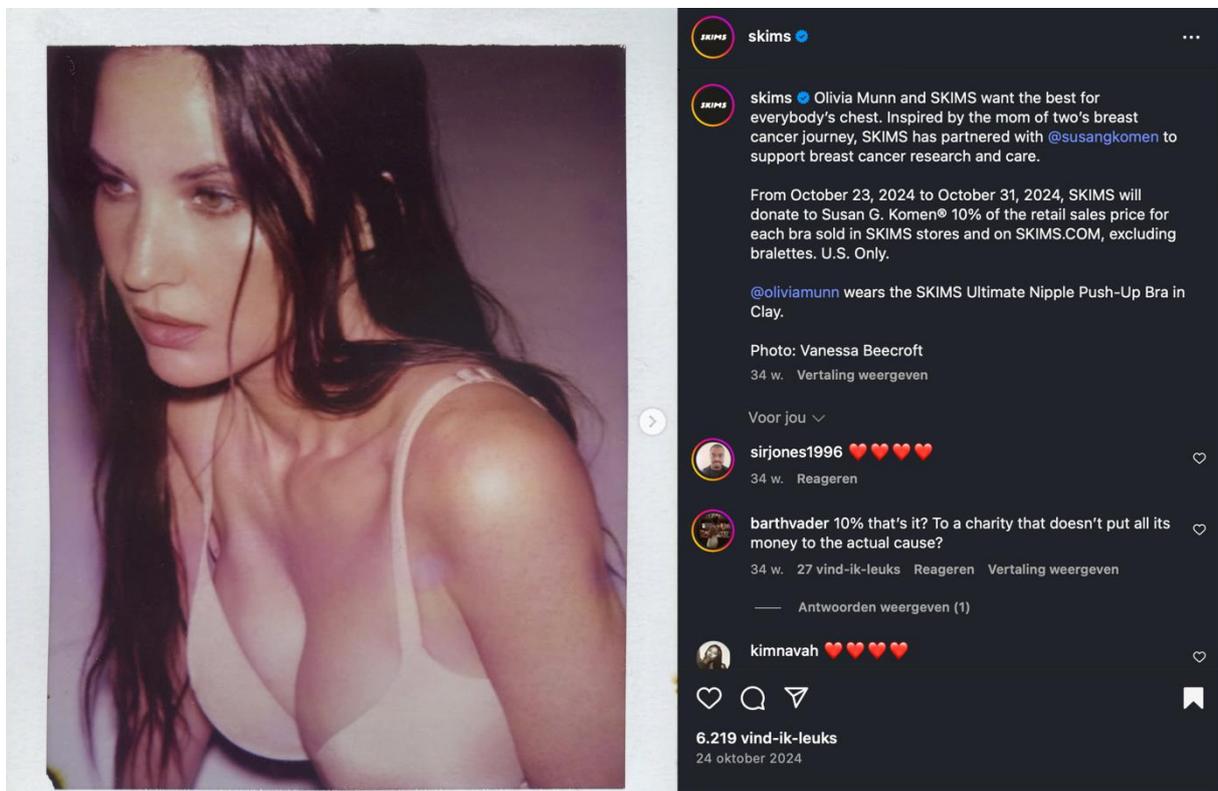




Figure 4.12. Olivia Munn for SKIMS x Susan G. Komen (Breast Cancer Awareness, 2024).
Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS posts from October 24 and 25, 2024.

To sum up, SKIMS' Instagram campaigns construct a layered portrayal of self-image that moves beyond surface representation. Through deliberate visual cues, the brand weaves a narrative of empowerment, acceptance, allure, and vulnerability. These are not mere stylistic choices but part of a broader cultural message. By spotlighting diverse and complex bodies, SKIMS challenges beauty norms and redefines what it means to feel comfortable in one's skin. In this way, self-image becomes both a personal and political act—one the brand actively encourages its audience to embrace.

4.3 Culture

SKIMS' Instagram feed functions as more than a product showcase; it operates as a cultural dressing room where society tries on new definitions of beauty, identity, and confidence. Through diverse representation, trend-responsive visual aesthetics, and influential partnerships, SKIMS embeds itself within broader sociocultural discourses. As Kapferer (2008, p.184) notes, culture constitutes the foundational system of values that directs a brand's communication and behaviour. For SKIMS, this cultural orientation is translated into its commitment to inclusivity, body positivity, and advocacy for women's health. By maintaining a consistent and value-driven cultural identity, the brand effectively differentiates itself within a highly saturated fashion and shapewear market.

Visual Inclusivity and Diversity

A central pillar of SKIMS' cultural identity is its sustained commitment to visual representation. In branding and media, diversity refers to the recognition and appreciation of differences among individuals. These differences span various dimensions such as race, gender, age, body size, ability, and

socioeconomic status (Umotong, 2021, p. 1040). It acknowledges that people are multifaceted and seek visibility within cultural and commercial spaces (Suradkar & Chanana, 2024, p.23). However, inclusivity goes a step further by ensuring these differences are not only present but actively valued and given equal space and opportunity (Suradkar & Chanana, 2024, p.23). While diversity represents presence, inclusivity ensures participation and equity. From its debut collections to recent campaigns, SKIMS has consistently prioritized diverse casting across skin tone, body type, gender identity, and ability. The brand's distinctive approach to nude-toned garments has been a hallmark since its first product launch. Rather than offering a single shade of "nude," campaigns feature models with a wide range of skin tones (light, deep, warm, and cool) styled in complementary tones that match their complexion (Figure 4.13). This challenges the long-standing fashion convention that equates nude with beige and reframes it as a full-spectrum, human-centred palette.

Evidently, SKIMS promotes body diversity by giving equal visual attention to curvy, plus-size, petite, and athletic models (Figure 4.13). These models are styled, lit, and posed consistently, demonstrating that no single body type is prioritized. SKIMS also naturally integrates models with visible disabilities, like prosthetics or scars, presenting them without exception in both solo and group shots (Figure 4.5). Group compositions often highlight contrasting skin tones, body shapes, and abilities, typically featuring 3–5 diverse models. These visuals act as cultural statements, showing SKIMS is for everyone, thus challenging fashion's history of exclusion and affirming its role in a more inclusive visual culture.



Figure 4.13. Diverse models for SKIMS Solutionwear™, “ShowYourSKIMS” (2019).
Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS posts from August 27, 2019.

Societal Trends

Beyond representation, SKIMS' visual culture is deeply attuned to aesthetic trends and societal moods. Its campaigns often reflect, and sometimes subtly critique, dominant style movements through choices in styling, backdrops, and overall visual language. SKIMS' campaigns generally fall into three separate visual categories. The first is the stripped-back studio campaign, characterised by minimalist, often monochromatic backdrops that place full focus on the garments and the body. This clean visual style signals modern luxury while allowing model diversity to take centre stage, reinforcing SKIMS' ongoing commitment to inclusivity. The second type includes lifestyle-oriented campaigns, which move beyond the studio and into real-world environments such as boats, gardens, mountaintops, beaches, or pools (Figure 4.14). These naturalistic settings convey spontaneity, seasonality, and adaptability, visually linking the garments to moments of leisure, intimacy, or athleticism. The third campaign style incorporates retro and era-specific aesthetics, drawing inspiration from cultural moments such as 1970s winter holidays (Figure 4.15), Y2K pop culture (Figure 4.2), and 1980s retrofuturism (Figure 4.8). These references appear through styling choices like hair and makeup, nostalgic props (e.g., flip phones, wooden ski poles), and photography formats such as Polaroid frames (Figure 4.12). By tapping into collective nostalgia, SKIMS positions itself as both trend-conscious and culturally grounded, reimagining past aesthetics through a modern, distinctive lens. Finally, SKIMS frequently invokes the visual language of comfort, with soft textures, robes, blankets, and muted lighting. These cues align with broader cultural shifts, such as the post-pandemic embrace of loungewear and the "soft life" ethos that values ease and emotional well-being over performance. In this way, SKIMS does not merely follow trends; it responds to shifts in cultural mood, maintaining emotional relevance and resonance with its audience.

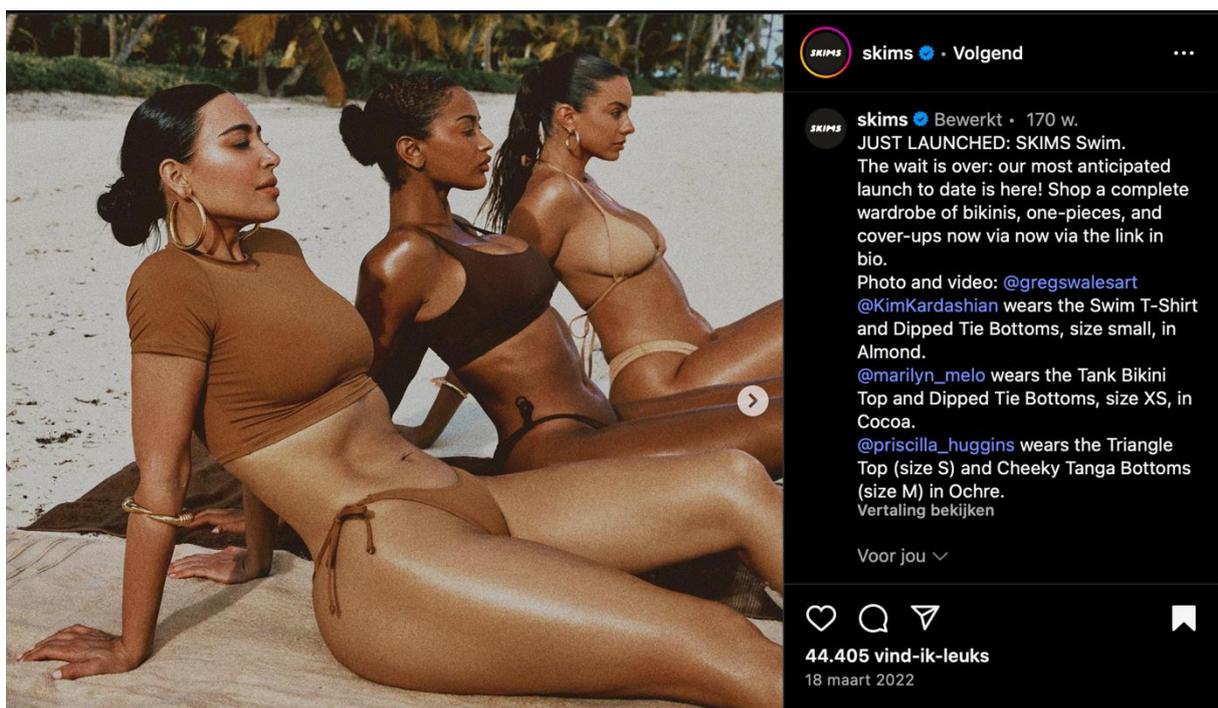


Figure 4.14. Kim Kardashian and other models emphasizing life-oriented campaigns in SKIMS Swim (2022).

Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS posts from March 18, 2022.



Figure 4.15. SKIMS highlighting a humouristic side in the SKIMS Holiday Collection (2023).
 Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS posts from December 10, 2023.

Cultural Partnerships and Impact

SKIMS does not only reflect culture, but it also participates in shaping it through strategic collaborations and cultural alignment. These partnerships amplify the brand’s relevance and deepen its identity as a player within broader cultural systems, from fashion to sports to activism. A standout partnership is with Team USA (2021 and 2024), where both Olympic and Paralympic athletes are dressed in SKIMS loungewear and performance basics. The inclusion of American flags, a balance beam, and athletic poses connects the product directly to national pride, elite performance, and resilience. The campaign visually highlights athletic bodies front and centre, proving that SKIMS supports both style and performance (Figure 4.16). Furthermore, another timely example is SKIMS’ collaboration with singer Charli XCX, launched during the peak of “Brat Summer” (Figure 4.4). This was a cultural moment characterized by bold, unapologetic youth expression and nostalgic pop influences. By partnering with Charli XCX, SKIMS leverages the artist’s symbolic associations of rebelliousness, playfulness, and cultural cachet, transferring these meanings onto the brand through celebrity endorsement (McCracken, 1989, p.310). This collaboration not only captures a vibrant cultural wave but actively moulds it. Such celebrity partnerships are essential for deepening brand identity and enhancing consumer engagement through alignment with culturally relevant figures and moments (Lee et al., 2022, p.1360).



Figure 4.16. Paralympic swimmer Jessica Long posing for SKIMS Team USA (2024).
Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from June 27, 2024.

In a more emotionally driven campaign, SKIMS partnered with Olivia Munn and breast cancer awareness organizations, centring imagery around mastectomy scars and survivor strength (Figure 4.12). The campaign departs from high-glam aesthetics, opting instead for quiet, intimate visuals that convey vulnerability, softness, and support. This stripped-back style intensifies SKIMS' perceived sincerity, aligning closely with the notion of moral authenticity. In this framework, consumers view a brand as ethically aligned with social values (Beverland et al., 2008, p.8). This campaign comes across as emotionally genuine, bolstered by SKIMS' prior support for (female) health-related causes. It also connects with existential authenticity by validating real experiences and representing post-surgical bodies in a dignified, unfiltered light (Morhart et al., 2015, p.202). This emotional resonance underscores SKIMS' broader authenticity strategy within the Experience Economy, where meaning, identity, and emotional connection hold greater significance than polished perfection (Gilmore & Pine, 2007, p.12).

Ultimately, SKIMS' Instagram imagery positions the brand as a sophisticated voice in cultural visual language, covering representation, trends, and social impact. Its steady commitment to diverse inclusion, clever use of societal aesthetics, and strong cultural partnerships create a brand identity that is both forward-thinking and visually appealing. This strategy moves SKIMS past simple fashion sales into cultural branding, where its products carry significant meaning beyond their physical traits. Each image is an invitation, showing consumer not just what to wear, but how to embrace comfort, confidence, and cultural awareness.

4.4 Product and Design (Physique)

A brand's physique encompasses its tangible features that define its identity and value, such as logos and flagship products (Janonis et al., 2007, p.72). For SKIMS, this is embodied in its seamless shapewear and signature nude palette, which visually represent the brand's essence. Kapferer (2008, pp.182–183) notes that physique must combine both form and function to effectively differentiate a brand. On Instagram, SKIMS' feed operates as a curated digital showroom, designed to highlight product quality, materiality, and brand distinctiveness. Through visual cues, SKIMS conveys how its garments sculpt, support, stretch, and integrate seamlessly into everyday life.

Fit and Form

The most visually defining feature of SKIMS products is their body-sculpting, form-fitting design. Across campaigns, garments are styled to make their function visible: tight, seamless fits glued to the body, accentuating waist cinching, bust lifting, and hip contouring (Yuan, 2024, p.3). This effect is intentional, with models posing with arched backs, extended limbs, and angled legs to emphasize fabric tension and flexibility. In motion-oriented shoots, especially with athletes, bodies are captured stretching, twisting, or leaning, evidencing how the garments move fluidly with the wearer (Figure 4.16). Moreover, in SKIMS Swim and Lounge-themed campaigns, fit is displayed through skin contact. Garments cling smoothly without bunching, portraying a second skin feel. Waistbands lie flat, bustlines remain secure, and hemlines hold in place, projecting comfort and functional elegance. Even looser items like robes or fuzzy sets intentionally display softness and relaxation through their drape and flow (Figure 4.17). What truly distinguishes SKIMS' portrayal of fit is its consistency across all body types. Whether worn by a size zero or size sixteen model, the garments maintain their intended shape and effect, visually reinforcing the brand's message of inclusive, reliable performance.

Materiality and Texture

While Instagram lacks physical tactility, SKIMS proficiently uses lighting, close-ups, and stylization to imply the texture and material quality of its garments. Throughout its various campaigns, different materials are visually identified through their sheen, grain, or structure. For instance, ribbed knits create visible vertical lines that catch light differently, emphasizing elasticity and structure. These are often used in *Lounge* or *Cotton* collections to evoke softness and stretch (Figure 4.18). Fabrics with fuzzy textures, such as those in the Cozy Collection (2019), are styled in plush, relaxed poses, paired with soft lighting and neutral backdrops (Figure 4.17). These choices visually cue warmth, comfort, and a tactile softness that viewers can almost feel. Textures become an aesthetic device to communicate temperature, seasonality, and sensory appeal, which are critical elements in the marketing of loungewear and at-home basics.



Figure 4.17. Kim Kardashian posing for SKIMS Cozy Collection (2019).
 Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from December 27, 2019.



Figure 4.18. Kim Kardashian showing stretch and softness in the SKIMS Stretch Rib Collection (2020).
 Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from April 16, 2020.

In contrast, SKIMS' limited-edition and premium capsule collections incorporate metallics, shimmer, and shine to visually communicate luxury and exclusivity. These surface-level cues, particularly in collaborations with brands like Swarovski, are captured through strategic lighting and zoomed-in product angles (Figure 4.19). The Swarovski x SKIMS collaboration translates everyday glamour into visible luxury, prompting consumers to feel confident, luxurious, and sensually radiant. It is reminiscent of a "shining star", as the body becomes a canvas for jewels. This partnership places SKIMS within high-end fashion circles, even as it gives precedence to comfort. The versatility of material portrayal allows SKIMS to fluidly move between utility and glamour, offering viewers both functional elegance and captivating allure through visual storytelling.



Figure 4.19. Kim Kardashian and other diverse models showing luxury in the Swarovski x SKIMS (2023). Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from November 4, 2023.

Product Categories and Functionality

SKIMS excels at visually distinguishing its product lines, enabling consumers to recognize a garment's category without relying on text. This clarity is achieved through careful styling, composition, and setting. For instance, shapewear is typically photographed in clean, minimal environments with tight, focused framing. Models are posed to highlight structure and compression, emphasizing the sculpting nature of the garments. The absence of accessories or props ensures that attention remains on fit, silhouette, and skin-tone matching (Figure 4.9). In contrast, loungewear is styled in cozy, home-like settings—on beds, couches, or against soft textures like fur throws or knit

blankets. The relaxed fits, barefoot models, and minimal makeup suggest a product designed for comfort and self-care. The overall mood is casual and intimate, aligning with the intended use of the garments (Figure 4.17). Meanwhile, the swimwear line leans into lifestyle-driven imagery. Campaigns are set by pools, on beaches, or aboard boats, where wet hair, sun-kissed skin, and glistening water droplets visually communicate durability and real-world application (Figure 4.14). The designs feature bolder colours and cheekier cuts, distinguishing swimwear from other categories while maintaining the brand's signature style. The menswear line further expands SKIMS' visual language. Athletes and male models are placed in performance or leisure-based settings, often accompanied by props like basketballs or footballs (Figure 4.20). These elements set the men's collection apart from the women's, while still upholding the brand's core values of comfort and functionality.

Across all categories, accessories also play a vital communicative role. Items such as ski goggles, high heels, or silk scarves serve to signal the mood, occasion, or aesthetic of each collection. Additionally, SKIMS uses subtle design details, like front closures, stretch panels, and seamless construction to visually highlight product functionality (Figure 4.5). These cues not only enhance the garments' practicality but also attest to the brand's user-centred philosophy. While such features may not always be immediately obvious, they are consistently integrated into the visual storytelling, consolidating SKIMS' commitment to inclusive, practical, and thoughtfully designed fashion.



Figure 4.20. NBA All Star Shai Gilgeous-Alexander balancing a basketball for SKIMS Mens collection (2023).

Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from October 26, 2023.

In brief, SKIMS' physique is more than just clothes on bodies; it is intentional visual storytelling. The brand accentuates fit and form by illustrating how garments sculpt and support a wide range of body types. Through strategic lighting and close-up framing, SKIMS communicates material qualities and texture, enabling viewers to virtually "sense" the fabrics. Moreover, the brand visually differentiates its product categories by clearly signalling their distinct functions and intended contexts. This cohesive visual strategy transforms everyday garments into expressions of identity, comfort, and confidence, effectively fulfilling the "Physique" facet of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism.

4.5 Visual Narrative and Mood (Personality)

This chapter is titled "Visual Narrative and Mood (Personality)", because it explores how SKIMS expresses human-like traits such as tone, mood, and aesthetic character through visual storytelling on Instagram. In Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008, p.184), personality alludes to the character of a brand as if it were a person, disclosed through its voice, emotional presence, and stylistic choices. Since SKIMS communicates primarily through imagery, its visual campaigns project a consistent persona that is sensual yet cozy, glamorous yet grounded, and powerful yet vulnerable. Through artistic direction, emotional resonance, and subtle world-building, SKIMS constructs a brand identity that is both aspirational and deeply relatable.

Aesthetic and Artistic Direction

SKIMS consistently crafts a distinct visual mood by adhering to a recognizable aesthetic style (Jurišová, 2020, p.121). Whether shot in a minimalist studio or an elaborate outdoor location, SKIMS imagery always feels intentional, elegant, and emotionally resonant. A key component is the use of cohesive colour palettes, which can influence consumer behaviour (Labrecque et al., 2013, p.188). Neutral tones such as taupes, browns, creams, and blushes dominate many campaigns, creating a sense of calm, minimalism, and harmony. These tones reflect the brand's commitment to inclusivity, especially in nude shapewear, while simultaneously establishing a modern, polished look (Figure 4.13). For more seasonal or limited-edition collections, bolder colours like vibrant reds (Figure 4.16) or silvers (Figure 4.19) introduce an emotional or thematic twist, signalling passion, luxury, or freshness. Regardless of the palette, SKIMS maintains visual unity.

Lighting techniques also play a major role in building emotional tone (Grodal, 2005, p.152). Soft, diffused lighting is often used to create a feeling of intimacy and gentleness, while high-contrast lighting or backlighting adds drama and intensity. Certain campaigns embrace ethereal glows or overexposure, giving the images a dreamy, cinematic quality. For example, the bright lights in the Swarovski x SKIMS campaign enhanced the shining star effect (Figure 4.19). Through light alone, SKIMS can shift the personality of a campaign from sensual to playful, or from elegant to athletic.

Beyond colour and lighting, props and backgrounds are also carefully selected to underpin this identity. In some cases, minimalist backdrops such as clean white walls and monochromatic studio floors enable the garment to speak without interference (Figure 4.20). In other campaigns, props such as vintage cars, pool loungers, and ski goggles build a more luxurious or playful mood. These details position SKIMS as a brand with emotional range, embracing multiple moods and energies beyond a single version of femininity or masculinity. This visual consistency exemplifies Aaker's (1997, p.348) brand personality framework, which posits that brands convey human-like traits through their design and communication styles. SKIMS' use of colour, lighting, and props constructs a personality that consumers can relate to and identify with, much like a self-assured friend who is always ahead of the curve.

Emotional and Sensory Appeal

SKIMS' Instagram imagery demonstrates a deliberate focus on emotional storytelling, an approach that enhances consumer engagement and solidifies brand personality. Emotional engagement is posited as the degree to which the audience is engaged (Hamby & Jones, 2022, p. 117). Neuroscientific research supports this strategy, showing that emotionally charged visuals stimulate dopamine release, thereby enhancing attention, memory retention, and emotional bonding (Lewis, 2010, p.177). Within SKIMS campaigns, the emotional tone is shaped through the expressions, poses, and body language of the models. Direct gazes and relaxed expressions in SKIMS campaigns foster intimacy and connection, while softer gestures introduce vulnerability and emotional depth. This vulnerability is particularly visible in Olivia Munn's pictures (Figure 4.12).

Additionally, sensory elements such as textured visuals, soft lighting, and warm colour palettes suggest comfort and care, helping viewers imagine how the garments might feel. For instance, models lounging in plush loungewear suggest emotional ease (Figure 4.17). SKIMS also incorporates humour to balance sophistication with relatability. A clear example is the Holiday 2023 campaign, which blended retro nostalgia with contemporary comfort. In Figure 4.21, Kim Kardashian appears styled in a 1960s-inspired look, seated playfully in a red pedal car with her scarf blowing in the wind. Framed like a vintage magazine cover titled "SKIMS Vol. 2," the image captures a whimsical, imaginative tone. This campaign reveals a more playful and timeless side of both the brand and its founder, reinforcing SKIMS' ability to explore different aesthetic moods while maintaining a coherent personality.



Figure 4.21. Kim Kardashian showing a humouristic side in SKIMS Holiday 2023 campaign (2023). Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from November 11, 2023.

Storytelling Element

At the heart of the SKIMS personality is the idea of storytelling through imagery. The campaigns are often structured like visual vignettes, snapshots of life, fantasy, or identity, rather than mere product showcases. This narrative quality is especially apparent in sequences where multiple images tell a progressive or thematic story. For instance, in Shaping Swim campaign (2022), viewers are guided through a full sensory journey: from models stepping on a boat, drying off on deck, to steering the boat (Figure 4.22). Each image suggests a moment in time, part of a broader lifestyle. Similarly, the Cozy Collection is styled like a lazy morning routine, with soft robes, coffee cups, and bed sheets, tapping into the universal desire for warmth and relaxation. Other campaigns use their visual storytelling to express social or emotional messages. In the Olivia Munn breast cancer awareness campaign, the focus is on resilience and softness. The storytelling is nonverbal but unmistakable: close-up shots, soft eye contact, visible scars, and subtle, comforting colour palettes. The narrative becomes one of survival, beauty, and solidarity (Figure 4.12). These visual strategies frame SKIMS not just as a fashion brand, but as one that acknowledges and supports lived human experiences. Whether it is about poolside luxury or bedroom coziness, SKIMS uses visual cues to open a narrative space for the consumer to project themselves into the brand world.

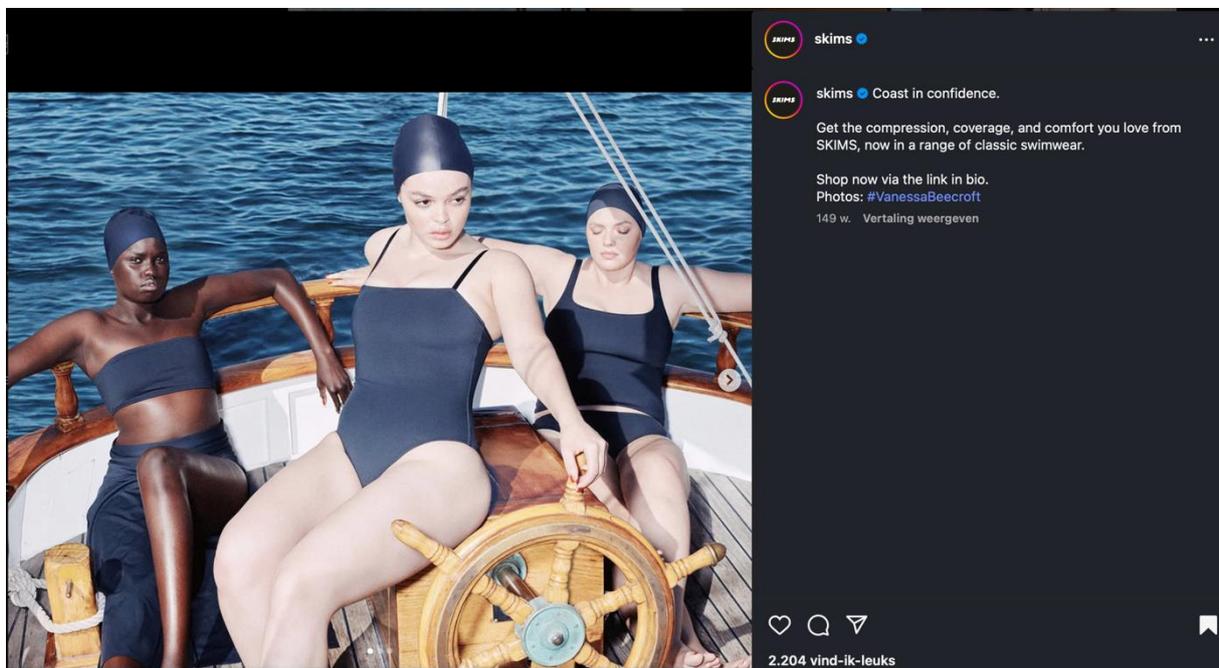
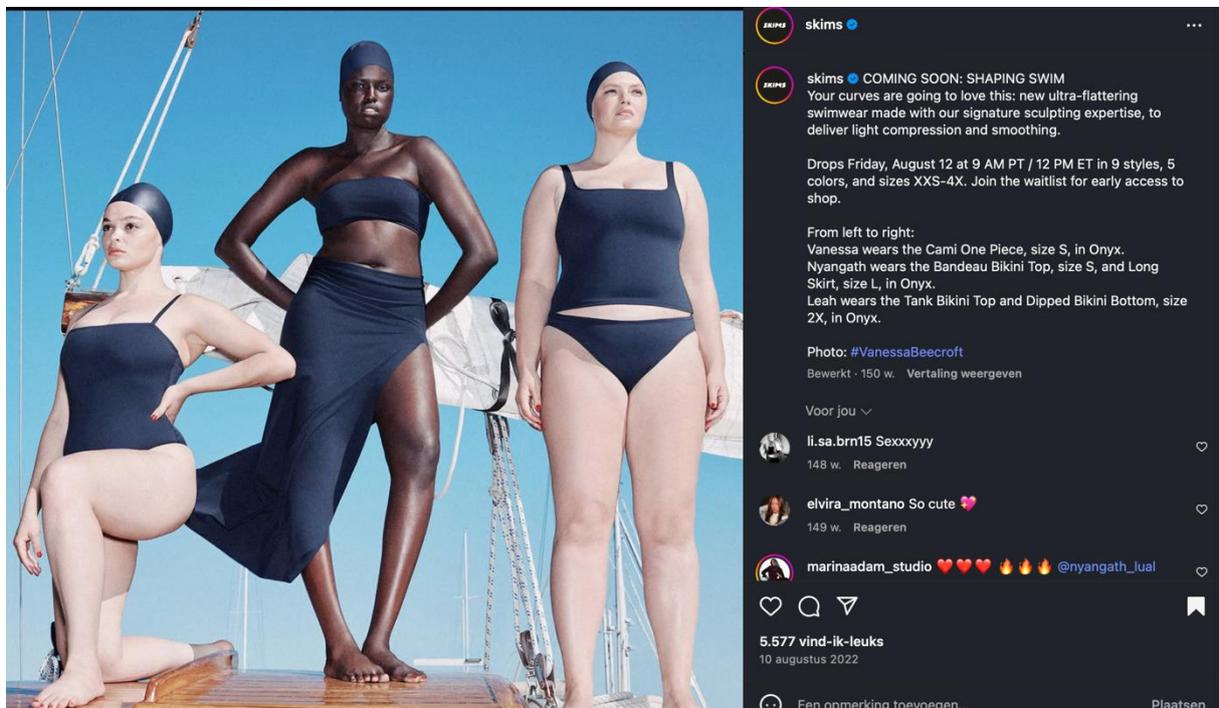


Figure 4.22. A series of consequences on a boat, illustrating visual storytelling in the Shaping Swim Campaign (2022).

Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS posts from August 10 and 13, 2022.

To conclude, SKIMS cultivates a brand personality that is emotionally rich and visually cohesive, reiterating Aaker’s (1997) idea that brands can personify human traits to strengthen consumer relationships. Through intentional aesthetics and narrative depth, SKIMS conjures a persona that is simultaneously confident and gentle, glamorous and accessible. This multifaceted emotional appeal facilitates consumer identification, positioning the brand not merely as a product provider but as a lifestyle emblem with which consumers can meaningfully engage and see themselves represented.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

SKIMS builds its brand identity on Instagram by carefully activating all six facets of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008) to create a brand that feels authentic, inclusive, and emotionally engaging (Heath, 2007, p.7). Through consistent messaging around body confidence, comfort and innovation, SKIMS shapes a clear visual and physical identity. Its evolving, versatile personality keeps the brand fresh and relatable. Their perfectly timed collaborations indicate a keen understanding of market positioning and partnership optimization. Another key strength is SKIMS' dedication to its brand values, particularly in relation to ethical and social issues, which reflects moral authenticity (Beverland et al., 2008, p.8). The brand connects with cultural values by actively supporting social causes and promoting diversity, thus strengthening its bond with followers. Through authentic storytelling and featuring real people, SKIMS fosters deep emotional connections (Heath, 2007, p.7). Each campaign contributed uniquely to shaping the multidimensional identity of SKIMS.

5.1 Discussion of the Results: SKIMS' Multifaceted Brand Identity on Instagram

Instagram as the stage for Brand Evolution and Identity Building

SKIMS' journey from a celebrity-backed label to a powerful independent brand is inseparable from its strategic use of Instagram, a platform that Kim Kardashian has long mastered as a personal branding tool (Whitney, 2023, p.62). Initially, SKIMS benefited immensely from Kardashian's global fame and media presence, harnessing her star power to generate immediate visibility and consumer interest (Zhang, 2024, p.2). For example, the 2019 Debut Campaign capitalized heavily on Kardashian's celebrity status to introduce the brand's vision of inclusive shapewear to a broad audience.

However, the brand's sustained success reflects a deliberate evolution, moving beyond mere celebrity endorsement to establishing a distinct, multidimensional identity grounded in authenticity and cultural relevance (Caan & Lee, 2023, p.15; Rojek, 2015, p.74). Instagram functions as the ideal stage for this transformation due to its visual-first nature and interactive possibilities. As Abidin (2014, p.121) notes, mobile devices have become critical "third screens," enabling brands to connect directly with audiences through immersive and interactive visual content. SKIMS leverages Instagram's affordances to present not only product features but lifestyle narratives, brand values, and emotional resonance (Felix et al., 2017, pp.119-120). The 2024 Olivia Munn Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign combined philanthropic storytelling with product promotion, demonstrating how SKIMS uses Instagram to incorporate emotional and ethical values into its brand story.

The platform's emphasis on highly curated aesthetics, consistent colour palettes, and aspirational styling aligns with the concept of "instagramism" (Manovich, 2016, p.73; Rogers, 2021, p.3), where polished, stylized content crafts an immersive brand world. SKIMS' Instagram campaigns

blend glamour with inclusivity, tapping into consumers' desires for social validation and emotional connection through visual storytelling (Lim & Childs, 2020, p.35). This aligns with Mollen and Wilson's (2010, p.5) definition of brand engagement as a cognitive and emotional commitment, enhanced through Instagram's interactive features that enable two-way communication and community building. Moreover, SKIMS' strategic timing of collaborations and posts reflects a deep understanding of consumer engagement stages (Sashi, 2012, pp.260-264), from initial connection via celebrity appeal to fostering loyalty through consistent messaging around values such as body positivity and empowerment. The brand's ability to create emotional attachment and co-create value with its followers illustrates how Instagram operates as a dynamic environment where SKIMS continually negotiates and reshapes its identity in response to cultural shifts and consumer expectations (Zhang, 2024, p.7). This analysis demonstrates how Instagram serves not only as a marketing channel but also as a dynamic space where SKIMS actively constructs and communicates its evolving brand identity, thereby illustrating a central argument of this thesis.

Inclusive and Culturally Relevant Visual Storytelling

Central to SKIMS' brand identity is its commitment to inclusivity and cultural responsiveness (Yuan, 2024, p.2), which is vividly expressed through its Instagram content. This commitment is manifested in the brand's deliberate casting choices, presenting a wide spectrum of skin tones, body shapes, ages, gender identities, and abilities. Unlike traditional fashion brands that often prioritize narrow beauty standards, SKIMS presents a more expansive and representative vision of beauty, challenging the industry's historical exclusions (Umotong, 2021, p.1040; Suradkar & Chanana, 2024, p.23).

A distinctive feature of SKIMS' inclusivity is its nuanced approach to "nude" shades. The brand disrupts the long-standing fashion convention equating nude with beige by offering a full spectrum of skin-tone matching garments that celebrate diverse complexions (Figure 4.13). This inclusive palette not only broadens the brand's appeal but also symbolizes a deeper cultural recognition of multiplicity and individuality. Beyond representation, SKIMS embeds its visual content within current cultural and aesthetic trends to maintain emotional relevance. Campaigns range from minimalist studio shots emphasizing understated luxury to naturalistic lifestyle imagery set in outdoor environments (Figure 4.14). The brand also taps into nostalgia and retro aesthetics, referencing eras such as the 1970s or Y2K culture, to create a layered, culturally grounded identity that appeals to varied consumer sensibilities (Figure 4.15).

Strategic partnerships further amplify SKIMS' cultural resonance. Partnerships with celebrities like Charli XCX or Team USA athletes position the brand at the crossroads of fashion, youth culture,

and social advocacy, signalling a brand that is attuned to current social conversations. For example, the inclusion of Paralympic athletes in campaigns underscores SKIMS' embrace of athleticism and resilience while advancing narratives of empowerment across abilities (Figure 4.16). Likewise, the collaboration with Olivia Munn on breast cancer awareness highlights SKIMS' commitment to social causes, boosting its moral authenticity and deepening emotional engagement (Beverland et al., 2008, p.8). Through these initiatives, SKIMS' Instagram presence transcends product promotion, serving as a cultural platform that invites consumers to engage with evolving notions of beauty, identity, and empowerment. This positions the brand as a socially conscious and forward-thinking player in the fashion industry.

Emotional and Sensory Engagement through Product and Persona

The physical and emotional appeal of SKIMS products is central to how the brand communicates its identity on Instagram. Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism emphasizes the importance of 'physique' and 'personality' facets in shaping brand recognition and affinity (Kapferer, 2008). SKIMS effectively brings these facets to life through its visual storytelling, illuminating the fit, materiality, and functionality of its garments alongside a carefully curated brand persona.

SKIMS highlights its signature seamless shapewear and nude palette as core elements of its physique. Campaign imagery showcases the body-sculpting effects of its garments, with models posed to accentuate fabric tension and movement (Yuan, 2024, p.3). This prominence on fit is consistently maintained across diverse body types, reinforcing the brand's inclusive ethos and reliability. Furthermore, textural qualities are artfully hinted at through lighting and close-up shots that entice consumers to virtually experience the softness, stretch, and warmth of fabrics (Figure 4.17, 4.18).

Concurrently, SKIMS cultivates a distinct brand personality that is both aspirational and relatable. The brand balances sensuality with comfort, glamour with practicality, creating a persona that feels both confident and approachable. Artistic direction involving colour palettes, lighting, and props inflates the emotional tone. As an example, soft, diffused lighting and neutral hues evoke intimacy and calm, while occasional bold colours or shiny metallics signal luxury and vibrancy (Labrecque et al., 2013, p.188). The inclusion of playful elements and humour in campaigns, such as the Holiday 2023 vintage-inspired shoot, further humanizes the brand. This makes SKIMS feel like a friend who is fashionable yet fun (Figure 4.21).

Crucially, SKIMS leverages visual storytelling to foster emotional engagement (Heath, 2007, p.7). Campaigns often unfold as vignettes: quick narrative snapshots that invite viewers to imagine themselves within the brand's lifestyle. For instance, the Shaping Swim campaign portrays models enjoying a luxurious nautical lifestyle. This imagery directly associates the products with moments of

leisure (Figure 4.22). Additionally, the breast cancer awareness campaign uses intimate close-ups and subdued colour schemes to transmit resilience and vulnerability, reinforcing SKIMS' commitment to authenticity and social support (Figure 4.12). This emotional and sensory appeal enhances consumer identification and brand loyalty by positioning SKIMS not merely as a provider of apparel but as an emblem of identity, self-care, and empowerment. The brand's multifaceted personality resonates across diverse consumer segments, enabling SKIMS to cultivate meaningful relationships that extend beyond transactional exchanges.

Ultimately, SKIMS' use of Instagram exemplifies how contemporary celebrity brands can evolve into culturally significant, independent entities through intentional visual storytelling and authentic engagement. Instagram serves as both a showcase and a stage where SKIMS crafts a distinctive brand identity characterized by inclusivity, cultural relevance, and emotional resonance. By integrating product qualities with a relatable and aspirational persona, SKIMS operates Instagram to build a brand that transcends fashion, embodying broader social values and lifestyle aspirations. This case underscores the growing importance of social media in shaping brand identity within today's digital and culturally conscious marketplace.

5.2 Societal Implications

SKIMS' brand identity and marketing approach have pivotal societal implications, especially in shaping ideas about body image, inclusivity, and empowerment. Through consistent promotion of body positivity and the representation of diverse body types, SKIMS contests conventional beauty standards that have historically excluded those who fall outside of them. This kind of representation helps foster greater self-acceptance among consumers and supports a broader cultural movement toward embracing diverse shapes, sizes, genders, and identities. In addition, SKIMS' genuine involvement with social causes like breast cancer awareness integrates important topics like health and social responsibility into everyday discourse. This approach sets a precedent for other brands to move beyond performative marketing and contribute meaningfully to social issues. As a result, this creates a culture where business success goes hand in hand with ethical values

5.3 Academic Implications

SKIMS' brand identity strategy on Instagram offers several valuable academic implications, especially for research in marketing, branding, and cultural studies. First, it provides a contemporary case study on how brands can effectively apply Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008) in digital contexts, showing how each facet can be activated through visual storytelling. Secondly, SKIMS highlights the increasing importance of authenticity and emotional connection in brand-consumer

relationships, supporting theories that accentuate experiential marketing. This corresponds with growing academic interest in the experience economy, where brands must offer meaningful emotional experiences to engage consumers deeply (Gilmore and Pine, 2007, p.12). Thirdly, SKIMS' integration of social causes and cultural values provides novel material for studies on ethical branding and corporate social responsibility. It exemplifies how brands can transcend performative activism by embedding social advocacy into their core identity, providing a model for sustainable brand ethics. Finally, SKIMS' cultural inclusivity and body positivity challenges traditional branding norms, contributing to academic discussions on diversity, representation, and identity politics in consumer culture. This case encourages further research on how global brands navigate and shape evolving societal values through digital platforms.

5.4 Study Limitations

A key limitation of this study lies in its subjective nature, inherent to the use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This method is grounded in interpretation and acknowledges that the researcher's perspective plays a central role in theme development. As such, the analysis is not intended to be objective or replicable in a positivist sense. For example, the Metallic Swim campaign (2022) was coded as "extravagant" and "kitsch", terms that reflect a personal reading of its aesthetic. Another researcher might interpret the same visuals as "glamorous" and "an accurate depiction of that era." These interpretive variations underscore the subjectivity embedded in thematic visual analysis. Moreover, the analysis focuses exclusively on SKIMS's brand output, specifically their curated Instagram posts. It does not examine audience reception, such as comments, likes, or overall engagement. Subsequently, this limits insights into how consumers interpret or emotionally respond to the brand messaging. Captions are considered, but only as contextual guides to support visual interpretation rather than as standalone textual data. Another limitation is the study's platform specificity. SKIMS's branding strategies extend beyond Instagram into platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and their website. By analysing only Instagram, this research offers a narrower scope and may overlook multimodal or cross-platform branding tactics. Finally, the study does not incorporate behind-the-scenes content, interviews, or production insights. Therefore, it misses out on information that could have broadened understanding of strategic intent.

5.5 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research on SKIMS and similar brands could explore numerous promising avenues to deepen understanding of brand identity development in the digital age. One key area is the evolving role of social media platforms (like Instagram) in shaping brand-consumer relationships. While this study focuses on SKIMS' brand identity activation, future research could examine how algorithm

changes and platform features (e.g., Reels, Stories), influence the brand's identity and consumer engagement over time. Another suggestion is to examine the impact of SKIMS' cultural inclusivity and diversity efforts on different demographic groups. It would be interesting to explore how various audiences with varying backgrounds perceive and relate to SKIMS' messaging, and whether these perceptions translate into brand loyalty and purchase behaviour. Consequently, this would offer insight into the effectiveness and limitations of inclusive branding strategies. The ethical dimension of SKIMS' advocacy and social cause integration also promises further study. Future research could critically assess how consumers interpret and respond to social activism embedded in branding, distinguishing between genuine commitment and perceived performativity. Longitudinal studies could reveal how such efforts affect brand reputation and consumer trust. Lastly, comparative research between SKIMS and other celebrity-driven brands could highlight best practices and unique challenges in cultivating authenticity and emotional resonance. This could include analyses of campaign content, consumer feedback, and influencer partnerships. Such work would contribute to a richer understanding of the complex dynamics between brands and consumers in contemporary culture.

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7. Appendix

7.1 Appendix A: Coding Tree

This appendix outlines the visual coding tree used to analyse SKIMS' Instagram campaigns. It details the hierarchical structure of codes, sub-codes, and thematic categories, which helped identify recurring visual patterns, brand messages, and narrative elements. This coding tree was a foundational tool for organizing data and tracing how SKIMS communicates its brand identity across various campaign types and product lines.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Open Codes / Visual Cues
Influencer Marketing	Recognition and Status	Recognizable public figures (e.g., Kim Kardashian, Neymar, Ice Spice, Charli XCX)
		Props implying celebrity status (basket balls, balance beam)
	Strategic Casting and Representation	Visible body diversity
		Models with disabilities
		Athletes in action-oriented campaigns
		Incorporating their own image (e.g. tattoos)
	Interaction and Group Dynamics	Multi-model images (“squad” aesthetic)
		Casual closeness
	Brand Alignment and Aspiration	Aspirational lifestyles (e.g. poolside)
		Poses referencing past SKIMS imagery
		Integration of SKIMS in their “everyday” routines
Self-Image	Confidence and Empowerment	Bold stances (hands on hips, athletic stances)
		Direct gazes
		Relaxed body language
		Expressions of joy
	Body Acceptance and Comfort	Natural poses
		Soft touch on body
		Diverse body sizes
		Scars/prosthetics normalized
	Sensuality and Allure	Reclining or suggestive poses
		Wet-look hair
		Lingerie emphasis

		Soft, glowing lighting Curves accentuated
	Vulnerability and Authenticity	Close-up, intimate shot Natural looks or no makeup Mastectomy scars
Culture	Visual Inclusivity and Diversity	Range of skin tones, body types, abilities Full spectrum of nude shades Group photos with deliberate diversity
	Societal Trends and Aesthetics	Retro/era-specific styling (Retro futurism, Y2K) Minimalist backdrops Outdoor shoots (boats, snow, pool) Cozy visuals (plush robes)
	Cultural Partnerships and Impact	Co-branded props/logos (Fendi, Swarovski, Team USA) Campaign visuals tied to awareness causes Celebrity culture as brand vehicle
Product and Design (Physique)	Fit and Form	Tight, sculpted, seamless fit Active body poses show stretch/flex Waist and bust support visibly framed
	Materiality and Texture	Ribbed knits, fuzzy textures, metallics Soft fabric visually implied Crystals, shimmer, shine as premium cues
	Product Categories and Functionality	Visual division: female shapewear, swim, lounge, men's shapewear Accessories showing function (goggles, heels, scarves) Unique elements: adaptive fits
Visual Narrative & Mood (Personality)	Aesthetic and Artistic Direction	Nude tones, monochromes, high contrast Bright white or diffused lighting Props: vintage cars, sculptures Consistent mood per campaign
	Emotional and Sensory Appeal	Cozy, warm settings Luxury glam with crystals Nostalgia via styling Playfulness (expressions, props) Intimate tone in framing
		Real-life snapshots (domestic scenes, travel)

	Storytelling Elements	Visual sequences (same model in different poses/settings)
		Emotional arcs: strength, softness, celebration

7.2 Appendix B: Overview of the dataset

Appendix B details the methodology for data collection, encompassing 168 posts sourced exclusively from the official @skims Instagram feed (<https://www.instagram.com/skims/>). Each documented entry includes the photo ID, date posted, campaign title, caption, and key visual elements. Additionally, each post was analysed in relation to the Kapferer Brand Identity Prism (2008) and assigned initial codes and emerging themes following Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. The collected photos are systematically grouped by 24 SKIMS collections, with an average of seven photos per collection. Notable exceptions in quantity include the SolutionWear™ #ShowYourSKIMS campaign (14 posts) and the SKIMS Swimwear lines from 2022, which comprise SKIMS SWIM 2022 (5 posts), METALLIC SWIM (5 posts), and SHAPING SWIM (4 posts).

All coding and interpretations are based solely on the visual and textual content posted by SKIMS on its official Instagram feed. No other promotional materials or third-party communication channels were included in this analysis. These are examples of Instagram posts that are examined



Figure 7.1.
Singer Charli XCX posing for Charli XCX x SKIMS campaign (2024). Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from August 21, 2024.



Figure 7.2.
Paralympic swimmer Jessica Long posing for SKIMS Team USA (2024). Source: See Appendix C, SKIMS post from June 27, 2024.

7.3 Appendix C: SKIMS Instagram Sources

- SKIMS. [@skims]. (n.d.). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved June 6, 2025, from <https://www.instagram.com/skims/>
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2019a, August 29). *Alice Marie Johnson (@alicemariefree) wears the Sculpting Bodysuit Mid Thigh (\$68 in sizes XXS - 5X) in Onyx. #ShowYourSKIMS Video by: #VanessaBeecroft* [Video]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1wlD1HgIY2/>
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2019b, September 1). *@anettemarweld wears the Sculpting Bra (\$32 in sizes XXS-5XL) and the Core Control Short Mid Thigh (\$38 in sizes XXS-5XL) in Mica. #ShowYourSKIMS Video: #VanessaBeecroft* [Video]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B14M3oLnWyl/>
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2019, August 27). *Solutionwear™ is innovative and first in class shapewear for all body types created and inspired by @kimkardashian. Shop SKIMS September 10 at SKIMS.COM.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1reRtJn68R/>
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2019, December 27). *@KimKardashian wears the Cozy Knit Robe and Cozy Knit Pant in Bone — available now in select sizes at SKIMS.COM.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B6lcspPngcs/>
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2020, February 11). *To You, From You: the limited edition Valentine's Day Collection. Featuring five of our most loved Solutionwear™ styles in Quartz, the perfect shade of dusty pink created exclusively for Valentine's Day. Shop the limited edition collection Friday, February 14 at 9AM PST / 12PM EST exclusively at SKIMS.COM and join the waitlist now to receive early access to shop.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/B8cHUTxnmIH/?img_index=1
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2020, February 14). *Launching exclusively at SKIMS.COM: the Valentine's Day Collection. A limited edition capsule collection of five of our most loved Solutionwear™ styles in Quartz, the perfect shade of dusty pink created exclusively for Valentine's Day. Shop the collection Friday, February 14 at 9AM PST / 12PM EST and join the waitlist now at SKIMS.COM to receive early access to shop.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/B8esCy6n7GZ/?img_index=1

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2020, April 16). *Coming soon: SKIMS Stretch Rib — a sleek, sport-inspired collection of soft ribbed underwear and loungewear pieces that flatter the body and mold to your curves. Available in new 3 colors and in sizes XXS - 5X, shop SKIMS Stretch Rib on Tuesday, April 21 at 9AM PST / 12PM EST exclusively at SKIMS.COM. Join the waitlist now to receive early access to shop.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/B_DDW2lnS31/

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2020, April 19). *The Scoop Bralette and Brief in Slate Green — part of the exclusive Stretch Rib Collection. Available in 3 new colors and in sizes XXS - 5X, shop Stretch Rib on Tuesday, April 21 at 9AM PST / 12PM EST. Join the waitlist now at SKIMS.COM to receive early access to shop.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/B_JGxZpHB46/

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2020, November 4). *Cover yourself in crystals with the limited edition SWAROVSKI x SKIMS Stretch Net Long Sleeve Dress. A standout dress in a net-like fabrication covered in @Swarovski crystals. Launching in Silver, Gold, and Bubble Gum online at 9AM ET on Tuesday, November 7 at SKIMS.COM and in select Swarovski stores. Sign up now. Photo: @vbuntitled.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CzOuShSu_3o/?img_index=1

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2021, February 10). *Velour: super soft, ultra-luxe, and extremely comfortable styles designed to take you from indoors to outside. Restocking on Thursday, February 11 at 9AM PT / 12PM ET in 4 colors and sizes XXS - 4X. Join the waitlist now via the link in our bio for early access to shop Velour.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CLFtSVunlor/?img_index=1

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2021, October 11). *SKIMS Cotton: sexy fits that hug your body in all the right places. @KourtneyKardash & @MeganFox wear the Cotton Jersey Triangle Bralette and Cotton Jersey Dipped Thong. Link in bio to shop the look. Photo: @DonnaTrobe.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CU5jxEJv0oN/>

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2022, March 18). *JUST LAUNCHED: SKIMS Swim. The wait is over: our most anticipated launch to date is here! Shop a complete wardrobe of bikinis, one-pieces, and cover-ups now via now via the link in bio. Photo and video: @gregswalesart @KimKardashian wears the Swim T-Shirt and Dipped Tie Bottoms, size small, in Almond. @marilyn_melo wears the Tank Bikini Top and Dipped Tie Bottoms, size XS, in Cocoa. @priscilla_huggins wears the Triangle Top (size S) and Cheeky Tanga Bottoms (size M) in Ochre.* [Instagram Photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CbQH6larlEk/?img_index=1

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2022, April 6). *Feel good, look legendary. Tyra, Heidi, Alessandra, and Candice wear our ultra-flattering, super comfortable Fits Everybody favorites. Get their looks now via the link in bio. Photo: @sandycandykim. [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb_RuEulDnj/*

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2022, April 29). *This is just the beginning. We're on a mission to provide more solutions for more people, and we want to hear from you! Tell us what other innovations you'd like to see next in the comments. The Adaptive Collection drops Monday, May 2nd at 9 AM PT / 12 PM ET. Join the waitlist via link in bio. @pansystbattie wears the Adaptive Fits Everybody Scoop Bralette and Brief, size S, in Cocoa. @halrosa wears the Adaptive Fits Everybody Scoop Bralette and Boy Short, size S, in Sienna. @stefanieschafferrr wears the Adaptive Fits Everybody Scoop Bralette and Boy Short, size S, in Clay. Photo: @hughkwils. [Instagram photo]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc8boY5IDVw/>*

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2022, July 1). *Swim's back and brighter than ever. We partnered with visual artist @NadiaLeeLee to bring barely-there pool vibes to life through her iconic Old Hollywood-inspired style. New Metallic Swim drops Wednesday, July 6th at 9 AM / 12 PM ET. Join the waitlist for early access to shop. @KimKardashian wears the Triangle Top and Dipped Tie Bottom, size S, in Gold. Photo: @NadiaLeeLee. [Instagram photo]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfewqG6lWS4/>*

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2022, August 10). *COMING SOON: SHAPING SWIM. Your curves are going to love this: new ultra-flattering swimwear made with our signature sculpting expertise, to deliver light compression and smoothing. Drops Friday, August 12 at 9 AM PT / 12 PM ET in 9 styles, 5 colors, and sizes XXS-4X. Join the waitlist for early access to shop. From left to right: Vanessa wears the Cami One Piece, size S, in Onyx. Nyangath wears the Bandeau Bikini Top, size S, and Long Skirt, size L, in Onyx. Leah wears the Tank Bikini Top and Dipped Bikini Bottom, size 2X, in Onyx. Photo: #VanessaBeecroft. [Instagram photo]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChFbzJeFBqX/>*

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2022, August 13). *Coast in confidence. Get the compression, coverage, and comfort you love from SKIMS, now in a range of classic swimwear. Shop now via the link in bio. Photos: #VanessaBeecroft. [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/ChLOkScI7T3/?img_index=1*

- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2022, December 10). *Cozy beyond compare. Mariama wears the Cozy Knit Unisex Onesie, size S/M, in Petal Houndstooth.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C0ra4HJs_7S/
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2023, October 24). *@neymarjr's comfort is one goal away in SKIMS Mens Cotton, the softest basics you'll ever feel with built-in recovery. SKIMS Mens launches Thursday, October 26 at 9AM PT / 12PM ET. @neymarjr wears the SKIMS Mens Cotton Tank and Cotton 3" Boxer Brief in Kyanite. Photos: @donnatrope.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CyySsLWMA1E/?img_index=2
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2023, October 26). *JUST LAUNCHED: SKIMS MENS. It's here: the most comfortable underwear you'll ever own, sported by MVPs @shai, @neymarjr and @nbsmallerbear. Shop 3 collections for your best performance now. Photos: @donnatrope.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cy3jQ4jRjzx/?img_index=1
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2023, November 11). *The fastest way to her heart: Fuzzy Knits. Shop our special new collection of playfully plush lounge for her in the Holiday Shop now. @KimKardashian wears the Fuzzy Knits Super Cropped T-Shirt and Tie Side Thong, size XS, in Marble with the Cozy Knit Scarf. Photo: @nadialeecohen.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Czg2uLMOtLP/>
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2024, May 14). *Taking your top drawer by storm: the comfiest, stretchiest underwear we make, sported by @WNBA point guard powerhouse @skylardigginssmith.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C67VUWgPf88/?img_index=2
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2024, June 27). *Unstoppable in SKIMS for @TeamUSA. 29-time Paralympic medalist and legend @jessicatatianalong leads the way in our innovative Adaptive Fits Everybody foundations and Signature Swim with special branding – available to shop for a limited time.* [Instagram photo]. https://www.instagram.com/p/C8seSNPPxO_/?img_index=1
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2024, August 21). *JUST DROPPED: NEW COTTON. @charli_xcx wears the Cotton Rib Split Neck Bralette and Thong in Light Heather Grey Stripe with the Cotton Fleece Waffle Lined Oversized Hoodie.* [Instagram photo]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-8BrlSuY9J/>
- SKIMS. [@skims]. (2024, October 24). *Olivia Munn and SKIMS want the best for everybody's chest. Inspired by the mom of two's breast cancer journey, SKIMS has partnered with*

@susangkomen to support breast cancer research and care. From October 23, 2024 to October 31, 2024, SKIMS will donate to Susan G. Komen® 10% of the retail sales price for each bra sold in SKIMS stores and on SKIMS.COM, excluding bralettes. U.S. Only. @oliviamunn wears the SKIMS Ultimate Nipple Push-Up Bra in Clay. Photo: Vanessa Beecroft [Instagram Photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/DBhJHCPOZUp/?img_index=1

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2024, October 24). *Olivia Munn and SKIMS want the best for everybody's chest. Inspired by the mom of two's breast cancer journey, SKIMS has partnered with @susangkomen to support breast cancer research and care. From October 23, 2024 to October 31, 2024, SKIMS will donate to Susan G. Komen® 10% of the retail sales price for each bra sold in SKIMS stores and on SKIMS.COM, excluding bralettes. U.S. Only. @oliviamunn wears the SKIMS Ultimate Nipple Push-Up Bra in Clay. Photo: Vanessa Beecroft. [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/DBhJHCPOZUp/?img_index=1*

SKIMS. [@skims]. (2024, October 25). *"When I look at the scars or how my breasts look different or how clothes fit on me differently, I feel a lot of gratitude. The way my body looks is just a representation of how hard I fought." - @oliviamunn Olivia Munn wears the SKIMS Body Legging in Onyx. Photo: Vanessa Beecroft. [Instagram photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/DBhdrczulcl/?img_index=1*

7.4 Appendix D: Online Sources (General)

- Ahmad, I. (2018, February 16). *The influencer marketing revolution*. *Social Media Today*. <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/the-influencer-marketing-revolution-infographic/517146/>
- Dixon, S.J. (2024, May 22). *Number of Instagram users worldwide from 2020 to 2025 (in billions)*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183585/instagram-number-of-global-users/>
- Dixon, S.J. (2025, March 26). *Most popular social networks worldwide as of February 2025, by number of monthly active users (in millions)*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>
- Statista Research Department. (2025, March 28). *Leading social media platforms used by marketers worldwide as of January 2024*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/259379/social-media-platforms-used-by-marketers-worldwide/>.
- Yaptangco, A. (2021, April 23). *Kim Kardashian West on her latest KKW fragrance, gardening with her kids, and her love of gardenias*. *Elle*. <https://www.elle.com/beauty/a36202978/kim-kardashian-west-jeff-leatham-kkw-fragrance/>

7.5 Appendix E: Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Julie Mastenbroek

Student ID: 572442

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. DC (Debora) Ramos Antunes de la Silva

Date: 30/06/2025

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 [CHATGPT], 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: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

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. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

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.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and flourishes, positioned to the right of the text.

Signature:

Date of Signature: 30/06/2025

In line with Erasmus University guidelines, I used ChatGPT solely for the following permitted purposes during the development of this thesis:

- Keyword suggestions
- Wording support (e.g. thesis title, section headings)
- Basic grammar and phrasing suggestions
- Methodological clarification (e.g. illustrating the differences between phases of Braun and Clarke)

Below is a selection of example prompts I used with ChatGPT, with the AI's responses summarized in italics. All responses were critically reviewed and adapted as necessary before inclusion in this thesis.

- “Suggest five keywords for a thesis on SKIMS and Instagram branding.”
 - **ChatGPT:** *Keywords suggested included: Celebrity branding, Instagram marketing, Brand identity, Visual storytelling, SKIMS campaigns.*
- “Help me come up with a subtitle for my thesis that includes both SKIMS and brand identity.”
 - **ChatGPT:** *Suggested subtitles focused on themes like “Exploring SKIMS’ Brand Identity through Instagram Campaigns” or “Decoding SKIMS’ Brand Personality on Instagram.”*
- “Could you give me 10 synonyms for ‘reinforce’ to improve my writing?”
 - **ChatGPT:** *Here are 10 synonyms for “reinforce” you can use to improve your writing: strengthen, support, bolster, fortify, enhance, back up, amplify, underscore, consolidate*
- “Could you give me 10 synonyms for ‘to highlight’ to improve my writing?”
 - **ChatGPT:** *Here are 10 synonyms for “to highlight” that can help improve your writing: emphasize, spotlight, underscore, showcase, stress, accentuate, draw attention to, feature, illuminate, bring out.*
- “What is the difference between phase four, phase five, and phase six of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis model?”
 - **ChatGPT:** *Here’s a clear explanation of the differences between phases four, five, and six of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis:*
 - **Phase 4: Reviewing Themes:** *At this stage, you check if the themes work well in relation to the coded data and the entire data set. You refine themes by merging, splitting, or discarding them to ensure coherence and distinctiveness.*

- **Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes:** Here, you clearly define what each theme captures and determine how it relates to the research question. You create concise and informative names for each theme.
 - **Phase 6: Producing the Report:** This is the final phase where you write up your analysis, telling the story of your data with vivid examples, connecting it back to your research question and literature.
- “Does the ‘Personality’ facet of Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism encompass aesthetic and storytelling?”
 - **ChatGPT:** Yes, the ‘Personality’ facet of Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism includes both the brand’s aesthetic style and the way it tells its story. It reflects the brand’s character and tone, conveyed through visual elements, language, and overall style that shape how the brand expresses itself and connects emotionally with its audience.
- “What is the difference between “self-image” and “reflection” of Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism?”
 - **ChatGPT:** The difference is:
 - Self-image refers to how consumers see themselves when they use or associate with the brand – it’s their internal perception and identity.
 - Reflection is how the brand externally projects the typical user to the outside world – essentially, the stereotypical image or persona the brand communicates about its customers.
- “What visual cues should I look for when identifying the “Culture” facet of a brand in Instagram images?”
 - **ChatGPT:** When identifying the “Culture” facet of a brand in Instagram images, look for visual elements that reflect the brand’s values, traditions, and social norms. This can include symbols, colours, rituals, settings, language, and references to community or heritage that communicate the cultural background or lifestyle the brand associates with or promotes.
- “What visual cues should I look for when identifying the “Reflection” facet of a brand in Instagram images?”
 - **ChatGPT:** When identifying the “Reflection” facet in Instagram images, look for visual cues that represent the brand’s typical or ideal customer. This includes demographics (age, gender, ethnicity), lifestyle indicators (activities, settings, fashion style), attitudes or aspirations (confidence, success), and how the brand portrays who uses or embodies it. These cues show how the brand projects its user image to the outside world.

- “What feelings does a Polaroid-type of image try to evoke?”
 - **ChatGPT:** *A Polaroid-type image typically evokes feelings of nostalgia, warmth, authenticity, and intimacy. It often suggests a personal, candid moment, creating a sense of memory, simplicity, and emotional connection.*
- “What does a big American flag reveal about SKIMS’ brand personality?”
 - **ChatGPT:** *The presence of a big American flag in SKIMS’ imagery suggests that the brand embraces patriotism and American cultural identity. It can convey boldness, confidence, and a sense of mainstream appeal, highlighting the brand’s connection to American values and its positioning within the U.S. market.*
- “What does a retro futuristic photoshoot reveal about SKIMS’ brand personality?”
 - **ChatGPT:** *A retro futuristic photoshoot reveals that SKIMS’ brand personality is innovative and forward-thinking while also embracing nostalgia. It suggests creativity, a willingness to blend past and future aesthetics, and a confident, bold identity that balances modernity with playful references to cultural history.*
- “What kind of brand values are typically communicated through minimalistic campaign imagery?”
 - **ChatGPT:** *Minimalistic campaign imagery typically communicates brand values such as simplicity, elegance, modernity, clarity, and sophistication. It often reflects a focus on quality over quantity, timelessness, and a clean, uncluttered aesthetic that highlights the product or message without distractions.*
- “What do nude tones suggest about SKIMS’ brand personality?”
 - **ChatGPT:** *Nude tones in SKIMS’ branding suggest naturalness, inclusivity, and subtle elegance. They communicate comfort, simplicity, and authenticity, reinforcing the brand’s focus on body positivity and approachable luxury.*
- “What do cherries suggest about SKIMS’ brand personality?”
 - **ChatGPT:** *Cherries in SKIMS’ brand imagery suggest playfulness, youthfulness, and a touch of flirtiness or sweetness. They add a fun, bold, and slightly cheeky element to the brand personality, contrasting with the brand’s often minimalist and neutral aesthetic to show a more vibrant, expressive side.*