



## Service brand coolness in the construction of brand loyalty: A self-presentation theory approach

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### ABSTRACT

As service brands need to find new methods to overcome consumers' distrust of physical spaces in the post-COVID-19 era, we explore how niche and mass service brands can recover their experiential value through perceptions of coolness. In three studies, we evaluate service brand coolness and its consequences for communal-brand connection and loyalty. In Studies 1 and 2, we examine consumers' thoughts on coolness and communal connection when describing their encounters with service brands. In Study 3, we test the relations among service brand coolness, communal-brand connection, and loyalty. Our findings show that for both niche and mass firms, service brand coolness similarly enhances communal-brand connection and loyalty.

*“Not only does hip/cool consumerism recognize the alienation, boredom, and disgust engendered by the demands of modern consumer society, but it makes of those sentiments powerful imperatives of brand loyalty and accelerated consumption.”*

The Conquest of Cool (Thomas Frank 1997, 231)

### 1. Introduction

The post-COVID-19 era has forced service companies to adapt their offerings using social distancing as the basic premise to avoid viral outbreaks among consumers. This effort has multiplied online operations, individualized the delivery of products and services, and reduced the symbolic value of social contexts of consumption (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). As the worldwide situation improves and people again transit physical spaces, service brands that offer interactive experiences among consumers have to reflect on how they can provide differential value and incentivize physical/social experiences. In light of this challenge, service brands may explore novel perspectives that help them re-construct their social/symbolic value. In this context, we evaluate service brand coolness as a potential solution.

In multiple sectors, brand coolness represents a determinant attribute driving consumers to differentiate brands that matter from those that do not. Pioneer conceptualizations of brand coolness have focused

on understanding how consumers obtain value through symbolic meanings of coolness that are traditionally associated with branded goods/products (Loureiro et al., 2020). As a result, brand coolness has been defined from multiple perspectives, ranging from considering this construct as a vehicle for increasing market share (Gurrieri, 2009) to regarding it as a dynamic positive trait attributed to cultural objects inferred to be appropriately autonomous (Warren and Campbell, 2014).

Although brand coolness is expected to influence consumers' attitudinal and behavioral responses, there is a lack of understanding regarding what this construct represents for service companies. The excessive goods/product- and individual-centric approaches used in exploring the influence of brand coolness on consumers' attitudes and behaviors have obscured academics' and practitioners' understandings of how perceptions of coolness are formed when consumers encounter service brands (see Table 1).

Considering the subjective, intangible, and experiential elements that are inherent in services (Parasuraman et al., 1985), it is plausible that prior conceptualizations of brand coolness may not adequately capture the details of consumers' desire for cool service experiences. The goods/product-centric approach of brand coolness can distract researchers' attention to novel consequences that this construct may have. For example, whether there are perceptual mechanisms that can reinforce identity from the brand positioning (cool brand) to consumers' personality traits (cool person) in social and physical encounters

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**Table 1**  
Extant research and contributions of this study.

Key studies	Brand coolness perspective	Context of consumption	Main brands analyzed	Dependent variables
Li et al. (2021); Loureiro et al. (2020); Tiwari et al. (2021); Warren and Campbell (2014); Warren et al. (2019)	Goods/product brands	Individual-centric	Ader Error (clothes); Adidas (clothes); Apple (technology); Anti-Social (clothes); Cav Empt (clothes); Dior (clothes); Gap (clothes); Gap (clothes); Gucci (clothes); Louis Vuitton (clothes); Nike (clothes); Old Navy (clothes); Off-White (clothes); Pepsi (drinks); Prada (clothes); Samsung (technology); Sketchers (clothes); Starbucks (branding a bottle of water); Steady Hands (clothes); Supreme (clothes); Roiku (fictitious clothes brand). Burger King (fast-food restaurant); Coachella Valley Music Festival (music festival); Chipotle (fast-food restaurant); Kentucky Fried Chicken (fast-food restaurant); Five Guys (fast-food restaurants); Lollapalooza (music festival); MEO SW (music festival); McDonald's (fast-food restaurant); NOS Alive Festival (Music festival).	Self-brand connection; attitude; satisfaction; WOM; willingness to pay more; brand love; pride; delight; brand exposure; brand familiarity; price premium; intention to use digital products.
This study	Service brands	Social-centric	Burger King (fast-food restaurant); Coachella Valley Music Festival (music festival); Chipotle (fast-food restaurant); Kentucky Fried Chicken (fast-food restaurant); Five Guys (fast-food restaurants); Lollapalooza (music festival); MEO SW (music festival); McDonald's (fast-food restaurant); NOS Alive Festival (Music festival).	Communal-brand connection; consumer loyalty.

controlled by service companies. In this sense, we suggest that the perceived coolness of a service brand may depend on whether the brand can produce experiences through which consumers can individually obtain the brand's symbolic value and whether they are socially recognized as cool by others (i.e., "they are cool"). Therefore, interactions with service brands may represent scenarios of self-presentation to others, in which brand positioning (e.g., coolness) can be signaled and transmitted between consumers (Otterbring, 2021; Sundar et al., 2017).

We adapt Belk et al.'s (2010) and Warren et al.'s (2019) reflections

on coolness to describe service brand coolness as a positive and socially constructed trait of firms that offer outstanding experiential interactions among consumers in controlled spaces (e.g., entertainment brands, hospitality brands, cultural brands). Thus, for service brands, what is cool is not necessarily mediated by goods/products as a *sine qua non* condition to signal the symbolic value associated with a cool service brand. Service brands must deal with subjective, intangible, social, and experiential contexts, in which consumers, rather than goods/products, are the direct signaling sources of coolness to others.

Given this difference between service brand coolness and product brand coolness, our main research questions are as follows: Do service brand coolness and product brand coolness differ in dimensional composition? For service brands, are coolness perceptions and the degree to which consumers feel connected with the brand significant and positive predictors of loyalty?

In response to these research questions, we adopt a social and symbolic perspective on coolness to examine the elements attached to consumers' consideration of service brands as cool while feeling socially connected with the brands and other consumers. In this endeavor, we build a theoretical framework for the importance of communal-brand connection with service brands as a result of perceptions of coolness. As brand coolness could show differences in its composition when comparing niche and mass service brands (Loureiro et al., 2020; Warren et al., 2019), we also include such a comparison in our empirical analysis. Here, while niche cool is associated with brands considered cool by a certain subcultural group, mass cool is characterized by brands that are recognized as cool by the general population.

Building on the self-presentation theory (Baumeister, 1982; Goffman, 1959; William and Bendelow, 1998), we reflect on how consumers, as social actors, engage and share a communal value (associated with an identity of coolness) with other consumers of the same brand (Studies 1 and 2). Furthermore, we demonstrate the influence of service brand coolness and communal-brand connection on loyalty to niche (music festival brands) and mass service brands (fast-food restaurants) (Study 3). In these findings, coolness attributes, such as being extraordinary and subcultural, are highlighted as central elements that may enhance loyalty to both niche and mass service brands. However, for niche service brands, the extraordinary, high-status, original, and subcultural dimensions emerge as significant characteristics of brand coolness. On the other hand, for mass service brands, the relevant factors are the authentic, extraordinary, popular, and subcultural dimensions.

For practitioners, we offer insights into how consumers evaluate cool service brands. At the same time, we present a measurement tool to detect whether a service brand creates communal-brand connection with consumers and consequently, whether the service brand enhances consumer loyalty.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Coolness: from goods/products to service brands

Rooted in the African-American culture of the late 1920s, the concept of cool has portrayed multiple meanings associated with expressing aesthetic approval, describing a particular personality, or being emotionally expressive within an artistic frame of restraint, as in jazz, acting, or basketball (Dinerstein, 2017). In the 1960s, American consumer culture used coolness as a symbolic value capable of attributing differential properties to products/artifacts while satisfying consumers' hedonism, narcissism, and ironic detachment (Pountain and Robins, 2000). Although multiple descriptions of coolness currently co-exist, recent marketing research shows brand coolness as a positive multi-attribute association that can include considering a brand extraordinary, aesthetically appealing, exciting, original, authentic, rebellious, high status, subcultural, iconic, and/or popular (Li et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2020; Tiwari et al., 2021).

Marketing researchers agree that brand coolness has a positive

valence based on multiple attributes that have been traditionally associated with branded objects/goods (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012). In this context, brand coolness is based on a subjective criterion entirely dependent on consumers' perceptions of brands. Thus, perceptions of coolness can vary, depending on the brand evaluated by consumers, and this dynamic characteristic makes coolness a complex phenomenon to objectivize, describe, and examine (Pountain and Robins, 2000). Foundational work regarding brand coolness also points out a duality where both niche and mass brands can be considered cool. Whereas niche brands are regarded as cool when a subculture perceives and adopts them as an autonomous response to standardization, mass cool brands have a globally recognized superior value, representing the standard for a particular market (Warren et al., 2019).

## 2.2. Service brand coolness

In the definition of what represents a cool service brand, we follow four main premises that may form overall coolness perceptions of brands (Warren and Campbell, 2014), with the idea that social and intangible values differentiate services from goods/products (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

First, service brand coolness is a socially constructed perception. This means that what makes a service brand cool is the extent to which an audience considers it such (Warren et al., 2019). Second, the coolness of service brands is a subjective and dynamic descriptor. This means that service brands that are regarded as cool can change in such consideration over time and across consumers (Belk et al., 2010). Therefore, depending on the characteristics defining a group of consumers who analyze the coolness of a service brand, this construct could show differences in the importance of its multiple dimensions (Warren et al., 2019). Third, a cool service brand may have a recognized superior value over its competitors (Sundar et al., 2014). Fourth, service brand coolness is a social and symbolic space of recognition among consumers, objects, and brand personnel. Consumers of cool service brands should be able to transfer the symbolic value of the brands to their self-concepts in front of other consumers and brand personnel during service encounters (Grove and Fisk, 1992). Building on these four considerations, we define service brand coolness as a positive and socially constructed trait of firms that offer outstanding experiential interactions among consumers in controlled spaces (e.g., entertainment brands, hospitality brands, cultural brands).

Previous efforts in marketing research that delimit brand coolness dimensions as a dynamic composition of brand attributes (i.e., extraordinary, aesthetically appealing, exciting, original, authentic, rebellious, high status, subcultural, iconic, and/or popular; Li et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2020; Tiwari et al., 2021; Warren et al., 2019) seem ample to describe multiple components that may also define service brand coolness. For example, similar to goods/product brands, service brands can also be considered extraordinary, aesthetically appealing, or original and have sufficient properties to be perceived as cool by consumers. Prior research also adds that multiple attributes that represent coolness can vary, depending on whether consumers evaluate niche or mass brands. For service brands, attributes based on exclusivity and novelty (e.g., extraordinary, high status, subcultural) may portray cool niche brands, whereas attributes based on a higher recognition and tradition (e.g., authentic, iconic, popular) may represent cool mass brands (Warren et al., 2019).

Therefore, what is unknown in marketing literature is which combination of multiple attributes of coolness is characteristic of service brands and what consequence service brand coolness has for consumer attitudes and behaviors. Prior nomological research on perceptions of coolness has documented the positive consequences of goods/product brand coolness for consumers' self-brand connection, brand love, willingness to pay more, attitudes, intentions, and desire to buy products (Li et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2020; Tiwari et al., 2021; Warren et al., 2019). Thus, existing studies on brand coolness recognize that this

construct is inherently related to how consumers form their identity by consuming objects/artifacts that can signal coolness as part of consumers' self-concept.

Indeed, the previous focus on consumers' self-brand connection as a consequence of goods/product brand coolness represents the product/individualistic perspective that dominates the marketing literature (O'Guinn and Muniz, 2005). In this context, self-brand connection is observed as a process in which consumers prefer product brands whose meanings are congruent with some aspects of their self-concept. Here, the product/individualistic view of brand coolness is oriented toward determining how a product brand can transfer coolness as a positive attribute to consumers' self-identity (Ferraro et al., 2013). This is possible when the focus is on goods/products/artifacts that serve to transmit coolness to consumers. Specifically, brand coolness may act as a signal that helps consumers perceive a positive value in themselves (i.e., an individual-centric approach).

However, in a more social experiential setting, such as in the case of service brands, the mechanism through which the coolness trait is transmitted to consumers' self-identity is not solely mediated by goods/products/artifacts. Rather, in such a process, multiple elements affect the experiential and social environments of a service (e.g., brand personnel, physical aesthetics, a set of products, other consumers, and the combination of these elements). In other words, service brand coolness may contribute to how consumers present themselves through social interactions that occur in a service setting (i.e., social-centric approach; see Table 1).

## 2.3. Self-presentation theory and service brand coolness: a quest for communal-brand connection

The idea of considering other consumers as contextual stimuli that can affect satisfaction and behavior has been extensively documented in the marketing literature (e.g., Argo et al., 2005; Kurt et al., 2011; Otterbring, 2021). The social presence of others in consumer experiences traditionally explores how the presence of "others" conditions consumer behavior in a physical context (Vohs et al., 2005). Theoretical approaches that serve as the basis for the social presence of others in marketing have focused on the idea of consumers' self-presentation.

Self-presentation behaviors have been approached in psychology and sociology through the lens of the self-presentation theory (Baumeister, 1982; Goffman, 1959; Jones, 1990; William and Bendelow, 1998). The self-presentation theory reflects on individual behaviors directed toward producing a certain impression of themselves in the minds of others. It is considered that self-presentation behaviors depend on social motivations, such as integration, self-promotion, intimidation, exemplification, or supplication (Jones, 1990; Jones and Pittman, 1982). As a result, an individual could be recognized by others as having a particular attitude, trait, or identity through a symbolic performance represented in a social situation (Jones, 1990).

Self-presentation views consumer behaviors in service experiences as mechanisms used to transmit information about oneself to others, with the goal of pleasing others and constructing one's social image in line with one's ideal identity (Sundar et al., 2017). The socioanalytic perspective of the self-presentation theory adds that consumers present themselves daily through the consumption of products and services in front of other persons who, depending on the context, can decode the symbolic meanings of the brands (Slama and Wolfe, 1999; William and Bendelow, 1998). This means that if a service brand positions its offer as something cool, consumers may find shared experiences with other consumers of the brand as opportunities to signal coolness and be recognized as cool people.

Given these theoretical ideas, service experiences can serve as physical scenarios where consumers can express their motivation and loyalty to service brands in front of other consumers and be recognized by the latter as having the same identity through which the service brands are positioned in the market. For example, if service brand X is

considered sophisticated, living experiences in its physical spaces could drive sophisticated consumers to interact with one another and consume the brand. Consumers of brand X will recognize one another as sophisticated, reinforcing their identity through the brand as a symbolic vehicle (Belk, 1986). In this regard, it seems important for a service brand to comprehend how consumers feel recognized as cool by other consumers in physical service encounters to maximize the brand's social/symbolic value and to reinforce loyalty.

Cool service brands can reinforce consumers' communal interest in and motivation to be part of a meaningful (cool) community, which ultimately enhances the communal connection between them and the brand (Hawkins, 2018; 2020). Here, the concept of communal-brand connection refers to social relations and communal spaces linked to a brand that provide an environment where consumers can form their self-identity and be recognized by other consumers (Hawkins, 2018, 2020; Rindfleisch et al., 2009). In other words, communal-brand connection emerges from the processing of multiple recognizable rituals and traditions that signal individuals' preferences and interests related to a brand in front of other consumers. As a result, consumers can feel a sense of communal identification with other brand users (Keller, 2003).

Drawing on the self-presentation theory (Baumeister, 1982; Goffman, 1959; William and Bendelow, 1998), we propose that brand coolness plays an important role in how consumers manipulate signs and embodied service experiences in social actions (in front of other consumers of the service brand) to construct their identities as cool individuals. Additionally, prior research has linked the formation of a communal-brand connection with iconic and emotionally engaging brands (Muniz and Schau, 2005). In this respect, previous studies generate a parallel understanding of communal-brand connection and coolness because brand attributes, such as being iconic and emotionally exciting, are recognized as components of brand coolness (Li et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2020; Tiwari et al., 2021).

Overall, we argue that cool service brands may have the capacity to provide consumers with a sense of communal identification. Specifically, we believe that subjective, intangible, social, and experiential scenarios, which are inherent in service brands, can generate perceptions of coolness, facilitating consumer engagement with the service brands through a sense of communal-brand connection.

### 3. Hypotheses development

The conceptual construction of brand coolness is based on multiple attributes related to being superior and unique among competitors (Loureiro et al., 2020). However, perceptions of brand coolness have been recognized as constituting a complex and dynamic phenomenon. This means that the set of associations that comprise the service brand coolness identity can be formed by different combinations of components, depending on the brand under analysis, as previously recognized in the case of goods/product brands (Warren et al., 2019). In this sense, the perception of service brand coolness can include any combination of brand associations that range from being extraordinary, aesthetically appealing, exciting, high status, rebellious, original, authentic, subcultural, iconic, and popular to being considered a cool brand.

Overall, a brand identified as cool, as the result of unique and distinctive brand associations, is expected to have a competitive advantage that enhances and reinforces its relationships with consumers through loyalty behaviors (Keller, 2003; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Thus, in line with prior researchers who agree that cool brands must have subjectively superior value compared with other options in a particular sector (Belk et al., 2010; Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012; Tiwari et al., 2021), we propose that service brands recognized as cool by consumers may have the capacity to enhance loyalty through multiple combinations of brand attributes related to brand coolness. More formally, we present our first hypothesis:

**H1.** Service brand coolness is a positive predictor of brand loyalty.

However, to better identify the mechanism through which service brands can enhance brand loyalty through perceptions of coolness, we observe coolness as a result of consumers' social and symbolic valuation of a service brand. This means that cool service brands can represent favorable physical scenarios where consumers' communal-brand connection can be reinforced (Gerber and Geiman, 2012). Consumers in contact with cool service brands may feel that they share the same meaning in the construction of their identities. All this identity choreography of service brand coolness occurs in an experiential and social environment that consumers necessarily share with other consumers (e.g., in a restaurant, museum, coffeeshop, bookshop, or physical store, among others; Belk, 2006; Belk et al., 2010). Thereby, the sense of belonging, through the community fostered by a cool service brand and the inextricable connection between the brand and the consumer's self-presentation to other consumers, may enhance loyalty on the basis of brand exposure and the apparent endorsement by the collective (i.e., other consumers and brand personnel; Oliver, 1999).

Building on these theoretical discussions, we propose that a strong communal connection with the service brand, derived from recognizing the brand as cool, will enhance brand loyalty. In other words, service brands can produce experiences that facilitate consumers' recognition by others as cool and as a result, contribute to generating perceptions of being reliable, high-quality, and easily recognizable brands (Gerber and Geiman, 2012; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Overall, this means that brand coolness may influence brand loyalty directly and also indirectly via communal-brand connection (see Fig. 1). Therefore, we present the following hypotheses:

**H2.** Service brand coolness is positively associated with consumers' communal-brand connection.

**H3.** Communal-brand connection is a positive predictor of brand loyalty.

**H4.** Communal-brand connection mediates between service brand coolness and brand loyalty.

### 4. Method

We developed a multimethod program with two qualitative studies (Studies 1 and 2) and a quantitative study (Study 3) to establish a holistic understanding of service brand coolness and its implications for consumers' communal-brand connection and loyalty. First, in a pre-test, we recruited a sample of 22 US participants from the online panel of Prolific (who were each paid US \$1.05; 41% female; mean age = 28 years) to describe which experiences they considered cool. From this pre-test, we extracted a list of experiences considered cool that could be linked to niche or mass service brands. This list serves to further contextualize and compare evaluations of niche and mass service brand coolness in Studies 1, 2, and 3. The findings of this pre-test reveal that coolness could be linked with highly experiential branded activities and venues, such as concerts, music festivals, sports events, amusement parks, cultural festivities, restaurants, gastronomic events, and museums, among other options mentioned. Following participants' indications of what represents cool experiences linkable with service brands, we selected music festivals as examples of niche service brands and fast-food restaurants as examples of mass service brands. Music festivals normally represent the particular interests and idiosyncrasies of a homogeneous group of people, such as a consumer niche. Fast-food restaurant brands, such as McDonald's and Burger King, are globally recognized by an ample consumer typology; therefore, they may represent mass service brands. Here, we describe music festivals and fast-food restaurants as service brands because these activities should apply specialized competencies, processes, and performances to benefit the value exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2008) and because both brands relate to the concept of service experiences. In other words, music festivals and fast-food restaurants are event-specific phenomena that simultaneously offer consumers individual and social value (Helkkula,

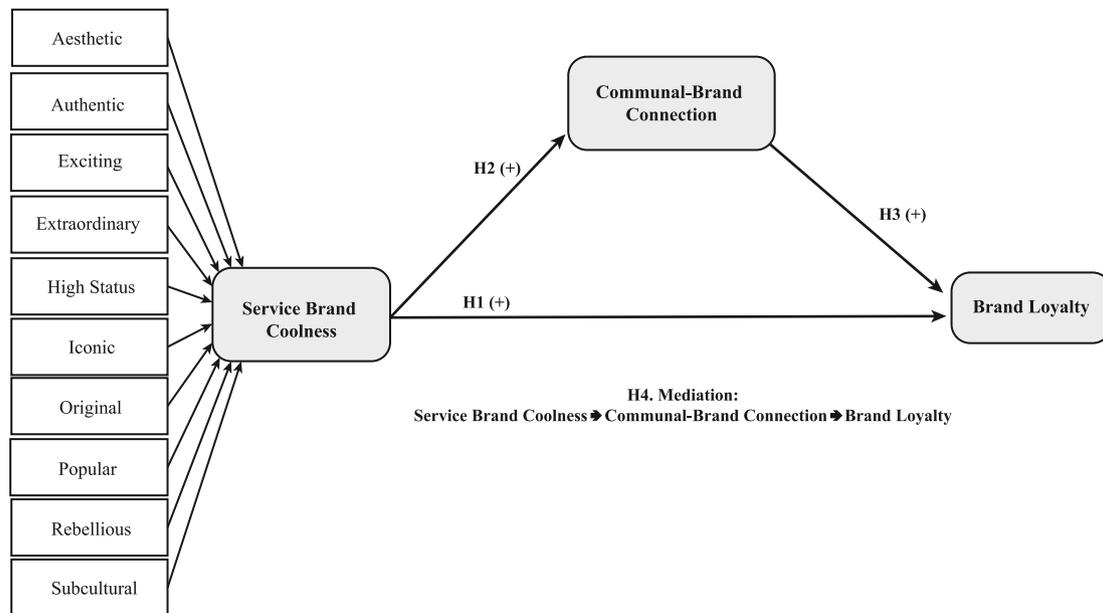


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

2011).

Furthermore, in two qualitative studies based on the visual elicitation technique and open-ended questions, we inductively examined individuals’ opinions, beliefs, and thoughts on coolness and communal-brand connection with regard to service brands when describing elicited images of niche (e.g., music festivals; Study 1) and mass service brands (e.g., fast-food restaurants; Study 2). This qualitative procedure indicated whether theoretical dimensions of brand coolness and consumers’ communal-brand connection could be observed and interrelated if individuals were asked to directly interpret them in different consumption contexts. Next, with a quantitative model, we deductively tested our hypotheses after measuring and testing the relations among perceived brand coolness, communal-brand connection, and brand loyalty with consumers of music festivals and fast-food restaurants (Study 3).

As coolness is considered rooted in the American cultural milieu that has been subsequently transferred to the worldwide consumer culture through globalization (Belk et al., 2010; Dinerstein, 2017), we used a combination of participants from the US and Europe. First, we used US consumers in our qualitative studies (Studies 1 and 2) to obtain a foundational understanding of the roots of brand coolness and an overview of its dimensions and repercussions for service brands. Then, in Study 3, we contrasted US consumers’ interpretations of service brand coolness with those of European consumers. In this sense, we offer here a triangulation of coolness interpretations among Western consumers in relation to service brands.

#### 4.1. Study 1

In Study 1, we analyzed how brand coolness and communal-brand connection were interpreted and expressed by consumers while describing images that showed consumers’ encounters with a niche service brand. We recruited a sample of 39 US participants (who were each paid US \$1.05; 56% female; mean age = 38 years) from the online panel of Prolific. We included a quota criterion in which we only considered consumers who had been to a music festival or a fast-food restaurant (at least once) in the previous year. In this case, we used a visual elicitation technique to uncover consumers’ deep understandings of service brand coolness (Coulter and Zaltman, 2000). In the projective scenario of Study 1, the participants were asked to imagine that they were searching for information about a branded music festival

representing niche service brands.

The participants were presented with four images of music festivals in which they could observe how people enjoyed the experience and see the brands of the festivals that appeared in the background of the images (e.g., *Coachella* and *Lollapalooza*; Appendix A). Then, the participants rated whether the branded music festivals could be considered cool on a seven-point scale (from 1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree”;  $M = 5.56$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). Finally, they answered this open-ended question: “Which characteristics made the presented music festivals cool and why?”

##### 4.1.1. Data analysis of study 1

We used the grounded theory approach to analyze the participants’ narratives about brand coolness and communal-brand connection, as indicated in their responses to the open-ended question presented to them. The grounded theory involves a qualitative analysis based on an inductive, systematic process that informs and develops a theory about a specific phenomenon (Saldaña, 2013). Following the procedure of Strauss and Corbin (1990), we developed three steps for the data analysis. First, we scanned the narratives to form an overall understanding of the participants’ opinions, beliefs, and interpretations of brand coolness and communal-brand connection. Second, we performed manual, open, axial, and selective coding. In the open coding, the participants’ quotes were extracted line by line in terms of the elements that could relate to the dimensions of brand coolness (e.g., “music festivals can be considered luxurious”) or describe individuals having a communal-brand connection (e.g., “able to connect with the community”). The axial coding highlighted the elements considered central to the participants’ quotes (e.g., luxury is a descriptor of a music festival; communal value is part of the music festival experience). Finally, we thoroughly analyzed the codifications with selective coding to determine the final subthemes (e.g., the high status derived from the luxury perception makes the music festival cool; their sense of community can describe consumers’ communal connection with branded music festivals). In adding the 37th participant, we did not observe new ideas, properties, dimensions, or conditions to code in the data. However, we added two more participants to effectively confirm data saturation in the textual narratives (Guest et al., 2006). Therefore, we closed our recruiting procedure with 39 participants.

4.1.2. Results of study 1

Across the participants' narratives regarding which characteristics made branded music festivals cool, we extracted enough codes to represent each of the theoretical dimensions of brand coolness (Warren et al., 2019; see Table 2). The participants indicated that music festivals, such as Coachella and Lollapalooza, allowed them to be part of something extraordinary, exciting, and highly exclusive. According to participant [7], "The fact that it feels exclusive and it's about more than the music is what makes it cool." Participant [33] stated, "I think the most appealing part of going to a festival like these would be the fact that you're surrounded by thousands of other people who like similar music."

At the same time, these festivals were considered cool because they represented rebellious, original, popular, and aesthetic experiences. According to participant [28], "I think many people view these festivals as an opportunity to creatively express themselves." Participant [32] wrote, "They [music festival attendees] have nice color schemes, and people look very happy in them." We also obtained evidence of the importance of the communal-brand connection with music festivals (Table 2). Regarding the communal-brand connection, two participants made these comments: "Just hearing someone went or has gone before is automatically seen as cool" [12]. "If you are a part of a group who thinks it's cool to go, you may be tempted to raise yourself higher in their eyes" [24].

In line with our theoretical discussion, highly experiential services, such as branded music festivals, are potential contexts in which it is possible to observe multiple components of brand coolness. Interestingly, because the participants described the coolness of branded music festivals, the communal-brand connection emerged as an interrelated component. The findings of Study 1 add to the prior literature on brand coolness by showing that when consumers provide their valuation of highly experiential brand services, the communal-brand connection inherently appears when perceiving a niche service brand as cool (such as branded music festivals).

4.2. Study 2

In Study 2, we examined consumers' interpretations of brand coolness and communal-brand connection when describing images that showed consumers' encounters with a mass service brand. In contrast to Study 1, for the visual elicitation technique in Study 2, we used fast-food restaurant brands representing mass service brands. This procedure would help us comprehend whether components of brand coolness and communal-brand connection would emerge in different service contexts (i.e., niche and mass service brands).

We recruited a new sample of 38 US participants from the panel of Prolific (who were each paid US \$1.00; 60% female; mean age = 32 years). We only considered consumers who had been to a fast-food restaurant (at least once) in the previous year. The participants were asked to imagine that they were in one of the fast-food brand locations shown in the images presented to them (Appendix B). Next, they rated whether fast-food restaurants could be considered cool on a seven-point scale (from 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 7 = "Strongly agree"; M = 5.32, SD = 1.05). Then, they were presented with the open question: "Which characteristics made the presented fast-food restaurants cool and why?"

For the data analysis of Study 2, we used the same coding procedure as in Study 1, focused on the participants' narratives extracted from the open-ended question. Including the 36th participant, we did not observe new ideas, properties, dimensions, or conditions to code in the data. We added two more participants to confirm data saturation. This procedure generated a total sample of 38 participants.

4.2.1. Results of study 2

We observed that for mass service brands, such as fast-food restaurants, the participants interpreted brand coolness as being extraordinary, exciting, aesthetically appealing, original, authentic, popular, subcultural, and iconic (Table 3). In contrast to our findings in Study 1, we did not observe any participant narratives linked with the high status

**Table 2**  
Study 1. Coolness components of music festival brands.

Examples of participants' narratives	Examples of open coding (Line-by-Line Coding)	Subthemes (Axial Coding)	Main Themes (Selective Themes)
<b>Brand coolness</b> "dressing up in festival wear, (eye catching clothes)"; "nice color schemes and people look very happy in them."	"eye catching clothes"; "nice color schemes"; "people look very happy in them."	Aesthetic	Aesthetic, authentic, extraordinary, exciting, high status, iconic, original, popular, rebellious, and subcultural are central elements of brand coolness for music festivals.
"surrendered by authentic music lovers."	"authentic music lovers."	Authentic	
"they are characteristically fun, hip, and vibrant"; "usually exposed to new cool fashion, art, and other people"; "experience that you don't receive anywhere else."	"fun, hip, and vibrant"; "exposed to new cool fashion"; "anywhere else."	Extraordinary	
"Sun, lots of happy people, lots of colors everyone looks excited"; "The 'energy' that it radiates".	"everyone looks excited"; "The 'energy' that it radiates."	Exciting	
"the artists that typically play at those venues and the exclusivity of the event"; "so just going to the event can be considered luxurious."	"the exclusivity of the event"; "can be considered luxurious."	High status	
"I believe that the famous icons that make the experience cool"	"the famous icons that make the experience cool."	Iconic	
"unique and different types of genres of music to these festivals"; "unique way to hear songs you love or maybe haven't heard."	"unique and different types of genres of music"; "unique way to hear songs you love."	Original	
"Events like Coachella and Lollapalooza are popular music festivals"; "You could say it's someplace all the 'cool kids' go."	"are popular music festivals"; "it's someplace all the 'cool kids' go";	Popular	
"The feeling of isolation very desirable to the youth."	"the feeling of isolation."	Rebellious	
"It's the atmosphere and environment of people that love music created at these events which make them cool"; "the incredible amount of styles, cultures, individualities, and methods of	"atmosphere and environment of people that love music"; "incredible amount of styles, cultures, individualities."	Subcultural	

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Examples of participants' narratives	Examples of open coding (Line-by-Line Coding)	Subthemes (Axial Coding)	Main Themes (Selective Themes)
experiencing the music.”			
<b>Communal-brand connection</b>			
“part of a group who thinks it’s cool to go, you may be tempted to raise yourself higher in their eyes”; “people who share an interest”; “surrounded by people who like similar music”; “I love going to shows, and I love being able to connect with the community surrounding the music that I enjoy.”	“raise yourself higher in their eyes”; “social with other people who share an interest”; “people who like similar music”; “able to connect with the community.”	Communal-brand connection	Communal-brand connection is an interrelated element of brand coolness for music festivals.

and rebellious components of brand coolness. Additionally, some participants (five individuals; 13% of the sample) reported that fast-food restaurants were not cool experiences due to a sense of standardization in their offers (“Cool, although not the first word that I would use to describe a fast-food restaurant,” participant [2] wrote). Thus, regarding fast-food mass brands, the perceptions of coolness seem more open to debate across the consumer spectrum compared with branded music festivals (niche brands).

These findings are in line with those of prior research on brand coolness that discriminates between the theoretical dimensions that better represent niche versus mass brands (Warren et al., 2019). In our case, compared with branded music festivals, fast-food restaurant brands are not considered to have high status or rebelliousness. This may mean that depending on the service context (niche vs. mass), brand coolness is formed by different combinations of its theoretical components. Additionally, mass service brands seem less capable of achieving a consensus regarding what consumers consider cool.

The participants also indicated these services (eating in fast-food restaurants) as interesting opportunities to share time with friends, other consumers, and family members (Table 3). Therefore, we can conclude that a sense of community also emerges from describing the coolness of fast-food restaurant brands.

In Study 3, we explored in detail the contribution of each dimension of brand coolness to niche and mass service brands, as well as the relations among brand coolness, communal-brand connection, and brand loyalty.

4.3. Study 3

In Study 3, our main goal was to examine the relations among service brand coolness, communal-brand connection, and brand loyalty. In congruence with Studies 1 and 2, we recruited a panel of consumers from two service sectors: branded music festivals and brands of fast-food restaurants (n = 306). We established a quota sampling criterion that included European consumers who were in a music festival or a fast-food restaurant (at least once) in the previous year. With this sampling procedure, our goal was to obtain a proportional distribution of participants similar to a representative sample of European festival goers (68.1% of consumers between 18 and 30 years old; Statista, 2017) and fast-food consumers (our reference was the age distribution of McDonald’s

Table 3

Study 2. Coolness components of fast-food restaurant brands.

Examples of participants' narratives	Examples of open coding (Line-by-Line Coding)	Subthemes (Axial Coding)	Main Themes (Selective Themes)
<b>Brand coolness</b>			
“the brick aesthetic”; “the cool experience is that the restaurant is a little old school”; “is appealing because of its retro look”; “McDonalds in downtown are so nice looking.”	“brick aesthetic”; “little old school”; “is appealing”; “retro look”; “nice looking.”	Aesthetic	Aesthetic, authentic, extraordinary, exciting, iconic, original, popular, and subcultural are central elements of brand coolness for fast-food restaurants.
“they are genuine”; “when they offer something different like a fast food place that’s unique to a city”; “for McDonalds, there’s a tied nostalgia feeling”.	“genuine”; “something different”; “fast-food place that’s unique to a city”; “tied nostalgia feeling.”	Authentic	
“To me, this makes it a slight bit healthier [Chipotle] and thus cool”; “depends on how well technology is involved in customer service”; “their own products to produce this effect on customers.”	“slight bit healthier”; “how well technology is involved in customer service”; “own products.”	Extraordinary	
“fast-food restaurants would be thought of as exciting”; “if fast-food places add something else inside to make the location more entertaining for their customers besides the food.”	“thought of as exciting”; “something else”; “more entertaining.”	Exciting	
“due to their celebrity endorsements”; “celebrities can also give them a coolness factor”; “if they are located next to a lot of trendy shops.”	“celebrity endorsements”; “celebrities”; “located next to a lot of trendy shops.”	Iconic	
“uniqueness in a McDonalds, like a certain theme of a specific location, gives it a distinct atmosphere”; “when the atmosphere of a restaurant is unique.”	“uniqueness”; “distinct atmosphere”; “is unique.”	Original	
“nobody will ever complain about a spontaneous McDonalds nighttime run”;	“nobody will ever complain”; “pretty cheap”; “are trendy”; “standard	Popular	

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Table 3 (continued)

Examples of participants' narratives	Examples of open coding (Line-by-Line Coding)	Subthemes (Axial Coding)	Main Themes (Selective Themes)
"it's pretty cheap and quick"; "they offer foods that are trendy"; "have a standard template making them cool because they are sleek, quick, efficient, and familiar."	template"; "familiar."		
"Five Guys is cool because it is seen as being newer and hip; "it looks somewhat hidden like an 'underground' place to get a burger"; "This is why cultural restaurants are trending."	"newer and hip"; "somewhat hidden"; "underground place"; "cultural restaurants."	Subcultural	
<b>Communal-brand connection</b>			
"an area friends may visit when they are hanging out together"; "people are sitting outside, lounging and eating their meal"; "I remember my grandparents taking me and my cousin, and there was a huge McDonalds there"; "you can invite friends, and the drive through is fun, usually".	"friends may visit"; "hanging out together"; "people are sitting outside"; "I remember my grandparents"; "with my cousin"; "you can invite friends"; "the drive through is fun usually."	Communal-brand connection	Communal-brand connection is an interrelated element of brand coolness for fast-food restaurants.

consumers in Germany, 57.4% of consumers between 14 and 39 years old; Statista, 2020).

As in Studies 1 and 2, the use of brands from different service sectors allowed us to determine which factors served as universal dimensions of cool service brands, as well as whether these dimensions' significance would vary, depending on the context. In Study 3, the participants evaluated their prior experiences in music festivals or fast-food restaurants. Thus, their evaluations could include both cool and uncool brands. Through this aggregated analysis of service brands, the dimensions that would emerge from each subsample should represent fundamental indicators of service brand coolness.

After a screening procedure to ensure the quality of the data obtained, 254 responses in total were ultimately used in the analysis (47% female; 60% between 18 and 24 years old). Of the total sample, 139 participants described their most recent experience in a branded music festival. The branded music festivals that were most often mentioned were MEO SW (33%) and the NOS Alive Festival (27%). The remainder of the participants (115) described their latest experience in a fast-food restaurant. The most often mentioned fast-food restaurant brands were McDonald's (54%) and Burger King (11%).

4.3.1. Measurement and model estimation

Because our goal in Study 3 was to evaluate whether brand coolness and communal-brand connection are effective predictors of loyalty, we

developed a relational model using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). We selected the PLS-SEM analysis, following the rationale proposed by Hair et al. (2020). First, our modeling included reflective and formative constructs, which PLS-SEM can estimate adequately. Second, our model involved an exploratory exercise to evaluate the predictive validity of service brand coolness, which aligns with the epistemological nature of PLS path analysis. Third, we estimated our model using the PLS consistent algorithm, which balances the propensity of PLS to augment measurement loadings while downplaying structural relations (Dijkstra and Henseler, 2015).

At the preliminary stage, brand coolness was measured as a formative second-order construct (type II; Hair et al., 2018) with ten theoretical first-order dimensions (i.e., four items for aesthetic appeal, authentic, extraordinary, exciting, high status, popular, rebellious, and subcultural; three items for original; and two items for iconic). The items were adapted from the study of Warren et al. (2019), and the estimation of brand coolness as a type II, second-order construct was adapted from the study of Loureiro et al. (2020). Communal-brand connection was measured as a first-order construct with three items adapted from the study of Rindfleisch et al. (2009). Finally, brand loyalty was measured via an adaptation of the measurement proposed by Yoo and Donthu (2001), with four items (see Appendix C). All measures were tested with seven-point Likert scales.

To ensure that the sample did not have a response bias, we conducted a common-method variance test using the marker variable method (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The marker variable corresponded to the participants' evaluations of their attitudes toward the color blue, measured using the aggregated means of three items ("I love the color blue." "I think that blue is a nice color." "I like the blue color." The responses ranged from 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 7 = "Strongly agree"; M = 5.47; SD = 1.49; α = 0.92). As expected, the correlations between all variables used in our model and the marker variable returned a weak range (0.03–0.16); therefore, we established that there were no issues with the common-method variance.

A principal component factor analysis with Varimax rotation conducted in SPSS 26 showed 10 factors representing brand coolness. These factors were consistent with 29 items (from a pool of 37 items representing brand coolness) divided into 10 brand coolness components (aesthetic appeal, authentic, extraordinary, exciting, high status, iconic, original, popular, rebellious, and subcultural; see Table 4). The variance was moderately explained (78.74%), the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was acceptable (0.91), and the value of Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ( $X^2_{406} = 4740.52, p < .001$ ). Similar results were produced by an oblique rotation.

The reliability and the validity of all the reflective scales of service brand coolness, communal-brand connection, and loyalty were acceptable, according to Cronbach's alpha (range: 0.76–0.89) and composite reliability (range: 0.86–0.93), with the reference limit of 0.70 (Hair et al., 1998). All constructs also showed acceptable values of average variance extracted (AVE; range: 0.60–0.83; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Additionally, the factor loadings of each item were significant on their corresponding construct (all loadings' ps < .001; Table 5). Regarding discriminant validity, we found that the square root of AVE per latent variable was higher than the correlations between each pair of constructs (see Table 6; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All constructs also returned satisfactory discriminant validity based on the heterotrait-monotrait ratio criterion (HTMT < 0.90; see Table 6; Henseler et al., 2015).

To evaluate whether the sample size was acceptable for SEM estimations, we checked the a priori sample size calculator for structural equation models (Soper, 2021). We used a desired statistical power level of 0.80 (which should be greater than or equal to 0.80), an anticipated effect size of 0.50 (considered medium), 36 observed variables, 12 latent variables, and 0.05 as the probability level. The results of this test supported our final sample size (n = 254), as the minimum sample size to

**Table 4**  
Study 3. Exploratory factor analysis of service brand coolness.

Items	Construct	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	Factor 9	Factor 10
X looks good.	Aesthetic	<b>.76</b>	.22	.17	.13	.16	.05	.19	.18	.23	.12
X is aesthetically appealing.		<b>.79</b>	.15	.15	.18	-.02	.06	.23	.11	.10	.21
X is attractive.		<b>.77</b>	.08	.13	.14	.12	.16	.22	.24	.18	.12
X is true to its roots.	Authentic	.19	<b>.78</b>	.14	-.11	-.03	.19	.21	.12	.16	.07
X doesn't seem artificial.		.26	<b>.60</b>	.24	.30	.34	-.02	.11	.00	.15	.01
X doesn't try to be something it's not.		.09	<b>.67</b>	.13	.21	.08	.04	.27	.18	.32	.08
X is superb.	Extraordinary	.17	.10	<b>.74</b>	.10	.18	.14	.12	.02	.24	.26
X is fantastic.		.08	.21	<b>.74</b>	.18	.19	.17	.06	.05	.18	.10
X is extraordinary.		.19	.09	<b>.80</b>	.14	.26	.04	.15	.02	.14	.17
X is energetic.	Exciting	.14	.04	.15	<b>.82</b>	-.03	-.01	.16	.11	-.02	.28
X is outgoing.		.01	.06	.15	<b>.83</b>	.09	.14	.09	.15	.13	.10
X is lively.		.26	.08	.05	<b>.75</b>	.20	.14	.12	.11	.12	-.10
X is chic.	High status	.05	.11	.25	.10	<b>.81</b>	.10	.01	.05	.06	.26
X is sophisticated.		.06	-.08	.13	.07	<b>.77</b>	.14	.14	-.05	.23	.18
X is ritzy (expensively stylish).		.07	.15	.18	.07	<b>.72</b>	.04	.12	.10	.24	.33
X is a cultural symbol.	Iconic	.11	.12	.13	.11	.13	<b>.84</b>	.12	.07	.02	.17
X is iconic.		.12	.05	.13	.12	.11	<b>.78</b>	.20	.19	.23	.05
X is innovative.	Original	.19	.13	.08	.28	.08	.17	<b>.75</b>	.13	.24	.08
X is original.		.29	.20	.16	.02	.16	.05	<b>.81</b>	.14	.04	.05
X does its own thing.		.18	.28	.10	.23	.06	.31	<b>.66</b>	.05	.13	.12
X is liked by most people.	Popular	.19	.05	.06	.19	.06	.05	.06	<b>.84</b>	.03	-.06
X is in style.		.23	.02	.18	.34	.22	.24	.32	<b>.53</b>	.15	-.02
X is widely accepted.		.10	.14	-.05	.04	-.07	.11	.10	<b>.89</b>	-.01	.03
X is rebellious.	Rebellious	.18	.21	.13	.17	.36	.07	.11	-.05	.71	.14
X is defiant.		.16	.22	.25	.16	.20	.19	.07	.10	<b>.71</b>	.11
X is not afraid to break rules.		.17	.14	.21	-.01	.05	.08	.20	.04	<b>.74</b>	.24
If I were to use X, it would make me stand apart from others.	Subcultural	.18	.05	.23	.10	.35	.10	.13	-.07	.13	<b>.71</b>
X helps people who use it stand apart from the crowd.		.16	.01	.18	.14	.37	.07	.08	.03	.18	<b>.69</b>
People who use X are unique.		.15	.11	.18	.08	.37	.19	.00	.02	.27	<b>.63</b>

Notes: Items cross-loadings are after Varimax rotation; X refers to the service brand.

detect an effect was 49, the minimum sample size for the model structure was 200, and the recommended minimum sample size was 200.

To operate with brand coolness as a second-order construct, we used the two-step approach (Ringle et al., 2012). This approach consists of the estimation of latent variable scores representing brand coolness through the repeated indicator approach (first step). As a result of the repeated indicator approach, the latent scores obtained were used as manifest variables for brand coolness in a first-order construct to estimate the final model (second step).

In the second part of our analysis, we ensured the measurement invariance as a requirement before comparing the path coefficients of each subsample (music festivals vs. fast-food restaurants). Building on the recommendations of Henseler et al. (2016b), we developed a measurement invariance of composite model (MICOM; Table 7). In this regard, we performed the three steps for the MICOM's analysis assessment. The first step ensures configural invariance by using exactly the same setup for each subsample-specific model. In the second step, we ran 5000 permutations on SmartPLS software, considering a significance level of 0.10, as recommended for models that test novel constructs, such as service brand coolness (Hair et al., 2018). The permutations demonstrated compositional invariance, which confirmed the partial invariance of our study (Henseler et al., 2016b). Because we did not obtain similar mean values across subsamples in the third step, we only achieved partial metric invariance.

After ensuring partial metric invariance, we evaluated the validity of the formative scale (brand coolness) in both subsamples. We first conducted a collinearity test among its components. All outer variance inflation factors (VIFs) were lower than five (range of all VIF values: 1.00–4.26). Overall, these results indicated no crucial multicollinearity issues across our subsamples (O'Brien, 2007). Second, for each subsample, we examined the contributions of the first-order indicators of brand coolness as a second-order construct to determine whether they were valid components of the formative construct (Hair et al., 2018). We

then conducted a non-parametric bootstrapping procedure based on 10,000 samples with no sign change with all the samples and subsamples proposed in the analysis (Figs. 2 and 3). We also tested approximate fit indices for our measurement model using the overall sample (Henseler et al., 2016a). The results showed acceptable values for the standardized root mean residual (SRMS = 0.015; threshold for SRMR < 0.08) and the normed fit index (NFI = 0.98; threshold for NFI > 0.90). These results indicate that our in-sample measures can be oriented to assess the explanatory power and the specifications of the proposed measurement model (Petter, 2018).

In the case of branded music festivals, the analysis revealed that of the 10 formative indicators, 4 had a significance of at least 95% for service brand coolness (i.e., extraordinary, high status, original, and subcultural). The measurement model for branded music festivals indicated an acceptable approximate fit, with values of SRMR = 0.02 and NFI = 0.96. For fast-food restaurants, the analysis again revealed that of the 10 formative indicators of service brand coolness, 4 had a significance of at least 95% (i.e., authentic, extraordinary, popular, and subcultural). For fast-food restaurants, the model also showed an acceptable approximate fit (SRMR = 0.015; NFI = 0.98). Finally, we ran a PLS multigroup analysis (PLS-MGA), where we confirmed no significant difference between the path coefficients across the two subsamples analyzed (see comparisons of the path coefficients in Table 8).

#### 4.3.2. Procedure for branded music festivals

Using the subsample of branded music festivals, we evaluated the model's explanatory and predictive capacity through the  $R^2$  and the  $Q^2$  values. The  $R^2$  parameter showed that service brand coolness and communal-brand connection explained 65% of the variance in brand loyalty. Additionally, brand coolness explained 61% of the variance in communal-brand connection. Positive  $Q^2$  values, greater than 0.20 in the dependent variables (range: 0.40–0.47), showed the predictive relevance of the subsample model (Hair et al., 2017). The results of the

**Table 5**  
Study 3. Measurement items, construct reliability, and convergent validity.

Constructs/items	Mean	SD	Kurtosis	Skewness	Loadings
<i>Aesthetic Appeal</i> ( $\alpha = .89$ ; $CR = .93$ ; $AVE = .83$ ).					
X looks good.	4.84	1.60	-.72	-.39	.92
X is aesthetically appealing.	4.67	1.50	-.63	-.21	.89
X is attractive.	4.75	1.52	-.53	-.33	.91
<i>Authentic</i> ( $\alpha = .75$ ; $CR = .76$ ; $AVE = .51$ ).					
X is true to its roots.	4.61	1.57	-.50	-.40	.76
X doesn't seem artificial.	4.12	1.72	-.92	-.05	.77
X doesn't try to be something it's not.	4.40	1.68	-.74	-.29	.80
<i>Extraordinary</i> ( $\alpha = .85$ ; $CR = .91$ ; $AVE = .77$ ).					
X is superb.	4.23	1.78	-1.20	.03	.88
X is fantastic.	4.35	1.70	-.87	-.21	.84
X is extraordinary.	4.34	1.71	-.98	-.22	.88
<i>Exciting</i> ( $\alpha = .84$ ; $CR = .90$ ; $AVE = .76$ ).					
X is energetic.	4.57	1.59	-.71	-.24	.87
X is outgoing.	4.56	1.55	-.63	-.44	.88
X is lively.	4.76	1.50	-.67	-.31	.85
<i>High status</i> ( $\alpha = .85$ ; $CR = .91$ ; $AVE = .77$ ).					
X is chic.	3.43	1.69	-.77	.22	.89
X is sophisticated.	3.63	1.77	-.89	.14	.84
X is ritzy (expensively stylish).	3.32	1.64	-.62	.26	.88
<i>Iconic</i> (Pearson's $r = .62$ ; $\alpha = .76$ ; $CR = .89$ ; $AVE = .81$ ).					
X is a cultural symbol.	4.66	1.64	-.52	-.50	.89
X is iconic.	4.89	1.57	-.26	-.59	.90
<i>Original</i> ( $\alpha = .85$ ; $CR = .91$ ; $AVE = .77$ ).					
X is innovative.	4.90	1.43	-.21	-.43	.88
X is original.	4.88	1.52	.00	-.74	.87
X does its own thing.	4.84	1.49	-.30	-.53	.86
<i>Popular</i> ( $\alpha = .86$ ; $CR = .89$ ; $AVE = .70$ ).					
X is liked by most people.	5.47	1.38	.49	-.95	.83
X is in style.	5.00	1.58	-.35	-.63	.89
X is widely accepted.	5.69	1.30	1.13	-1.15	.76
<i>Rebellious</i> ( $\alpha = .82$ ; $CR = .89$ ; $AVE = .74$ ).					
X is rebellious.	3.93	1.62	-.72	.10	.87
X is defiant.	4.04	1.56	-.78	.18	.87
X is not afraid to break rules.	4.21	1.61	-.83	.05	.82
<i>Subcultural</i> ( $\alpha = .83$ ; $CR = .90$ ; $AVE = .75$ ).					
If I were to use X, it would make me stand apart from others.	3.66	1.66	-1.08	.12	.88
X helps people who use it stand apart from the crowd.	3.88	1.62	-.80	.02	.85
People who use X are unique.	3.60	1.77	-1.10	.16	.85
<i>Communal-brand connection</i> ( $\alpha = .83$ ; $CR = .90$ ; $AVE = .74$ ).					
I really identify with people who attend/consume X.	3.95	1.59	-.65	.14	.83
I feel like I almost belong to a club with other attendants/consumers of X.	3.61	1.76	-.85	.26	.88
I feel a deep connection with others who attend/consume X.	3.69	1.63	-.76	.17	.86
<i>Brand loyalty</i> ( $\alpha = .86$ ; $CR = .91$ ; $AVE = .71$ ).					
I consider myself to be loyal to X.	4.10	1.93	-1.29	-.03	.89
X would be my first choice.	4.32	1.91	-1.98	-.24	.81
I will not buy other brands if X is available.	3.93	2.03	-1.26	-.06	.87
If another brand is not different from X in any way, it seems smarter to purchase X.	4.19	1.69	-.98	.02	.77

Note: X refers to the service brand.

relational model (Fig. 2) confirmed a positive and direct influence of service brand coolness on brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.58$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Brand coolness also exerted a positive and direct influence on communal-brand connection ( $\beta = 0.77$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In turn, communal-brand connection ( $\beta = 0.26$ ;  $p < .01$ ) positively and directly influenced loyalty. The specific indirect effects derived from the bootstrapping procedure using SmartPLS with 10,000 subsamples confirmed that communal-brand connection had a mediation effect between service brand coolness and brand loyalty ( $\beta_{\text{communal-brand connection}} = 0.21$ ; 95% CI: 0.07–0.38;  $p < .01$ ).

#### 4.3.3. Procedure for fast-food restaurant brands

For the subsample referring to fast-food restaurant brands, we also evaluated the model's explanatory and predictive capacity. Service brand coolness and communal-brand connection explained 75% of the variance in brand loyalty. Additionally, brand coolness explained 57% of the variance in communal-brand connection. The  $Q^2$  values (range: 0.41–0.50) demonstrated the predictive relevance of the model with this subsample. The measurement model for fast-food brand restaurants (Fig. 3) confirmed the positive, direct influence of service brand coolness on loyalty ( $\beta = 0.59$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Brand coolness also exerted a positive, direct influence on communal-brand connection ( $\beta = 0.75$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and communal-brand connection ( $\beta = 0.33$ ;  $p < .001$ ) positively and directly influenced brand loyalty. The specific indirect effects derived from the bootstrapping procedure using 10,000 subsamples confirmed that communal-brand connection had a mediation effect between service brand coolness and brand loyalty ( $\beta_{\text{communal-brand connection}} = 0.25$ ; 95% CI: 0.15–0.39;  $p < .001$ ).

#### 4.3.4. Results of study 3

We confirmed that brand coolness in service brands was a positive predictor of brand loyalty and communal-brand connection (supporting H1 and H2). As we expected, communal-brand connection also exerted a direct and positive influence on brand loyalty (supporting H3). In line with our expectations, communal-brand connection also significantly mediated the relation between brand coolness and brand loyalty (supporting H4). Overall, the findings indicated a significant interplay between service brand coolness and communal-brand connection regarding the generation of brand loyalty.

### 5. General discussion

Although the prior marketing literature has focused on the investigation of the coolness of goods/product brands through an individualistic approach (e.g., Li et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2020; Tiwari et al., 2021), consumers usually describe physical and social experiential service brands as possessing specific properties that make them cool. In this regard, we have developed three studies that expand consumers' perceptions of brand coolness from products to services (niche and mass) to analyze whether cool service brands enhance consumers' communal-brand connection and loyalty. In this exercise, we have considered coolness as a signal that consumers can transfer to their identity while in contact with other consumers in controlled physical spaces of service brands. Our contribution responds to recent calls to explore new consequences of brand coolness beyond consumers' self-brand connection, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Li et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2020; Tiwari et al., 2021; Warren et al., 2019). Our findings show the influence of service brand coolness on loyalty through the interplay of communal-brand connection. Thus, this study confirms that service brand coolness could help companies offer value across physical and social experiences to consumers in the post-COVID-19 era.

#### 5.1. Implications for theory

As contributions to prior research on brand coolness (Li et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2020; Tiwari et al., 2021; Warren et al., 2019), Studies 1

**Table 6**  
Study 3. Discriminant validity.

Fornell and Larcker's criterion	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
(1) Aesthetic	<b>.91</b>											
(2) Authentic	.61	<b>.77</b>										
(3) Extraordinary	.48	.55	<b>.88</b>									
(4) Exciting	.43	.42	.40	<b>.87</b>								
(5) High status	.34	.41	.55	.31	<b>.88</b>							
(6) Iconic	.36	.42	.40	.33	.34	<b>.90</b>						
(7) Original	.60	.72	.44	.45	.33	.48	<b>.88</b>					
(8) Popular	.52	.44	.31	.48	.26	.44	.49	<b>.83</b>				
(9) Rebellious	.52	.61	.59	.35	.51	.41	.49	.31	<b>.86</b>			
(10) Subcultural	.45	.43	.59	.33	.70	.38	.37	.21	.58	<b>.86</b>		
(11) Communal-brand connection	.43	.52	.61	.49	.58	.36	.50	.40	.48	.59	<b>.86</b>	
(12) Brand loyalty	.52	.66	.69	.42	.55	.43	.55	.37	.59	.64	.75	<b>.84</b>
HTMT <.90 criterion	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
(1) Aesthetic	–											
(2) Authentic	.71	–										
(3) Extraordinary	.55	.66	–									
(4) Exciting	.50	.50	.48	–								
(5) High status	.39	.47	.65	.37	–							
(6) Iconic	.44	.55	.50	.41	.43	–						
(7) Original	.69	.88	.52	.53	.39	.59	–					
(8) Popular	.57	.50	.30	.52	.25	.50	.54	–				
(9) Rebellious	.60	.76	.70	.42	.61	.52	.58	.32	–			
(10) Subcultural	.53	.52	.70	.40	.83	.47	.44	.20	.70	–		
(11) Communal-brand connection	.50	.63	.73	.59	.69	.45	.59	.44	.58	.71	–	
(12) Brand loyalty	.59	.79	.49	.65	.53	.63	.40	.69	.75	.75	.88	–

Note: In the diagonal and in bold are the square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE).

**Table 7**  
Study 3. MICOM analysis.

Composite	C value (= 1)	90% confidence interval	Compositional invariance?
Aesthetic	1.00	[1.00;1.00]	Yes
Authentic	.99	[.99;1.00]	Yes
Extraordinary	1.00	[1.00;1.00]	Yes
Exciting	.99	[.99;1.00]	Yes
High status	1.00	[1.00;1.00]	Yes
Iconic	.99	[.99;1.00]	Yes
Original	1.00	[1.00;1.00]	Yes
Popular	.99	[.99;1.00]	Yes
Rebellious	1.00	[1.00;1.00]	Yes
Subcultural	.99	[.99;1.00]	Yes
Communal-brand connection	.99	[.99;1.00]	Yes
Brand loyalty	1.00	[1.00;1.00]	Yes

and 2 show that service brands introduce social contexts in which consumers can be recognized by others who share common interests and spaces as adopters of what is cool. Thus, consumers' relationships with cool brands are not constrained by the presence of products/objects as mediums to signal coolness. Study 3 demonstrates that social self-presentation and the recognition of being consumers of cool service brands have significant repercussions on individuals' communal connection and loyalty to service brands. Thus, our research contributes to prior studies on self-presentation in marketing (e.g., Slama and Wolfe, 1999; Sundar et al., 2017) by showing that brand coolness participates in social interactions with service brands as a symbolic value that motivates consumers to present themselves to other consumers and be recognized as having a cool personality trait through consumption experiences.

In Study 3, we confirm the validity of Warren et al.'s (2019) brand coolness dimensions and the estimation of this construct as a second-order type II (Loureiro et al., 2020) with service brands. However, the findings reveal that among service brands, the dimensions that appear to be useful measures of brand coolness can vary, depending on niche (branded music festivals) or mass service brands (fast-food restaurants). This evidence is in line with prior researchers' argument that

brand coolness is dynamic and can be expressed in multiple dimensions, depending on the context (Loureiro et al., 2020; Warren et al., 2019). For music festivals, the extraordinary, high-status, original, and sub-cultural dimensions emerge as significant components of service brand coolness. For fast-food restaurants, the important factors are the authentic, extraordinary, popular, and subcultural dimensions. These indicate that the differences between niche and mass service brands are represented by the high-status, popular, authentic, and original dimensions of brand coolness. These findings imply a parallel line of argument in prior research on brand coolness (Warren et al., 2019) and in the findings obtained in our qualitative studies (Studies 1 and 2). Services with the high-status or the original dimension as one of their principal components of brand coolness may be considered cool in the niche context. This is noted in the case of branded music festivals, which the participants in Study 1 described as exclusive, high-priced, and unique experiences. Conversely, service brands with the popular or the authentic dimension as one of their principal components of brand coolness may be described as mass brands, such as fast-food restaurants.

The dimensions of brand coolness that appear stable in our analysis across niche and mass service brands (i.e., extraordinary and subcultural) may represent the primary conditions for consumer perception of service firms' coolness. This means that a cool service brand may offer a superior value to consumers compared with its competitors (i.e., captured by the extraordinary dimension; Belk et al., 2010; Sundar et al., 2014). At the same time, it may provide a sense of autonomy to a group of people who perceive their relationship with the brand as outside mainstream social standards (i.e., captured by the subcultural dimension; Belk et al., 2010).

### 5.2. Implications for practitioners

As the worldwide impact of COVID-19 diminishes, service brands that offer physical and social experiences to consumers may find new ways to provide differential value. Here, we recommend that service brand managers consider coolness a valuable symbolic quality for niche and mass brands. First, our findings highlight coolness attributes, such as being extraordinary and subcultural, as central elements associated with loyalty for niche (music festivals) and mass (fast-food restaurant)

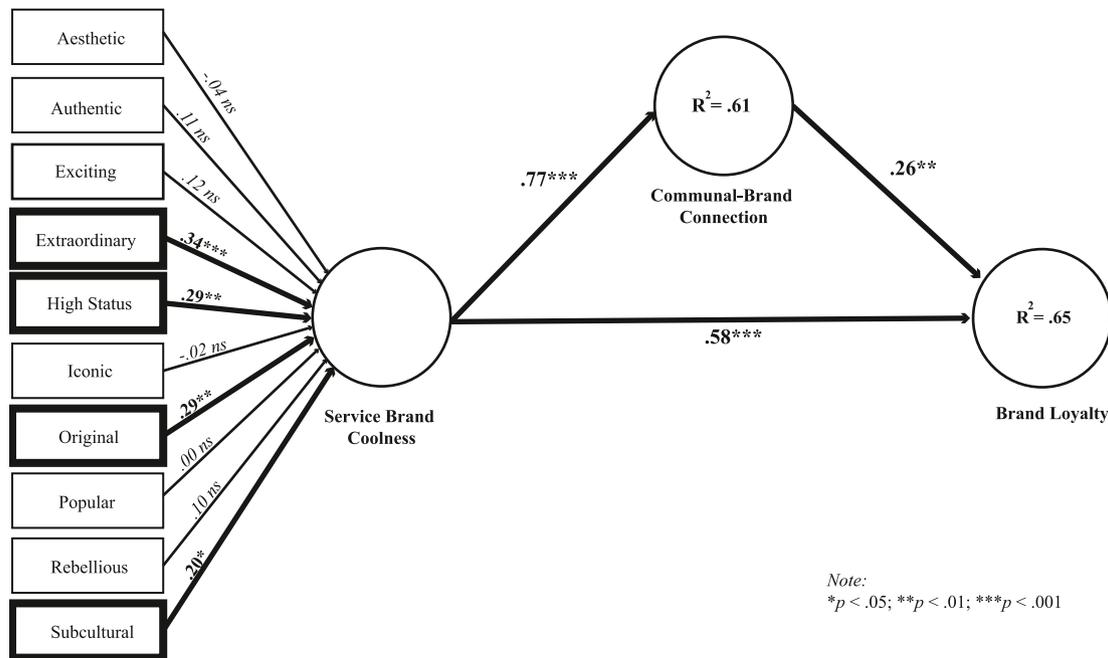


Fig. 2. Study 3. Relationship model for music festival brands.

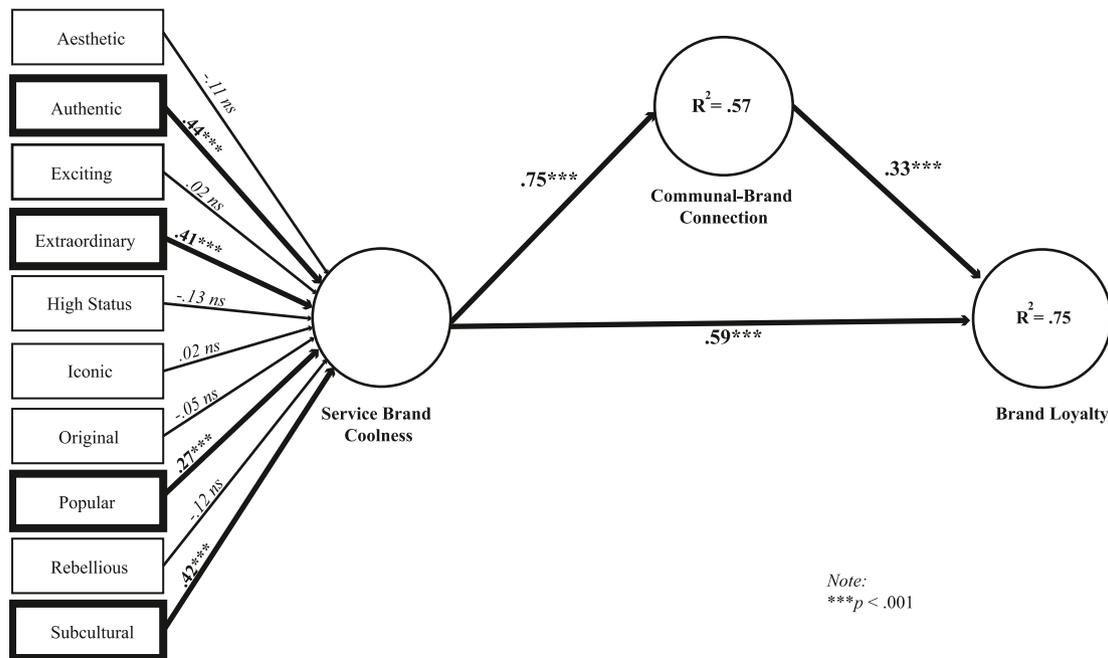


Fig. 3. Study 3. Relationship model for fast-food restaurant brands.

service brands. However, for niche brands, the high-status and the original components are particular attributes of coolness. This means that niche brand managers may reinforce high-status signals, such as price, exclusivity, uniqueness, and exotic attributes, which accommodate and potentiate consumers' internal interests and idiosyncrasies related to coolness.

For mass brands, the singular property of coolness emerges when they are considered popular and authentic. These perceptions may be constructed over a long period, with actions intended to accommodate a brand's tradition while leveraging its consumers' beliefs, tastes, and opinions. One way to develop this idea could be to create and communicate a highly recognizable and unique offer, for example, the branding

support of traditional fast-food menus, such as Whopper and Big Mac by Burger King and McDonald's, respectively.

Second, our research suggests that service brands should reflect on how they can facilitate consumers' identifying with and being identified by other consumers of the same brand as seekers of what is cool. Certain strategies may enhance communal recognition of consumers of a particular brand through positive symbolic meanings based on where the brand is positioned in the market. For example, service brands may design exclusive events for loyal customers or develop social programs consisting of experiences that highlight consumers' loyalty by recognizing them in front of other individuals (Dreze and Nunes, 2009).

**Table 8**  
Study 3. Structural equation modeling results.

Hypotheses				Bias Corrected Confidence Intervals	
	Path Coefficients <sup>a</sup>	f <sup>2</sup>	t-value	Lower bound	Upper bound
<b>H1: supported</b>					
<b>(Overall sample)</b> Service brand coolness → Brand loyalty	.54	.43	10.02***	.42	.63
<b>(Music Festivals)</b> Service brand coolness → Brand loyalty	.58	.38	6.46***	.34	.72
<b>(Fast-food Restaurants)</b> Service brand coolness → Brand loyalty	.59	.60	7.44***	.40	.71
Differences between paths (Multigroup analysis) = .01 (p > .05)					
<b>H2: supported</b>					
<b>(Overall sample)</b> Service brand coolness → Communal-brand connection	.74	1.23	26.55***	.67	.78
<b>(Music Festivals)</b> Service brand coolness → Communal-brand connection	.77	1.53	23.45***	.67	.82
<b>(Fast-food Restaurants)</b> Service brand coolness → Communal-brand connection	.75	1.31	17.11***	.62	.81
Differences between paths (Multigroup analysis) = .02 (p > .05)					
<b>H3: supported</b>					
<b>(Overall sample)</b> Communal-brand connection → Brand loyalty	.34	.17	5.84***	.24	.46
<b>(Music Festivals)</b> Communal-brand connection → Brand loyalty	.26	.07	2.61**	.09	.48
<b>(Fast-food Restaurants)</b> Communal-brand connection → Brand loyalty	.33	.18	3.60***	.18	.50
Differences between paths (Multigroup analysis) = .07 (p > .05)					
<b>H4: supported</b>					
<b>(Overall sample)</b> Service brand coolness → Communal-brand connection → Brand loyalty	.25	.13	5.75***	.17	.35
<b>(Music Festivals)</b> Service brand coolness → Communal-brand connection → Brand loyalty	.21	.02	2.51**	.07	.39

**Table 8 (continued)**

Hypotheses				Bias Corrected Confidence Intervals	
	Path Coefficients <sup>a</sup>	f <sup>2</sup>	t-value	Lower bound	Upper bound
<b>(Fast-food Restaurants)</b> Service brand coolness → Communal-brand connection → Brand loyalty	.25	.12	3.77***	.14	.39
Differences between paths (Multigroup analysis) = .04 (p > .05)					
<b>Variance explained (R<sup>2</sup>)</b>					
<b>(Overall sample)</b> Communal-brand connection (R <sup>2</sup> = .55); Brand loyalty (R <sup>2</sup> = .70)					
<b>(Music Festivals)</b> Communal-brand connection (R <sup>2</sup> = .61); Brand loyalty (R <sup>2</sup> = .65)					
<b>(Fast-food Restaurants)</b> Communal-brand connection (R <sup>2</sup> = .57); Brand loyalty (R <sup>2</sup> = .75)					

Note: \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001; f<sup>2</sup> refers to the effect size. <sup>a</sup> Standardized coefficients.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Our research is not exempt from several limitations. First, in our analysis of service brand coolness, we have focused only on comprehending two types of service categories (high experiential services, such as music festivals and fast-food restaurants). Future research should explore multiple types of service categories to facilitate the generalization of our findings. Second, our studies were developed when physical services reestablished their operations after COVID-19 pandemic in the US and most European countries. Thus, the participants could have had a high level of skepticism while evaluating the coolness of physical service experiences (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). Future research on service brand coolness with residual COVID-19 impacts worldwide may help generalize the results.

Third, due to the dynamic structure of brand coolness, future research must seek a simpler but similarly effective measure of this construct, reducing its ten theoretical dimensions (e.g. Li et al., 2021; Tiwari et al., 2021) to a more manageable number of indicators. This approach will open up opportunities to explore contextual moderation, such as comparing cool service brands across multiple sectors.

Fourth, although our quantitative study provides acceptable validity and reliability in each subsample used, future research should employ ample samples to reinforce the generalization of our findings in the context of analyzing service brands. We have used a combination of consumers from western countries with similar interpretations of brand coolness. Future analyses comparing consumers' cultural values (western and eastern countries) while describing and rating service brand coolness will complement and expand on our contributions.

Finally, we have not included other consumer characteristics as potential moderators in our relationship models. Future research could indicate whether brand familiarity, frequency of service use, fear of physical encounters after COVID-19, high versus low adopters of online

brand platforms, or various generational consumer cohorts would lead to significant changes in the relations among brand coolness, communal-brand connection, and brand loyalty.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102876>.

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