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**THE PERCEIVED ROLE OF BRANDING IN CONSUMER
BEHAVIOR WITHIN THE ENERGY DRINK INDUSTRY
AMONG FINNISH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

Bachelor's thesis

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the thesis independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors have been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading. The document length is 8360 words from the introduction to the end of conclusion.

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ABSTRACT

We are currently living in an era where the consumption of energy drinks is abnormally high due to the availability and association linked to consumer perceptions of added "energy" within the product. Specific targeting and branding activities present this connecting variable that forms perceptions and increases consumption. The aim of this study is to reveal new information about Finnish university students' attitudes towards the role of branding within the energy drink industry and to explore how it affects consumer behavior.

The data in this research is collected by utilizing a qualitative focus-group interview with five participants to reach insight on students' perceptions and formed attitudes of branding. In addition, a thematic analysis, i.e., conventional qualitative content analysis, was carried out together with self-selection sampling for this thesis.

The results indicate that branding has value and is an essential tool for companies in the energy drink industry to differentiate. In addition, the results suggest that students choose brands that are perceived as visibly accepted among the majority and associated specific communication.

Keywords: Energy drinks, attitudes, branding, Theory of planned behavior, consumption, communication, differentiation

INTRODUCTION

Energy drinks refer to "non-alcoholic beverages that contain caffeine, amino acids, herbs, and vitamins" and are marketed "to reduce fatigue and improve physical/mental performance" (Vercammen et al., 2019).

The consumption of energy drinks has experienced an increasing trend in the 2000s, specifically among adolescents and young adults. This growing pattern has generated severe discussion and research among medical field professionals of the negative health effects of the consumption of energy drinks. These negative effects represent, for example, sleep deprivation, obesity, fatigue, depression, and conditions linked to cardiovascular diseases, etc. (Rath, 2012). Although the negative effects are self-evident, the consumption is increasing. Studies conducted to measure the energy drink consumption from Vercammen et al. (2019) in the U.S and Zucconi et al. (2013) in the EU show a substantial increase. Therefore, the real question lies in why the consumption is growing, although the negative effects are evident.

Caffeine intake level is measured to be healthy by Health Canada at "400 mg/day for adults [10 g for lethality], 300 mg/day for pregnant women, and 2.5 mg/kg/day for children and adolescents" (Wikoff et al. 2017). However, controversially, one energy drink can of NOCCO Energy Drink contains 180mg of caffeine per 330ml, and Monster Energy contains 160mg/473ml, while a cup of black coffee only carries 40mg/100ml. Thus, we can argue that a person's caffeine intake is already alarming by consuming two 200ml cups of black coffee and one can of NOCCO Energy Drink (total of 500mg caffeine) without considering other unhealthy ingredients like taurine and sugar.

It is clear that the consumption of energy drinks is unhealthy and that the purchasing power is high but what remains unclear are the underlying factors empowering this behavior. A study conducted by Verplanken and Faes (1999) discusses that unhealthy food consumption can be the result of repeating the same act, which forms a habit. These habits are behavioral responses to

environmental cues that lead to unintentional behavior. Another study conducted in Finland by Puupponen (2017) argues that continuing caffeine consumption leads to increased tolerance and addiction-like behavior, like a constant need for the substance and a struggle to stop consuming it. Both studies are drawing attention to unwanted behavior that is also the case of the consumption of energy drinks. This behavior is learned and supported by targeted branding activities that motivate consumers to consume and neglect the negative aspect. Therefore, the title of the thesis: *The perceived role of branding in consumer behavior within the energy drink industry among Finnish university students.*

Previous research is mainly related to consumption habits, health effects, exposure to energy drink marketing or communication, and lacking in the aspect of attitudes. One existing study by Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014) examines the effect of social media communication on consumer perceptions of brands. Still, it is insufficient for understanding the attitudes linked to actual branding activities. Even though some studies explore related topics, no research has been conducted on consumers' attitudes towards branding in the energy drink industry. Also, understanding the most dominant factors influencing purchases within branding is limited and needs to be understood better.

The research will offer managerial implications and insight for companies on how branding affects consumer perceptions in the energy drink industry and what activities are of value. Furthermore, the research is expected to have external validity since there are no past studies on the topic and the angle of studying attitudes.

The consumption of energy drinks is continually increasing, although the adverse health effects are self-evident and widely communicated in modern society. However, people continue this toxic behavior, which is understudied and, therefore, presents a gap in research knowledge. Moreover, revealing the research problem of understanding why this behavior continues and the perceived role of branding has in it, by examining attitudes of the energy drink industry.

The aim of this paper is to explore and explain Finnish university students' attitudes towards energy drinks in general and how their purchasing behavior is affected by branding activities. Additionally, to establish an understanding of what the most dominant branding activities are and why, especially in this industry.

The aim of the study can be answered with the help of the following research questions:

- RQ1) How is branding affecting students purchasing behavior of energy drinks?
- RQ2) What are the most dominant branding activities within the energy drink industry?
- RQ3) What are students' attitudes towards energy drinks?
- RQ4) Do students believe that branding is influencing their choices?

The study is conducted by collecting the data via a focus group interview that does not take into consideration the participant's level of expertise within the topic. Instead, the research focuses on studying received responses and general attitudes that play a role in branding and consumer behavior. Moreover, because the study is qualitative, it cannot be generalized to a large population. However, it gives us a deeper understanding of the everyday consumption background of energy drinks and a possibility for participants to elaborate on their thoughts and, through that, increase the value of the study.

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section is the theoretical framework, functioning as the base of the study and covering the most important concepts. Moreover, it presents what branding is and related theoretical frameworks like the Theory of planned behavior and sensory marketing. In the second section, the empirical framework followed by empirical findings showing how the data was collected, research conducted and analyzed. Finally, the third section includes the analysis, the results, the conclusion of the thesis, and suggestions for possible follow-up research.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section presents the theoretical framework, which explains, covers, and connects the thesis's most relevant concepts. Moreover, it gives the reader tools and insight into understanding the complexity within the topic. The supporting information is gathered from relevant academic literature, research papers, and other verified resources.

1.1. What is branding?

Branding today is not self-explanatory nor referring to one specific act that automatically creates something; it rather works as a tool to gain value by a multitude of intangible efforts. To fully understand the concept of branding, we first need to distinguish the term brand itself, how it works, what it refers to, and its function in the past and modern society. Various marketers throughout time have made changing definitions, making the exact wording complicated. However, maintaining the key principle of differentiation is critical for all definitions. Early literature approaches (Wood 2000, 664) are drawn from The American Marketing Association (1960), stating that a brand is: "A name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors." and from Bennett (1988) defining a brand as: "A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers," making the essential change of adding multiple features to the context and shifting away from company-oriented thinking, allowing brands to become intangible and create value for the company, thus connecting to the concept of brand equity (Keller 2009, 140). Brand equity is defined by Kotler et al. as "the value of a brand, based on the extent to which it has high brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, strong brand associations and other assets such as patents, trademarks, and channel relationships" (Harris et al. 2002, 134). By fulfilling these

pillars of brand equity, companies can successfully strive to achieve a solid brand to support the company as a whole.

Brands merge heavily into everyday human lives through commercials, word-of-mouth, sponsors, clothing, etc., that all guide consumers to make set decisions. These decisions create value for the company by making consumers see your brand as the only one, thus establishing brand loyalty (Harris et al. 2002, 132-133). This increased loyalty phenomenon is very actual and has occurred, for example, with Apple and Nike, i.e., trapping consumers to ecosystems that only allow one brand to be used. According to Kotler et al., all brands can be viewed by examining the provided meaning they give, i.e., attributes, benefits, values, and personality to the user. This user later becomes a stakeholder who co-exists with the brand and creates value (Ibid., 133-134). In its essence, if a brand can increase its awareness and be perceived as a valuable option for the consumer, it will boost its value. This effect is explained by perceived value, which occurs when consumers perceive something as more valuable than it is, thus making a value increase (Ibid., 134-135).

The actual activity of branding combines activities, tangible or intangible, that mix values by differentiating suppliers and support customer choices (Murphy 1991, 1-2). Moreover, branding is completed by applying multiple theories to real-life situations that are molded and measured through the actor.

1.1.1. Brand identity and positioning

Brands often lift up the question of their vision, which sparks curiosity among consumers. Thus, creating questions like: What is the brand trying to say? How are they communicating this? Why? Etc. and if they are in line with the consumer's actual beliefs. Brands are much more than just a name; they represent values created in the company's core and further communicated to the consumer as the vision (Kapferer 2012, 149). Moreover, modern companies utilize two specific tools, namely "brand identity" to communicate these values and "brand positioning" to make a clear distinction between competitors (Kapferer 2012, 149). These tools support each other and create value for the company.

Brand identity refers to the built perception that reflects how company aims, values, and ethos are communicated to other parties involved. This identity is constructed through time, good communication, transparent management, and constant efforts from the whole company. Moreover, referring to the synergy of how well brand vision and -culture are applied that creates a good brand identity (Chernatony 2003, 380-381). According to Harris and de Charlnatony (2001), "brand identity is made of brand vision, brand culture, positioning, personality, relationship, and presentation" (Srivastava 2011, 341). Thus, establishing a shared understanding that brand identity is a creation of multiple impressions associated with various sources.

The model in Figure 1 presents one example of how brand identity is composed - stating that it is central for any organization to have a clear vision that reflects the wanted future. This vision is created by identity, which is achieved by creating a poisoned culture (functional values) and personality (emotional values) – together establishing a relationship that will be presented to others and seen as the company's vision (Chernatony 2003, 380).

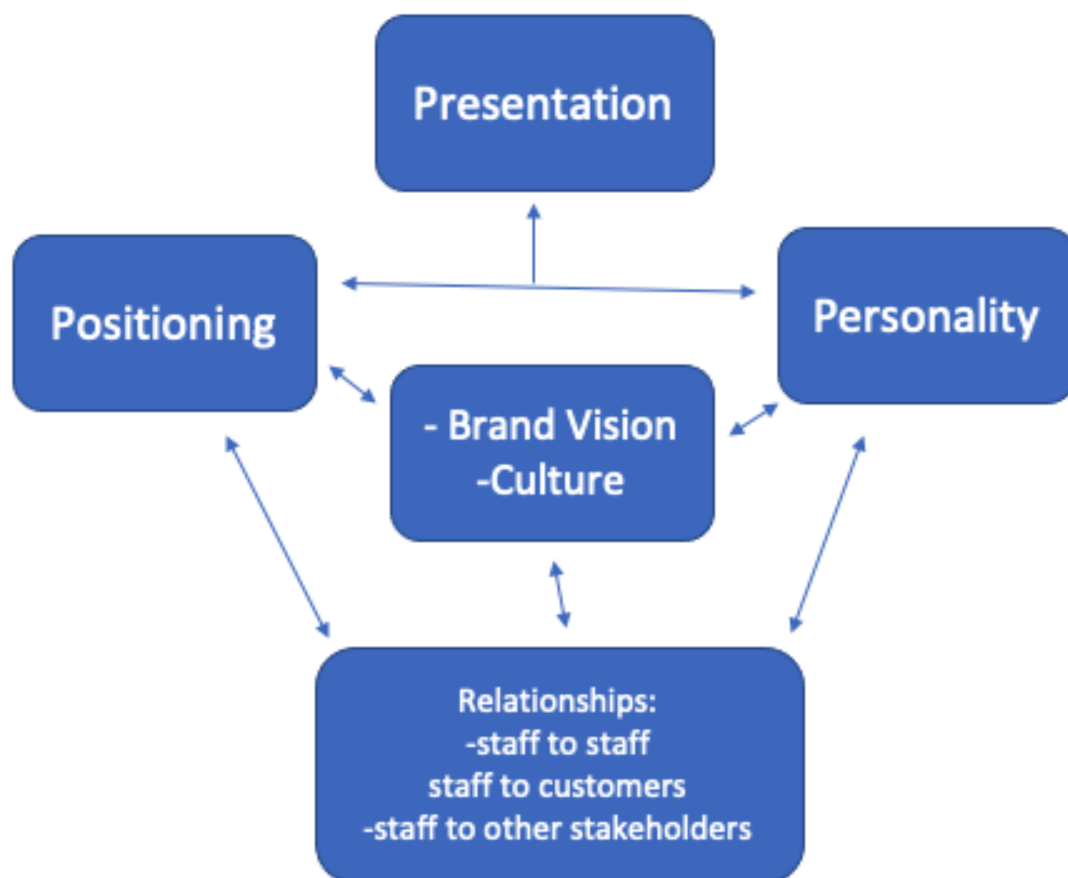


Figure 1. The components of brand identity. (Chernatony 2003, 380)

Furthermore, to establish a successful brand identity, companies should operate like a business card stating who they are and what they do in a few seconds (Kapferer 2012, 149). For example, energy drink companies should clearly distinguish this for the consumer (in a few seconds) to influence their decision and let them take a position.

Brand positioning refers to the act of creating a connection with the brand and consumers through instant associations. Successful positioning enables consumers to connect the brand to benefits, which have been communicated to them over time (Chernatony 2003, 376). For example, in the energy drink industry, Red Bull is perceived as high quality and for everyone, while Monster is preserved as a beverage for the gamers. Thus, creating a set "label" positive or negative. The creation of these perceptions as a strategy is vital and usually connected with the organization's key capabilities (Jalkala, Keränen 2014, 254). Kotler (2003) has defined brand positioning as "the act of designing the company's offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the mind of the target market" (Jalkala, Keränen 2014, 254). It is important to remember that consumers always have multiple options and that decisions are made through comparison.

In brand positioning, we need to understand the difference between intended and actual positioning. The distinction between these two is significant and best explained by Fuchs and Diamantopoulos (2010): where intended brand positioning refers to the images the company is intending to make in consumer's eyes and actual brand positioning refers to the marketing communication activities presented to the consumer (Fuchs, Diamantopoulos 2010, 1765). These activities are, for example, ads that consumers reflect over and build individual perceptions or, according to Ellson (2004), "beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and impressions that consumers hold for the brand compared to competitor brands" (Fuchs, Diamantopoulos 2010, 1766).

Furthermore, questions from Kapferer (2012, 155) represent how the positioning is archived:

- For ... (definition of targeted consumers) Brand X is ... (definition of competitive set and subjective category)
- Which gives the most ... (promise or consumer benefit)
- Because of ... (reason to believe).

Brand identity and positioning together work as essential concepts for company management. Brand identity distinguishing what made this brand unique and gave it value in the first place. While brand positioning is comparative, i.e., why one is chosen over another? (Ibid., 154). Finding

answers to specific "gaps" from target consumers and applying them -allows brands to be instantly perceived, thus upgrading other communicated branding activities and the company as a whole.

1.2. Theory of planned behavior

This thesis's primary goal is to find out and explain factors in branding that affect consumer behavior and determine how heavily they are connected to the final decision-making process. Therefore, utilizing a theory that explains human behavior is of utmost importance. The Theory of planned behavior (TPB) is chosen to establish this connection. This choice was constructed by reviewing two supporting studies with relating topics and the use of theory. The first study (2016) by Liobikienė, Mandravickaitė, and Bernatoniė examining factors that determine green purchasing behavior in the European Union (Liobikienė et al. 2016, 38-46). Similarly, the second study (2003) by Kassem, Lee, Modeste, and Johnston presenting factors influencing consumer behavior within soft drink consumption among female adolescents (Kassem et al. 2003, 278-291). Both studies utilize TPB as the core for research and involve buying in the presented problem. Moreover, TPB was chosen for its wide usage and advantages over other social cognition models, such as being a general theory, having a precise construction, etc. (Sutton 2001, 223).

The Theory of planned behavior states that human behavior is a function of three factors: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen 1991, 179). These factors correspondingly seek the answer for the questions; what I think, what do others think, and can I do it – together with leading to intention and actual behavior (Ibid.). This phenomenon is illustrated in the figure (Figure 2) and elaborated through an example.

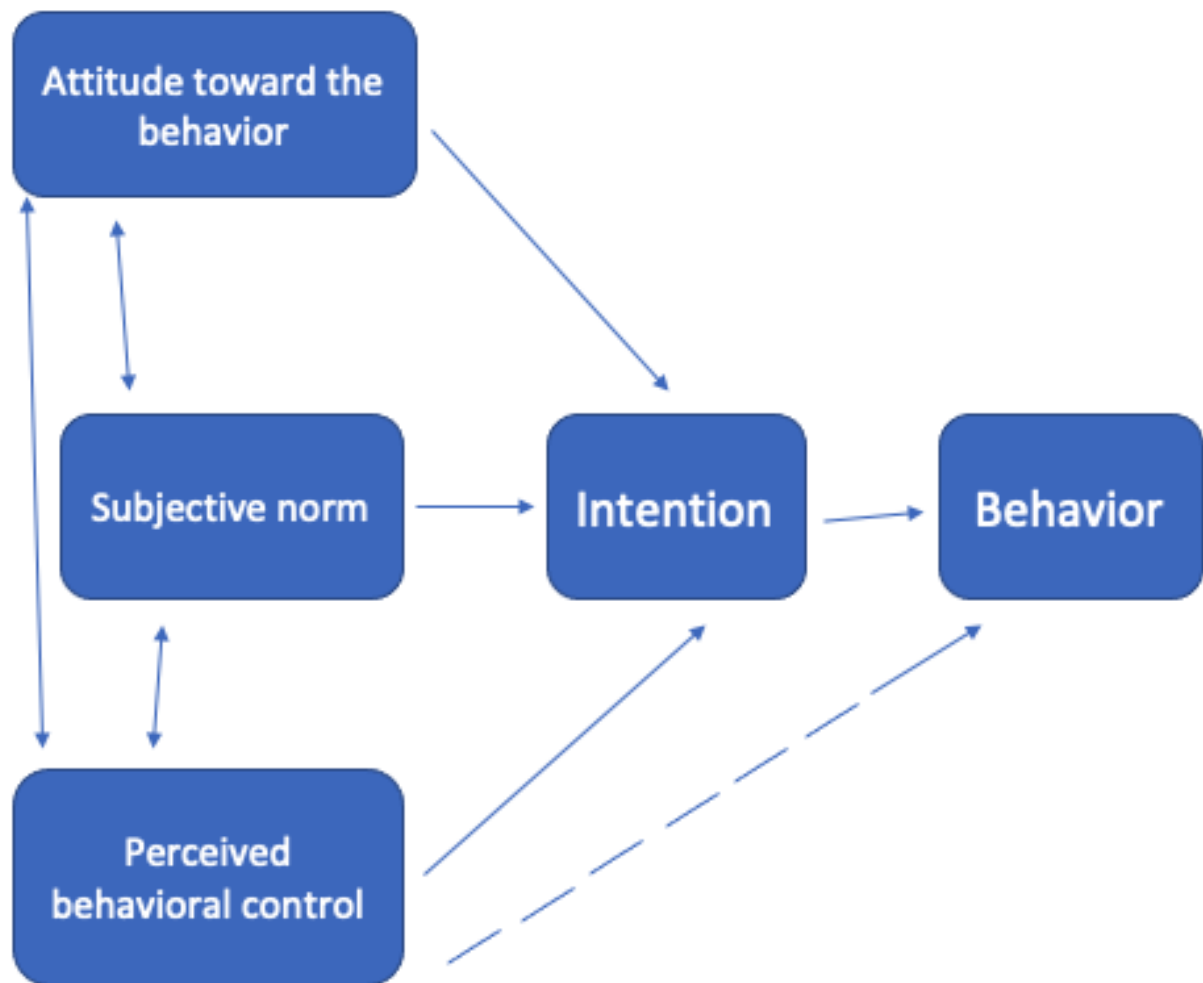


Figure 2. Theory of planned behavior. (Ajzen 1991, 182)

A university student enters a supermarket planning to purchase an energy drink. However, when arriving at the beverage section, he faces the multiple brand dilemma and struggles to make a choice. TPB argues that this choice does not happen surprisingly, rather that it is affected by three options that define intention and finally lead to behavior. The first option is attitudes – suggesting that the student will make a choice that reflects his attitudes (what do I think?), positive or negative – demanding reflection of outcomes, linked to performing the behavior. The second opinion is subjective norms – suggesting that the student will make a choice that is in line with his social circle (what do others think?) and reflect on the outcome. Finally, the third option is perceived behavioral control – suggesting that the more the student has control over a particular behavior, the more likely he is to behave in that way. Thus, TPB helps us examine determinants of personal, social, and non-volitional intention and upgrading our understanding of decision making. (Han et al. 2010, 326)

1.2.1. History and development

The Theory of planned behavior is constructed from its predecessor theory of reasoned action (TRA). TRA was developed in 1967 by Ajzen and Fishbein to understand better the relationships between attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Montano, Kasprzyk 2015, 96). The basic premise of TRA is that action is not random and that it happens with intention, more specifically, behavioral intention. These intentions reflect over human attitudes and subjective norms that reflectively impact performance and association with a behavior (Ibid., 97). TPB was proposed later in 1985 by Ajzen, with an added feature (Ajzen 1991, 179) - the perceived control element that enabled the individual to power over a behavior (Montano, Kasprzyk 2015, 97).

Because TRA had a limitation of only predicting voluntary behavior, TPB was taken into broader use. TPB, together with the perceived control, enabled individuals to look over the voluntary behavior and behave according to beliefs of control. (Trafimow et al. 2002, 102)

TPB's determinants are understood through behavioral, normative, and control beliefs. However, because of factors influencing humans like age, gender, status, nationality, religion, values, experiences, and so forth, an extra layer called "background factors" was added (Ajzen 2005, 134) – to involve how humans experience different situations and why to act accordingly. Thus, allowing us to use these factors as influencers for behavior. Ajzen (2005, 134-135) presents the following:

- * Personal – General attitudes, Personal traits, Values, Emotions, Intelligence
- * Social – Age, Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Education, Income, Religion
- * Information – Experience, Knowledge, Media exposure

These factors establish a deeper understanding of TPB but should only be used as support. Ajzen (2005, 134) states that "although a given background factor may in fact influence behavioral, normative, or control beliefs, there is no necessary connection between background factors and beliefs" – arguing that the core still is in the determinants.

1.3. Sensory marketing

Humans collect and experience many senses each day, some new and some old, varying from unthinkable logic. You may touch a new product, experience the effect of noise-canceling headphones, see something that is both familiar and weird, for the first time, all reflecting over senses. Sensory marketing refers to this very phenomenon of interacting with the most ordinary human senses, i.e., taste, vision, sound, smell, and touch (Krishna 2009, 1-2). Moreover, as demonstrated in the framework below (Figure 3.) – senses lead to human perceptions, which further leads to emotion or cognition and, in the end, affects an attitude, learning/memory, or behavior (Krishna 2012, 335).

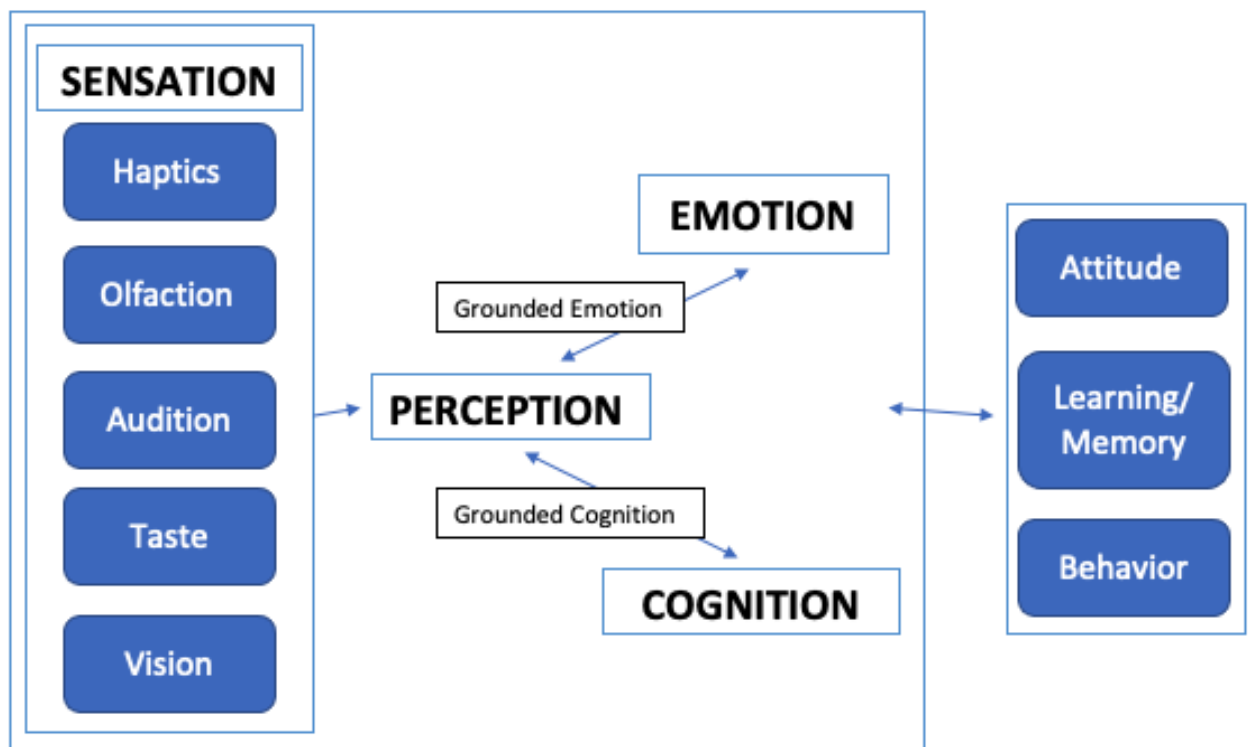


Figure 3. A conceptual framework of sensory marketing. (Krishna 2012, 335)

Each sensation has a biomechanical effect on the human brain linked to perception – this perception informs humans what each sensation stands for and explains why we experience senses as we do (Krishna 2012, 334-335).

- Touch** – "Haptics" is the first sense humans develop and the last one we lose. The importance of this sense is critical for humans to create perceptions. Touch also affects behavior, for example, "touch and products", arguing that being able to touch the product makes consumers more likely to buy it. (Krishna 2012, 335-338)
- Smell** – "Olfaction" is deeply connected to our memory and, through that affecting, for example, product connections; moreover, enabling to predict consumer behavior (Ibid., 338-340). Specific smells make perceptions that we as humans act on positively or negatively.
- Sound** – "Audition" can be viewed through, for example, symbols with attached meanings, music in ads, recognizable voices, etc.; thus, making instant connections with consumers (Ibid., 340-342). Moreover, different languages are also considered sections for sound (Ibid., 341).
- Taste** – Taste is related to perceptions of sweet, salty, sour, and bitter feelings that are hard to distinguish without smell and touch; the sense of taste is further divided into consumption and satiety, which play a significant role in affecting behavior (Ibid., 342-343).
- Vision** – Vision is the humans' dominant sense and a tool that enables enormous reach through giving visual input to context (Ibid., 343-344). For example, being able to see a product has an impact on behavior.

Humans form cognitive or emotional responses through experiencing senses that lead to action. The cognitive response is linked to perceptions, attitudes, and quality assessments, which trigger action. Emotional responses reflect mood, feelings, and emotions caused by senses. (Erenkol 2015, 14)

1.2.1. Sensory marketing in the beverage industry

Sensory marketing has a proven effect on consumer behavior and is used broadly across different media types. National projects, for example, ICA Sverige AB, decided to use sensory marketing

through labels (describing the products via senses) to increase healthy food consumption in Sweden (Krishna 2012, 334) – successfully. Similar results were found in 2017 by a study conducted about labels, where connecting energy drink labels to drinks made respondents feel more intoxicated, thus affecting human senses (Cornil et al. 2017, 17). But, conversely, this type of marketing can work as warnings, as it has in cigarette packages, and shift consumers away from it.

The beverage industry is strongly linked to the concept of sensory marketing through multiple product features. For example, consumers wanting to purchase something to drink, such as choosing a beverage product -are built from perceptions that reflect over human senses. However, which ones are the most relevant? What guides the decision? – are questions marketers in the beverage industry focus on. A study conducted by Raz et al. (2008) linked and explained which senses have the most effect in a specific category of drink, thus establishing differentiation from competitors (Raz et al. 2008, 719-726). The following attributes were measured:

Colour – Intercepts, Colourless, Light, Intermediate, Deep

Aroma – Raw1, Raw2, Cooked

Packaging – Size like 1 l, 1.5 l

Label – Hard label, Soft label

The importance ranked as the following, flavor (42.8%) and color (32.1%) as the most significant (Ibid., 723-724).

Links between certain beverages formed from perceptions are well known (for example, mint beverages should be green and banana tasting products yellow) and guide decisions accordingly (Ibid., 725). Therefore, measuring the importance through targeted communication enables marketers to make connections (e.g., human senses) to reflect consumer behavior. Moreover, successful sensory marketing strives for senses to appeal and affect human emotions, positively affecting buying behavior (Ibid., 278-279). Thus, enabling this phenomenon to be measured through discussion.

1.4. Summary

The theoretical framework is divided into three sections that together form the base for the thesis. These sections discuss and explain branding, the Theory of planned behavior, and sensory marketing. Each section is chosen due to its relevancy and ability to connect and support the research.

The first section, covering branding, explains the difference between the noun brand and branding itself and further discusses various concepts. Moreover, brand identity and brand positioning are covered in more detail. Having a strong brand is essential for companies to "be seen" and differentiate from others. This phenomenon is achieved by strategic decisions (i.e., positioning, name awareness, perceived identity, etc.) that affect consumer perception of the brand and thus create value for the company. Establishing a solid position with a competitive target in contrast to similar options and creating value for the consumer is essential for any brand. This section's findings are linked to the actual research by making connections in the focus group interview. For example, how certain products are positioned in supermarkets and if the communicated brand values like responsibility and boldness affect purchase behavior – furthermore, giving a base for detailed questions. This section also connects to the others, thus forming a multidimensional understanding for analysis.

The second section, covering the Theory of planned behavior (TPB), started with a detailed explanation of the theory as a whole, covering each area with the help of a figure. Moreover, an example situation was presented for extra clarity. The predecessor, the Theory of reasoned action (TRA), was also introduced and linked to the context. TPB enables us to identify the reasoning behind a particular behavior, for example, if we make decisions according to subjective norms and whether our perceived control of making a decision exists. TPB helps us to deeper understand decision making and, for example, behavior in multiple options dilemmas, connecting it strongly to branding and brand differentiation.

Furthermore, using this theory (TPB) enables a clear structure to be constructed in the analysis. This section marks the most meaningful link between the received answers from the focus group interview and demonstrates specific thoughts and feelings to support the discussion.

The third section, covering sensory marketing, presented the last part of the theory. This marketing style was explained through a figure and further elaborated. Each sense plays a significant role and reflects human behavior, thus establishing connections. The senses are connected to each other and easy to identify through communication, therefore an excellent topic for discussion. Moreover, because energy drink products are tangible, and experiences are formed over time, making it easy for participants to share personal thoughts that, in the best-case scenario, will connect to the branding activities explained above.

All of the sections have a significant impact and connection to the research. Therefore, enabling a specific creation of questions and themes to be covered in the focus group interview.

2. EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK

This section of the thesis covers and motivates the study's methodology by dividing it into four parts. First, by presenting how the research was designed. Second, by covering the data collection process. Third, by discussing the sample. Fourth, by showcasing the data analysis.

As stated in the introduction of the paper, the research questions are defined as follows:

- RQ1) How is branding affecting students purchasing behavior of energy drinks?
- RQ2) What are the most dominant branding activities within the energy drink industry?
- RQ3) What are students' attitudes towards energy drinks?
- RQ4) Do students believe that branding is influencing their choices?

Because this study aims to explore and explain Finnish university students' perceptions towards the role of branding on energy drinks through examining attitudes on consumer behavior, a qualitative approach is chosen. For the data collection, a qualitative focus group interview is selected, to be specific. This method allows the researcher to understand the phenomena, explain typical behavior, beliefs, and opinions formed from the context of people's experiences (Hennink et al. 2020). Moreover, it enables to find meaning to these characteristics, which are hard to measure through a quantitative approach. To achieve this level of understanding, a philosophical stand is also taken – interpretive philosophy, which enables studying a specific phenomenon through expression and understanding the socially and subjectively formed constructions (Saunders et al. 2015, 168). The research falls under the abductive research approach, enabling us to explore a phenomenon that reflects the research. The abductive method observes a "surprising fact" from the study. Further, it examines it by first making it to a conclusion, then setting premises that later from the explanation and conclusion to the phenomenon (Saunders et al. 2015, 144-150).

As for the interview framework, which is designed to reflect over the four research questions and specifically include and use the Theory of planned behavior, the following was established - first,

scratching suggestions of key topics that would later be drafted and lead the complete discussion. Second, by creating the questions for each related topic - to achieve a deeper understanding. Third, by presenting the plan to the supervisor for external insight and dialogue. Lastly, having a completed framework consisting of 24 questions that group into four topics to gain insight into Finnish students' behavior and attitudes. The first topic discusses students' general knowledge and perceptions towards energy drinks and the industry as a whole. The second is discussing the convenience aspect of consuming energy drinks. The third is discussing attitudes connected to energy drink branding and perceived consumer behavior. Finally, the fourth is discussing the importance and role of branding to make the final purchasing decision.

Moreover, as the paper in its nature is exploratory and focuses on understanding the perceptions of different branding approaches, the research is designed accordingly. The research is completed by only using one data collection technique - through a mono method qualitative study (Saunders et al. 2015, 168). This study's time horizon is cross-sectional and limited due to a set time constrain of the Bachelor's thesis (Ibid., 200).

Because of the study's aim and the choice of using a focus group interview as the base, a sampling method is a form of non-probability sampling, called self-selection. Self-selection retains voluntary and requires participants to match a particular criterion. The requirements for the criterion for the sampling are as follows:

Interviewees similar...

- Social status
- Nationality
- Age
- School background
- Work experience

This specific criterion is chosen to deny the emergence of inhibition within the discussion (Saunders et al. 2009, 344). The goal is to acquire as wide of an understanding as possible through conversation in the focus group. In addition, the five chosen participants are selected and contacted through the author's own links, which further enhances the probability of participants opening up in the study via a relaxed atmosphere.

The decision to use a focus group setting is motivated by the belief of participants elaborating and challenging other opinions to gain new knowledge of perceptions within the topic. Additionally, it is aimed to explore, identify and understand unclear issues and phenomena through allowing participants to elaborate and identify (Hennink et al. 2020, 138-168).

The focus group interview was conducted and recorded in Vaasa, Finland, and consisted of 5 participants and the moderator. The interview was conducted in Finnish due to the participants' national background and ability to elaborate further. Altogether, the interview took 1 hour and 25 minutes to comprehensively cover all participants' angles and opinions. The interview was semi-structured, i.e., the questions were open-ended, allowing a discussion to be started. Moreover, all persons were briefed about their anonymity being granted and how the recording would be handled.

The collected data from the focus group interview is used for conventional qualitative content analysis to break down the answers from the bulk of the transcribed interview text to find themes from the text. These themes present a better understanding of the participants' actual perceptions and motivations. This type of analysis technique is chosen due to its ability to describe a phenomenon, which serves to answer all research questions of the paper. Additionally, the conventional content analysis makes clear categories through the decoding system and links the themes together (Hsieh, Shannon 2005, 1277-1288). Only primary data is utilized for the purpose of the study.

The five main categories that the discussion is divided into are: General knowledge and overall perception of energy drinks, Convenience, Attitudes towards branding, Role of branding on purchases, and last but not least, a Blind test that will be completed as last.

3. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This chapter presents the empirical findings from the conducted focus group interview by covering key topics related to *value creation through branding, consumer purchasing behavior, and the role of senses in marketing*. Together, these topics structurally cover the interview and enable a further examination of the discussion.

The five interviewees in this research are re-named, i.e., they become code names: Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 4, and Interviewee 5 for the purpose of citing comments from the interview transcription.

The received answers and comments from the participants are divided into five primary categories that are established through transcribing the recorded interview. Together, these categories form identifiable themes that help understand the participant's motivations and perceptions to perform a thematical analysis.

Category 1: *General knowledge and overall perception of energy drinks*

Category 2: *Convenience*

Category 3: *Attitudes towards branding*

Category 4: *Role of branding on purchases*

Category 5: *Blind test*

3.1. General knowledge and overall perception of energy drinks

The general knowledge of energy drinks, i.e., different brands, level of healthiness, availability, etc., is relatively high among the participants. It is also evident that their perception of the industry and provided products are good, thorough years of gathering information and environment.

Moreover, living in a surrounding where energy drinks and their consumption has been actual from a young age. In the interview, comments involving first experiences have very similar themes. The participants first came in contact with energy drinks between the end of elementary and the beginning of secondary school through a vast surrounding and friends. Moreover, a big emphasis was put on a "hype" around these products and that it was something new and "cool" as it was introduced to the market at that time. One participant clearly states that he fell into the world of energy drinks through peers and confrontation, saying that:

"The whole "scene" started practically from defiance and from being able to try something new... So-called "mini alcohol" -which was also "cool". However, the biggest influence on buying behavior was definitely the appearance of the cans and the idea that "this is a tough thing to consume"! Also, the fact that this was a new stimulant, that gave "boost" and that it had a clear effect on energy levels -motivated buying." (Interviewee 4)

Another theme in the discussion is how the level of consumption has decreased and focuses more on the product's usefulness of increasing energy levels. The participants express thoughts of how they clearly use energy drinks to support tough study sessions, long workdays, and as a "boost" before physical activity. Moreover, it becomes clear that energy drinks are not consumed for their taste, instead of the effect. However, one of the participants is entirely against this thought and explains that he consumes energy drinks specifically for the taste. He states the following:

"I like energy drinks the most, precisely because of their taste and I prefer them over, for example, normal lemonades, Coca-Cola, etc." (Interviewee 3)

The participants also discuss how traditional energy drinks do not appeal to them anymore and need to involve a connection with "being a healthier option" or at least be marketed that way. One brand example was clearly lifted in the discussion, NOCCO (NO Carbs COmpany), for its differentiation from rivals. One interviewee says that:

"My consumption from traditional energy drinks has changed towards more health-focused energy drinks as the awareness of their disadvantages increased at one point, which strongly influenced my buying behavior" (Interviewee 2)

"I try to avoid certain harmful substances, e.g., sugar, taurine, different E-codes, etc." (Interviewee 2)

The balance between what is known of energy drinks in the context of "healthiness" and their consumption goes hand in hand with participants' consumer behavior and overall perception of them.

3.2. Convenience

The participants have homogenous opinions on what the most convenient way of purchasing and consuming energy drinks are. However, they agree that there is a "common rule" or a set standard for publicly accepted brands. More specifically, what brands can be consumed at work, school, etc., without "labeling" a person through the choice of energy drink brand. The interviewees see it like this:

"I most certainly prefer NOCCO and REDBULL because they are marketed / branded so well - and stand out from the crowd... Both can be taken to different situations / environments - without a bad stamp / label" (Interviewee 2)

"It is particularly REDBULL that is branded for everyone -and thus makes it OK for everyone to drink... So common and accepted - doesn't make a mark / label" (Interviewee 4)

The interviewees also feel that how these products are located has a significant impact on the final purchasing decision. The participants agree that brands that are differentiated clearly from others in supermarkets, gas stations, etc., and are kept "in the cold" like a refrigerator – come across as more appealing. Participants express their thoughts like this:

"Placement definitely makes an impact... And if I want to drink it right away -then I always buy from the fridge!" (Interviewee 4)

"Big brands like REDBULL have their own refrigerators... BATTERY has the same thing"
(Interviewee 3)

The aspect of "sugar-free" products is also raised in the discussion. The interviewees feel that these are the only option since one does not drink energy drinks for the taste but rather for effect. Thus, having a common understanding that sugar-free options are superior to ones that include sugar for health reasons. One participant notes this:

"Recently, I have rather started to prefer sugar-free energy drinks and with this REDBULL... I immediately create the connection of sugar-free to -light blue REDBULL" (Interviewee 4)

The transparent role of convenience is also reflected over behavior, i.e., behavior that is learned from one's environment and is perceived as "OK". Thus, making a connection to the Theory of planned behavior (TPB), discussed in the theory section of the paper. More specifically, the opinion of subjective norms – suggesting that humans make a choice that is in line with their social circle and reflect over what others think? This action leads to intention and, finally, a particular behavior, which is an uprising theme in the discussion. As one of the participants puts it:

"Energy drink consumption is most influenced by the environment, friends and age" (Interviewee 1)

"Behavior has always been tied to friends and group buying behavior... Desire to be part of a group" (Interviewee 5)

The discussion also introduces reflections on how convenient a plastic bottle with a cap is compared to a tin can. However, this does not seem to be a significant factor affecting the interviewees' purchasing decisions; it is more of a "bonus" or "nice to have" aspect.

3.3. Attitudes towards branding

The focus group raises an extensive discussion of favoring certain brands and attitudes towards them. Participants elaborate on this through focusing on their feelings towards branding in specific. The themes that are raised are linked to making connections, brand presentation, and favoring premium quality. Moreover, branding is seen as "positive" and something that makes the product visible and desirable. For example, one interviewee says the following:

"I definitely prefer! And the first thing that comes to mind is REDBULL & ED and their branding... Probably due to subconsciousness and good communication from brands. I have a lot of faith that it works - REDBULL is clearly advertised to me" (Interviewee 1)

As for making critical connections and, through that having positive attitudes towards brands. The participants' comment:

"REDBULL is no longer just an energy drink brand but a much bigger thing... like some big organization like "MANU" (Manchester United FC) that creates a link to something else... there aren't many similar brands that can do this in this field -that's what makes it unique!" (Interviewee 4)

"It definitely depends a lot on what one follows, e.g., if you are a skier then BATTERY is really big on display and in motorsport similarly MONSTER... Internationally visible brands" (Interviewee 3)

There is also a discussion regarding tools used in branding and their effectiveness to create value for the brand. Participants state that those brands that are considered "premium" need to associate themselves with big events, big marketing campaigns, etc., and make a link to the mindset of "money, money, money". For example, thoughts over this are communicated as:

"Big brands need to have big advertising targets and channels... e.g., REDBULL cannot cooperate with small companies / individuals because it would reduce the perceived value of the brand and thus negative visibility for the company" (Interviewee 5)

"Small brands need to link via social media and Big ones, through sponsorships and the same "intellectual" connectivity! e.g., EX-GAMES helmets" (Interviewee 3)

Overall, the thoughts and feelings of attitudes reflect well over the theme of "wanting to belong" and make associations and, through this, purchasing decisions.

3.4. Role of branding on purchases

The role of branding and how energy drinks create value to the company through being "visible" and "clear" in their marketing is a major theme in the discussion in the focus group. In addition, participants explain how brands position themselves through social media and how critical this is for communication and reaching the right target audience. Moreover, thoughts over how some brands do this so well that it is hard to choose a rivalry product when making a purchase choice. Hence, some comments from the participants:

"I always choose NOCCO because it's so featured... NOCCO is constantly producing and communicating new flavors / different themes -that grab the buyer's attention... big availability!" (Interviewee 2)

"The fact that brands can combine with something, e.g., Red Bull and sports... And create images that can be combined with something, e.g., in bars Red Bull & Vodka = brands create added value" (Interviewee 2)

"Brand name gives face value... no one wants to serve "energy drink & alcohol"-But, Red Bull & Vodka or "Kossu" & Battery are favored... Big brands" (Interviewee 4)

One other occurring theme and topic of interest is WOM (Word-Of-Mouth) marketing and how some companies automatically rise above others in daily communication. As commented earlier, some companies do not even come across as energy drink brands instead of multinational companies, for example, Red Bull – through its association with extreme sports, own F1 team,

hockey, etc. These factors lift brands to the next level and create a "buzz" around them. Two interviewees comment this in the following way:

"NOCCO has basically the perfect brand! They don't need to market it (so much) themselves, but others will sell it for them! - WOM - e.g., friends to friends or social media characters for their followers (even without advertising)" (Interviewee 2)

"NOCCO combines lifestyle and is a broader concept + "more these days" / actual... energy drinks are bound to make branding healthier" (Interviewee 5)

The participants also state that companies who successfully brand themselves "for someone" will automatically get these "niche" groups' interests. Moreover, the participants note that this could be an "in" for new companies to penetrate the existing market. For example, one person states the following:

"In my world, where I follow bunch of different streamers (Twitch and YouTube) -one brand called G-FUEL is really heavily branded and visible everywhere... This is not available yet in Finland, but has already created an image and value for me and others interested in gaming... NEW PRODUCT AND I WOULD BUY RIGHT AWAY" (Interviewee 2)

The role of branding is known among the participants, and thoughts over how this is beneficial for companies has a consensus – of being a "way of receiving info and increase interest".

3.5. Blind test

The focus group interview also included a blind taste test to spike conversation and make additional findings. The blind test was divided into two parts where the panelists first had to score unknown energy drinks according to taste and later try to connect with a brand. In the later section, panelists were made aware of possible brands in the test. This system enabled the test to be conducted with no bias. The table below further illustrates the tests setting and results:

PARTICIPANT	BRAND	TASTE (BEST TO WORST)	CORRECT GUESS OF THE BRAND
<u>Interviewee 1</u>	RED BULL (5)	1. TEHO 2. RED BULL 3. MONSTER 4. ED 5. NOCCO	5/5
<u>Interviewee 2</u>	NOCCO (4)	1. NOCCO 2. RED BULL 3. ED 4. MONSTER 5. TEHO	5/5
<u>Interviewee 3</u>	MONSTER (3)	1. RED BULL 2. MONSTER 3. NOCCO 4. ED 5. TEHO	5/5
<u>Interviewee 4</u>	ED (2)	1. RED BULL 2. ED 3. MONSTER 4. NOCCO 5. TEHO	3/5
<u>Interviewee 5</u>	TEHO (1)	1. TEHO 2. ED 3. MONSTER 4. RED BULL 5. NOCCO	3/5

Table constructed by the author, HMV (data collected from the participants – paper form)

The themes discussed in the revival of the results are thoughts over how some brands have evident tastes and can be identified instantly and how unexpected surprises appeared over false guesses. Participants comment this as follows:

"I was quite sure of the order and that it went right... The taste of citrus and its strength was a big factor" (Interviewee 4)

"The three of us connected everything right and it was easy to combine the biggest brands with the right product / taste" (Interviewee 2)

The test group agrees that the most extensive brand, i.e., Red Bull is easy to identify, and the same thoughts apply to NOCCO, due to its abnormal taste. Additionally, the group states that although these are the test results – most of them will still favor big "safe" and known brands in the future.

3.6. Discussion

This research seeks to explore and explain Finnish university students' perceptions towards the role of branding on energy drinks through examining attitudes on consumer behavior – By answering the research questions: *How is branding affecting students purchasing behavior of energy drinks; What are the most dominant branding activities within the energy drink industry; What are students' attitudes towards energy drinks; Do students believe that branding is influencing their choices.* Moreover, to deliver an understanding of why certain opinions arise, what activities are the most dominant, and how they could be implemented from a managerial point of view.

This research provides an insight into the presented topics above in a thematical manner, based on the qualitative data analysis of the data gathered from the focus group interview. These themes structurally cover the data and enable the construction of connections to be drawn from the discussed categories. Additionally, by giving the analysis a sense and final conclusions.

All of the participant's knowledge of the energy drink industry, products, branding, and the associated perceptions within was on a proficient level, thus creating depth to the discussion. The group discusses that many unspoken factors influence particular behavior and that companies must

focus on specific aspects in branding to be prolific. Furthermore, findings within the value of association were made and interpreted as a "bonus" for the analysis.

Behavior turned out to be a central theme in the discussion and one of the significant connecting factors, providing value for the research. Based on the focus group, it can be said that there is a certain behavior affecting the choice of brand, which is linked to expected behavior and avoidance of being labeled. This behavior further connects with the Theory of planned behavior (TPB) and subjective norms in specific, suggesting that humans make a choice that is in line with their social circle and reflect over what others think. This leads to preferring and consuming big brands that have achieved a "status" of being perceived as vastly accepted and without a "stigma". Furthermore, to the consent of mentally not connecting these brands to energy drinks, rather to activities they communicate – through branding. For an energy drink brand not to be negatively labeled, it needs to make a connection to links such as athletes, social media personnel, big events, etc. Through this, be perceived as accepted. Thus, answering the first, third, and fourth research questions.

The focus group also discussed branding and how it needs to be orchestrated, specifically in the energy drink industry. Continuing on the topic of connectivity and communication away from negative perceptions that consumers have over energy drinks and shifting it to something positive, i.e., avoiding using the term "energy drink" in general. Energy drink brands need to clearly position themselves away from this association and channel their branding activities to link with target segments. This facilitates consumers to make a different opinion of the brand "that is positive" and increase acceptance and sales. Thus, answering the second and supporting the first research question.

Other themes supporting the research are senses and differentiation. Senses, in particular, through the convenience of consuming a cold beverage, the light color communicating "sugar-free" and carrying the correct size. These features connect with branding activities through their own company refrigerators in supermarkets and gestations, thus communicating these as premium and different from ordinary energy drinks. This further excludes receiving a label. Differentiation, on the other hand, offers consumers a chance not automatically to link energy drink products to something and, therefore, a chance to perceive them differently. By positioning and not "making the energy drink connection", participant's attitudes are instantly more positive. Thus, supporting the fourth research question.

Managerial implications that can be drawn and recommended from this research can be divided into two main topics. First, branding activities in this industry should aim to support consumer behavior by avoiding a negative label to be created by clearly connecting the brand with something that shifts away from the term "energy drink". Second, these branding activities should establish differentiation and positive associations – through positioning, communication, and branding the company to link with target segments' interests. Additionally, the interviewees agree that big companies should focus on extensive partnerships, events, and sponsorships – to remain a "premium" brand.

As for smaller brands, the analysis suggests that a focus should also be drawn to connecting links, such as social media personnel, possible co-events with exciting partnerships, or sponsoring a person/ company of target audiences' interests.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the constructed research questions aim to explore and explain Finnish university students' perceptions towards the role of branding on energy drinks by examining attitudes on consumer behavior where all answered. Branding has a vital role in communicating and supporting perceptions that are formed through attitudes. These attitudes influence particular consumer behavior and develop a trait that favors association branding.

Based on classical qualitative content analysis, it can be concluded that branding in this industry creates value through differentiation and by marketing activities associated with the target segment's interests, i.e., linking a brand together with other personnel or companies, through sponsorships/ events/ social media/ etc. Additionally, understanding that behavior reflects over what others do and therefore avoiding the creation of negative labeling, i.e., connecting to the Theory of planned behavior and showing that behavior in this industry is valued through one's understanding of the surrounded perceptions. Thus, the key takeaway is that energy drink companies must favor branding that removes the thought of "energy drink" from the context and focus on making perceptions that communicate associations.

The paper structurally gives an opportunity to provide adequate results through having a comprehensive theoretical base that translated well to the actual research. Together with the empirical framework, this facilitates a strong conclusion to be drawn, providing new insight on the topic by elaborating on behavior and brand association.

Based on these conclusions, companies in this industry should focus on branding activities that make instant connections and shift the focus away from the actual product. This enables the consumer to perceive the brand by linking it to something, such as athletes, big events, etc., and increasing the likelihood of purchase. From a larger point of view, companies must create a brand that is first associated with something that interests the target segment and later reveals the "energy

drink" within the product. Thus, allowing the consumer not to categorize the product and creating a personal understanding of the brand.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Thematical analysis table

Themes	Category	Codes
Consumer purchasing behavior	<i>General knowledge and overall perception of energy drinks</i>	term knowledge, consumption, healthiness, feelings, hype/buzz, association,
Consumer purchasing behavior	<i>Convenience</i>	location, quality, labeling, choice, big brand, acceptance, communication, environment,
Value creation through branding	<i>Attitudes towards branding</i>	added value, quality, visibility, connectivity, communication, events, attitudes, part of something, sponsors,
Value creation through branding	<i>Role of branding on purchases</i>	differentiation, trust, rivalry, availability, links, association, added value, WOM, targeting,
The role of senses in marketing	<i>Blind test</i>	touch, smell, sound, taste, vision, connectivity,

Table constructed by the author, HMV.

Appendix 2. Interview questions

In English:

- Welcome, Topic overview, rules, and first question...
- Demographic questions (age, gender, nationality, home, etc.)
- How would you describe your current life situation?
- When and how did you first come across energy drinks?
- What is your opinion on energy drinks in general?
- Do you prefer a particular brand? Why / why not?
- How much do you consume energy drinks per week?
When and why?
- How would you describe your consumer behavior related to energy drinks? Why?
- Do you think branding affects this? How / why not?
- Would you describe yourself as a person who is constantly looking for new brands or as loyal to specific brands? Why / why not?
- Thinking about the energy drink industry, which brands come to mind first? Why these?
- What do you think, which brands lead the industry and why?
- What are the unique features of these brands?
- Do you automatically create links for specific brands (e.g., for their communications, ads, etc.)?
How?
- Do you feel that energy drink brands are clearly positioned in the market or not? Why?
- Are the brands clearly differentiated or not? How?
- What do you think creates the most value for brands in this industry? Why this?
- How do you feel about new brands in the energy drink industry? Describe.
- How big do you think the senses (taste, smell, sight, hearing, and touch) play a role in making a purchase decision in the energy drink industry? Yes: how? No: why not?
- Could you say that your views on certain brands in this industry have changed over the years or not? Yes: how? No: why do you think so?
- How would you describe the perfect energy drink brand? Why this way?
- Do you think you will pay more attention to brands, their differences, and communication after this interview, do you? Yes: how? No: why not?
- What do you think is the most effective brand tool of all and why? Why do you think so? How should it be used?

In Finnish:

- Tervetuloa, Aihekatsaus, säännöt ja ensimmäinen kysymys...
- Demografiset kysymykset (ikä, sukupuoli, kansallisuus, kotipaikka, jne.)
- Miten kuvailisit tämänhetkistä elämäntilannettasi?
- Milloin ja miten törmäsit ensimmäisen kerran energiajuomiin?
- Mikä on mielipiteesi yleisesti energiajuomista?
- Suositko tiettyä brändiä? Miksi/mikset?
- Kuinka paljon kulutat viikkotasolla energiajuomia?
Milloin ja miksi?
- Miten kuvailisit ostoskäyttäytymistäsi liittyen energiajuomiin? Miksi?
- Uskotko brändäyksen vaikuttavan tähän? Miten/mikset?
- Kuvailisitko itsesi henkilöksi, joka jatkuvasti etsii ja on lojaali tietyille brändeille? Miksi/mikset?

- Ajatellen energiajuoma teollisuutta, mitkä brändit tulevat ensimmäiseksi mieleen? Miksi juuri nämä?
- Mitä mieltä olette, mitkä brändit johtavat alaa ja minkä takia?
- Mitä erikoispiirteitä kyseisillä brändeillä on?
- Luotko automaattisesti kytköksiä tietyille brändeille (esim. heidän kommunikaatiollensa, mainoksista, jne.)? Miten?
- Koetko energiajuoma brändien asemoituvan selvästi markkinoilla vai et? Miksi?
- Onko alan brändit selvästi eritelty toisistaan vai ei? Miten?
- Mikä mielestäsi luo eniten arvoa brändeille? Miksi juuri tämä?
- Miten suhtaudut uusiin brändeihin energiajuoma alalla? Kuvaile.
- Kuinka iso rooli mielestäsi aisteilla (maku-, haju-, näkö-, kuulo- ja tuntoaisti) on ostopäätöksen tekoon, energiajuoma alalla? Kyllä: miten? Ei: miksei?
- Voisitko sanoa, että näkemyksesi tietyistä brändeistä tällä alalla on muuttunut vuosien varrella, vai et? Kyllä: miten? Ei: miksi luulet näin?
- Miten kuvailisit täydellistä energiajuoma brändiä? Miksi tällä tavalla?
- Uskotko kiinnostävän enemmän huomiota brändeihin, niiden eroihin ja kommunikaatioon tämän haastattelun jälkeen, vai et? Kyllä: miten? Ei: miksei?
- Mikä on mielestäsi kaikista vaikutusvaltaisin brändityökalu ja miksi? Miksi luulet näin? Miten sitä tulisi käyttää?

Appendix 3. Transcript

Google docs. -file:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1opGY0GBe2IMgbbF8QBZZrxzVTQVPucSE_8cENcNTI64/edit?usp=sharing

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