

The emergence of a values-based premium private label brand reputation within a multiple-tier brand portfolio

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to increase the understanding of the emergence of a values-based (VB) premium private label (PL) brand reputation within a multiple-tier PL brand portfolio in retailing.

Design/methodology/approach – By building on the research on PLs, brand image, brand reputation and consumer values, this study creates a conceptual foundation for the emergence of VB PL brand reputation within a multiple-tier brand portfolio among consumers and examines the emergence of such reputation empirically using interpretive exploratory qualitative laddering interviews in the context of fast-moving consumer goods.

Findings – The findings of this study illustrate that the VB reputations of the premium PL product brand and the PL brand store intertwine, ultimately relating to two terminal values: pleasure and doing good. These reputations differ remarkably from the VB reputations of the economy PL brand and the umbrella brand of the retail chain (not doing good and financial security).

Research limitations/implications – This study explains the emergence of VB brand reputation within a multiple-tier brand portfolio and introduces the use of the laddering technique in such research.

Practical implications – This study reminds brand managers to carefully design the relevant brand strategy for brands and their relationships under a brand umbrella.

Originality/value – Although much is known about PL brands and brand reputation, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this study might be the first to increase the understanding of how a VB premium PL brand reputation emerges and accumulates from brand images within a multiple-tier brand portfolio.

Keywords Brand image, Consumer values, Laddering, Private labels, Qualitative research, Retailing

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Private label (PL) brands originally emerged as low-cost alternatives to national brands by manufacturers (Halstead and Ward, 1995). *PL brand* is a brand owned exclusively by the retail store in which the brand is sold, and the *PL brand portfolio* refers to all brands owned solely by that store (Erdem et al., 2004; Geyskens et al., 2010). For instance, Tesco has a portfolio of PL brands, including, for example, the brands Tesco Everyday Value and Tesco Finest.

Brand architecture is a hierarchical organizing structure of a brand portfolio that specifies the roles of each brand and the type of relationships between brands in the portfolio (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Brexendorf and Keller, 2017). As the Tesco example shows, PL brands typically operate under *brand umbrellas*, which means the PL brand operates under the same name as the store it is sold at; that is, the store brand (and simultaneously the corporate brand) represents the umbrella

brand (Keller et al., 2020). PL brands can be further divided into the categories of economy, standard and premium brands based on their price and quality: while economy PL brands – such as Tesco Everyday Value – are located at the lower end of the price and quality range, premium PL brands – such as Tesco Finest – represent the higher end of the price and quality range (Braak et al., 2014; Erdem et al., 2004), typically being at least 20% more expensive than the average price of the respective product category (NielsenIQ, 2016), although the prices may vary remarkably in different markets (Pasirayi and

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Richards, 2023). A setting where a brand contains two or more of the above categories in its product range is called a *multiple-tier PL brand portfolio* (Geyskens et al., 2010), which has recently become increasingly common in the grocery business (Palmeira and Thomas, 2011). While the research on PL brands originated in the context of economy PLs, premium PL brands increasingly attract research attention (Ailawadi et al., 2008; Kumar et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2021), because they are competing with national brands and their market share is growing fast (Nenycz-Thiel and Romaniuk, 2016). The current study focuses on premium brands within a multiple-tier PL brand portfolio.

Researchers have revealed that consumer perceptions of different brands in PL brand portfolios influence each other (Böger et al., 2018; Geyskens et al., 2010; Palmeira and Thomas, 2011) and recognized that such perceptions relate to the formation of the PL brand image (Braak et al., 2014; Geyskens et al., 2010; Kumar et al., 2023; Steenkamp et al., 2010; Valaskova et al., 2018). Brand image refers to the perceptions and associations (Aaker, 1996; Anselmsson et al., 2007; French and Smith, 2013; Keller, 1993) “formed in the mind of a member of the external audience about the brand after one real or mental encounter with the brand”, and the accumulation of brand images constructs brand reputation, “an aggregate and compressed set of public judgments about the brand” (Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018, p. 257) over time. Although the researchers recognize a need to examine these unconscious processes that drive purchase behavior of PL brands, the research is typically quantitative and uses either explicit self-reported measures by consumers or functional magnetic resonance imaging scanning (Fuduric et al., 2022). Additionally, although some researchers have acknowledged the importance of consumer (consumption) values in guiding the formation of the brand image (Kotler et al., 2012; Verplanken and Holland, 2002; Wilkie, 1986), specifically concerning the luxury brands (Atkinson and Kang, 2021; Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2019; Kowalczyk and Mitchell, 2021), to the best knowledge of the authors of the current study, the understanding of how the underlying values guide the emergence of the brand image and accordingly, conclude in the emergence of the values-based (VB) brand reputation within a multiple-tier brand portfolio, remains absent. Emergence refers to the evolving and often unconscious processes of brand image and reputation becoming visible after being concealed. Values refer to mental representations of believing a particular condition is desirable (Wilkie, 1986, p. 213). VB brand reputation refers to aggregate public judgments about the brand based on collectively desirable conditions in life. Although such a multidimensional and unconscious setting may offer challenges in examining the emergence of premium PL brand reputation, increasing the understanding of the topic is essential. Creating such an explanation would offer researchers novel insights into why brand reputation accumulates as it does, thereby providing researchers a contemporary platform to examine the emergence of brand image and reputation in a multidimensional context. It would also provide brand managers information on why consumers make their brand choices in the ever-growing multiple-tier PL brand market, thus helping brand managers to

better design and manage their premium PL brands as part of their brand portfolios.

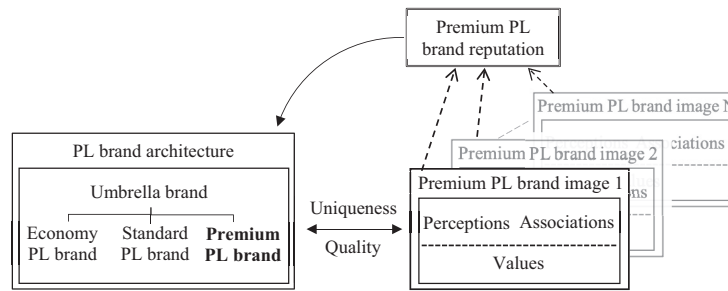
The purpose of the current study is to increase the understanding of the emergence of VB premium PL brand reputation in the setting of a multiple-tier PL brand portfolio. The research questions of the study are: *How does VB premium PL brand reputation emerge within a multiple-tier brand portfolio? Why does VB premium PL brand reputation emerge within a multiple-tier brand portfolio as it does?* To answer the research questions, the study first creates a conceptual framework for the emergence of a VB premium PL brand reputation within a multiple-tier brand portfolio and then conducts an exploratory empirical case study on the topic. The findings map out the collective thought-processes of consumers that explain the emergence of the VB brand reputation in this specific context, showing how the premium PL brand reputation is intertwined with the reputation of other brands and is based on several factors, including but not limited to the attributes of the brand itself. The article concludes by discussing the conceptual and managerial implications of the findings, along with the limitation of the study and suggestions for further research.

A conceptual framework for the emergence of a values-based premium private label brand reputation within a multiple-tier brand portfolio

Multiple-tier private label brand portfolio architecture

The research recognizes various brand architecture strategies in diverse contexts (Hong et al., 2023; Kapferer, 2008; Zelenskaya and Elkanova, 2021). Brand architecture relates to the identity of the brands, that is, to the internal perspective on what the brand is (Chung and Byrom, 2021; Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018), but it also gives a structure for the external stakeholders such as consumers to differentiate the brands in the portfolio in their minds (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Strebinger and Otter, 2022). While the researchers acknowledge the importance of the stakeholder alignment in the architecture (Åsberg and Uggla, 2019), the research has shown that company representatives and consumers often perceive the brand portfolio differently (Åsberg, 2015). More research on why consumers perceive the portfolio differently is needed. This study provides such an explanation next.

Figure 1 shows a *PL brand architecture* of a retail organization in a setting of a multiple-tier brand portfolio. As introduced above, PL brands typically operate under *umbrella brands*, meaning a product brand operates under the same name as the corporate brand or the store brand, thereby creating a connection between the umbrella brand and a product brand (Keller et al., 2020; Morrin, 1999). In fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs) sector, companies seldom use single corporate brands, but instead, corporate brands are used as endorsers for product brands (Jit Singh Mann and Kaur, 2013). PL brands can vary from *economy PL brands* to *standard PL brands* to *premium PL brands*. While the first locates at the lower end of the price-quality range, the last represents the higher end of the range (Braak et al., 2014; Erdem et al., 2004; Geyskens et al., 2010; Palmeira and Thomas, 2011), and standard brands are located between these two extremes. Figure 1 highlights the premium PL brands, because the current study focuses on them.

Figure 1 The emergence of a values-based premium private label brand reputation in a multiple-tier brand system

Source: Author's own

Along with price and high quality, uniqueness can differentiate a premium PL brand from competitors and other brands in the portfolio (Gürhan-Canli, 2003; Keller, 2015; Shah, 2015). Uniqueness refers to the particularly remarkable, exceptional or unusual characters or attributes of the brand. In the FMCG sector, packaging is often the most effective way to build uniqueness (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007; Mao *et al.*, 2023). Because uniqueness and quality are ultimately perceptions created by the brand attributes and concretized as perceptions and associations in the consumer's mind (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007; Böger *et al.*, 2018; Erdem *et al.*, 2004; Hudders, 2012), they can be seen as concretizing in the interaction between the brand and the consumer and can be affected by brand elements and the consumer's thoughts. Figure 1 locates *uniqueness* and *quality* between the PL brand architecture and the premium PL brand image using double-headed arrows. Although not illustrated in Figure 1, this study acknowledges that many additional factors such as the environment, social circumstances (Wilkie, 1986) and the brand's competitors (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007) may influence consumers' perceptions.

Brand image

Private label brand perceptions and associations

There is no consensus on the definition of brand image among researchers, yet the researchers widely agree that brand image is a dynamic, subjective concept heavily based on an individual's cognitive aspects (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Parris and Guzmán, 2022). Many brand researchers also agree that perceptions and associations (Aaker, 1996; Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007; French and Smith, 2013; Keller, 1993), whether they are based on a real or mental encounter with the brand (Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018), are the base of brand image. Keller (1993, p. 3) defined brand image as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" and proposed that associations refer to all the attributes, benefits and attitudes the consumer attaches to the brand when seeing, hearing or recalling the brand. Positive associations have a powerful effect on brand loyalty, while negative associations may hinder the success of a brand (Jansson-Boyd, 2010). Figure 1 locates *perceptions* and *associations* in the upper part of the *premium PL brand image*.

As economy and premium PL brands are typically differentiated based on their price and quality, it is natural that most research focuses on consumer perceptions of the price and quality of a particular brand. Perceived quality refers to

how the consumer views the quality of a brand or a product, which can differ from the actual quality of the product and be affected by various ways of marketing (Amatulli and Guido, 2010; Erdem *et al.*, 2004). Quality perceptions are heavily based on brand credibility, perceptions that a brand is able and willing to continuously deliver its promises (Baek *et al.*, 2010; Erdem and Swait, 2004). Researchers have recognized that tier-specific and umbrella branded PLs create confidence in how consumers view a brand: consumers often consider the qualities of the brands within an umbrella to be on the same level (Keller *et al.*, 2020), and the presence of economy PLs may lift the perceived quality of the premium PL brand upwards (Palmeira and Thomas, 2011). Previous research has linked the consistent quality of PLs to their success and sales amounts (Baek *et al.*, 2010; Hyman *et al.*, 2010).

Research proposes that consumers perceive the uniqueness of two brands in the same category based on their different attributes (Palmeira and Thomas, 2011). Uniqueness is specifically important for premium PL brands, as a wider variety of aspects influences their purchase decisions than economy brands, which are often chosen based on price only (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007; Hudders, 2012). Along with packaging (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007; Mao *et al.*, 2023), perceptions of uniqueness can be built on other attributes of the product, such as origin or product variety. Additionally, the research on multi-brand portfolios in business-to-business context emphasizes the importance of salesperson's efforts in building perceptions of uniqueness (Gillespie *et al.*, 2016; Mullins *et al.*, 2023). Because all the brands within a PL brand architecture or in a PL brand portfolio may affect how a consumer perceives a premium PL brand within the portfolio (Keller *et al.*, 2020; Palmeira and Thomas, 2011), it is reasonable to assume that the consumer perception of a premium PL brand within a multiple-tier brand portfolio emerges based on not only the uniqueness and quality of that particular brand but also the uniqueness and quality of all brands in the portfolio.

Brand image researchers recognize that associations are often based on personal preferences, emotions and values (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007; French and Smith, 2013; Keller, 1993), and luxury brand researchers increasingly acknowledge the critical role of consumers' personal values in guiding their purchase decisions (Atkinson and Kang, 2021; Kauppinen-Räsänen *et al.*, 2019; Kowalczyk and Mitchell, 2021), but research that explains the role of consumers' values in the emergence of a brand image seems to be missing. The next section offers such an explanation.

The emergence of private label brand image from the underlying values

Values refer to mental representations of believing a particular condition is desirable (Wilkie, 1986, p. 213). By their nature, human values are typically considered to be positive (Kautish *et al.*, 2022; Rokeach, 1973) and collectively held (Spiggle, 1986). Consumer researchers have long recognized that consumer perceptions and associations are impacted, and consumer behavior is highly guided, by underlying value systems. Figure 1 illustrates values at the bottom of premium PL brand image and separates these underlying systems from perceptions and associations using a dotted line.

Value systems lead consumers to believe a particular product or service helps them to attain a value-related goal (Kotler *et al.*, 2012; Verplanken and Holland, 2002; Wilkie, 1986). Such belief system is traditionally seen to form a means-end chain from product attributes to instrumental values to terminal values (Gutman, 1982). Product attributes refer to the physical and abstract aspects of the product (Gutman, 1982; Vinson *et al.*, 1977), such as price, quality and uniqueness. Terminal values refer to preferred social, emotional, aesthetic and self-expressive end-states of existence that are enduring, global, symbolic and expressive in nature (Allen, 2001; Kahle, 1986; Phau *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b; Rokeach, 1973; Vinson *et al.*, 1977). Terminal values are based on universal needs of individuals, such as achievement (e.g. a sense of accomplishment), hedonism (e.g. a pleasurable life and a comfortable life), security (e.g. family safety and national safety) and universalism (e.g. equality, a world of peace and social justice) (Allen, 2001; Schwartz, 1994). Instrumental values relate to beliefs about the desired modes of behavior which help in achieving the desired terminal values (Rokeach, 1973). Such beliefs are often strongly related to the utilitarian meaning of the product that relates to functional, economic and green values, such as being independent, honest, ambitious, courageous, broad-minded or responsible (Allen *et al.*, 2002; Phau *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b; Vinson *et al.*, 1977).

Although researchers have suggested general categorizations of terminal and instrumental values (De Mooij, 2005; Rokeach, 1973), it is widely acknowledged that values are culturally bound, and whether values are considered terminal or instrumental varies by culture and country (De Mooij, 2005). Additionally, a consumer's value system ranks their values by their relative importance, meaning that different values have different weights of importance for decisions. In other words, consumers with some shared values might also act differently based on their own set of values and the order of preference of said values (Verplanken and Holland, 2002). While early researchers stated a consumer's brand choice is systematic and follows repetitive patterns (Howard and Sheth, 1969), modern researchers consider consumer choice to be dynamic and constantly changing (Kotler *et al.*, 2012).

Recent research has shown that both instrumental and terminal values affect consumers' behavioral intentions (Kautish and Sharma, 2018). For instance, researchers have proposed that terminal value-oriented individuals seek social or individual benefits by consuming products that offer them symbolic and expressive benefits, while instrumental value-oriented individuals value a product's utilitarian benefits over hedonic benefits (Allen *et al.*, 2002; Phau *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b).

The purchase decision of premium brands is often motivated by different reasons than that of economy products. While premium products might offer the same utilitarian benefits as cheaper options, they may provide more psychological benefits (Hudders, 2012). Luxury brand researchers have revealed that, for instance, happiness, a sense of accomplishment, an exciting life, pleasure, a comfortable life (Kautish *et al.*, 2020), self-confidence, self-fulfillment and a better life (Amatulli and Guido, 2010) are terminal values in the decision of purchasing luxury products. Brands can also provide symbolic value to the consumer, and choosing a particular brand can be a way for the consumer to build and highlight their identity (Kotler *et al.*, 2012). Although researchers recognize that consumer values should be aligned with company values, this is not necessarily always the case (Rindell *et al.*, 2013).

The section that follows explains how the brand reputation of a premium PL brand derives from the accumulation of brand images of individual consumers.

The emergence of values-based brand reputation

Although various definitions for brand reputation exist, researchers widely agree that reputation represents the collective, aggregate perceptions or evaluations of multiple stakeholders about the brand over time (Fombrun and Van Riel, 1997; Rust *et al.*, 2021; Shamma and Hassan, 2009; Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). In other words, accumulating brand images construct brand reputation (Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018). To be successful and profitable, brands should have a positive reputation (Herbig and Milewicz, 1993; Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). Although some researchers consider that reputation remains relatively stable over time (Chung and Byrom, 2021; De Chernatony, 1999; Fombrun and Van Riel, 1997), others recognize the dynamic nature of brand reputation, as it both influences and is influenced by brand identity (Da Silveira *et al.*, 2013).

Applied to the context of multiple-tier brand portfolios, the dashed arrows in Figure 1 indicate how a VB premium PL brand reputation accumulates from various VB premium PL brand images of individual consumers forming collective VB public judgments about the PL brand over time. Premium PL brand images are profoundly based on consumer perceptions of PL brand attributes, concretizing as associations guided by a consumer's underlying values and heavily impacted by the elements of the entire PL brand architecture by a company. The ongoing dynamism of the process is illustrated in Figure 1 using arrows from PL brand image(s) to PL brand reputation, from PL brand reputation to PL brand architecture ("brand identity") and between PL brand architecture and PL brand image. The following section introduces the methodological choices of the current study to examine these aspects empirically.

Methodology

Introducing the case brand

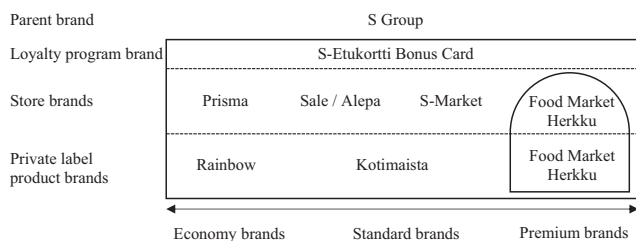
In line with the purpose of this study – and because the novel topic of the current research would benefit from exploratory research – the empirical examination of the topic proceeded by conducting a qualitative case study. Qualitative research is suitable when there is little known about a phenomenon and

when there is a need to explain the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the persons who are essential for understanding the phenomenon (Morse and Field, 1995), such as consumers in the current research. A case study is suitable for research where an individual contemporary case is of interest and which aims to answer “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 1984, 2009). The current study integrated the logics of two case study types: interpretive sensemaking and natural experiments. The first builds on a social constructivist approach, and although typically not focusing on causalities, the approach accepts causalities constructed by research participants and interpreted by the researchers, and while the latter builds on positivist assumptions to test existing theories, the approach recognizes the importance of providing rival explanations (Welch et al., 2011) to the existing knowledge. Together these approaches helped the researchers to explain cause–effect linkages between the concepts by understanding consumers’ subjective experiences.

The case of the current study is the emergence of reputation of a Finnish premium PL brand *Food Market Herkku*. The *Herkku* premium grocery store brand was originally launched by *Stockmann*, a premium department store chain with a long history of operating in Finland, Russia and the Baltics. In 2017, S Group (<https://s-ryhma.fi/en>), one of the leading retailers in Finland, bought *Herkku* from *Stockmann*. In 2018, S Group opened *Herkku* with a new name, *Food Market Herkku*, and launched a variety of premium *Food Market Herkku* products (Aivan, 2023). In the beginning, the quality of the store dropped drastically and up to 10% of the loyal customers abandoned *Food Market Herkku* (Lassila, 2020), but the quality of the store has thereafter improved, and customers are returning.

Along with the premium *Food Market Herkku* store brand and product brands, the existence of other brands within the same brand portfolio provides further complexity in the explaining the emergence of the VB reputation of these brands (Figure 2). *S Group* is the corporate brand in the current study. *S Group* is widely known for its affordable pricing and has a nationwide loyalty card system called *S-Etukortti Bonus Card*. *S Group* has four traditional economy and standard PL store brands of different sizes: *Prisma*, *Sale*, *Alepa* and *S-Market*. *Alepa* and *Sale* represent the two brands of one concept, the name of which varies based on the store location. The PL product brand portfolio of *S Group* also contains the economy PL brand *Rainbow* and the standard PL brand *Kotimaista*.

Figure 2 The *Food Market Herkku* brands as part of the *S Group*’s grocery brand portfolio



Source: Author’s own

Data collection

Observation

Interviews and documentary data are the most typical types of data in case studies. If no documentary data is available, as was in this study, then observation is an important data collection method to ensure data triangulation along with interviews (Woodside and Wilson, 2003). While observation typically focuses on behavior of people, brands and organizations (Carù et al., 2014; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008), observation and analysis of the physical environment, including the spatial arrangement and the material objects within it, add richness and depth to the collected qualitative data, as it helps to make sense of place that forms the context in which research is conducted (O’Toole and Were, 2008; Schlereth, 1982).

The first author of this study conducted observations of the physical environment in the *Food Market Herkku* flagship store and in a *Prisma* and an *S-Market* in Helsinki in August 2021 (Table 1). The observation focused on product variety, price and placement of the PL brands in question across the selected S Group stores above.

During observation in a *Food Market Herkku* store, the researcher noticed that premium and economy PL products were available in some product categories, such as jams and oils, while in other product categories, including coffee, bakery and ready-made meals, only the premium PL option was available. The economy and standard PL products dominated the selection in the visited *Prisma* and *S-Market* stores. Still, *Food Market Herkku* products had their own displays, which stated, “Greetings from *Food Market Herkku*.” In all the visited stores, the premium PL products were often placed more upfront, either at eye level or on separate displays, whereas economy PL products were more often on the bottom shelf. The premium PL products were roughly twice the price of economy PL products.

The observations concluded with a preliminary understanding of the brand’s product range, placement and pricing, and the different shopping experiences consumers may engage in at the various stores. The observations also raised the idea of showing images of products to the interviewees in the interviews.

Sample

In qualitative research, the researchers purposely select participants who have a special knowledge of the phenomenon and are willing to talk, instead of selecting a random sample (Goulding, 2005; Morse and Field, 1995; Thompson, 1997). The following criteria for an interviewee applied: The interviewee needed to be aware of the *Food Market Herkku* PL brand; be a customer or former customer of any of the stores the brand is sold at; and be willing to participate in an online interview of approximately 30–45 min in August–September 2021. Regarding option a, brand awareness referred to recognizing the brand name (Aaker, 1996), regardless of whether the interviewee was a customer or knew much about the brand. The study also included consumers who had formed a view or an opinion of the brand even though they were not customers. Option b refers to a customer who considers themselves a customer of the said store, regardless of the frequency of their store visits. This way, the current study was able to include consumers familiar with the stores and the

Table 1 The empirical data

Data source	Location	Date	Demographics of interviewees		
			Life situation	Age	Gender
<i>Observations</i>					
The Food Market Herkku flagship store	Helsinki	August 2021			
Prisma	Helsinki	August 2021			
S-Market	Helsinki	August 2021			
<i>Interviews</i>					
Test	Helsinki	August 14, 2021	Student	23	Female
A	Helsinki	August 17, 2021	Student	23	Male
B	Kauniainen	August 20, 2021	Working full-time	54	Female
C	Helsinki	August 21, 2021	Working full-time	52	Female
D	Oulu	September 04, 2021	Student	24	Female
E	Espoo	September 08, 2021	Working full-time	25	Male
F	Helsinki	September 20, 2021	Pensioner	79	Female
G	Helsinki	September 21, 2021	Working full-time	26	Male
H	Espoo	September 21, 2021	Student	24	Female

Source: Author's own

products sold in the stores. Regarding option c, because the ongoing coronavirus crisis (COVID-19) posed obstacles to approaching consumers physically at the stores, the interviewees needed to volunteer for an online interview.

The interviewees were recruited using the social media profile of the first author on Instagram. Nine interviewees volunteered without any incentives. Although the number of interviewees is smaller than often recommended in studies that use laddering interviews as will be described next (Reynolds *et al.*, 2001), it can be considered reasonable for an exploratory qualitative study wherein the number of informants is necessarily small (Morse and Field, 1995) and because such number of interviews was sufficient for reaching a code saturation, which refers to the range of thematic issues in the data (Hennink *et al.*, 2017). The interviewees were based in Helsinki, Espoo, Kauniainen and Oulu in Finland and included both male and female interviewees (Table 1). The interviewees represented two main demographic groups: young adults (university students) with a lower spending capability and educated working adults with a higher spending capability. One interviewee was a pensioner.

The interviews

The qualitative interviews were the main data collection method, as they provide the opportunity for in-depth, real-time insight into an individual consumer's thoughts, feelings, sayings and values about the brand (Rust *et al.*, 2021). A test interview focused on testing and validating the interview guideline. The guideline contained the introduction of the case brand, including images of Food Market Herkku products. It then covered the interviewee's perceptions and associations of the quality and uniqueness of the premium PL brand Food Market Herkku store and products in a semi-structured interview, meaning the pre-determined themes and questions concerned aspects related to brand image in Figure 1 (except values, as will be explained below). Still, the interview was shaped by the interviewee's answers (Lee, 1998). Because the study focused on premium PL brands, the economy brands were not included in the planned structure of the interview,

though they were discussed when the interviewee brought them up.

Although the test interview provided essential findings, it was excluded from further analyses, as it raised a need for more in-depth questioning to dive deeper into the consumer's value system and the introduction to the case brands seemed to affect the answers. Accordingly, the researchers included values in the conceptual framework. This is in line with interpretive sensemaking and an example of the abductive nature of the current study, which moved back and forth between theory and empirical observations (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Welch *et al.*, 2011). In line with the research on values, the researchers applied the laddering technique (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988) in the interviews. In branding research, the technique is used to examine, for instance, brand identity (Robichaud *et al.*, 2012) and brand meaning (Rossolatos, 2019). In this technique, a series of *why* questions are used to dig deeper into the values underlying the interviewees' answers (Allen, 2001), thereby allowing the identification of the instrumental and terminal values that relate to the brand attributes, perceptions and associations of the interviewees. Although the contextual description is necessary for understanding in interpretive sensemaking (Welch *et al.*, 2011), the introduction to the case brand was removed, as it influenced the interviewee's answers, and showing the images of Food Market Herkku products was moved to the end of the interviews for the images not to affect the initial answers but rather to provide a chance for the interviewees to remember anything they wished to add to their previous comments.

After the above changes, eight interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams software. The interviews were in Finnish to allow the interviewees to express their thoughts clearly without a language barrier. Yet, to avoid misunderstandings concerning terminology, the key terms in Figure 1 were introduced and explained both in English and Finnish. The interviews lasted 25–40 min. The interviews were recorded and transcribed simultaneously. The transcriptions were anonymized before the analyses.

Analyses

The analysis built on the logics of qualitative content analysis to make sense of the stories told by interviewees by interpreting their relationships with the means-end chain model (Grunert *et al.*, 2001; Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). The analysis proceeded in two main phases. The first phase focused on brand image. The phase started by categorizing the aspects of each interview based on the main themes recognized in the literature review to form the PL brand image. In other words, the analysis progressed by deductively forming the categories of the brand attributes such as expensive price, perceptions such as quality and uniqueness (Amatulli and Guido, 2010; Erdem *et al.*, 2004), along with associations, instrumental values and terminal values (Kautish *et al.*, 2020; Rokeach, 1973) concerning different brands. In practice, the analysis progressed by first listing all descriptive words and phrases that came up in each interview (Gough, 1976; Parris and Guzmán, 2022) regarding each brand into these categories, followed by inductively grouping the words/phrases in each category into sub-categories by topic (Juntunen *et al.*, 2020) and, finally, identifying the cause-effect relationships (Welch *et al.*, 2011) or means-end chains (Gutman, 1982; Rossolatos, 2019) from product attributes to perceptions to associations to instrumental values to terminal values. At this phase, additional categories emerged from the data. For instance, the interviewees listed associations such as exiting or luxurious and mentioned the specific products of a brand or store locations. Such emergence is essential for case studies, as it allows for creating a novel conceptual understanding grounded in empirical data (Welch *et al.*, 2011), further highlighting the abductive nature of the study. The findings showed that the brand image was very similar across different demographics.

The second phase focused on brand reputation. The phase began by categorizing the material in each category across the interviews (Welch *et al.*, 2011) to derive a broader understanding and a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon

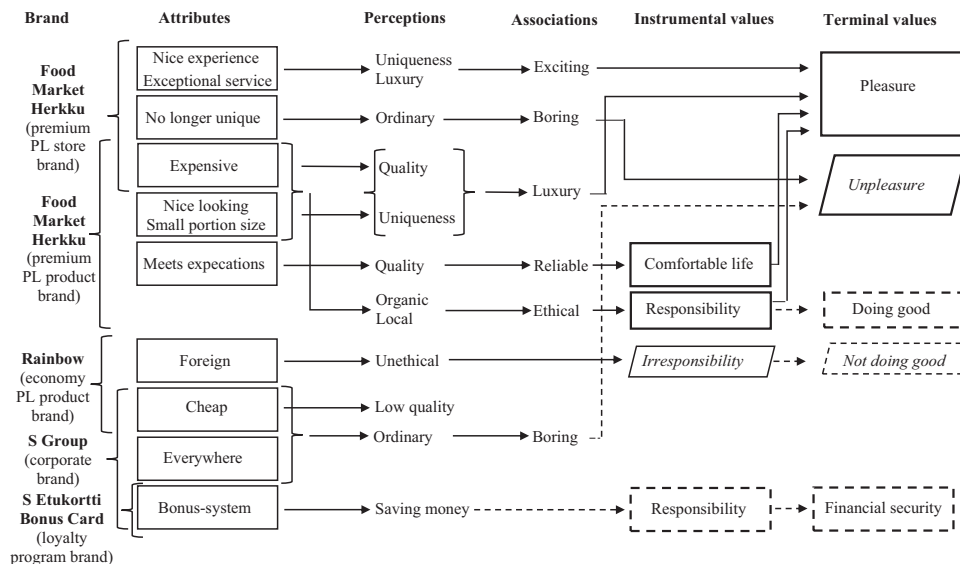
(Goulding, 2005; Thompson, 1997), that is, to explain the formation of PL brand reputation. The first step was to form a concept map of all the attributes, perceptions, associations and values the interviewees mentioned at least twice. The map helped to identify linkages of the findings collectively across the interviews. The second step was to organize the material by brands and identify the connections between them. These processes identified general “ladders” (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988) from attributes to perceptions to associations to values across the interviewees and brands, thereby showing the emergence of VB PL brand reputation. The processes above revealed the subsequent findings.

Findings

Although the interview questions focused on the premium PL product brand, the interviewees also freely discussed the premium PL store brand (the umbrella brand), the economy PL brand and the corporate brand. Figure 3 illustrates how the VB reputations of these four brands emerge by portraying the collective attributes the interviewees mentioned regarding each brand, along with how the perceptions concretized as associations the interviewees collectively used in describing the brand and what instrumental and terminal values the interviewees collectively linked in the associations.

As the straight arrows show, each attribute relates directly to some perceptions and associations, which, on their part, relate directly to their respective instrumental or terminal values. Some attributes relate to multiple perceptions and thereby to multiple terminal values; and diamond shapes illustrate the negative connotation the interviewees related to some instrumental and terminal values. Because the interviews focused on two premium PL brands of Food Market Herkku – the store brand and the product brand – understandably, the interviewees did not explicitly mention terminal values regarding the other brands. However, as these values could be

Figure 3 The emergence of the values-based premium private label brand reputation of Food Market Herkku



Source: Author’s own

interpreted from the other discussions of the interviewees, Figure 3 shows these values marked with a dotted line. Additionally, the instrumental value of *responsibility* has multiple roles as a means to diverse terminal values. The following section first introduces the emergence of the VB premium PL brand reputation of Food Market Herkku, followed by the influences of the economy PL product brand Rainbow and the corporate brand S Group.

The emergence of the values-based premium private label brand reputation of Food Market Herkku

All interviewees associated the product brand with the store brand. The discussion in the interviews often circled simultaneously around both brands, indicating that the two brands were very much intertwined. For instance, when the interviewees answered the questions regarding the product brand, they often started by discussing the store brand, as the following quote expresses:

With a store like Food Market Herkku, I expect there to be a team with extensive research behind each product they bring out. I trust they know more than I do about the product category and present only the best option. I see their products as something I should try, even if it's not on my shopping list (Interviewee C).

Therefore, it was not always clear which perceptions were created by the product brand attributes and which by the store brand attributes. Three attributes specifically related to the Food Market Herkku umbrella brand: *nice experience/exceptional service, no longer unique* and *expensive*; and three attributes concerned the Food Market Herkku product brand: *expensive, nice looking/small portion size* and *meets expectations*. The following section introduces these attributes, along with the perceptions, associations and values the interviewees related to them, in the order above.

Many interviewees described the store brand as nice to visit and feeling like more of an experience than a task. The flagship store in Helsinki especially offered a *nice experience* and *exceptional service* for the interviewees, thereby raising perceptions of *uniqueness* and *luxury*. Various interviewees stated that they enjoy buying premium products in groceries because they associate it being *exciting*, and ultimately, bringing *pleasure*, which represented the terminal value for these interviewees. As the interviewees summarize:

It's the place I go to for special occasions (Interviewee H).

I went to S-market the other day and was delighted to find ready-made meals from Food Market Herkku there. I felt they brought some luxury to everyday shopping as they came from Herkku's kitchen instead of a factory (Interviewee C).

However, some interviewees felt the umbrella brand was *no longer unique*, as it had become a part of a larger chain. Therefore, the interviewees perceived the brand being *ordinary* and that it had become *boring* and no longer brought pleasure to them. Figure 3 shows such a negative connotation of the terminal value pleasure, that is *unpleasure*, in a diamond shape:

The brand is still unique, but no longer as interesting now that it's a part of a chain (Interviewee G).

Many interviewees considered the product and store brands *expensive*, an expected attribute for a premium brand. The price did not raise strong feelings within the interviewees, but it seemed to affect the perceived *quality*. The expected high quality was why these interviewees chose the brand. Some

interviewees even recognized that even though the pricing might be an unreliable way to evaluate quality, they still behaved as if it was. The interviewees did not consider high prices unfavorable but associated it with the *luxury* a premium brand should offer. In the store, product placement endorsed the expensive and luxurious brand perceptions and associations. The *nice looking* and *small portion size* of packages raised similar perceptions regarding *quality*. Packaging helped the brand stand out as being perceived as a *unique* option, thereby being associated with *luxury*, and ultimately bringing *pleasure* to the interviewees:

The jams are in smaller glass jars, which to me means the product is better and more luxurious than the ones sold in large plastic pots. – Rationally thinking, the difference between the premium and the economy product is probably not big. But still, it feels better (Interviewee A).

I feel the product quality is high, regardless of whether it is or not (Interviewee B).

If a product is really cheap, I know it can't have quality ingredients (Interviewee G).

When grocery shopping, I am a bit of a dreamer. I like to choose the premium products regardless of the price because it's more enjoyable (Interviewee E).

Expensive pricing also created perceptions that the product is *organic* and *local*. These perceptions indicated that the interviewees associated the brand with *ethical*. However, only one interviewee specifically mentioned noticing the labels of local or organic origin on the packaging. In contrast, most interviewees could not state specific reasons why they felt the product was ethical. For some interviewees, the associated ethicality was generated by the dominant green coloring in Food Market Herkku packaging, as they connected the green color with *organic* in their minds:

I assume Food Market Herkku is produced from local ingredients, based on how it looks and how it's priced (Interviewee G).

A word that comes first to mind is organic. Because it's green (Interviewee C).

The *ethical* aspects above relate to the instrumental value of *responsibility*, which ultimately relates to two different terminal values: choosing a responsible product relates to *doing good*, but choosing a responsible product also makes one feel good, which relates to *pleasure*.

Even though perceptions of quality were similar for those who had not tried a specific product, experiences of having tried the products created further assurance that an important attribute for the premium product is that it *meets the expectations* and is, therefore, perceived as being of reliable *quality*. For instance, one interviewee explained that they chose this premium product because of their hectic life and want to ensure that cooking does not fail. Because the interviewee felt the product was *reliable*, it allowed for maintaining the interviewee's *comfortable life*, which represented the instrumental value toward the terminal value *pleasure*. The interviewee also recognized that the brand constantly ensures its high quality:

When a product is sold under the Food Market Herkku brand, I know what to expect — I know the brand would take it very seriously if the quality did not meet expectations (Interviewee C).

Although the current study did not focus on purchase decisions, the interviewees often linked positive associations (*exciting* and

reliable) to a positive purchase decision and negative associations (*boring*) to a negative purchase decision:

I have purchased the brand spontaneously because it looked inviting in the store (Interviewee A).

Overall, these findings suggest that having tried the premium PL product itself does not have such a substantial impact on the VB brand reputation; instead, the VB brand reputation is built from many different aspects before the purchase. The perceptions were heavily affected by personal feelings instead of concrete product attributes.

Although the above findings represent the VB reputations of a unique and high-quality premium PL, these findings alone were not enough to explain the emergence of the total VB reputation of the brand. The economy and corporate brands came up repeatedly during the interviews and heavily impacted the views on the premium PL brand. The following section introduces the emergence of the VB economy PL and corporate brand reputation, as they influence the emergence of the reputation of premium PL brands.

Influences of the economy private label brand, the corporate brand and the loyalty program brand

The attributes of the economy brand Rainbow, the corporate brand S Group and the loyalty program brand S Etukortti Bonus Card were intertwined, like the attributes concerning the premium brands. Two attributes related to Rainbow: *foreign* and *cheap*; three attributes concerned the S Group: *cheap*, *everywhere* and *bonus system*; and one attribute related to the S Etukortti Bonus Card: *bonus system*. The next section briefly introduces these attributes, followed by their influences on premium brands.

The interviewees considered the economy brand *foreign* because they did not know its origin. This made the interviewees perceive the brand *unethical*, which relates to the terminal value *responsibility* and ultimately *not doing good*:

My first thought is foreign. I would not purchase the brand because of where it comes from (Interviewee C).

In general, the cheap prices of both the economy and corporate brand products were perceived to represent *low quality*. Because of the national status, the corporate brand was seen to be *everywhere*. This made the interviewees perceive the brands *ordinary* and associate them with *boring*, ultimately representing *unpleasure*. The interviewees perceived the loyalty program brand and specifically its *bonus system* as *saving money*, which they associated positively with *responsibility* and, ultimately, with *financial security*.

Only some interviewees connected the premium PL brand with the corporate and economy PL brands. For some interviewees, the presence of the economy brand and the bonus system reminded them of the connection between the premium PL brand and the corporate brand:

For me, Rainbow and Food Market Herkku are two very separate brands. I would not have recalled they even have a connection (Interviewee A).

The presence of Rainbow products reminds me that the store is now a part of the chain. The last straw is when the cashier asks for the bonus card (Interviewee E).

For those who frequently visited the stores of S Group, the feelings toward the connection of these brands were more

positive. Some felt the connection brought the premium PL brand closer to them as a consumer, both financially and physically:

I never used to visit Herkku, but since it became a part of S Group, I go there for the bonuses (Interviewee F).

I love to be able to buy my favorite Food Market Herkku product at Prisma, which is much closer than the nearest Food Market Herkku store (Interviewee H).

If recalling, or when reminded of, the connection, then all interviewees perceived the distinction between the economy and premium PL brands was ultimately in the *quality* of ingredients used and in the product's origin. The brand hierarchy of the multiple-tier portfolio was clearly visible in the interviewees' perceptions:

I would position these two brands in the way that Rainbow is the lowest quality option and Food Market Herkku is the highest quality option (Interviewee B).

Those interviewees with negative feelings about the corporate or umbrella brand were more likely to discuss the premium PL brands negatively. These negative associations, however, did not affect the interviewees' perceptions of the quality or uniqueness of the PL brands as much as they seemed to affect the purchase decision. Although these interviewees recognized the premium PL product as high quality, they preferred not to buy it:

The premium brand being a part of a large group makes me less inclined to purchase the products. I would rather choose a small independent brand for the same price (Interviewee E).

I do not like the brand, but regardless, it's still the highest quality private label in Finland (Interviewee B).

Overall, the perceptions, associations and values of the premium PL product and store brand attributes and the perceptions, associations and values of the economy PL product, corporate brand and loyalty card brand attributes are very different, showing that these brands seem to have quite opposed reputations among consumers. Whereas the attributes of the premium PL brand mainly brought *pleasure* and was considered as *doing good*, the attributes related to the economy brand seemed to affect in the opposite way, that is, not bringing any pleasure and being *boring*. The latter was also the case for the premium PL brand among those interviewees who considered that the brand was no longer unique. Additionally, a *cheap* price of the economy brand indicated a *foreign* and less *responsible* product origin, compared to an expensive price, creating the feeling of *luxury* and *ethicality*. Although the ladders in Figure 3 do not connect, the reputation of the premium PL brand could be seen as strengthened by having an economy option with which to compare it. The following section discusses the findings.

Discussion

The current study aimed to answer two questions: How does premium VB PL brand reputation emerge within a multiple-tier brand portfolio? Why does VB premium PL brand reputation emerge within a multiple-tier brand portfolio as it does?

As an answer to the first question, the study shows that a VB premium PL brand reputation emerges collectively from

various PL brand images of individual consumers that are profoundly based on attributes and perceptions concretizing, as associations guided by the underlying values of a consumer and heavily impacted by the elements of the company's brand architecture. The finding is in line with extant research that has suggested that brand reputation is the accumulation of brand images multiple stakeholders over time (Fombrun and Van Riel, 1997; Rust *et al.*, 2021; Shamma and Hassan, 2009; Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018). The finding is also in line with the research on multiple-tier brand portfolios, where the researchers have long recognized the importance of consumer perceptions (Böger *et al.*, 2018; Palmeira and Thomas, 2011) and, with brand researchers, who have recognized that brand image forms based on perceptions and associations (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007; Keller, 1993; Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018). The finding differs from the existing research by suggesting that consumer values, along with the perceptions of different brands in a multiple-tier portfolio, form the underlying basis for the emergence of brand image and reputation.

The empirical examination showed that the perceptions, associations and values of the premium PL product brand attributes and the premium PL store brand attributes interlink. This highlights the intertwined nature of an umbrella brand in the formation of a premium PL brand reputation and shows that the impact of the umbrella brand can be more significant than that of the product itself. The finding is in line with previous research that has proposed product brands may benefit from umbrella brands (Keller *et al.*, 2020; Laforet and Saunders, 2007). The findings also showed that having tried the premium PL product itself does not have such a substantial impact on brand reputation and that the reputation is built from many different aspects before the purchase. The recognized perceptions were heavily affected by personal feelings instead of concrete product attributes, which is in line with Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester (2018), who noted that brand image could form whether the consumer has had a real or mental encounter with the brand.

In line with earlier research, the current study showed that quality (Amatulli and Guido, 2010; Erdem *et al.*, 2004) and uniqueness (Gürhan-Canli, 2003) are essential characteristics of premium PL brands. The study revealed that along with exceptional service (Gillespie *et al.*, 2016; Mullins *et al.*, 2023) in the premium store, consumers expect luxury from the premium products and the premium grocery products to be ethical. All these findings show that consumers desire everyday luxury: they expect premium PL brands to offer them a pleasurable experience and that they can both feel good and do good by consuming such products. This way, the consumers consider the premium PL brands exciting, and the brands are aligned with their underlying values. The findings align with existing research in that a quality perception alone does not explain the reasons for purchasing premium PL brands (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007).

As an answer to the second question, the current study revealed that the underlying consumer values firmly guide the emergence of a VB brand image and, ultimately, the emergence of a VB brand reputation. The empirical examination showed that even though the perceptions, associations and values of the economy PL brands and the economy-priced corporate brands

are interlinked, the interviewees viewed these brands as very separate from and different than the premium PL brands. This shows that the reputations of premium PL brands seem to form quite independently from economy brands. Specifically, the underlying values of consumers differed remarkably: whereas the values related to the premium PL brand were hedonistic and positive, the values related to the economy PL product brand and the economy corporate PL brand were either negative (not doing good) or ordinary (financial security). This can be explained by the finding that the associations often related to the feelings of a consumer, such as the feeling of excitement or that the brand has become boring. Depending on the positive or negative connotation of the feeling, the respective value was also considered positive or negative, showing that the negative reputation of a brand emerges from the negative connotation related to a value. This is an interesting finding, because the human values are traditionally considered positive (Rokeach, 1973), and to be successful and profitable, brands should have a positive reputation (Herbig and Milewicz, 1993; Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). This highlights the importance of aligning company and consumer values (Rindell *et al.*, 2013) in developing VB brand architecture strategies.

The findings also show that the instrumental value "responsibility" may have multiple meanings as a mean to diverse terminal values: it is a mean to a consumer's pleasure (making responsible choices can make one feel good), to a wider ethical viewpoint (doing or not doing good to others) and to the ethicality of the corporate brand (ensuring one's financial security with a loyalty card system). This is in line with the research suggesting that terminal values refer to preferred social, emotional, aesthetic and self-expressive end-states of existence (Kahle, 1986; Kautish and Sharma, 2018; Phau *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b) and are based on universal needs of individuals such as hedonism (pleasure), security (financial security) and universalism (doing good) (Allen, 2001; Schwartz, 1994). While the findings are also in line with research that has considered pleasure as one possible terminal value in the decision of purchasing luxury products (Kautish *et al.*, 2020), it extends this line of research by highlighting the important role of doing good and showing that monetary incentives may have an underlying influence on consumers' purchasing decisions regarding premium PL brands. Related to this, some instrumental and terminal values in the current study slightly differed from those researchers have listed earlier: while some researchers have considered comfortable life as a terminal value (Allen, 2001; Kautish *et al.*, 2020), in the current study, comfortable life was an instrumental value toward terminal value pleasure. However, this is understandable, as it is widely acknowledged that whether values are considered terminal or instrumental varies by culture and country (De Mooij, 2005), and even individuals may perceive values differently (Verplanken and Holland, 2002).

Despite the differences in the emergence of diverse brand reputations, the findings showed that the economy PL brand may help position the premium PL brand to be considered higher quality by consumers. The finding is in line with earlier research (Palmeira and Thomas, 2011). The findings also align with research that has revealed that the perceptions of the corporate brand may influence the perceptions of brands within

its portfolio (Böger *et al.*, 2018). Although researchers have proposed that premium PL brands can positively or negatively influence the corporate brand (Geyskens *et al.*, 2010), this study could not find such a relationship. The following section presents the implications of the study.

Conclusions

Theoretical implications

The purpose of the current study was to increase the understanding of the emergence of VB premium PL brand reputation in the setting of a multiple-tier PL brand portfolio. The study offers the following theoretical implications.

First, an empirically validated framework for the emergence of VB premium PL brand reputation in a multiple-tier brand portfolio is a novel contribution. The researchers interested in multiple-tier brand portfolios have revealed the influences of the economy PL brands on the standard PL brands (Geyskens *et al.*, 2010) and the premium PL brands (Palmeira and Thomas, 2011), along with their influences on the corporate brand (Geyskens *et al.*, 2010) and vice versa (Böger *et al.*, 2018) and recognized the importance of consumer brand perceptions (Palmeira and Thomas, 2011), but studies have neither advanced the research with the literature on brand image nor provided a framework of the whole process of the emergence of the VB premium PL brand reputation. The current research closes these gaps.

Related to this, explaining why the VB premium PL brand reputation emerges as it does in the context of a multiple-tier brand portfolio is a novel contribution. Although researchers have proposed that the accumulation of brand images constructs brand reputation (Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018), research that has built on such an approach in the context of a multiple-tier brand portfolio has remained absent. Furthermore, while research on brand image has been extensive throughout decades (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Keller, 1993, 2009; Kotler *et al.*, 2012) and the existing research has widely agreed on the importance of associations and perceptions in the formation of brand image (Aaker, 1996; Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007; French and Smith, 2013; Keller, 1993; Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018), research on the role of consumer values in such a process has remained under-researched. The current research closes these gaps, simultaneously showing how the consumers may relate positive and negative attributes, perceptions, associations and values to the brands.

Moreover, the explanation that the VB reputation of the economy and premium PL brands within a brand portfolio emerge quite independently is a novel contribution. Although the extensive research on the influences between economy and premium PL brands has revealed, for instance, influences of the economy PL brands on the premium PL brands (Palmeira and Thomas, 2011) and the corporate brand (Geyskens *et al.*, 2010) and vice versa (Böger *et al.*, 2018), this study showed only limited influences between the economy and premium PL brands. Even though this is in line with earlier research, which suggests that for a premium PL to succeed, it needs to be branded as higher quality (Braak *et al.*, 2014) and unique, it also shows other aspects that need to be taken into account, such as service, the shopping experience and accessibility.

Finally, the current study contributes by showing that brand luxury and the organic and local nature of the brand are essential novel aspects in the emergence of the premium PL brand reputation within a multiple-tier brand portfolio in retailing. The finding advances earlier research, recognizing the importance of brand uniqueness (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007; Dhar and Sherman, 1996), price and quality (Söderlund *et al.*, 2017) in forming consumer perceptions of the premium PL brand. Additionally, although the research has recognized that brand uniqueness and quality are essential aspects of a consumer's perceptions, research on their role in the emergence of brand image and reputation has remained absent, specifically in the context of a multiple-tier brand portfolio.

Methodologically, although the laddering technique is used in examining brand identity (Robichaud *et al.*, 2012) and brand meaning (Rossolatos, 2019), its use in examining premium PL brands, brand reputation and brand image has remained scarce. With these contributions, the current study offers a novel platform for researchers to examine the emergence of VB brand reputation in various contexts.

Managerial implications

These findings should inspire managers to identify the VB reputations of their brands. The consumers typically relate positive attributes to premium PL brands. Such attributes further raise positive perceptions and associations, ultimately resulting in positive collective instrumental and/or terminal values, which represent VB reputations of the brand. Managers need to invest in identifying these values and ensure that the values are successfully reflected in the attributes of the PL brand (or in brand identity) over time.

The empirical research shows that consumers evaluate and form a view of product quality even without having tried the product. Package design and product placement strongly impact those evaluations, which affect the purchase decision. An uninviting product might not be purchased, regardless of the package content. This highlights the importance of packaging in groceries, especially for products on the higher end of the price range, and the importance of creating the perception of uniqueness in higher-priced products. The findings also raise the importance of responsibility and interest in products with ethical origins as a growing trend. PL loyalty has already been established to drive store loyalty (Ailawadi *et al.*, 2008). The findings show that specific favorite products affect the attractiveness of a particular store, and nice shopping experience and exceptional service in a premium PL brand store drive positive PL brand image, reputation and, ultimately, PL product purchases, emphasizing the importance of carefully designed brand strategy and execution between all brands under a brand umbrella.

However, the study demonstrated that organizational changes, such as changes in the ownership of the brand, may lead consumers to see negative attributes in the premium PL brand that earlier was successful. Such negative attributes conclude in negative perceptions and associations, and ultimately negative values, thereby representing negative VB reputation of the brand. While such reputations might be intentional in some cases, such as concerning economy PL brands, it is important for brand managers to recognize if the premium PL brand has unintended negative reputations and

carefully consider about via which attributes the negative reputation might be revised toward a more positive reputation. The study showed that even the views toward the corporate brand can negatively impact the purchase decision: as the corporate brand was associated with not bringing pleasure, the connection had a negative impact on purchasing the premium PL brand. It is important for brand managers to recognize this kind of negative loop and identify ways to turn it to a positive VB reputation that encourages purchases.

Limitations and further research

Although the carefully designed conceptual framework of this study forms a basis for high-quality research, the study comes with limitations. Because of the qualitative research method, the findings of this study are not statistically generalizable for all premium PL brands. Instead, the results portray an exploratory case of how a PL brand reputation can form among consumers. It is also to be noted that the case brand of *Food Market Herkku* is a brand with a long history that has gone through a re-branding and change in ownership, which at the time generated strong feelings among the interviewees. Therefore, the case in question represents a unique situation. Additionally, the circumstances posed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and global recommendations to limit contact during the empirical study posed challenges that could have been avoided using face-to-face interviews. It is also vital to remember that the number of interviewees was smaller than often recommended in laddering studies (Reynolds *et al.*, 2001) and that the empirical data of the study explained neither how the information on the premium PL brand reputation impacts the identity of the premium PL brand or the PL brand portfolio nor the development of the PL brand reputation over time.

The study encourages researchers to further conceptualize the ongoing nature of the emergence of brand reputation, along with conceptualizing the differences between the emergence and formation of brand image and reputation. Empirically, the study encourages researchers to conduct similar research focusing on different PL brand portfolios to see if and how the results of this research are mirrored in other brands. The authors of this study suggest a similar research design with a random selection of consumers or other stakeholders and a novel PL brand. Methodologically, as the current research was qualitative and aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the formation of brand reputation, these findings can be further validated through a wider laddering study or a quantitative study. For even more generalizable results, a study of a larger group of different types of stakeholders and other PL brands would be needed.

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