

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Economics and Business Administration

Maryam Baghirova

CHAOTIC BRAND VOICE VERSUS CONVERSATIONAL HUMAN VOICE:  
EFFECTS ON CONSUMER BRAND TRUST ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Lecturer Kristian Pentus

Tartu 2026

I have written this Bachelor's Thesis independently. Any ideas or data taken from other authors or other sources have been fully referenced.

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## Introduction

A significant shift has become observable in the landscape of digital brand communication. On social media platforms, a growing number of prominent brands are deviating from traditional, polished advertising in favor of a "chaotic" or "unhinged" brand voice. This strategic pivot involves the deliberate use of sarcastic, absurd, or self-deprecating content, designed to foster a more relatable and human persona, particularly with younger audiences. Examples include Duolingo, whose humorous and meme-like social media communication constructs a more "human" and relatable brand persona (Barber, 2023), and Ryanair, which similarly relies on informal, self-aware content on platforms such as TikTok to appear more approachable to its audience (Forslund & Friman, 2022).

This change in tone is not arbitrary; it is a calculated response to the "volatile environments" of modern social media (Surikova, 2024, p.1). To remain relevant, organizations must demonstrate "resilient agility" in their brand voice. The chaotic style, therefore, can be framed as an advanced engagement tactic. It moves beyond simple humor to employ forms of "aggressive" brand-to-brand teasing (Ning et al., 2022, p.1) and the strategic deployment of "memetic videos" to foster a "participatory culture" with consumers (Shifman, 2012, p. 1,3). By speaking the native language of the internet through memes and irony, brands attempt to build a deeper and more relatable connection with their audiences.

This strategy, however, is predicated on a high-stakes paradox. Its success hinges on how audiences interpret the brand's intent and credibility, with trust serving as the most immediate and measurable expression of that judgment in a single-exposure context. The primary audience, Generation Z and Millennial consumers, are simultaneously receptive to this ironic tone yet deeply skeptical of overt marketing ploys (Pettersson & Nilsen, 2025). This creates what Pettersson and Nilsen (2025, p.5) identify as a "fragile thread of authenticity." If the chaotic content is interpreted as a genuine and harmless "benign violation" (Ning et al., 2022, p.3), it can build significant trust. Conversely, if it is decoded as a cynical "persuasive intent," it triggers skepticism, risks "advertising wear-out," and ultimately undermines brand credibility (Pettersson & Nilsen, 2025, p. 8).

Despite this growing attention, no peer-reviewed study has defined this communication style as a theoretical construct. For instance, some graduate-level studies characterize unhinged marketing as a practice in which brands abandon conventional approaches in favor of chaotic, expectation-defying communication (Noor, 2024), but they draw on practitioner rather than scholarly sources. Within the academic brand voice

literature, the only established continuum runs between corporate voice and Conversational Human Voice as its two extremes (Barattin & Latusi, 2026), leaving what happens beyond that range unexplored.

Additionally, existing research has explored brand-to-brand humor (Ning et al., 2022) or the mechanics of virality (Shifman, 2012), still, a significant gap persists. There is limited understanding of the specific nuances of what this paper refers to as the Chaotic Brand Voice (CBV) as a distinct strategic pattern in social media marketing. In this paper, CBV refers to a distinct configuration of brand communication on social media that deliberately pushes past the boundaries of standard conversational informality through stylistic, paralinguistic, and humour-based choices, resulting in a recognisable and norm-defying brand persona. The aim of this paper is to examine the effects of Chaotic Brand Voice on consumer brand trust relative to standard Conversational Human Voice in social media. This aim is pursued through a synthesis of existing theoretical and empirical literature, followed by a between-subjects online experiment testing whether perceived appropriateness and benign appraisal explain the effect of voice condition on brand trust. Building on prior research that mainly highlights the engagement benefits of informal brand communication, this study addresses the relative lack of consolidated work on trust-related outcomes at the point where conversational informality escalates into norm-defying territory. By synthesising existing evidence on informal and norm-defying brand communication and conducting a controlled experimental test, this research explores whether perceived appropriateness and benign appraisal account for the relationship between Chaotic Brand Voice and consumer brand trust relative to standard Conversational Human Voice.

This thesis focuses on consumer-facing, brand-generated social media marketing communication, meaning the brand's own voice, rather than influencer-led content or user-generated communication. The analysis concentrates on consumer brand trust as the focal outcome variable, rather than on engagement metrics such as likes and shares or business performance outcomes such as sales. The study is conceptual in its first part, synthesising existing theory and empirical findings, and empirical in its second part, designing and conducting a between-subjects online experiment to test the proposed relationships.

To achieve the aim, the paper addresses the following research tasks:

- To define and delimit Chaotic Brand Voice as a distinct communication pattern in social media marketing and identify its key markers.

- To explain the mechanisms through which Chaotic Brand Voice markers may shape consumer brand trust relative to standard Conversational Human Voice, and why these effects are context-dependent.
- To synthesise empirical research on informal and unconventional brand communication and consumer brand trust, and identify key boundary conditions that strengthen or weaken this relationship.
- To integrate these insights by designing and conducting an empirical study that tests the proposed relationships between Chaotic Brand Voice, perceived appropriateness, benign appraisal, and brand trust.

This paper consists of a theoretical framework and an empirical research design. Chapter 1 develops the theoretical framework by analysing the definitions of the key concepts, such as CBV and brand trust in social media marketing in subchapter 1.1, explaining the mechanisms linking CBV to brand trust in subchapter 1.2, and synthesising relevant empirical studies in subchapter 1.3. Chapter 2 presents the methodology, results, and discussion of the empirical study, after which the paper concludes by summarising the main insights and their implications.

Keywords: chaotic brand voice, unhinged marketing, brand trust, conversational human voice, social media marketing.

## **1. Theoretical framework of Chaotic Brand Voice and brand trust in social media marketing**

### **1.1 Key concepts and definition of Chaotic Brand Voice and brand trust in social media marketing**

This subchapter defines the key concepts used in the theoretical framework of the paper. Where concepts are defined differently across the literature, the paper brings together several definitions and compares their main points in order to set clear working meanings for this study. The subchapter follows a broad-to-specific order, starting with the concept of brand and the context of brand communication on social media, then moving to brand voice and Chaotic Brand Voice, and finally defining the outcome concept, such as brand trust.

The branding literature does not provide one universally accepted definition, and different authors emphasise different nuances when defining the concept (Kapferer, 2004). As shown in the Table 1, two of definitions treat the brand primarily as an identifier, focusing on how it differentiates offerings and signals source. In this view, branding is anchored in

recognising the seller and distinguishing the offering from competitors, which aligns with the table's conceptual focus on a brand as an identifier that differentiates offerings and signals source (Aaker, 1991). A closely related emphasis appears in the American Marketing Association definition, which frames the brand as a set of identifying features that creates distinctiveness between sellers (American Marketing Association, 2017). Additionally, regarding the definition described by AMA, Kotler and Keller further note that these differentiating dimensions may be functional and performance-related, but also symbolic, emotional, and intangible (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

Table 1

*Definitions of brand across key studies*

Source	Definition	Conceptual focus
Aaker (1991, p. 7)	"A brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors.	Brand as an identifier that differentiates offerings and signals source.
American Marketing Association (2017)	"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"	Brand as a set of identifying features that creates distinctiveness between sellers.
De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley (1998, p. 427)	"... the "brand" is a multidimensional construct whereby managers augment products or services with values and this facilitates the process by which consumers confidently recognise and appreciate these values. "	Brand as added values attached by managers, recognised and valued by consumers.
Keller et al. (2012, p. 5)	"A brand is therefore a product but one that adds other dimensions that differentiate it in some way from other products designed to satisfy the same need. "	Brand as a product with added differentiating dimensions, including intangible meaning.
Kotler (1997, p. 443)	"A brand is essentially a seller's promise to consistently deliver a specific set of features, benefits, and services to the buyers. "	Brand as a consistency-based promise shaping expectations of delivered value.

*Source:* Compiled by the author based on the sources presented in the table

Other definitions from Table 1 shift attention from identification alone to what the brand adds and how it shapes expectations. Kotler (1997) highlights the brand as a

consistency-based promise shaping expectations of delivered value, positioning branding as a mechanism that stabilises what buyers believe they will receive over time. Keller et al. (2012) connect branding to the offering itself, but frame the brand as a “product” with added differentiating dimensions, including intangible meaning, which broadens differentiation beyond purely functional attributes. Finally, De Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley (1998) place the emphasis on brand as added values attached by managers, recognised and valued by consumers, which makes the consumer’s interpretation of these values central to what the brand is. Additionally, such consumer-focused view fits with the idea that brand meaning is held in memory: in this sense, brand knowledge refers to how the brand is mentally stored and what it comes to mean to the consumer, based on both descriptive details and evaluative impressions (Keller, 2003). Overall, the definitions in Table 1 vary in whether they treat the brand mainly as a market identifier or as a set of added meanings and values that shape consumer interpretation.

Accordingly, in this paper, a brand is defined as a differentiated market offering that is identifiable in the marketplace and carries consumer-held meaning in the form of brand knowledge. This meaning is formed and updated through brand-related cues, including brand communication on social media via official brand accounts, which provides the basis for consumer judgments examined later in the paper, including perceived trust.

As this paper focuses on how consumer perceptions are formed in social media settings, it is necessary to clarify the role of social media in marketing and in brand communication. Social media has become a central part of everyday online activity. Statista (2025) reports that the number of global social media users exceeded five billion in 2024, with projections exceeding six billion by 2028. This scale of usage has made social media a key communication environment for brands. Khanom (2023) describes social media as an important marketing factor that supports brand–consumer engagement, brand awareness, and promotion. As Voorveld (2019) notes, “In an attempt to capitalize on this intense usage, almost every consumer brand is present on social media and advertisers and marketers are eagerly integrating social media in their digital strategies” (p. 14). In this paper, “social media platforms” refers to the most popular platforms widely used in marketers’ practice, including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Threads (Statista, 2025).

From the consumer perspective, social media is used as part of the information search process, for comparing offers, and for establishing relationships with sellers (Lopes & Casais,

2022). Brands communicate through published content (e.g., posts, videos, stories, and images) and may also interact directly with users through replies and ongoing exchanges (Jeswani, 2023). In this paper, brand communication on social media is defined as brand-generated communication on social platforms, including published content and interactional messages such as replies and comments, which provides consumers with cues for evaluating the brand.

Within these dynamic digital environments, the effectiveness of brand-consumer engagement depends significantly on the specific linguistic identity a brand adopts, commonly referred to as brand voice.

Brand voice refers to the characteristic way a brand communicates through language and style. It can be understood as a set of linguistic and stylistic parameters that shape message expression and interpretation, including features such as intonation and emotional colouring, and these parameters can vary depending on the communication channel, intended receiver, and desired effect, as described by Surikova et al. (2022). Brand voice can also be conceptualised from the recipient's side, as the projection and perception of a brand's message through cues such as attitude, tone, language choice, and typography, as defined by Kohli and Yen (2019). Brand voice further serves an identity-expressive function, since "An appropriately set voice conveys the overall identity and personality of the brand" (Murár et al., 2024, p. 52). This aligns with corporate tone-of-voice work that treats voice as deliberate language style used to convey brand personality to different audiences, as discussed by Delin (2007). Accordingly, in this paper, brand voice is defined as the set of linguistic and stylistic choices through which a brand expresses a characteristic communication style in its messages, shaping how those messages are perceived by consumers. In this study, brand voice is examined in social media settings and is identified through linguistic and stylistic cues in brand-generated messages on social platforms, including published content and interactional messages such as replies and comments.

The brand voice literature generally distinguishes between two contrasting styles of brand communication, recognising a continuum between a conversational human and a corporate voice as its two extremes (Barattin & Latusi, 2026). One is the corporate voice, a distant and formal style traditionally used by companies (Barcelos et al., 2018). The other is a more personal and human style, which has been most prominently conceptualised as Conversational Human Voice (CHV), though some studies refer to the same underlying concept using alternative labels such as "human tone-of-voice" (Jeong et al., 2022). CHV has

received growing attention in brand communication research due to evidence suggesting it increases consumer engagement and brand evaluations and at its core, it refers to an organisational communication style that audiences perceive as natural and engaging (Kelleher, 2009). This study uses CHV as the theoretical baseline against which Chaotic Brand Voice is defined and compared. Therefore, before defining CBV, it is necessary to first establish what CHV is defined as in this paper.

Table 2

*Conceptualisations of Conversational Human Voice across key studies*

Source	Definition	Conceptual Focus
Kelleher (2009)	"An engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization's publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics." (p. 177)	CHV as perceived communication style characterised by naturalness and engagement, formed through organisation-public interaction.
Barcelos et al. (2018)	"A more natural, close, and human style of online communication, opposed to corporate voice, which is the more distant and formal style traditionally used by companies." (p. 61)	CHV as relational proximity and humanness in brand communication, explicitly contrasted with formal corporate voice.
Jeong et al. (2022)	"A more natural, intimate, and interpersonal tone in brand interactions with consumers, as opposed to traditional corporate tone-of-voice, which appears to be more distant and official." (p. 4233)	CHV as interpersonal intimacy and psychological proximity in brand-consumer communication.

*Source:* Compiled by the author based on the sources presented in the table

The three definitions share two common emphases. The first is relational proximity: all three sources define CHV in contrast to corporate voice, as a style that reduces distance between the brand and the consumer (Barcelos et al., 2018; Jeong et al., 2022). The second is perceived naturalness: across all three definitions, CHV is characterised by how the communication is received rather than what is said, specifically whether it feels human and unscripted (Kelleher, 2009). It is worth noting that independent CHV definitions remain scarce in the literature, with most studies building directly on Kelleher's (2009) original conceptualisation rather than proposing distinct alternatives, which limits the conceptual diversity available for comparison.

Accordingly, in this paper, CHV is defined as a brand communication style perceived as natural, engaging, and relationally close to the consumer, representing the informal end of the brand voice continuum.

Recent social media practice shows a more extreme communicative pattern that goes beyond the range documented in existing CHV research. This paper terms this pattern as Chaotic Brand Voice (CBV), where "chaotic" refers to the perceived unpredictability and norm-defying character of this escalated style rather than a separate brand voice category.

Additionally, as noted in the introduction, the phenomenon that this paper examines is circulating under the practitioner label "unhinged marketing," which remains without a peer-reviewed definition. This paper does not adopt "unconventional marketing" as an alternative term either, despite surface-level similarities. The unconventional marketing literature examines cases where the marketing tactic or channel itself deviates from standard practice, such as guerrilla campaigns and disruptive formats (Cova & Saucet, 2014), with effects shown to depend on product type and industry expectations (Stoenescu, 2018). CBV operates at a different level entirely since the format remains conventional, a standard social media post, while the unconventionality lies in the linguistic and stylistic choices made within it (the textual variable within the ad or post). That distinction is what situates this paper within the brand voice literature rather than the unconventional marketing one. The term Chaotic Brand Voice is used because it is theoretically anchorable within that literature, captures the perceived unpredictability and norm-defying character of the phenomenon, and can be operationalized through a specific set of markers, as developed below. The word "unconventional" appears descriptively throughout this paper to characterize the norm-defying quality of CBV's communication style, not as a reference to that body of literature.

Table 3 presents the main CBV markers compiled from prior research on informal and unconventional brand communication on social media, incorporating both features that appear in Gretry et al.'s (2017) list of linguistic features of conversational human voice but are used in an amplified form, and CBV-exclusive features.

Table 3

*CBV markers and their distinguishing features*

CBV marker	Description	Source
Implied authorship and personified voice	Use of first-person singular pronouns and a distinct individual-like persona that makes the brand appear as a specific "person" rather than a corporate entity	Barber (2023); Gretry et al. (2017)
Platform-native informal stylisation	Deliberate use of minimalist typography, all-lowercase writing, and unconventional punctuation as part of a recognisable brand communication style	Barber (2023)
Exaggerated paralinguistic features	Amplified use of emoji, repeated punctuation, and sound mimicking (e.g., "soooo", "awww") at a density and intensity that exceeds standard informal communication	Gretry et al. (2017); Liebrecht et al. (2021)
Linguistic deviation and creative lexis	Use of non-standard words, internet-native slang, metaphorical language, and culture-specific expressions as deliberate stylistic choices	Waleed et al. (2024)
Humour repertoire as a voice component	Use of self-deprecating humour, sarcasm, parody, puns, and silliness as recurring and identifiable elements of the brand's communication style	Taecharungroj & Nueangjammong (2015); Ning et al. (2022); Malodia et al. (2022)
Meme-based format adaptation	Adoption and curation of internet meme formats aligned to brand persona, using platform-native visual and textual conventions	Malodia et al. (2022); Campbell & Marks (2015)

Source: Compiled by the author based on the sources presented in the table.

The markers presented in Table 3 are best understood in relation to what they go beyond. Conversational Human Voice, as operationalised in prior experimental research, already covers a substantial range of informal linguistic features. Liebrecht et al. (2021) identify seventeen subcategories across three CHV tactics, including personal greetings, first and second-person pronouns, emoji, contractions, and dialogue-inviting phrases. Gretry et al. (2017) similarly constructed their informal condition using features such as informal vocabulary, emoticons, sound mimicking, contractions, and common expressions, and demonstrated that this level of informality already produces measurable shifts in brand trust perceptions. In the context of this study, these features form the baseline of the conventional CHV condition and appear in both experimental stimuli. They are therefore held constant and are not what distinguishes CBV from CHV in the design.

The markers presented in Table 3 were identified through a synthesis of empirical studies on informal brand communication, linguistic deviation in advertising, and humour in

social media marketing. No single study examines all six markers together, as CBV has not been previously defined or tested in the literature. Each marker is instead drawn from a study that documents it in a related context: implied authorship and platform-native stylisation from Barber (2023), exaggerated paralinguistic features from Gretry et al. (2017) and Liebrecht et al. (2021), linguistic deviation from Waleed et al. (2024), and the humour repertoire from Ning et al. (2022), Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015), and Malodia et al. (2022).

The selection criterion was that each marker captures a dimension of brand communication either absent from established CHV frameworks or present only in a form too mild to produce the norm-defying impression that characterises CBV. Features that already appear as standard CHV elements in Liebrecht et al. (2021) and Gretry et al. (2017), such as personal pronouns, friendly greetings, and basic emoji use, were excluded because they form the shared baseline of both conditions in this study rather than what distinguishes them.

While CHV humanises the brand through general warmth and personal pronouns, implied authorship and platform-native stylisation reflect a qualitatively different communicative act: rather than simply reducing social distance, they construct a specific recognisable individual-like persona that creates consistent audience expectations around a character. Barber (2023, p. 18) documents this through "minimalist typography, all-lowercase writing, and unconventional punctuation" combined with first-person singular pronouns to personify an implied brand author, and Gretry et al. (2017) similarly document first-person singular pronouns as part of informal brand communication, though in CBV this extends into a fully constructed individual-like persona rather than general humanness.

Linguistic deviation and creative lexis similarly goes beyond what standard informal language achieves. Where CHV uses casual vocabulary that any audience can read as friendly, CBV draws on what Waleed et al. (2024, p. 96) describe as "lexical variations as non-standard words, metaphorical language, and culture-specific items" as deliberate stylistic choices. The distinction matters: standard informality is broadly accessible, but creative lexical deviation signals cultural fluency and deliberate effort, which Waleed et al. (2024) argue strengthens perceived credibility rather than just approachability.

Exaggerated paralinguistic features share their building blocks with CHV but differ in function. In CHV, features such as emoji, repeated punctuation, and sound mimicking soften tone and signal casual engagement (Gretry et al., 2017; Liebrecht et al., 2021). In CBV they appear at a density and intensity that exceeds normal conversational use, shifting their role

from tone markers to recognisable stylistic signals of the brand's persona. The difference is therefore not quantitative but functional.

The humour repertoire is the most structurally distinct marker in Table 3 relative to CHV. Liebrecht et al. (2021) found humour in only five of their 38 reviewed CHV studies and only in a mild form, meaning its recurring and identity-defining use in CBV represents a genuine departure rather than an intensification. Humour can be discussed as styles including self-enhancing, affiliative, self-defeating, and aggressive (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015), and at the message level may take forms such as parody, puns, silliness, and self-deprecating humour (Malodia et al., 2022). Crucially, Ning et al. (2022) show that low-aggressive humour generates more positive consumer responses than high-aggressive humour, meaning CBV's effectiveness depends on whether the specific execution stays within a benign range.

Meme-based format adaptation is the most platform-native marker in Table 3 and the one most dependent on audience cultural literacy. This aligns with the view that meme use is curated rather than copied unchanged, where “The brand manager’s role is to identify meme trends and curate them according to their brand persona.” (Malodia et al., 2022, p. 1783) Importantly, meme references do not require visual formats and can operate through textual structures and recognisable internet joke patterns embedded in written posts, making them compatible with text-native platforms. Campbell and Marks (2015) further note that this kind of platform-native expression is designed to appear in-stream and minimally disruptive, distinguishing it from conventional advertising humour.

Accordingly, in this paper, Chaotic Brand Voice is defined as a systematic configuration of stylistic, paralinguistic, and humour-based markers that intensifies and extends Conversational Human Voice past the boundaries of standard conversational informality into a recognisable and deliberately norm-defying communication persona.

Because CBV is an intentionally unconventional communication cue, the most relevant outcome for evaluating how audiences interpret it is brand trust, as it directly captures whether stylistic norm deviation is perceived as credible and consistent rather than merely attention-grabbing. Prior research suggests that brand communication perceived as consistent and honest can strengthen brand trust by supporting inferences about a brand's integrity and competence (Monfort et al., 2025). While reach and engagement indicators are widely used to evaluate social media performance, research cautions that such metrics can function as “vanity metrics” based on the brute counting of likes and views (Rogers, 2018, p.

451) and may be strategically “gamed” in ways that distort what they appear to measure (Peters et al., 2013, p. 292). Therefore, this study prioritizes trust because it assesses whether audiences perceive a brand’s communication as credible and trustworthy, rather than merely attention-grabbing.

To operationalize the outcome construct of this study, this paper further reviews and synthesizes prior conceptualizations of brand trust in order to derive a working definition for the present context. The discussion begins with brand trust, discusses the constructs that have been conceptualized in prior research, and synthesizes these perspectives into a working definition. It is worth noting that brand trust is a concept that is considered difficult to define consistently, and prior work indicates a lack of widely accepted measures (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001).

Table 4 presents key definitions of brand trust from the literature and identifies their conceptual focus to support the development of a working definition for this study.

Table 4

*Conceptualisations of brand trust across key studies*

Source	Definition	Conceptual focus
Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001)	“... we define brand trust as the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function.” (p. 82)	Trust as consumer willingness to rely on the brand’s functional ability and performance.
Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán (2001)	“... a feeling of security held by the consumer that the brand will meet his/her consumption expectations” (p. 1242)	Trust as perceived security and expectation fulfilment in consumption.
Anderson & Narus (1990)	“the firm's belief that another company will perform actions that will result in positive outcomes for the firm as well as not take unexpected actions that result in negative outcomes.” (p. 45)	Trust as belief in reliable partner behaviour and non-opportunism, expressed as delivering positive outcomes and avoiding unexpected harmful actions (supports the general trust conception within brands)
Panyekar & Marsasi (2024)	Brand trust is defined as any form of words or actions that consumers believe in a brand. (p. 74)	Trust as consumer belief in the credibility of the brand’s words and actions.

*Source:* Compiled by the author based on the sources presented in the table

Taken together, the four definitions imply that brand trust is not a single idea but a convergence of two evaluation logics. One logic is competence-based reliance: trust depends on whether the brand is perceived as able to deliver its stated function (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) and meet consumption expectations (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001). The second logic is integrity-based predictability: trust also reflects whether the brand is expected to behave in ways that do not produce unexpected negative outcomes (Anderson & Narus, 1990) and whether consumers find the brand's words and actions believable (Panyekar & Marsasi, 2024). Conceptually, this means that trust is formed not only from product performance, but also from the perceived credibility and consistency of the brand's behaviour and communication.

These conceptual emphases are synthesised into a working definition: in this paper, brand trust is defined as a consumer's feeling of security and willingness to rely on a brand to deliver as promised, grounded in perceived competence and in confidence that the brand's words and actions are credible, consistent, non-deceptive and not harmful.

## **1.2 Mechanisms linking Chaotic Brand Voice to brand trust on social media**

This subchapter explains the mechanisms through which CBV, compared to standard Conversational Human Voice (CHV), is likely to shape consumer brand trust. Because CBV represents a deliberate escalation of linguistic and stylistic norm deviation beyond what CHV already involves, the question is not simply whether informal voice affects trust, but what happens when that informality is intensified in specific ways, specifically through implied persona, linguistic deviation, and humour.

On social media, brand voice functions as more than a stylistic choice, it also operates as a set of cues that audiences interpret to assess the brand's intent, credibility, and coherence. According to Barcelos et al. (2018), brands are often personified in these contexts, and the tone they adopt is typically read as a reflection of character or authenticity. As they explain, "communication style plays a central role in reducing uncertainty during brand encounters, influencing whether the brand is seen as trustworthy" (p. 62). This process of interpreting tone and stylistic cues becomes especially important on platforms like TikTok, where younger users are highly attentive to signs of inauthenticity, and if a brand's behaviour appears insincere, inconsistent, or overly rehearsed, trust can decline rapidly (Pettersson & Nilsen, 2025, p. 7). The effects of CBV, therefore, do not stem from the stylistic elements

themselves, but from how these elements are interpreted within specific platform and audience contexts.

CBV cues can work when they reduce perceived distance between the brand and the audience without undermining credibility. One mechanism is linguistic convergence, where adapting language style toward the platform and audience norms can make the brand appear socially attuned rather than distant (Deng et al., 2021).

A second mechanism concerns source credibility. Credibility is treated as an audience judgement that depends on perceived characteristics of the communicator, including trustworthiness, competence, and goodwill, and these impressions can be shaped by how the message is delivered (Pettersson & Nilsen, 2025). In CBV terms, linguistic deviation and persona cues are therefore more likely to support trust when they are interpreted as socially competent and coherent with the brand, rather than as a forced performance of informality. Perceived inappropriateness in language can lead audiences to suspect strategic manipulation, which undermines perceived sincerity and reduces brand trust (Sundar & Cao, 2020).

CBV often relies on interpersonal language, the brand writes “as a person” rather than as a corporation. When a brand uses informal expressions, personal pronouns, emojis, or other conversational markers, the message can feel closer to an everyday interaction, which supports the impression of a coherent persona. At the same time, the same markers can trigger competence-related scepticism if they look excessive or misplaced. Evidence from social media brand posts suggests that consumers expect a conversational style, but “excessive language informality might hurt their perception of brand competence,” implying that brands need an “optimal level” rather than maximum informality (Deng et al., 2021, p. 10).

Critically, interpersonal language also influences perceived trustworthiness through the relational signal it sends. When a brand uses familiar language without having established that level of familiarity, audiences may perceive this as overstepping, which lowers trust because it violates expected social distance norms (Gretry et al., 2017, p. 84). This is directly relevant since CBV pushes past the informality of standard CHV, the risk of being perceived as overfamiliar or socially inappropriate is potentially higher, particularly with an unfamiliar brand.

The psychological mechanism that explains this effect is perceived appropriateness. Gretry et al. (2017) demonstrated experimentally that perceived appropriateness fully mediates the relationship between informal communication style and brand trust. Whether

CBV's escalated norm deviation amplifies this negative effect, or whether its humour component generates a sufficiently benign appraisal to offset it, is precisely what this study examines.

Linguistic deviation works similarly. Internet-native spelling, exaggerated punctuation, slang, emojis, and hashtag bundles can signal emotional stance and “platform nativeness,” which may support trust judgments because the content looks less scripted and more like ordinary user speech. This effect is especially strong when the language invites interpretation or shows creative effort, such as through wordplay, metaphors, or subtle references, because these forms imply a clear point of view and communicative intent (Waleed et al., 2024).

However, this effect is conditional. When deviation appears out of place, shallow, or imitative of internet trends without genuine cultural fluency, it can suggest strategic mimicry rather than an organic voice, which weakens perceived credibility (Sundar & Cao, 2020). For CBV specifically, the distinction matters: creative deviation that signals originality and cultural alignment is more likely to support trust, while deviation that increases processing difficulty or appears forced is more likely to undermine it (Deng et al., 2021; Waleed et al., 2024).

The humour component of CBV operates through a separate but related mechanism grounded in benign violation theory. According to this framework, “humor occurs when a stimulus is evaluated as containing a violation, and also the violation is evaluated as benign” (Ning et al., 2022, p. 2). When this dual condition is met, humour can produce positive affect and increase consumer engagement. When it is not, the same violation is experienced as offensive or threatening, generating negative affect that reduces brand evaluations.

This distinction between benign and genuinely disparaging humour is documented in practice in Dynel's (2020) corpus-based analysis of Wendy's Twitter communication, which shows that the brand's humorous posts range from roasting and witty retorts that remain within a playful frame, to jibes that cross into genuine aggression toward competitors, with the former generating engagement and the latter carrying reputational risk.

A further mechanism worth noting is interpretation effort. Unlike straightforward conversational language, irony and sarcasm require audiences to infer that the intended meaning differs from the literal meaning, which depends on context cues such as platform norms, prior brand knowledge, and the communicative setting. Nonliteral cues can increase involvement because they require interpretive work, and sarcastic content has been discussed

as a way of "capturing their attention and involving them in the thought processing of the advertisement" (Danielyan, 2022, p. 73). However, sarcasm is "notoriously difficult to detect in text" (Deng et al., 2021, p. 10), and as Danielyan (2022, p. 74) notes, "not in all cases sarcasm and irony can be absolutely recognizable to consumers." For CBV, this means that outcomes depend less on whether humour is present and more on whether the platform context supplies enough shared meaning for the intended stance to be reconstructed.

Even when audiences do find a humour attempt amusing, humour can still generate negative emotional reactions that damage brand evaluations. Warren and McGraw (2016) make this point directly: "being funny is not enough" (p. 40), because humour "can backfire and hurt the brand" when it "can elicit negative feelings, and thereby decrease consumers' attitudes towards the brand" (Warren & McGraw, 2016, p. 40). This risk increases when humour relies on stronger norm violations, targets specific people or groups, or produces aversive affect alongside amusement.

In CBV practice, irony and teasing often operate as deliberate norm violations, and excessive violations stop being amusing when appraised as too far. As Ning et al. (2022, p. 4) show, "excessive violations of the norm, however, offend or threaten the perceiver and inhibit the experience of humor." This means CBV succeeds on the trust dimension when its humour is interpreted as acceptable play, and fails when it is interpreted as a threat or provocation.

Moving further, meme-based expression adds a further constraint specific to cultural competence. Meme formats carry implied meanings and community norms, meaning the brand can appear authentic when it demonstrates fluency and performative when it misuses the format. Malodia et al. (2022) argue that effective meme use requires active curation aligned to the brand persona rather than direct copying of trends. Memes are not only "jokes," they are shared references with implied meanings and community norms, so the brand can look authentic and thus trustworthy when it demonstrates fluency, and look performative when it misuses the format. In a review of meme marketing pitfalls, it is stated that "Meme efforts often backfire, hurting the company's reputation and making the brand seem out of touch with its audience" (Rathi & Jain, 2023, p. 58). For CBV, meme-based elements are therefore a risk vector rather than a guaranteed benefit, and their effectiveness depends entirely on whether audiences read them as culturally fluent or as opportunistic imitation.

The mechanisms described above are also context-sensitive. Barcelos et al. (2018) demonstrated experimentally that a human rather than corporate tone increased engagement

only under low-risk, hedonic conditions, with the effect reversing when consumers were highly involved or when visible negativity was present. This suggests that the tolerance for norm-defying communication is highest in low-involvement hedonic contexts, where competence-related scepticism is less likely to override the relational signals that CBV sends.

These context-sensitive effects point to four boundary conditions that shape how CBV is decoded: audience goals and involvement, industry-specific credibility demands, the surrounding social proof environment, and authorship expectations, that is, whether the brand's voice is perceived as genuinely organic or strategically constructed. The last condition is particularly relevant in contemporary social media contexts: when audiences suspect a human voice is simulated, the same stylistic cues can be reinterpreted as manipulative, reducing brand trust (Brüns & Meißner, 2024). This suspicion also translates into lower trust when artificial intelligence disclosure labels appear in service-related advertising, even when the content is otherwise identical (Grigsby et al., 2025). Stoenescu (2018) argues more broadly that the success of nontraditional campaigns hinges on product type, industry expectations, and audience literacy, and those same factors determine whether CBV cues are interpreted as fresh and credible or as dissonant and off-putting. The key question is therefore not simply whether context matters, but how credibility, expectations, and the audience's interpretive effort jointly produce the perceived meaning of voice.

Concluding this subchapter, the discussion has identified the main mechanisms through which CBV cues are likely to shape brand trust. Audiences interpret linguistic deviation, persona construction, and humour as signals of intent, competence, and social fit rather than as style alone (Barcelos et al., 2018). Trust is more likely to increase when these cues reduce social distance while remaining interpretable and consistent with consumer expectations, and more likely to decrease when they raise ambiguity, trigger appropriateness violations, or produce aversive affect (Gretry et al., 2017; Sundar & Cao, 2020).

Two psychological mechanisms are central to this process in the present study. The first is perceived appropriateness, which captures whether the CBV communication style is seen as fitting given the brand relationship and context (Gretry et al., 2017). The second is benign appraisal, which captures whether the humour element of CBV is evaluated as acceptable and non-threatening rather than offensive (Ning et al., 2022). Both are expected to explain how and under what conditions CBV either supports or undermines trust relative to standard CHV.

### **1.3 Analysis of empirical studies on Chaotic Brand Voice and brand trust on social media**

The selected empirical studies form a cohesive foundation, each addressing a distinct and critical component of this paper's research gap. Ning et al. (2022) analyse brand-to-brand teasing as a form of aggressive humour through the lens of benign violation theory, showing how boundary-pushing communication can still be perceived positively. Barcelos et al. (2018) test how human versus corporate voice affects consumer responses across four experiments, showing that voice effects are context-dependent and can reverse under high involvement or utilitarian goals. Waleed et al. (2024) focus on linguistic deviation and wordplay, demonstrating how creative language strengthens perceived credibility and emotional connection, while clichés and jargon undermine it. Deng et al. (2021) extend this logic by showing that linguistic style cues in brand social media posts predict engagement outcomes in a non-uniform way, which supports treating platform-native style as a constrained lever rather than an automatic benefit. Gretry et al. (2017) provide a direct trust test of informal brand communication and show that the direction of the trust effect depends on relationship conditions (brand familiarity) and perceived appropriateness.

As the introduction establishes, the Chaotic Brand Voice (CBV) is an emergent strategic trend, and no single peer-reviewed study yet exists to test the phenomenon as a whole. Therefore, the following studies have been selected to form a cohesive part of the foundation. They provide:

1. A multi-experiment test of how voice style affects consumer responses across hedonic and utilitarian contexts, establishing that human voice effects are conditional rather than uniform,
2. A micro-level linguistic analysis of the creative language that builds credibility,
3. A micro-level psychological analysis of the “aggressive humour” that defines the CBV’s “unhinged” tone,
4. A large-scale test of how post-level linguistic cues predict engagement (supporting a constraint logic for CBV styling), and
5. A causal test showing that informal brand voice can either strengthen or weaken trust depending on perceived appropriateness and brand familiarity.

Table 5 provides a comprehensive summary of these studies and their specific contributions to building the CBV framework.

Table 5

*CBV-related aspects of the selected empirical studies*

Dimension	Ning et al. (2022)	Barcelos et al. (2018)	Waleed et al. (2024)	Deng et al. (2021)	Gretry et al. (2017)
Study context	China; mobile-phone brands' humorous dialogues on Sina Weibo (experiment)	Facebook; fictitious brands; 4 between-subjects experiments; human vs. corporate voice	Cross-sector ads & social media; 300 ads + 500-consumer survey	Facebook; 15,396 posts from 104 brands across 18 industries (field data; multilevel modelling)	Social media brand communication; three experiments (informal vs. formal style × brand familiarity)
CBV aspect examined	Aggressive vs low-aggressive teasing humour in brand-to-brand banter	Human vs. corporate voice across hedonic/utilitarian and low/high involvement contexts	Linguistic deviation: metaphors, puns, idioms, cultural allusions; jargon/clichés	Linguistic styles in brand posts: emotionality, complexity, informality	Informal "human" social media voice vs more formal corporate voice
Psychological mechanism	Benign violation appraisal: humour vs perceived negativity of attack	Hedonic value and perceived risk mediate voice effects on purchase intentions	Creative deviations boost perceived credibility and emotional connection; clichés/jargon lower sincerity and clarity	Style cues operate through processing/interpretation constraints; cue effects differ by engagement type	Appropriateness mediates voice → attitude; familiarity conditions appropriateness judgements
CBV-relevant outcomes	Consumer engagement behavioural intention; interest in initiating brand connection; brand loyalty	Purchase intentions; hedonic value of online experience	Perceived credibility, emotional connection, empathic response	Likes/shares/comments vary systematically with linguistic cues; some cues predict backfire	Brand trust increases for familiar brands but decreases for unfamiliar brands under informal voice
Implication for chaotic brand voice	CBV-style teasing boosts engagement only when humorous, low-	Human voice backfires under high involvement; CBV's escalation carries even	CBV's playful language builds credibility and emotional connection when creative,	Cross-industry evidence that informality and complexity can suppress engagement, so "more chaotic"	CBV informality needs relational "permission" (familiarity); otherwise it reads as inappropriate

aggressive, and on-brand	greater contextual risk	while clichés/jargon backfire	is not linear benefit
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*Source:* Compiled by the author based on the sources presented in the table.

As the table illustrates, each study provides a unique and necessary component for understanding CBV. A cross-analysis of these five studies reveals an integrated framework in which the business impact established by one study is operationally specified and empirically constrained by the others. First, Barcelos et al. (2018) establish that human voice is not a uniformly positive lever: across four experiments, its effect on purchase intentions is positive under hedonic, low-involvement conditions but reverses under utilitarian goals or high situational involvement, mediated by hedonic value and perceived risk respectively. This contribution is foundational for CBV research because it reframes the question from whether informal voice works to when and why it works or backfires. However, Barcelos et al.'s framework leaves a micro-level gap: it identifies the contextual conditions that shape voice effects but does not specify which linguistic features within a human voice activate credibility or erode it. This gap is filled by Waleed et al. (2024), who show that perceived credibility in brand communication is partly constructed through specific linguistic choices. In CBV terms, Waleed et al. clarify that the credibility pathway identified in Barcelos et al.'s framework is likely strengthened when brands use creative deviations such as wordplay and metaphorical framing, and weakened when language signals low effort or insincerity through clichés and jargon. Thus, Waleed et al. specify a content-level mechanism that operationalises what makes voice credible within the conditional framework that Barcelos et al. established.

Second, the linguistic distinction identified by Waleed et al. (2024) aligns closely with a psychological distinction that is central to CBV: the difference between a norm violation that is perceived as acceptable versus one that is perceived as threatening. Ning et al. (2022) provide this psychological layer by demonstrating that aggressive humour can increase positive consumer responses when it stays within a benign range. Their findings suggest that low-aggressive teasing is more likely than high-aggressive teasing to elicit favourable engagement intentions because audiences appraise the violation as humorous rather than harmful (Ning et al., 2022). When interpreted through CBV, this creates a parallel “safe zone” logic across the two papers: Waleed et al. differentiate constructive deviation from “lazy” or credibility-reducing language, while Ning et al. differentiate boundary-pushing humour that remains benign from humour that crosses into perceived hostility. Importantly,

both distinctions imply the same practical constraint: CBV is not defined by deviation alone, but by deviation that remains interpretable, socially acceptable, and consistent with brand expectations (Ning et al., 2022; Waleed et al., 2024).

Third, Deng et al. (2021) strengthen this constraint logic by showing, at scale, that style cues in brand posts do not produce uniform benefits across engagement outcomes. Their evidence that linguistic features predict likes, shares, and comments differently supports treating CBV markers as conditional levers rather than universally positive signals (Deng et al., 2021). This matters for the CBV research gap because much of the popular discussion of chaotic voice assumes that “more internet-native” automatically means “more engaging.” Deng et al.’s cross-industry field evidence makes that assumption empirically risky: some markers associated with informality or stylistic intensity can be neutral or negative depending on the engagement behaviour being predicted (Deng et al., 2021). When combined with Waleed et al. (2024), this suggests a refined interpretation of “creative deviation”: deviation may support credibility when it signals originality and cultural fluency, but it may suppress engagement when it increases processing difficulty, adds noise, or becomes difficult to decode in fast-scrolling contexts (Deng et al., 2021; Waleed et al., 2024). In other words, CBV can be attention-grabbing without being trust-building, and it can be stylistically novel without being behaviourally effective.

Fourth, Gretry et al. (2017) add a further boundary condition that connects directly to trust and helps explain why CBV can backfire even when it appears humorous or platform-native. Their experiments show that an informal communication style can increase brand trust for familiar brands but decrease trust for unfamiliar brands, with perceived appropriateness explaining this interaction pattern (Gretry et al., 2017). This contribution is particularly important for integrating the other studies into a single CBV interpretation: it provides an explicit relational “permission” mechanism. In CBV terms, informality, teasing, or meme-like language does not only communicate personality; it also signals social distance. If the brand has not established a relationship that supports this reduced distance, the same cues may be interpreted as overfamiliar or strategically manufactured, lowering trust (Gretry et al., 2017). This appropriateness mechanism also complements Ning et al. (2022), because humour that is theoretically “benign” can still be perceived as inappropriate when it violates expectations about how a brand should speak, particularly when relational cues do not support that tone. In this way, Gretry et al. explain why CBV outcomes depend not only on what is said, but on whether the brand has credibly “earned” the right to speak that way.

A critical nuance emerges when contrasting the contexts and implied risk profiles of these studies. Barcelos et al. (2018) provide the clearest contextual contrast: their experiments show that human voice effects are strongest in hedonic, low-involvement conditions and weakest or reversed in utilitarian or high-involvement ones, which implies that CBV, as an escalation of human voice, carries even greater contextual risk when deployed outside these favourable conditions. Additionally, Ning et al. (2022) indicate that tolerance for aggressive humour depends on brand personality, suggesting that brands positioned as exciting may face lower penalties when pushing boundaries than brands positioned as sincere. When combined with Gretry et al. (2017), this implies a layered boundary condition for CBV: high-trust or credibility-demanding contexts, unfamiliar brands, and “sincere” brand positioning jointly narrow the acceptable range of informality and norm violation, because appropriateness and benign appraisal become harder to maintain. Deng et al. (2021) further indicates that even when a style cue is attention-grabbing, it may not translate into deeper engagement behaviours, making it insufficient to treat “chaotic” styling as a reliable growth lever across brands and contexts.

Taken together, these five studies provide a multi-layered framework for operationalising and evaluating CBV without treating it as a single uniform tactic. The synthesis supports conceptualising CBV as a specific voice configuration whose effects on consumer responses are conditional rather than directional, where the same stylistic choices can increase or reduce trust depending on context, involvement, and relational conditions (Barcelos et al., 2018). Within that configuration, creative linguistic deviation can support credibility and emotional connection when it signals originality and cultural fluency, but it can undermine these outcomes when it signals low effort or reduced clarity (Waleed et al., 2024). Boundary-pushing humour can support engagement when it remains within a benign range and fits brand positioning, but it can become harmful when it is perceived as overly aggressive or misaligned with consumer expectations (Ning et al., 2022). At the same time, large-scale evidence shows that linguistic cues operate under constraints and can shift different engagement behaviours in different directions, meaning that “more chaotic” is not a linear benefit (Deng et al., 2021). Finally, informal voice itself is not inherently trust-building: its effect depends on relational conditions and perceived appropriateness, which determines whether reduced social distance feels natural or intrusive (Gretry et al., 2017). These integrated insights directly address the research gap around CBV by specifying not

only why CBV may strengthen credibility and trust, but also the conditions under which the same stylistic markers are likely to produce scepticism or reduced engagement.

The empirical patterns identified across these studies, particularly the mediating roles of perceived appropriateness and benign appraisal, directly inform the experimental design and hypotheses developed in this paper's empirical section.

## **2. Empirical research on the effect of Chaotic Brand Voice on brand trust**

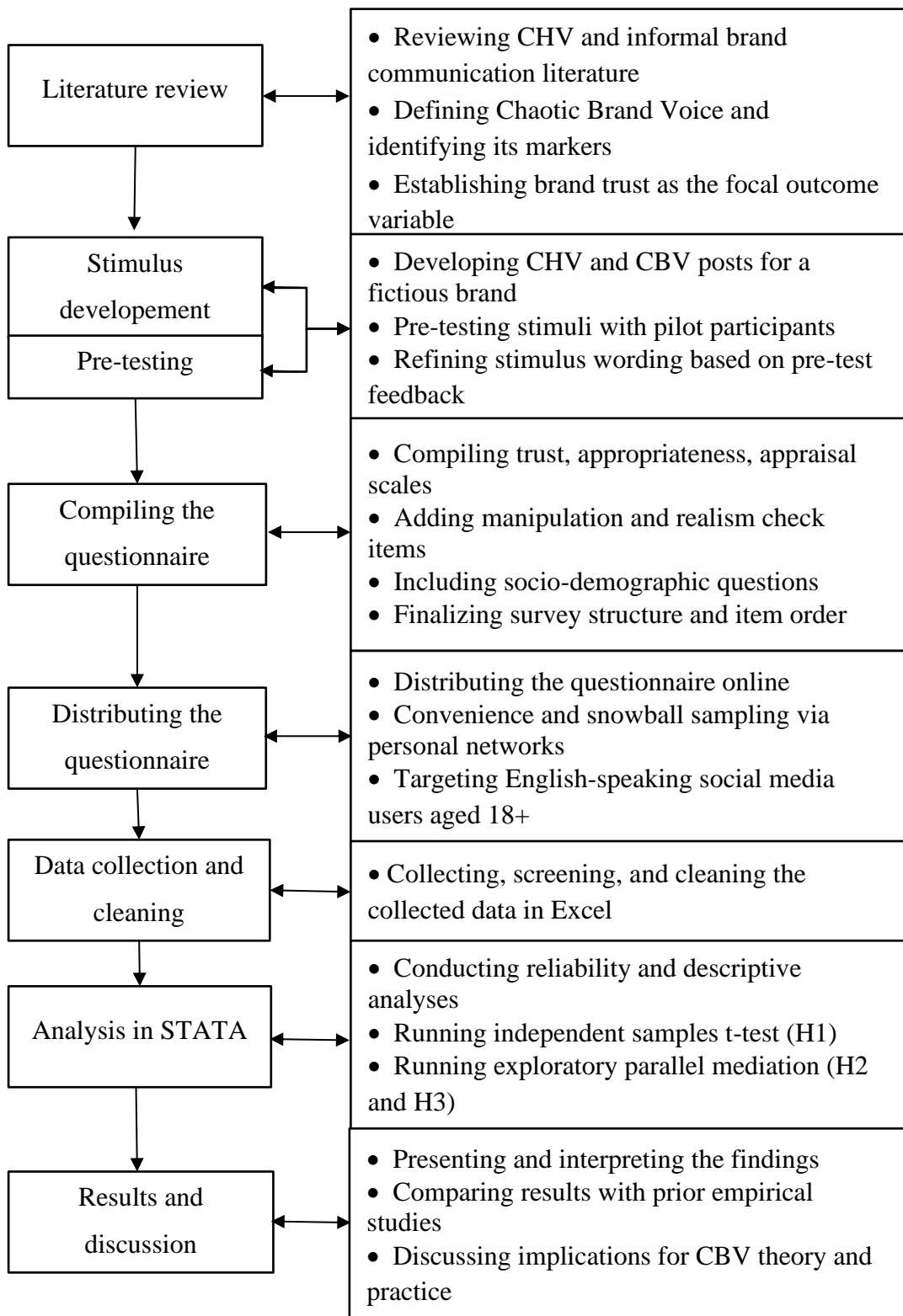
### **2.1 Methodology of the empirical study**

This subchapter describes the methodology used to conduct the empirical part of this thesis. The empirical study aims to test whether CBV, compared to standard CHV, produces a measurable difference in consumer brand trust, and to examine whether perceived appropriateness and benign appraisal explain this relationship.

The methodology follows a sequential process consisting of the following stages: reviewing the existing literature, developing and pre-testing the stimuli, compiling the questionnaire, distributing the questionnaire, collecting and cleaning the data, conducting statistical analysis in Stata, and presenting and interpreting the results. An overview of this process is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1

*Methodology of the empirical research*



Source: Compiled by the author

The study employs a between-subjects experimental design, in which each participant is randomly assigned to one of two conditions and exposed to a single experimental stimulus: either a post written in CHV or a post written in CBV from a fictitious brand. Participants are not aware that an alternative version exists. This design is appropriate because it isolates the effect of voice condition on brand trust without the carryover and contrast effects that a within-subjects design would introduce, where exposure to both conditions in sequence could make differences in tone artificially salient. The between-subjects approach is also consistent with the experimental designs used in the most directly comparable studies in this area (Barcelos et al., 2018; Gretry et al., 2017; Ning et al., 2022), which provides a basis for methodological comparability when interpreting results against prior findings.

The theoretical framework developed in Chapter 1 identified perceived appropriateness and benign appraisal as the two psychological mechanisms most likely to explain how CBV shapes consumer brand trust relative to CHV. Building on this, three hypotheses are proposed for empirical testing.

CBV represents a deliberate escalation of linguistic and stylistic norm deviation beyond the range documented in existing CHV research. Because the fictitious brand used in this study is by definition unfamiliar to all participants, the study replicates the relational conditions under which Gretry et al. (2017) found that informal voice reduces brand trust, with perceived appropriateness explaining this effect. Since CBV pushes past the informality of standard CHV, the same mechanism is expected to apply with greater force in the CBV condition. Accordingly, the first hypothesis is as follows:

*H1: Participants exposed to CBV will report significantly lower brand trust scores than participants exposed to CHV.*

Perceived appropriateness captures whether a communication style is judged as fitting given the brand relationship and context. Gretry et al. (2017) demonstrated experimentally that this variable fully mediates the relationship between informal voice and brand trust, with consumers judging an informal style as inappropriate when the brand is unfamiliar, which in turn reduces trust. Since the present study uses an unfamiliar fictitious brand and CBV escalates informality beyond standard CHV levels, perceived appropriateness is expected to partially explain the trust difference between conditions:

*H2: The effect of voice condition on brand trust will be mediated by perceived appropriateness, such that CBV will be perceived as less appropriate than CHV, which will in turn contribute to lower brand trust.*

Benign appraisal is specific to the humour component of CBV. Drawing on benign violation theory as applied by Ning et al. (2022), humour produces positive consumer responses when the norm violation it involves is appraised as acceptable and non-threatening. When the same violation is appraised as threatening or offensive, consumer evaluations decline. Since the CBV condition includes a humour element absent from the CHV condition, benign appraisal is expected to capture whether that element is interpreted positively or negatively, and to explain part of its effect on trust:

*H3: The effect of voice condition on brand trust will be mediated by benign appraisal, such that lower benign appraisal of the CBV humour element will contribute to reduced brand trust relative to CHV.*

Both experimental conditions use the same fictitious cafe brand, Velvet Café, and are built around the same seasonal occasion and product reference. The only variable that differs between conditions is how the post is written. This section explains the rationale behind each design decision, followed by a description of the two stimulus posts and the specific markers used to construct them.

The product category was selected on the basis of three criteria derived from the existing literature. First, the brand must be fictitious, which eliminates the influence of prior brand attitudes and familiarity effects that would otherwise confound any observed trust differences, a requirement established in comparable experimental studies (Gretry et al., 2017; Ning et al., 2022). Second, the category must be hedonic and low-involvement, because Barcelos et al. (2018) demonstrated across four experiments that human voice effects on consumer responses are strongest under these conditions and can reverse when involvement is high or the category is utilitarian. Since CBV is theorised as an extension of human voice, the most favourable conditions for detecting an effect are those where human voice itself is most likely to work, making a hedonic low-involvement category the appropriate choice. Third, informal and personality-driven brand communication must be contextually plausible in the selected category, meaning participants should find it believable rather than jarring that a brand in this space communicates in a casual or even unconventional way.

The café and specialty beverage category satisfies all three criteria. It is straightforward to fictionalise, it qualifies as hedonic on the grounds that consumption is driven primarily by sensory pleasure and aesthetic experience rather than instrumental need (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000), and casual personality-driven brand communication is already

widely documented in this space. Matcha-based beverages in particular represent a trending product format as of 2026, meaning participants are likely to find a social media post promoting such a drink immediately familiar and contextually believable, which strengthens the ecological validity of the manipulation.

Using this category therefore allows the CBV condition to draw on communicative norms that are recognisable to participants without requiring them to accept something entirely novel.

Velvet Café was chosen as the fictitious brand name. The name is short, plausible as a modern fast casual brand, and carries no existing brand associations that could introduce prior attitudes, which matters because semantically meaningful brand names have been shown to generate expectations strong enough to shape brand evaluation even in the presence of contradictory factual information (Wänke et al., 2007). The brand is presented as a café offering specialty matcha drinks, a product format that is both immediately recognisable and cognitively accessible, ensuring participants direct interpretive effort toward how the brand communicates rather than what it sells.

Valentine's Day was selected as the occasion for the post for two reasons. First, seasonal occasions represent periods of naturally heightened consumer engagement with brand communication, making them appropriate contexts for experimental stimuli that require participants to find a brand post believable and situationally relevant (Batraga et al., 2018). Second, Valentine's Day provides an emotionally resonant framing around love and being single that creates a plausible setup for both the warm reassuring CHV version and the playful self-aware CBV version, without either feeling forced. Research on Valentine's Day consumer behaviour confirms that this holiday is associated with emotional extremes, and for some consumers it can be "a source of obligation, self-loathing, and/or disgust for various segments of the population" (Close & Zinkhan, 2006, p. 1), making it a suitable occasion for stimuli designed to work plausibly for both a warm, reassuring tone and a self-aware, playful one. The post references a limited Valentine's Day menu item, which holds the product reference constant across both conditions.

The use of a limited edition menu item further strengthens the ecological validity of the stimulus, as limited edition campaigns represent a widely studied and commonly practiced marketing strategy across multiple product categories (Shi et al., 2020), making them a familiar and believable framing for brand social media content.

Both posts are presented in a format imitating a standard Instagram brand post, including the same product image held constant across conditions. Instagram was selected as the reference platform because its interface is broadly familiar to the target population of social media users aged 18 and older, and because it is an image-first platform, meaning that a food photograph accompanying a short brand caption represents one of the most ecologically valid and immediately recognisable formats of brand social media content. Consistent with the stimulus construction approach used in prior experimental studies in this area, no comment section is included (Barcelos et al., 2018; Gretry et al., 2017). Including brand replies or consumer comments below the post would introduce additional variables that are outside the scope of this study and could shift participant attention away from the brand's voice.

The CHV post reads as follows:

*"Happy Valentine's Day from Velvet Café! 🍷💕*

*Whether you're celebrating with someone you love 💕 or treating yourself 🍷, we think you deserve a special treat, this year introducing our new limited Love Edition Matcha. Hurry up to grab yours while it's still available!*

*P.S. We promise you no ghosting on Valentine's from our side 😊"*

The CBV post reads as follows:

*"jeez, another situationship ghosted you just before Valentine's? 🍷💕 ... yk, our new limited love edition matcha would have never done that to you...shhh..say no more.. just grab your bro and get it while it's there, waiting for you..and ONLY YOU 🍷😏*

*(unlike that ex of yours.. 🍷💕)"*

Both posts are accompanied by the same product image of a Velvet Café matcha drink, held constant across conditions. The image was sourced online and selected to be visually neutral and consistent with the aesthetic conventions of specialty café content on social media. The Velvet Café logo was designed by the author and photo-edited to the image using artificial intelligence tools to produce a realistic brand visual. The CHV post was constructed by drawing on the linguistic taxonomy developed by Liebrecht et al. (2021) and the informal style operationalisation used by Gretry et al. (2017), covering three categories of Conversational Human Voice (CHV) elements: message personalisation, informal speech,

and invitational rhetoric. In terms of message personalisation, the opening line functions as a personal greeting, while first and second-person pronouns are used consistently throughout to address both brand and consumer as individuals rather than faceless entities. In terms of informal speech, contractions and informal vocabulary are present throughout, and the closing call to action reflects the preference for active, common verbs over formal alternatives. Four emoji are included as visual paralinguistic elements at a density consistent with standard informal brand communication. In terms of invitational rhetoric, the line acknowledging both romantic and solo celebrations functions as an expression of empathy recognising different consumer situations.

The CBV post was constructed by drawing on the six-marker framework developed in Chapter 1 (Table 3). Each marker is present in the stimulus: implied authorship and personified voice, platform-native informal stylisation, exaggerated paralinguistic features, linguistic deviation and creative lexis, humour repertoire, and meme-based format adaptation. The specific linguistic and stylistic evidence for each marker across both conditions is presented in Tables 6 and 7 below.

Table 6

*Comparison of linguistic features across CHV stimulus post*


CBV and CHV markers	Level	Evidence from post
Personal greeting	+	"Happy Valentine's Day from Velvet Café!"
First and second-person pronouns	+	"we think you deserve", "grab yours"
Contractions	+	"you're celebrating", "it's still available"
Informal vocabulary and active verbs	+	"special treat", "grab yours", "Hurry up"
Visual elements (emoji)	+	👉❤️💕🙌😊 moderate density, tone-softening
Empathy and invitational rhetoric	+	"Whether you're celebrating with someone you love or treating yourself"
Implied authorship and personified voice	-	Collective brand voice, no individual persona
Platform-native informal stylisation	-	Standard capitalisation and punctuation
Exaggerated paralinguistic features	+/-	Emoji at standard density only
Linguistic deviation and creative lexis	-	"ghosting" appears once in the P.S. line as an isolated culturally native term; not systematic deviation
Humour repertoire	+	P.S. line introduces mild self-aware humour
Meme-based format adaptation	-	No meme format or cultural reference

Note: “ + „ indicates that a feature is present; “ - „ indicates that a feature is absent, „+/-“ indicates that a feature is partially present.

Sources: Compiled by the author based on Liebrecht et al. (2021); Gretry et al. (2017); Barber (2023); Waleed et al. (2024); Ning et al. (2022); Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015); Malodia et al. (2022); Campbell and Marks (2015), and stimulus posts created for this study.

Table 7

*Comparison of linguistic features across CBV stimulus post*

CBV and CHV markers	Level	Evidence from post
Personal greeting	-	No greeting; opens mid-thought with "jeez"
First and second-person pronouns	+	"waiting for you", "ONLY YOU", "your bro", "that ex of yours"
Contractions	-	No contractions; informality achieved through other means
Informal vocabulary and active verbs	++	"jeez", "yk", "shhh", "bro", "ghosted", "situationship"
Visual elements (emoji)	++	 amplified density; used as dramatic punctuation and direct reader address
Empathy and invitational rhetoric	-	No empathy expression or dialogue invitation
Implied authorship and personified voice	+	Reads as an individual speaker, not a corporate brand
Platform-native informal stylisation	+	Entirely lowercase except "ONLY YOU"; trailing ".." as stylistic signal
Exaggerated paralinguistic features	+	Full caps "ONLY YOU"; five emoji at amplified density
Linguistic deviation and creative lexis	+	"situationship", "ghosted", "yk" signal cultural fluency
Humour repertoire	+	Matcha positioned as more loyal than a romantic partner; low-aggressive register
Meme-based format adaptation	+	"Loyal product vs. ex" is a recognisable internet joke format; dating vocabulary requires cultural literacy

Note: “ + „ indicates that a feature is present; “ - „ indicates that a feature is absent and „++“ indicates that a feature is present and intensified.

Sources: Compiled by the author bases on Liebrecht et al. (2021); Gretry et al. (2017); Barber (2023); Waleed et al. (2024); Ning et al. (2022); Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015); Malodia et al. (2022); Campbell and Marks (2015), and stimulus posts created for this study.

Prior to distributing the main survey, a pilot test was conducted with 15 participants who were not included in the final sample. The pilot served two purposes: to verify that participants perceived the Chaotic Brand Voice (CBV) post as meaningfully more informal and unconventional than the Conversational Human Voice (CHV) post, and to confirm that both posts were perceived as realistic and plausible as brand social media content. Pilot participants rated both posts on the manipulation check and realism check items described below. Based on their feedback, the stimulus format was changed from Instagram to Threads, as pilot participants indicated that the image-first layout of Instagram drew attention toward the visual before the text, undermining the primacy of the voice manipulation. Minor wording adjustments were also made to several survey items to improve clarity, while the construct meaning and response format of each item remained unchanged.

All items in the survey use seven-point Likert scales anchored at 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree, which is consistent with the scaling used across all source studies from which the scales are drawn. The survey was divided into the following sequential sections: socio-demographic questions, stimulus exposure, manipulation check, main measures consisting of brand trust, perceived appropriateness, and benign appraisal, and realism check. The order of these sections was deliberate and is explained in the discussion of each measure below. A summary of all measures, their sources, number of items, and reported reliability from source studies is presented in Table 8.

Brand trust is the dependent variable of the study. It was measured using the three-item scale originally developed by Morgan and Hunt (1994) and subsequently used by Gretry et al. (2017) across three experiments, where it demonstrated strong internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.89 to 0.95. The three items are: "I feel that I can trust this brand," "I feel that this brand can be counted on," and "This brand appears reliable." This scale was selected because it was validated in a social media brand communication experiment that is directly comparable in structure to the present study, making it both contextually appropriate and empirically established.

Perceived appropriateness is the first mediating variable. It captures whether participants judged the brand's communication style as fitting given the context and their expectations of how a brand should communicate. The three-item scale was adapted from Gretry et al. (2017), where it showed strong reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93. The items are: "This is how I would expect a brand to communicate on social media," "This communication style fits the way I expect brands to talk to consumers," and "This

communication style is appropriate." The choice of this scale is directly motivated by the theoretical role it plays in the present study: Gretry et al. (2017) demonstrated that perceived appropriateness fully mediates the effect of informal voice on brand trust, which is precisely the mechanism hypothesised in H2.

Benign appraisal is the second mediating variable and captures whether the post was evaluated as acceptable and non-threatening rather than offensive or harmful. The four-item scale was adapted from Ning et al. (2022), where it showed reliable internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.884. The items are: "I think this post is acceptable," "The humour in this post feels harmless," "This post comes across as playful rather than offensive," and "I felt comfortable reading this post." These items were adapted to more naturally reflect the benign appraisal dimension in the context of a social media brand post, while remaining grounded in the original scale's theoretical logic. This scale is included because the CBV condition incorporates humour as a structurally central element, whereas the CHV condition uses it only minimally in a single closing line, meaning the direction of the trust effect may depend in part on whether the humour in each post was appraised as a benign norm violation or as something threatening or inappropriate.

The manipulation check was placed immediately after stimulus exposure and before the main outcome measures. Its purpose was purely technical: to confirm that participants in the CBV condition perceived the post as more informal and unconventional than those in the CHV condition. Three items were adapted from Gretry et al. (2017): "This brand communicates in a casual way," "This brand communicates in an easygoing way," and a seven-point semantic differential scale anchored at "Normal" on one end and "Chaotic" on the other. A fourth item was added to capture the unconventionality dimension specific to CBV and not covered by standard informality items: "This communication style is unlike what I normally see from brands." This addition was necessary because both conditions use informal language, and the difference between them lies in the degree of norm deviation rather than informality alone, meaning a standard informality check would not have been sufficient to confirm that the manipulation produced a detectable difference between conditions. Placing the manipulation check before the trust and mediator items ensured that participants had actively processed the stimulus without yet being prompted to think analytically about the brand. The full wording of all survey items in their final formulation is provided in Appendix A.

The realism check is placed at the end of the survey, after all main measures have been completed. It consists of two items adapted from Barcelos et al. (2018): "This post seemed like something a real brand would publish on social media," and a seven-point ease-of-imagination scale anchored at 1 = Very difficult and 7 = Very easy, asking how easy it was to imagine encountering this post while scrolling through social media. Placing it at the end ensures that participants answer the trust and mediator items based on their genuine initial response to the stimulus, rather than after being prompted to evaluate the scenario's believability, which could prime a more analytical and skeptical processing mode.

Socio-demographic questions are placed at the beginning of the survey, which follows standard survey practice and ensures participants complete them before engaging with the stimulus material. The questions cover age, gender, and frequency of social media use. Social media usage frequency is included as a descriptive variable because familiarity with platform communication norms may influence how participants decode the CBV post, and it is therefore relevant for contextualising the results.

Table 8

*Summary of measures*

Measure	Role	Source	No. of items	Alpha in source
Brand trust	Dependent variable	Morgan and Hunt (1994); Gretry et al. (2017)	3	0.89 to 0.95
Perceived appropriateness	Mediator 1	Gretry et al. (2017)	3	0.93
Benign appraisal	Mediator 2	Ning et al. (2022)	4	0.884
Manipulation check	Technical check	Adapted from Gretry et al. (2017)	4	n/a
Realism check	Technical check	Adapted from Barcelos et al. (2018)	2	n/a

*Note: All items use seven-point Likert scales anchored at 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree, with the exception of one semantic differential item in the manipulation check anchored at "Normal" and "Chaotic".*

Source: Compiled by the author based on the sources presented in the table

The study targets English-speaking adults aged 18 and older who are active social media users. No restrictions are placed on nationality, educational background, or occupation. Social media usage is included as a criterion because the stimulus is presented as a brand social media post, and participants who have no experience with social media platforms would lack the contextual familiarity needed to evaluate the post in a meaningful way. No

restriction is placed on prior familiarity with fast food brands because the brand used in the study is fictitious and participants have no basis for prior brand attitudes.

The survey was distributed online using a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling, which is appropriate given the time and resource constraints and consistent with the distribution methods used in comparable experimental studies at this level. The questionnaire was compiled via Google Forms. The author initially shared the survey link through personal academic and social networks, and participants were encouraged to pass it on to others who met the eligibility criteria. This approach aimed to reach a sufficiently diverse sample in terms of age and social media experience while remaining feasible within the available timeframe.

The target sample size was set at between 100 and 150 participants in total, with participants approximately equally distributed across the two conditions through random assignment embedded in the survey structure. This range was informed by the sample sizes reported in the most structurally comparable experimental studies: Gretry et al. (2017) used between 64 and 152 participants across their three experiments, and Barcelos et al. (2018) used comparable sample sizes across four between-subjects experiments. A minimum of 100 respondents was considered sufficient for an independent samples t-test and an exploratory mediation analysis at the bachelor's level, provided the pre-test had confirmed that the manipulation was strong enough to produce a detectable difference between conditions. The final sample characteristics, including age distribution, gender, and social media usage frequency, are reported in Table 9.

Following data collection, the data were cleaned and prepared for analysis. Incomplete responses and cases where the realism check scores fell below an acceptable threshold were reviewed before the final dataset was confirmed.

The reliability of each multi-item scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha as a first step, prior to any substantive analysis. Scales showing insufficient internal consistency would have required item-level review; however, all scales exceeded the accepted threshold, as reported below.

The primary analysis was an independent samples t-test comparing mean brand trust scores between the Chaotic Brand Voice (CBV) condition and the Conversational Human Voice (CHV) condition, which directly tested H1. This approach is consistent with the analytical method used by Gretry et al. (2017) in structurally comparable experiments. Before

running the t-test, the manipulation check results were examined to confirm that the two conditions were perceived as meaningfully different on informality and unconventionality

If the sample size permits, an exploratory parallel mediation analysis will be conducted to test H2 and H3. The two mediators, perceived appropriateness and benign appraisal, will be tested in parallel rather than sequentially, meaning each mediator's indirect effect will be estimated while controlling for the other. This approach follows the analytical logic used by Gretry et al. (2017) and Ning et al. (2022) in comparable studies. Given the modest sample size, the mediation analysis is treated as exploratory rather than confirmatory, and results will be interpreted with appropriate caution. The full analysis will be conducted in Stata.

Table 9

*Sample characteristics*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18 to 24	47	46.1%
	25 to 34	34	33.3%
	35 to 44	14	13.7%
	45 to 54	5	4.9%
	55 or older	2	2.0%
Gender	Female	61	59.8%
	Male	36	35.3%
	Other	1	1.0%
	Prefer not to say	4	3.9%
Social media use	Once a week or less	7	6.9%
	A few times a week	13	12.7%
	Once or twice a day	20	19.6%
	3 to 5 times a day	36	35.3%
	More than 5 times a day	26	25.5%

*Note: N = 102. N = 51 per condition.*

Source: Compiled by the author based on survey data

The survey was distributed online between 12 April and 10 May 2026, collecting a total of 102 valid responses, with 51 participants assigned to each condition. The survey distributions were regulated in a way that each participant would only see 1 condition, and the distribution was stopped after both surveys had the same number of participants and satisfied the required sample size to run all the tests. The sample skewed young, with nearly 80% of participants falling within the 18 to 34 age range, which is consistent with the

convenience and snowball sampling approach used and is also appropriate given that this age group represents the primary audience for social media brand communication. The majority of respondents identified as female (59.8%), and a large proportion reported using social media frequently, with over 60% accessing platforms three or more times per day. This level of social media engagement suggests that participants were sufficiently familiar with brand communication on social platforms to meaningfully evaluate the stimulus posts.

## 2.2 Results and discussion of the empirical study on Chaotic Brand Voice and brand trust in social media marketing

The results are reported in the following order: reliability analysis, manipulation check, realism check, descriptive statistics, and hypothesis testing.

Prior to hypothesis testing, the internal consistency of all multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. As presented in Table 10, all scales exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory to excellent reliability. Brand trust demonstrated the highest internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ), followed by benign appraisal ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ), perceived appropriateness ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ), and the manipulation check items ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ). These values are consistent with or exceed the reliability coefficients reported in the source studies from which the scales were drawn, specifically Gretry et al. (2017) for brand trust and perceived appropriateness, and Ning et al. (2022) for benign appraisal.

Table 10

### *Reliability of measurement scales*

Scale	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Brand trust	3	0.96
Perceived appropriateness	3	0.89
Benign appraisal	4	0.92
Manipulation check	4	0.74

Source: Compiled by the author based on Stata output

Further, the manipulation check was conducted to confirm that participants in the two conditions perceived the stimulus posts as meaningfully different on the dimensions central to the Chaotic Brand Voice (CBV) construct. Four items were tested using independent samples t-tests, and the results are presented in Table 11. The pattern across the four items is not uniform, which in itself reflects the theoretical distinction between informality and chaoticity that underlies the CBV versus Conversational Human Voice (CHV) comparison, and offers some early interpretive insight before the main hypothesis testing.

Table 11

*Manipulation check results by condition*

Item	CHV Mean (Std. Dev.)	CBV Mean (Std. Dev.)	t-value	p-value
Casual	4.82 (0.79)	4.16 (1.01)	3.71	0.000
Easygoing	5.04 (0.72)	4.82 (1.09)	1.18	0.241
Unlike typical brands	2.08 (0.69)	4.45 (1.50)	-10.26	0.000
Normal to Chaotic scale	1.88 (0.43)	5.94 (0.79)	-32.36	0.000

*Note: Seven-point scales. For the Normal to Chaotic item, higher scores indicate more chaotic. N = 51 per condition.*

Source: Compiled by the author based on Stata output

The two items most directly relevant to the CBV construct, namely the Normal-to-Chaotic scale and the unconventionality item, both produced large and highly significant differences between conditions. The CHV post was placed nearly at the normal end of the scale ( $M = 1.88$ ), while the CBV post was placed close to the chaotic end ( $M = 5.94$ ), yielding a t-value of  $-32.36$  ( $p < 0.001$ ). The consistency of responses within each condition, visible in the small standard deviations, suggests that participants had little ambiguity in placing each post along this dimension. This is consistent with both stimuli being grounded in recognizable real-world brand communication patterns (e.g., for CHV stimuli, Starbucks drink posts, and for CBV, Wendy's Valentine's Threads post served as references when constructing the stimuli, as real-life representatives of respective brand voice styles) rather than artificially constructed extremes. The unconventionality item reinforced this picture, producing an equally strong difference between conditions ( $t = -10.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming that the CBV post was widely perceived as departing from expected brand communication norms.

The casualness item also reached significance, though in the direction of CHV being rated as more casual than CBV ( $t = 3.71$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This finding is theoretically informative rather than contradictory. It suggests that participants distinguished between warmth and relaxedness, which characterise the CHV post, and the kind of norm-defying intensity that characterises CBV. The CBV post was not read simply as more informal, it was read as qualitatively different in character, which is precisely the escalation this study sets out to capture. This pattern also carries interpretive weight for the trust findings that follow. Participants were not simply responding to a higher degree of informality in the Chaotic

Brand Voice (CBV) condition; they were responding to a qualitatively different communicative register, one perceived as norm-defying and unconventional rather than merely relaxed. This distinction matters because it suggests that the trust reduction observed in H1 is unlikely to reflect a general informality penalty and is more specifically tied to the perceived deviation from expected brand behaviour. The easygoing item produced no significant difference between conditions ( $p = 0.241$ ), a result that was anticipated given that both stimuli were written to avoid formal corporate voice, meaning a baseline level of informality was held approximately constant across both conditions by design.

Taken together, the manipulation check supports the validity of the experimental manipulation. Participants consistently perceived the CHV post as normal and warm brand communication, and the CBV post as unconventional and chaotic, with the two conditions differing most sharply on the items that directly operationalise the defining characteristics of the CBV construct.

As mentioned earlier, the realism check was included to confirm that participants found the stimulus posts believable as genuine brand social media content. As presented in Table 12, both conditions produced mean realism scores comfortably above the midpoint of the seven-point scale. The CHV condition scored higher on both items, with a mean of 5.74 across the two realism items, compared to 5.07 in the CBV condition. The slightly lower realism score in the CBV condition is not surprising and does not threaten the validity of the study. Given that the CBV post deliberately deviates from conventional brand communication norms, a degree of reduced familiarity is theoretically expected and consistent with the manipulation working as intended. Importantly, no participant scored below 3 on either item, meaning no responses were excluded on grounds of insufficient engagement with the stimulus.

Table 12

*Realism check results by condition*

Item	CHV Mean (Std. Dev.)	CBV Mean (Std. Dev.)
Seemed like a real brand post	5.69 (0.71)	5.16 (1.01)
Easy to imagine while scrolling	5.78 (0.90)	4.98 (1.05)
Overall realism mean	5.74 (0.75)	5.07 (0.92)

*Note: Seven-point scales.  $N = 51$  per condition.*

Source: Compiled by the author based on Stata output

Moving further onto descriptive statistics, Table 13 presents the means and standard deviations for the three main scales by condition. Across all three variables, the CHV condition produced consistently higher scores than the CBV condition. Participants who viewed the CHV post reported higher brand trust (Mean = 4.65, Std. Dev. = 1.43) compared to those who viewed the CBV post (Mean = 3.41, Std. Dev. = 1.38), suggesting that exposure to the chaotic voice style was associated with a meaningful reduction in trust. A similar pattern emerged for perceived appropriateness, where the CHV condition scored notably higher (Mean = 5.14, Std. Dev. = 0.63) than the CBV condition (Mean = 3.80, Std. Dev. = 0.99), indicating that participants found the conventional post considerably more fitting as brand communication. The gap between conditions was somewhat smaller for benign appraisal, with the CHV condition scoring higher (Mean = 5.57, Std. Dev. = 0.57) than the CBV condition (Mean = 4.72, Std. Dev. = 1.12), suggesting that while the CBV post was appraised as less benign overall, the humour element was not perceived as strongly threatening or offensive by the majority of participants. This pattern of results is directionally consistent with all three hypotheses and provides an initial indication that voice condition systematically influenced participant responses across all measured constructs.

One pattern in Table 13 is worth noting before hypothesis testing. The gap between conditions is considerably smaller for benign appraisal (0.85 points) than for perceived appropriateness (1.34 points), and the CBV condition mean for benign appraisal (M = 4.72) sits above the scale midpoint. This indicates that participants did not, on balance, find the CBV post threatening or offensive; they found it inappropriate and untrustworthy. This early pattern suggests that the appropriateness pathway may carry more explanatory weight than the humour pathway in this particular design, a possibility the mediation analysis will directly address.

Table 13

*Descriptive statistics by condition*

Scale	CHV Mean (Std. Dev.)	CBV Mean (Std. Dev.)
Brand trust	4.65 (1.43)	3.41 (1.38)
Perceived appropriateness	5.14 (0.63)	3.80 (0.99)
Benign appraisal	5.57 (0.57)	4.72 (1.12)

*Note: Seven-point scales. N = 51 per condition.*

Source: Compiled by the author based on Stata output

Having confirmed that the manipulation worked as intended and that both stimulus posts were perceived as realistic, the study proceeds to test the three proposed hypotheses.

*H1: Participants exposed to CBV will report significantly lower brand trust scores than participants exposed to CHV.*

To test the first hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted comparing mean brand trust scores between the two conditions. The results supported H1. Participants exposed to the CHV post reported significantly higher brand trust (Mean = 4.65, Std. Dev. = 1.43) than those exposed to the CBV post (Mean = 3.41, Std. Dev. = 1.38), with the difference being statistically significant ( $t = 4.48, p < 0.001$ ). The 95% confidence interval for the difference between means (0.696 to 1.801) does not include zero, providing additional confirmation that the observed gap is unlikely to reflect sampling error. The effect is also substantively meaningful, representing a difference of 1.25 points on a seven-point scale, which corresponds to roughly 18% of the total scale range.

These findings are consistent with the prediction derived from Gretry et al. (2017), who demonstrated that informal brand voice reduces trust for unfamiliar brands through a perceived appropriateness mechanism. The present study extends this logic to an even more extreme form of informal voice and finds that the trust-reducing effect holds and is detectable even within a single-exposure experimental context with a hedonic product category. H1 is therefore supported.

This finding extends the logic of Gretry et al. (2017) in a theoretically meaningful direction. Where Gretry et al. demonstrated that standard informal voice reduces trust for unfamiliar brands, the present study shows that an escalated form of that informality produces the same directional effect, and does so within a hedonic, low-involvement product category, which is precisely the context in which Barcelos et al. (2018) showed human voice to be most effective. The fact that CBV reduced trust even under these favourable conditions suggests that the escalation past standard Conversational Human Voice (CHV) introduces a distinct appropriateness cost that the category context does not absorb. The effect is also substantively meaningful: a difference of 1.25 points on a seven-point scale represents approximately 18% of the total scale range within a single-exposure, zero-familiarity context, which strengthens confidence that the manipulation produced a genuine rather than marginal response.

To test H2 and H3, an exploratory parallel mediation analysis was conducted using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. Perceived appropriateness and benign appraisal were

tested simultaneously as mediators of the relationship between voice condition and brand trust, with each mediator's indirect effect estimated while controlling for the other. The full results are presented in Tables 134a and 14b.

Table 14a

*Mediation analysis results*

Path	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Condition → Perceived appropriateness	-1.35	0.16	-8.23	0.000
Condition → Benign appraisal	-0.85	0.18	-4.83	0.000
Condition → Brand trust (total effect)	-1.25	0.28	-4.48	0.000
Condition → Brand trust (direct effect)	-1.49	0.36	-4.27	0.000
Perceived appropriateness → Brand trust	-0.39	0.25	-1.58	0.117
Benign appraisal → Brand trust	0.27	0.23	1.16	0.248

Table 14b

*Mediation analysis results*

Indirect effect	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Via perceived appropriateness (H2)	0.244	-0.295 to 0.784
Via benign appraisal (H3)	-0.002	-0.285 to 0.282

*Note: N = 102. Bootstrap resamples = 5,000. Condition coded 0 = CHV, 1 = CBV.*

Source: Compiled by the author based on Stata output

Voice condition significantly predicted both mediators. Compared to the CHV condition, exposure to the CBV post was associated with significantly lower perceived appropriateness (coefficient = -1.35,  $p < 0.001$ ) and significantly lower benign appraisal (coefficient = -0.85,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming that participants judged the CBV style as less fitting as brand communication and appraised its humour element as less acceptable. Both effects are consistent with the mechanisms described in Chapter 1.

However, neither mediator emerged as a significant predictor of brand trust within the parallel model. The path from perceived appropriateness to brand trust was non-significant (coefficient = -0.39,  $p = 0.117$ ), as was the path from benign appraisal to brand trust (coefficient = 0.27,  $p = 0.248$ ). Bootstrap confidence intervals for both indirect effects crossed zero, so H2 and H3 are not supported.

Crucially, the pattern is not one of simple non-mediation. The direct effect of voice condition on brand trust after controlling for both mediators (coefficient = -1.49,  $p < 0.001$ ) is larger than the total effect (coefficient = -1.25,  $p < 0.001$ ), which indicates suppression rather than mediation. A plausible interpretation is that benign appraisal, which remained above the

scale midpoint even in the CBV condition, partially buffered the trust reduction; once this buffering is controlled for statistically, the direct negative impact of voice condition on trust becomes more visible. In other words, the relatively acceptable appraisal of the CBV humour was absorbing some of the trust cost, though not enough to offset the direct effect of perceived deviation.

The non-significant indirect effect via perceived appropriateness is better understood as a power limitation than as evidence against the theoretical mechanism. The confidence interval spans from -0.295 to 0.784, a wide range that is consistent with a meaningful true effect that this sample size cannot detect reliably. Gretry et al. (2017) established full mediation via appropriateness across multiple experiments with larger samples and repeated brand exposure; in a single-exposure context with a completely unfamiliar brand, participants may form a holistic trust judgment simultaneously with their appropriateness assessment rather than sequentially, which would structurally reduce the detectable indirect pathway. This is a design-level consideration rather than a theoretical contradiction, and it points to a direction for future research using larger samples and longitudinal designs.

The non-significant benign appraisal pathway carries a different interpretation. The positive sign of the path coefficient (0.27) is directionally consistent with benign violation theory: higher benign appraisal is associated with higher trust, as expected. The issue is insufficient variance in the mediator. Because the CBV humour stayed within a broadly acceptable range, there was not enough spread in benign appraisal scores to produce a detectable indirect effect. This is not evidence that benign appraisal is theoretically irrelevant; it suggests that the humour manipulation in this study was not extreme enough to create the kind of appraisal variation needed to activate the pathway. A CBV condition incorporating higher-aggression humour would provide a more demanding test of this mechanism.

The findings fulfill the stated aim of the thesis. CBV was conceptually defined as a systematic marker-based construct and empirically shown to reduce brand trust significantly relative to CHV, even under hedonic low-involvement conditions most favourable to human voice effects. The primary theoretical contribution is demonstrating that CBV's trust cost in low-familiarity contexts operates more directly than the theoretical model predicted, suggesting that stylistic norm deviation triggers an immediate holistic trust response rather than a stepwise appropriateness judgment. This points to a priority for future research: larger samples, repeated exposure designs, and humour manipulations with greater aggression variance would be better positioned to isolate the mediation pathways proposed here.

Practically, the results carry a clear implication for brand communication strategy. Even when CBV humour is appraised as acceptable, the appropriateness cost persists, meaning playfulness alone does not neutralise the trust reduction. Brands in low-familiarity contexts, including newer brands or those entering new audience segments, should treat CBV as a high-risk strategy regardless of product category. The trust penalty is likely lower for brands with established relational familiarity, but that boundary condition falls outside the scope of this single-exposure design and warrants direct testing in future work.

### **Conclusion**

This paper set out to examine the effects of Chaotic Brand Voice (CBV) on consumer brand trust relative to standard Conversational Human Voice (CHV) in social media, pursuing this aim through a theoretical framework followed by a between-subjects empirical experiment. All four research tasks were addressed, and the overarching aim of the paper was fulfilled.

The first research task was to define CBV as a distinct communication pattern and identify its key markers. This was accomplished in subchapter 1.1, where the paper established that the brand voice literature had until now recognised only a continuum between corporate voice and CHV, leaving what happens beyond that range without a peer-reviewed definition. Drawing on empirical research on informal brand communication, linguistic deviation, and humour in social media marketing, CBV was defined as a systematic configuration of stylistic, paralinguistic, and humour-based markers that intensifies and extends CHV past the boundaries of standard conversational informality into a recognisable and deliberately norm-defying communication persona. Six markers were identified and grounded in prior literature: implied authorship and personified voice, platform-native informal stylisation, exaggerated paralinguistic features, linguistic deviation and creative lexis, humour repertoire as a voice component, and meme-based format adaptation.

The second research task was to explain the mechanisms through which CBV markers may shape consumer brand trust and why these effects are context-dependent. Subchapter 1.2 traced how linguistic deviation, persona construction, and humour each function as interpretive cues rather than neutral stylistic choices. Two psychological mechanisms were identified as central: perceived appropriateness, capturing whether the communication style is judged as fitting given the relational and contextual expectations of the consumer (Gretry et al., 2017), and benign appraisal, capturing whether the humour element is evaluated as

acceptable and non-threatening rather than offensive (Ning et al., 2022). Four boundary conditions shaping how CBV is decoded were also identified: audience goals and involvement, industry-specific credibility demands, the surrounding social proof environment, and authorship expectations.

The third research task was to synthesise empirical research on informal and unconventional brand communication and consumer brand trust. Subchapter 1.3 brought together five studies that each addressed a distinct and necessary component of the CBV research gap, collectively establishing that informal and norm-defying brand communication does not produce uniform effects, and that the same stylistic choices can either strengthen or reduce trust depending on contextual conditions, relational familiarity, and the audience's interpretive effort.

The fourth research task was to design and conduct an empirical study testing the proposed relationships, which was carried out in Chapter 2. A between-subjects online experiment exposed 102 participants to a single social media post from the fictitious brand Velvet Café, written either in CHV or CBV. The manipulation check confirmed that the two stimuli were perceived as meaningfully different on the dimensions central to the CBV construct, with both posts also perceived as realistic brand content.

The primary hypothesis, that participants exposed to CBV would report significantly lower brand trust than those exposed to CHV, was supported. The CBV condition produced a mean brand trust score of 3.41 compared to 4.65 in the CHV condition, with the difference statistically significant at  $t = 4.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$  and representing approximately 18% of the total scale range. This finding extends Gretry et al. (2017) by showing that an escalated form of informal voice produces the same trust-reducing effect even within a hedonic, low-involvement category that would otherwise be the most favourable context for human voice to succeed.

The mediation hypotheses were not supported, as neither perceived appropriateness nor benign appraisal emerged as statistically significant mediators, with bootstrap confidence intervals for both indirect effects crossing zero. This is better understood in terms of design-level constraints than as a contradiction of the underlying theoretical mechanisms. In a single-exposure, zero-familiarity context, participants likely formed simultaneous rather than sequential trust and appropriateness judgments, structurally compressing the detectable indirect pathway. The benign appraisal pathway similarly reflects insufficient variance in the mediator, since the CBV humour remained within a broadly acceptable range and did not

generate the spread in appraisal scores needed to activate the indirect effect. The positive direction of the benign appraisal coefficient remains consistent with benign violation theory, and a CBV condition incorporating higher-aggression humour would provide a more demanding test of this mechanism in future research.

Overall, this paper fulfilled its aim and contributed on two levels. Theoretically, it proposed and operationalised CBV as a marker-based construct situated within the brand voice literature, filling a definitional gap that had previously only been addressed at the practitioner level. Empirically, it demonstrated that CBV produces a measurable and substantively meaningful reduction in consumer brand trust relative to standard CHV even under the most favourable conditions for informal voice, suggesting that stylistic norm deviation triggers a direct holistic trust response whose full mediation pathways warrant further investigation with larger samples, repeated exposure designs, and humour manipulations with greater aggression variance.

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## APPENDIX A

*Thank you for taking part in this study!*

*This survey is part of a Bachelor's thesis research at the University of Tartu. The purpose of the study is to understand how people respond to different brand communication styles on social media. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. The survey takes approximately 5 minutes to complete. Your responses will only be used for academic purposes and will not be shared with third parties. The collected data will be deleted following the completion of this study in May 2026.*

Table 9

*Survey Questionnaire Items, Sources, and Response Options*

Question	Construct	Role	Response Options	Source
This brand communicates in a casual way.	Manipulation check	Technical	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Adapted from Gretry et al. (2017)
This brand communicates in an easygoing way.	Manipulation check	Technical	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Adapted from Gretry et al. (2017)
On the scale below, indicate where you would place Velvet Cafe's communication style, from Normal to Chaotic.	Manipulation check	Technical	Semantic differential: Conventional (normal, conversational) [1–2–3–4–5–6–7] Chaotic (unhinged, unconventional)	Adapted from Gretry et al. (2017)
This communication style is unlike what I normally see from brands.	Manipulation check	Technical	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Adapted from Gretry et al. (2017)
I feel that I can trust this brand.	Brand trust	Dependent variable	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Morgan & Hunt (1994); Gretry et al. (2017)
I feel that this brand can be counted on.	Brand trust	Dependent variable	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Morgan & Hunt (1994); Gretry et al. (2017)

Question	Construct	Role	Response Options	Source
This brand appears reliable.	Brand trust	Dependent variable	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Morgan & Hunt (1994); Gretry et al. (2017)
This is how I would expect a brand to communicate on social media.	Perceived appropriateness	Mediator 1	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Adapted from Gretry et al. (2017)
This communication style fits the way I expect brands to talk to consumers.	Perceived appropriateness	Mediator 1	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Adapted from Gretry et al. (2017)
This communication style is appropriate.	Perceived appropriateness	Mediator 1	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Adapted from Gretry et al. (2017)
I think this post is acceptable.	Benign appraisal	Mediator 2	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Ning et al. (2022)
The humour in this post feels harmless.	Benign appraisal	Mediator 2	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Adapted from Ning et al. (2022)
This post comes across as playful rather than offensive.	Benign appraisal	Mediator 2	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Adapted from Ning et al. (2022)
I felt comfortable reading this post.	Benign appraisal	Mediator 2	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Adapted from Ning et al. (2022)
This post seemed like something a real brand would publish on social media.	Realism check	Technical	1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree	Adapted from Barcelos et al. (2018)
How easy was it to imagine encountering this post while scrolling through social media?	Realism check	Technical	1 = Very difficult, 7 = Very easy	Adapted from Barcelos et al. (2018)
What is your age?	Socio-demographic	Descriptive	18–24 / 25–34 / 35–44 / 45–54 / 55 or older / Prefer not to say	—
What is your gender?	Socio-demographic	Descriptive	Female / Male / Other / Prefer not to say	—

Question	Construct	Role	Response Options	Source
How often do you use social media?	Socio-demographic	Descriptive	Multiple times per day / Once a day / A few times per week / Once a week or less / Rarely or never	—

Source: Compiled by the author based on the sources presented in the table.

## APPENDIX B



[\\_velvet\\_cafe\\_](#)

Happy Valentine's Day from Velvet Café!



Whether you're celebrating with someone you love 💕 or treating yourself 🙌, we think you deserve a special treat, this year introducing our new limited Love Edition Matcha. Hurry up and grab yours while it's still available!

P.S. We promise you no ghosting on Valentine's from our side 😊



Source: The product image used in both stimulus posts was retrieved from Pinterest (<https://pin.it/1osgkCuxB>) and selected to be visually neutral and consistent with the aesthetic conventions of specialty café content on social media. The Velvet Café logo was designed by the author and photo-edited to the image using artificial intelligence tools to produce a realistic brand visual.



[\\_velvet\\_cafe\\_](#)

jeez another situationship ghosted you  
just before valentine's? 🌹💔

...yk, our new limited love edition matcha  
would have never done that to you....

shhh..say no more...

just grab your bro and get it while it's still  
there, waiting for you...and

ONLY YOU 🙌😔

(unlike that ex of  
yours..🌹)



Source: The product image used in both stimulus posts was retrieved from Pinterest (<https://pin.it/1osgkCuxB>) and selected to be visually neutral and consistent with the aesthetic conventions of specialty café content on social media. The Velvet Café logo was designed by the author and photo-edited to the image using artificial intelligence tools to produce a realistic brand visual.

## Resüme

### KAOOTILINE BRÄNDIHÄÄL VERSUS VESTLUSLIK INIMLIK HÄÄL: MÕJU TARBIJA BRÄNDIUSALDUSELE SOTSIAALMEEDIAS

Maryam Baghirova

Bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on välja selgitada kaootilise brändihääle (CBV) mõju tarbija brändiusaldusele võrreldes vestlusliku inimliku häälega (CHV) sotsiaalmeedias. Uuring täidab kahte uurimislünka. Esiteks ei ole varasemates akadeemilistes uuringutes defineeritud normidest eemale kalduvat kommunikatsioonistiili, mille kohta käib mõiste “unhinged marketing” ning mis on lisaks ka üks tänapäeva trendidest turunduses. Teiseks puudub siiaamaani tunnustatud teadustöö selle kohta, kuidas selline äärmuslik mitteformaalsus mõjutab tarbija usaldust brändi vastu.

Autor tuletas omaenda määratlused võtmemõistetele eelnevates allikates toodud definitsioonide põhjal. Brändihääl on keele- ja stiilivalikute kogum, mille kaudu väljendab bränd omale iseloomulikku kommunikatsioonistiili. Vestluslik inimlik hääl on brändi kommunikatsioonistiil, mida tarbija tajub loomuliku, kaasahaarava ja suhteliselt lähedasena. Kaootiline brändihääl defineeriti süstemaatilise stilistiliste, paralingvistiliste ja huumoripõhiste markerite konfiguratsioonina, mis intensiivistab CHV-d ja viib selle väljapoole tavapärase vestlusliku mitteformaalsuse piire, luues äratuntava ja tahtlikult normidest hälbiva persoona. Brändiusaldus on tarbija turvatunne ja valmidus brändile toetuda, mis põhineb tajutud pädevusel ning veendumusel, et brändi sõnad ja teod on usaldusväärsed, järjepidevad ja mittekahjustavad.

Teoreetilises osas selgus, et CBV markerid (näiteks isikustatud autorsus, platvormispetsiifiline stiil, liialdatud paralingvistilised vahendid, loov keelekasutus, huumorirepertuaar ja meemivormingute kohandamine) toimivad tarbija jaoks tõlgenduslike vihjetena brändi kavatsuste, pädevuse ja sotsiaalse sobivuse kohta. Kaks keskset psühholoogilist mehhanismi on tajutud sobivus ja huumori healoomuline hinnang.

Empiirilise uuringu läbiviimiseks kasutati kvantitatiivset rühmadevahelist eksperimentaalset lähenemisviisi. Osalejad jaotati juhuslikult kahte tingimusse ja neile kuvati üks postitus fiktiivselt brändilt Velvet Café, mis oli kirjutatud kas CHV või CBV stiilis. Valim koosnes 102 vastajast (51 igas tingimuses), peamiselt 18–34-aastastest aktiivsetest sotsiaalmeedia kasutajatest. Andmeid analüüsiti Stata tarkvaras, kasutades sõltumatute valimite t-testi ja paralleelset mediaatoranalüüsi.

Tulemused näitasid, et CBV-le eksponeeritud osalejad andsid oluliselt madalama brändiusalduse hinnangu ( $M = 3,41$ ) kui CHV-le eksponeeritud osalejad ( $M = 4,65$ ) ning erinevus oli statistiliselt oluline ( $t = 4,48$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ). Seega kinnitati esimene hüpotees. Lisaks tajusid CBV-d näinud osalejad seda stiili oluliselt vähem sobivana ja vähem healoomulisena. Siiski ei toiminud kumbki muutuja statistiliselt olulise mediaatorina, mistõttu teist ja kolmandat hüpoteesi ei kinnitatud. Tulemused viitavad pigem disainipiirangutele kui teoreetiliste mehhanismide puudumisele – ühekordse eksponeerimise ja täiesti tundmatu brändi kontekstis kujundavad tarbijad usaldushinnangu tõenäoliselt holistiliselt ja samaaegselt, mitte järjestikku.

Kokkuvõttes näitab uuring, et kaootiline brändihääl vähendab brändiusaldust mõõdetavalt ja sisuliselt oluliselt isegi hedoonilise ja madala kaasatusega tootekategooria kontekstis, mis peaks olema inimlikule häälele kõige soodsam keskkond. See viitab sellele, et normidest hälbiv stiil tekitab vahetu holistilise usaldusreaktsiooni. Praktiline implikatsioon brändidele on järgmine: madala tuttavuse kontekstis tuleks CBV-d käsitleda kõrge riskiga strateegiana olenemata tootekategooriast, sest mängulisus üksi ei neutraliseeri sobimatuses tulenevat usalduskaotust.

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**14/05/2026**