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**BRAND MEANING CO-CREATION BETWEEN BRANDS
AND FANS ON INSTAGRAM**

Master's thesis

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the paper independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors has been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading. The document length is 11845 words from the introduction to the end of conclusion.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
ABSTRACT	4
INTRODUCTION	5
1. LITERATURE REVIEW	8
1.1 Brand identity	9
1.2 Brand meaning.....	9
1.3 Consumer engagement on social media	11
1.4 Brand meaning co-creation on social media.....	14
2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	19
2.1 Research design	19
2.2 Sampling and data collection.....	20
2.3 Research instrument	23
2.4 Analysis methods.....	24
3. FINDINGS.....	26
3.1 Brand’s actions on Instagram	27
3.2 Fans’ reactions on Instagram.....	30
3.3 How does the brand meaning co-creation process occur on Instagram?.....	32
CONCLUSION	38
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	41
APPENDICES	46
Appendix 1. Online questionnaire and results.....	46
Appendix 2. Examples of the different types of brands’ actions proposed in this research.....	50
Appendix 3. Examples of the different types of fans’ reactions proposed in this research.....	55
Appendix 4. Non-exclusive licence.....	59

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, with the flourishing of social media platforms, brands-fans interaction has reached an unprecedented level of communication where this last group can shape different interpretations of brands' messages, tipping the scale towards fans and their power to influence on what a brand represents. Due to this increasingly interaction on social media, the term "co-creation" is gaining more relevance in the matter of brand strategy. This master thesis aims to contribute with an approach about how brand meaning co-creation process between brands and fans is happening on Instagram. Through a case study methodology three brands' Instagram accounts (Audi, Netflix US and Starbucks Spain) are selected to analyzed their content. Besides, applying survey method, questionnaires are distributed to get insights from fans. The study concludes that this process occurs first with brand managers creating content in a product-centric or customer-centric approach, to carry out 10 main type of actions. Once these actions are displayed, fans interact with brands and other fans performing 8 main type of reactions to influence, consciously or not, on brands' perception. Finally, these reactions driven by inner motivations are linked to one or more facets of brand identity, which in turn can reinforce or reshape what brands mean for fans in a so-called co-creating process. The author is not proposing a universal framework for this process but this study can serve as a reference to identify which facets of identity and meanings are more present in brands to aligned properly the desired brand objectives on Instagram.

Keywords: Social media, Instagram, brand meaning, brand co-creation, engagement, brand identity

INTRODUCTION

Customers can find in a brand not only the mean to satisfy their needs but also create the emotional link with it and its creator. By identifying a brand amid an ocean of advertisement, decision-making process is less complex for the customer and in many cases, it can be accompanied by a positive association brand-customer which generates a specific self-image perception on the consumer (Keller *et al.* 2011, 8). But throughout this process, brands' identity is influenced by customers' interaction as well.

Since the Internet era, brands have found a very useful tool to reach audiences and start building a not only lucrative, but also meaningful interaction. Nowadays, with the flourishing of social media platforms, this connection between brand and audiences has reached a level of communication that has never seen before, where this last group has become key player for generating and sharing brand content within virtual communities (Singh, Sonnenburg 2012, 190). Customers are much more tech-savvy, they react and interact in such a pace that brands and their identity can be reshape by them.

In the past four decades, literature regarding brand management have resulted in meaningful content addressing the brand identity, its architecture and how to build it. Last decade has forced scholars and professionals to develop new literature in the context of digital world and its new social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter) where the interaction between brands and fans/users/customers is shaping brands in an unprecedented way.

Currently two-thirds of the inhabitants in the planet are internet users and the figures for social media usage are equally impressive. Since 2010, the number of social media users has grown from less than a billion to almost 3 billion (Statista 2019). Whit this gigantic outreach, it was obvious that businesses would not skip the chance to take advantage of this powerful channel. Social media has allowed brands to be visible for their target audiences, generate discussion around them, and subsequently an identity. Since the customers/fans have become key participants in shaping the identity of brands, thanks to their increasingly activity on social media, the term "co-creation" is

gaining more relevance in the matter of brand strategy. Thus, marketers and brand managers need to be aware of how the interaction within social media platforms is happening and how is affecting the construction of brand meaning

Several authors (Rosenthal, Pereira 2017; Hollebeek *et al.* 2014; Vallaster, von Wallpach 2012) have made their contribution and research for insights that can give light about the kind of interaction between fans and brands which are influencing and helping the construction of brand meaning on social media. Rosenthal and Pereira (2017) have already made some valuable approaches about how this is occurring on Facebook. Even though, social media platforms share common features, the author considers each one has their own particularities and deserves to be object of study as well. According to Statista (2019), after Facebook, Instagram is the second most used social media platform among marketers globally with 500 million of daily active Instagram stories users; representing a very significant object for the sake of study to generate more scientific content.

Hence, literature still have gaps or lack of insights about how this process of brand meaning co-creation is carried out in the context of online social networks. The author considers that there has not been enough formal debate about how businesses and customers are supporting altogether for the construction of image within these digital platforms. Thus, the author motivation is to contribute with more substance for discussion and further analysis through a research on how brands are performing their communication actions, how their fans are behaving towards brands and how this process is shaping the perception that audiences have regarding brands' identity.

After considering the aforementioned, a central research question arises to find out what the author consider is lacking in current literature: How does the brand meaning co-creation process between brands and fans occur on Instagram?

In order to find answers to this main research question, it is necessary to perform the following tasks: (1) Select three representative Instagram brand accounts from different business categories with significant activity that offers meaningful content for analysis. (2) Analyze and generate a classification of marketing actions that the selected brands perform on Instagram. (3) Analyze and generate a classification of fans' reactions towards brands' actions. (4) Understand how brands-fans interactions are linked to create different brand meanings.

This master thesis aims to contribute with an approach for brand meaning co-creation on Instagram between brands and fans to fill in the current gaps on how this process is being carried out in the context of social media environment. Furthermore, the document's target is to bring up interest in the topic among scholars, professionals in marketing, students, and people interested in digital marketing to promote discussion and encourage future research. Scholars and professionals can find in this document useful insights to understand what is happening behind the curtain of Instagram environment to better tune brand strategies in the duty of building the desired brand meaning.

The first chapter of this master thesis presents the theoretical foundations of brand meaning creation and the current context of interaction on social media between brands and fans, in order to provide the necessary background to understand where the author has found the gap to be filled.

In the second chapter, the methodology of the research itself is presented where inductive approach is applied since data of the interaction between brands and fans is collected from Instagram accounts of three brands from different category business to serve as a base for drawing a framework of the most significant types of brands' actions and fans' reactions. In this exploratory study the author uses two main methods, surveys and case study, where mixed-model research combines quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques such as questionnaire, and observation with the ultimate goal of fulfilling the necessary tasks and find out answers for the research question. The last chapter will address the most important findings made by the author as well as the discussion of limitations and room for future research on brand meaning creation on social media platforms.

The author would like to thank his supervisor Iivi Riivits-Arkonsuo, for being a meaningful guide through the development of this thesis. Furthermore, the author wants to thank to his family and people who offered support and inspiration towards the achievement of this milestone in his student life.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

For a better understanding of the context in which this research is being carried out, it is necessary to start tackling relevant concepts, as well as providing enough background about where the author has found opportunities to contribute with the current literature.

Brands are an essential element for the success of products (people or organizations) especially in the long run. A brand and its value can be analyzed from the perspective of the customer and owners (companies) (Keller *et al.* 2011, 8-11). Customers can find in a brand not only the means to satisfy their needs but also create the emotional link with it and its creator. Imagine the amount of advertisements and products that a customer is being exposed everyday. By identifying a brand, the decision-making process is less complex for the customer and in many cases it can be accompanied by a positive association brand-customer which generates an improved self-image perception on the consumer. “A successful brand aims to develop a high-quality relationship, in which customers feel a sense of commitment and belonging, even to the point almost of passion.” (De Chernatony, McDonald 1998, 27).

On the other hand, brands provide companies with several benefits beyond a mere way to simplified processes of identification, tracking and handling products (Keller *et al.* 2011, 10). As mentioned before, brands can generate a meaning for the customers that make them choose a particular brand among the competitors, generating besides those incentives to trigger the rebuy. Nevertheless, processes and products can be copied and here is where legal aspects help to protect these valuable assets for companies. Intellectual property rights provide brand owners the right to protect their investments, profit from their developments, and keep generating incomes out of them in the long term. These legal instruments provide a fair barrier against competitors and support the construction of a big name in consumer’s mind what ultimately makes a company successful. Thus, for a company, reputation, intangible value and goodwill that a brand can generate are assets that make a huge difference when it comes to value a firm and its power. “Around 70 percent of the intangible assets can be made up by brands, as part of the total value in a typical fast-moving

consumer goods (FMCG) company.” (Keller *et al.* 2011, 11). Definitely, brands offer significant benefits for costumers and are essential for companies.

1.1 Brand identity

Having clarified the key role of brands, it is necessary to dive within brand concept and what entails all the constructions around it. Cambridge Dictionary defines identity as who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others. Following this definition, we can build an idea of what brand identity means. What a company wants to reach, what this wants to convey as a key message, what makes it distinguishable, in which industry this is operating and the way of standing out amid competitors, these are the aspects shaping identity for a company/entity. The vision to create products, the key belief of the brands and its core values is called identity (Kapferer 2008, 171). Brands are meant to be recognizable, that’s the nature of its mere existence but also they are bound to trigger a reaction within their publics. “Brand Identity fuels recognition, amplifies differentiation, and makes big ideas and meaning accessible.” (Wheeler 2013, 4). Nevertheless, even though brand identity makes an organization recognizable for audience, it is necessary to make a differentiation and clarify that this concept is generated within the creator entity, the owner of the brand, and what publics are perceiving and building in their minds is brand image. This last concept is the result of what the publics receive, process and construct, their perception, regarding what brands are generating and communicating. As per Kapferer (2008, 174), identity is on the sender’s side attempting to specify the brand’s meaning, aim and self-image. An image on the other hand, is a synthesis made by the public of all the various brand messages.

1.2 Brand meaning

Nowadays in the context of digital world and how businesses are relying more and more on digital tools and channels to promote their brands and products, it is inevitable to mention the role of social media in the construction of brand meaning and how the interaction brands-fans are shaping it. But before diving into this topic, lets address first the concept behind brand meaning.

Meaning is the link between brands and consumers. When a person is choosing a product there is a process behind that triggers the decision of choosing one brand or another which in turn creates

a meaning in the consumer's mind. On one hand, the consumers analyze the tangible benefits there are going to receive versus what they are going to pay, and the convenience or ease to reach a particular product/service. On the other hand, there is an emotional side that makes consumers think of how a brand is matching their beliefs, life-style, and aspirations (Antonio Damasio 1994). Hence, when a brand conveys its features, messages, what it is standing for, and aims to provide its customers with a significant purpose, there is where meaning starts evolving. The definition of brand meaning might not seem to be that simple or straightforward, but it is imperative to understand that "brand meaning both defines and is defined by the territory where the meaning derived from brand associations corresponds with consumer needs and aspirations. It is where the concrete qualities of the product meet the abstract qualities of the brand" (Batey 2008, 111).

When brand qualities, objective and subjective, match its audience's needs and ideals, hence brand creates meaning in its customers' minds. Batey provides a simplified explanation on how brand meaning is built. When a brand encounters its audience, generates different brand perceptions at a cognitive and non-cognitive level in the audience's mind. These perceptions in turn create, confirm or modify different associations that are responsible to determine a particular brand meaning. These perceptions evolve both at a conscious as well as at a semi or subconscious level (*Ibid.*, 111). Through brand narratives, marketers try to communicate a story about the brand, to convey a message, and generate a meaning to their audiences and stand up amid the competitors.

Brand meaning allows brands to be differentiated from others and construct bonds to keep a strong and long-lasting relationship with their customers. Relationships that can be based on engagement with the brand, loyalty from customers, and commitment from brand to fulfill consumers' needs. There is no space for product-centric marketing. Marketers must include more and more their strategies around consumers' motivations and ideals. This is the right starting for the path towards meaning creation.

Traditionally firms were the main source of brand meaning. They were the owners of what a brand communicates, what a brand represents, and how brands' image should be perceived. Nevertheless, currently the consumers are playing a more critical role in the communication process that marketers can not disregard. Open and free spaces for interaction, like internet, where discussion and exchange of opinions about products and services are carried out in such a level that big communities are emerging and many actors are taking part in shaping what a brand

represents. Thus, brand meaning creation is also seen as a constant social, economic, and cultural interaction between stakeholders (Lury, 2004). Subsequently, brand meanings can be seen as dynamic textual expressions of stakeholders' thoughts regarding brands that constantly result from this interaction and interpretation (Vallaster *et al.* 2013).

Taking this into account, the meaning creation or transference can not be seen as a one-way process but a bidirectional one. As Batey (2008) described, when consumers give meaning to the brands, this has an impact on how brands are generating their communication strategies which in turn will pass to the dominant culture. Hence, meaning is always in a continuous circulation.

Nowadays, brands are not anymore a product of marketing actions alone. Brands are the result of a variety of interactions between numerous stakeholders involved around common topics. This networks encompass individuals, communities and marketers, all influencing each other within the framework of brand meaning and its construction (von Wallpach *et al.* 2017). Hence, it is not a surprise that many of the actors taking part of this process are far from being controlled by firms. Furthermore, all efforts from marketers to create a desired brand meaning are converging with competitors, audiences, customers, institutions, and different stakeholders taking part in the process (Cova, Dalli 2010).

1.3 Consumer engagement on social media

Communication actions are meant to not only catch the attention but also make audiences interact with brands, looking for that kind of synergy between brand and fans that boosts the construction of bonds between these parties. Firms and marketers are aware, more than ever, that activities where brands are connecting with audiences' interests, touching inner fibers, making them feel part of a community; are the best way to generate engagement. When consumers interact with brands and a positive reaction at the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral level is generated; it is here when brand engagement arises (Hollebeek *et al.* 2014, 154). If the consumers are engage with a brand; they are not only fans, but also advocates; and they together, brand and fans, can harmonically create a desired brand meaning.

According to Brodie *et al.* (2011), customer engagement it is a psychological state as a result of the interaction with an object, and all the experiences generated by this interaction. In this context

the object of interaction are the brands. Since the appearance of internet, people are much more exposed to an immeasurable quantity of information coming from all over the world. This level of exposition has become a magnet for audiences to search for content of their interest, in turn being seduced by the evolution of brands and their catchy marketing campaigns. It has been almost two decades since the beginning of the first social media platform, and the development that these platforms have reached represents a key channel to target directly to consumers. Brands that are connecting with their audiences try to not only convey a message but also to be part of an experience, and this is a fundamental insight to say that engagement comes from experiencing (Calder *et al.* 2009). Thus, it is fair to say that engagement is a collection of experiences that users are having while going through social media platforms. In this context, the content within social media platforms can be engaging because either it represents a utilitarian or intrinsically enjoyable experience. When social media users consider that the content they are receiving is improving their lives in some way, this is utilitarian experience. On the other hand, when the content helps users to get distracted from their daily routine and escape from their reality, here we are talking about an intrinsically enjoyable one. (*Ibid.*, 2009).

Several studies have been made to give insights about the different reasons or motivations for brand engagement on social media. Consumers are keen on receiving information, entertainment or to get something back in exchange for their loyalty towards brand pages (Muntinga *et al.* 2011). Another similar approach made by Keller *et al.* (2012) advocates that a high engagement on social media is the result of brands providing content that is not only interesting and entertaining but also innovative, involving consumers' preferences and needs. For such researches the U&G (uses and gratifications) approach has been used as a base for the sake of analysis of the users' engagement. This way the focus of analysis is not what brands are communicating but how social media users are reacting and interacting (Aitken *et al.* 2008).

One of the factors that contribute to engagement on consumers is the popularity of brand posts in social media (Sabate *et al.* 2014). A valuable conceptual framework for the factors influencing popularity of brand posts has been proposed by de Vries *et al.* (2012). According to these authors there are six determinants: vividness, the richness of content features to stimulate senses; interactivity, the level of interaction between parties; informational content, about product/service or category; entertaining content; position, related to the number of days the brand post is located on top of page; and valence of comments, positive, negative or neutral. These determinants result

in number of likes and number of comments, granting a social media brand account a certain degree of popularity.

Among the approaches about consumer engagement, Hollebeck *et al.* have developed a very reliable one. This approach is based on conceptual relationships where everything starts with the involvement of the consumer with brands and three main factors are taking part in the process of consumer brand engagement. First, all the information and interaction generated go through a cognitive processing where a reaction is stimulated. A second factor, affection, creates a connection between brand-consumer. Activation, the third factor is triggered when the consumer gives a priority or recognition to the brand in his/her mind. As a consequence, a consumer/brand connection and brand usage intent is generated.

Since the flourishing of Instagram, several studies have been carried out to find out the motivations for engagement on Instagram. In a study made by Erkan (2015), 20 brands from different sectors were examined in order to discover if the engagement level depends on the sector of the brands. The study concluded that Beverages sector is more likely to get likes by fans than Apparel-Luxury sector. The reason is because Apparel-Luxury communication is much more product-oriented. Likewise, the study found out that Electronics sector has the highest rate of comments by users, Entertainment-sport and Cars are very close, and Apparel again is the the sector that receives comments the less.

Another study that provides interesting insights about the motives for Instagram use was made by Sheldon and Bryant (2016). The study was focused on on the context of age and narcissism, concluding that the Instagram users are into this platform to know about others' life, to document their own life and gain recognition within social activity, to express creativity, and to show a level of coolness towards the rest of users. All of these insights might differ but they provide meaningful overview and understanding about what is happening on social media and how brand posts are influencing fans' reactions. Here is where brands can and take advantage generating content for users to fulfil this needs, encouraging them to generated interaction around brands' actions and generate a positive connection.

Therefore, to get consumers involved, brands needs enough exposure and richness of content. Here is where social media is a key player. Through social media, brands can get insights about consumer behaviors and preferences, but also the opportunity to built relationships with their

publics, since consumers see social media as platforms to interact and make connections. Brands that focus their social media to generate content not only around their product/service but also around their fans, are strongly likely to generate interaction and engagement (Cvijikj *et al.* 2013). Subsequently, engagement represents a vital factor for brand meaning creation.

1.4 Brand meaning co-creation on social media

Traditionally the responsible of the brand and communication was the main source of what the meaning of a brand was meant to be (Hoffman, Novak 1996). Using unidirectional/traditional means to convey messages, the core idea intended to be communicated did not suffer much disruption. If something was misunderstood or mistakenly communicated, brand manager had the time to react and take corrections in due time. Nevertheless, the impressive fast interaction that the current digital social platforms provide for users, has change the rules of the game and in the scale of brand meaning creation, the side of fans/users have gained more weight. Currently, there are multiple stakeholders involved in the process of brand meaning creation specially because of the ease of interaction that online environment provides to the actors (Vallaster, von Wallpach 2012, 1506). When the stakeholders and customers take part in the process, trust and empathy can flourish quickly. Thus, co-creation is not only about developing better products/services but improve the experience of their usage. Here is where a long-lasting relationship arises. In a simple way, co-creation happens when firms and consumers collaborate to create new and positive associations around the brand, driven by motives to promote something that all stakeholders perceive as meaningful. On one end, the brand gains more relevance. On the other hand, customers get more attached to brands.

Fans have started to play a key role in the development of the aforementioned meaning. Their interaction with brands and digital communities can re-shape instantly a whole campaign but at the same time can be a useful tool to guarantee a successful brand action towards brand meaning creation. The diffusion of messages from brand is no longer unidirectional, audiences are getting involve more and more in this rapid-pace social media environment where brand managers can not longer neglect this new process of building meaning.

Some authors (Fueller *et al.* 2007; Fueller *et al.* 2008) have studied how social media has boosted the blooming of virtual communities and how these communities are getting more and more involved not only in the creation of brand meaning but also in the development and promotion of new products. Last decade, researches regarding brand meaning co-creation are discussing this process as the result of interaction and influencing of different stakeholders (Vargo, Lusch 2011; Payne *et al.* 2009), all of them active parties in this construction.

Nowadays, marketing campaigns are more focused in digital advertising where social media represent the perfect soil to spread the seeds of brand messages. This trend can be noticed in the U.S. market. In 2014 the digital marketing spending reached roughly 7.52 billion U.S.D. In 2019 the estimation for this spending is approximately 17.34 billion U.S.D. These statistics just show the huge investment on digital marketing, and how promising is the future of social media platforms to market business (Statista, Leading social media platforms used by marketers worldwide as of January 2019).

The relevance of digital platforms of communication is irrefutable, as well as its ease to reach audiences with better accuracy. This has led brand officers to find creative ways to involve audiences and react at an increasingly fast speed. Content is no longer mainly rooted in brands or product qualities, on the contrary, marketers are trying to study more their consumers to generate content around them, make use of content generated by them, and even encouraging them to create content based on brand messages. Several marketers are taking advantage of consumer-generated content to use it in their long-term marketing campaigns, even though some others are concerned of giving too much control of brand messages and meanings to consumers (Muniz, Schau 2011, 210). Social media communities have created the perfect spaces for users to express themselves and be the originators of content around brands' actions. This so-called Consumer-generated content (CGC) has gained more and more relevance and marketers are not only taking advantage of this but also promoting this CGS because the rest of users find this type of content more reliable and trustworthy (Scholz *et al.* 2018).

Currently, social media is one of the main influential sources of online information and the ease of interaction within them has made consumer-generated content one of the driving forces of online experience (Denhardt 2014). As a matter of fact, brands can be created with CGC on social media by communities of users where their products are available for every other user showing a

creative effort (*Ibid.*, 2014). This shows the impact and power that CGC has gain in in the construction of reputation for brands.

On the contrary, CGC can be very dangerous for brands' credibility if the consumers are not satisfied, if they feel that a brand is either not fulfilling its value promise or simply attempting their believes. These anti-branding efforts can be very harmful for brands and destroy the perception that other users have about a brand (Cheregi 2018). Considering the aforementioned, users/fans in social media are undeniably supporting in many ways the creation of brand meaning.

While reviewing the different literature about brand meaning, social media engagement and its motives, and consumer-generated content, the author has found out that the analysis about how the process of brand meaning creation is carried out in social media has been neglected. In this context, few authors (Rosenthal, Pereira 2017; Kamboj *et al.* 2018; Vallaster, von Wallpach 2012) have started to search for insights that can help to give light about the kind of interaction between fans and brands, or fans-fans, which are influencing and helping the construction of brand meaning on social media. Particularly, Rosenthal and Pereira (2017) have already developed valuable findings on what are the type of interactions on Facebook, the brand actions and how they connect with Kapferer's brand identity facets (2008). Kepferer pictured 6 facets of brand identity: Physique, composed primarily by physical traits that make brands stand out from the crowd. Personality, is the way in which a brand is conveying its message, how it expresses its traits and benefits. Culture, represented by principles and values shaping products and communication. Relationship, is the link between what a brand represents and its audiences' ideals. Reflection, is the perceived image of the kind of users/ customers of a brand (the stereotype of a brand's user). Self-image, encompasses the way in that users/ customers project their inner image when using a particular brand. The Figure 1 depicts Kapferer's prims and the different brand facets.

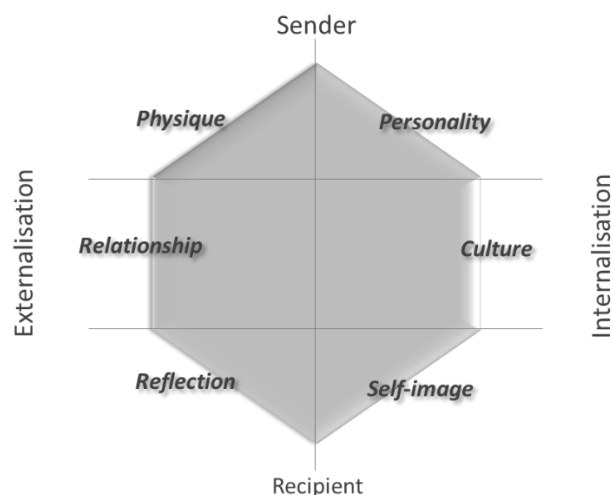


Figure 1. Brand identity prism

Source: Kapferer (2008, 183)

Rosenthal and Pereira (2017) have enlightened the path for better understanding of how the brand co-creation is orchestrated on the social media platform called Facebook. They have developed a categorization of 8 types of brand communication actions on Facebook: category habits, events, apps, product, brand stories, questions, challenges, and category knowledge (*Ibid.*, 927). Likewise, the research proposes 8 main types of fan reactions: like, share, criticize, doubt, suggest, praise, self-expression, and engagement in consumer-to-consumer (C2C) communication (*Ibid.*, 928). Every brand action can trigger a fan reaction, which in turn is connected with the different brand identities of the Kapferer’s prism (2008) to support brand meaning creation.

Nevertheless, literature might suffer lack of insights or further analysis on how this process of brand meaning co-creation is carried out in the context of the rest of social media platforms. As of January 2019, all around the world the social media platforms most used between marketers are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube, in that order (Statista, Leading social media platforms used by marketers worldwide as of January 2019).

Instagram is a social network focused on the uploading and treatment of images that with its retouching and advanced photographic filters make it unique, since users can give a professional treatment to any image and share it with their network of friends both on Instagram and other platforms like Facebook, Tumblr or Twitter. Instagram is composed by two words. First Insta,

referring to the word instant that evokes the old instant cameras. Second, the word Gram, referring to the word telegram, the old way of sharing messages.

Its ease of use has caused Instagram to become one of the most popular social networks. According to the latest statistics share by Instagram (2019), the social network counts with around 1,000 million users and it is still in constant growth. Its potential was seen by the giant Facebook and it was acquired by this on 2012. Mark Zuckerberg and its team implemented changes that made Instagram become the powerful network it is nowadays. But not only Zuckerberg has seen this potential, but also brands have seen this as a big opportunity to reach a growing community of users to promote their image. Instagram is the second most used social media platform among marketers globally and counts with 500 million of daily active Instagram stories users (Statista 2019). This social network has been evolving to provide an environment more convenient for brands to promote their products and generate strong relationships with their audiences. This year, Instagram launched Shoppable Posts, a feature that allows brands to tag products within a post. With three clicks, a user can move from a brand's post to the cart section of the brand's website. Thus, making the journey of the user much more fluid and natural.

The popularity and relevance that Instagram has gained not only between users, but also among marketers is evident. This social network and its figures are still growing and within within the digital marketing environment this can not be neglected. Therefore, the author considers pertinent to conduct this research within Instagram in order to draw more attention to what is happening within social media platforms and contribute the existing literature about fans – brands interaction and and its impact on building a brand.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the methodology and methods used by the author are detailed with the aim of answering the research question of how the brand meaning co-creation process between brands and fans occurs on Instagram. At the end of the previous chapter the reasons for the relevance of this social network were addressed. Nevertheless, there are more figures supporting the aforementioned. According to Instagram Business (2019) more than 200 million users visit at least one business profile every day. The potential advertising reach of this social network is 849.3 million users, and amongst the most viewed Stories on Instagram one-third are generated by businesses. It is not a coincidence that Statista (2019) ranked Instagram as the second most used social media platform by marketers. The increasing role of Instagram among brands add more reasons for the author to believe this social network represents a favorable environment for the research of fans-brands interaction. That said, this chapter will go through the selection of studied objects, methods of sampling, and how the data is collected and analyzed.

2.1 Research design

The research approach chosen for this study is the Inductive approach, in which data is collected, analyzed, and will help to develop the tasks proposed to the main research question (Saunders et al. 2009, 124). Through this research the author wants to understand how the process of brand meaning creation is happening on social media platforms, specifically on Instagram. Every insight or clue to explain this process is valuable (Robson 2002, 59). The interaction between brands and fans shall be studied to understand the nature of this so called co-creation process. The author considers that this process is a topic which has not been given enough attention, and there are still room for investigation and thorough analysis. Thus, an exploratory study has been selected for this research. Even though, exploration is sometimes perceived to have qualitative research constraints like subjectivity or non-representativeness; in reality it may save time and money and it ought not be underrated (Cooper, Schindler 2014, 94). Exploratory study was chosen to be the most suitable for the research purpose of understanding this phenomenon within this digital marketing context.

A case study research strategy was chosen for this thesis. This strategy to make social science research brings advantages to generate answers to questions like “how” or “why” (Yin 2014, 4), which is the case of the main research question, narrowing down theoretical approaches, into a real context within the social media platform Instagram. “A case study allows investigators to focus on a case and retain a holistic and real-world perspective—such as in studying individual life cycles, small group behavior, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood change, school performance, international relations, and the maturation of industries” (*Ibid.*, 5).

In order to perform the necessary tasks to find the answers about how the process of brand meaning co-creation on Instagram is occurring, it is vital to analyze this phenomenon within its own environment. Hence, following thorough criteria the author selected three different brands/firms for this research. All brands are internationally well known and their Instagram accounts offer the necessary interaction with fans to facilitate the research. The details about the chosen brands and why they are supporting the objective of the research are explained further within the next subchapter. A qualitative data collection technique is applied to obtain primary data by gathering content from each Instagram brand account from a specific period of time. Pictures, videos, captions, comments, and reactions from every post are subject to analysis.

2.2 Sampling and data collection

Due to the availability of countless firms with social media platforms on the digital market the author has considered convenient criteria to be able to select the appropriate brands and their Instagram accounts as object of analysis. First, since the author wants to generate new insights that can be applied in the general context of Instagram across industries, the research made by Erkan (2015) was taken into account to strengthen the criteria for the selection of three different brands to be object of study. Erkan found out that the sectors with more interaction and more likely to be engaging are Beverages, Electronics, Entertainment-Sports, and Cars. Second, the brands were chosen based on high level of recognition or leaders in their category with remarkable marketing strategies. The fourth criterion is the significant amount and availability of content within their accounts that provide enough material to analyze. Last but not least, the level of interaction and/or engagement from the side of their followers has been taken into account.

After several rounds, the following brands and their Instagram accounts were chosen. Audi, an automobile manufacturer of luxury vehicles, was the first brand selected. The German manufacturer is a well-know brand with followers all over the world. The brand counts with 15,000,000 of followers on Instagram and its account is fed with new content every two days in average. Netflix US, the giant of entertainment industry worldwide was the second selected brand. Undoubtedly, Netflix US stands out from the crowd with its marketing campaigns and productions. Its Instagram account has more than 19 million of followers, posting content almost in a daily basis generating a high level of interaction with fans of different TV shows and films broadcasted by the company. The third brand belongs to the beverage industry, Starbucks España (Spain). This regional account, even though has much less followers compared to the other two selected brands, offers regular content with very engaging communication actions that trigger a significant interaction with followers. With almost 265,000 followers Starbucks Spain provide rich content to analyze how fans are getting involved in the construction of brand meaning. The Table 1 contains the details of each brand Instagram account.

Table 1. Brands' Instagram accounts studied

Instagram account	Number of followers	Content of analysis	Time of data collection
Audi	15,000,000	Photos, videos, links, captions, likes, and comments.	4 months
Netflix US	19,000,000	Photos, videos, links, captions, likes, and comments.	4 months
Starbucks España	256,000	Photos, videos, links, captions, likes, and comments.	6 months

Source: Author's table

The collection of the data for this research has been done trough observation technique and gathering of all posts from each of the three brands' Instagram accounts selected to be part of this study. For the sake of this research, all the content posted on Instagram from March 1st until September 30th 2019 was collected. At a first glance, during the review of the content posted on each Instagram account, the author has noticed that the time frame for meaningful content analysis can vary from one brand to another.

For the case of Audi, during the last 8 months, similar pictures and videos were posted. This might be due to a product-centric content generation that the brand applies mostly in its account and

communication campaigns. However, only the last 4 months of activity on Instagram were deeply analyzed since the content tends to be saturated with similar brand actions.

In the case of Netflix US, the activity in its Instagram account is one of the most interactive and rich in content between the selected brands for the study. Posts are focused on pictures of series, movies, videos generated by actors, CGC shared by the brand, and content that fans can make use of it. Netflix is evidently generating content in consumer-centric approach. The sample subject to study was taken only during the last 4 months considering that this time frame encompasses enough rich content.

For the third brand, Starbucks España, its Instagram account has a very well defined graphic line, always evoking the corporate colors. The content is not only centered in promoting products but also promoting the involvement and participation of its followers through quizzes, contest and activities that enrich this social media account. To be able to catch more valuable insights, the posts from the last 6 months have been analyzed.

It is important to emphasize that what is analyzing here is not a particular brand, but the content of its Instagram account with the ultimate goal of understanding what are the type of actions that brands are performing on this social media and how fans/followers are reacting, how these reactions can be classified. The author considers that these brands can serve as a vehicle to discover how brands' actions and fans' reactions are orchestrating brand meaning co-creation.

After analyzing the content on Instagram and proposing a classification of brands' actions, fans' reactions and their linked brand meaning; the author has considered important to apply a survey method of research and through questionnaire technique obtain the insights from users' perspective. By doing this, the author wants to corroborate that the proposed findings are reliable and matching the fans' behavior. Convenience sampling has been selected as the most suitable sampling technique in order to find the proper audience, distribute the questionnaire, and collect the necessary answers for the sake of the analysis. By using different data collection techniques – so-called method of triangulation – the author is ensuring that the data analysis is reflecting more accurate results (Woodside 2010, 33). This way and after a comparison of results, findings can be polished to present a final and more trustworthy categorization of brands' actions, fans' reactions and how they are linked to the different facets of brand meaning.

2.3 Research instrument

The questionnaire, part of the survey method that is applied in this study has two main components for its development before being distributed among the sample. The first component is the classification of brands' actions and fans' reactions. The questions were generated around situation that exemplify the different interactions between brands and the reactions that fans have within Instagram. By providing real examples, the respondents are more likely to understand the context, give an accurate answer, which in turn provides more reliable insights for the proper analysis of the data collected.

The second component for the development of the questionnaire is the Kapferer's brand identity facets. The six facets, personality, culture, self-image, physical, relationship, and reflection are linking brands' actions and fans' reactions to close the loop of the co-creation of brand meaning. Each facet encompasses different characteristics that make them identifiable. Thus, each option provided as a possible answer represents each one of the 6 facets of the brand. By using common language and clear descriptions to depict the different facets and their characteristics, the respondents will have an easy understanding of the questions, the possible answers about how they are reacting to the different brands' actions and the generated perceptions. Besides, this will help for the further analysis to find out how this interaction is linked to the correspondent brand identity facet and the meaning it represents. Since the author pursues to find the prevalent meanings and related facets for each interaction, the respondents are instructed to provide up to 3 answers out of the 6 possible, considering that more than one facet can be linked to a fan-brand interaction.

Students from bachelor and master programs from Tallinn University of Technology and friends of author in social media accounts, within the range of age of the most active users of social media platforms (Statista, Instagram distribution of global audiences 2019), represented a suitable sample for the survey within the framework of a convenience sampling technique (Sanders et al. 2009, 241). The survey was carried out via online questionnaires using Google Forms where 156 respondents took part. The questionnaire used in the research along with the results of percentage of respondents can be found in Appendix 1.

2.4 Analysis methods

After collecting the content of Instagram accounts from the three firms part of different business categories, the analysis of the data was carried out in order to get the significant insight that allows the author to extrapolate findings and draw conclusions, which in turn helps to answer the research questions of this study. The analysis was performed as per the following lines.

The content of each Instagram account was collected. The data analyzed included pictures, videos, comments, likes, stories, tags, and links that the brands posted. The first brand to be analyzed was Starbucks España (Spain) considering the rich content it offered in terms of brand activities within its Instagram account. Hence, the author considered this brand to serve as the most suitable starting point to propose the different type of brand's actions and fans' reactions. Carefully, each post was read and decoded to find out the topic or theme most related, so that the first tentative classification was done. This first classification gave 10 different type of brand's actions as a result (Product/Service, Stories, Contests, Fan-generated content, Social responsibility, Category knowledge/Educational, Sponsorship, Utilitarian, Interactive, and Responsive). Likewise, fans' reactions in the form of comments, likes, or any interaction related to the brand were studied in order to understand the themes and purposes behind and draw a first classification for these reactions. After going through Starbucks' content, the classification of fans' reactions proposed included 8 types (Tagging, Advocate, Antagonist, Sharing, Liking, Product doubts, Participant, and Collector).

The second brand to be studied was Netflix US. Following the same procedure applied with Starbucks all content was analyzed and the first classification proposed for brands' actions and fans' reactions did not suffer any change. In fact, Netflix US account matched only 6 brands' action and 7 fans' action types previously proposed after the analysis of Starbucks' content. Audi, the third brand analyzed did not provide any additional type for neither brands' actions nor fans' reactions. Within Audi's account, 6 brands' actions were identified, and the 10 fans' actions found in Starbucks España were identified as well.

The process of analysis took several rounds to cluster, define, and refine the different codes for brand's actions and fans' reactions. The coding software MAXQDA was used as a tool to carry out the coding process. The six facets of brand meaning proposed by Kapferer were used as an umbrella for this classification where after defining the most significant types of brand's actions

and fans' reactions, these were linked to one or more facets to understand what kind of brand meaning was co-created on Instagram. After distributing and gathering answers to the questionnaires, the data was analyzed and classified with the purpose of reassure the findings made through the analysis of the Instagram accounts from the three selected brands. The content of the questionnaire was developed in line with the literature review and the different approaches presented in this document. The answers provided insights of the perception that social media users have towards the different actions carried out by brands in their communication efforts. These surveys helped to refine the classification developed through this study, which was mostly matching the findings made by the author.

3. FINDINGS

In this chapter of the thesis, the outcomes of the study are presented. The author after analyzing and interpreting all the collected data through different data collection techniques, method of triangulation, presents empirical data that has been combined with theoretical approaches specified in the first chapter of this document. The results of the research are afterwards presented and serve as mean to understand what is the process of brand meaning co-creation been carried out on Instagram. A graphical summary of the findings is presented in Figure 2.

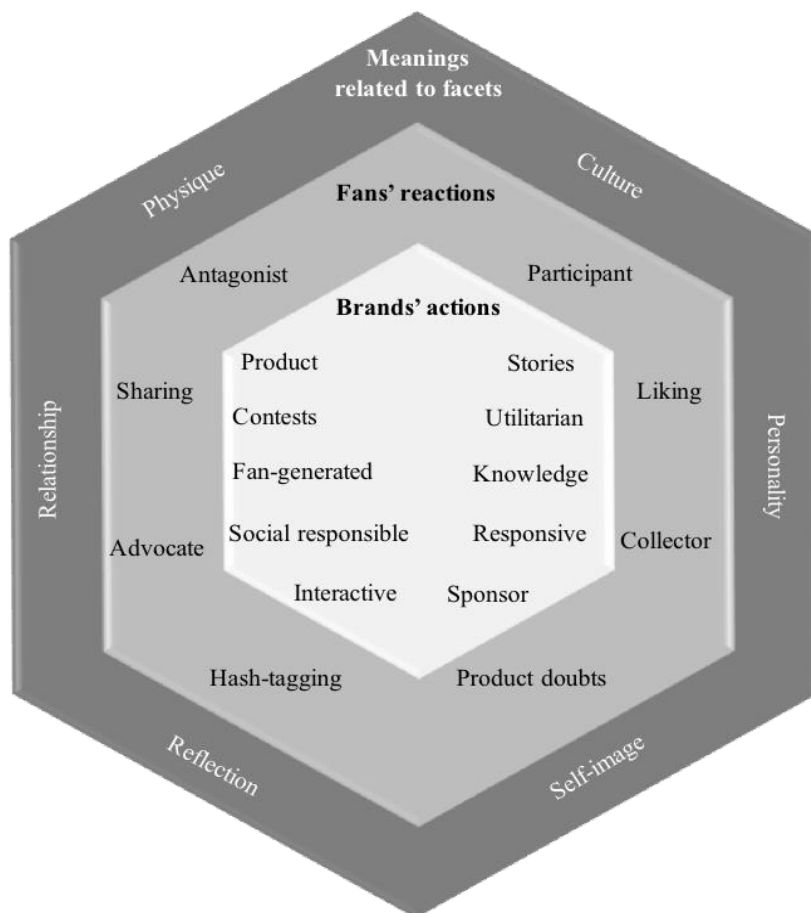


Figure 2. Brand meaning co-creation process on Instagram

Source: Author's figure

Besides, the results of the research prepare the prelude for the conclusion and discussion section of this master thesis.

3.1 Brand's actions on Instagram

The author considers important to highlight that this classification of the type of actions that brands are carrying out on Instagram doesn't intend to be a universal categorization for all brands and business categories, but an approach to understand how the different actions are influencing fans' reactions and contributing for brand meaning creation. As a result, after the analysis and interpretation of the data, 10 main type of brands' actions were identified. Appendix 2 shows examples of the actual posts made by brands belonging to proposed typology. Details of the types of brands' actions are presented bellow.

Product/Service

This type of action is related to content generated mainly focusing on the product or service of brand. These posts are intended to promote and describe products and service through videos, pictures and captions. Usually these posts include the use of symbol of number or so-called hashtag (#) to let followers connect with the brands. A good example of posts within this classification can be found in a post by Starbucks España the picture is centered on its new frappuccino and the caption too, "The new #CookieandCreamFrappuccino is already here with one of your favorite flavor and plenty of extra summer. #WithExtraVerano."

Stories related to brand

By describing short topics, situations, recommendations, or by using short videos brands create a story related to their products or services with the aim of catching followers' interest. Netflix achieves a quite interesting storyline in one of its posts with the caption "welcome to the Netflix's Holiday Movie Universe, an interconnected world of eight films (and counting) where anyone could become a princess and your soul mate may be hiding in plain sight — or the past". A catchy way to promote movies produced by this giant of entertainment.

Contests

Within this type of action brands encourage followers to perform activities that promote the products or that nurture the relationship brand-fans. These activities offer followers the chance to win a reward for their participation and commitment with the activity. Starbucks España perform draws where fans need to follow Starbucks' Instagram account and mention a friend in the comments (by using @ plus friends' account) to get the chance of winning special cups for beverages. An interesting way to promote the brand and gain more followers.

Fan-generated content

This type of action is meant to promote an active participation of the followers in generating content where the brand is the central topic. This content is somehow awarded by posting it in the the brand's Instagram account. This is an increasing way to promote a more intimate relationship brand-fans, generate engagement, not mentioning the chance that brands have to get low-cost and valuable material for future posts. Audi has a special section within its account to post pictures sent by followers with nice angle of their cars.

Social responsibility

With an increasing sense of social responsibility from many stakeholders, brands are not falling behind in promoting activities regarding recycling, re-usage, renewable energy, or social causes. These activities offer brands the chance to speak out and show their values and mission. These actions open the door of tight bonds with fans. Starbucks offers a discount to clients who use its branded re-usable mugs when buying coffee.

Knowledge

This type of action is carried out by brands to provide information about topics related to the category of the product and increase the knowledge of the followers. Starbucks has a very useful section in its Instagram account, specifically in Insta-stories. This section called Barista contains videos dedicated to teach fans how to taste coffee, the so-called coffee cupping.

Sponsor

In this type of actions brands promote activities or events that they are sponsoring. This is a type of actions that are commonly seen in sport brands and sponsored competitions. Audi sponsors the AFI Fest, the longest-running international film festival in Los Angeles and a qualifying festival

for the Short Films category of the annual Academy Awards, the Oscars. Audi not only promotes this art-related activity but also its prestige as a brand.

Utilitarian

This type of action encompasses Brands' content specifically generated for the fans to use it. This utilitarian content can be found from wallpapers, pictures, video clips to even apps related to the product /service or business category. While followers can take advantage of it, brands can use to built more proximity with their fans. Netflix provide to its followers wallpapers for smartphones of its TV series, satisfying its fans' need of having a nice souvenir of their favorite programs and actors. Audi does something similar by providing attractive pictures of its car models.

Interactive

With this type of action brands take the participation of followers to another level where content is generated specifically for a more lively interaction through quizzes or questions related to products. Instagram offers several useful features specifically built for this purpose and facilitate brands to perform these actions easily. These activities promote engagement and participation of followers and can be useful to get insights about fans' preferences. Netflix has included sections in its Instagram account dedicated to these kind of activities.

Responsive

This type of interaction might sound very basic but not all brands are performing it. Here, brands are responding to their followers' comments. It can go from a simple message of gratitude for a nice comment to an apologize for any inconvenience related to product. This action makes fans feel more connected to brands and promote a strong relationship since they feel they are being listened and their opinion is valuable for brands. Starbucks and Netflix are performing very well this kind of activities, particularly Netflix that has a very friendly and spontaneous way of replying to its fans. (follower: Can't wait to watch when I get off work tonight. Netflix' answer: hope you enjoy, it's on fire.

3.2 Fans' reactions on Instagram

The analysis of the data and rounds of coding gave as result 8 different type of reactions from the side of the fans of brands, more known as followers in the context of Instagram. A very basic action that a user of this social media can perform is to *follow*. Nevertheless, since this research is focus on the interaction between fans and brands, the author is not including it based on the logic that a user becomes a fan when they follow a brand's account. That said, following the scheme used in the previous section of brands' actions, here is presented the typology of fans' actions and the main features portraying each of them. Appendix 3 provides graphical examples of the actual interaction of fans belonging to following typology.

Liking

This is one of the most common reactions that fans can perform within Instagram to express their sympathy towards brands. Fans can like videos, pictures and comments that are part of a post.

Advocate

This type of reaction is represented by positive feedback in the form of comments supporting brands' content or statements. Fans can highlight brands' good qualities, suggest to others a particular brand, and even take part in a discussion to defend it. This reaction reveals a high degree of engagement towards brands. Very often followers are using small digital images or icons, so-called emoticons, to express their brand advocacy.

Antagonist

On the opposite side to the Advocate reaction is the Antagonist. This type of reaction encompasses negative feedback to the content shared by the brand in the form of comments to criticize, complain and somehow discredit brands due to quality, policies or believes. Different from an advocate reaction, antagonism is expressed mainly through comments than emoticons.

Hash tagging

For this type of reaction fans are using the hashtag symbol (#) into their comments that are part of the posts to include topics related to brand's account, name or product. Fans can follow specific hashtags to receive the most relevant posts that contain this particular hash tagged topic. A perfect way that followers find to connect with their favorite topics and show their preferences to the rest of members within this digital community.

Sharing

Within this reaction, fans have the opportunity to connect with brands or other Instagram users by sharing a post. There are two main ways that fans can share content. First, fans can tag other users or brands using the symbol @, better known as tagging, and those that are tagged will receive a notification and will be able to see the post. Tags can be added within comments, pictures or videos belonging to a post. Second way of sharing can be done by using the built-in options of sending a post directly to other users or reposting the content in Insta stories, or in other social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Messenger). Instagram has a built-in section dedicated for this matter. All the posts made by fans that include tags (@) will appear in the account of the tagged brand within this section.

Doubts

When fans have some questions regarding a product, service, promotion, functionality or any topics related to a brand, they can find on Instagram a fast channel to solve these doubts by writing down them in the comments section. Fans can use tags to involve directly to the brand or other users. Actually, in many cases these doubts are answered by other users which in turn reinforce the sense of community around brands.

Participant

This action is defined by fans' involvement and participation in activities that brands are promoting to take part of. These activities like contests, challenges, quizzes, questions require an action from followers. Therefore, those individuals engaging in these activities can be clustered under this classification. Starbucks España encourages its followers to share its content with other users to be able to take part in draws to win different prizes from cups of coffee or breakfast for two to books.

Collector

This classification encompasses actions that involve followers making use of content generated by brands. Saving a post to check its content later on, downloading a wallpaper to install it on a smartphone, or an app to apply filters in pictures; lie on this type of fans' reaction. Starbucks provide their followers with interactive filters that they can be applied to videos to replace human faces with cups of frappuccinos or promote Spotify playlists of ideal songs to enjoy along with coffee. A very catchy way to strengthen bonds with fans and promote a brand.

3.3 How does the brand meaning co-creation process occur on Instagram?

The results of this study show that brand meaning co-creation process is the result of the interaction between brands and fans who are involved in common interests and motives, where both parties are performing actions that influence how brands are perceived. First, the process starts with brand managers as the originators of the content that will convey the different messages to their audience depending on the chosen strategy. Brands can generate content focused on their salient features aiming to communicate added-value and an identity. Also, brand managers can go beyond and generate content based on the preferences and topics that consumers are more attached to. Once the themes and content are generated, brands are performing 10 different type of actions through their Instagram account. Second, actions performed by brands trigger a response from audience that can react in 8 main ways towards what brand is communicating. Finally, each fan's reaction is driven by an inner motivation that is linked to one or more facets of brand identity, which in turn can reinforce or reshape the meaning of the communication intended by brands. Thus, not only brand managers, but also fans are capable to shape what a brand represents.

Hereafter, the propositions about how the interaction of fans are connected with the facets of brand and what represents are detailed. These propositions are based on the theoretical frame presented in chapter 1 and supported by the results of real users' opinion and perception about their own experience while interacting with brands on Instagram. The details of numerical results of the survey can be seen in Appendix 1. A total of 156 respondents took part in the survey and the results show that the gender distribution between Instagram users is relatively even with slightly more female than male presence, 58.9% and 41.1% respectively. Majority of respondents are in the age range of 26 to 35 years old. Also, among Instagram users, more than 72% are following brands in this social network. Due to the fact that some fans' interactions might involve more than one meaning generated, the following interpretation considers those that are predominant in each facet of the brand. The author considered better to start from the reactions that encompass less degree of fan's involvement and escalate to those that represent more engagement towards brands or the discussion around them.

Liking is one of the most basic reactions that fans can have towards brands' posts. When fans give a like to a posted content, they are evaluating the features of the brand. This perception of the brand as an appealing object or not is related to meanings associated with the physical facet of brand (see Figure 3). Also, fans can find attractive the way of communication of a brand, how the

brand is conveying a message and the resources used for this purpose. Thus, liking is associated to meanings that are related to the personality facet of a brand.

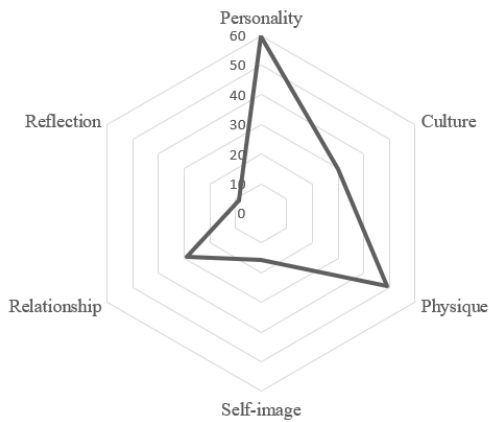


Figure 3. Brand meanings co-created within the “Liking” type of interaction on Instagram

Source: Author’s figure based on data from Appendix 1

Sharing offers fans, the possibility to express a higher degree of connection and affinity that they can feel towards brands’ content comparing to a simple like. Fans are not only enchanted by the the way of communication of a brand, but also they can perceive that what a brand is communicating fulfil their needs, and endorses somehow their reality and believes. By sharing brand’s content, fans are spreading these messages and helping generate meanings related not only with personality and physical facet, but also those linked to the relationship and cultural facet of a brand as depicted in Figure 4.

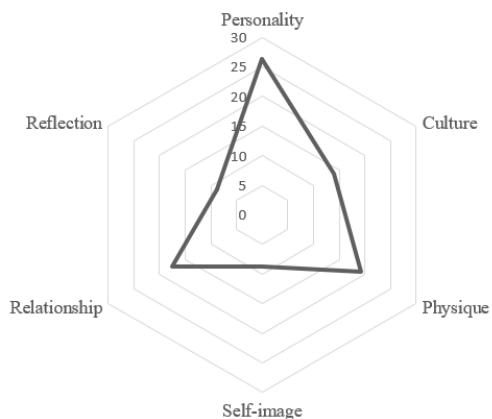


Figure 4. Brand meanings co-created within the “Sharing” type of interaction on Instagram

Source: Author’s figure based on data from Appendix 1

Product doubts arise when fans are looking for clarification regarding brand products or services. Fans are showing their interest in the visible attributes of the product and an intention of consumption since they can have the chance of fulfilling a need. In a Starbucks’ post containing image of its new blackberry mojito green tea and one fan ask “what are the prize and available sizes for this beverage?”, there is no necessarily a real commitment yet about acquiring the product, but this give the brand the chance for customer loyalty. Figure 5 portrays how this curiosity behind asking questions to solve product doubts generate meanings strongly attached to the physical facet, and in less degree to the personality facet.

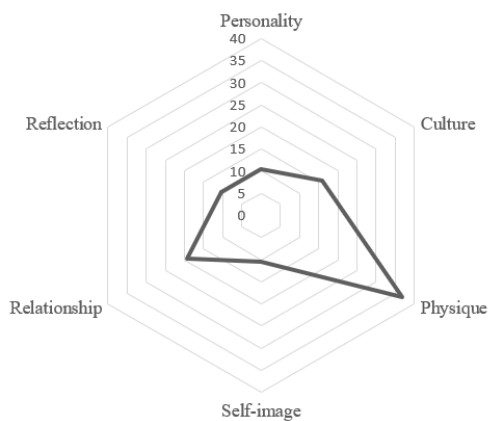


Figure 5. Brand meanings co-created within the “Product doubts” type of interaction on Instagram
Source: Author’s figure based on data from Appendix 1

Collector depicts a sense connection where brand content is matching fan’s expectations, preferences, and they are willing to make use of what brands share with them. Netflix provide wallpapers of its movies and series for fans to download them who are willing to use them and have sort of a souvenir of their favorite actors/ characters. These are meanings related to the physical and relationship facets. Starbucks give the opportunity to fans to use special filter to make videos more interactive and replace faces for branded cups of coffee. Fans are willing to use them and express this creativity, to expose who they are or represent when using brand content; meanings mainly related to the facet of relationship and in lesser degree to self-image facet as Figure 6 shows.

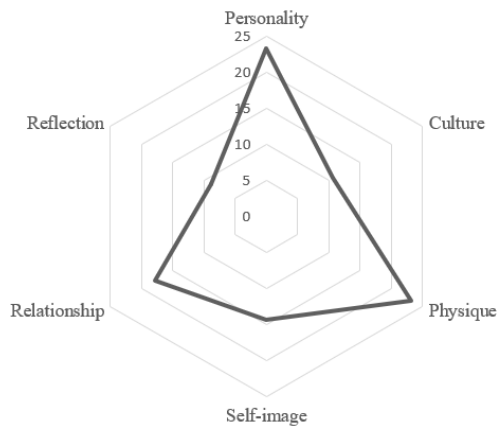


Figure 6. Brand meanings co-created within the “Collector” type of interaction on Instagram

Source: Author’s figure based on data from Appendix 1

Advocate and **antagonist** are truly engaged with what they believe and follow beyond a simple like or indifference. These kind of fans have reached a special connection at the point of standing for what brands are communicating or reject what they believe brands are doing wrong. A follower complained about the fact that Starbucks is still using plastic cups and contributing to more pollution, another fan replied like “Starbucks has reusable cups and besides offer discount when you buy your beverage in this cup. They are acting on the solution already”. The first party feels rejection and discomfort towards the firm’s policies, becoming an antagonist of the brand. The second one shows selfless interest of defending the brand denoting not only a sense of belonging, but also compatibility of values and believes between fans and brands. This interaction generates meanings strongly linked to the personality and cultural facets in lesser extent as represented in Figure 7. Also, positive or negatives comments are led by the fans’ experience regarding performance of products and satisfaction they provide, denoting meanings connected to physical and relationship facets of the brand.

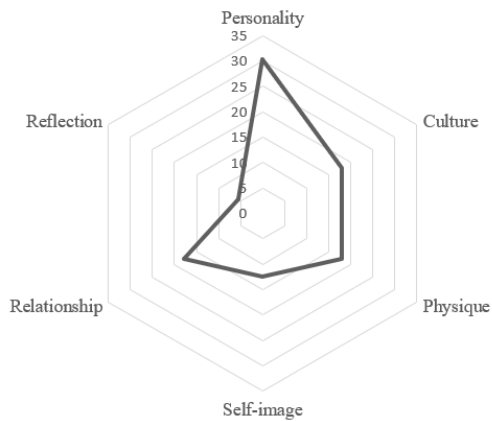


Figure 7. Brand meanings co-created within the “Advocate/Antagonist” type of interaction
 Source: Author’s figure based on data from Appendix 1

Participants are fans taking part on interactive activities promoted by brands (e.g. draws, challenges, quizzes), and results show they are willing to do it because what they mainly pursue is a reward to satisfy themselves, or easy access to brands products/services. Starbucks’ fans can tag their friends only motivated by the fact that they can win their favorite coffee for free. This motivation is linked to meanings related to the physical and relationship facets of the brand (see Figure 8). On the other hand, fans can be caught up by the appeal and style of brand’s communication. Netflix knows how to attract fans to take part on quick quizzes about movies, series, scenes, topics that fans are in devoted to. This mainly generates meanings related to the personality facet of the brand.

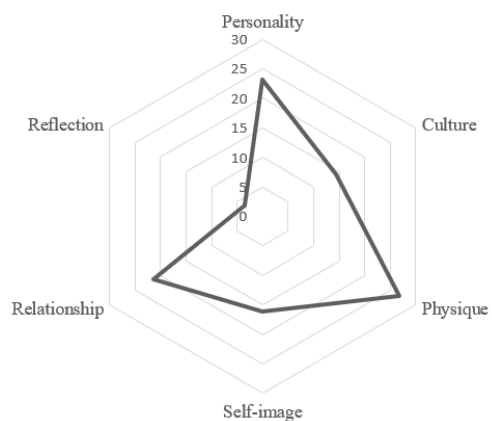


Figure 8. Brand meanings co-created within the “Participant” type of interaction on Instagram
 Source: Author’s figure based on data from Appendix 1

Hash-tagging is a demonstration that a brand represents the fans' ideals and expectations. Fans are also willing to include the brand's name in their posts because they feel connected and identified with the way brands talk and even the values that brands stand for. These traits represent meanings related to brand facets of relationship, personality and culture as depicted in Figure 9.

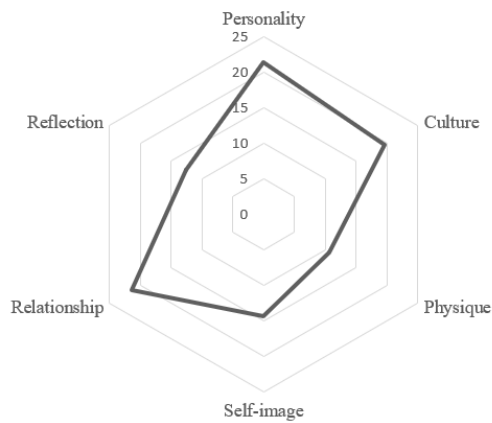


Figure 9. Brand meanings co-created within the “Hash-tagging” type of interaction on Instagram
Source: Author’s figure based on data from Appendix 1

Besides, results show fans want to project their own image through their favorite brands, and to a lesser degree reach somehow the idealistic stereotype of a brand's user. A fan posting a picture next to an Audi car and using the hash tag #audi as part of the caption wants to show other users an affinity with the brand, a link with a life style, or perhaps project a personal identity. Thus, this interaction nurtures meanings related to self-image and reflection facets of the brand.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally, marketers were the owners of what a brand communicates, what a brand represents, and how brands' image should be perceived. However, in the current ecosystem of communication the consumers are playing a more critical role that marketers can not neglect anymore.

Nowadays, social networks have gained an increasing relevance for the communication and construction of brands. These platforms within digital environment provide audiences with a vast and free space to interact and discuss with brands and virtual communities, impacting the way that brands are perceived. Instagram has been evolving in such a pace that currently it has become the second most used social network by marketers and firms have realized its potential to market their brands pursuing not only a positive impact in sales volume, but also its position in consumers' mind. Within this social network, fans' interaction is exercising such an influence that they are capable to give to a brand the meaning they consider more attached to their reasoning and close to their reality.

Hence, this study was intended to find out what is happening throughout the environment of Instagram regarding the interaction between brands and fans, and how this is affecting the meaning of brands and their identity. Regarding how the brand meaning co-creation process is happening on Instagram, the results of the study conclude that it occurs first with brand managers creating content aligned with the firms' strategy. They are generating it in a product-centric or customer-centric approach, and carrying out 10 main type of actions (Product/Service, Stories, Contests, Fan-generated content, Social responsibility, Knowledge, Sponsor, Utilitarian, Interactive, and Responsive). Once these actions are displayed, fans start to interact with brands and other fans performing 8 main reactions (Liking, Advocate, Antagonist, Sharing, Hash-tagging, Product doubts, Participant, and Collector) to influence, consciously or not, on brands' perception. Finally, these reactions driven by an inner motivation are linked to one or more facets of brand identity, which in turn can reinforce or reshape what a brand means for fans in a so-called co-creating process.

The results of the study showed that majority of the fans' reactions are linked to the physical, personality and relationship facets of the brand identity. These facets are characterized by traits related to visible features of brands, appealing of communication style, and fulfilment of needs. This can be attributed to the fact that Instagram is a social network where visual and creative aspect of content plays a huge role, where users interact to relieve tension, spend spare time and pursue social validation. Thus, the author considers imperative that brand managers should focus on generating content and actions not only centered in products, but also in fans' interests along with creative and appealing ways to do it. Starbucks is able to generate more likes, comments and shares around their posts by telling a story that involves idealistic situations related to coffee consumption (e.g. your perfect breakfast for a summer break with friends and the best cappuccino) and portraying an enjoyable experience. On the other hand, Audi might generate less interaction around some of its posts by focusing only in image and a brief description of its model. Evidently, every brand has its own peculiarities and faces different challenges when it comes about generating attractive communication actions.

In this research 3 different brands belonging to 3 different business categories were studied, which represents a limitation to extrapolate results over different categories, reason why, as mentioned in the chapter 3, the author is not proposing a universal classification of brands' actions and fans' reactions. However, this helps provide the starting point for further discussion and draw more attention for future broader studies in order to comprehend if this can be replicated across different business categories.

Currently the market offers several Instagram analytic tools to measure the performance of brands on this social network. Sprout Social, Hootsuite, Iconosquare, or Instagram itself, offer the possibility to analyze different metrics about the performance of the content posted by brands. These metrics (e.g. measuring followers growth, number of followers redirected to webpage, demographic breakdowns, popular hashtags, how many comments or likes a post generates) are focus mainly on a quantitative performance, very important of course because the ultimate goal for many brands is to sell. Nevertheless, the author considers brands should not neglect the qualitative side of their performance on Instagram, to be aware of what kind of emotional reaction are causing on followers, or how the relationship with them is being nurture. Thus, the author also believes this study can be useful as a reference to generate an additional tool for scholars and professional in marketing to identify which facets of identity are more present in a particular brand and what meanings are being created. By identifying what actions are performed, what reactions

are triggered, and what meanings are generated, marketers can focus on replicate and enhance them in order to drive this interaction to the desired identity of brands on Instagram.

Furthermore, future studies can be carried out to find out how fans-brands interaction is shaping brands within other social networks like Twitter, LinkedIn, Youtube, or Pinterest, and considering some features are shared between them, a cross-network approach might be proposed.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Online questionnaire and results

QUESTIONS	% OF RESPONSES
1. What is your gender?	
Female	58.9%
Male	41.1%
2. What is your age?	
15-25	43.8%
26-35	53.4%
36-45	2.8%
46 & up	0%
3. Are you a user of Instagram?	
Yes (continue to the next question)	91.8%
No (end of the questionnaire. Thank you)	8.2%
4. Do you follow any brand on Instagram?	
Yes (continue to the next question)	73.9%
No (end of the questionnaire. Thank you)	26.1%

Appendix 1 continued

5. If you give a “like” to any post of a brand that you follow (e.g. like to the picture, video or comment), which of the following statements represent your motivation to do it? (up to 3 options)

I like the style that brand uses to express or communicate features and benefits	59.6%
The brand and its communication are close to my values or culture	29.8%
I am attracted by the visible attributes of the brand	49.1%
I want to project my own image through the use of the brand	15.8%
The brand is matching my needs and expectations	28.1%
I want to fit more into the image of the brand’s user that people have in mind	8.8%
I don’t give likes to brands on Instagram	12.3%

6. If you use hashtags (e.g. #audi, #netflix) in your posts to include the brands of your preference, which of the following statements represent your motivation to do it? (up to 3 options)

I like the style that brand uses to express or communicate features and benefits	21.4%
The brand and its communication are close to my values or culture	19.6%
I am attracted by the visible attributes of the brand	10.7%
I want to project your own image through the use of the brand	14.3%
The brand is matching my needs and expectations	21.4%
I want to fit more into the image of the brand’s user that people have in mind	12.5%
I don’t use hashtags of brands	55.4%

7. If you share or repost the post of a brand you follow, which of the next statements represent your motivation to do it? (choose up to 3 answers)

I like the style that brand uses to express or communicate features and benefits	26.3%
The brand and its communication are close to my values or culture	14%
I like the tangible attributes of the brand	19.3%
I want to project my own image through the use of the brand	8.8%
The brand is matching my needs and expectations	17.5%
I want to fit more into the image of the brand’s user that people have in mind	8.8%
I don’t share posts of brands	54.4%

Appendix 1 continued

8. If you ask a question related to the product or service of a brand on Instagram (e.g. where can I find a Starbucks in Madrid?/ what is the price of new Audi A6?), you ask because of which of the next reasons? (up to 3 options)

I like the style that brand uses to express or communicate features and benefits	10.5%
I want to know if the brand is close to my principles and values	15.8%
I am interested in the product itself and the possibility to get it	36.8%
I want to know if the product will meet my own image	10.5%
I want to know if the product can fulfil my needs and expectations	19.3%
I am interested because of the reputation that you can get by using the brand	10.5%
I have not asked question related to brands' products on Instagram	45.6%

9. If you make use of content provided by the brands you follow (e.g. download the wallpapers of TV series provided by Netflix / download the new filter for videos in Insta stories provided by Starbucks), what are the motives for you to consume these content? (up to 3 options)

I like the style that brand uses to express or communicate features and benefits	23.2%
The brand and its communication are close to my values or culture	10.7%
I like the visible attributes of the brand or its product	23.2%
I want to project my own image through the use of the brand	14.3%
The brand is matching my needs and expectations	17.9%
I want to fit more into the image of the brand's user that people have in mind	8.9%
I don't use, save or download content of brands on Instagram	55.4%

10. If you praise or criticize a post of a brand, if you defend the brand from critics or support critics (e.g. Audi is a bad imitation of BMW / Netflix is producing great series lately), which of the following reasons motivates you to do it? (up to 3 options)

I like (dislike) the style of the brand to express messages or benefits	30.4%
The brand and its communication are (not) close to my values or culture	17.9%
I like (dislike) the visible attributes of the brand or its product	17.9%
I can (not) project my own image through the defense of the brand	12.5%
The brand is (not) matching my needs and expectations	17.9%
I would (not) like to fit into the image of the brand's user that people have in mind	5.4%
I don't take part in defending or criticizing brands on Instagram	53.6%

Appendix 1 continued

11. If you take part on activities promoted by brands within Instagram that require your active participation like draws, challenges, quizzes (e.g. tag your friend to participate in a draws to win free breakfast in Starbucks / answer quick questions on Insta stories about your favorite character of the new Netflix series / moving the bar of the meter to show how much you like a picture), what of the following represent a motivation to take part on this? (up to 3 options)

I love the style and the way the brand is organizing or carrying out these activities	23.2%
The brand and its communication are close to my values or culture	14.3%
I am only interested in activities where I can get a tangible reward	26.8%
I want to project my self through an active participation in these brand activities	16.1%
The brand is matching my needs and expectations	21.4%
I would like to fit more into the image of the brand's user that people have in mind	3.6%
I don't take part in these kind of interaction on Instagram	53.6%

Appendix 2. Examples of the different types of brands' actions proposed in this research

Product/Service



starbucks_es • Siguiendo

starbucks_es • El nuevo #CookieandCreamFrappuccino ya está aquí con uno de tus sabores favoritos y mucho extra de verano! #ConExtradeVerano

21 sem

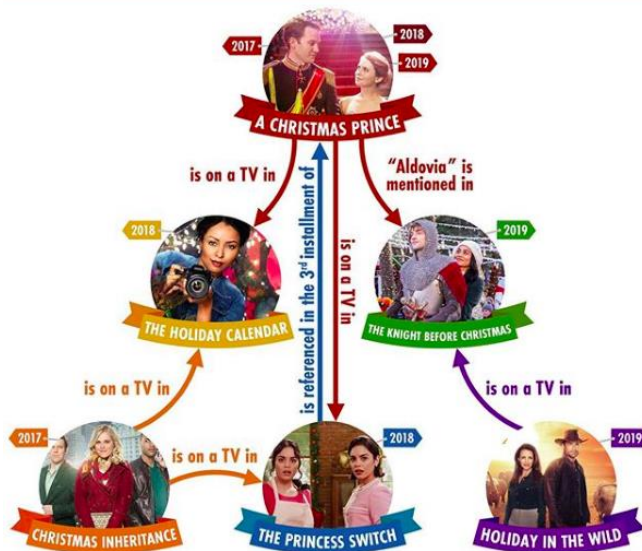
Translation

The new #CookieandCreamFrappuccino is already here with one of your favorite flavors and plenty of extra summer! #WithExtraVerano

Les gusta a zoelhi y personas más

Stories

NETFLIX'S HOLIDAY MOVIE UNIVERSE



netflix • Siguiendo

netflix • welcome to the Netflix's Holiday Movie Universe, an interconnected world of eight films (and counting) where anyone could become a princess and your soulmate may be hiding in plain sight — or the past...

1 sem

httplovelydani i just watched all the christmas prince movies, had a little marathon and ended with the 3rd installment and it was just amazing

1 sem 84 Me gusta

Responder

Ver respuestas (5)

Les gusta a netflixfilm y personas más

HACE 7 DÍAS

Añade un comentario...

Publicar

Appendix 2 continued

Contests



starbucks_es • Siguiendo

starbucks_es • ¡SORTEO!
Participa y llévate este termo Cold Cup para tus bebidas frías, sorteamos 5! Participar es muy fácil:

Translation

¡DRAW! Participate and win this Cold Cup for your cold beverages, we raffle 5! Participating is very easy:

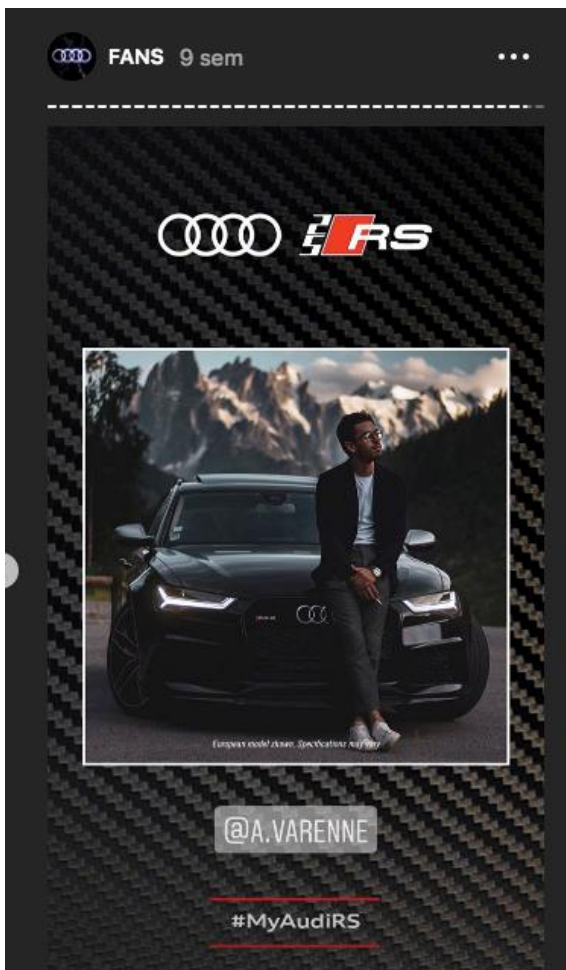
de junio anunciaremos el ganador en stories, mucha suerte!

Y si no os lo lleváis... ¡lo tenemos a la venta en nuestras tiendas! Recordad que si traéis éste o vuestro propio termo reutilizable a termos es

Les gusta a daveaiman y personas más

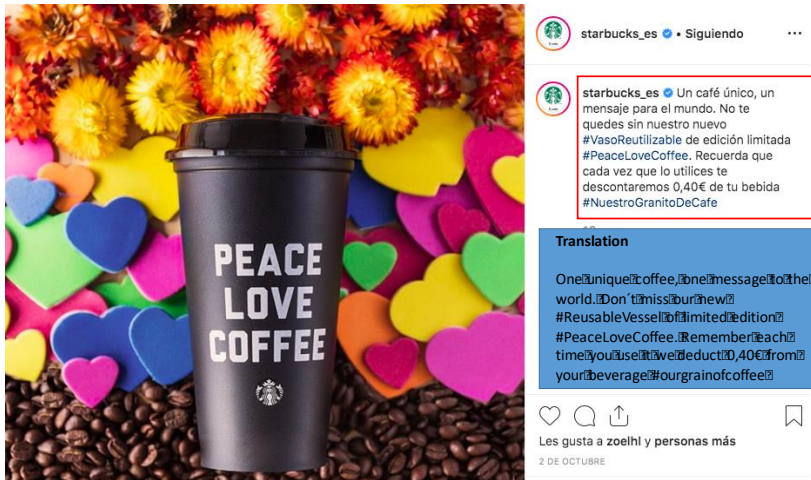
13 DE JUNIO

Fan-generated content

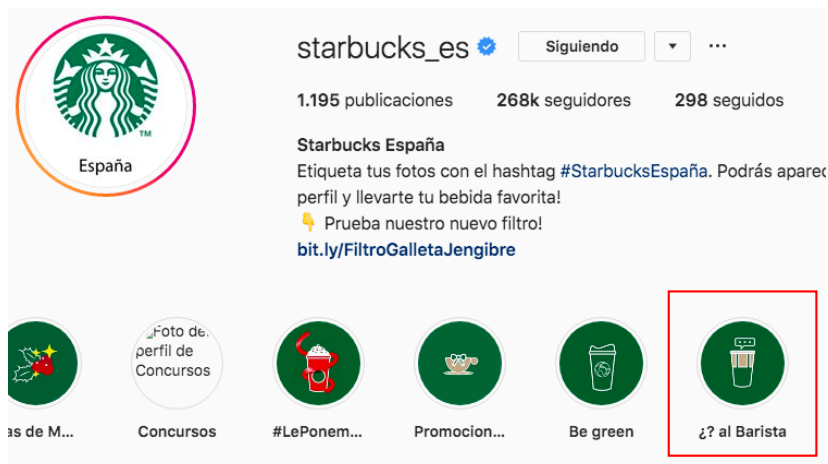


Appendix 2 continued

Social responsibility



Category Knowledge/educational

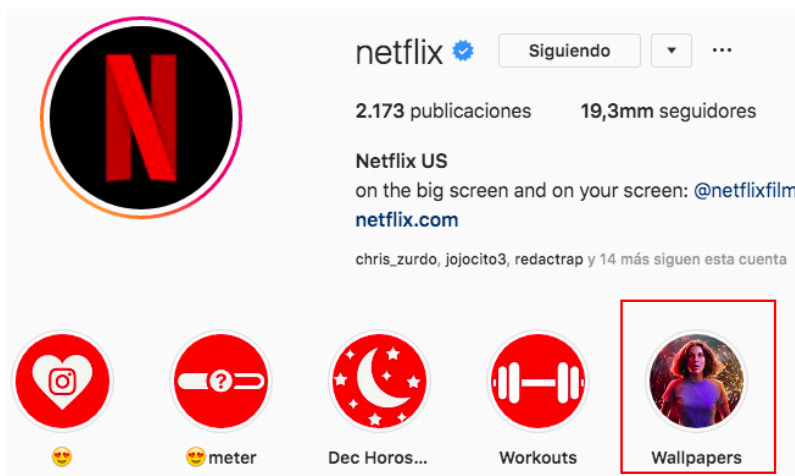


Sponsorship

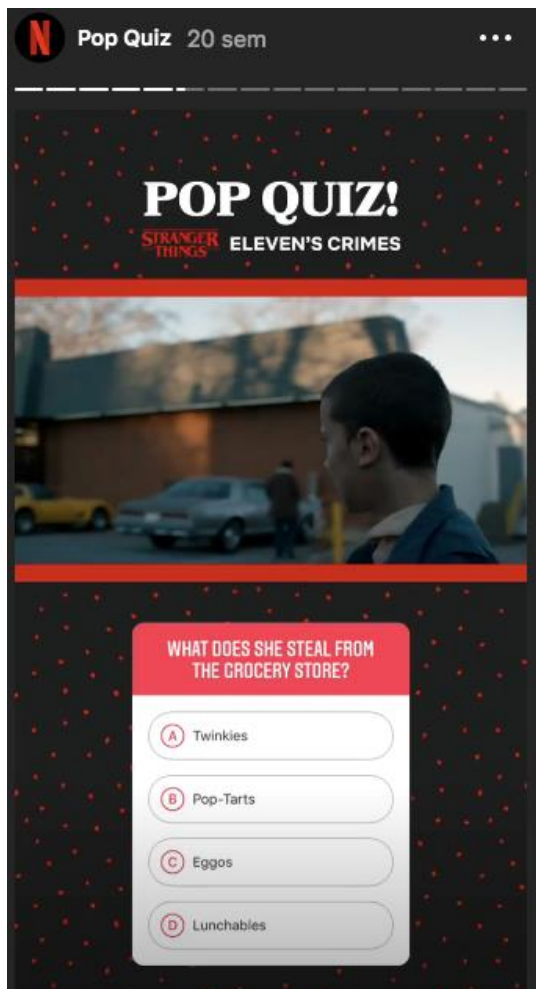


Appendix 2 continued

Utilitarian



Interactive



Appendix 2 continued

Responsive



 **netflix**  • Siguiendo ...

 **silverback_pidg** Can't wait to watch when I get off work tonight ♡

2 sem 5 Me gusta
Responder
[Ocultar respuestas](#)

 **netflix**  [@silverback_pidg](#) hope you enjoy, it's 🍷 ♡

Les gusta a alexjsimons y personas más

Appendix 3. Examples of the different types of fans' reactions proposed in this research

Liking




Advocate



Appendix 3 continued

Antagonist



audi • Siguiendo

10 sem Responder

tutubizzle @eu.lucaxx

10 sem 1 Me gusta Responder

creepthis @audiofficial retroactively increased my car buyout to match the insurance payout from a total loss, in order to be the ones that would legally receive my insurance money that was intended to get me into a new car. What a corrupt practice. #corrupt #insurancefraud #audi #vw

9 sem Responder

Ver respuestas (2)

Les gusta a **quattroculturepierre** y personas más

20 DE SEPTIEMBRE

Hash tagging



_4Anthony • Seguir
Bayern, Germany

_4Anthony All New RS6 be like 🏎️

@_4Anthony

#audi #audisport #audirs6 #love #quattro #bayern #rs6 #buttlantis #carstagram #driver #cars #street #luxurycars #cargram #carporn #nürnberg #instaphoto #carsofinstagram #speed #power #horsepower

17 h

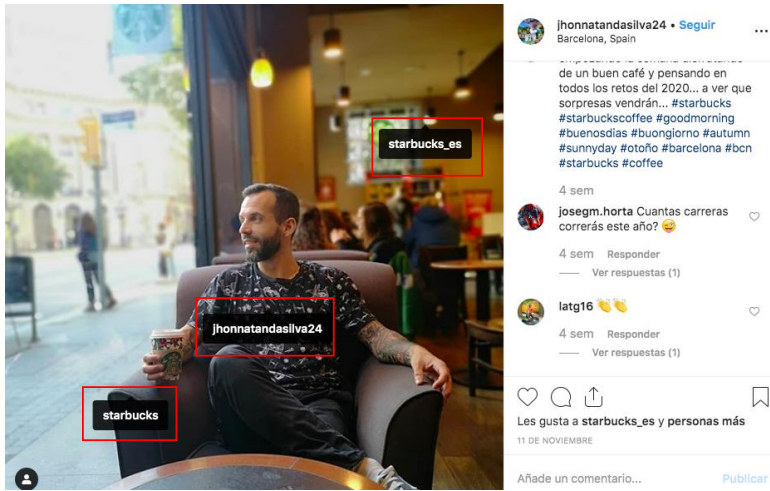
the.supercar.lifestyle Awesome shot Anthony! Love the new RS6 🏎️

Les gusta a **the.supercar.lifestyle** y personas más

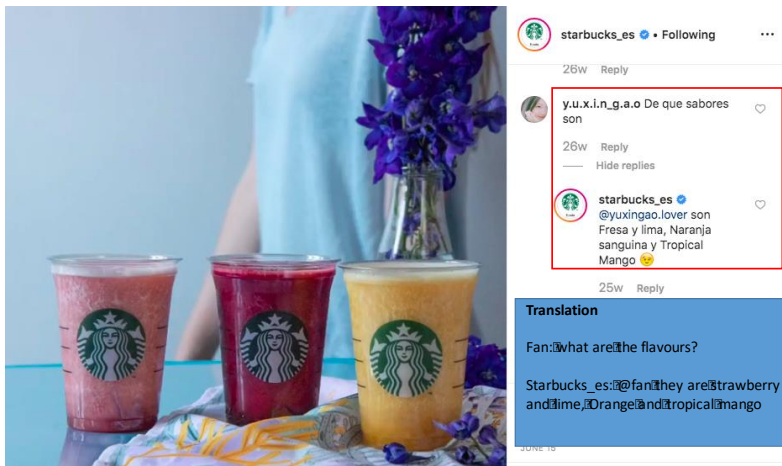
HACE 17 HORAS

Appendix 3 continued

Sharing



Doubts



Participant



Appendix 3 continued

Collector



Translation

Swipe and follow our new playlist in Spotify *Aroma de café* with a selection of your songs!

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