

Evaluating brands in online communities: it's not just a matter of engagement

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Objectives. *The paper proposes an analytical approach that explores brands in virtual environments by combining indicators of consumer brand alignment with measurements of social engagement. The results illustrated can be useful to devise adjustments to brand communication. The analysis is applied to brands belonging to the fashion industry.*

The life of a brand is both physical and virtual; it is arising more and more in online markets, where it seeks to unfold all its relational potential (Aaker, 1999). Brands are experienced in virtual consumer communities which are interactive places populated by consumers who share information, perceptions and, thus, also sensations (Szmigin et al., 2005). Collecting these data can be useful for companies that need to understand and analyze consumer behaviors and their feelings about brands (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2011). A topic investigated in recent studies (Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Brodie et al., 2013) is the engagement that a brand produces among consumers. It is seen as the level of a customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment in specific consumer/brand interactions (Hollebeck, 2011, p. 6). If investigated in online contexts, this engagement can take on, according to Mollen and Wilson (2010), the form of cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the company website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value (p. 5). The cognitive engagement identifies "the consumer's level of brand-related thought processing and elaboration in a particular consumer/brand interaction", while the emotional engagement concerns the "consumer's degree of positive brand related affect in a particular consumer/brand interaction". The behavioral engagement, finally, can be defined as "a consumer's level of energy, effort and time spent" interacting with a brand (Hollebeck et al., 2014, p. 154). All these are closely interrelated but the latter kind of engagement most attracts businesses' interests. Nowadays there is a diffusion of monitoring platforms that measure the general engagement that a brand generates on the web and thus, how much online consumers are talking about it. However, these data alone are not able to offer companies an adequate level of detail necessary to take effective brand decisions (Murdough, 2009). They should be compared with others information in order to allow for interpret them in an objective way. These information might concern the alignment between the brand as it is perceived by consumers and the brand as it is defined by the company. They could be obtained through interdisciplinary research methods applied to online communities (Crawford Camiciottoli et al., 2014).

In this paper we illustrate how to build specific indicators of brand alignment by exploring online communities and how to use them in a combined way with data on the related brand social engagement (resulting from Talkwalker and Social Mention) in order to provide information that can serve to adequate orient branding policies. We focus the analysis on the traits of brand personality and thus on the "set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347) that makes the brand a "brand persona" (Herskovitz and Crystal, 2010). Moreover the context of the analysis is the world of fashion. Here, the online communities are digital platforms where consumers interact intensively and animate discussions exchanging ideas and information (Boyd et al., 2007; Rickman and Cosenza, 2007).

Methodology. *The analytical approach we used to determine the indicators of brand alignment to be combined with data on the engagement that a brand produces online was inspired to an interdisciplinary approach that has recently emerged in marketing literature (Crawford Camiciottoli et al., 2014; Ranfagni et al., 2016). It follows netnographic rules to identify and collect digital texts (Kozinets, 2002) and uses the quantitative techniques of text mining to extract linguistic data (Witten, 2005). As indicated by it, we followed the following steps.*

(i) The selection of a sample of brands for study. We focused on those found in the fashion blog Style.com and in the social media monitoring tools Talkwalker and Social Mention. We made an explorative analysis on ten brands .

(ii) The collection of data involved two sources, one external and one internal. The external source consists of texts written by consumers and posted on the Syle.com blog. These texts were chosen as they had an excellent

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performance record in terms of data traffic, membership and links; moreover, the posts and comments were archived for extended periods of time (from August 2008 through August 2015). The internal source, on the other hand, consisted of texts contained in the digital spaces created and maintained by the company, such as the company's website and Facebook page, which provide descriptions of the brand personality.

(iii) The text files contained in the company and consumer datasets were then subjected to the analytical text-mining procedures (Swales and Burke, 2003). As Ranfagni, Crawford and Faraoni (2016) show, we used these procedures to isolate and extract the adjectives derivable from the basic features of brand personality proposed by Aaker (1997). Technically, the adjectives were subjected to a process of grammatical tagging (using the software CLAWS4) that labels each word according to grammatical function (for example VV for verb, JJ for adjective and AT for article). Then, through another software (WordSmith Tools and Scott 2010) we extracted from the files all the words tagged JJ together with the sentences in which they occur. We decided to discard from the analysis the adjectives not related to the brand as well as those that were neutral or not significant (those relating to color, size, dimension and nationality). The list of adjective types for each brand was set against the personality adjectives occurring in the respective blog files. This comparison was facilitated and made systematic with the help of another software program, AntConc (Anthony, 2011), which allows the researcher to carry out automatic searches for more than one adjective within a predefined language corpus. Table 1 shows the brands investigated, the number of adjective types communicated by the company (section A), the number of words per blog file, the number of shared adjective types that also consumers use and the number of times consumers associates each adjective type to the brand (section B).

(iv) On the basis of these data we produced the resulting indicators of consumer brand personality alignment (CBPA). These are the consumer brand personality matching (CBPM) (Ranfagni et al., 2016) and the brand personality coverage BPC(CP/CN) (Ranfagni et al., 2016). The CBPM relates for each brand the number of shared adjectives to the number words composing the blog files and then normalizing the resulting value by 1000. The higher the values of the CBPM, the greater the number of adjectives in common that occur at least once per 1000 words of text produced by consumers. It is a vertical measurement of the brand matching. The BPC(CP/CN) evaluates how much the adjective types adopted by consumers overlap with the adjective types used by the company in its brand communication. It emerges by comparing the BPC(CP), which measures the numerousness of the adjective types per 1000 words of the blog files, in the event all the adjective types used by the company were also used by the consumers in their brand narrations, and the BPC(CN), which calculates the numerousness of shared adjective types per 1000 words of the blog file. The resulting differential value once is related to BPC(CP) determines the value of BPC(CP/CN). The more this value is low, the more the adjective types recognized by the consumer cover the variety of the adjectives used by the company in brand communication. It is a horizontal measurement of the brand matching. The combination of the CBPM and of the BPC (CP/CN) produces four situations where different levels of vertical alignment (how much is the alignment) are combined with different level of horizontal alignment (on what the alignment is).

(v) Subsequently, the values of the CBPM and BCP(CP/CN) were enriched by the measurements of social engagement (SE) extracted from the platforms Talkwalker and Social Mention. Each of them measures the social engagement in different ways. Talkwalker includes "blogs; news sites; forums; number of Facebook likes + number of comments on the article + number of shares on Facebook of the URL + number of tweets on Twitter of the URL; Facebook: sum of shares, likes and comments; Twitter: number of retweets; Instagram: sum of likes and comments" (www.talkwalker.com). Social Mention measures "the likelihood that a brand is being discussed in social media and comes from a very simple calculation: phrase mentions within the last 24 hours divided by total possible mentions" (www.socialmention.com). The data relative to the two measurements of social engagement were gathered in August 2015. Combining the results obtained by crossing CBPM and CBN(CP/CN) with the level of social engagement is possible to identify consequences in terms of brand communication.

Findings.

- Comparing consumer brand alignment indicators. From our analysis (table 1), it emerges that the values of the CBPM oscillate from a minimum of 0,95 for Alfa to a maximum of 5,165 for Eta. In general, considering all the CBPM values of the brands investigated, they may be reasonable grouped in low (0.90-1.09), medium-low (1.10-1.97), medium-high (1.98-3.17) and high (3.18-5.16). As regards the value of BPC(CP/CN), the results show that for the brand Iota the adjective types recognized by consumers cover the highest level of adjective types used by the company in its communication, while the correspondence is lower for the brand Beta. In addition to Iota, the cases in which the coverage gap of the adjective types is lower are those of Kappa (62.5%) and of Epsilon (63.15%). Considering that companies tend to speak about brand more on the web than on traditional media (Harris and Rae, 2010), the percentage levels of the lack of coverage CBPC(CP/CN) among the brands examined may be reasonable aggregated in the following way: high if above 81,42% (coverage attained below 18.58%); medium-high is in the range between 75.19% and 81.41% (coverage attained between 18.59% and 24.81%); medium-low if between 65.78% and 75.18% (coverage between 24.82% and 34.22%); low if below 65.77% (coverage above 34.23%). A first comparison may be made between the two kinds of CBPM indicators; this leads to the following diverse situations (figure 1).
 - (i.) Cognitive brand matching. High CBPM values are accompanied by low values of BPC(CP/CN) and thus of lacking coverage. The variety of brand language and the intensity with which company and consumers use it are similar. This is the situation in which the match between brand personality communicated and that perceived is at its highest (Delta, Epsilon, Kappa).

- (ii.) *Cognitive brand mismatching.* This includes those cases in which low CBPM values combine with high levels of lacking coverage. The number of brand personality adjectives that both company and consumers employ is low; then, these adjectives reflect a small part of the range of adjectives the company uses when it talks about brand (Alfa, Theta, Gamma).
 - (iii.) *Vertical brand matching.* In this case both CBPM and BPC(CP/CN) values are high. When consumers speak about the brand, they adopt with high frequency the personality adjectives that company communicates; but these common adjectives cover a low rate of the common adjective types. Consumers do not use the variety of personality adjectives the company uses (Beta, Zeta, Eta). The resulting brand image appears quite focalized.
 - (iv.) *Horizontal brand matching.* This involves low CBPM values combined with low BPC(CP/CN) values. Consumers speak about the brand making use with a low frequency of common personality adjectives, which cover, however, a considerable share of the adjective types employed by the company (Iota). The resulting brand image results quite defocused.
 - (v.) *The comparisons between the CBPM and BPC(CP/CN) indicators can be combined with the different levels of social engagement.*
- *Adding the measurements of social engagement.* On the basis of the data collected we have identified the following levels of social engagement: (a) high: the measurement of engagement of Talkwalker is greater than the value of 100,000 and/or that of Social Mention is above the level of 50% (Beta, Gamma, Theta.); (b) medium: the level of engagement provided by Talkwalker is between 10,000 and 100,000 and/or of Social Mention is between 30% and 50% (Alfa, Delta, Eta, Iota); and (c) low: the measurements resulting from Talkwalker and Social Mention are lower than those characterizing the medium level (Epsilon, Zeta, Kappa). Now we are going to show how the analysis of the consumer brand matching indicators together with the measurements of social engagement can help managers determine their branding policies. It is on this that attention is now focalize.

Research limits. *Our work is still explorative and inevitably must, to some extent, be refined; it is not, in other words, without its limits. One of these is that the value of engagement on social media is based on the analysis of data stemming from only two platforms, that is, Talkwalker and Social Mention. Moreover the extraction of data on the perception of brand personality is based solely on the blog style.com. In this case as well it would be advisable to widen the field of investigation to include other blogs and forums monitored by social platforms available on the web.*

Practical implications. *The use of social media as tools to communicate and to determine branding policies is by now more and more widespread among companies. Our analysis is focalized on online communities and produce specific managerial implications. It emerges that in case of cognitive brand matching and low or medium social engagement, it could be interesting to increase brand engagement on social media by developing specific brand communications. Consumers' perception of brand is quite aligned with the company brand identity and thus, there are all the conditions to foster a coherent social engagement. However, the latter has to be controlled over time: the challenge is to maintain it together with the cognitive brand matching. On the contrary, the cases of cognitive brand mismatching and high social engagement that emerge in our analysis describe a risky situation: consumers' perceptions of brand are distance from the company brand identity. A high social engagement can generate the spread of this disalignment. It could be necessary to evaluate how to redefine brand communication to reduce it. The revision of brand communication will probably involve both the traditional media both the innovative ones. Cases of vertical brand matching and horizontal brand matching identify positive situations. However, in both of them the company could review brand communication in order to enlarge or to intensify the brand perception. If in cases of vertical brand matching or horizontal brand matching, social engagement is low, the company could evaluate to use the common brand adjectives as driver to generate consumers involvement in social media. The study we have proposed aims to fill research gaps emerging in brand-image studies which, in fact, explore the impact of marketing choices on brand perception without comparing the ensuing consumers' brand associations with those that company defines and communicates (Häubel and Elrod, 1999; Schoormans and Robben, 1997; Czellar, 2003). Moreover, the brand perception is investigated not through online research techniques but through the conventional ones belonging to qualitative or quantitative methods (Till et al., 2011). Regardless of the method, measurements that synthesize brand image versus brand identity matching are important as the level of brand equity and thus, the differential response to the marketing of a brand depends on their values (Keller, 1993). This is why our work could be a valid support for monitoring the effects that strategic brand decisions produce.*

Originality of the study and future research. *The innovation of our scientific work lies in the proposal of specific indicators that could be used by companies in managing brands. As possible future research developments it would be interesting to enlarge the analysis by considering other social platforms (not only Talkwalker and Social Mention) and other blogs and forum (and not only those in style.com). Besides it could be also interesting to verify the existence of relations between social engagement, cognitive brand matching/mismatching and brand performances.*

Keywords: *Brand identity; brand image; social engagement; online communities*

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Tab. 1: An overview of elaborated digital data (personality adjectives from company and blog files) and of values of CBPA indicators and of SE measurements

	Section A Company File	Section B Blog File			Section C CBPA Indicators				Section D Social Engagement Measurements		
Brand	Adjective types communicated	Shared adjective types	Number of shared adjectives	Words	CBPM	BPC _(CN)	BPC _(CP)	BPC _(CP/CN)	Talk Walker	Social Mention	SE
Alfa	18	3	3	3.157	0.950	0.950	5.702	83.333	5	42	MEDIUM
Beta	96	4	7	2.028	3.452	1.972	47.337	95.833	11.500	66	HIGH
Gamma	41	6	8	8.855	0.903	0.678	4.630	85.366	3M	55	HIGH
Delta	38	13	17	3.507	4.847	3.707	10.835	65.789	4.500	41	MEDIUM
Epsilon	19	7	11	2.800	3.929	2.500	6.786	63.158	936	2	LOW
Zeta	36	5	7	2.145	3.263	2.331	16.783	86.111	432	14	LOW
Eta	70	13	24	4.647	5.165	2.798	15.063	81.429	11.200	42	MEDIUM
Theta	12	3	3	2.738	1.096	1.096	4.383	75.000	133.400	53	HIGH
Iota	19	9	18	11.344	1.587	0.793	1.675	52.632	62.100	48	MEDIUM
Kappa	16	6	13	2.860	4.545	2.098	5.594	62.500	2.700	5	LOW

Fig. 1: Main results by combining CBPM and BPC



