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How virtual brand community traces may increase fan engagement in brand pages

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Abstract   Brand pages in social media are a great way to foster consumer gathering around a brand, but it can be challenging to keep fans engaged and coming back to see updated content. Brands with millions of fans on Facebook have seen organic reach fall below 2% of their base. In this article, we describe how the creation of virtual brand communities can help brand managers increase fan engagement. We suggest the steps, conditions, advantages, and limitations involved in nurturing a brand page as an online social gathering that assumes some of the characteristics of a virtual brand community. The results of our study show that a brand page can have some of the characteristics of a virtual brand community—topical information exchange, identity communication, and establishment and internalization of cultural norms. We also show the importance of having celebrities among fans in order to foster social interactions and legitimate social practices on brand pages.
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1. What are the benefits of communal brand pages?

In 2007, the first Facebook pages for brands, companies, movies, artists, and sports teams were created to give these institutions a new tool to create a two-way relationship with their consumers. In 2017, brand pages remain one of the tools that Facebook offers for companies to reach current and potential customers and to promote their products and services. Originally named fan pages, brand pages are a platform that allow the brand to be present, to create a community around its users, and to create economic value. Brand pages use the news feed to introduce new information about products, promotions, or content of interest in order to develop the fan-brand relationship. By promoting and paying for its content on brand pages, a brand may accumulate many more fans than if it did not promote itself. Brand pages are used mainly as a communication tool, but research on brand communities (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009) suggests that more value can be created in cultivating communal environments.

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Social media environments were not created for brands to communicate with consumers or to sell products and services to them (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Facebook is a place for people to interact with family and friends and to read, comment, and share selected content coming from multiple content creators that users find interesting (e.g., Buzz-Feed, *Daily Mail*, *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*). The multiplicity of content on Facebook is one of the reasons big brands' organic reach has dropped significantly since 2013 (Delo, 2014), a problem named 'Reachpocalypse' (DeMers, 2015). There is much more content than time to absorb it. On average, 1,500 stories could appear in the news feed every time someone logs in. The news feed algorithm chooses approximately 300 stories based on thousands of factors relative to each user (Boland, 2014).

Brands would profit from organically getting more attention and increasing the engagement of their fans with brand content. We borrow from the literature of virtual brand communities (Schau et al., 2009) to show the importance of communal aspects of brand pages for increasing fan engagement. Communal characteristics can increase the number of individuals who have interest in the topic and in the social relationships that may take place in brand pages. These individuals might come back regularly to the page in order to have access to its social, informative, and symbolic resources.

The objective of this article is to present how some communal aspects of brand pages contribute to fan engagement and to describe the steps, conditions, advantages, and limitations involved in nurturing a brand page as an online social gathering that assumes some of the characteristics of a virtual brand community (VBC). We present three cases of brand pages in which the benefits of communal pages are shown and the traces of virtual brand communities are presented and discuss the actual limits and proximities that brand pages have with virtual brand communities.

2. Engagement on virtual brand communities

The study of engagement in virtual environments is contextually, theoretically, and pragmatically relevant because the relationship/contact of individuals with brands is more and more located in virtual environments such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Airbnb, Amazon, or Netflix (van Doorn et al., 2010) and because the longtime benefits of customer engagement with companies, online or offline,

have been amply discussed (e.g., Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2010).

Engagement in virtual brand communities was defined by Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013, p. 107) as "interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community" and also as "a context-dependent, psychological state characterized by fluctuating intensity levels . . . comprising a cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimensions." The work of Brodie et al. (2013) is in line with several other authors who aimed to define consumer engagement in virtual brand communities previously (Mollen & Wilson, 2010).

Many users participate in virtual brand communities either because they already had experiences with the product or service of that brand or because the product is complex and they wanted to learn more about it, both from the company and other users (Wirtz et al., 2013). Consumer engagement in virtual brand communities is a process with several subprocesses that include sharing, learning, co-developing, advocating, and socializing (Brodie et al., 2013). The positive consequences of consumer engagement in virtual brand communities involve effective commitment to the brand (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2008); positive word-of-mouth (Kumar et al., 2010); self-brand connections and brand usage intent (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014); trust, loyalty, satisfaction and empowerment (Brodie et al., 2013); and customer knowledge value (Kumar et al., 2010). Consumer engagement in virtual brand communities is a central concept for a customer relationship (Brodie et al., 2013).

Brands can foster increasing levels of engagement in brand pages by managing content characteristics such as entertainment and information levels, vividness, and interactivity (de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012) or through posts that have content-oriented (functional/hedonic), relationship-oriented (interactions with brand/users), or self-oriented (self-expression) content (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). The evolution of engagement over time from the user perspective has also been studied (e.g., Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011; Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011), evolving from viewing, forwarding, and creating content to moderating groups and arbitrating brand or user disputes. Brodie et al. (2013) showed that consumer engagement is highly interactive with several subprocesses—learning, sharing, advocating, socializing, and co-developing—and that these engagement processes are influenced by consumers' need for information.

Brand engagement requires aspects of the virtual brand community like self-brand connections,

brand usage, loyalty, trust and satisfaction, and engagement, which are documented in the literature. However, a structured approach to the process of building engagement over time in a virtual brand community/brand page is still missing.

Six Degrees, the first social networking site, was launched in 1997. After that time, Kozinets (1999) described the process of evolution of a virtual community of consumption (VCC). His work, which is the basis of the analytical process adopted here, showed that, first, participants share interest, enthusiasm, and knowledge with respect to the consumption topic. When the topic is central to the participant's identity, the contextual conditions for frequent communication and the construction of social ties are present. However, the online environment will grow as a community only through the evolution of collective participation in the community—a task that is not simple. An individual initially perceives such a community as a space that merely presents the exchange of topical information. Gradually, communication evolves to cultivate identity communication between members of the group. Second, the group establishes cultural norms in the form of language and practices, bears witness to conflicts, sets status and power relationships, and internalizes and conforms to cultural norms. Over a period of time, the virtual space becomes a place where people form perceptions of one another and where cultural cohesion can be noted in the form of stories, chosen topics, empathy, rules, common behaviors, and meanings. When a virtual space presents these characteristics, it can be considered a space of communal relationships. Kozinets (1999) highlighted the importance of insiders for the VCC. Insider interactions are high in social and informational exchanges and, due to their importance, we will fully disclose their value for VBCs and then for brand pages.

3. Influencers in virtual brand communities

Fans do not participate equally in virtual communities (Kozinets, 2002). Kozinets (1999) suggested categorizing individuals in online communities into four groups based on levels of attachment to the community and to the topic of the community. These four levels are:

1. *Tourists*: those who do not have strong ties to the community or the topic;

2. *Minglers*: those who develop strong ties to the community but not the topic;

3. *Insiders*: those who have strong ties both to the community and to the topic; and

4. *Devotees*: those who have a strong attachment to the topic but weak ties with the community.

Minglers and insiders are more social and relational in their communication because they attribute value to the social ties that the community allows them to create and nurture.

Golder (2003) named the individual who posts most often in the online community as the *celebrity*. Because of his/her frequent participation, the celebrity is responsible for much of the community content and is easily identified by the many newbies who lurk in the community. The celebrity has a high degree of communicative competence and common ground with the community. Kumar et al. (2010) and Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, and Wiertz (2013) have discussed the potential importance of influencers—who are also called celebrities in the social media environment—due to their topical expertise and capacity to influence other individuals and propagate brand stories, especially in environments such as virtual communities where customers can easily communicate. Brand fans are influenced by other brand fans, and posts with higher shares of positive comments are also posts that are more popular (de Vries et al., 2012). Finally, Tsai and Men (2013) have shown that parasocial interactions between consumers and brand representatives in social networking sites (SNS), such as sponsored or co-opted celebrities, are a key antecedent to consumer engagement in SNS. We concentrated on the presence—and absence—of celebrities on brand pages, their roles, and the effects of their participation on communal environment building and user engagement.

4. Brand page study: Budweiser, Jack Daniel's, and Nike Run

To investigate the extent to which there can be a process for building more communal brand pages and if more communal brand pages contribute to fans engagement, we considered the characteristics for an online environment to become an online community proposed by Kozinets (1999) as the main focus of analysis. We searched for processes underlying community building and for the advantages the brands had from the communal traces. We studied brand pages in Brazil for Jack Daniel's, Nike Run, and Budweiser. We chose these pages because they are representative of two different

consumption categories—alcoholic beverages and running apparel—and because they are prestigious global brands in their categories.

There are similarities between brand pages and VBCs, and so for the purpose of the analysis we implemented the use of netnography (Kozinets, 2002). We watched these pages on a daily or weekly basis during the period of data collection and primary coding. During that time, all posts, videos, pictures, hyperlinks, and all fans comments were collected in a non-participative manner. The data collection lasted between 4—8 months for each brand page, and we stopped collecting data when thematic saturation occurred in each case. The volume of data in the data collection phase was approximately 140,000 words of text, plus videos and pictures.

We codified each brand page's content, frequently exchanging opinions, solving differences, questioning motives when in doubt, and achieving consensus. We created the code categories based on the proposed research objectives—to identify, understand, and contrast the presence of the communitarian characteristics proposed by Kozinets (1999) in the three brand pages:

1. Topical information exchange;

2. Identity communication from fans;

3. The establishment of cultural norms in the form of language and practices;

4. The presence of conflicts, status, and power relationships;

5. Internalization and conformity with cultural norms;

6. Fan perceptions of one another; and

7. Cultural cohesion in the form of stories, topics chosen, empathy, rules, common behaviors, and meanings.

We interviewed seven celebrities of the Nike Run page (but none from the other two brand pages as they did not have this type of individual). These celebrities were recruited online by asking about their availability to participate in an interview. Each interview was conducted in a non-synchronic, semi-structured manner by consistently exchanging messages through the Facebook Messenger app. The duration of the entire interview process was between 2—14 days. Additionally, we interviewed the marketing managers of Nike and Jack Daniel's in

order to comprehend the marketing strategy of these companies on Facebook. We did not have access to a Budweiser marketing executive.

4.1. Budweiser: What matters is content about the fan world

The Budweiser fan page belonged to a product category (beer) that has a strong presence in the life of the fan although, as we found, not as much as running does. Beer can be consumed socially (e.g., parties, bars, games) and at home (e.g., while watching TV) for many occasions. The Budweiser brand page did not have celebrities.

Topical conversation developed around broad subjects such as music festivals sponsored by the brand, popular celebration dates, or promotions to consumers. Budweiser's posts received hundreds of likes and shares as well as a high number of comments per post. On the part of fans, comments concentrated around compliments (and also criticism) of the brand or the content posted by the brand, comments about shows and artists the brand presented, expressions of love for beer and for drinking it cold with friends when the temperature is hot, manifestations of urgent desire for beer (especially at the end of the day), and examples of the presence of beer in their daily lives.

Interestingly, fans did not present any significant tendency to use the brand page content as a tool to communicate their identities. In contrast to what was observed on the other brand pages, the fans of Budweiser did not present any strong connection to the brand or to its content. The reason appears to be the type of content that Budweiser posts—content that is interesting for young consumers but at the same time generic. The content could be part of the script of any brand aiming to communicate with young consumers (e.g., mentions of indie rock concerts or UFC wrestlers). It is not that young consumers do not like this type of content; on the contrary, Budweiser content received a high number of likes, comments, and shares. Fans of the brand page rapidly passed through the content and expressed their appreciation in the form of brief contacts with brand content, but not with other fans.

Also, there was no evidence of fans forming perceptions of one another. The Budweiser brand page is more of a collection of individuals who want to receive information about the brand than a group with social interactions. These fans presented a behavior that is similar to the ones concerning the Louis Vuitton brand public studied by Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) as they were using Budweiser content to publicize observations in self-expressive

behaviors. The main difference in our case is that most of this content if self-expressive in nature, something different from what Arvidsson and Caliandro noticed regarding Louis Vuitton content, wherein users shared news connected to the fashion business and to commercial venues of the brand. In both cases there was almost no social contact among fans.

Finally, the Budweiser brand page lacked a strong brand culture in the form of jargon, behaviors, rules, histories, values, themes, and meanings that are common to the group (Fine, 1979) and with which members could compete for legitimacy (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001)—different levels of understanding and belonging. It was the only brand page in this research that did not present any trace of this VBC characteristic.

4.2. Jack Daniel's: What matters is content about the brand

The Jack Daniel's case helps to clarify what happens when a brand page has hundreds of thousands of fans, publishes content about an iconic brand (Holt & Cameron, 2010), but, as with the Budweiser page, does not have any type of celebrities among its fans and does not belong to a category that plays a central role in a person's identity.

The Jack Daniel's brand page clearly presented consistent topical information. The iconic image of the traditional square bottle, the original whiskey, product variants (e.g., single barrel, honey, Old No. 7, Gentleman's Jack) and phrases that represent the ethos of the brand, such as masculinity, traditionalism, independence, and authenticity (Holt & Cameron, 2010) were constantly used to engage the fans. Comments were almost always full of positive associations with the product, such as being tasty, traditional, and unique with compliments on the quality of the whiskey being the most common form of topical information. The brand frequently used the image of its founder, Mr. Jack, as a topic.

We also observed identity communication among fans. Fans used the content of the brand to position themselves as lovers of the Jack Daniel's whiskey, brand values, and lifestyle. These individuals presented their identities through their proximity to the behaviors and values expected from a Jack Daniel's drinker, such as masculinity and brotherhood. Fans also shared the content of the page in word-of-mouth behaviors that helped the brand to spread its messages to a larger audience. But as fans presented their identity merely by sharing content, they did not engage in conversations inside the brand page. The absence of celebrities in this brand page is significant. Although we cannot confirm that

celebrities would certainly foster social bonds between fans, turning them into members of an online group, we believe celebrities can be useful in pursuing such a goal. Therefore, we do not consider Jack Daniel's fans to be members of a brand page, a characteristic that differs this case from the Nike Run case (see Section 4.3.).

The establishment and internalization of cultural norms was also observed in a similar degree to that of the Nike Run case. Jack Daniel's content is permeated with strong and consistent values such as independence, traditionalism, cordiality, masculinity, virility, nostalgia, provincialism, and authenticity (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Fans responded to the content in consonance, endorsing these values in their language and declared drinking habits. Even fans who were already savvy in the Jack Daniel's culture could become progressively more versed in the histories, values, norms, jargon, and expected behaviors of a Jack Daniel's drinker after accessing the brand page. A brand page like that of Jack Daniel's cannot be understood in isolation from the image and history of the brand. All the brand associations established before connection with the brand page are part of the brand context. One of the advantages of a brand page is the capacity to progressively reinforce the brand's position and cultural values as part of an ongoing interaction with fans. An iconic brand such as this can be the narrator of its own stories and might not need celebrities to play this role.

We witnessed a cultural cohesion on the Jack Daniel's brand page, with the brand values permeating posts and comments, individuals sharing drinking practices, the history of the brand being celebrated, and the brand values being incorporated into fan expressions. There was a common understanding of the expected behaviors of a whiskey drinker and fans appreciated brand icons such as the square bottle and the imaginary Lynchburg distillery. Thus, the Jack Daniel's brand page presented several of the traces of online communities that Kozinets (1999) proposed but not social relationships between fans. The Jack Daniel's brand page is an online environment in which fans have a shared interest in the brand (de Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2007) and act as fans but not members of a virtual brand community. Clearly, the absence of social relationships between fans turns the brand page into a page with information of the brand for fans to use as a symbolic tool for their identity aspirations. Brand content engages fans who use it for identity expression. These fans participate in word-of-mouth communication that helps to co-create brand meanings.

4.3. Nike Run: What matters is the community

Nike's strategy is to transform running into a social activity, according to the marketing executive who was interviewed. To facilitate this transformation, the brand creates activities related to training and competition and uses the page as a communication channel to promote these activities. In these running activities, many of the brand page fans establish offline relationships and use the page to foster their bonds through constant communication. We call followers who foster social relationships within the brand page members and the ones who do not have these relationships are simply fans.

On the Nike Run page, one can frequently observe the presence of narrow topic communication. The brand content is related to running, the Nike brand and its products, and contests and promotions. Members engage in interactions by expressing their experiences as runners, complimenting—but also criticizing—the brand and its products and services, and asking for further information on running matters. Frequently, the answers to the questions do not come from the brand but from other members, in a practice that Schau et al. (2009) termed *governing*. Celebrities are often the source of these governing practices, since they are perceived as having credibility. The subject of these conversations, running, is a key element in the lives of members, in a similar way to the Star Trek fans studied by Kozinets (2001). Part of the value of having a more communal brand page comes from these governing practices as well as from the self-expressive practices of members and other fans through which information about Nike products, apps, and sponsored competitions is spread in word-of-mouth communication (e.g., by sharing content and tagging friends to see the content).

Identity communication was often observed. Members interacted with other members based on the content of the posts created by the brand and the comments of other members on these posts. It was common to observe members expressing their training routines and races of various distances to legitimize themselves as real runners. Members also aimed to demonstrate how hard they work to pursue their targets in order to be seen and perceived by their peers as part of the group. Celebrities have an important role here since they are among the best runners that belong to the brand page. Several celebrities affirmed in the interviews that other runners see them as role models in the category. Fans showed their connection to objects such as running apparel, apps, badges, and t-shirts collected in running challenges to communicate their running identity. The use of these expressions allows participants to extend the time in which they are identified as runners in their social world.

In the case of Nike Run, the establishment and internalization of cultural norms materialized in language and practices. These norms were created by the continuous posting of content that educated members on the running culture of the brand: training routines, running challenges, athletes' personalities, histories and performance, nutrition, and portraits of ordinary runners and their histories as athletes. This sort of ritualistic content should be familiar to fans of the Nike Run page; it is common for runners to educate themselves about running in order to advance in the sport. But Nike frames this knowledge in its own way. It not only posts content but also asks questions regarding running themes, encouraging individuals to express and collectively create what it means to be a runner. Celebrities also play a key role here, legitimizing the running practices within the brand page. Two of the celebrities interviewed stated that they inspired other runners to work in order to be like them. This influence transforms celebrities into pivotal elements through which running content is discussed and engagement increased.

Power and status relationships were sometimes observed on the Nike Run page, but they depended on the existence of offline social relationships among the members and on their frequent participation. The performance of each individual was communicated through apps designed to register and compare performance. The presence of strong social bonds among some of the members stimulated competition and created the occasion for disputes among members. Celebrities have an important role in the construction of power and status relationships because they are frequent commentators on the brand page and because they are viewed by other members as the individuals with the most expertise about running matters. Celebrities are deeply connected to the running circuit of races and training, and they help Nike to engage members in processes of learning, advocating, sharing, and socializing (Brodie et al., 2013).

Nike Run's step toward achieving a cultural community is usually a difficult move for brands but the category of running lends itself well to this type of member engagement. The fact that most of the brand page members were runners of varying experience helped to create the conditions for identity building and identity noticing. As noted in some of the interviews with celebrities, runners like to run, but they also like to talk about running, relate to other runners, and by reading what others post, they deduce how well they are performing in terms

of running efficacy. Celebrities cited the brand in the function of managing the social relationships in the page, being information gatekeepers, problem solvers, motivators, and exemplar runners.

Finally, the Nike Run page presented an intermediate level of cultural cohesion (Kozinets, 1999) in the form of norms, behaviors, topics, histories, practices, and common meanings within the members. The repetition of topical conversations on running themes and the consistent tone of the brand voice (jargon, attitude, stories, and plot) not only constructed the brand page into a coherent piece of running culture but also educated the runners who read and commented on the content that Nike posted. Nike is working to transform the activity of running into a challenging, rewarding, and collective activity. On the Nike Run page, one can witness members communicate how they are evolving as individuals, becoming physically stronger, more competitive professionally, and more socially involved in the running community. The establishment and internalization of cultural norms in the Nike Run case is a consequence of topic coherence, repetition, and relevance to the runners' self-expressive practices.

The question of whether the Nike Run page can be considered a communal environment should not be a straightforward, dichotomous choice. We showed that the brand page may be constructed as a communal environment for a part of the fans (members) but certainly not for the majority of
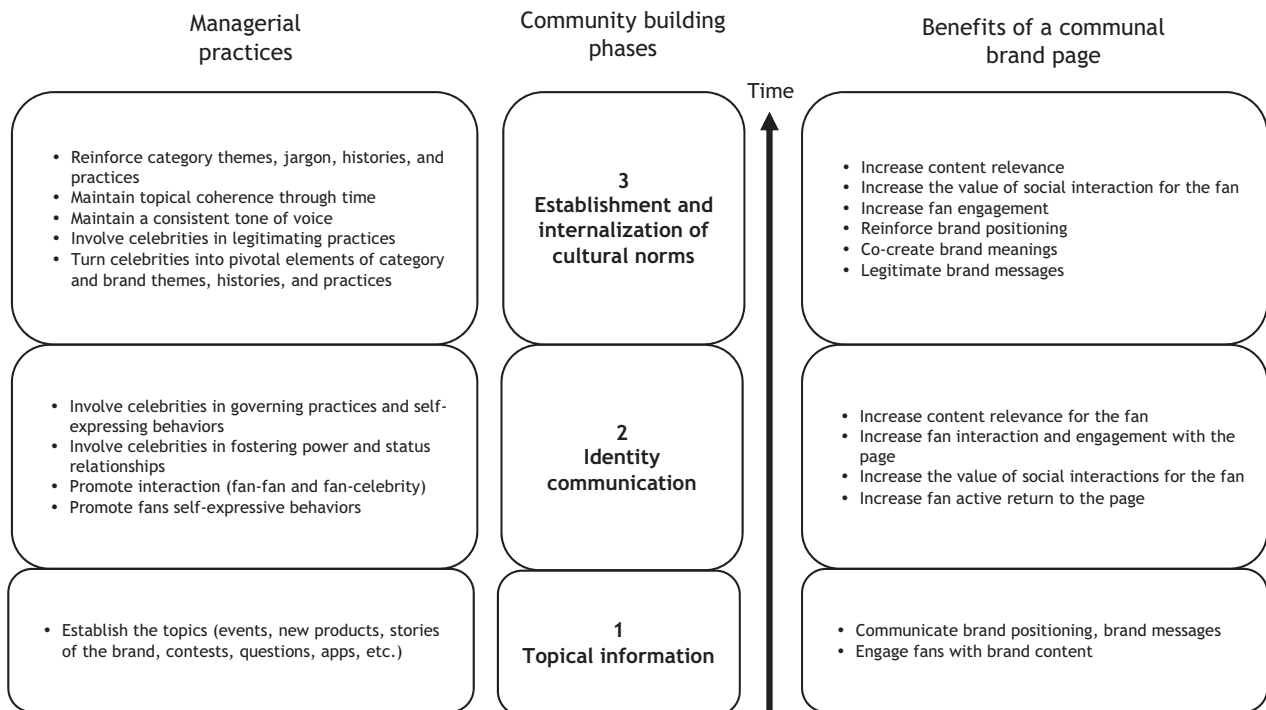
fans. Topical information, identity communication, and the establishment and internalization of cultural norms and cultural cohesion were all seen in the brand page, and celebrities played a central role in fostering such communal traces. The Nike case showed that, for members, there is no limitation for the brand page to function as a virtual brand community. But for the majority of fans that liked the page merely to receive information, the brand page is more a media vehicle than a virtual brand community. Thus, the brand page can represent two concepts at the same time for different publics.

5. Effective practices to transform your brand page

As we see, the main challenge for a brand page to increase fan engagement is, first, to reach them and, second, to increase participation of fans in the environment and personalize its impersonal nature. Fans, even those who frequently use the brand page to express their identities and to obtain information on topics of interest, stay in the brand page virtual space for only a few moments amid the multiple tasks that they perform online or offline. Considering that in an online community, "the link is more important than the thing" (Cova, 1997, p. 307), brand pages usually lack the link and focus on the content.

In Figure 1, we outlined the three steps for a brand to nurture its brand page as a communal

Figure 1. The evolution of communal characteristics on brand pages

Managerial practices	Community building phases	Benefits of a communal brand page
• Reinforce category themes, jargon, histories, and practices • Maintain topical coherence through time • Maintain a consistent tone of voice • Involve celebrities in legitimating practices • Turn celebrities into pivotal elements of category and brand themes, histories, and practices	3 Establishment and internalization of cultural norms	• Increase content relevance • Increase the value of social interaction for the fan • Increase fan engagement • Reinforce brand positioning • Co-create brand meanings • Legitimate brand messages
• Involve celebrities in governing practices and self-expressing behaviors • Involve celebrities in fostering power and status relationships • Promote interaction (fan-fan and fan-celebrity) • Promote fans self-expressive behaviors	2 Identity communication	• Increase content relevance for the fan • Increase fan interaction and engagement with the page • Increase the value of social interactions for the fan • Increase fan active return to the page
• Establish the topics (events, new products, stories of the brand, contests, questions, apps, etc.)	1 Topical information	• Communicate brand positioning, brand messages • Engage fans with brand content

environment. Topical information is a decision in the hands of brand managers and they can influence individuals (fans) to comment about these topics too. Relevance to the life of the fan is key and, in each category, brand managers should know what is the relevant content for the fan and what is the content's function for fans (e.g., self-expressive and/or interaction-driven). Identity communication depends on the relevance of the content for individuals' identity goals. Content might come from the brand universe (e.g., Jack Daniel's) or from the category universe (e.g., Nike Run). Finally, the establishment and internalization of cultural norms is a stage in the process that only comes with time, as the brand maintains its topical coherence in terms of themes communicated, jargon used, histories of the brand, or of relevance in the consumption category and maintains a consistent tone of voice. The constant use of celebrities legitimates the practices that the brand tries to foster through the brand page. These celebrities are the pivotal elements that connect the messages of the brand to the audience of fans. We propose these practices to transform a brand page into a VBC.

5.1. Focus on content

Content is a main challenge for digital marketers as it is a key point in the relationship with the fan base. We have shown how content can be used to leverage the self-expressive behaviors of fans who communicate their identities and increase social interactions with other fans—transforming them into members of a brand page. We also showed how brands can manage content and work with celebrities in order to foster social interactions with fans, increasing online engagement and the communal spirit of the brand page.

Content is key in establishing the topics the brand wants to communicate to its fans. The content strategy is a function of the brand positioning and will be the vehicle for the intended brand messages, thus increasing fan engagement in directions desired by the brand. Social analytics tools will monitor engagement level with brand content.

5.2. Focus on influencers

We can infer from our research that product categories in which experts are valued offer more opportunities for brands to work with celebrities in order to engage fans in interactive experiences. Celebrities can be a powerful instrument if their presence incentivizes other fans to engage in self-expressive practices and social interactions with other fans. The continuous use of celebrities fosters

the brand page as a place of cultural cohesion, attracting fans (members) by providing additional context on threads and increasing person-to-person dialogue. Celebrities are pivots from which conversation occurs, constituting an alternative to the brand as an active actor on the brand page. Celebrities propagate stories from the brand (Gensler et al., 2013) and foster the self-regulation of the brand page—a characteristic that increases the value of a community for its members (Seraj, 2012). Brands should attempt to work with celebrities, choosing a group of celebrities that have a large base of followers, notoriety in the category, and empathy with fans. In doing so, brands can profit from the social relationships between fans and from the extra visibility of brand content in celebrities' social networks.

5.3. Focus on community

We suggest that a common objective of many brands—to have the greatest possible number of fans—is myopic. A larger base of fans can bring a higher number of views of the brand content. However, this notion represents the media logic that brands had in the old TV days—the cost per thousand viewers logic. However, the essence of participating in social networks is self-expression and communication with people of similar interests.

The brand category is an external contextual element that influences the capacity of the brand page to become a more communal space. Running is an activity that plays an important role in the lives of runners, having what Gensler et al. (2013, p. 245) called "high visibility of consumption." Therefore, the level of commitment to the activity is high, which in the case of Nike Run's community implies running several times a week and engaging in conversations both online and offline about running, race results, or tips on training and racing tactics. Brands that belong to categories of high involvement might see better results from building communal traces in brand pages.

Based on the three brand pages studied, we suggest that brands from different categories should have different community goals regarding their brand pages. Not all will have the same community potential, and they should not be treated as serving the same goals in a brand strategy. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) proposed that products that are consumed conjointly by many individuals are more adequate for the formation of groups or communities than other products. We showed that condition is not sufficient with regard to brand pages. A product such as beer can be consumed while in a group, but if the product

category is not technically complex or if the brand is not culturally rich, then fans will not have a theme to discuss or a source of meaning for self-expression. Brands like Nike may foster groups of runners through the brand page. Brands like Coca-Cola will be more successful if they use the potential of the brand page to communicate content that can be a source of information and identity expression, but not if they try to create a community around Coca-Cola. Brand pages should not have a final and homogeneous goal (Fournier & Lee, 2009) but a conditional goal, subordinate to the potential to be a locus of social interactions (engagement with other fans) and/or of self-expressive behaviors (engagement with content).

Following O'Guinn & Muñiz (2009), we suggest that brand pages be considered a loose form of online community. The relationship that a brand and individuals have within the brand page environment represents a brief dialogue. The communal side of brand pages should be understood in this context, within the possibilities and limits of most online communities to form and foster bonds in a world that encourages the formation of weak ties and in which the nature of communication is speed, high volume, and lacking a meaningful bond (Zwick & Bradshaw, 2016). The metaphor of communities in virtual worlds is appealing, but it is often used inadequately (Arvidsson, 2013; Fernback, 2007). The brand page as a VBC is a useful framework but most online communities are limited. The main contribution of this article is to show that the community concept can be useful to boost the potential of the brand page as a relationship tool.

6. Final thoughts and future research

The key benefits of communal brand pages go beyond an increased level of fan engagement and the relevance of the brand page content for the fan. As fans engage with brand content amid interactions with other fans and celebrities, they validate brand messages and co-create brand meanings in these interactions. This reinforces brand positioning. Fans who use the content of the page for self-expressive practices may actively or passively (i.e., through the Facebook algorithm) interact with brand content more frequently. Thus, a communal brand page is a powerful tool for co-creating brand meanings desired by the brand manager. Brand health measurements within the fan base can quantify the results of the ongoing interaction between the brand and its fans on the page.

We encourage some brands to bring a more communal spirit to brand pages and brand managers to produce content aimed to increase social conversations between fans and not only self-expressive behaviors from fans. One of the key metrics to measure a brand page's success is engagement, defined by Facebook as "the percentage of unique people who clicked on, liked, commented on or shared a post, divided by the total number of unique people who saw that post" (Facebook Business, 2013). This metric does not encourage the quality of interactions but largely emphasizes the quantity of likes, shares, and comments. Furthermore, this metric does not directly measure communal status. Such measurements must still be created and added to the existing social media metrics (Peters, Chen, Kaplan, Ognibeni, & Pauwels, 2013) to direct marketing actions.

Future research into the potential benefits of a communal brand page should look at the possibility that brand pages as a VBC will result in more loyalty and sales from fans (members). Closed-loop analysis of fan behavior towards products and services could bring more knowledge into this under-researched area. We can see in this study that fans compliment the products of Nike, Jack Daniel's and Budweiser, sometimes discovering novelties through the posts. Whether they buy the products or not remains to be measured.

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