

**FUNDAÇÃO GETÚLIO VARGAS
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BENJAMIN ROSENTHAL

**Brand image co-creation and individual identity extension in online
environments: a Facebook investigation**

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Tese apresentada à Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo da Fundação Getúlio Vargas, como requisito para a obtenção do título de Doutor em Administração de Empresas.

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Data de aprovação:

___ / ___ / ___

Banca examinadora:

Profa. Dra. Eliane Brito (Orientadora)
EAESP-FGV

Prof. Dr. Mario Aquino Alves
EAESP-FGV

Prof. Dr. Russell Belk
SCHULICH-YORK UNIVERSITY

Profa. Dra. Suzane Strehlau
UNINOVE

Profa. Dra. Tânia Modesto Veludo-de-Oliveira
EAESP-FGV

Aos meus pais, com amor.

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“Dear, dear! How queer everything is today! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? Let me think: *was* I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I am not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle!”
(Carroll 2012, p.8)

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I investigate the extent to which companies can build a more communal environment out of their fan pages while also evaluating the corresponding brand value that may come from having such a communal environment. My research is comprised in three articles: in the first article, I describe how the brand image is created or augmented in the fan page environment, therefore providing demonstrable evidence of value creation. In the second article, I describe how individuals use fan page semiotic elements to communicate their identities. Finally, in the third article, I describe the possible communal characteristics of a fan page and the conditions that enable it to evolve to the virtual brand community concept. As a result, I will contribute to the marketing literature on the use of Facebook for communicating brand identity, on the co-creation of the brand image in social media context, and on the conceptual definition of fan pages as a communal environment.

Key Words: fan pages; virtual brand communities; consumer identity; brand image; co-creation

Table of Contents

General Introduction.....	11
Article 1 - Brand image co-creation in Fan Pages: it takes two to tango.....	15
Article 2 - Identity Projects of Mature Runners and Self Expression on Facebook	55
Article 3 - Fan Pages and Virtual Brand Communities: Faraway, so Close..	92
General Conclusion	126
References	130

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 - Characteristics of the fan pages studied and amount of data analyzed	24
Table 2 – Main codes for brand actions, fans actions and brand identity co-creation	26
Table 3 – Informant Profiles and Data Collection	65
Table 4 - Characteristics of the fan pages studied	102

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – Brand Image Co-Creation Process in Fan Pages	37
Figure 2 – Frequency of Occurrence of the Facets of the Brand Identity Prism	46
Figure 3 - Runners’ identity communication process on Facebook	74
Figure 4 - The Quest for Beauty theme represented in Guilherme and Juliana’s pictures	82
Figure 5 - The evolution of communal characteristics on fan pages	105
Figure 6 – Communal characteristics of the fan pages studied	106

General Introduction

Social media is a general term used to describe a vast array of web-based platforms created for individuals and communities to share information, opinions and to co-create content (Kietzmann et al 2011). This vast array of distinct platforms can be differentiated according to the extent to which people in the platform are grouped into communities (Kietzmann et al 2011). Some social media platforms, such as Foursquare, are not used to build communities. Other social media platforms that are used by members to build communities, such as Facebook, have a technical functionality that allows individuals to create groups and invite other members to participate. Brands can also build brand-centered' groups on Facebook – such commercial fan pages are created with the objective of connecting brands to their consumers in an increasing two-way conversation.

Although brands have attempted to create channels to increase the conversation with consumers, the social media landscape is a challenging environment for brands because this environment was not created for brands to communicate with individuals; rather, it was created to allow individuals to communicate with each other (Fournier and Avery 2011). Social media has allowed individuals to connect and converse “...long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationship...” (Rheingold 1993). These webs of personal relationships are called virtual communities (Rheingold 1993). My main topic of interest in this thesis is focused on a special type of virtual community – the virtual brand community (VBC).

Virtual brand communities are social gatherings that create incremental value for brands. Schau, Muniz and Arnould (2009) described several practices through which brand communities help to create value for the company: 1) they confer a greater use of the brand's products and services by its members; 2) they increase the level of community engagement; 3) they confer higher levels of cultural capital and insider' repertoire for its members; 4) they create more opportunities for interaction and consumption; and 5) they create greater overall brand vitality. This last topic specifically piqued my interest when I began to work on my thesis – the creation of value, specifically the brand image, by virtual brand communities.

Virtual brand communities are thematically centered on the brand; therefore, they cannot exist without the brand (Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Grovan 2007). Nevertheless, the perpetuation of a virtual brand community depends on the participation of individuals, and individuals only remain in a virtual brand community if they perceive value in participating in the community. Value for members comes from social relationships, knowledge acquisition, social support, improved status, the emotional sensation of belonging to a group of equals (Jang et al 2008), and from meeting and bonding with similar people (Cova and Cova 2002). Individuals also perceive value in virtual brand communities when they are able to freely express themselves to the group.

Researchers have shown that individuals engage in communicating their actual selves (Back et al 2010) and their ideal selves (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012) in social networking sites. Additionally, it is ontologically important to study the use of social networking sites from such an individual perspective because social media is conceptually centered on the individual, not on the brand. Thus, how and why individuals use virtual brand communities for identity communication purposes became my second topic of interest. Therefore, my research also evaluates how and why individuals use semiotic content, including fan pages, to communicate their identities to their social network on Facebook.

It was during the preliminary observation and analysis of two fan pages while researching the creation of brand image on virtual brand communities that I questioned whether such context actually represented virtual brand communities. This skepticism underlies my third research interest: the extent to which fan pages share the characteristics of a virtual brand community.

So, in the first of the three articles of this thesis I investigated the stakeholders' ability to co-create brand meanings. I began to discover how two brands competing in the same category (Nike and Mizuno) both leverage their fans on Facebook to co-create brand meaning by leading a mutual dialogue with fans who extend this dialogue while communicating further with members of their particular social network. I also describe the ways in which the brands use social media content to engage fans in the co-creation of the brand image, in alignment with the brand strategy and with the identity projects of their fans.

In the second article of my thesis, I investigate how adults in their 50s and 60s use the activity of running, and engage with running-related content on Facebook, with the objective of communicating their identities. These people project individual identities that are based on their personal life history and on the cultural meanings associated with running that are borrowed from the social environments in which they are immersed. I also demonstrate how Facebook has become a distinct stage for the projection of individual consumer identities. I aim to fill a theoretical gap in the literature, since marketing research has not extensively investigated the identity projects of mature individuals, with notable exceptions that will be detailed in this second article. I also show how brands have a secondary role in this identity communication process and only become part of these runners' posts by being immersed in running practices and by offering utilitarian and symbolic value for these mature individuals. Interestingly, my research shows that mature individuals use brand fan pages and their personal pages on Facebook to communicate their identities in the same way that much younger individuals do.

In the third article of my thesis, I investigate what fan pages are. At the end of 2012, there were more than 50 million fan pages on Facebook. Despite their prevalence, fan pages have received relatively little attention in the marketing literature, with the exception of Zaglia (2013), who empirically investigated whether brand communities embedded in social networking environments exist. However, the Nikon fan page studied by Zaglia belongs to the photography category, which has both high symbolic value for the individual and products with an elevated level of technical complexity and necessary investment of effort from the consumers. My study involves cases with a lesser degree of involvement between consumers and the product category. Moreover, I empirically identified key characteristics that are typical of the fan page concept and the virtual brand community concept, and I have also identified the conditions and limitations for a brand that wants to cultivate a fan page into becoming an online social gathering.

Thus, collectively, these three research interests unite to form something broader – a framework to understand the extent to which companies can build a more communal environment out of their fan pages. I begin to build this framework as I describe the possible communal characteristics of a fan page the conditions for a fan page to be conceptually closer to the virtual brand community concept, and how

individuals use the semiotic elements of a fan page to communicate their identities. Additionally, while describing how the brand image is created in the fan page environment, I begin to demonstrate the increased value for the brand of having a more communal fan page. These three research interests will be developed next in three separate but synergistic articles.

Finally, the methods that were used in these three articles seemed to be appropriate at the time I started each one of them. I used what I considered the appropriate lens for the object of interest. In the first article I post-modernly assume that the signification of the brand is co-constructed, rather than given, between the brand and its fans. But I adopted the modern framework of the brand identity of Kapferer (2003). In the second article I fully adopted the post-modern perspective of consumption as a symbolic system in which symbolic consumers navigate (Firat & Venkatesh 1995). In the third article I aimed to describe and define the fan page with the concept of the virtual brand community in mind. This is a structural perspective, more aligned with a modern perspective of reality. I believe that these choices made my work coherent with which I intended to deliver as result. I kept my lens on reality and adopted the methodological perspective that could best “solve the problem”, but always with the precaution of not looking at a certain terrain with the wrong map (using Baudrillard’ metaphor in another context).

Article 1 - Brand image co-creation in Fan Pages: it takes two to tango**Abstract**

This article empirically describes how two brands and their fans on Facebook co-create brand meaning through mutual discourses in a process whereby the brand leads the dialogue and the fans continue this dialogue in communicating their identities to their social world. We adopt a case study perspective in a netnography of two fan pages of brands that are active in the running category. The results contribute to marketing theory by empirically demonstrating that online social conversations may collectively create brand image, illustrating the complexity of the brand management function in this social networking environment, presenting several types of brand content that may lead to social conversations that create the brand image, discussing the role of social networking on brand image co-creation, presenting individuals' motives to tell brand-generated and brand-related stories, and discussing the role of consumption in the co-creation of brand image.

Keywords: co-creation; brand image; Facebook; fan pages; brand management

Introduction

In social media, relationships between stakeholders are characterized by several competing interests, decentralized power (Kornum & Mühlbacher 2013), and consumer empowerment (Cova & White 2010). This configuration has led to a change in the balance of forces within the marketing ecosystem. From the brand perspective, the concept of a brand has evolved, with branding being considered “a collaborative and value co-creation activity of firms and all of their stakeholders” (Merz, He & Vargo 2009). Consequently, brand managers must not only produce branded content but also monitor the content that stakeholders produce about the brand. In addition, brand managers should develop strategies that lead consumer expressions in directions that are of interest to the brand in order to maintain brand stories “as close as possible to the brand owner's desired story” (Singh & Sonnenburg 2012, p. 190). This task is difficult in an environment in which several conversations occur at a rapid pace and “the once-tidy, controlled arena of marketing communications with discrete, identifiable corporate spokespeople has given way to a messy tangle of market-based communications consisting of multiple authors” (Muñiz & Schau 2011, p. 209). Social media has fundamentally changed the brand value creation process.

The velocity of information exchange in social media and the huge number of stimuli to which the average Internet user is exposed constitute a challenge for brand managers who are willing to communicate with consumers. Moreover, the challenges presented by social media and the Internet are particularly salient in the brand management context because brand managers have historically constructed their brand image through TV and radio media, which afforded brand managers increased control of each individual's experience because the communication was unidirectional and the brand manager was the sole sender of the message (Firat & Dholakia 2006). Brand managers used to tell the story, and individuals listened to this story with less interruption and in a more passive way than in the social media environment. In addition, consumers are currently paying less attention to brand content because of multitasking, multiple screens, multimedia possibilities, and information excess (Brasel 2012). As Fournier and Avery (2011) have noted, social media is not a technology that was created for brands to sell products or even to communicate with consumers.

Furthermore, consumers are selective when they are in the virtual world, and most of the time, they interact on online social networks with brands that they already know or consume (Sashittal, Sriramachandramurthy, & Hodis 2012). For example, an individual who is an active runner has previously experienced several brands of running shoes, listened to other runners' opinions on these brands, frequented races sponsored by the major brands in the category, and watched brand advertising. Therefore, when individuals become fans of Nike, Asics, or Mizuno's fan pages, they already have impressions of these brands. In addition, individuals continue to form impressions of brands across several channels, such as stores, websites, e-commerce platforms, sponsored street races, and conversations with other runners, through which the relationship continues to evolve. Therefore, relationships between individuals and brands on fan pages are often the continuation of a previous relationship between these parties in other environments, and the content that brand managers produce on brand fan pages will be used and understood in light of these outside experiences.

The content of an individual's interaction with a brand is interpreted in light of what is relevant for that individual's life and identity projects and not from a set of meanings determined by marketers (Thompson, Pollio & Locander 1994). However, each brand has an identity, and brand managers intend to create a brand image in a structured and planned way; nonetheless, in the Web 2.0 context, the means of communication have changed, and content is now co-created by companies and consumers (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner 2010). Meaning is co-created at the intersection of individuals' idiosyncratic goals and projects and the brand's intentional communicative actions. Two of the main reasons why individuals use social networking sites are to create a distinctive identity and to satisfy narcissistic tendencies by promoting their own "personal brand" (Sashittal, Sriramachandramurthy & Hodis 2012), sometimes through the use of brand content as cues to their actual or ideal selves (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012).

Nevertheless, not much is known about stakeholders' ability to co-create brand meanings (Gyrd-Jones & Kornump 2013, p. 1486). Empirical studies that demonstrate how and why consumers engage in brand co-creation of meaning are lacking in the literature (Kornum & Mühlbacher 2013). Co-creative environments may only occur if value complementarities exist between the different parties.

Research on marketing has found little empirical evidence describing these value complementarities within the context of the stakeholder ecosystem (Gyrd-Jones & Kornump 2013).

This article empirically describes how two brands and their fans on Facebook co-create brand meaning through mutual discourses in a process whereby the brand leads the dialogue and the fans continue this dialogue in communicating their identities to their social world. Methodologically, we adopt a case study perspective in a netnography of two fan pages of brands that are active in the same activity—running. The results contribute to marketing theory in five ways by empirically demonstrating that online social conversations may collectively create brand identity, illustrating the complexity of the brand management function in this social networking environment, presenting several types of brand content that may lead to social conversations that create the brand image, discussing the role of social networking on brand image co-creation, presenting individuals' motives to tell brand-generated and brand-related stories, and discussing the role of consumption in the co-creation of brand image.

Theoretical Foundations

Co-creation of brand meaning

Merz, He, and Vargo (2009) claimed that the logic of branding is evolving from one centered on the company providing brand meaning to that of stakeholders co-creating brand meaning and value. According to Hatch and Schultz (2010), brand co-creation is a concept that evolved from the idea of the consumer-driven innovation process. The value produced by the combined work of different types of stakeholders attracted attention and became a topic of interest of many fields, including that of branding. One of the principles of co-creation is that the brand value emerges from the stakeholders and their engagement with the company (Hatch & Schultz 2010).

In the co-creation of brand meaning, the brand managers control part of the content that is exposed (Ligas & Cotte 1999), which is a consequence of what brand managers' marketing objectives are and what marketers want consumers to know and feel about the brand. All the cues and stimuli that marketers offer are interpreted by

individuals in accordance with their desired social goals, life context, objectives, and identity projects (Ligas & Cotte 1999). Therefore, consumers are an active force in shaping brand meaning. Consumers' interactions collectively shape brand meanings through negotiation processes that occur within social relationships (Ligas & Cotte 1999). Consumers also co-create brand meanings to belong to a desired group (Cova, Kozinets & Shankar 2007).

Brand meaning co-creation is “the process in which consumers actively appropriate, extend, and/or modify products in ways that differ from the predefined or prescribed form and/or use in order to create new symbolic structures and meanings that have both personal and communal significance” (Lanier Jr. & Schau 2007, p. 327). Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2008) included a negotiation characteristic in the process of co-creation, as individuals negotiate the brand's meaning, personality, and role in society. This social characteristic of the co-creation process is important in the social network environment. Merz, He, and Vargo (2009) asserted that brand value is conjointly created “through network relationships and social interactions among the ecosystem of all stakeholders”.

The brand “not only emerges as a co-creation of all stakeholders, but is also driven by the identity they create together and define for themselves, supported by the interdependent activity that ranges from buying and selling products and services” (Hatch & Schultz 2010, p. 592). Consumers may be more engaged in positively co-creating the brand if they are aligned with the brand's purposes and values. In the absence of such alignment, evidence indicates that collaboration will cease (Cova & White 2010) or even stimulate consumer protests, as demonstrated by the “United Brakes Guitars” case (Gensler, Volckner, Lui-Thompkins & Wiertz 2013).

The connected consumer is also savvy about media and advertising practices and extracts meaning from these sources for use in his identity projects (Firat & Venkatesh 1995). Such a consumer is less concerned with loyalty to a brand and more concerned with the meaning and image that he wishes to borrow from that brand (Firat & Venkatesh 1995). Brand meaning is one of the most important values that consumers extract from brands (Peñaloza & Venkatesh 2006); individual consumers interpret brand meanings according to their subjectivity and express to the world what their thoughts on the brand are through their lens and interests. Brands as forms of expression, meaning, and sense making are dependent on the consumer's cultural

references (Firat & Venkatesh 1995) and are thus diverse and idiosyncratic. The diversity of brand meanings is exemplified in a study by Cova, Pace, and Park (2007), in which two geographic (and culturally) distant groups allocated different meanings to the RPG Warhammer. Consumers not only accept the meanings produced in the market but also alter them in accordance with the idiosyncrasies of their cultural group in the “bricolage” process described by Arnould and Thompson (2005).

The co-creation of brand meaning has increased in importance in the post-Web 2.0 era owing to changes in the direction of communication resulting from the increasing prevalence of bidirectional and many-to-many communication. The brand converses with consumers, who in turn converse with the brand and with other consumers, and this flow of exchanges alters the process of meaning creation (Muniz & Schau 2011). This process becomes analogous to the pinball metaphor described by Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching (2013), with marketing actions (the ball) targeting consumers (the machine’s bumpers, kickers, and slingshots) but with consumers also influencing marketing actions through their active participation in the game. A good pinball player reacts readily to the direction that the ball takes after it hits the bumpers and kickers and does not try to plan an intended direction for the ball. In this way, brand content may not only come from the brand, resonate in consumers, and be multiplied and transformed by these consumers but also come from the consumer, resonate with other consumers, and return to the brand in a form of feedback and meaning creation. This multidirectional exchange helps to increase cultural and value complementarities (Gyrd-Jones & Kornump 2013, p. 1490).

Some examples of the co-creation of brand meanings are found in advertising creation (Durgee 2004), brand relationship design (Payne et al 2009), and noncollaborative consumers (Cova & White 2010), but little empirical evidence regarding how the co-creation of brand identity occurs in social media environments or why and under which conditions brands and individuals co-create more frequently and significantly has been reported.

Brand identity

Brand image is defined by Keller (1993) as the totality of associations with a brand that consumers have in their memory. These associations may have different degrees

of favorability, strength, and exclusivity. Aaker's (1997) concept of brand personality is analogous to Keller's concept of brand image and is defined as the conjoint of human characteristics that are associated with a brand. Brand personality has five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and rusticity. The metaphor of brands as individuals has been useful in studies intended to increase the understanding of the congruence between the personalities of individuals and brands and the behaviors of individuals (Dobni & Zinkhan 1990).

The image-processing perspective of Keller and Aaker may be complemented with the "inside-out" perspective of the brand as an object that is constructed and managed by the brand owner, an approach that considers the external image a consequence of the internal identity (Burmam, Hegner & Riley 2009). In this conception, a strong company identity leads to a solid brand image in the receiver's side if the receiver's expectations are achieved.

The conception that the brand image is dynamically constructed through the interaction of brand owners and consumers in a co-creation process is a premise of this research. The seminal work of Goffman (1995), who defined individual identity as being socially constructed by the interaction of the individual with his social world, provides the theoretical foundation for this concept of the social formation of the brand image. Goffman's main unit of analysis was the "social encounter"—an interaction that occurs between individuals— which allows brand-consumer online relationships to be proxied by brand-consumer online interactions. Identity is an ongoing process that is developed in social interaction; therefore, according to Goffman, one must maintain a consistent role over time. Da Silveira, Lages, and Simões (2013) developed four assumptions related to brand identity based on the work of Goffman: first, brand identity is initiated by the brand manager but develops through inputs of several stakeholders; second, brand identity should be enduring but dynamic; third, the role that managers and consumers want for the brand eventually becomes the brand identity; fourth, the gap between brand image and brand identity is narrowing.

Kapferer (2003) developed a brand identity framework in which a communicative flow from the brand to the individual occurs and in which the brand image is formed under the influence of the brand identity. Kapferer's framework structures brand identity as a prism with six facets. The physical facet is composed of

the relatively more objective characteristics of the brand, such as product, package, colors, and benefits—elements that, in general, make the brand tangible to the consumer. The personality facet is represented by the brand's emotional characteristics, the tone of voice, and its personified elements. The cultural facet is profound, immersed in a system of values and practices that govern brand actions. The relationship facet is materialized in what the brand does for the consumer. The reflected consumer facet is the perceived image of the consumer for whom the brand appears to be addressing. Finally, the mentalization facet refers to the image that the consumer creates of himself as the user of the brand. The six facets are thus constituted not only of elements internal to the company but also of elements that are external and relational to the consumer, always constructed in a communication process between the brand and its consumers. Kapferer's framework is clearly managerial and modern in the sense that it presupposes a certain degree of control of the brand manager over the image of the brand, although it recognizes that this image may be materialized not merely in the consumer's mind.

For Kapferer, identity is a concept of emission that shows what the brand is, something that precedes the image that consumers construct. The flow of meanings presupposes an intentional behavior from the brand, which continuously plans what it wants to communicate with the imagined consumer in mind. Kapferer's brand identity framework also considers the perceived image that the brand manager has of the consumer—the reflected consumer and the mentalization facets are constituted from the receiver's perspective. Finally, identity precedes image because on the Internet, transparency predominates, with information circulating freely and the brand actions—intended or not—are revealed with consequences to its image.

Together, the six facets consistently integrate external brand manifestations with brands' internal capacities and culture. The image of the brand rests in the interaction of consumers' lives and brand manifestations in a negotiation process that may begin with both the brand and the consumer and that materializes in the ongoing relationship between the brand and the consumer. In the fan page environment, this relationship is communicative and, in the cases of Nike Run and Mizuno, is also an extension of brand manifestations and consumer practices that are related to running and that occur in the offline world in the form of training routines, running apparel, apps, social groups, and competitions.

In the context of social media and online brand aggregations, such as the fan page, identity precedes image, but the pinball-like characteristic described beforehand might change this process. The fan page is an environment in which the brand manager is the main sender of information but in which fans quickly respond to the content that the brand manager sends by commenting, liking, ignoring, or replicating it. Fans have previously interacted with the brand, and the brand image will likely be continuously updated in these co-creative interactions between the brand and fans. We will empirically demonstrate how the brand identity creation process is dynamic and emanates from several actors, as theoretically proposed but not empirically demonstrated by da Silveira, Lages, and Simões (2013).

Method

The research objectives in this paper are to identify how brand managers and consumers co-create brand images through their communicative interactions in the fan page environment and what the roles of consumers and brand managers are in their co-creative interactions. To identify how the brand image is constructed in the dialogue between brand managers and consumers in the fan page environment, we studied two cases. The case study methodology (Woodside 2010) was chosen because the phenomenon (the co-construction of brand image) and the context (the fan page environment, in which the brand strategy and fan are strongly connected to running) are inseparable and because their relationship is complex and not well explored. We collected all the brand posts and all the fan comments on the Brazilian Nike Run and Mizuno fan pages in a netnographic manner (Kozinets 2002, 2006). We chose the running category because running is an activity in which the individuals are highly engaged and, supposedly, this engagement should be manifested in their comments in the fan pages studied. We chose the Nike Run and Mizuno fan pages as the two cases on the basis of three criteria: the case should involve a strong brand in its product category, the case should involve a high level of activity of both brand managers and brand fans, and the case should include a high level of fan involvement with the product category. Analytically, following the tradition of discourse analysis, we searched for themes and functions that were present in the discourses related to the brand and its fans (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). We opted for studying fan pages that are controlled by the brand (as opposed to fan pages created by individuals) because

fan pages controlled by the brand have content (posts) that is created by the brand and that is liked, shared or commented by individuals (fans). Therefore, in all posts we can witness conversations between the brand and individuals. In fan pages controlled by individuals the brand might not necessarily participate in the conversation in all posts.

The Nike Run fan page content was collected and coded during the period between May and October 2011, and the Mizuno fan page content was collected and coded during the period between September and December 2011. In the Nike Run case, after two to three months, the types of brand content and fan comments became repetitive, indicating saturation, and we thus ended the data collection. In the Mizuno case, saturation occurred after we had collected data over four months of interaction (Table 1 summarizes the data analyzed in this research). We took notes on the process of codification and continually exchanged reflections on the evolving analysis. Nike Run's fan page was analyzed first in a process that began during the data collection phase to obtain an understanding of the brand identity construction process before we undertook the analysis on the second brand fan page.

Table 1 - Characteristics of the fan pages studied and amount of data analyzed

Fan page	Number of fans¹	Period of data collection	Object of analysis	Volume of data
Nike Run	1,000,000	May to October, 2011	Brand posts, member comments, photos, videos, links, and interviews with 7 fans of the page and with 1 Nike brand manager	Approximately 100,000 words of text
Mizuno	7,500	September to December, 2011	Brand posts, member comments, photos, videos, and links	Approximately 26,000 words of text

Seven fans of Nike Run, four of whom were also fans of the Mizuno fan page, were interviewed by email and by Facebook messenger to understand their use of the fan pages and their reasons for liking and participating on the fan pages and to obtain additional insights into the social dynamics of the fan page. They were told about the objectives of the interviewer. The exchange of messages lasted several weeks, allowing time for reflection for the interviewed and for the interviewer. This search

for the triangulation of methods within a time period is one of the sources of deep understanding in a case study (Woodside 2010, p. 6). This research included the direct observation of fan pages and queries of participants regarding their thoughts about the concepts being studied.

At the final stage of the coding process, we interviewed the marketing manager of one of the fan pages to validate the understanding of the marketing actions of the company on the fan page and to comprehend the marketing strategy and how the company worked on Facebook. This interview took place in a café in São Paulo and it lasted approximately 90 minutes. We tried to contact a Mizuno manager in order to interview him too but we were not successful.

Kapferer's brand identity framework is very structured and presupposes the emission of meanings from the brand to the individual. Therefore, to explore how this emission occurs in the postmodern context of the social media environment, we applied Kapferer's framework in the data analysis. Kapferer's framework is also more consumer focused than other existing frameworks (Ross & Harradine 2011). The six facets of Kapferer's (2003) brand identity prism (physical, personality, culture, relational, reflected consumer, and mentalization) were used as codes in the search for brand identity instances in the dialogue between brand managers and brand fans. All the text (pictures, words, links, videos) was analyzed line by line as we searched for correspondence with each of the six facets of brand identity. We searched for data units (Spiggle 1994) in the text that clearly represented the meaning creation according to Kapferer's framework.

Notes were taken during the codification process to obtain an understanding of what was occurring in that setting. After rounds of tentative coding (Spiggle 1994), we established the final codes and continued the codification process. Table 2 contains the list of the main codes that we used. We produced guidelines for the definition of each code to increase the internal validity of the coding process. The HyperRESEARCH 3.0 software for qualitative analysis was used in the codification and analysis process.

The "border" of the case (Stake 2005) in the coding process comprised all the communicative activity between the brand manager and the brand fans that contained textual elements that co-created the brand identity. We initially lurked on the main

Brazilian fan pages dedicated to running (Nike, Adidas, Mizuno, and Asics) and selected the Nike Run and Mizuno cases because these fan pages had the highest level of brand posting and consumer involvement of the four fan pages that we observed. We opted to research the product category of running because the running community is a mature community with four million runners in Brazil (Totti 2010) and because of the perceived involvement that runners have with the activity of running—one of the authors was previously a nonelite runner and had witnessed this community's passion for the activity for years.

Table 2 – Main codes for brand actions, fans actions and brand identity co-creation

Code	Definition
<i>Brand Actions</i>	
Posting non direct content	The brand posts content that relates to running but not to the brand itself
Posting questions and requests for fans	The brand posts questions and requests for fans regarding running
Posting brand content	The brand posts content that refers to itself, in the form of sponsored races, advertising and apps)
Posting content of the brand products	The brand posts content on new products launches, design and performance
Posting content on brand promotions	The brand posts content on consumer promotions (generally non-price based)
<i>Fans Reactions</i>	
Run talk	Discourses that involve running matters (e.g.: races, nutrition, stretch, training, habits and preferences)
Praise and critics	Compliments to the brand, the product, athletes and to marketing actions and content in general
Questions and requests	Discourses with questions, requests and suggestions to the brand about running events, apps, products or places to buy novelties
Social talk	Expressions that kept the fan page as a social environment, with discussions on running matters and also expressions of support, comprehension and empathic acts toward other fans
<i>Brand Identity Facets</i>	
Physical facet	The “objective” characteristics of the brand such as product, package, colour, and benefits
Personality facet	Elements that represent the character, tone of voice, and personified traces of the brand
Relationship facet	What the brand does for the consumer/fan
Reflection facet	Traces of the image of the consumer for who the brand seems to exist
Mentalization facet	The image that the consumer creates of himself when using or thinking of the brand
Cultural facet	Traces of the system of values and practices that govern the brand actions

Findings

Characteristics of communication on the fan page

The communication process observed on fan pages starts predominantly with brand managers, with several types of content choices, and rapidly continues through individuals who comment on, like, or share the content or invite others to see it. Because brand managers choose the content that they wish to share, brand managers exercise a high level of control over the topics that are discussed on fan pages. The fans, however, have the option of commenting in any direction that they choose to pursue. The brand identity emerges in the interaction among the brand managers' choice of topics, the quality of brand content in the form of text and images, and the fans' communicative responses to these stimuli.

Much of the communication process occurs from brand managers to the group of individuals and then moves back from each of these individuals to brand managers. Fans also talk to each other and even ask friends to engage in the conversation, but such interactions are less frequent compared with the preponderant brand-fan-brand model. In the fan page environment, brand managers are leaders in the process—but not because they are the only speakers. By contrast, textually, significantly more content is produced by fans, but fans' texts are guided in the direction chosen by brand managers.

Although this process of communication was often observed and represented the vast majority of the communication observed in this research, it was not the only process of communication that we observed. In cases in which brand managers presented some type of failure, the fans rapidly criticized the brand and attributed to the brand the responsibility for answering and solving the problem. In these cases, fans assumed control of the topic of the conversation, but this type of communication process was more the exception than the rule in the two cases studied.

Our data revealed that even in the online social network environment, brand managers may lead the conversation and strongly influence the construction of brand meaning through the choice of brand topics. The topics chosen by brand managers included communications related to the brand (e.g., marketing campaigns, videos, TV ads), running challenges, runner profiles, running apparel information, specialist's

opinion on running matters, various contests, and personal questions about running (e.g., time of the day when fans run, preferred music for running, rituals before and after running, food habits, the meaning of running in runners' lives).

The attractiveness of the content played an important role in the brand managers' dominance over the content. The quality of the posts, reflected in highly engaging videos and pictures, increased the use of the fan page, an effect confirmed in the interviews with fans of Nike Run and Mizuno. More attractive images increased fan engagement and elicited more favorable comments made by these fans, who were seduced by the brand narrative. This process was not entirely one sided, however, as previously mentioned. Textual instances in the fan comments that implied criticism of the brand and praise for Nike's competitors (such as Asics and Mizuno) were observed.

Brand expression on the fan page

The communication process observed on the Nike Run and Mizuno fan pages comprised five main categories of communication from brand managers and four main categories of reactions from fans. The five forms of posting from brand managers were nondirect content, questions and requests for fans, brand content, content on brand products, and content on brand promotions.

One of the most common forms of brand communication involved nondirect content or content that was not associated primarily with the brand. This category comprises content connected to running but that is not connected to Nike or Mizuno directly, such as playlists of music for running, techniques for stretching, rituals of preparation for difficult running challenges, information on street races, tips for beginners, the role of dogs in runners' lives, histories and opinions about athletes of different levels, or homages to special dates such as Valentines' Day and Mothers' Day. Below are some examples of this type of post from the Nike brand.

Nike Run

The Challenge of Peace, organized by NGO AfroReggae in Rio de Janeiro yesterday morning, brought together more than 4500 runners at the Complexo do Alemão. Among them, respectful athletes: Vanderlei Cordeiro, godfather of proof, and Franck Caldeira, who won the competition <http://go.nike.com/058erhd4>

Nike Run

Today is a day to honor our greatest hero of all time, the legendary Steve Prefontaine. He was a hero not only for the race but also for Nike, and even after his death, he continues to inspire us today. Steve said: "Over the years, I've been looking for a thousand reasons to keep running, but always come back to where it all began, self-satisfaction and fulfillment".

Nike Run

Today is Valentine's day, but we want the atmosphere of passion for running to dominate this Sunday. Run with love :)

The second category of brand communication was posting questions and requests for fans. Questions are a way to promote intensive interaction of consumers with the brand because, whenever a question is of interest to a fan, that fan has an opportunity to express his point of view on running. A question needs an answer, and, in general, questions received more comments than other types of brand communication. These questions referred to issues related to running or issues directly related to the brand, as demonstrated in the examples below.

Nike Run

If your shoes could speak ... what would they say?

Nike Run

Let's talk about music to liven up this Monday! Which Powersong best represents the spirit of the race?

Nike Run

What does running mean to you: to reduce body weight or to lose the weight from stress?

Nike Run

The # GOODSTUFF is happening, and we want to know: which of these ads from the campaign did you identify with?

- I knew it was dangerous, but I still experienced it
- A little walk is a stepping stone to harder stuff
- A friend challenged me, and I accepted

Nike Run

Morning, afternoon or evening? What is your training schedule? Defend your choice in the new virtual challenge that opened in Nike +. If you have the Nike + kit and are registered in the biggest virtual community of runners of the world, please choose your team and earn miles for your team. Let's see who runs more: morning, afternoon, or evening runners?

The third category of brand communication was brand content (e.g., race events sponsored by the brand, brand advertising, or apps developed by the brand). This form of communication was the most common type of brand communication on the Nike Run fan page and one of the two most common types of brand communication on the Mizuno fan page. In the Nike case, for example, when the #GOODSTUFF communication campaign was launched, content related to the campaign became main form of communication between brand managers and consumers. Nike brand managers appeared to refer to the Nike brand only when Nike brand content was relevant to runners. Otherwise, the conversation related to other topics of interest to runners. The Nike+ app allowed individuals to communicate their timing on the races and their daily training routines, turning an individual performance into a social experience. These posts created the occasion for running talk to develop between fans. From the brand identity perspective, these forms of brand content are interesting because they textually represent the images and meanings that brand managers intend to express. Below are two examples, the first of which concerns the Nike+ app and the second of which concerns the mentioned Nike campaign:

Nike Run

We have already accumulated 935K in the virtual challenge commemorating 5 years of Nike +! If you're a Nike + member do not waste time: join the team "Nike + Party" of the online challenge and get to this party.

Nike Run

Race, music and fun. See what happened at the launching event of the campaign #GOODSTUFF in Sao Paulo with the presence of rapper Emicida <http://go.nike.com/058erhd4>

The fourth category of communication was content on brand products. This form of communication was less frequent and was not used every week, likely because such communication depends on new product launches, which do not occur every week. Posting content on brand products is important for the construction of the brand image because it provides consumers with a chance to express their impressions about Nike and Mizuno products and to thus endorse the brands (if they like the products). Below are two examples in which Nike presents new running shoes that provide the sensation of being “barefoot”:

Nike Run

We believe in the benefits of natural running (barefoot), but we do not want to go home with a piece of glass in one of our toes ... So we go with Nike Free Run +2. Learn more about these shoes in Nike Run: <http://go.nike.com/0lee757>

Nike Run

Studies show that runners who train barefoot develop stronger feet. After all, the natural movement increases strength, and strength means speed. Nike Free Run + 2 is also this: speed. It helps to build "powerful muscles" - but go slow because the runner is not used to these movements, and it takes a while to get accustomed to. <http://go.nike.com/0lee757>

The fifth category of communication was content on brand promotions. This type of communication was not common and, in the case of Nike Run, was part of the brand strategy not to exaggerate the perception of the fan page as a promotional space. During an interview, a Nike brand manager stated that there was an intense internal discussion of whether to use the fan page as a promotional space to promote sales, but the company decided to devote limited resources to the promotional potential of the fan page. Brand promotions were instead used as a tool to increase member participation on the fan page or to "promote the sport", as demonstrated in the following post, in which Nike provided free running advice for runners younger than 23 years old. The emission of this content was immediately followed by both comments praising the initiative and criticism for not extending it to older runners.

Nike Run

Do you know that some of Nike's running partner advisors train every day of the week and are free of costs for those under 23 years old? The list of advisors is here: <http://go.nike.com/084j19gg>. Check it out. Run. Have fun.

These five forms of communication together were repeated several times per week during the entire data collection period in both cases. The content varied, but these forms of communication were the most common. Their impact on the conversation flow is discussed in the next session, which presents the way in which fans replied to Nike's and Mizuno's content and, in doing so, communicated their identities to their social world.

Brand-fan dialogue and fans' identity communication

The four main categories of fans' reactions to brand communications were run talk, praise and criticism, questions and requests, and social talk. Run talk is a category that aggregates several different types of expressions about running matters, such as expectations regarding future races, the best time or place to train, mood about running, feelings regarding and the meaning of running, the distance of a specific running course, music to listen to while running, techniques for stretching, and tips for nutrition, fitness, and general health. Run talk is a regular discourse that positions the runner in the running community and that represents the glue of social relationships within this community. Run talk on the Nike Run and Mizuno fan pages was similar to the conversations that runners have during their social encounters in parks and racing events in the offline world.

The second category was praise and criticism, which includes praise for the brand, the product, and marketing actions. Public demonstration of the appreciation for a brand is an important communicative element in the brand identity creation process. Criticism, however, was common whenever the brand failed to deliver the promised value, such as in the perceived disorganization of some paid races or in the perceived lack of post-purchase services in a brand store.

Questions and requests, the third category of communication, comprised myriad expressions about running events, apps, the correct product for each type of foot, or places to buy novelties. Questions and requests was an important form of

communication for the relationship not only between the company and its consumers but also among consumers. Commonly, the answers came from consumers and not from Nike or Mizuno. In addition, this type of communication provided a rich source of suggestions for the brand regarding new places to host races and ways of improving races, products, and apps.

The last category of communication was social talk, which comprises expressions that maintained the fan page as a social environment in which people not only discussed running matters but also expressed support, comprehension, and empathy in situations such as when an injury takes an athlete out of a marathon or when a beginner completes his first track and shows pride.

We perceived in fans' discourses an attempt to communicate their identity as runners to others who share the same interest as well as to their own social network within Facebook. However, these discourses occurred on the fan page after the brand managers had posted their content. Fans' discourses were responses to a conversation that began with brand managers. The dialogue that occurs between these two parties provides the opportunity for fans to communicate their identities. A brand post is thus an opportunity for fans to express themselves to their online network and to the fan page. The fan pages in this study relate to running, have high symbolic value, discuss running matters, and target runners. The importance of running in the fans' lives and the presence of equals are motivational elements for identity communication and for social bonding.

We found three strategies through which the fans communicated their running identities to others on the basis of an approach similar to that of Schau and Gilly (2003): extension of time, self-legitimation, and connection to objects. Extension of time is a strategy that involves communicative actions that have the function of extending the time during which one is a runner in the group. Digital social networks allow individuals to communicate their identity almost 24/7 (Schau & Gilly 2003). Runners used the content of Nike and Mizuno several times per day to narrate their running routines. Self-legitimation is a strategy that runners use to qualify their position within the running community in the form of their level of motivation; level of dedication; history of races inside and outside Brazil; number of kilometers run; time and pace in completing a race; knowledge of running-related activities, such as nutrition and preparation for running; and level of injury, which is an indication of

their strength. Connection to objects, as in Belk (1988), refers to the attachment to objects related to running, such as all the types of running apparel, and special figures in running, such as the epic athlete Steve Prefontaine.

In the following example, Mizuno posted content about a running race (Mizuno 10 Miles Series) and asked fans to participate. A woman (named Fan 1) took the opportunity to express her frustration for not being able to participate owing to an injury, which is a difficult event in the life of a runner. She had to abandon training and racing, could not have the same access to the social bonds that running provides, and had to discontinue an important and pleasurable activity in her life. Through Mizuno's post, she was consoled by other runners and could at least express her frustration, which in some way allowed her to continue being a runner for these others runners even when she could no longer run. This extension of time for being a runner was a common form of identity communication among fans of both fan pages.

Mizuno Brazil

On October 01 and 02, the last stage of the 10 Mile Series Mizuno, which passes through São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Porto Alegre, and now the capital of the country, will happen. Who will run?

Fan 1

I trained the whole year, I signed up for the 10 miles, and a week ago, an abscess appeared. I ended up in the hospital, and since then, I am hoping to recover in time to be allowed to participate I am almost crying as I write ...

Fan 2

Ah, that's boring ... Positive thoughts for you!

Fan 3

I have passed for the same situation

Fan 4

Get better... hugs

Fan 1

Thank you ...! Just those who run can understand the sadness of not being able to participate, right! ? Good training to all! I'm sure it will be a great race!

Next, we present an example of the connection to objects strategy: a fan declared that his running companion was a specific model of Mizuno shoes until the day that the model was substituted for another one (Mizuno Prophecy). In the text, he refers to himself as a “Mizuneiro” (which is the Portuguese equivalent of a “Mizuno enthusiast”)—an experienced runner with almost 70 tracks completed in his racing history. He discussed how bad he felt for having to throw out three pairs of Mizuno running shoes at the request of his wife. His experience as a runner was emotionally interconnected with his “museum” of running shoes, objects that reflected his personal history as an athlete. A second fan endorsed the importance of the collection, arguing that she aimed to achieve his level as a runner by buying and using three more pairs of running shoes.

Fan 1

This was the greatest companion until the arrival of the Prophecy!

I'll set the challenge: is anyone more MIZUNEIRO than me?

Mizuno Brazil

We have many Mizuneiros. Let's see if anyone beats your collection!

Fan 2

I have Creation 10 and 11 and the Lightning (for volleyball) I want the Prophecy to achieve the collection of (Fan 1) ... laughs

Fan 1

These that are shown in the photo are still in use Today is a sad and happy day for me I am close to completing my 70th race.... my wife pressured me so much that I'll have to throw away... my 3 Mizunos that were just filling up the closet ...; they were great companions I will post the goodbye photo! ha ha ha Let's go mizuneiros

The most common strategy was self-legitimation. Through apparently mere comments, fans communicate their knowledge, experience and willpower, among other traits, to others. We separate a sample of conversations from Mizuno fans in different contexts. Fan 1's comment was made after another fan complained about being injured and having to miss a competition. Fan 2 had just completed his first 10-mile race and posted about it following a Mizuno video about the causes of cramps.

Finally, fan 3 explained to “less experienced others” about the ideal times to drink water compared with isotonic beverages. This communicative strategy was used in a similar way on both fan pages.

Fan 1 (female)

Only those who run know the sadness of not being able to participate (in the competition). Good luck training to all! I am sure it will be a great run!

Fan 2 (male)

It was my first 10-mile race. I made it. 1 h 22 m 17 s. I am completely happy and filled with endorphins.

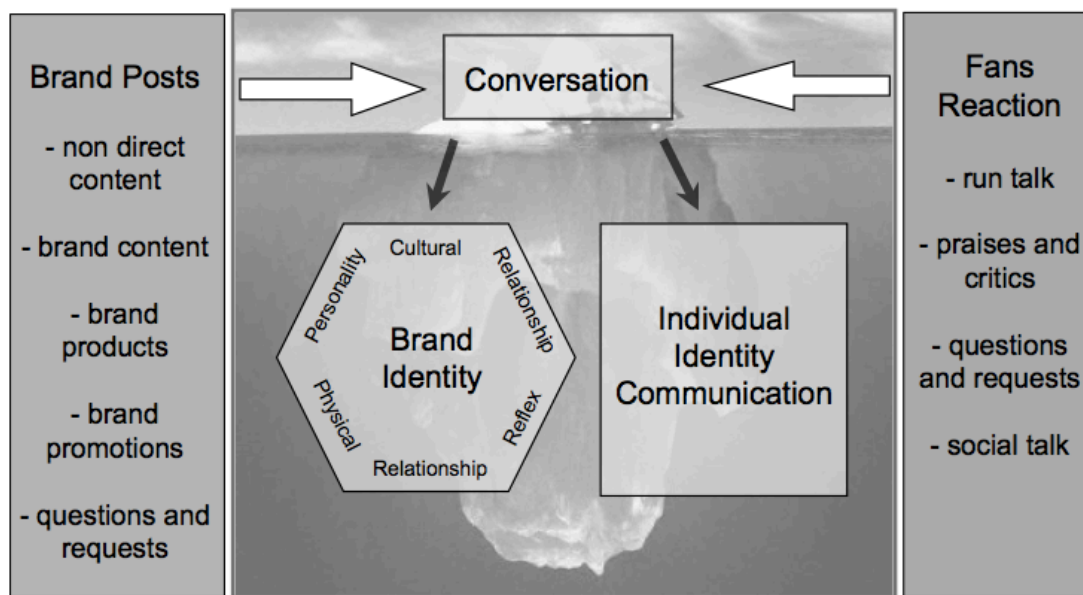
Fan 3 (male)

In fact, if you engage in moderate exercise for one hour or less, water is recommended for fluid replacement. But if you're running a marathon or practicing a sport for long periods, isotonic drinks can give a helping hand to replace what you have lost.

Brand image co-creation

In this section, we present how the posts published by brand managers and the comments, shares, and likes of fans constitute conversations that explicitly or implicitly represent one or more of the six facets of Kapferer's (2003) brand identity prism. The flow of the conversation and its impact on the creation of the brand image is represented in Figure 1. As the end of this section, we present the resulting brand identity prism for Nike and Mizuno (Figure 2). The co-creation of the brand image is presented in the following examples in the sense that the conversations that arise in the fan page are the collective product of textual expressions from the brand and its fans. These expressions are a result of the brand strategy (content choice) and the individual appropriation of the text in light of their personal interest in running.

Figure 1 – Brand Image Co-Creation Process in Fan Pages



The physical facet of Kapferer's brand identity prism was commonly observed in posts made by fans. Mizuno is a highly respected running apparel brand. Praise of its products, particularly its running shoes, and its customer service was common. Fans commented about Mizuno shoes when brand managers posted content about the company's products and in response to posts regarding other issues that were not directly related to Mizuno's products. These responses are important for the brand, as they are praise that comes not from a sponsored athlete or from an advertisement of the brand but from simple users, a more neutral source in the eyes of other fans who read the posts. However, fans' discourse may only occur after brand managers give them a chance to speak through one of their posts. Thus, transitions in the roles between speaker and listener occur rapidly. Below is an example in which fans spontaneously praised the Mizuno Prophecy I shoes and a brand manager simply thanked one of them for it.

Fan 1

I have just purchased the Mizuno Prophecy; I was elated with these shoes. You guys manage to improve every day.

Mizuno Brazil

The technology of the Prophecy really impresses. We are glad that you are happy with yours. Tell us about the evolution of your workouts.

Fan 2

I want to PRAISE publicly ALPARGATAS, the owner of the brand MIZUNO, for the excellent quality of its products and the care provided to us customers! CONGRATULATIONS!!

The personality facet was explicit in the posts of Nike and Mizuno brand managers as well as in comments made by fans. The main forms of communication that were used to imprint personality traits onto the brand entailed posting questions and requests about running matters and posting nondirect content (about running matters but not directly related to the brand). After these brand communications, fans continued the co-creation process through likes, shares, and comments on these posts in order to use them to tell the world who they are as runners. Nevertheless, the direction of the conversation was set by the brand managers through the strict range of topics that questions and requests presuppose. In the next example, the personality facet is imprinted onto the Nike brand through content posted by brand managers and content posted by fans afterward. Nike brand managers asked, “What does it take to be a serious runner?” Through fans’ answers, personality traits such as being focused on physical and emotional goals, being dedicated to running, being disciplined, having willpower and perseverance, being independent, and loving freedom were imprinted onto the brand. All these traces are somehow connected to the heroic figure that Nike has imprinted on its image in recent decades through its connections to athletes and its attitudinal discourse toward sports in general, which is present in the brand’s advertising campaigns:

Nike Run

After much dedication to training, each runner feels rewarded in a way: lower weight, greater distances, less time idle, a place guaranteed in the SP-Rio Race ...
And you, what rewards you for your devotion to running? #NikeSpRio

259 people like this

22 shares

Fan 1

After 2 months of training, an average of 185km a week, the reward came: a beautiful trophy, an excellent pace and a feeling that I can run a few kilometers and celebrate life simply because it is wonderful.

Fan 2

Freedom, self-esteem and a body in shape (laugh)

Fan 3

Overcome my limits!

Fan 4

I cannot wait to run it is the freedom that few know!!

Fan 5

Pure endorphins hopefully tomorrow at 5 am I will stretch and go for a 22 km

Fan 6

The feeling of accomplishment and pleasure that running brings. This is our fuel for running forever.

The relationship facet was implicitly present whenever the brand served some purpose in the life of the consumer. Through this purpose, value is more explicitly created and is not simply an attribute of the brand but an element of the relationship between both agents (Vargo & Lusch 2004). Mizuno and Nike brand manager frequently used their brand identities as specialists in running to communicate an image to their fans by posting content on running, such as tips related to stretching, nutrition, training, injury prevention, and apparel. Fans rapidly recognized the value of such information as it related to the issues that they face daily in their running routines. The next example is representative of dozens of similar interactions observed in our data. Nike posted a question asking about fans' foot type. Some fans knew their foot type and commented on the quality of Nike running shoes and even on what model they like to use, but some fans did not know their foot type and took advantage of the discussion to obtain better information about foot types to use when they choose running shoes.

Nike Run

Understanding and knowing your foot type makes all the difference in training.

<http://go.nike.com/058erhd4> What is your trampled?

Fan 1

HELP ME (LAUGH) I DON'T KNOW

Fan 2

Very pronated... Lunarglide+2.

Fan 3

Mine is of running, scraping the tennis shoe sides and internal tissues, as always.

Fan 4

Mine is perfect

Fan 5

My feet are pronated. And I love Nikes. Most are pronated, have you noticed?

The reflected consumer facet of brand identity was embedded in two main types of content: brand content and nondirect content. Such content contains images and stories of idealized runners and fan discourses in which they reflected on their own identities as runners, their lifestyle, and the benefits of running for their lives or idolized other runners' images. Again, the role between speaker and listener changed rapidly: whenever brand managers posted content, fans rapidly reacted by sharing it and praising running, athletes, and even their own identities as runners. The discourses imprinted through such athletes in Nike and Mizuno's posts educated runners regarding what being, feeling, talking like a runner entails. In this sense, Nike and Mizuno help to create the running culture. In the next example, Nike posted content about an athlete who ran a difficult marathon. The athlete provided a long reflection (omitted here) on her experience, and fans responded to her. Fans liked her testimony and shared it. One of these fans stated that the testimony in Nike's post better described what he felt as a runner than he could have described himself.

Nike Run

To inspire the practice of the weekend, it is worth checking the emotional and exciting testimony of Zilma Rodrigues, who ran the Comrades Marathon for the fourth time! <http://go.nike.com/058erh>

82 people liked it

Fan 1

"Every day is a new start, every km I run is a victory. I was not born to run, my body is not a machine to run, but my head and my soul are"

Fan 2

Congratulation!! Sharing! Hugs...

Fan 3

One of the most interesting stories so far. Very nice!!!

Fan 4

Ouch... I loved it... My eyes are full of tears because I feel it and know exactly how many obstacles we have every day to continue doing what we love... to run.

The mentalization facet refers to the images associated to the brand that come to mind when consumers reflexively think, "Who am I when I use this brand?" Kapferer (2003) used the example of a Porsche customer who imagines himself as powerful, successful, aggressive, and sexy when he envisions himself driving a Porsche. The mentalization facet manifested in fans comments after Nike's and Mizuno's posts. The dialogue initiated by the brand managers, usually in the form of questions for fans, was followed by dozens of answers that shared similarities in terms of the sensations, motivations, and benefits of running. For both fan pages, this facet was the least prominent. The mentalization facet of Kapferer's framework may be more present in runners' minds than in their words on Facebook. A runner can like or share content that Nike posted because the content represents who he would like to be or how he likes to be perceived. However, one may not explicitly express that the content reflects his identity and may construct his identity in a more implicit way (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin 2008). Therefore, the mentalization facet may be more present in the fan page environment than the codification of the text is able to show. In the next example, fans commented on their sensations and motivations for running in response to a question posed by Nike. Nike is not the subject of the conversation; rather, fans are, and they fill the space with their self-reflections as runners.

Nike Run

You study and work all week.... What motivates you to keep on training on the weekend instead of sleeping late or sitting on the couch?

Fan 1

The endorphins - I'm addicted to it.... I also love my shoes because they take me away from everything and everyone....

Fan 2

I did not believe it until I felt it in my own "skin". Running is addictive, in a good way. It is not a sacrifice for me. It entered into my routine, and I cannot imagine myself without running.

Fan 3

The pleasure of running, to feel the sun on your skin and the wind in your face. The satisfaction of accomplishment afterward, and the wonderful feeling of endorphins...

Finally, the cultural facet, a reflection of the system of values and practices that govern brand actions, may be observed in the discourses of brand managers, through which Nike and Mizuno express their values and their representations of an archetypical runner. The cultural facet is also less frequently evident in the discourses of fans, who reflect the values of the runner as proposed by brand managers. The runner's values proposed by brand managers resonate with fans' own images of the ideal runner. In the next example, Nike mentioned the history of the Comrades ultramarathon in South Africa and paid homage to its heroic creator, Vic Clapham. In the text, Nike communicates values such as perseverance, willpower, resistance, boldness, and integrity, all of which are embedded in the history of Clapham's enterprise. Meanwhile, the history of the Comrades Marathon tells a tale of the tradition of the running sport in the same way that other sports, such as tennis, soccer, and cycling, have their own tournaments or races with historical origins, such as Wimbledon, the World Cup, and the Tour de France, respectively. One fan mentioned that he and other "warriors" will be running in this competition.

Nike Run

In a few hours, we will start to another weekend of pure resilience, with several long distance events happening simultaneously around the world. Florianopolis'

Ironman, Bertioga-Maresias' relay in São Paulo and the Comrades Marathon, which takes place Sunday in South Africa.

The Comrades is reputed to be the world's largest ultramarathon—and for a good reason! The history of how it started is itself an example of strength and companionship.

The idea came from Vic Clapham, an Englishman who immigrated to Africa at a very young age. After surviving the First World War, in 1921, he decided to make a march to honor their colleagues who had not resisted fighting. Along with 33 friends, Vic Clapham went from Pietermaritzburg to Durban in a race that would forever change the history of the country. Today, the race receives more than 13,000 athletes in a race as exciting as it was more than 90 years ago.

With an extremely challenging journey, full of ups and downs, the race alternates the direction every year. In odd years, it will go from Pietermaritzburg to Durban, doing the opposite in even years, but always closing a total of 86.96 K...

Fan 1

Family of runners, we will be there with approximately 30 warriors to run on Sunday.

These facets of Nike's and Mizuno's brand identities may be found in the conversations between the brand managers and brand fans. Brand identity was explicitly and implicitly manifested in the words and images of the brand managers' posts on the fan pages and in the comments, likes, and shares of the fans. This textual characteristic of Facebook allowed the brand managers to imprint a brand image that is relevant to running and that fans may express in ways connected to their own identity projects as runners. The symbiotic combination of discourses from a desired brand image with meanings represented in fans' identity projects through their discourses enabled these meaningful conversations to occur.

Many of the discourses that we analyzed contained multiple facets of brand identity, usually two facets, such as the relationship and physical facets or the cultural and personality facets. This finding is not surprising, as the facets of brand identity are interrelated (Kapferer 2008). Conversations between brand managers and fans do not necessarily have a sole meaning; they are contextually signified and may provide several possible meanings. In the next example, Nike asked fans to choose the phrase

from the campaign with which they most identify. Fans chose the phrase that best reflected their spirit as runners (an equivalent to the mentalization facet), and, concomitantly, Nike imprinted its desired spirit of what being a runner who is slowly becoming addicted to the activity means (an instance of the personality facet).

Nike Run

The #GOODSTUFF is going on, and we want to know: with which of these ads from the campaign do you identify:

- I knew it was dangerous, and I still did it
- A little walk is a stepping-stone to harder stuff
- A friend offered me, and I accepted

Collectively, all the conversation on the fan pages inform prisms reflecting Nike's and Mizuno's brand identities (Figure 2). These two brand identities differ to some extent, and these differences reflect both the brands' strategies and the relationship that fans established with the brands. The relationship and physical facets were somewhat more present in the case of Nike than in that of Mizuno. Regarding the relationship and reflected consumer facets, these results were influenced by Nike's strategy of posting content that is useful for consumers and that does not necessarily or directly involve the brand as well as its strategy of using text and images of runners that continually communicate Nike's vision of the ideal runner. With regard to the physical facet, the results are a consequence of fans continually mentioning and praising Nike's products or services. Nike did not post content about its products very often, so brand managers cannot be considered to have pushed individuals in this direction. By contrast, this facet of brand identity resulted from a conversation, in which Nike offered a good service to its consumers and its consumers repaid Nike through praise. In comparison, the cultural facet was moderately observed in the texts. Although Nike is known for its strong brand culture, the company appeared not to push its culture in every post. Although we can only speculate about the company's reasons for doing so, an interview with a Nike brand manager revealed that its brand managers deliberately devote specific amounts of its fan page content to services for runners, running events, the Nike+ challenge, products, and global content (content that is posted simultaneously and in a similar

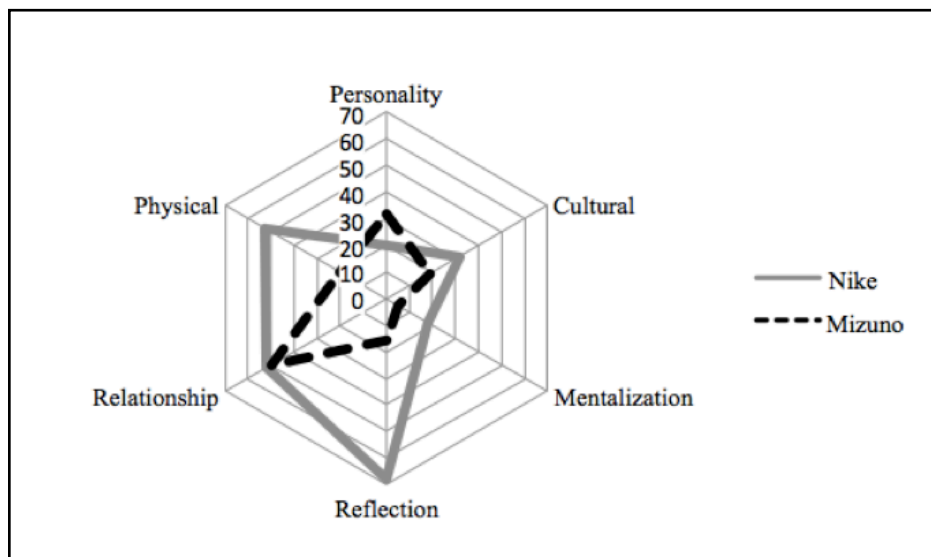
manner on each fan page worldwide). The content related to the Nike+ challenge and content related to global campaigns were potent vehicles for the transmission of Nike's running culture, although other types of post were also capable of communicating its running culture. The personality facet was present in several posts made by fans of the brand. The mentalization facet was the least often observed facet on both fan pages but, as explained above, the mentalization facet of brand identity generally exists more in individuals' minds than in their express words on Facebook.

The brand identity prism of Mizuno was marked by a greater presence of the relationship facet. The presence of this facet clearly resulted from the brand's strategy of posting nondirect content, mainly related to races, training, nutrition, preparation, and exercising. This information is useful for runners, who declared in interviews that they perceived the fan page to be informative and directed at their running needs. Similar to Nike, Mizuno often posted content about athletes and thus implicitly imprinted elements of the personality facet of its brand identity, which was the second most prominent facet of Mizuno's brand identity prism. The physical facet was moderately evident, likely because Mizuno is already known in Brazil for being a "technical brand" and is adored by runners for its quality and competence (a trait recognized by the Nike brand manager interviewed for this project). The cultural facet was present in the same relative proportion that we observed for Nike. Both brands appear to balance the type of content that they post on their fan pages to direct influence their fans' responses. Finally, a difference between Nike and Mizuno was the relative absence of the reflected consumer facet on Mizuno's fan page. Mizuno fans appear to be more into running than into talking and socializing, as indicated by the few number of comments on Mizuno's posts than on Nike's posts. Nike Run's fan page appears to have created an environment in which commenting is encouraged through the explicit behavior of other runners.

To facilitate the visualization of the codification results, we created a visual map comparing the resulting brand identities of Nike and Mizuno (Figure 2). The frequency of codes of each facet revealed different brand identities for both brands because brand identity results from the ongoing conversation between brand managers and brand fans. This conversation is influenced by the brand strategy, the types of content that brand managers present, and the different relationships established between a brand and its fans. These facets were co-created in the sense

that they result from the relationship between the brand and its fans and from the benefits that fans perceive in the brand content. The Nike brand manager that we interviewed was intuitively correct when he noted that the company does not aim to use the fan page as a tool to push products and promotions onto consumers because doing so would drive them away from the fan page. Instead, Nike wanted them to expand the running experience into the digital world and into their social networks. In addition, Nike wished to promote its self-expressive potential because, in its understanding, this self-expressive potential was what the fans wanted.

Figure 2 – Frequency of Occurrence of the Facets of the Brand Identity Prism



Discussion

Social networking sites allow individuals to extend their digital selves to a broader audience and over a broader range of time compared with communication platforms in the offline world (Schau & Gilly 2003). In environments full of people with similar values and interests (such as fan pages related to running), individuals produce discourses with identity goals regardless of whether the brand participates in these interactions. This article presented ways in which brand managers are able to enter and even direct consumer conversations through content that is mutually enriching for both consumers and their brand. The running conversations observed in this research simultaneously facilitated both identity discourses for consumers and embedded brand image meanings.

The presence of runners with similar interests on these fan pages not only increased the motivation for self-expression but also created the perfect audience for such expression. As Belk (2013) argued, the social networking environment exposes us to others who “increasingly help in constructing our individual and joint extended sense of self through an updated version of Cooley’s looking glass”. Belk (2013) called “affirmation seeking” one of the characteristics of the extended self in the digital world. In this research, runners often encouraged each other in training, competing, adopting a certain diet or exercise routine, recovering from injuries, and so on. All these conversations reaffirmed who they are as runners. All the likes and comments of this audience reinforced members’ need for affirmation. Therefore, not only the brand image but also the brand identity is collectively shaped through Facebook’s discursive “glass mirror”. Nevertheless, not every comment was reinforced by likes and comments from other fans. Much of what was written on the fan pages that were studied was ignored, at least from what we could observe through the words and images in our data. Consequently, the “glass mirror” mentioned by Belk (2013) is indeed sometimes a social experience and sometimes is merely an imagined or desired mirror. The individual does not know when or whether his comments are going to be liked or commented on, and part of the benefit of participating in these virtual social gatherings may be the anticipation of social feedback.

This research illustrated the active role of brand managers in influencing and directing the discourses on fan pages. According to Cayla and Eckhardt (2008), most studies on consumer culture theory have been oriented toward the consumer perspective and have downplayed the role of brand managers in shaping consumer discourses. This research presented five types of discourse categories that Nike and Mizuno used to serve as a tool to foster individuals’ identity narratives as runners. These narratives, as a consequence, helped to symbiotically co-create the brand images of Nike and Mizuno. In this research, we noted that brand managers initiate the dialogue by setting the theme and that fans rapidly assume the authorship of the communication for their own purposes toward the internal audience within the fan page and the external audience within their personal social networks. When asked, brand managers continued the dialogue, but after the ball is shot (in the pinball metaphor), the brand managers no longer control the direction of the conversation and

become just another participant in the collective dialogue. The rapid change in the role between speaker and listener blurred the boundaries between the company and individuals. Fan page lurkers can be exposed to substantial content about running, and the author is not merely Nike or any individual—it is a collective creation.

According to Kapferer's (2003) model, the physical and the personality facets relate to the sender, the reflected consumer and mentalization facets relate to the receiver, and the cultural and relationship facets relate to the bridge between these two agents. Although brand managers may start the conversations with posts containing elements that indicate the brands' running culture and capacity to produce high-quality running apparel, in the social media environment, these discourses are ignored if they do not resonate with fans' reality. Thus, through fans' responses, the conversations produce content that truly represents the physical or the personality facets of brand identity. The same logic may be applied to the other facets (cultural, reflected consumer, mentalization and relationship). In the absence of content that makes sense in the mind of fans or that fans may use as a semiotic resource for their identity communication, the brand would risk being ignored, and these facets of brand identity would not be communicated at all. Kapferer's framework is useful for understanding brand image co-creation, but theoretical evolution of the framework is required because of the context in which it works (social media), the fast pace of communication between multiple stakeholders, and to the blurred roles of these stakeholders in content transmission. As Belk (2013) noted, "As such strings of short messages accumulate and as photos and other postings accrue digital patina, they become less an expression of one person and more a joint expression and possession of the couple or group that has composed them".

The use of powerful narratives is a necessity, from the brand perspective, in a world in which competition for individuals' online attention entails competition with all content producers in a multimedia environment where TVs, tablets, cell phones, and other offline stimuli divide individuals' scarce attention (Brasel 2012). Both Nike and Mizuno use high-quality photography and video. The attractive power of such images is evident in fans' interactions with Nike's and Mizuno's posts. When a runner wishes to see appealing content about his sport, the Nike and Mizuno fan pages are one of the best places to find it. However, running is a very narrow product category in terms of the specificity of the activity and has relatively few players

compared with other product categories populated with more brands, such as fashion or healthy food. Thus, the specificity of the product category, the number of players within that market, and the user's level of engagement with the category may all be positively related to the potential for brand managers to produce brand content that may be used for individuals' self-expression.

Theoretical Contributions

This research aimed to contribute to marketing theory in several ways. First, the empirical findings show that a brand image may emerge from virtual conversations between brand managers and individuals as well as between individuals in social media. Individuals appeared to play an active but inattentive role in socially constructing brand images. Brand managers lead the conversation, but they must be deeply rooted in the product category culture to create content that is meaningful for the individuals' identity projects. Therefore, even in the postmodern era of social media, a modern framework such as Kapferer's may be useful for understanding how brand image is co-created with brand managers still leading the process. Kapferer's framework allowed us to capture instances in the discourses that represented the brand image of the two brands and, at the same time, understand the exchange of the sender' and receiver' roles from the brand to its fans. The fast pace of conversations in social media did not take power away from the brand manager, at least not in these two cases. The two cases analyzed show that consumers' freedom to express themselves in social media may be consistent with brand managers' power to conduct the conversation. The fans' participation was typical of a follower who engage in scripts originally designed by the brand manager. So we present evidence that, even in social media platforms such as Facebook, brands can maintain a degree of control of their image, branding strategies can be effective for brand managers and power is not always more concentrated in the hands of individuals.

Second, this co-creation process of brand image communication brings complexity to the brand management function (Gensler et al. 2013). Although brand managers clearly have a leading role in the co-creation of brand image on social networks, this power only manifests if the created content stimulates the conversation between brand managers and individuals. Brand managers should provide stories that

motivate individuals to continue the conversation and to use these stories in their own identity projects. In this sense, we demonstrate how brand managers may engage in strategies that Fournier and Avery (2011) have called Leveraging Web 2.0 Interconnectedness by getting consumers' expressions to work on behalf of the brand. This approach adds complexity to the brand management function because brand managers should not only plan the creation and distribution of brand-related content but also plan the creation of content that will resonate with consumers' identity projects. Nevertheless, we show that, even in co-creative and more democratic environments such as social media, brand managers are still able to have a reasonable degree of control over the brand image.

Third, this research empirically presents one of the impacts of meaning co-creation through a brand and its fans: the collective shaping of brand image. Belk (2013) claimed that the notion of self in 2013 is more a collective one than it was in 1988 when he wrote "Possessions and the Extended Self". Indeed, social networks are increasingly making humans work more as collaborative groups than as individuals. The collective shaping of brand image is one of the actual impacts of consumer-generated brand stories on brand performance (Gensler et al 2013) but certainly not the only one. This research shows some of the types of stories that are disseminated through individuals' social networks (Gensler et al 2013). Nonbrand-related stories, brand-related stories, product stories, promotion stories, and questions and requests for fans are the stories that these two cases presented, but many more stories may be created depending on the type of activity of the product category, on the brand's history, and on the author of the story (e.g.: the brand or the fans as the author).

Fourth, this research demonstrates the role of Facebook' fan pages on brand image co-creation, a relevant subject given the vast number of fan pages created by brands to connect with their consumers. Social networks are a vehicle for individual and collective identity communication as well as a vehicle for brand stories and brand image communication. The constant evidence of who someone is (or how he likes to be perceived) through what he publishes online (Schau & Gilly 2003) creates the perfect scenario for brands and individuals to symbiotically share content that communicates their identities. This self presentation in online environments is as true in 2013 as it was in 2003, when Schau and Gilly had their paper published, but in 2013, digital social networks were more widely used than they were ten or fifteen

years earlier. Now, the leading social networking site (Facebook) is used by approximately one-sixth of the world's population (Belk 2013); in 2003, one of the leading social network sites (MySpace) was growing from 3 million users up to 22 million in 2005—the year that the company was acquired by News Corp (Young 2005). Digital social networking environments were new and highly discussed in 2003, but by 2013, they had become a mainstream tool. As Boyd (2014) explained, in the 80s the place to be (for teenagers) was the mall; in 2013 it is social networking sites such as Facebook or Instagram. The presence of a vast majority of one's relationships in a social network, such as Facebook, creates a stage for one to perform for his audience. When the content of such performance is brand related, the brand image becomes part of this play's subtext. Boyd (2014) called social networking sites “networked publics” in the sense that they unite people through technology and social practices. The fan pages studied were online environments in which people could communicate their running identities because there were running practices. Therefore, fan pages can be the place where individuals can discuss the social practices of their preference (e.g.: running) and these conversations can be a valuable asset for brands on building their image.

This research also reveals one of the motivations for consumers to tell individual stories mixed with (or even simply sharing) brand content (Kuksov, Shaschar & Wang 2013). Identity communication in the digital environment has been profoundly investigated in marketing research. Belk (2013) wrote about the easiness of connection that digital social networks provide. Through comments, likes, shares, and tags, people are able to interact with others' relevant content on Facebook and to thus resolve their search for self-affirmation (Belk 2013). This ease of connection is one of the incentives for posting brand-related identity content online. When a brand story is closer to individuals' identity, these individuals will more likely share, comment on, and like this content.

Finally, this research indicates that the product category possibly plays an important role in the co-creation of branded stories. In the two cases discussed herein, the product category played an important role in individual users' lives. The importance of the product category for the individuals' lives directly affects their motivation for using content from this product category, whether branded or nonbranded, to communicate their identity. In addition, individuals aggregate

themselves into groups related to activities of common interest (Kozinets 1999), so a more communal product category of interest is associated with a greater probability that individuals with this interest are connected to others with this interest through social networks. All the runners observed in this study were connected to dozens of other runners and used Facebook to maintain these ties. Category relevance, individual identity communication, and relevant brand content collectively influenced the co-creation of stories between the brand and individuals. Brands in a product category that has engaged users may provide content that is relevant to their lives and that has the semiotic power that individuals need to communicate their identities.

Future Research

In the present research, we studied a product category that features high user involvement (i.e., running). Future studies may use comparative approaches for product categories with less user involvement (such as soap or pasta) and product categories with limited association between brands and users (such as geriatric diapers). Such research could provide insight into possible intrinsic limits that each product category has in its ability to provide meaningful conversations on social networking sites.

Future studies may also investigate whether and how product categories that present risks to individuals' identity (as opposed to categories that magnify positive aspects of one's identity, such as running) have intrinsic limitations in their potential to provide content that can be used in identity communication. The association with brands and products of alcoholic beverages (particularly those with high alcoholic content) might be a threat to one's desired image in relation to a group of acquaintances (such as professional acquaintances) but not to another group (such as close friends). As Belk (2013) has stated, "the challenge of segregating multiple personas is more difficult in the digital age". Whether and how individuals avoid or attenuate the use of brand content in these situations to produce a more desirable identity remain to be determined.

This study only investigated five categories of content that Nike and Mizuno posted on their fan pages. Future research may also identify other forms of content that brands use to communicate with their fans and how these other types of content

differentially engage fans in commenting, sharing, liking, and co-creating brand meaning. We only investigated fan pages on Facebook; thus, future research may aim to advance knowledge in the field through studies in other social media contexts, such as Instagram, Picasa, Flickr, and Twitter, as each of these contexts has its own social and technical idiosyncrasies (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden 2011).

Finally, digital self-expression is becoming an activity that is constant, fragmented, and commonly observed in an increasing variety of online media. What we do, say, visit, like, and share is constantly available online, and somehow, we are leaving a legacy through all these fragmented pieces. Some activities such as running may be a central part of who someone is in the world, but other activities may not have the same role in one's life. Future studies could investigate the role of excess and multiplicity in identity communication. In a world marked by excessive self-disclosure, what remains stable? What is transient? How do we continue to construct our multiple selves in the digital context in a consistent and integrative way? At the end of 2013, Facebook released an application that turned the entire digital life of a person in that year into a video clip with a retrospective narrative of who that person was so that friends can obtain a directed sense of how he/she wanted to present her life during that year. Therefore, there is empirical evidence of a necessity for order in the Facebook timeline. Zhao et al. (2013) found that people engage in self-disclosure on Facebook in three main ways, one of which is exhibition (what one wants to disclose for the long-term presentation of the self). Hogan (2010) also stated that online self-presentation has an "exhibitional" nature in which all that we post represents the collection of our personal gallery. Future research could investigate how significant others perceive exaggerated self-disclosure (such as the "selfie" habit of exposing one's images in each and every situation) and the multiplicity of personas being presented. Overexposure in self-presentation may lead one's digital connections to cease caring; excess makes it difficult to create a difference, which essentially defines one's identity.

Managerial Implications

The present research provides digital marketing managers with objectives to drive their decisions regarding fan page management. Our findings suggest that brand

managers should have the goal of helping consumers (fans) to communicate their desired identities. The brand content must inspire them and make them comment on, like, and share the posts by brand managers. Brand managers should accomplish this goal by considering the facets of brand identity. The content of brand posts should inspire conversations that build the brand identity in one or more facets of Kapferer's prism. Therefore, managing fan pages entails planning the content that is pertinent for the category and for individuals' interests in that category (category-related content). The need to direct fan page content is somewhat obvious, but it should be done such that the content also creates opportunities for individuals to communicate their desired category-related identities to their Facebook networks and to other fan page members (individual-related content). The content should also embed meanings that help to build the desired brand image (brand strategy-related content). By doing so, brand managers will facilitate the development of more significant brand-fan relationships and thus increase consumer engagement, which is one of the holy grails of contemporary digital marketing.

We also recommend that brand managers measure the effects of fan page conversations on the brand identity, brand image, or any other framework that the company uses. Managers may quantify the evolving brand image communicated in these conversations. Using the framework of Kapferer (2003) as a reference, managers may evaluate whether the relationships on their fan page are embedding the facets of the brand identity prism in a way that is consistent with the brand objectives. Managers should also fine tune the content posted on their fan page to emphasize facets of their brand identity that are absent in the conversations on the fan page.

Finally, in our opinion, this type of analysis should be fundamentally qualitative because it concerns meanings that are extracted from conversations through the use of methods such as discourse analysis. Nevertheless, the quantification of these conversations is necessary to measure the extent to which the conversations on fan pages reflect the desired brand strategy and to determine the degree to which results approach or depart from the brand objectives.

Article 2 - Identity Projects of Mature Runners and Self Expression on Facebook

Abstract

The marketing literature suggests that older people tend to be more oriented toward the past. This exploratory study examines how six runners in their 50s and 60s actively use their personal Facebook pages and brand content (from fan pages) to communicate their actual identities to their social world. Our findings show that people in their 50s and 60s who consider running to be a very important part of their life are oriented toward the present and that they use their discourses and social media content as a tool to communicate their actual identity similarly to people in their 20s. These runners do not use Facebook as a semiotic tool to communicate their ideal selves, as recent studies have suggested. In addition, the meaning of running for each of the six individuals studied was deeply connected to their particular life histories.

Keywords: identity; symbolic consumption; aging consumers; life course; Facebook; fan page

Introduction

On July 1, 1988, Nike launched its Just Do It campaign with a film of an octogenarian named Walt Stack who ran 17 miles across the Golden Gate Bridge every morning. At the time, he was one of the oldest marathon runners in the USA (Holt and Cameron 2010). In the ad, Walt Stack talks to the viewer while he runs and poses a rhetoric question: “People ask me how I keep my teeth from chattering in the winter”. To this question, he answers: “I keep them in my locker”. Walt Stack expresses that he has no problems with getting older and with the commonly assumed problems associated with getting old. Running helps him overcome all these minor aspects of life. His life is good as it is. He smiles as he runs, simply enjoying life at his age.

Culturally, getting old is generally associated with decline, ugliness, dependency, impoverishment, unproductiveness, and loss. The assumed loss of working capacity and a mature adult’s removal from a relevant economic role contribute culturally to perceptions of mature adults being old. When the media discuss the global aging process, metaphors such as “flood”, “epidemic of old age”, and “avalanche” unsurprisingly appear frequently (Cruikshank 2009).

People’s identities change as they age and as their social contexts evolve. People’s social contexts are always specific to them, and people may have many ways of dealing with the effects of age. Assuming new roles, engaging in hobbies, going back to university, getting involved in social work, travelling, and joining new groups are all common and positive activities to facilitate a healthy aging process, and today, the idea that aging can be a successful process is becoming more widespread in the media (Cruikshank 2009).

One of the common changes in an adult’s life is the adoption of a healthier lifestyle, and becoming involved in sports is part of this transformation. Mature adults are engaging in running increasingly more often when they reach their 40s and 50s (Tarantino 2013). Running has become an important social and economic activity, with 44 million runners in the USA (Thomas, Price and Schau 2013) and more than 4 million in Brazil (Totti 2010). Moreover, the demography of the running community is changing, with middle-age woman being the fastest growing segment in the USA (Thomas, Price and Schau 2013). Furthermore, more than 9% of runners are in their 60s or older in some street races in Brazil (Tarantino 2013).

This paper examines the process of identity communication on personal Facebook pages by mature adults in their 50s and 60s. These adults use the activity of running and running-related content on Facebook with the semiotic objective to build their identities. We argue that the identities that are communicated are based on each person's life history and on the cultural meanings associated with running that these runners borrow from the social environments in which they are immersed. Running is an activity that is crucial in the discovery of new identities for these individuals and that is often connected to other identities apart from running. The ways that runners use their personal pages and the content of brand fan pages are components of a virtual social expression that is theoretically and managerially crucial for brands when companies seek to be part of consumers' lives. We demonstrate how Facebook has become a distinct stage for the expression of such identities.

The vast majority of marketing strategies for running brands target people aged between 20 and 39 years, according to a Nike marketing manager interviewed by one of the authors. Nevertheless, the mature adults presented in this study have been using running-related social media content as a semiotic tool to build their identities. The interplay of personal identity projects and the meanings that are derived from running and brand fan pages can be understood within a research tradition that understands brands as objects of heterogeneous meanings that are derived from personal identity projects that cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which people are immersed (Peñaloza 2001).

Lastly, although identity is a concept that has already been investigated in the fields of gender (Holt and Thompson 2004), ethnicity (Peñaloza and Barnhart 2011), youth culture (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006), and class (Holt 1998), marketing research has not extensively investigated the identity projects of mature individuals, with notable exceptions that include Barnhart and Peñaloza (2013) on elderly consumption, Bonsu and Belk (2003) on death rituals, Price Arnould and Curasi (2000) on dispossession of cherished objects, and Schau, Gilly, and Wolfenbarger (2009) on retirement. The present study examines individuals' communications related to their identities as runners and their use of digital semiotic tools to become immersed in a running community. We show how brands have a secondary role by becoming immersed in running practices when they offer utilitarian and symbolic value for individuals.

Next, we review the literature on self/identity projects, consumption, and the life course perspective and the expected implications of the life course perspective for consumption and identity projects.

Theoretical Foundations

Self/Identity

The words “identity” and “self” are occasionally used interchangeably (Swann and Bosson 2010). Authors within the symbolic interactionism tradition take such a position because the self, being multiple and situational, is constituted by parts. Each of these parts (or roles) is an identity that the individual performs in society (Stets and Burke 2003, p. 8), and these roles can change throughout the life course.

Swann and Bosson (2010) described how William James (1890-1950) initially discussed the concept of self as a source of continuity, which gives the individual a sense of “connectedness” and “unbrokenness”. By contrast, Goffman (1959) understood people to be actors who perform their own play, at each moment, for distinct audiences, and in various ways. Therefore, according to Goffman, there is no enduring self but instead one that is transmitted according to the situation; this perspective came to be called the “situationist approach” (Stets and Burke 2003).

In the 1980s, the concept of self began to be conceived as multifaceted, with not only enduring central elements but also situational components (Swann and Bosson 2010). Therefore, the metaphor of the actor on the stage gave way to an identity that is steady but negotiated all the time within the individual’s interaction with others. In a certain way, this view was a return to the concept set forth by William James, who had already accounted for the social self, which is presented to each person with whom an individual interacts. Therefore, individuals use feedback from others to form their own self-perceptions and simultaneously regulate their behavior to keep themselves socially efficient (Markus and Cross 1990).

In addition, the self and one’s behavior are closely related. One performs a social action, and the feedback from the environment becomes an incentive to maintain this behavior and association (Perinbanayagam 2006, p. 235). Consumption,

therefore, plays an important role in the formation of identity (Arnould and Thompson 2005), and understanding the processes through which consumers expand their identities from objects, ideas, or symbols of consumption (Connell and Schau 2013) has been of crucial importance for marketing theory.

Connell and Schau (2013) showed how collective projects of identity occur when two or more people engage in a similar identity project, expanding an external identity element into their own identity projects. Such symbiosis between these individuals and the external element that provided resources for their identity building can create collective identities or shared identities (Belk 2013). Swaminathan and Monga (2013) defined collective identity as the aspects of an individual that she or he attributes to a certain group but that do not necessarily have meaningful relationships within that group. Therefore, collective identities emerge when individuals perceive certain groups to have strong similarities to important facets of their selves (Escalas and Bettman 2005).

Individual identities can be constructed around both the actual self, or who people perceive themselves to be, and the ideal self, or who people would like to be or aspire to become (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, and Nyffeneger 2011). In the context of social networking sites, researchers have shown that individuals engage in communicating their actual selves (Back et al 2010) and their ideal selves (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Turkle 2011) and that individuals tend to communicate their ideal selves on sites with no serious penalties for being different to some extent from how one is usually perceived. Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) showed how even on social media sites with a high level ofonymity (Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 2008), which is a high level of disclosure about who someone is, such as Facebook, people link to brands that reflect their ideal selves, mostly because the majority of people have a weak tie to their friends on Facebook (Granovetter 1979). However, on Facebook, people do not present images, ideas, and associations that are too dissonant from their actual selves because they can be counteracted by friends in evaluations, posts, and comments, leading to a more realistic self-presentation (Walther et al 2009). In addition, cultural differences influence whether and how people present an identity that is more linked to their actual self than to their ideal self, as shown by Grasmuck et al (2009) in their work with Afro-Americans, Indians, and Latinos in the USA. People who are proud of their

culture tend to present their identities to the world. Personality differences account for narcissistic self-promoting behavior (Carpenter 2012), and ego fulfillment (Toma and Hancock 2013) constitutes one of the primary motivations for the use of social networking sites.

In the Goffman (1959) metaphor, the digital context therefore becomes an important theater for the construction and communication of a person's multiple identities because individuals are immersed in a society that is increasingly connected through social network sites. As of 2013, one billion people in the world had an account on Facebook, and 500 million had an account on Twitter (Krotoski 2013), and these two platforms, while very important, are just a small part of contemporary everyday virtual connectedness. These digital technologies have allowed individuals not only to connect but also to communicate who they are to their social world through myriad semiotic resources in texts, pictures, videos, personal and professional affiliations, hobbies, tastes, and ideas. Everything that individuals choose to post tells their social world that this information is part of them, identifying them digitally—"we are what we post" (Schau and Gily 2003). These self-representations may create digital narratives that tell the world about one's competence, expertise, and abilities at a frequency and to an audience that could not possibly be accomplished through nondigital expressions (Belk 2013). Nevertheless, as Belk (2013) states, "a more comprehensive treatment of the extended self in a digital world is still missing" (p. 83).

The Life Course Perspective

Biology, psychology, and sociology are the primary academic disciplines that seek to understand the passage of time and its effects on the body, life, habits, attitudes, perceptions, and relationships of aging people (Bengtson, Elder and Putney 2005). Until the mid-1960s, human development research was based on the life cycle approach, which at the time was a useful method to study intergenerational patterning through the sequence of role transitions (Bengtson, Elder and Putney 2005). However, the duration of intergenerational cycles depends on social factors such as the time of marriage and childbearing, and in contemporary society, given the

variability of family typologies and the variability of life transition patterns, the life cycle can no longer account for people's life evolution.

During and after the 1970s, the life cycle approach began to converge with a new awareness of the aging process and condition, which accounts for the subjective experiences of aging and the structural and cultural forces that shape what aging means (Bengtson, Elder and Putney 2005). According to Bengtson, Elder, and Putney, the life course is a multifaceted evolution of the life cycle concept and is defined as "a sequence of age-linked transitions that are embedded in social institutions and history" (p. 493). The life course, which is the most widely cited theoretical framework in social gerontology (Bengtson, Putney, and Johnson 2005, p. 13), and has five principles: 1) "linked lives", in which each life is interconnected; 2) social and historical forces, in which factors related to time and place shape individual lives; 3) transitions, in which the social context affects individuals' life transitions; 4) agency, in which individuals are important in affecting outcomes; and 5) life-span development, in which aging is a lifelong process.

Anthropology has contributed greatly to the literature on transitions through the life course (Nydegger 1986), with studies searching for associations among biological psychological, social, and historic factors in the trajectories of individuals and groups, primarily with respect to variability and complexity (Nydegger 1986). Age transitions are transitions that are solely dependent on the evolution of chronological age, such as the passage of infancy to adolescence. However, apart from this transition, it is hard to identify another transition that clearly depends on age—although the media has continually tried to identify cohorts, such as "the forties" or "the fifties", as homogeneous groups (Nedegger 1986). A transition between roles, which can be concomitant with an age transition, may better explain a meaningful transition in one's life, such as a change in one professional status to another, completely different status. This change in perspective is important methodologically because the researcher moves away from using age as an explanatory variable for the role changes of large groups toward searching for patterns of change in significant life events that lead to new roles and determine how these roles organize an individual's social participation (Nedegger 1986).

The psychological tradition also presents a bias in searching for patterns of change during the lifespan. Gergen and Gergen (2000) stated, "there is a widespread

tendency within the social and biological sciences to search for the naturalized life course, that is, to chart the innate development and decline of human capacities...over the life-span". Gergen and Gergen (2000) attributed part of this vision to a socio-cultural context in which the young have more power than the old. Nevertheless, as the population of the world ages and as the political and economic importance of older people increases, a new vision of the aging process can be constructed (Gergen and Gergen 2000).

The managerial literature traditionally considers the life course to be a more structured, linear concept with a strong relationship to individuals' purchase behavior. Belk (1988) extensively reviewed the effect of time passage on identity and found that young people are more oriented toward the future than older people and that older people, valuing objects such as photographs and memorabilia that serve as reminders of the past and that are associated with nostalgic emotions, are more oriented toward the past than young people (Belk 1985). According to Belk, older people find happiness in objects of the past and look to the past for confirmation that they were happy, loved, respected, and competent. Young people, however, value objects in their house that have a relationship with what they can become (Olson 1985).

Belk (1988) asserts that older people have a strong awareness of their mortality, which becomes closer and inexorable. The decline in physical and mental abilities and a reduction in social relations create the perception of a negative change in identity. Belk cited Lifton (1973) to suggest five ways through which people compensate for this perceived deterioration of identity: 1) proximity to their children; 2) beliefs in the afterlife; 3) involvement in their own work; 4) identification with nature; and 5) participation in transcendent experiences.

According to Schouten (1991), most people pass through life with self-concepts that are relatively constant because these self-concepts reflect social roles that change slowly and that are immersed in perennial social structures. Transitions correspond to a limbo between a past state and a future state, which is associated with ambiguities and anxieties that relate to an unanchored identity that may begin with the separation from some role, relationship, or key element of one's self to date (Schouten 1991, p. 421). Thus, transition phases are generally difficult for individuals.

Mehta and Belk (1991) found that people create personal rites for these transition phases by molding new identities via activities and symbols that are present in the cultural environment. This process of searching for new identities is characterized by freedom and experimentation, and by trying these new identities, people come to understand whether the new roles and symbols fit their expectations.

Although these ideas about age, consumption, and identity are broadly accepted, possible evolutions should be considered given the contemporary conditions of aging individuals. People who are 50, 60, or 70 years old today were young in the 1970s and 1980s and were exposed to all the transformations that Western society has witnessed since then. The aging population has increased, their purchasing power has grown, and their use of digital communication technologies has allowed them to be more connected to the world (Gergen and Gergen 2000).

Role transitions also occur at a faster rate today, a change supported by both the economic capacity of aging individuals and the actual media environment that identifies the aging phase as a period that is “fun and fulfilling” (Gergen and Gergen 2000). This context differs from that in the 1970s and 1980s, when Belk, Schouten, and others wrote their articles on aging and identity. The appropriateness of attributing a specific life stage to an individual based solely on his chronological age or physical appearance is therefore questionable, as the life stage might not reflect the actual social context (Debert 2006).

Method

This study aims to examine how runners in their 50s and 60s actively use their personal Facebook pages to communicate their identities as runners to their social world. We also aim to identify cultural themes presented in the discourses of these runners and to determine the relation between these cultural themes and some of most relevant facts in the runners’ life histories. Additionally, we aim to describe how and under which conditions brand content extracted from fan pages entered these runners’ digital narratives on Facebook.

Data from six runners ranging from 52 to 69 years old and two runners in their early to mid-20s were analyzed. We compared how the cultural themes that were present in these runners’ digital narratives differed depending of the runners’ position

in their life phase. We had previously conducted a netnographic study on two Brazilian fan pages related to running (Nike Run and Mizuno) and observed hundreds of young runners and dozens of more mature runners in these digital environments for 6 months. We found that the older minority also communicated their identities in these digital environments but that the ways in which the older individuals communicated their identities differed from that of the younger majority.

All the participants were selected because, in our judgment, running is an important part of their lives, an assumption that was subsequently confirmed in personal interviews. The participants were chosen during six months of unobtrusive observation of Nike Run and Mizuno fan pages because, in our judgment, these individuals represented critical cases for the purpose of the study. We observed their personal Facebook pages in a nonobtrusive way (Kozinets 2002) to confirm that running was a clearly preeminent activity in their lives. We observed all the posts that these runners made to their personal Facebook pages and all the comments that their friends added to their posts (Table 3 summarizes the profile and the data collected of each participant). We were particularly interested in their narratives related to running and how the participants used content from brand fan pages (e.g., Nike Run, Mizuno, The North Face, and several local running clubs and organizations). We found that running was the most prominent theme on their personal pages. We observed each informant's personal page from one to two months, depending on the volume of daily posts and the saturation of themes that were present in their timeline. Field notes were taken to identify the primary events, activities, possible conflicts, or territories that the participants spontaneously mentioned in their narratives (Keith 1985).

After obtaining a sufficient understanding of the participants' use of running content for identity purposes, we invited them to participate in a semistructured interview (Kvale 2007) and explained the objectives of the research, the importance of their participation, and how we had selected them for the research. We conducted the interviews face-to-face or asynchronously via e-mail and Facebook messages (Hine 2005). Face-to-face interviews were conducted in places that were chosen by the interviewed individual, generally a cafe near the areas where they run and usually after they finished daily training. The duration of the interviews varied from 75 to 110 minutes (information on the interviews is detailed in Table 3).

Table 3 – Informant Profiles and Data Collection

Name	Age	Residence	Interview method	Data collected from personal page	Interview duration
Juliana	early 20s	Rio de Janeiro	Facebook and email messages	November to December 2012 (40 A4 pages)	messages exchange - 10 days
Romulo	mid 20s	Rio de Janeiro	Facebook messages	December 2012 (21 A4 pages)	messages exchange - 18 days
Corretor Corredor	52	São Paulo	face-to-face interview	April 2013 (39 A4 pages)	110 minutes
Guilherme	52	Rio de Janeiro	Facebook and email messages	December 2012 (41 A4 pages)	messages exchange - 3 days
Neide	53	São Paulo	face-to-face interview	November to December 2012 (42 A4 pages)	70 minutes
Roberto	52	Jundiai (within of São Paulo State)	face-to-face interview	May 2013 (38 A4 pages)	90 minutes
Tomiko	63	São Paulo	face-to-face interview	May 2013 (76 A4 pages)	105 minutes
Lucina	69	São Paulo	face-to-face interview	August 2013 (33 A4 pages)	100 minutes

Each interview began with general open questions about the evolution of running throughout their life histories (e.g., today versus ten years earlier), their running routines, their expectations regarding the evolution of running in the next few years, the meaning of running to them, the benefits of running for their lives today and for their lives in the future, whether and how running has changed their lives, how they imagine they are perceived by their running community, and the development of social ties through running. We then proceeded to more specific probing questions about the content that we observed on their personal Facebook pages, their use of content from fan pages related to running, and other themes noted by the interviewees. Our primary objective was to understand the runners' habits of self-expression on Facebook in light of each runner's personal life. We aimed to capture significant facts in their life histories, which is a type of data that is often used in life and role studies (Nydegger 1986), and to simultaneously maintain an open-ended interview format to allow for an interpretative analysis.

The data that were collected amounted to 330 pages of Word processor text from eight informants' personal Facebook pages and 320 pages from transcribed interviews. The data were analyzed line-by-line, image-by-image, with the aid of HyperResearch™ qualitative software. Considering that these individuals were using language to “make sense of their social world” (Elliott 1996, p. 65) in connection to their life histories, we conducted a discourse analysis (Elliott 1996) as we searched for the rhetoric function of the posted content. Inspired in the hermeneutic circle, we also made constant efforts in the analysis to understand parts of the text in relation to the whole and the whole text in relation to the individual parts of the text, as well as the fusion of horizons between the participant and the researcher, as proposed by Thompson, Pollio, and Locander (1994).

The literature on the cultural meanings of sports and running was used to understand the participants' objectives in identity communication. Cultural themes are conceptualized in this study as values, norms, behaviors, and physical artifacts that shape a cultural system and that provide ways of doing things in the everyday interactions of a group (Fine and Kleinman 1979)—in this case a group of runners. This body of literature on the cultural meanings of sports and running is cited in the following session in which the findings are discussed. The data were therefore analyzed in a circular fashion, with the codification process being based on coded generated of grounded meanings found on the text and also of theoretical categories found on the literature of cultural meanings of sports and running.

Findings

The analysis is reported in this section in the form of cultural and experiential themes related to running that were found in the discourses of the informants. Four of these individuals were in their early or mid-50s and two of them were in their mid- or late 60s. Two additional individuals in their mid- to late 20s were chosen because they represented a young and theoretically useful counterpoint. First, we describe who these individuals are and how running became an important component of their actual identities. We then describe how cultural themes related to running are presented on their Facebook timelines and how these themes are connected to their actual identity projects.

Neide, the activist runner

Neide, 52, is the founder and owner of an NGO that works with young people from a poor neighborhood in São Paulo, Brazil, called Capao Redondo. Her job is to transform the lives of these people through running. According to Neide, running breaks the cycle of social exclusion and idleness that permeates the lives of the young people with whom she works. It also promotes autonomy and leadership, strengthens community ties among them, and connects the inhabitants of this neighborhood to the physical public space.

Neide found motivation for this project in an unfortunate way. Teenagers from the Capao Redondo neighborhood killed her son, and the aversion and revulsion that she experienced from this event led her to leave the community for two months. After this period, however, she decided to return to create her social project to improve the lives of other children.

Neide was married twice, and she is currently divorced. Police in Capao Redondo killed her first husband. After these two tragedies running assumed a therapeutic function in her life, becoming the context of the goals in her professional and personal life.

Neide is not solely dedicated to the NGO. She also works elsewhere, mainly for financial reasons, but only for five hours per day. She has given up 30% of her salary in this daily job to dedicate more time to running and to the NGO. She has completed more than 30 marathons.

She has a large number of social ties owing to her NGO activity. She has almost five thousand friends on Facebook. Her online friends have positive perceptions of her because of her job at the NGO. Inside the Capao Redondo community, she is viewed as an exemplary woman.

Guilherme, the solo, serious runner

Guilherme is 51 years old and lives in Rio de Janeiro. His second wife is almost 10 years younger than him, and she is a runner as well, albeit at the beginner level. He began running when he was 17. At the time, he practiced jiu-jitsu and surfed, and running was a complementary activity. He decided to run seriously and aimed to

complete a marathon, which he finished in good time. After suffering a few contusions from running and moving to São Paulo, he almost abandoned running and began to drink, smoke, and eat in excess. Guilherme said that drinking had become an addiction. He returned to Rio de Janeiro and now lives with his second wife. He is a member of Alcoholics Anonymous and has been attending meetings for two years. During this time, running became important to him again.

Running is part of what Guilherme calls his “spiritual awakening”. He describes running as a pillar of his life and considered it to be “a gift”, which, he believes, was introduced into his life by something greater than himself. Running was part of Guilherme’s life during several periods, and occasionally, had a supportive role during periods of difficulty and transition (as we will discuss below). Guilherme is profoundly dedicated to running, and it constitutes a large part of his routine. He enjoys the competitive side of running and mentioned competing against others several times even when competition was not an immediate topic of the interview. Competition and being better than other runners are important to him.

Finally, unlike most of the runners on the Nike Run fan page, Guilherme perceives himself to be a “serious runner”. For him, other, “social” runners are only there for fun, with the aim of taking pictures and enjoying a social and physical activity. He perceives that these other runners as less engaged with the true spirit of running. This oppositional condition is therefore part of his identity as a runner.

“Corretor Corredor”, the running character

The “Corretor Corredor” did not even tell his birth name to the author who interviewed him. He much preferred to be known by his codename, which in English means the “running realtor”. Corretor Corredor today is a character who expresses himself through a YouTube account, a blog, and a Facebook group (with more than 2,000 participants). He has more than 3,000 friends and 7,000 pictures on his personal Facebook profile. He is a 53-year-old real estate broker who runs often but with moderate intensity—generally 5-kilometer runs. He mentioned three primary reasons for his passion for running: the amazing sensation of being able to run, the pleasant vision of belonging to a massive group of people who run, and the good quality of life that running facilitates. He has no ambitions to be a serious runner who improves his

pace or who runs marathons. He does not want to hurt himself from running too much.

A few years ago, Corretor Corredor decided to write about running and created a blog with his codename as the title. This blog gave life to the character, and through writing text and posting pictures of him in the streets, running and acting as the character in an entertaining way, the character became the runner. In his own words, “until that moment, I was a common runner”, and now, he is a small celebrity. He was clearly delighted to have become a character, which he built with planning and care, that has begun to be recognized in the running circuit. As an example, a few years ago, he created a personalized t-shirt with a tie printed in the front, to entertain people and have fun in the streets. He planned ways of taking pictures in which his right eyebrow is lifted, his closed-mouth smile is always the same, and his right index finger is pointed at people beside him. All these gestures were created naturally and organically, but they became part of his trademark. The character is very important to him, and through the character, he has become someone who other people consider to be distinct, important, and revered, as he declared in an interview with one of the authors.

Two of his favorite themes in his Facebook posts are the people whom he interacts with and news about cheap or free races. He believes that running has become too expensive because of the not only of street races but also of equipment. The democratization of running is a preoccupation for him. As an example, he began to run with a Nike #goodstuff group, but he soon realized that he did not feel comfortable in this environment, mainly because of the predominant number of very young people with (in his words) running habits that were driven by exaggerated fashion. He left the group after he realized that he did not belong there.

Roberto, the brave heart runner

Roberto is a runner in his midfifties. A father of three daughters, he is in a second marriage with a high school teacher and lives in a medium-sized city near São Paulo, Brazil. He works for a multinational chemical company. He has built strong relationships in the running community. One of the authors interviewed him in a park

in São Paulo after his run, and several people, continually interrupting the interview, came to compliment him even though he was outside his own city. Roberto has cardiac problems. When he was sixteen years old, he suffered an accident with fireworks that took part of his left hand and injected in him some chemical substances that caused his heart problems.

Roberto started running in 2007 and faced difficulties that are normal for beginning runners. He nevertheless persisted and even defied his doctor's advice of not running in excess. In 2008, even after two moderate heart attacks, he ran his first 10,000-meter challenge. On this occasion, he suffered a serious heart attack at the end of the track. Later, in the hospital, the exams revealed that his heart was working with only 65% of its capacity. He agreed with his doctor who urged him to obtain medical supervision while he prepared himself to run seriously. Since then, he has increased his running activity, and in the last three years, he has run organized racing events every weekend. In 2011, he completed 11 half marathons, and in 2012 and 2013, he ran the Buenos Aires and Disney marathons. Roberto is clearly improving his running capacity despite his heart problems. His wife was with him during the interview. She did not seem to completely approve of her husband's decision.

Tomiko, the ultrarunner

Tomiko is a single, 63-year-old woman who lives in São Paulo and has already retired from her job as a nurse assistant. Tomiko was diagnosed with osteoporosis and high cholesterol when she was 48 years old. A few years later, in 2002, when she was 52 years old, she decided to start walking. A friend of hers invited her to run, and she went, although she knew nothing about running. In the same year, she completed a famous 15-kilometer race in São Paulo that takes place on the last day of the year. Her evolution was rapid; she dedicated every weekend to running races and almost every day to a training routine. In 2003, she completed her first marathon, and in 2007, she began to run ultramarathons—challenges of more than 150 miles to be completed in 48 hours.

Although running clearly has become the most important activity in her life, Tomiko says proudly that she is an amateur runner. On the day of the interview, she woke up at 4:00 a.m. to run for two hours, after which she lifted weights for more two

hours (and, according to her, that routine was just a normal day). Tomiko has more than 4,000 friends on Facebook, and her personal page displays more than 1,700 pictures, mostly of her running routine. She seems to be a very social person, and her social ties are clearly connected to the habit of running. On the day of the interview, a girl stopped by just to tell her that she was “her fan and admired her so much”. The interviewer felt as though he was in the presence of a local celebrity. She received the compliment with natural modesty and a little shyness.

Lucina, the happy and social runner

Lucina is a 69-year-old woman who began running twelve years ago. She owns and works in a flower street shop near the center of São Paulo. Her job is a very time and energy intensive because she buys the flowers, takes care of them during the day by watering them, prepares packages, and addresses costumers and other stakeholders. According to her, she works twelve hours every day. She has been a hardworking woman her entire life, and she is very happy and proud of that fact. Before assuming her husband’s flower shop twelve years ago, she worked by selling figures of religious saints, sandals, food, and various regional goods from Minas Gerais (a Brazilian state). She also used to own a bar and once bought a clothing factory with 80 employees. Her energy is impressive, and during the interview, she was always smiling and happy in remembering all her accomplishments and life events. Before the formal interview, she told a joke provides some insight into her personality: during more extensive races, she often hears verbal encouragement from people for her not to give up. In such situations, she likes to reply with humor: “but who said I was thinking about giving up?”

Lucina is famous for running long races that are longer than 24 hours and more than 50 kilometers in length. According to her, she completes these races easily, never getting very tired and never becoming exhausted by the end. She just completes them and smiles, enjoying being with the running community, which composes the majority of her more than 1,800 friends on Facebook. Lucina declared that being within this group, which is composed mainly of happy and easygoing people, is what motivates her most, along with helping others to complete their races and to proceed even when they are very tired. Her humor and charisma have made her famous in the

running community. She is often asked to give interviews with the press and was once studied by physiologists from the University of São Paulo, who were looking for something exceptional in her body. According to her, they never found anything special, which she believes has to do with her mind.

Juliana, the young runner

Juliana is a woman in her early 20s who lives in Rio de Janeiro, works in the fashion business, and takes her running routine seriously. Apart from family matters or work obligations, nothing can disrupt her routine of running and taking spin and jump classes (which she takes to improve her running ability). She has been a runner for the last 5 years, and she can sense the evolution in her body, which, according to her, “has less cellulite due to running”.

Running gives her internal peace and is a complementary activity to her therapy, which she adopted three years ago. This peace is found in her contact with the natural environment. She likes to be fully involved in the activity, so she avoids listening to music while running, for example. The activity is so connected to who she is that she dislikes not running for even one week. Once, she broke her arm, and the doctor insisted that she not run. She cried, and as soon as she could, she entered a street challenge, running while wearing her hard cast.

Juliana frequently participates in the Nike Run fan page and often uses the content in the Nike Run page as a source of information for posts on her Facebook timeline. She is also an enthusiast of the fan page and often interacts with other fans. She is someone who is perceived to belong to the fan page’s “elite group”.

Romulo

Romulo is a runner in his early 20s who lives in Rio de Janeiro. Romulo is a serious runner with daily dedication to training and competing in street challenges. He often accesses the Nike Run fan page because the brand promotes races such as the Nike 600K, a competition among runners from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Nike also encourages young runners to practice and provides free advice from professional instructors in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Romulo was one of the adopters. Romulo

is very connected in the running community, with most of his friends belonging to this group. His Facebook timeline is full of comments and pictures of friends who run and discuss running matters. He also uses Facebook to access the fan page of the races that he intends to run. His primary motivation in using Facebook is to obtain information on all running matters and to establish and maintain social relationships with the running community. Therefore, he accesses Facebook daily and exchanges messages with his friends who are runners several times a day. Romulo not only knows the running community in Rio de Janeiro very well but is also connected with the running community in São Paulo.

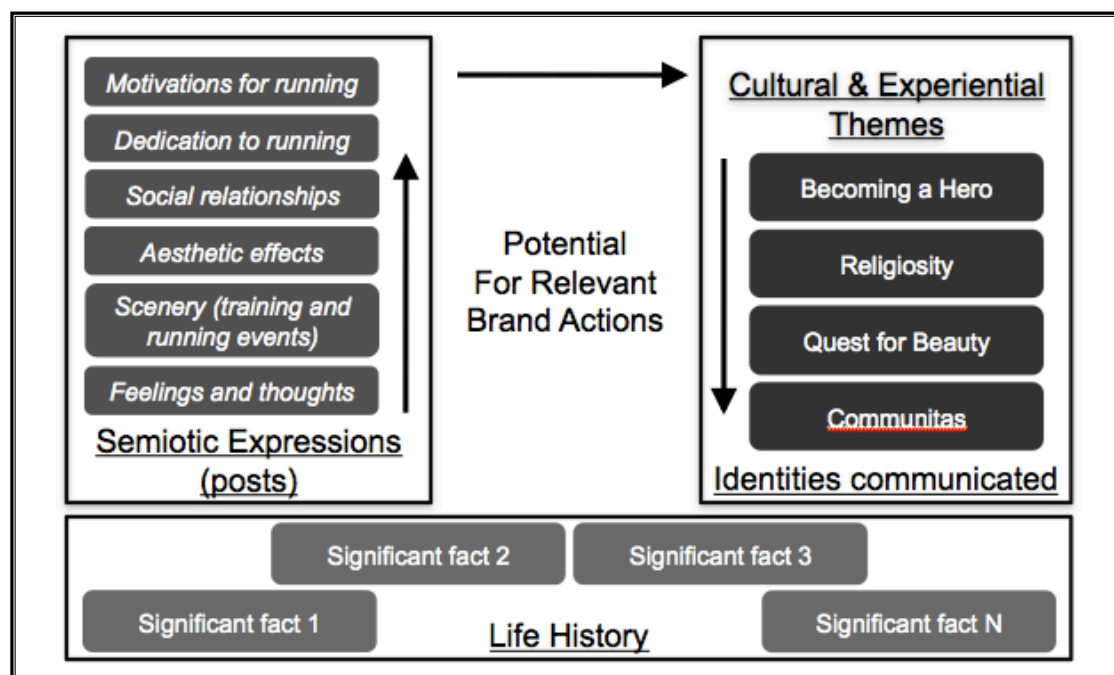
Cultural and Experiential Running Themes

Cultural and experiential running themes arise where consumers can borrow the desired meaning of running with which they semiotically express their identities to their social world. The following themes were found in the semiotic expressive discourses of the individuals we studied. Running is interpreted differently by each of the runners, and the cultural and experiential themes perceived in their discourses are associated with their actual identities and personal life histories.

In this way, this study reveals a personal relationship with running and a semiotic use of brand content that is structurally similar to that found in Thompson and Haytko (1997). These runners appropriate running discourses and generate running narratives through metaphoric references that negotiate key existential tensions (Thompson and Haytko 1997). Six of the individuals are not the intended target demographic of the Nike brand. Nevertheless, these individuals create meanings from running and use brand fan page content in a way that reflects their personal objectives and their identity projects.

The cultural and experiential themes associated with running that were found in this research were religiosity, becoming a hero, quest for beauty, and *communitas*. The process through which the runners communicated their identities by using digital semiotic expressions that are connected to their personal life histories and that are embedded in cultural and experiential themes related to running is visually illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 - Runners' identity communication process on Facebook



Religiosity

According to Fry (2007, p. 60), “sports exhibit many structural similarities to religion. It too has myths and rituals, and it recounts the exploits of heroic figures.” Fry (2007, p. 61) also noted that running has “functional parallels to religion”, as it “[...] helps bring a sense of order to one's life [...], is restorative for the body and the spirit, and contributes to a sense of self-realization”.

Fry (2007) highlighted the religious aspect of commitment and the spirit of dedication and sacrifice by presenting the example of the “marathon monks” of Kyoto, who utilize running in the process of attaining enlightenment. The most dedicated of these devotees undertake a 1,000-day marathon, which can be spread out over seven years. The monks who complete this arduous trail are considered to have become a living Buddha. The author also drew a parallel based on the suffering experienced by serious runners: “Suffering provides an occasion for exemplifying and developing positive character traits such as compassion, generosity, and courage. Hence, suffering can become an occasion for ‘soul making’” (p. 66).

Kozinets (2001) noted that Star Trek fans consider the series to be “higher than themselves” and that the philosophy behind the Starship ethos approaches a religious status (p. 76). We found similar religious elements in several aspects of the

runners' relationship with running and the meaning that they attribute to their running practices.

Religiosity is present in Neide's discourses about her motivation to run and to work at her NGO because both activities provide a sense of order to her life. In some of the videos that she shared on her personal page and on the NGO page, she states that running has given her a reason to live and to fight for what is meaningful in life. The suffering provoked by the death of her son was the trigger for her to fully adopt running as central part of her life. Running is religiously embedded in her routine, in the form of daily training and competition, and in her part-time job at the NGO, in the form of the promotion of running among poor, young people. She wakes up every morning at 5:00 am to run or exercise in some form. This unrelenting dedication to running and to the NGO is the most common type of expression observed on her personal Facebook page. As a source of semiotic material for her discourses, she uses and frequently posts content from Nike Run and other Facebook fan pages related to running, as well as other websites, on her personal page.

The frequency of posts related to running, in which Neide is generally representing the NGO—presenting young people who run for the NGO and demonstrating the efforts and results in the lives of some of the runners—also shows the religious nature of her relationship with running. For Neide, running is clearly more than a sport; running is the main part of her life—an emotionally positive part—and an activity that she invests her energy in and that brings her satisfaction as a result. As with the trekkers in Kozinets' (2001) study, running provides Neide with an optimistic vision of the future.

This dedication to running and her compassion to transform the life of others is well represented in one of Neide's posts in particular. Below is a compliment received by Neide from one of the young participants in the NGO, which she shared with her entire group of friends. This post received numerous comments and likes:

[It is] people like you that make us happy, and I want to say how important you are in this world and how dear you are to me.

Not even the dictionary [...] is capable of saying in human words what you represent, but I want to tell you that you are a great person, great for your simplicity, your charisma, your strength, your person, your love for what you do [...]

Congratulations! Happiness! Love You!

The display of generosity is clearly an important part of Neide's identity. Communicating this generosity through another person's opinion provides more strength and credibility to this part of her identity than expressing it through her own words and images, in what Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) label implicit self-representation. This comment resulted from the social ties that Neide has built through running and through her work at the NGO. In this way, Neide's social capital is working in her favor, evidencing her reputation within her network.

Religiosity is also found in Guilherme's running routine. He runs six times per week, and he varies the distances of these runs to avoid injury. He runs distances ranging from 6 to 20 kilometers and, almost daily, communicates the distances that he runs through an Endomondo app that shares his performance on his personal Facebook page. Endomondo is a virtual community that tracks and analyzes athletes' performance in various sports, such as kayaking, running, cycling, skating, and skiing. The exposure of his daily training has allowed his friends who are runners to maintain conversations about running, with each person witnessing and celebrating the results of the other. Guilherme likes to show that he runs religiously. In his interview, one of the authors asked whether running was somehow a sacrifice for him; he replied: "There are two kinds of runners: the ones who suffer from running and the ones who run even when they are suffering." Guilherme appreciated some of the aspects of his running routine that were a sacrifice, and the Endomondo app helped him to express that facet of his running routine to his social network.

In addition, all of Guilherme's pictures reflect an image of a runner or of a running scenario. His adoption of running as a way of life has affected how he displays himself in the kind of person who composes in his social connections, and he receives support from the people with whom he is socially connected through likes to and comments on his posts regarding his running distances, pictures, running challenges, and moral messages about strength and willpower.

These images were better understood after the interview with Guilherme. He took on running as a way of life and as a new identity that substituted his previous identity, which he regretfully connected with excessive cigarette, alcohol, and food

consumption. His running identity has replaced a worse identity that, according to him, would have led him nowhere. In his case, as Fry (2007) noted, suffering could provide him with the chance to develop positive traits, such as courage, and a chance to change who he is.

Above all, running entered his life as a sacred activity that is worth investing his time, energy, and interest in. Running directed him back to the path of healthy living and has kept him from the evil of bad habits that have continually surrounded his life. Given his life history, his devotion to running and lack of approval of people who only run for social purposes are not surprising. In his own words:

“...running for me today is one of the foundations of the commitment I have with the recovery of my spiritual, physical and mental sanity. If my body is my temple, I pray in running. Today the race is much more SPIRITUAL than physical or mental”

(Interview conducted with Guilherme by e-mail in January 13, 2013)

Becoming a hero

Perinbanayagam (2006, p. 185) cited J. Campbell to describe the journey of becoming a hero as follows: “an agent stops one course of action, starts another, fulfills its demands successfully, then returns to the original course of action, empowered and with an enhanced sense of his or her self”. This description is very similar to Neide’s story, wherein running gave her life meaning and was a tool by which to diverge from the course of tragedy in her life and by which to become someone with a cause, which could be enhanced by her work and by running.

Perinbanayagam (2006, p. 186) used the context of games, which have many parallels with sports, to show that “in everyday life games become the surrogate for myths and the bridge between the ordinary tasks of everyday life and the challenging ones that demand greater mental and physical prowess”.

The heroic acts that runners perform are physical and aesthetic. Runners saliently present themselves to the world in a physical way with respect to their running equipment, their muscular power, the moral beauty of their sacrifices, and the aesthetic harmony of their performance. Being a heroic runner entails being a physically and morally heroic athlete. The ancient Greeks admired their athletes for

the harmonic aspects of their athletic performances (Carroll 2011, p. 7), which were a way to get closer to the Gods.

The high frequency of posts on Neide's page by people whom she has helped to break through personal barriers, to find motivation, to inspire others, and to transform themselves shows that, for Neide, becoming a hero is a cultural meaning that is associated with running. This cultural meaning can be observed in the post below, which originally came from the Nike Run fan page. This post is representative of many similar posts that are found on her personal page, where Neide not only talked about herself but also digitally communicated her values by showing other people's stories, as in the following post:

(name omitted) is this warrior.

She started to run [at] 17 years old and always [found] her #greatness alone. [...]

She keeps breaking records at Nike+. "When you really want something, you can get it, as long as there is willpower".

Preferring the long runs where "your body fluctuates and you [lose] the notion of time", the results could only be this: lots of kilometers invested in the mission.

As stated previously, Neide's personal history was extremely tumultuous. She overcame a number of barriers, not the least of which was having a husband and a son killed in Capao Redondo. She not only tells her story through her work and through running but also expresses positive sentiments toward people who have overcome their own barriers and who have invested in running as a path to personal victory.

Guilherme's discourses also contain implicit meanings related to becoming a hero. He frequently shares his long runs of more than 20 kilometers. As he mentioned in an interview, even on the day after a long run, when he should rest or run a short distance, if he sees someone nearby running faster than him, he feels the need to compete; he follows the runner and runs faster and for longer than his imaginary competitor to prove to himself that he is in good shape.

The athletic pictures that he often posts reflect the image of a serious athlete and often consist of images of circuit runs, as well as people who are full of energy and who are muscular. Guilherme likes to project the image of a serene athlete. He often

contrasts himself and his philosophy of running with individuals of the younger generation and their philosophy of running, which is regularly expressed on the Nike Run fan page. For him, these runners use the fan page to meet people, to share pictures, to have fun, and even to find motivation to stay in shape. These motivations have nothing to do with the meanings that he associated with running.

One of the clearest manifestations of this theme is a sequence of images and texts posted by Tomiko, the ultrarunner, in which she reveals that she is going to race a 150-mile track called Angels' Marathon. In this sequence of posts, Tomiko shared pictures from the Facebook fan page of Ultrarunner Events, a company that promotes high performance sports events. Pictures and texts were posted over several days during the period that preceded the race, and these pictures and posts were often followed by likes and comments incentivizing Tomiko to finish the race and expressing admiration toward her for pursuing a task as challenging as running 150 miles in two days.

Lucina presented a Facebook personal narrative in which meanings of becoming a hero were embedded. The repetition of posts with explicit references to her next 50-kilometer challenge shows that becoming a hero was one of her narratives. This narrative is apparent from Lucina mentioning her need for more training before the challenge, appearing in pictures that allude to the challenge (in pictures posted by both her and her friends), mentioning the challenge in several comments on the posts of other friends or in replies to the comments of friends on her own posts, and posting several pictures of the challenge on the day of the event and on the days following the event. These pictures appear to be the most common and impactful form of the semiotic communication of her identity as an ultrarunner.

Interestingly, reciprocal behavior in posting and tagging friends who are also runners can be observed in these pictures. Members of her network of runners are accustomed to posting pictures of the group and being tagged in pictures that reflect their identities to each other's social networks. When one of the runners has a picture in which he was tagged posted on his personal wall, his running identity is communicated by another person, and he is therefore not the author but the subject of the narrative. This action increases the credibility of the runner by also showing that he belongs to the community of runners.

Brands clearly have a role in the runners' behavior related to sharing pictures. Several companies that organize or sponsor running challenges use picture posting and sharing to increase the level of activity and engagement of their fans on Facebook. In this research project, Nike, Mizuno, and other, smaller companies that organize events or that train runners used picture posting and sharing in this way. In so doing, these companies were the vehicle for runners not only to compete and participate but also to increase the time during which they were athletes with a virtual audience. Similarly, Jonas, Stewart, and Larkin (2003) described river rafters' need for encounters with strangers to have an audience for being rafters, an identity that can be easily hidden in day-to-day routines.

Quest for beauty

Beauty is valued very highly. The loss of beauty as life passes by is considered to be associated with the body's decline and is generally not desired. Gullette (2004, p. 3-4) described the exhibition "Face Aging" at the Boston Museum of Science in which kids under fifteen years old could see how they would look at one-year intervals up to sixty-nine years of age through a digital technology developed for that purpose. The author asked some of the kids what they learned through the exhibit. An interesting answer was merely "I don't want to get old", with nothing more to add. Losing beauty is undesirable even for kids. "Beauty is a promise of happiness", as wrote Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

The quest for beauty is manifested in our daily lives through fashion, architecture, product design, and all the habits that are associated with beauty maintenance through the so-called beauty industry. Sports are also associated with the quest for beauty and are considered as a way to achieve sacred glory (Carroll 2011, p.7). According to Carroll, "the ancient Greeks often attributed sporting excellence to divine intervention". Athletic performances were connected to the beauty, austerity, and elegance of athletes' movements. Carroll exemplified his idea by the life size bronze of the Charioteer in Delphi, sculpted in homage to a victory in the Pythian Games of 478 BC or 474 BC and in dedication to the god Apollo.

The quest for beauty in everyday modern life can be observed in Juliana's behavior of often posting new pictures focused, although not necessarily explicitly, on

her physically strong body. In these pictures, she is clearly exposing her athletic body, shaped by years of exercising through running. Her body is also the explicit focus of her communication about the event of running. She also posts pictures from the Nike Run fan page where she appears in the middle of street running challenges that are promoted by the brand. These pictures sometimes receive praise, mostly from her male friends on Facebook, as can be observed in the following comments on a new picture of Juliana's legs posted on her page:

male 1: Your leg is beautiful! #thickthigs

Juliana: Watch out for the bullying with your little friend (laugh)

male 1: It's a good bullying, so I can!!!

Juliana: (laughs) OK!

male 2: Working hard! Your legs are pumping (laughs)!!

Juliana seems to like the social ties that she creates through running and the opportunities that running and beauty provide for her personal life. She does not run merely to be beautiful, however. Running has several functions in her life, but being beautiful, as an athlete, is something that she considers to be important. In the interview conducted by e-mail, she wrote, "Vanity is everything [...]; no one wants to be ugly [...]; the search for an ideal [of beauty] among your friends is natural. Running brings that to me". Interestingly, the quest for beauty is a very visual theme, one that can often be observed on the Nike Run fan page. The brand combines several running events (trainings and races) with technologies that take pictures of the runners and then post them directly on Facebook. Accordingly, Nike facilitates the semiotic expression of this theme for those who want to associate their identities as runners with that of the beautiful athlete.

The quest for beauty was not an exclusively feminine cultural meaning. Romulo and Guilherme also stated that running provided them with spiritual and physical benefits: "we keep an ideal weight; we exalt the muscles, fortify our bones, and increase our aerobic capacity...; physiologically speaking, it improves our sleep, digestion, mood...; it improves our sexual disposition". In this comment, Guilherme mentioned physical benefits of running that are aesthetic but also functional, such as having better sleep, better digestion, and a better sexual life. He also noted the

physical benefits of running for his imagined future: “I plant today to harvest tomorrow, to have fewer problems with old age.... What I hope to do in sports is to make it my longtime partner, if possible until the end of my life. I will die happier if I die running”.

Figure 4 - The Quest for Beauty theme represented in Guilherme and Juliana's pictures



The quest for beauty for Guilherme is associated with masculinity. Muscles and masculinity have been associated with one another in Western culture and manifested and constructed in the movies since the Italian *forzuto* of *Quo Vadis?*; the virtuous control and mastery of swords of Errol Flynn; the exotic and savage character of Tarzan; the Western tradition of honored cowboys such as Gary Cooper or John Wayne; the virility and rebellious appeal of Boggart, Brando, Belmondo, and James Dean; the mastery of fighting of Bruce Lee and Rambo; the boxing brutes of Rocky and Jake LaMotta; the solitaire and morally rigid Dirty Harry of Clint Eastwood; and, finally, all the muscular men with super powers shaped by technology or external forces, such as Batman, Superman, and the nonhuman Terminator. In all these characters, the common denominator is the exhibition of the athletic male body in narratives of heroic male imposition of will over the world (Bacque 2013).

Interestingly, the concept of beauty for Guilherme, Romulo, and Juliana is that of an athlete with a muscular, toned body. In this study, the more contemporary association of feminine beauty with thinness was nearly not observed—either for Juliana or for the many other young women observed on the Mizuno and Nike Run fan pages. In addition, the quest for beauty is a theme that is generally not explicitly stated, as it is rarely observed in the texts that these runners post but is frequently observed in the images that they post. Figure 4 presents a compilation of photos extracted from the data that represent this theme. In addition, this theme not observed for the oldest runners in this study (Tomiko and Lucina). Running seems to assume different meanings according to the runner's current phase of life. Lucina declared in the interview that she does not have any vanity and that she runs to maintain mental health—being short (1 meter and 42 centimeters tall) and slightly chubby (she did not reveal her weight) does not affect her, but after staying out of the running circuit for a few months, she developed depression. Beauty seems to be valued by the younger runners and male runners in their early 50s, such as Guilherme, who appreciates the aesthetically pleasing muscular appearance that running gives him.

Communitas

To belong to a group of people who share similar objectives and rituals, to behave according to the same implicit rules and codes, to admire inspirational athletes who are known almost only within the group, and to submit to the same sacrifices in order to run are some of the reasons why these individuals like to run and continue to run. Experientially, observing the interactions every morning in the park provides an opportunity to meet the same people, identify the community of runners, and engage in their practices of starching, running, talking about running, joking, developing collective plans for competitions, and so on. Arnould and Price (1993) described how experiencing communitas is one of the most valued outcomes for the river rafters whom they researched: “feelings of linkage, of belonging, of group devotion to a transcendent goal are facilitated by proximity forced by the narrow canyons, small camping areas, boats, and teamwork associated with rafting itself” (p. 34).

Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) cited Turner (1969) to define communitas as “an antistructure that frees participants from their normal social

roles... and engages them in a transcending camaraderie of status equality”. Such equality occurs from belonging to the group. Communities have hierarchies that serve the function of strengthening the desire of members to belong and to simultaneously be superior to the other members of the group. Turner (1969, p. 97) noted that “rites of passage” are a condition for community members to change their position. Interestingly, runners clearly have rites of passage, mainly in the form of marathons and other challenges that runners must have completed to deserve the respect of the group. As stated by Roberto in his interview: “every runner must have on his resume... the half marathon of São Paulo, the Volta da Pampulha, the Rio de Janeiro marathon...; how can you be a runner if you do not have such a track record?”. Interestingly, in Roberto’s opinion, even though one specific marathon may not be fun to run, a runner must have completed it in order to discuss it and to note to the group that the marathon is not fun for concrete reasons. Clearly, such a marathon is not something that a runner does for himself; rather, he does it to belong and to acquire a higher status among the community of runners to which he belongs.

Finding *communitas* was a common theme among almost all the runners observed in this research project. The most interesting case was Guilherme, who clearly prefers to be on his own and to run for personal reasons, which were related to his past personal life of excess alcohol and food consumption. Guilherme even showed a disdain for individuals who run mainly for social reasons and noted avoiding being in the presence of the type of runner that is largely associated with the Nike Run members of the #goodstuff group—a group that originated after Nike’s marketing campaign that aimed to identify running as a vicious activity:

The target audience and the profile of the runner that Nike seeks do not fit me. This #goodstuff group is just about little models, people who look like runners but actually aren’t. They keep "training", just in the noble points of the city. They are showcases, disguised as "athletes", disseminating products and posing for photos. I do not think it's wrong, but I do not like it. It completely fails to capture the true spirit of the runner.

(Interview conducted with Guilherme by e-mail in January 14th, 2013)

Interestingly, Guilherme noted identifying with another group comprising more serious athletes from various sports. Guilherme uses the app of Endomondo, a virtual

community of athletes of several sports, to share his training with other athletes around the world. With this app, he is able to see where and how they are running and can compare his performance with these more competitive runners and even participate in virtual challenges with them. This group of competitive, serious, performance-oriented, and generally not social runners seemed to be Guilherme's imagined community, one with meanings that resonate more with his actual identity.

Lucina is perhaps the most strong and physically resistant runner in this study. Nevertheless, running for her was more associated with belonging to the corridors' community than with becoming a hero (which, objectively, she most likely is). She has built her network of friends mainly in the last twelve years and through running with groups of runners who train together, compete together, and build their ties based on running and on their similar values. Lucina leaves her competitive side for her job at the flower shop. The purpose of running for her is to laugh and make friends, although as a marathon runner, she chose an uncommon way of doing so. In the interview, Lucina spoke of her running group as being "a family", a family of people, not bounded by geography, who run and support themselves.

The only fan page from which Lucina continually shares posts is the Ultrarunners' fan page. Ultrarunners is a company specialized in organizing ultramarathons and similar events, and the company develops close relationships with athletes like Lucina who perceive the Ultrarunners' page to be valuable and who are willing to share its content. By contrast, she has not even considered posting content related to brands such as Nike and Mizuno on her personal page. These brands simply do not fit into her identity project of being a marathon runner. In addition, Lucina communicates her identity as an ultrarunner through her network of friends who are runners. As previously mentioned, she often posts pictures of her training for running challenges and running races with several friends. She also has pictures of her running or in a running environment that were posted by friends who were with her and who tagged her on Facebook. The community of runners serves the function of frequently communicating the runners' identities as not merely isolated runners but members of an active community to their social networks.

In this process of communicating identity through the community, brands provide both the vehicle for textual and pictorial discourses to be expressed through pictures of runners within their community, such as with Nike Run, and the occasion

for running to take place, such as by creating or sponsoring all levels of challenges, training sessions, running groups, and so on. The more embedded the brand is in the running community, the more clearly the identity is communicated to the consumer. Below, a post of Lucina thanking Ultrarunner Events for organizing a challenge in the city of Valinhos, a small city in southwestern Brazil, is presented. The role of Ultrarunner Events was fundamental in allowing these athletes to prepare for the task, to compete, to get together in Valinhos, and to share their running experience through their digital social network.

I would like to congratulate Ultrarunner Events for another success!!!! 12 hours of happiness and enjoyment.... I look forward to the next one".... Even without training, by walking and trotting, I still managed to make 50 km. I'd like to thank all my buddies, Ultras who always supported me in the races. I always say that our friends, Ultras, are our second family.

(Extracted from Lucina's timeline on Facebook, August, 17th, 2013)

Discussion

The most important finding of in this study is that running can be important aspect of a person's life, whether the person is a young woman in her 20s or a mature adult in his 60s. Running constitutes the most important facet of the actual selves of the runners in this study, and they wanted to express this facet of their identities to their social world. Brands were instrumental for this process, providing them with tools, semiotic material, virtual social gatherings, running events, and so on; however, brands were secondary in importance and conditional in relevance for the runners. The mature runners wanted to be immersed in a network of runners, and Facebook (mainly), Nike, Endomondo, and Mizuno primarily provided tools for them to do so. The importance of practices such as running in relation to consumption and the dependence of consumption on being embedded into such practices are topics that have already been discussed in the marketing literature (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Shankar, Elliott, and Fitchett 2009). However, our study reveals the degree to which brands are dependent on being embedded into practices that are relevant for the identity projects of our informants.

Our mature informants only posted brand content on their timelines if the brand offered them immediate utilitarian value (such as for Neide and Lucina) or if the brand provided a utilitarian and symbolic purpose for their running practice, such as with the Endomondo app for Guilherme, Nike's pictures of races and trainings for Neide, and Ultrarunner Events for Lucina. Brands were therefore not often communicated on the runners' timelines, but running was often the focus of their everyday posts on Facebook. As Warde stated, "patterns of consumption... can therefore be explained and accounted for partly by volume of practices and commitment to practices." (2005 p. 144).

The use of the discourse elements of brands by these mature individuals in their identity projects is a contemporary form of communication that locates these consumers in the postmodern arena described by Firat and Venkatesh (1995), a world in which everyone, independently of age, can "make and remake their identities over the courses of their lifetimes..." (Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger 2009, p. 256). These individuals were ultimately aiming to achieve social differentiation at a phase of maturity in their lives, and they did so by developing an identity as a runner within their community of runners and by posting running-related content in their Facebook timelines aimed at their outside social networks. They created meaning in their everyday lives through simple acts of digital expression, and when they created such meaning with the help of brands such as Nike, they were experiencing and consuming the brand in a utilitarian and symbolic way (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

Brand value, therefore, arises from complying with relevant roles in consumers' lives, and brand narratives, which are full of meaning, must be embedded in individuals' identity narratives. Brands, in turn, create meaning by having a role in consumer's daily lives. The Nike brand was associated with being young, vibrant, street-belonging, combative, determined, and social—elements that are consistent with Juliana's actual identity project. For Guilherme, the Nike brand seemed to be overly social, young, and hip and, consequently, was not consistent with his identity project in contrast to the more serious and athletic brand Endomondo. Guilherme's attitude toward Nike content parallels that of consumers who rejected Starbucks and supported independent cafes in Thompson and Arsel's (2004) study. Although our unit of analysis is not consumers' narratives related to advertising but consumers' narratives related to running (with brand content merely included), our results are also

consistent with the findings of Mick and Buhl (1992), who suggested that advertising is not a message with fixed meaning. Instead, meaning in advertising messages is fluid, in flux with the personal context of consumers, their interests, their life themes, and their life projects. Thompson and Haytko (1997) also studied the appropriation of advertising content by consumers in the fashion industry and found that consumers create emergent meanings that reflect in interaction between personal objectives, life history, specific interests, and a multitude of cultural meanings associated with fashion.

Above all, the identity projects of the mature adults in their 50s and 60s in our study were related to the present, not to the past. Through running, similar to the much younger runner Juliana, they seek their personal identify projects. These findings are consistent with contemporary literature adopting the life course perspective (Bengtson, Putney, and Johnson 2005). Schau, Gilly and Wolfenbarger (2009) studied identity renaissance through consumption practices in retirement, and one of the categories that these authors identified was emergent identity renaissance. Running was an emergent activity for all but one of the informants in this research project because running was not previously present in their lives but only entered into their lives when they were in their 40s or 50s. Guilherme is the exception, as he has been involved in running since he was in his 20s, albeit with different meanings and purposes, and running later assumed a different role in his life.

Similarly to Arnould and Price's (1993) outcomes, cultural categories do not seem to have clear borders. The theme of religiosity is intertwined with the theme of becoming a hero, both of which share routine practices of devotion and sacrifice as well as functions of personal growth and life meaning. In addition, collective religiosity, or the religiosity of all the members of the group related to daily training and running, is connected to the *communitas* theme. A group must have shared practices and values to become a community. Connell and Schau (2013) showed how collective projects of identity occur when two or more people engage in a similar identity project and expand an external element of identity into their own identity projects. The interdependence between these individuals and the external element that provided a source for their identities can create a collective or shared identity (Belk 2013).

The runners in this study who acquired social and symbolic capital within the group, most notably, Tomiko, Guilherme, Juliana, and Lucina, seemed to continue to be motivated to run and to communicate their identities as runners to the group. For the most competitive runners whom we studied, achieving an elevated level of respect within the running community was both distinguished them from the members of the group and motivated them to continue being part of the running community. Facebook timelines serve the function of both communicating to the group how these runners are training and competing on a daily basis and maintaining a log of the runners' story for future visitors to their pages. Anyone who visits their timelines will immediately perceive them to be serious and competitive runners. This process is analogous to that found by Parmentier and Fischer (2011) for the fashion world; however, as difference between this study and ours, the runners in our study seem to be positively motivated to compete and to achieve a level of prominence, but they do not seem to be negatively motivated to abandon the activity and to reject their running identity if and when they are not running as well as they would like to.

Finally, the amplification of roles and identities through the almost daily posting of running content can also be perceived to reflect a search for the spectacular (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) in the everyday lives of these individuals—the runners presented in this study, particularly the marathon runners, are heroic, are aesthetically beautiful, and have lives that are full of meaning and purpose. Moreover, the aging adults in our study notably seem to be pursuing and expressing their identities as runners to counteract their social disappearance as the value placed on younger generations increases. Running religiously to become a hero is a sacrificial behavior. The implicit message that these mature adults are communicating to the public is that, as stated by Walt Stack, they are keeping their aging issues and difficulties in their lockers. Facebook helps these mature adults to reveal themselves to the world, whereas brands can provide them with the tools and semiotic material to tell their running narratives.

Managerial Implications

The brands that were present in the narratives of the runners in this study are brands that played a role in their lives by helping them to become runners in several ways. The role of the brand was not merely to tell interesting stories that reinforced the brand identity. Rather, the primary role of the brand was to create narratives and tools (e.g., apps) that served utilitarian and symbolic purposes in helping the individuals' develop their identity projects and daily narratives (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998, p. 135). The four cultural themes related to running that were found in this study are embedded in the culture in which these runners live, but they were appropriated by the individuals to communicate their personal digital discourses in a manner consistent with their lives. As we showed, the brands that entered into the self-expressive discourses of our informants on Facebook clearly played a role in their running practices. Companies can profit from properly incorporating the cultural themes found in this study into their brand narratives. Companies can also influence consumer identity projects by posting content that constructs a cultural meaning that is consistent with the cultural meaning that consumers desire and that is strategically positive for their brand. Nike adopted such an approach by turning running into a social activity, an element that was valued by some of our informants. Brands can be structuring forces in establishing meanings that consumers use for their own purposes (Arnould and Thompson 2005), yet the meanings established from brands are not homogeneous, with similar understandings from all consumers. Nike's narrative resonates with Juliana's identity project but not with Guilherme's, because running has a different meaning for Juliana and Guilherme. Because of their polysemic character (Holt 1997), brands provide different semiotic tools for meaning construction for individualized consumers with differing life and identity projects. Accordingly, the impact of a brand may be limited, as a brand may have a positive impact for a group of individuals but not for the totality of individuals because the meaning associated with the brand may differ among individuals.

Finally, the Nike Run and Mizuno fan pages provide virtual gathering spaces for runners with similar interests who desire a sense of community. These runners share common values, aesthetic tastes, habits, and language through their collective identities (Kozinets 2001). Nike and Mizuno, being connected to the running community, help to create the running culture in which our informants are immersed. The role of the brand in this symbiotic relationship with the community should be to

provide occasions, technologies, stories, achievements, and symbols for the group to grow stronger as a community.

Article 3 - Fan Pages and Virtual Brand Communities: Faraway, so Close

Abstract

Brand fan pages are a recent form of consumers gathering around a brand, a space in which brands can have a two-way communication with their consumers. Despite their importance, fan pages have received relatively little attention in the marketing literature and few authors have aimed to theoretically define what a fan page is. The expression “brand community” has been used to name people gathering around a brand, including those gatherings occurring in virtual environments. Kozinets (1999) theorizes about how virtual communities of consumption evolve in a continuum, from simple information exchange about a topic to gradually becoming an environment where cultural norms are created, adopted, and exchanged, relationships of power and conflict emerge, and, finally, cultural cohesion can be noted. In this research I describe if and how the concept of fan pages is similar to the concept of a virtual brand community. Brazilian fan pages of Nike Run, Mizuno, Jack Daniel’s, and Budweiser were analyzed to derive elements essential to this description. The results showed that a fan page can have some of the characteristics of a virtual brand community but not all. Furthermore, I present the steps, conditions, and limitations for a brand to nurture a fan page as an online social gathering with the characteristics of a more communal environment.

Keywords: fan pages; virtual brand community; social media.

Introduction

Brand fan pages or simply “pages,” as Facebook calls them, are a relatively recent environment of consumers gathering around a brand. In 2007, the first Facebook fan pages for brands, companies, movies, artists, and sports teams were created to give them “voice” and a new tool for relationships with their consumers. Since 2007, the importance of fan pages has increased as a result of the prominent role that Facebook has assumed in the digital life of hundreds of millions of people. In 2007, Facebook had 100,000 fan pages. At the end of 2012, there were more than 50 million fan pages and more than 618 million daily users on Facebook (Facebook 2012). Fan pages have become a significant virtual space in which brands can build a two-way communication process with their consumers, allowing brands to publish content and consumers to express what they think and feel. This communication occurs not only with the brand but also with other consumers who are fans of the brand, in a many-to-many communication process.

Social media environments were not created for brands to communicate with consumers or to sell products and services to them (Fournier and Avery 2011). Facebook is a place for people to connect with family, friends, co-workers, or former classmates from childhood, and individuals spend most of their time online in interactions with these ties. Facebook’s creation of the Pages feature to allow brands to connect with their consumers does not imply that all consumers will connect with pages or will spend a significant portion of their time doing so. According to global research from InSites Consulting (2012), 55% of social network users follow at least one brand. Within these brand-connected segments, eight to twelve brands are followed passively (with no engagement to the brand at all), and three to six brands are followed actively (reading, sharing, liking, or commenting on brand content). According to the same research, most of these consumers began following a brand after they had a positive consumption experience with that brand.

The fan page is not an environment in which a brand and a consumer begin their relationship; a consumer who decides to become a fan of a brand likely has some degree of past experience with this brand. For instance, the consumer may have consumed its products or services; may be interested in knowing more about the brand, its offerings, or its history; or may even like its communication content or aesthetic expression and identify with its messages. Therefore, the fan page is a tool

that allows a brand to continue a relationship with many different consumers who have distinct interests and historical experiences with the brand. Our perspective in this research is that the fan page is both a social gathering space and a tool for continuing a previously started conversation between a brand and its consumers and between consumers themselves.

Despite their importance, fan pages have received relatively little attention in the marketing literature. Some authors have studied brand content popularity on Facebook (de Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012), the structure of networks (Aral and Walker 2012), fans' motivations for using fan pages (Lin and Lu 2011), the effects of the use of fan pages (Jahn and Kunz 2012), or rivalry and conflicts between fan pages (Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell 2013). However, few authors have aimed to theoretically define what a fan page is. In one exception, Zaglia (2013) empirically investigated whether brand communities embedded in social networking environments exist and how these communities differ from one another. According to her data, all three markers of a community according to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001)—consciousness of a kind, or the capacity to perceive participants as belonging somehow to a group; rituals and traditions, or the presence of a common set of behaviors, values, and jargon; and members' sense of moral responsibility to one another—were found on the Malaysian Nikon fan page (administered by Nikon) and on a Nikon discussion group that is also on Facebook (administered by members). However, the Nikon fan page studied by Zaglia belongs to the photography category, which has both high symbolic value for the individual identity project and products with an elevated level of technical complexity and necessary investment of effort from consumers. We will study cases that also have a lesser degree of involvement of individuals with the category.

Kozinets (1999) presented a framework of four typologies of consumers in virtual communities of consumption, and two of these typologies (devotees and insiders) were based on consumers with a high level of personal involvement with the consumption activity (p. 255), which appears to be the case for Nikon's fans. The objective of this paper is to theorize whether fan pages can be understood as a special type of virtual brand communities, considering fan pages with varying degrees of consumption activity centrality for members. Despite the importance assumed by fan pages regarding branding strategy, there is no conclusive academic work defining

these online social environments. Furthermore, another objective is to empirically identify characteristics that approximate (or separate) the fan page from the virtual brand community concept. Although there is considerable research on the characteristics, antecedents, and consequences of the use of virtual communities, little is known about how interactions are developed within such communities (de Valck, van Bruggen, and Wierenga 2009). The value of a brand community for a company was explored in the work of Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009). We aim to advance the knowledge on the subject and describe the steps, conditions, and limitations for a brand to nurture a fan page as an online social gathering in assuming the characteristics of a more communal environment.

The theoretical revision is divided into two parts: first, we describe the virtual brand community's characteristics and the evolution of a virtual space into a virtual community space; second, we describe the different types of participants in virtual communities that are cited in the literature and explore how these different participants contribute to the establishment of a communal online environment. Next, we present the method used to study the Brazilian fan pages of Nike Run, Mizuno, Jack Daniel's, and Budweiser. These fan pages were chosen because we perceived them as different in terms of consumer involvement and the personal importance of the category to the lives of consumers.

Theoretical Background

Virtual Communities and Virtual Brand Communities

Virtual brand communities (VBCs) studies are generally developed based on two streams of knowledge, brand communities and virtual communities, which proliferated with the popularization of the Internet and online social networks. Rheingold (1993) conceptualized virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationship in cyberspace." Modern social media sites facilitate these gatherings, allowing people to easily find sites and groups composed of people with similar interests. The author explained that the main difference from traditional communities is that in online

communities, members unite through volitional choice, and ties are not imposed by chance of birth or residence; hence, in virtual communities, one chooses whether to retain a relationship or to end it without significant emotional losses.

Complementary to this definition, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) regarded the virtual community as a computer-mediated environment in which individuals organize around a distinct interest, have a collective sense of kin, share mutual conventions and language, and create content through mutual participation.

Virtual communities can be fostered by offline occasions in which individuals gather (Fox 2004), increasing the strength of their ties. The perpetuation of an online community depends on the benefits that members perceive in participating in the community (Jang et al. 2008); such benefits may include access to social relationships, topic knowledge, social support from members, status, and the emotional sensation of belonging to a group of equals. In online communities, individuals meet and bond, fostering their individualistic interests in small tribes, spaces where they can be behaviorally and emotionally anchored both online and offline (Cova and Cova 2002).

A VBC is a contemporary and important concept in marketing that allows human relationships to be fostered and enhanced in a period in which the concepts of online and offline are merging and becoming blurred (Hine 2005). VBCs are online communities that are thematically centered on one main topic—the brand. VBCs can be divided into two major types based on the criteria of who hosts them: consumer-initiated communities and company-initiated communities (Jang et al. 2008). Online brand communities have some similar characteristics: they have no geographical limitations, they are built around a commercial product or service, they are relatively stable, they have members who are committed to the same goals and themes, they are a place for social negotiation in which individuals voluntarily interpret the meanings of the brand, and they unite consumers who have a high level of identification with and understanding of the commercial landscape of the brand (Jang et al. 2008).

It is also important to consider how VBCs evolve through time. Kozinets (1999) described the process of evolution of a virtual community of consumption (VCC), which can also be used to understand the evolution of the VBC, as a VBC is a special type of VCC that is centered on a brand. In a VCC, participants share interest,

enthusiasm, and knowledge with respect to the consumption topic, and if the topic is central to the participants' identity, then the contextual conditions for the frequent communication and 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. Driskell and Lyon (2002) affirmed that relationships in a VBC tend to be less engaging and emotionally meaningful or committed than those observed in the offline world and that a VBC will typically contain weaker and more numerous ties. According to Kozinets (1999), an individual initially perceives such a community as a space that merely presents topical information exchange. Gradually, this communication evolves to house identity communication between members. Over time, 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, such a VCC becomes a place where people form perceptions of one another and where cultural cohesion can be noted in the form of stories, topics chosen, empathy, rules, common behaviors, and meanings. According to Kozinets (1999), when a virtual environment presents these seven characteristics, it can be considered a space of communal relationships.

As previously stated, an important characteristic of a VBC is the centrality of consumption and the brand. A VBC cannot sustain itself without the brand (Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Grovan 2007), and the decision to gather into a VBC implies that a consumer has strong interest in that brand or in the activity that the brand promotes. For a fan page, one consumer can easily like a certain fan page and not necessarily maintain strong and frequent relationships in that community. In terms of communal relevance, the number of fans on a fan page is less important than the number of fans who consider that brand to be relevant to their lives.

The benefits of having a brand community were detailed by Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009) in a seminal work in which the authors extensively identified social practices present in communal consumption environments. According to the authors, four groups of social practices are present in these communities: social networking, impression management, community engagement, and brand use. The social practices present in these four groups work together to create value for brands and for community members in the form of greater use of the brand and its products

and services, more community engagement, higher levels of cultural capital for its members, more repertoires (for the insiders), more opportunities for consumption, and greater brand vitality. These authors perceive the members of the community as agents and as a resource for the company, consistent with the work of Vargo and Lusch (2004).

Types of participants in virtual communities/VBCs

Members of a VBC do not participate equally in virtual communities (Kozinets 2002). Participants of these environments have been classified in different ways by various scholars in the field. Some of the common criteria used are the level of involvement with community members; the level of involvement with the topic of the community, the brand, or the company that sponsors the community; the level of competence in the topic of the community; the level of communication capacity related to the topic; and the reasons to participate in the community.

Kozinets (1999) suggested clustering members of online communities into four groups based on differential levels of attachment to the community and to the topic of the community: tourists do not have strong ties to the community or to the topic, minglers develop strong ties to the community but not to the topic, insiders have strong ties both to the community and to the topic, and devotees have a strong attachment to the topic but weak ties with the community. Devotees and tourists are oriented to the topic of the community and therefore become more involved in the informative content in the community than in building social relationships, although it is possible that tourists, who attribute low importance to the topic, will be infrequent visitors to the community. By contrast, minglers and insiders are more social and relational in their communication (Kozinets 1999, p. 255) because they attribute value to the social ties that the community allows them to create and nurture.

Ouwensloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) proposed a model for segmenting the members of brand communities based on their level of attachment with the four relationships of the McAlexander et al. (2002) customer-centric brand community model: the customer-company relationship, the customer-product relationship, the customer-customer relationship, and the customer-brand relationship. The authors obtained four typologies of members: “users,” representing the largest group in their

study, tend to place more value on their relationship with the product and have average levels of attachment to the three other relationships; “enthusiasts” have the highest scores in the four relationship constructs as the ideal members of a community; the “behind the scenes” group have the lowest scores on attachment to the product and to other community members but presented average values in their attachment to the brand and the company; and the “not me” segment is characterized by low scores on all constructs and exhibits little interest in the community, likely having joined for one reason but with no further intentions to remain in the community.

Golder (2003) proposed a framework of classification of online community members that accounted for the communicative capacity and the level of “common ground” (knowledge) with the community. The newbie is the newcomer who has little communicative competence and little common ground with the group. Communicative competence is more important in socially oriented groups with an elevated presence of ritualized behaviors, and common ground is more important in environments that are technically complex. Because they lack one or two of these characteristics, it is normal for newbies to “lurk” for some time in the online community before becoming involved with the group. The celebrity is the individual who posts most often in the online community, and because of this high-frequency participation, he is responsible for much of the community content and is easily identified by the many newbies who lurk in the environment. The celebrity also has a high degree of communicative competence and common ground with the community, which is another reason for being perceived as a celebrity. The elder is a special type of celebrity who has been in the group for a long time and represents the history of the community. The elder does not need to participate as often as the celebrity, as he has acquired the respect of the group for being in the community for a long time and for all the knowledge that he possesses (but not necessarily for his age). The lurker is a person who does not interact with others and merely views the content of the online community. The role that each type performs within the group is crucial for the development of the community (Golder 2003, p. 54). Elders and celebrities ensure a certain level of social cohesion, but they need lurkers and newbies to witness their leadership behavior and their knowledge possession.

Parent, Plangger, and Bal (2011) described the evolution of participation in social media in a framework that may be useful for the fan page environment. Customers begin the relationship with a brand merely by *viewing* content that is relevant to them. The next steps of participation are *forwarding* content (via email, tweets, and Facebook wall posts) and *commenting* on the brand content. The most participative members engage in *creating* content and, consequently, in *moderating* comments on their creations posted by other people. In the last stage, consumers engage in *arbitrating*, judging the comments of other people and mediating conflicts that may arise. Although the sequence of Parent, Plangger, and Bal (2011) is considerably rigid and may not apply to all members in the context of fan pages (e.g., a member may frequently comment, share, and even moderate discussions that arise but not create any content in the fan page), the logical sequence proposed by these authors may help understand behaviors that should be noted in fan pages that aim to acquire a communal status, as these behaviors are expected to be observed in a space with meaningful social interaction.

The typologies described here can be useful to identify the differences between and the importance of fan page members. The roles played by these different types can be a relevant factor in explaining the social dynamics of the fan page and the social relationships that are established in this online environment. Individuals who have high levels of competence in the topic of a fan page and who make efforts to create content have been termed celebrities by Golder (2003), insiders by Kozinets (1999), and enthusiasts by Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008). Despite differences in the classification criteria used by these authors, there is common ground in that this type is fundamental for the social functioning of the online space. This type is highly involved with the topic and with the community and can be responsible for a significant portion of the content posted on a fan page and for fostering social relationships within the fan page. Therefore, we concentrated considerable attention on the presence of this type and the behavior of such individuals.

Method

To investigate the extent to which fan pages share characteristics that are similar to a VBC, we considered the seven characteristics for an online environment to become an online community proposed by Kozinets (1999) as the main code categories of analysis for the four fan pages studied. We searched for textual instances that represented each of these seven characteristics to understand whether and to what degree these fan pages can be considered VBCs.

To achieve the proposed objectives, we studied four fan pages. We analyzed the Jack Daniel's, Nike Run, Mizuno, and Budweiser fan pages in Brazil. We chose these fan pages because they are representative of the consumer categories of alcoholic beverages and running apparel; because they are prestigious global brands in their categories; and because they have a significant number of fans with a high frequency of brand posts and consumer interaction in the form of comments, likes, and shares. These categories differ from one another in that running is an activity that frequently becomes an important part of one's individual identity, whereas drinking generally does not become a goal or part of one's identity. Both drinking and running have social motivations behind their practice, as they allow more social integration for participants (at least for those who seek to run in groups).

Because of some apparent similarities between fan pages and VBCs, we decided on the use of the netnographic method in a direct and non-participative manner, which is an adaptation of the ethnographic method for the setting of online communities (Kozinets 2002). Runners, as an example, constitute a cultural group with practices, jargon, and meanings that are better understood after a researcher spends some time with the group. We aimed to avoid taking information out of context from the fan page environment. The immersion and internalization of what was observed occurred slowly during the four months of data collection. The aforementioned content was extracted from the Facebook fan pages and submitted to HyperRESEARCH™ software for the coding process. We codified each fan page's content, frequently exchanging opinions, solving differences, questioning motives when in doubt, and achieving consensus. We followed and watched the fan pages on a daily basis or at least on a weekly basis during the period of data collection and primary coding.

Table 4 - Characteristics of the fan pages studied

Fan Page	Number of fans	Period of data collection	Object of Analysis	Volume of Data
Nike Run	1,000,000	May to October 2011	Brand posts, member comments, photos, videos, links, and interview with 7 members	Approximately 100,000 words of text
Mizuno	7,500	September to December 2011	Brand posts, member comments, photos, videos, and links	Approximately 26,000 words of text
Jack Daniel's	190,000	October 2011 to January 2012	Brand posts, member comments (limited to 50 per post), photos, and links	Approximately 17,600 words
Budweiser	450,000	August 2011 to January 2012	Brand posts, member comments (limited to 50 per post), photos, videos, and links	Approximately 23,500 words

We created the code categories based on thick description and grounded meanings extracted from the text (Strauss and Corbin 1990) and based on the proposed research objectives—to identify, understand, and contrast the presence of the seven communitarian characteristics proposed by Kozinets (1999) in the four fan pages: a) topical information exchange; b) identity communication from members; c) the establishment of cultural norms in the form of language and practices; d) the presence of conflicts, status, and power relationships; e) internalization and conformity with cultural norms; f) members' perceptions of one another; and g) cultural cohesion in the form of stories, topics chosen, empathy, rules, common behaviors, and meanings. Subsequently, we interviewed some of the celebrities from the Nike fan page. We noticed that the presence of celebrities was more obvious on the Nike Run page but almost absent in the other fan pages. Therefore, celebrities were interviewed only from the Nike Run fan page.

We initiated the data collection process on the Nike Run fan page. All the posts of the brand, videos, pictures, hyperlinks, and all member comments on the fan page pertaining to content, to other members, and to the brand were collected in a non-participative manner. We also took notes that were reflexively constructed based on the facts, implications, and dynamics of what was observed each week. The data

collection and primary codification were conducted between May and October of 2011. The Nike Run fan page had nearly 1,000,000 fans in December 2011. After we understood the social dynamics of this fan page (e.g., what type of content the brand posts, what type of reactions the members have, the type of interaction among the members online and offline, and the different types of members who could be viewed on the fan page), we proceeded to the analysis of the second fan page. The difference in the period of data collection for each fan page did not present any threat to the quality of our data because running is a popular sport in Brazil and because runners are used to training all year, as winter is not very cold in most Brazilian cities. The Mizuno fan page was studied between September and December of 2011, and it had 7,500 fans in December 2011. We choose a fan page with significantly fewer fans because at the time, all the relevant Brazilian competitors of Nike Run were either a fan page with fewer fans (Asics) or a fan page not directed only toward runners (Adidas). We chose to use this difference in the analysis of the case, comparing a fan page with nearly 1 million fans with a fan page with significantly fewer members but still having a prestigious image among runners.

After the observation and coding of the cases in the running category, we moved to a second category—alcoholic beverages. The Brazilian Jack Daniel's and Budweiser fan pages were studied between October 2011 and January 2012. Based on the analyses of the Nike Run and Mizuno fan pages, we decided to analyze the content published by the brands—posts of the brand, videos, pictures, hyperlinks, and member comments pertaining to the content, to other members, and to the brand—during one week each month. Moreover, only the last 50 comments made by fan page members to each brand post were analyzed. We made this decision after we verified a similarity of content among comments to each post during the first week of data collection. In January 2012, the Budweiser and Jack Daniel's fan pages had achieved 510,000 and 190,000 fans, respectively.

We had previously studied the four fan pages in other research projects, which made our experience richer and our cultural comprehension wider. As noted previously, we also used data from interviews conducted with some assiduous members of the Nike Run fan page. Seven members 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

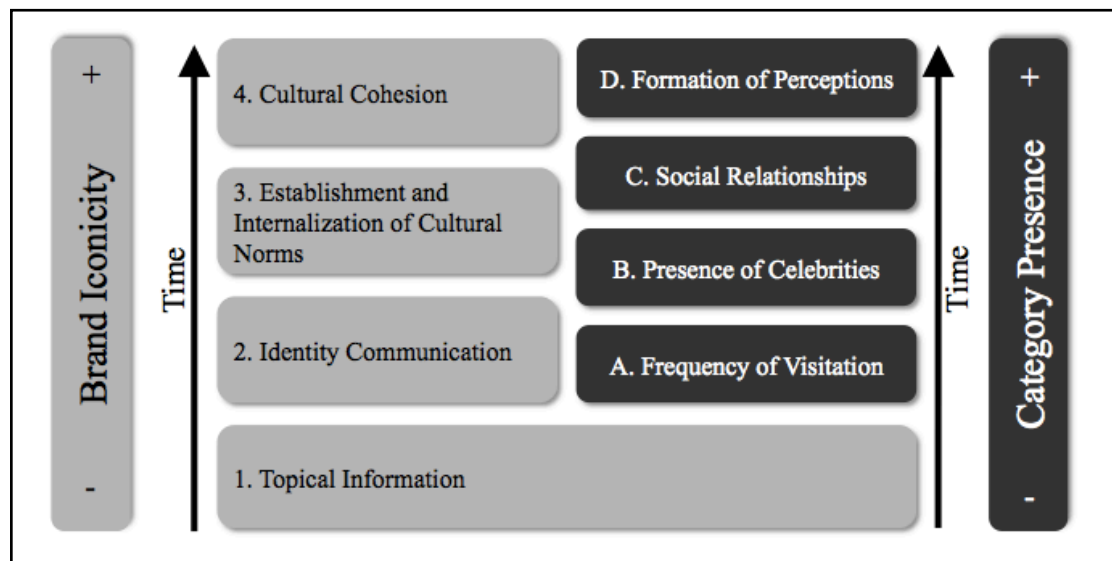
through the Facebook message system, allowing time for the interviewees to think about the topic and answer when appropriate. The duration of the entire interview process was between two and fourteen days. We chose these members because they were clearly frequent and influential participants on the Nike Run fan page or celebrities, as they are called.

In the four cases, we analyzed whether and how the seven characteristics of Kozinets (1999) were manifested, and we analyzed their interrelationships with constant comparison, integration, and iteration (Spiggle 1994). The analysis was also inspired by case study theory (Woodside 2010), as the phenomenon is new and the context is dynamic and complex. In each case, we sought data on the nature of the case (its activity and functioning) and the physical setting and its contexts (e.g., the intertwined role of running activities and the fan page) in a search for detailed description and explanation. We sought data from various sources (direct observation and interviews with a Nike manager and fan page members) and observed the evolution of each case for several months (Woodside 2010). The analysis procedure included within-case understanding and cross-case comparisons.

Findings

Based on the data of these four cases, we propose that fan pages are environments that can present several of the characteristics of community building but that these communal characteristics evolve in a simpler manner than is presented by Kozinets (1999) and that leads to a more loose and ephemeral form of online community, in line with O'Guinn and Muniz (2009). Furthermore, the process of community building in a fan page is positively influenced by the level of iconicity of the brand and by the level of presence of the category in the lives of individuals, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5 - The evolution of communal characteristics on fan pages



Next, we discuss whether and to what degree the characteristics of online communities theorized by Kozinets (1999) appeared in our data in the four cases studied. However, the finding of these characteristics is less important than how we perceived them to develop over time. Topical information and identity communication were common in three of the four fan pages. The establishment and internalization of cultural norms and conformity to cultural rules were characteristics that manifested rapidly and almost simultaneously for the frequent visitors of the fan pages. However, we observed almost no conflict, status or power relations, or perceptions among members, with the exception of the Nike Run case and only to a low degree, for reasons that will be explained further. In Figure 6, we present a summary of the presence of the seven communitarian characteristics of Kozinets (1999) in the four cases.

Figure 6 – Communal characteristics of the fan pages studied

	Nike Corre	Mizuno	Jack Daniel's Brazil	Budweiser Brazil
a) topical information	++	++	++	++
b) identity communication	++	+	++	–
c) establishment and internalization of cultural norms	++	+	++	–
d) presence of conflict, status and power relations	+	–	–	–
e) internalization and conformity to cultural rules	++	+	++	–
f) formation of perceptions	+	–	–	–
g) cultural cohesion	++	+	++	–

Nike Run

The Nike Run fan page is characterized by the frequent participation of many members. Each post of the brand is commonly followed by hundreds of likes, comments, and shares. Running is perceived as a central part of the identity of members, who use Nike Run content to express their runner identity to their social world (as can be seen by the fact that many fans had pictures of them running as their profile's picture on Facebook). This expression is another characteristic of Nike Run—its central activity (running) appears to be particularly relevant for the identity projection of most members. Moreover, the Nike Run fan page is not an online environment isolated from external brand marketing activities. The Nike strategy is to transform running activity into a more social activity, according to one of its managers in Brazil who was interviewed for this research. To facilitate such a transformation, the brand creates activities related to training and competition and uses the fan page as a communication channel to promote such activities. In these running activities, many of the fan page members establish offline relationships and use the Nike Run fan page to foster their bonds through constant communication. Hence, the Nike Run fan page cannot be understood outside of its context—the brand strategy context and the consumer use of the brand context.

On the Nike Run fan page, one can frequently observe the presence of narrow topic communication. The brand content is related to running in the form of text,

video and pictures as well as questions regarding running issues, Nike brands and products, and contests and promotions. The members participate in the conversations by expressing their experiences as runners, complimenting and criticizing the brand and its products and services, and asking for further information and explanation on running matters. Frequently, the answers do not come from the brand but from other members, in a practice that Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009) termed *governing*, which is part of the group of practices called *social networking*.

Commonly, this topical information exchange is led by the brand that decides what content to publish and is completed with the participation of individuals who engage in the issues that the brand proposes. Thus, the brand leads individuals to discuss, comment on, and express themselves on the specific topics that the brand initiates, although consumers have the liberty to drive the conversation in the direction that they wish. Fan pages appear to be environments in which individuals receive content and then act upon it by commenting, sharing, and liking it.

The second characteristic, identity communication from members, was often observed on the Nike Run fan page. Members interact 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 them as “real” runners. Members also aimed to demonstrate how hard they work to pursue their targets to be seen and perceived by their equals as part of the group. Members frequently showed their connection to objects (e.g., running apparel, apps, and badges, such as t-shirts collected in running challenges) to communicate their running identity. The use of these semiotic tools allows these runners to extend the time in which they are runners to their social world. A runner, outside of the online world, can be a runner only in the few hours that he runs or talks about running to his group. Fan pages allow individuals to sustain and communicate their identities for longer periods and for a different audience.

The third characteristic of a VBC is the establishment and sharing of cultural norms materialized in language and practices. In the fan pages studied, these norms were created by the continuous posting of content that educates 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. Nike Run not only posts content but also asks questions

regarding running themes, incentivizing individuals to express and co-create what it means to be a runner, as shown in the following example in which members were asked to describe what it means to them to cross the finish line:

Nike Run (07/20/2011) *“After the first time we cross the finish line, it’s an addiction and we want to feel that #GOODSTUFF. Which word best describes the sensation of crossing the finish line?”* 103 people like this

The answers concentrated on themes of overcoming barriers and victory. This question was a way to instigate reflection about why members run, what their motivations are to continue, and what they feel when significant episodes in the running routine occur. Nike led this social construction of what it is to be a runner. The brand communicates its values with respect to running through text and image in each of its posts. Even in this post and in several others that preceded it, Nike affirms that running is an addiction and that one should feel the “#GOODSTUFF.” The members of the fan page answer this question under the influence of previous Nike content, their own thoughts on what motivates them to cross a finish line, and the comments of other members on the same post.

The fourth characteristic of a VBC is the establishment of power and status relationships and the presence of conflicts within the fan page. Conflicts were infrequent in the four fan pages analyzed and were largely in the form of mild criticisms to the brand, the product, or some activity in which the brand was involved. Nevertheless, power and status relationships could be observed for a small group of heavy users of the Nike Run fan page, built around the individual performance in running activities. Runners who prepared for challenges, trained frequently, and exhibited the athletic attitude of a serious runner acquired higher status among the group. This status can be observed in the following excerpt from an interview with a member of Nike Run:

“This group is not different than others. There are those who like to show off, some are interested, some don’t want anything, some want a date or friends. And people ... are interested in running, and they make contacts to go to running events in other states or countries. And there are people with influence on the group, who are differentiated ... as in all groups, we have critics, supporters, influencers,

people with contacts, money ... what kind of influence? Maybe an invitation to a competition, privileges ... ”

(interview with a male member conducted between December 5 and December 15, 2011)

These power and status relationships can be observed on the Nike Run fan page, but they also depend on the existence of offline social relationships among the members. The performance of each individual was communicated through apps designed to register and compare performance, and the presence of strong social bonds among some of the members stimulated the 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 the most frequent commentators on the fan page, are viewed by other members as the individuals who know the most about running matters, and are deeply connected to the running circuit of races and training.

The fifth characteristic of a VBC is internalization and conformity to cultural norms by members of the fan page. Nike Run members appeared to behave in accordance with the cultural rules established by the brand. As previously noted, in the fan page environment, brands evince their culture through the repetition of posts with a strong cultural content and themes that are constantly repeated to educate individuals. At the same time, it is necessary that members return to the fan page regularly to interact with the brand culture. The Facebook algorithm facilitates this process, as one is more exposed to the content of fan pages with which one has more interaction. Members of Nike Run who frequently like, comment, and share Nike Run content view the brand content on a daily basis. Celebrities, one of the most frequent groups of commentators on fan pages, do not need to enter the fan page, as the brand content automatically appears in their timeline. Furthermore, when members comment or share brand posts, they help the brand in the co-creation of its culture. Thus, this characteristic is essentially an evolution of time and assiduity from individuals, and when they are highly involved, they do not even need to actively visit the fan page to view Nike content—it simply appears in their news feed, and they become accustomed to the brand language and fan page norms.

The sixth characteristic of a VBC is the development of perceptions of “who’s who” between the members. This characteristic was observed the least frequently on the four fan pages, suggesting that most fans view only the content of the brand but rarely view the content of other fans. Nevertheless, for the most assiduous members of the Nike Run fan page, there were declared perceptions of other members, as could be noted in some of the interviews. Celebrities, as they foster social relationships among the members, contributed to the construction of such perceptions; however, the extent to this contribution appeared to be limited and cannot be considered for the vast majority of fans.

Nike Run’s achievement in terms of certain individuals actively reading one another’s comments and identifying the individual aspects of some members marks a difficult task in the fan page environment. The fact that most of the page’s members were runners of varying experience helped to create the conditions for identity building and identity noticing. As noted in some of the interviews, runners like to run, but they also like to talk about running, and by reading what others post, they deduce how well they are performing in terms of running efficacy. Celebrities also helped in this process as they engaged other people, serving as conversation moderators in the fan page.

The seventh characteristic, the presence of cultural cohesion in the form of behaviors, topics, histories, and common meanings within the group could also be noted in the Nike Run fan page. As previously noted, the exhaustive repetition of topical conversations on running themes and the coherent tone of the brand voice (jargon, attitude, stories, and plot) not only constructed the fan 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 slowly transforming the activity of running into a social, challenging, rewarding, and constructive activity. On the Nike Run fan page, one can witness members evolving as a person, becoming physically stronger, becoming more competitive professionally, and becoming more socially involved in the running community. Cultural cohesion in the Nike Run case is a consequence of topic coherence, topic relevance to the runners’ identity projection, and constant repetition of topics in the timeline.

The question of whether the Nike Run fan page can be considered a communal environment cannot be answered in a dichotomist choice, as it is more a matter of

degree. We noted some of the communal characteristics previously mentioned, but there was no trace of consciousness of kind (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Members did not textually express anything near to a "we-Nikers" attitude or anything similar to what can be observed in the traditional and strong community of Harley Davidson' owners (Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

Mizuno

The Mizuno fan page shares some structural similarities with the Nike Run fan page. Mizuno uses the fan page as an extension of its communication strategy. Mizuno also uses the fan page to communicate with individuals on offline matters such as its sponsored running events, trainings in traditional running places that the brand organizes, new products launched, and advertising campaigns. Similar to Nike Run, the Mizuno fan page is characterized by the frequent participation of its members in the form of likes, comments, and shares. Running is a central part of the identity of its members, who use Mizuno content to express their runner identity. However, the Mizuno fan page differs from the Nike Run page in several important aspects. The Mizuno fan page had 1,500 members when the study began and 7,500 members when the data collection process ended. Mizuno used the strategy of having some celebrities serving as moderators in the fan page but with fewer moderators and less efficacy than Nike, as will be explained next. The comparison of fan pages in the same category, with both brands being respected in the running community but with a different number of fans on each fan page, allowed us to understand the role of size in the fan page dynamic.

The communal characteristic of topical information exchange was present on the Mizuno fan page. As previously noted, this characteristic does not appear to be a discriminating characteristic of the fan pages analyzed. The most frequent forms of topic information exchange were praise of the brand and its products, questions posted by individuals on running matters, and incentives to increase and to foster the running behavior of other runners. These topical information exchanges resulted from previous Mizuno posts in a process similar to that found on the Nike Run page. Running appears to be a category with narrow topics, which facilitate this topical conversation: athletes, challenges, training, exercises, nutrition, psychological states

that favor the achievement of improved running results, running apparel, running apps, and prestigious marathons are some of the types of topical information that Mizuno brought to the fan page and that engaged the members in conversations.

Identity communication was also observed on the Mizuno fan page. Individuals used their expressions on the fan page to communicate their identities as runners, both on and off the Mizuno fan page, for their own social network. However, the size of this fan page appeared to influence the desire of members to communicate with other fans. A few members posted constantly on the fan page or shared its content with their own social networks. Brands can be a powerful tool for semiotic expression by individuals on Facebook if the content possesses the intrinsic characteristics that are necessary to engage individuals and allows them to express who they are and if the fan page becomes an environment full of people who are engaging in similar behaviors. Nike's one million fans (as of October 2011) appeared to be a more attractive public space for such self-expressive runners. In addition, Nike messages in the form of text and images appeared to be more attractive for fans. Furthermore, Mizuno is not an iconic brand despite being respected in its category, and as explained before, iconic brands appear to have an advantage in the potential of the brand to become a source of content for individuals to like and share in their social networks.

We noted the presence of cultural norms in the form of language and practices and the internalization and conformity to cultural rules established by the brand, although to a low degree compared with the Nike Run case. For clear practices and language to permeate the fan page, it is necessary that the brand frequently posts content that establishes such norms and that members to repeatedly engage in conversations surrounding such topics. As mentioned, the members of the Mizuno fan page formed a less cohesive group, with communications being less vivid than in the Nike Run case. For similar reasons, the internalization and conformity to cultural norms was difficult to observe in the conversations present on the fan page. In the following example, Mizuno gave the history of a runner who completed her first half-marathon in Amsterdam. The brand posted a video (part of the series www.webseriesmizuno.com.br) with her narrative of the event. However, the content, despite representing quality content in our opinion, received only 12 likes, 2 comments, and no shares.

Mizuno Brazil (October, 20th) *“I put out a cry of pain, relief, victory, conquer, overcome, Discovery!”*

Congratulations, you are a winner.

My victory in Amsterdam

webseriemizuno.com.br

“Congratulations!!” (female)

“One day I’ll do the same. Congratulations!” (male)

Cultural cohesion was moderately noted on the Mizuno fan page. One can find the same topics posted by the brands on both fan pages—topics related to all running issues. However, in the Mizuno case, the presence of these topics is not sufficient for members to verbally behave in accordance with the rituals, histories, and jargon proposed by Mizuno. For a brand to have cultural cohesion on its fan page, members must engage in the script proposed by the brand. The more iconic characteristics of Nike also played a role here.

When all the characteristics proposed by Kozinets (1999) are considered and compared with the Nike Run case, one cannot affirm that the Mizuno fan page is an environment conceptually similar to a VBC, although it presents some of the basic characteristics of online communal spaces (a narrow type of information exchange, identity communication within the social space, and common language and practices to some degree). Furthermore, there was no trace of consciousness of kind, a moderate presence of rituals and traditions, and almost no sense of obligation among the members of the fan page (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), apart from the assistance offered by celebrities.

Jack Daniel’s

The Brazilian Jack Daniel’s fan page had 190,000 fans and a high level of engagement from the fan page in the form of likes, comments, and shares of brand posts. The brand content was composed of histories of its founder (Mr. Jack), the original liquid, product variants (e.g., single barrel, honey, Old No. 7, Gentleman’s Jack), the iconic squared bottle, and phrases that represent the ethos of the brand, such

as masculinity, traditionalism, independence, and authenticity (Holt and Cameron 2010). The Jack Daniel's case shares similarities with the Nike Run case, as Jack Daniels's is an iconic brand in the alcoholic beverage category, as Nike is in the sports apparel category.

The Jack Daniel's fan page clearly presented topical information. The iconic image of the traditional square bottle was constantly used to engage the members, who commented, liked, and shared the images. Comments were almost always full of positive associations, such as being tasty, traditional, and unique, with compliments on the taste and the quality of the liquid being the most common form of topical information. The brand constantly used the image of its founder, Mr. Jack, as a topic of discussion. One story involving the death of Mr. Jack received 610 shares, 1,130 likes, and 175 comments. In the comments, one can observe proximity to the brand in the form of Mr. Jack, the bottle, or the symbolic desire to visit his grave.

“Legend has it that the two chairs next to the grave of Mr. Jack were for the girls in Lynchburg City to mourn his death ...

Too ghoulish for Halloween? Would someone here commemorate this date ‘next’ to Mr. Jack too?” (Jack Daniel's Brazil, October 31)

“This guy did a lot for the man; let's celebrate his passage through this life ...”
(male)

“With some bottles of Jack, I would easily go ...” (female)

“oh!! Now I know where to go next Halloween ... you should have told me earlier ... LOL.” (female)

“This guy knew how to treat the ladies ...” (male)

In the Jack Daniel's fan page, we also observed the communication of identities among its members. Fans constantly used the content of the brand to position themselves as lovers of the Jack Daniel's liquid, brand value, and lifestyle. These individuals legitimated their identities through their proximity to the behaviors and values expected from a Jack Daniel's drinker, such as masculinity (e.g., the previous comment, *“this guy knew how to treat the ladies”*) and brotherhood (*“this guy did a lot for the man; let's celebrate his passage through this life”*).

The presence of cultural norms was also observed on the Jack Daniel's fan page and in a similar degree to that observed in 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. Members of the fan page responded to the content in consonance, endorsing these values in their language and declared drinking habits. In the following example, the brand asked members to describe what they would do for the old Mr. Jack. Members embraced the brand values with replies that are full of masculinity, brotherhood, and authenticity. The following post received 912 likes, 183 shares, and 118 comments:

“There are fans of JACK DANIEL'S that make tattoos, compose music ... wear the shirt with pride, travel to the distillery ... ask to be buried with a bottle ... there's a singer who said that she brushed her teeth with Jack!

Fans around the world show their love for JACK DANIEL'S with the same AUTHENTICITY that the brand carries in its DNA.

And you Jack lovers, what's the craziest thing you have ever done or would do for the good old Jack?” (Jack Daniel's Brazil, January 27)

“It was the birthday of (name of friend), and I had nothing to give him ... I remembered that he liked Jack ... we drank half a bottle cowboy style, that wonderful taste ... when it came to half the bottle, I said I was not well and went home ... I drank the rest alone. hehehe” (male)

“Yesterday I drank one bottle alone. Jack is great. I made a chandelier with the bottle; it was as cool as hell.” (male)

“I would wear Jack as perfume all day!!!” (male)

“I would go without sex for a week!!!” (male)

Conflicts, power, and status relationships were rarely observed on the Jack Daniel's fan page. The few occasions in which conflicts and status relationships could be noted concerned the correct method of drinking Jack Daniel's. Some purists considered adding ice or honey to the liquid to be a sacrilege, and they considered drinkers to be closest to the values of Jack Daniel's when respecting “the cowboy way of drinking it.” However, communication between fans was not common.

Members constantly commented on the content of Jack Daniels's but rarely on the comments of other members.

We noted a high level of internalization and conformity to cultural norms on the Jack Daniel's fan page. It is difficult to determine whether the Brazilian members of the fan page were already savvy and behaved in accordance with the Jack Daniel's culture or whether they became progressively more versed in the values, norms, jargon, and expected behaviors of a Jack Daniel's drinker after accessing the fan page. The fan page of Jack Daniel's, a brand immersed in tradition and permeated by a strong culture, cannot be understood in isolation from the image of the brand. All the brand associations established before the creation of the fan page are part of the brand context, and the fan page is simply an additional marketing tool to communicate with fans.

We witnessed a cultural cohesion on the Jack Daniel's fan page—an environment in which the brand values permeated all conversations, individuals shared drinking practices, the history of the brand was celebrated, the brand values were incorporated into individual identity, a common understanding of the expected behaviors of a whiskey drinker existed, and icons such as the square bottle or the imaginary Lynchburg distillery were appreciated equally by members. Thus, the Jack Daniel's fan page presented several of the characteristics of online communities that Kozinets (1999) proposed, consistent with our observations of the Nike Run fan page.

Budweiser

The Budweiser fan page had 450,000 fans in January 2012. The topical conversation developed around subjects such as music festivals sponsored by the brand, popular celebration dates (e.g., the Chinese New Year), and promotions. Budweiser's posts received hundreds of likes and shares as well as a high number of comments per post. On the part of fans, conversations concentrated around compliments to (and sometimes critics of) the brand or the content posted by the brand, comments about shows and artists that the brand presented, expressions of love for beer and for drinking it cold in the heat and with friends, manifestations of urgent desire for beer (especially at the end of the day), and examples of the presence of beer in individuals' daily lives (e.g., their refrigerators were always stocked with beer).

Budweiser's fans did not present any significant tendency to use the fan page content as a tool to communicate their identities. In contrast to what we observed on the Nike Run, Mizuno, and Jack Daniel's fan pages, the fans of Budweiser did not present any strong connection to the brand or to its content. The reason appears to be based on the type of content that Budweiser posts—content that is interesting for younger consumers but at the same time generic in that 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, such as the Brazilian star Anderson Silva). We are not stating that young consumers do not like this type of content; on the contrary, their liking of this content is evidenced by the high number of likes, comments, and shares that the brand received. Rather, we observed that these consumers rapidly passed through this content and expressed their appreciation (e.g., for Anderson Silva or for beer in general) in the form of brief words, as shown in the following post, which received 299 likes, 34 shares, and dozens of comments such as the comments below.

“Great fortune or misfortune? What will become of your friends in 2012? Email a fortune cookie and decide. To write your message and send the video, click here: <http://tlk.tc/V9UE> The Year of The Dragon is coming. Great times are coming.”
(Budweiser Brazil, January 24)

“hummm, that's nice” (female)

“I love beer.” (female)

“I don't like people who eat dogs.” (male)

“great idea!!” (male)

“crazy!” (male)

We also did not see the establishment of power and status relationships or the presence of conflicts within the fan page. As in the other three fan pages studied, conflicts were infrequent and concentrated in the form of mild criticisms of the brand, the product, or some activity in which the brand was involved. Moreover, power and status relationships were not observed. Furthermore, there was no evidence of members forming perceptions of one another. The Budweiser fan page is more of a collective of individuals that decided to receive information about the brand than a

group with social interactions. The Budweiser fan page did not have any celebrities among its fans. The absence of this heavy user type on the fan page helps to explain the complete nonexistence of social relationships between fans of the brand. In this manner, the Budweiser fan page constitutes an environment in which two-way communication frequently occurs (from the brand to a fan and from a fan to the brand) and one-to-many communication also occurs (a fan to his or her own network when sharing a content, for example), but many-to-many communication (fans to fans) rarely occurred.

The Budweiser fan page clearly lacked a strong brand culture in the form of vocabulary, behaviors, rules, histories, values, themes, and meanings that are common to the group (Fine 1979) and on which members could compete for differential levels of understanding and belonging. This lack of brand culture is exactly the reason that this fan page did not exhibit internalization and conformity to cultural rules from its members; the Budweiser page was the only fan page in this research that did not present this VBC characteristic. Budweiser is a brand that has been present in Brazil since 2011 after the company decided to internalize the American brand. Thus, the brand is relatively new in this country as a massive brand. We found no evidence in the media or in academic studies that Budweiser is considered an iconic brand in Brazil. This lack of recognition also contributes to the lack of a clear and strong culture on which fans could extract relevant semiotic material for their self-expressive needs.

Discussion and Theoretical Contributions

We showed that the main barrier for a fan page to be conceptually closer to a VBC is the velocity and brevity of the participation of fans in the environment and its consequent impersonal nature. Fans, even those who frequently use the fan page to express their identities and to obtain information on topics of interest, are there for only a few moments amid the multiple tasks that they perform online or offline. Observations of people relating to one another were infrequent. Members converse with the brand, with their own social network outside of the fan page, and occasionally with the fan page as a whole but rarely with one another in a personal

manner. The exception was the Nike Run case and, even in this case, only for a small group of heavy users of the fan page.

We showed that fan pages can assume several characteristics of a VBC. Nike fulfilled nearly all the necessary characteristics, but based on the four cases studied and the seven characteristics of the continuum theorized by Kozinets (1999), fan pages cannot be considered a truly communal environment. Thus, our data suggest a conclusion that differs slightly from that of Zaglia (2013), who studied the Nikon fan page and concluded that it presented the three marks of VBCs—consciousness of a kind, the presence of rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility among members. Although we do not disagree with her conclusions, we propose that her case is an extreme case in terms of category insertion in the lives of consumers. In such cases, a fan page can assume the character of a VBC, but in other cases, with categories of less presence in the lives of consumers, a fan page will present, at most, only some of the characteristics of a VBC.

We suggest that the type of brand category plays an important role in the capacity of the fan page to become a more communal space. Running is an activity that plays an important role in the lives of runners. Therefore, the level of commitment to the activity is higher, which implies running several times a week and engaging in conversations about running both online and offline (e.g.: conversations about results or tips on training and racing tactics). The Nike Run and Mizuno fan pages have a greater capacity to become a more communal space compared with the Jack Daniel's and Budweiser fan pages. Although drinking is an activity that can occur often in the lives of young people in particular, it is not the drinking per se that counts—it is the entire social environment in which the drinking occasions occurs that is relevant. Thus, the propensity to discuss drinking or beverages online and offline on a daily basis is not the same as that observed with running. A category with a high level of presence in the lives of consumers brings with it an intrinsic high potential for a fan page to present more communal characteristics.

Together with a high level of category presence in one's life, our cases showed that the presence of celebrities among the members of a fan page facilitates the construction and fostering of social relationships within the fan page. However, these relationships occurred, in the Nike and Mizuno cases, for only a small number of members. These celebrities contribute to turning the fan page into a more

communal environment by engaging in practices of social networking, impression management, community engagement, and brand use (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009). Celebrities help to bring life to a fan page, which can thus become more than simply a place where information is shared. Celebrities help to construct social relationships within the fan page, providing additional context on the fan page threads and therefore increasing the person-to-person dialogue on the fan page, as the Nike Run case showed. Celebrities are pivots from which such conversation occurs, constituting an alternative to the brand as an active actor on the fan page. Furthermore, celebrities foster the self-regulation of the fan page—a characteristic that increases the value of such a community for its members (Seraj 2012). These highly engaged fans are a group analogous to insiders, who have strong ties both to the community and to the topic (Kozinets 2002) and to newsgroup moderators, according to Whittaker et al. (2003).

Our cases suggest that the level of brand iconicity also plays an important role in the potential of a fan page to exhibit more VBC characteristics. The Jack Daniel's case showed an advantage for iconic brands, those few brands full of meanings that are sufficiently powerful "to organize collective identities" (Holt 2006). As an example from the alcoholic beverage category, the content that Jack Daniel's posted provoked conversations with higher engagement levels than what Budweiser posted. Iconic brands organize collective identities through axes of social class, gender, race, nationalism, or group affiliation, allowing individuals to enact their identities (Holt 2006). Nike, one of the most iconic brands in the world (Holt and Cameron 2010), is inserted into the mass cultural movement of street running, and this insertion plays to the advantage of Nike when its fans become involved in discussing running events related to this practice. The topical information aspect of community formation is simpler when there are so many running matters to discuss, when the history of a brand such as Jack Daniel's is permeated with anecdotes and gossip about its founder, or when the brand represents myths that somehow resolve major contradictions in society, such as Jack Daniel's and contemporary masculinity (Holt 2006).

We presented data that suggest that fan pages can grow to be places that are community-like or almost communal and that the evolution of the fan page in this direction differs from the online community evolution process theorized by Kozinets (1999). The fast pace, intermittency, and impersonal nature of the relationships that

occur between a brand and its fans leads to a simplified framework in which time, topical consistency, individual identity communication, and the establishment and internalization of cultural norms and cultural cohesion form the evolving pattern of the VBC. The establishment of social relationships and the formation of perceptions of “who’s who” in such an environment are community characteristics that are difficult to form on fan pages, with only a small group of heavy users and celebrities presenting these two characteristics. Time and consistency of topics are fundamental for a group to develop as a community. Whittaker et al. (2003) considered the presence of “common ground” a crucial condition for communication to be fostered in online communities. The principle on which Whittaker et al. (2003) based their research is that people interact more with others who share the same knowledge and references and that if participants in an online community are willing to discuss with one another, then they must have a conversational topic to discuss. Nike Run and Mizuno fans shared topics surrounding the activity of running. Jack Daniel’s fans could discuss the iconic bottle, the history of the brand and its founder (Mr. Jack), and the values that Jack Daniel’s represents. However, Budweiser did not present any significant topic for members to discuss—at least not any topics that would not be discussed in many other places.

Following O’Guinn and Muniz (2009), we found that fan pages can be considered a loose form of online community, with greater adherence to the postmodern society in which “disconnectedness from neighbors and face-to-face community ... (and) ephemeral attachment ...” (O’Guinn and Muniz 2009) are more the rule than the exception. The relationship that a brand and individuals continue to have within the fan page environment is not fanatical but represents a thin and non-negligible dialogue that is important and difficult to construct in an environment that was not originally created for brands to communicate with consumers (Fournier and Avery 2011). The communal side of fan pages should be understood in this context, within the possibilities and limits of most of the online communities to form and foster bonds in a world that encourages the formation of weaker ties. Not all fan pages are created equal, and Nike Run and Jack Daniel’s showed a possible direction for how companies can bring about community on their fan pages. However, the Budweiser case revealed that this task is not easy. The metaphor of communities in virtual worlds is appealing, but it is often used inadequately (Fernback 2007). The fan

page as a virtual brand community is a useful framework but is one that can only be used given the limitations of most online communities to truly be a community. As O'Guinn and Muniz stated, "for most consumers, that is the level at which the social brand and brand community exist ... we do not want other researchers, managers or readers to believe that communal brand relationships must always be this strong, or this seemingly fanatical" (2009, p. 9).

The four fan pages studied were environments in which the brand was more in control of themes, norms, or culture creation. This characteristic separates fan pages from VBCs, where consumers are in control and brands lose power and centrality (Kozinets 1999). Although individuals have the liberty of speaking as they wish and even criticizing the brand, what was observed in the four cases was a positive attitude toward the brand or the topics that the brands posed—the attitude of a follower, which is typical of fans. The Nike Run and Jack Daniel's cases were the pages with the greatest levels of member participation. Nike Run and Mizuno members commented on running matters; helped one another; and criticized or paid compliments to the brand with respect to its products, races, content, and apps. Therefore, the topic control that brands exerted on the fan page did not present a barrier to members' free expression, nor did they present a disincentive to their will to participate. In fact, the topic control from Nike, Mizuno, and Jack Daniel's worked only because their fans valued the topics.

The centrality of a brand prompts mention of another interesting stream of research. If an impersonal audience was perceived or intuited by the majority of members, then to whom are fans talking: to the brand, to some of the fan page members, or to their personal networks on Facebook? Our data indicate that members are communicating with all these audiences and that they are also communicating with themselves by creating their personal character, whether through the image of the tough runner or the independent, free-spirited heavy drinker. Fan pages appear to present a narcissistic environment in which one can appropriate the brand, the product, the activity, and the story and construct one's personal history.

Managerial Implications

We propose that brands from different categories should have different communal goals regarding their fan pages. Not all fan pages will have the same “communal 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 to the formation of groups or communities than other products. Our data showed that this condition is not sufficient. 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 individuals will not have a theme to discuss or a source of meaning for identity expression. Thus, a fan page should serve the strategy of each brand, according to the capacity of each brand or the nature of each category’s consumer-brand relationship. We propose that fan pages should not have a final and homogeneous goal (Fournier and Lee 2009) but a conditional goal.

Fan pages can possess communal traces of their own and receive the benefits that brand communities offer to companies, such as a higher level of brand use, consumer engagement, and brand vitality (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009). Fan pages are part of the marketing strategy of brands, and they allow brands to foster a relationship that is typically begun before a consumer “likes” the brand page on Facebook. Therefore, more than communally defining the fan page in a dichotomy of “yes” and “no,” the interest of researchers and practitioners can be devoted to the process of the construction of a fan page as a more communal environment.

If having members who participate actively in the fan page, who share with other members the same values toward the brand, who engage in discourses that are in consonance with the brand interest, and who use the content of the fan page to the offline side of their lives, then the fan page can become a more communal environment, given that the 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. If companies want the fan page to be more communal and to receive the benefits that Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009) discussed, then brands need to involve individuals in brand or category activities and post content that expresses who these fans are or how

they want to be perceived, in turn facilitating self-expression on Facebook and even helping fans in the construction of social relationships. Future research could investigate how brands can involve individuals in such activities and identify whether and when the presence of too many fans plays against the fan page communitarian characteristic.

This research indicates that brands should provide opportunities and tools for identity expression. This approach is a way to engage individuals with fan pages. Individuals use the online environment to construct their personal branding, “similar to actors on Goffman's (1959) stage ... participants chose their props (pictures, applications) and dress (information) to create meaning through self-presentation to others” (Labrecque, Markos, and Mine 2011, p. 44). Meanwhile, the content that brands post and that individuals respond to on fan pages in a participative process should reflect and amplify the brand culture. Without a strong brand culture (Holt and Cameron 2010), there is no space for competition for status on the fan page, as the individual appropriation of meanings (the basis for competition) cannot exist.

The quality of the content posted on a fan page is crucial to engage members and to enable a brand to establish its presence in social media (Parent, Plangger, and Bal 2011). De Vries, Gensler, and Leeftang (2012) showed that content that is more vivid, interactive, and possessive of a high level of entertainment and/or information tends to be more popular. Our data suggest that there is another variable in this proposition: the capacity of the content to communicate who someone is or the semiotic potential of the content. Nike Run and Jack Daniel's were the two cases in which the brand culture was most evident, both in the posts of the brands and in the comments of fans. The absence of a strong culture in the Budweiser case provided the contrast from which that conclusion can be made. Future research could investigate the symbiosis of brand culture and consumer identity expression on fan pages as well as the benefit of that symbiosis to brand identity building.

Additionally, this research encourages brands to bring a more communal spirit to fan pages. The fan page is an online tool constructed under the structure of a corporation (Facebook) and is organized and managed by marketing executives who need to show results based on quantitative evidence. One of the key metrics to measure a fan page's success is engagement, which is 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 2013). This metric does not encourage the quality of conversations but largely emphasizes the quantity of likes, shares, and comments. Furthermore, this metric does not directly measure “communal status.” Such measures must still be created to direct marketing executives’ actions.

General Conclusion

In the first article of my research, I contribute to marketing theory in several ways. I show that the brand image may emerge from virtual conversations between the brand and individual fans and that the brand leads the conversation; individuals play an active but unintentional role in socially constructing brand images. I also show that the co-creation process of the brand image brings increased complexity to the brand management function. Although brand managers clearly have a leading role in such co-creation of brand image on social networks, this power only manifests if the created content stimulates the conversation between the brand and individuals.

In the second article, I show that identity projects (e.g.: running) can be an important aspect of a person's life, and both young and mature adults want to express their identities to their social contacts on Facebook. I show that brands are instrumental in this self-presentation, providing fans with tools, semiotic materials or virtual social gatherings; however, the brands are secondary in importance and conditional in relevance to the runners' identity projects. Additionally, I reveal the degree to which brands are dependent upon, or embedded within, practices (Warde 2005) that are relevant for the identity projects of individuals. I also show how brand narratives must be embedded within each individual's identity narrative and how brand value arises from compliance with relevant roles in consumers' lives.

In the third article, I show that fan pages can assume several characteristics of a VBC; however, based on the four cases studied and the seven characteristics of the continuum proposed by Kozinets (1999), fan pages cannot be considered a truly communal environment. I propose that the main barrier for a fan page to become conceptually similar to a VBC is the velocity and brevity of the engagement with fans in the social media environment. Fans are there for only a few moments amid the multiple tasks that they perform online or offline. Similarly to the Nutella community studied by Cova and Pace (2006), fans visit the fan pages to put themselves on display and to see how they are perceived by other fans. Most of the fans are there more for self-disclosure than for nurturing social relationships. I also suggest that the type of product category plays an important role in the capacity of the fan page to become a more communal space. Brands have a higher chance of entering into consumers' conversations in categories that are immersed in their consumers' daily practices (e.g: running). I also show that even brands that are already market leaders

in their categories (such as Nike) can create communal environments for their brands. This finding confirms the theory of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 428), and the findings of Cova and Pace (2006), that even for popular, mainstream brands such as Coca-Cola or Nutella, communal feelings can exist and can be powerful.

Together, these three studies reveal how brands are secondary in importance to the individual on social networking sites. The individual is always at the centre, and all social media activities planned by brands must be in congruence with the self-identity projects and real life practices of individual fans (e.g.: running). Following the argument of the cluetrain manifesto (www.cluetrain.com), fan pages can perhaps be best understood as an online platform for conversations in which the flow of information is open and honest, the language is natural, and the voice of the fans is genuine. Furthermore, more brands should enter these conversations in a natural, honest, and genuine way, connecting primarily with fans' lives and only secondarily with specific brand objectives.

Additionally, I have proposed that fan pages are not exactly like virtual brand communities; however, they do share some common characteristics. Although I formally applied Kozinets (1999) framework of online community building, Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) markers and mechanisms of a brand community can also be useful to consolidate the common characteristics of virtual brand communities and fan pages. Fan pages and brand communities are both organised around the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). For example, the Nike Run, Mizuno and Jack Daniel's fan pages are centred around the brand and on the activities that these brands patronise. Individuals use the social media content of these brands to communicate their own self-identities and as part of their everyday practices of running or drinking with friends. Therefore, brands that want to create a fan page with more communal characteristics should take actions to integrate their brand and/or product into the everyday life and discourses of their consumers.

One of the fan pages studied in this thesis helped individuals to create interpersonal ties (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). The experience of the Nike Run brand provides the case study in which this characteristic clearly appeared. Nike Run fans built relationships that were initiated via the fan page or used the fan page to continue previously existing relationships. Although it seems to be a difficult task, brand managers can use the fan page as a place to nurture the evolution of social

relationships by communicating brand events and promoting these events as Nike did. For example, the promotion of events through the use of pictures allows individuals to use this material as a semiotic tool for their own self-projections, as the mature runners studied herein did. Brands can provide powerful and interesting content, and consumers can use this content in their everyday narratives and discussions. The Dove Real Beauty campaign provides a very well-known example – Dove promoted virtual discussions based on the underlying moral message of how the beauty of women should be pictured compared to the way the beauty industry frames it (Parent, Plangger, and Bal 2011). Thus, brand content can serve the purpose of starting meaningful conversations, but it can also simply serve as a vehicle for more simple and quotidian self-expression.

On the fan pages studied, I also noted the agency effect of individual fans (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). As I studied not only fan pages but also the personal Facebook pages of mature individuals, I found that fan pages for brands such as Nike Run and Mizuno have engaged fans only because these fans are using the fan page content to communicate their self-identities and because individuals use the fan page as a source of information for their everyday practices (running practices in this case). Thus, to understand how a brand can nurture a more communal environment out of a fan page, one has to comprehend the various roles that a fan page can play in promoting the lives and behaviours of the individuals who may then borrow contextual brand elements from relevant sources that help to reveal who they are.

The branding implication that I have addressed herein is that the brand image is co-created by the communication of the brand with its fans. The brand image co-creation is dependent on the participation of individuals on the fan page and on individuals' appropriation of brand posts for their own identity projects. Therefore, value is created for the brand only if value is offered to individual fans beforehand. For example, Nike and Mizuno offered distinct social media content for mature fans, which allowed these fans to appropriate these elements into their own social media discourses. This integration of running-related semiotic elements by these individuals inserted Nike and Mizuno (and other mentioned brands) into their Facebook content. The image of the brand is created in synergy with individuals' communication of their identity projects.

Together, these three studies provide evidence of the social model of brands that O'Guinn and Muniz (2009) conceived. The co-creation of the brand image in brand-consumer relationships that happen in a social-media environment rich with communal characteristics is evidence that brands are objects that are neither the sole property of the company nor exclusively an image in the mind of the consumer. Instead, brands are social entities that result from interactions between companies, individuals and several other agents. These interactions happen only because the brand serves a purpose in the life of these individuals, a purpose that can be either utilitarian (such as when Nike both sponsors a race and constantly informs its fans on matters regarding the event), or symbolic (such as when Jack Daniel's communicates its values and lifestyle in the form of pictures and other semiotic digital content that can be used as a self-expressive elements by its fans), or purely social. As noted by Ahuvia (2005), brands are part of a person-thing-person relationship in which the brand is instrumental in mediating the relationship between individuals - an idea that is central to the concept of brand communities.

Finally, the fan pages' pictured herein has similarities to the imagined communities mentioned by O'Guinn and Muniz (2009) as a characteristic of contemporary brand communities. The social glue that unites Jack Daniel's, Nike's, or Mizuno's fans is thin but not negligible, and the self-validating experiences shared between fans within these virtual environments helps to create such imagined virtual brand communities (O'Guinn and Muniz 2009). These two authors noted the existence of powerful and active brand communities in the past, but they also recognised the importance of studying brand communal relationships that are superficial, not fanatical, and more ephemeral (O'Guinn and Muniz 2009). Thus, I have shown in these articles that, even in ephemeral communal-like environments, such as fan pages, the presence of other similar fans is an incentive for individuals to communicate their extended self (Belk 2013) to other fans as well as to members of their own social network on Facebook.

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