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Brandscapes: contrasting corporate-generated versus consumer-generated media in the creation of brand meaning

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to add to the growing literature addressing whether, and to what extent, brand meaning is determined by corporate and consumer-generated processes. To do this, the authors compared the expression of brand meaning across three key sources i.e. first, brand strategy (i.e. traditional marketing mix); second, corporate-generated media (i.e. web site); and third, consumer-generated media (Facebook).

Design/methodology/approach – To address the research question of this study, the authors conducted an in-depth investigation into consumer co-creation experiences in the context of Facebook brand communities. The authors then interpreted the findings in relation to the brand strategy (i.e. marketing mix) and brand meaning expressed via corporate-generated online media (i.e. corporate web site). The authors achieved this by applying a narrative discourse analysis to textural data. To effectively handle the high quantity of textual data spawned via consumer-generated media (i.e. Facebook), the authors used a computer-assisted content analysis application (i.e. Leximancer).

Findings – In the analyses the authors found that brand expressions varied considerably across the chosen retail brands, but in all cases strong integration and alignment were present between the corporate and consumer-generated media. Specifically, the authors found that Facebook interactions echoed the brand meanings espoused on the corporate web sites. The findings indicate that online marketers can define the nature of brand co-creation, especially in the context of Facebook interactions.

Practical implications – For marketers who are eager to take advantage of Web 2.0 to build their brand, the findings of this research are highly significant. The authors showed that the brands developed their own interaction profiles, which allowed them to align the Facebook content with their core brand values. The results indicate that sound brand governance is articulated through the effective management of social media touchpoints by providing interactive, content rich, and relevant Facebook sites that echo core brand values.

Originality/value – Even though businesses have now started to penetrate the online social networks and offer direct links from corporate web sites to social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, little is known regarding the relationship between social media and traditional media in brand building. This research addresses this gap by undertaking an exploratory study of Facebook brand communities with implications for brand co-creation and brand governance.

Keywords Social media, Facebook, Brand meaning, Brand co-creation, Brand governance, Brandscapes

Paper type Research paper
Introduction
It is estimated that in 2013, 1.73 billion people will access social networking sites (SNS) and this will increase to 2.55 billion people by 2017 (Emarketer, 2013). One of the most popular SNS is Facebook with 699 million daily active users, an increase of 27 per cent year over year (Facebook, 2013).

Social media sites such as Facebook offer brand managers great opportunity for brand advocacy (Wallace et al., 2012). As such, brand managers are embracing Facebook as a marketing tool to engage and mobilize consumers around their brands (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008, Mangold and Faulds, 2009). However, despite the growth of social media, the effective management of multiple and dissonant brand meanings, that often emerge through this predominantly consumer-generated media (Berthon et al., 2009), remains largely unidentified.

Researchers argue that involving customers in brand building is an important source of brand equity (Keller, 2008; Parent et al., 2011). As more branding activity moves to social media, more consumers participate in online dialogue and interact with each other in the process of co-creating products, services and experiences (Nambisan and Baron, 2009; Payne et al., 2009; Rowley et al., 2007). Previous research indicates that consumers demonstrate value-creating behaviors above and beyond that which the firm creates or anticipates (Johnson and Rapp, 2010; Schau et al., 2009). Thus, it is argued that consumer co-creation is increasingly based on inputs provided by other consumers and parties beyond the control of online marketers (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). In the case of branding, social media has sparked an increasing focus on brand co-creation (Vargo et al., 2008; Hatch and Schultz, 2010), virtual brand communities (Casaló et al., 2008; Barwise and Meehan, 2010) and the nature of the relationships and experiences that occur within online brand communities (Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010). However, surprisingly, research has failed to explore the dynamics between brand strategy, corporate-generated online communications and consumer-generated online communications in defining brands (i.e. brand meaning). Herein resides the research gap upon which this study is framed, the results of which provide significant food for thought in relation to contemporary branding theory and brand management practice.

Literature review
The service dominant logic posits that consumers are resource integrators (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) and that “firm activity is best understood in terms of input for the customer’s resource-integrating, value-creation activities rather than it is in terms of its own integration of customer resources for the ‘production’ of valuable output” (Vargo et al., 2008, p. 214). Edvardsson et al. (2011) emphasize the mutual interrelationship between the firm (the brand) and the consumer. Whilst their argument supports the notion that brand messages are often (usually) reinterpreted by consumers and other stakeholders, they emphasize that meaning is constructed in the same social space. They go further to argue, from a service dominant logic perspective, that each actor brings with them a separate set of resources and resource configurations that become available for all actors in the exchange. This ideology highlights the influence of all stakeholders in the exchange process and raises significance brand governance issues.

Brand governance issues
Researchers defined stakeholder participation in brand co-creation as an issue of brand governance and control (Ind and Bjerke, 2007). Fournier and Avery (2011) argue that
the emergence of Web 2.0 must lead us to question the current brand management paradigm that assumes brand managers control the brands: “We’ve moved from a world where the brand set the agenda, to a world where consumers decide if – and when – brands are invited in” (p. 14). This perception of loss of control is often the hardest adjustment for marketers to make as brand governance shifts from the company to the dynamic outcomes of brand co-creation (Barwise and Meehan, 2010; Hatch and Schultz, 2010). Thus we see a shift in the role of the brand as provider of concrete brand messages that are directly consumed by consumers, to a model where brands must provide the consumer with operant resources from which they can pull and create their own value (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Therefore, a number of scholars argue that the brand’s role is radically challenged in light of co-creational effects (Klaus and Maklan, 2007; Merz et al., 2009; Grönroos, 2011).

Researchers argue that the concept of co-creation is the participation of consumers in the creation of value for companies (Zwass, 2010; Skaržauskaitė, 2013). According to this definition, co-creation can be initiated by companies or by consumers themselves. In fact, different platforms and social technologies have the potential to be effective tools for companies to co-create with their consumers, leading to better products (Sawhney et al., 2005), better user experiences (Kietzmann et al., 2011), and more engaged consumer bases (Casaló et al., 2008).

For brand managers, the development of social media requires a new strategic mindset that allows them to adapt to the co-creation paradigm (Vargo et al., 2008; Edvardsson et al., 2011). Fournier (1998) demonstrates that consumers’ attachment to their brand can be of a highly intimate nature. The strength of these ties has led some scholars to describe the consumer as “an active partner with the marketer in brand meaning formation” (Coupland, 2005, p. 106). Increasingly, brands, as holders of complex cultural meaning (Eckhardt and Houston, 2002; Holt, 2004), are not regarded as the product of the brand manager but as a result of the interaction between the brand and its consumers (Boyle, 2007). In other words, brands are realized as being increasingly co-created with consumers (Merz et al., 2009). In the context of early attempts by brands to manifest themselves on social media, Fournier and Avery (2011, p. 194) observed that “brand marketers no longer controlled the reach of their messages, consumers did”. The proactive role that consumers play in the co-creation of value is enabled via brand communities (Schau et al., 2009; Füller et al., 2009).

### Brand communities

A brand community, or brand tribe, is “any group of people that possess a common interest in a specific brand and create a parallel social universe (subculture) rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy” (Cova and Pace, 2006, p. 1089). Brand communities enable consumers to exert greater influence on products and brands they consider for purchase (Kozinets, 1999). Specifically, the development of brand community in social media (i.e. online) has significantly increased consumers’ ability to engage in consumer-to-consumer interactions that transcends geographical limitations. Thus, online interactions have strong community-based emotional and social elements (Riegner, 2007) that parallel those of offline brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

Brand communities facilitate the co-creation of value by means of increasing social networking among brand community members, creating favorable impressions of the brand in the social universe, engaging and reinforcing members of the brand community, and improving or enhancing the use of the brand (Schau et al., 2009). As a result, social networking within brand communities leads to positive consequences
such as brand community participation, brand-related purchase, community recommendation by word-of-mouth, brand loyalty, consumer intentions and behavior (Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2003). However, the most frequently documented effect of brand community on consumer behavior is consumer empowerment, articulated by the active and influential participation in the construction of brand experiences, traditionally pre-determined by marketers (Cova and Pace, 2006; Firat and Shultz II, 1997; Kozinets, 2002). As such, brand communities represent empowering domains which enable consumers to actively engage in brand problem solving and innovation (Fuller et al., 2008). On the other hand, brand communities also provide opportunities for marketers, who effectively “govern” social media domains such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, to enhance profitability (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Brand co-creation
At the heart of brand co-creation is the idea that organizations share control over their brands with stakeholders (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). Fisher and Smith (2011) argue that co-creation is chaotic and there is no guarantee that a predictable and satisfactory outcome, for the company, will result. Now, more than ever, consumers are empowered to exert significant control over key brand expressions (Brodie and de Chernatony, 2009; Fisher and Smith, 2011). For example, through social media, users can put forth ideas about brands that may differ greatly from what brands share with the public (Aula, 2010). As a result, there is the perception that the brand manager is no longer a custodian of the brand, but rather a host of consumer-generated content for the brand (Brodie and de Chernatony, 2009). However, other researchers argue that stronger brands can result through the effective management of a homogeneous identity in both social media and traditional media (De Chernatony and Christodoulides, 2004; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

The co-creation of brands can be understood from two different perspectives. The first view espouses the consumer as a dominant player in the co-creation process. It is mainly focussed on the potential for individualization of consumer experiences in relation to the brand. For example, Fisher and Smith (2011) examined brand communities that have developed around the film and character Indiana Jones; they argue that the Indiana Jones brand has become a highly flexible set of symbols and worldviews, which allow consumers to find meanings in a multitude of ways. Furthermore, in their examination of 12 brand communities, Schau et al. (2009) focussed on the internal community logics, rituals and hierarchies and found that brand communities developed their own value systems and practices, distinct from the brand. As a result, Kozinets et al. (2010) argue that brand communities espouse brand values “through a complex process that transforms commercial information into cultural stories relevant to the members of particular communities” (p. 86). In fact, they found that commercial messages are systematically altered by brand bloggers in order to confirm to their own cultural norms.

The second perspective is focussed on the management of the co-creation process from the company’s vantage point. It is based on the notion that controlling or influencing the co-creation process with consumers ensures a predictable and satisfactory outcome for the company. As the overall business direction is pointing towards greater community spirit, brand co-creation takes place between the brand and consumers and between consumers and consumers, across multiple online and offline media, many of which are beyond the control of the company (Constantinides and FOUNTAIN, 2008). “The brand owner, therefore, has to navigate its brand content through the consumer-generated
content to ensure that consumers’ brand stories remain as close as possible to the brand owner’s desired story” (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012, p. 190). Christodoulides (2009, p. 143) argues “a brand is a brand regardless of context”, therefore, branding in the post-internet era represents different enactment of the brand through different technological functionalities, such as Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies. Furthermore, Schlinke and Crain (2013) argue that social media tools are better suited to filling two important management requirements: brand extension and brand reputation. Therefore, it is important for marketers to manage the co-creation process through the strategic integration of social media with traditional marketing activities (Barwise and Meehan, 2010; Schlinke and Crain, 2013).

**Research agenda**

Regardless of the theoretical standpoint upon which one understands brand co-creation, there is no doubt that consumers do influence the co-creation of brands. However, this does not necessarily imply that consumers hold the balance of power, as some perspectives would suggest. What we know is that consumers are “actors” within the co-creation process but we know little, if nothing, of the so-called “balance of power” in the co-creation process. To this end we pose the following research question:

To what extent does consumer-generated online media (e.g. Facebook) create brand impressions that differ from those espoused through the brand’s marketing mix and its corporate-generated online media (e.g. web site).

Even though businesses have begun to penetrate online social networks and offer direct links from corporate web sites to SNS such as Facebook and Twitter (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), little is known regarding the relationship between social media and traditional online media in brand building. Despite brand managers’ perceived need to engage with social media, much remains unclear about the processes involved in brand co-creation in the social media sphere (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Fisher and Smith, 2011).

**Research framework**

This research aims to come to a better theoretical and empirical understanding of brand co-creation through the comparison of brand impressions (i.e. meaning) generated by the marketer (i.e. controlled) and that generated by the consumer (i.e. uncontrolled). In the consumers’ eyes, these two arenas are both part of the corporate image (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Figure 1 demonstrates a theoretical framework where a distinction is made between controllable marketing factors – marketing tools under the control of online marketers – and uncontrollable marketing factors (Cheung et al., 2003; Constantinides, 2004; Constantinides and Fountain, 2008).

In this model we juxtapose traditional marketing stimuli with web based ones (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008) in the context of a traditional consumer decision-making model. We also differentiate the brand and the consumer as resource integrators (Edvardsson et al., 2011). The purpose of the model is to illustrate the relationship between the traditional marketing communication variables of price, promotion (advertising and PR), product and place, with the web-based experiences provided through corporate webpages and social media. We do not consider the impact of individual elements of the uncontrolled stimuli, such as gender, age, social, professional status, and ethnicity since, as Brown et al. (2007) argue, they become “filtered out” in computer-mediated environments as these cues are lacking (Keisler and Sproull, 1992). Web interactions are typified by their relatively anonymous: “Readers of
Controllable stimuli:
Traditional Marketing Mix

Uncontrollable stimuli:
Demographic, personal, cultural, attitudinal, perceptual, sociological, economic, legal, environmental, etc.

Customer
(Resource integrator/beneficiary)

Information processing

Customer decision

Web Experience:
Online controllable marketing Factors:
Web site navigability, interactivity, atmosphere, online marketing mix

Social media Experience:
Online uncontrollable Marketing Factors:
Social networks (i.e. Facebook), Weblogs, Podcasts, Forums, etc.

Brand/Firm
(Resource integrator/beneficiary)

Sources: Adapted from Constantinides and Fountain (2008) and Edvardsson et al. (2011)
online community postings are thus faced with the task of evaluating the opinions of complete strangers” (Brown et al., 2007, p. 7).

While the goal of the corporate web site is mainly to communicate a clear brand identity, the social media site mainly focusses on increasing social interactions and establishing relationship between consumers and brands (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Social media based brand communities can be classified as either firm-sponsored or user-generated (Porter, 2004). Previous research examined entirely user-generated brand communities (Fisher and Smith, 2011). This model is based on the social media brandsphere (De Chernatony, 2006) where both companies and consumers share brand control. Thus, the model is used as a appropriate framework upon which to base this research, which has its focus on the relationship between corporate-generated and consumer-generated brand meaning.

Research design
The branding literature supports the use of a narrative or storytelling perspective to examine brands (Brown et al., 2003; Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012; Woodside et al., 2008). The approach used herein is a narrative discourse analysis, which focusses on meaning in situ. Brand meaning is defined as the “mental links between brand names, images and cognitions in a consumer’s memory, which cause the brand to acquire meaning” (Franzen and Bouwman, 2001). Understanding brand meaning cannot be divorced from the social and cultural context in which brands are consumed (Holt, 2004; O'Reilly, 2005). Evaluating brands, therefore, requires an analysis of the context or discourse within which they are produced and consumed. Narrative discourse analysis provides the opportunity to explore brand meaning in relation to corporate texts, such as corporate web sites, and consumer texts, such as Facebook postings. Narrative approaches have been applied to brands to explain why some brands have compelling “stories” while others fail to break through the clutter (Woodside et al., 2008).

In line with our research framework (refer Figure 1), we focus our analysis on three specific domains traditional marketing mix, corporate-generated online media and social media experience (i.e. consumer-generated online media).

Traditional marketing mix
Marketing strategy (i.e. marketing mix) can be considered an internally developed narrative that attempts to justify organizational existence, convince others to invest in the company and to build the tangible and intangible value of the company (O’Connor, 2002). The marketing narrative specifically aims to position the company or brand in a positive and unique light in relation to customers and the market. To explore such marketing narratives, we analyzed each brand from available strategic documents and reported practices. Therefore, sources of data were company reports, magazine articles, journal articles and web sites. Reference to specific sources can be found in Table II in the ensuing results section.

Corporate web sites
Well-designed corporate web sites use narratives as planned articulations of core brand values through both functional attributes (i.e. layout, links, navigation, level and quality of information) and emotional and hedonic elements (i.e. Color schemes, imagery, typeface, message appeal) of the web site (Weisnewski, 2008). Researchers argue that the meaning of a brand is a cluster of functional, emotional and hedonic
values (De Chernatony, 2001, 2006). Functional value propositions capture the performance benefits of the brand (Keller, 2008). Emotional value propositions refer to the emotional responses the brand promises its customers in terms of feelings and imagery (De Chernatony, 2001). Hedonic value propositions are the specific functional and emotional value propositions related to the individual person’s well-being and personal pleasure (De Chernatony, 2006). Thus, in this research we elicited brand meaning by assessing the web sites’ narratives expressed through functionality, imagery and message elements.

Social media (i.e. Facebook)
We explored consumer co-creation experiences in Facebook brand communities in a naturalistic context. Here we were inspired by the netnographic approach to studying online communities (Kozinets, 2002) and grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Netnography is both a method of study and analysis based on the principles of ethnographic research. Netnography “is built for social media, and it helps researchers follow consumers into online social worlds without compromising their privacy” (Kozinets, 2010). Used to assist marketers to channel the genuine voice of the consumer, netnography offers advantages in understanding the world of social media articulated in an authentic, emotionally charged and largely raw manner. Thus, its strength in relation to this research is that it is “grounded in knowledge of the local, the particularistic, and the specific” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Netnography is particularly appropriate for our research (i.e. exploring consumer-generated brand impressions) as it has, previously, been effectively used in the examination of brand meaning. For example, a number of authentic meanings were revealed when the Listerine brand was the subject of netnographic research. Results indicated that “some consumers associated the color of the mouthwash with alien beings; some found its smell reminiscent of a grandparent.” (Kozinets, 2010).

In terms of analysis, we used a new text analysis tool called Leximancer, which has been used successfully by researchers across a range of disciplines in the social sciences, including marketing and advertising in social media (Campbell et al., 2011; Dann, 2010; Hansson et al., 2010). Leximancer is “a relatively simple but powerful device for visualizing and interpreting complex textual communication” (Campbell et al., 2011, p. 91). We examined the most recent Facebook activities lasting for one month, from 19 September, 2012 to 19 October, 2012. For each brand, we converted all textual information on the Facebook wall in this period into PDF documents. This produced more than 100 pages of textual information for each of the brands; this provided the first initial set of codings of the data which were then analyzed and verified manually by each author separately. The emerging themes were then cross-checked between the authors. It was important that the symbolic richness of the data were not compromised by overreliance on the software package chosen in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). We followed the interactive postings on the Facebook sites of three major online retail brands. We chose these official Facebook sites because most of the concentrated virtual interactions related to the brand take place there. For each site, the Facebook wall was the major point of virtual interactions and thus served as the object of our study[1].

Research context. Three retail brands were chosen for this exploratory study: Jones Soda (carbonated beverage), Burt’s Bees (personal care products) and Bonobos (men’s clothing). The sample represents traditional retail marketplace offerings. As this paper will detail, the product is not an end itself, but the means to a meaningful connection
and sharing of ideas and experiences with others within the Facebook brand community (Fisher and Smith, 2011). The data also represent gender diversity (Schau et al., 2009). Bonobos is primarily male; Burt’s Bees is primarily female; and Jones Soda is gender balanced. Table I provides a brief overview of the three retail brands. There are three common elements in the selection of the sample. First, they serve as good examples of entrepreneurial brands for creating a distinct brand image. Second, they enjoy relative popularity on Facebook. We assumed that a large number of Facebook fans (people who “like” the brand’s Facebook page) represented a large community of brand followers. Third, multiple interactions take place on the brands’ Facebook wall, and dialogues appear on a daily basis (Campbell et al., 2011).

Results
The results in relation to the three brands, used as the brand stimuli for this study, (i.e. Jones Soda, Burt’s Bees and Bonobos) are presented in the ensuing sections. Each analyses present the findings in relation to the brands marketing mix; the functional, hedonic and emotional elements of the brand’s web site; and the emergent themes extracted from consumer discourse on the brand’s Facebook site. For each brand, the narratives are summarized in a table of results (refer Table II).

In addressing the research question of this study, this table provides the foundation for the comparative analysis of corporate-generated and consumer-generated brand media for each of the brands. Finally, for each brand, the comparative findings are discussed and graphically depicted in a model of results.

Results: Jones Soda
*Traditional marketing mix.* The central focus of this brand, through all its marketing elements, is the notion of being “alternate”. Marketed at a premium price, the product focus is on unique flavors and labels and close contact with consumers in the development of such. Distribution is “alternative” in that it is sold “where national mainstream brands are not sold” (Jones & Co, 2012) in surf, skate and snowboarding shops, fashion retailers, tattoo parlors, etc. In addition, there are direct-to-retail agreements with major retailers, such as Starbucks, Banes & Noble, Panera Bread, Target and Walmart. Promotion is highly reliant on word-of-mouth communications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retail brand</th>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Distribution</th>
<th>Slogan</th>
<th>Brief history</th>
<th>Sales (US$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jones Soda</td>
<td>Soda beverage</td>
<td>Cannot purchase online</td>
<td>Run with the little guy</td>
<td>A carbonated beverage company founded in 1996.</td>
<td>26 million in 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burt’s Bees</td>
<td>Natural personal care products</td>
<td>Both online and offline purchase</td>
<td>We make people’s life better every day – naturally.</td>
<td>A manufacturer of natural personal care products established in 1984</td>
<td>$250 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonobos</td>
<td>Men’s clothing</td>
<td>Online purchase only</td>
<td>Better-fitting men’s clothes</td>
<td>Online manufacturer and retail of men’s clothes established in 2007.</td>
<td>8 million in 2010*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Background information for the three retail brands

Jones Soda


Place: alternative distribution in surf, skate and snowboarding shops, fashion retailers, tattoo parlors etc. (BusinessWeek, 2005). Also, direct-to-retail agreements with major retailers: Starbucks, Barnes & Noble, Target & Walmart (Wong, 2014).


Promotion: Slogan: “Run with the little guy [...] create some change” (Jones & Co., 2014). Undertakes no advertising (BusinessWeek, 2005). Promotion is at P-O-S, events (Schau et al., 2009) and sponsorship of “alternative sports athletes” (Joseph, 2004). Highly reliant on WOM promoted through these and their webpage and guerilla marketing (Seattle Business, 2011).

Strategic Positioning: Focus on counter-culture image: “We have built our brand to a large extent on the independent counter-culture image as well as by providing unique and exciting flavors that appeal to consumers who prefer alternatives to the corporate CSD brands. This market is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Traditional Marketing Mix</th>
<th>Brand web site</th>
<th>Facebook site (Leximancer map)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jones Soda</td>
<td>Product: focussed on alternative products (other brands) in the beverage industry. Began own production in 1995. Focus on unique flavors and labels. Ideas for flavors came from consumers on when they launched their Webpage in 1997 (Underwood, 2005).</td>
<td>The functional value of the brand is tied to the soda flavors. The brand offers refreshing flavors, such as Green Apple and Crushed Lemon, and untraditional flavors, such as Turkey and Gravy, Dirt and Perspiration</td>
<td>Four themes reflected the functional positioning of the brand “soda” – a discussion the love and the addiction to flavored soda “flavor” – focussed on the soda flavors “guys” – informal discussions between the consumer and the service provider regarding the brand/product “stores” – a discussion about consumers trying to find Jones Soda in stores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Place: alternative distribution in surf, skate and snowboarding shops, fashion retailers, tattoo parlors etc. (BusinessWeek, 2005). Also, direct-to-retail agreements with major retailers: Starbucks, Barnes &amp; Noble, Target &amp; Walmart (Wong, 2014)</td>
<td>The hedonic value pertains to the use of consumer-created photos on every Jones Soda bottle or can – that is, individualization and customization of the labels. Consumers can design their own label by submitting their photos to the online Photo Gallery</td>
<td>Three themes were aligned with the hedonic value of the brand regarding the co-creation of soda bottles and cans “Jones Soda” – a discussion about the Jones Soda bottles and labels “Photo” – submission of photos to the Photo Gallery “Cans” – Jones Soda cans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Price: Premium pricing strategy (Wong, 2014)</td>
<td>The emotional value is created by the brand personality</td>
<td>The brand is genuine because it continues to use clear glass bottles and gives consumers the freedom to label the bottles with their own pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promotion: Slogan: “Run with the little guy [...] create some change” (Jones &amp; Co., 2014). Undertakes no advertising (BusinessWeek, 2005). Promotion is at P-O-S, events (Schau et al., 2009) and sponsorship of “alternative sports athletes” (Joseph, 2004). Highly reliant on WOM promoted through these and their webpage and guerilla marketing (Seattle Business, 2011)</td>
<td>The brand is spirited in that the retailer web site is lively with images of different colored and flavored sodas. A bar on the top portion of the web site showcases the winning photos</td>
<td>The brand is outdoorsy. In 2007, Jones Soda beat out mainstream soda providers to become the exclusive soda provider for the Seattle Seahawks at Quest Field. Jones Soda also sponsors snowboarding, boxing and surfing athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic Positioning: Focus on counter-culture image: “We have built our brand to a large extent on the independent counter-culture image as well as by providing unique and exciting flavors that appeal to consumers who prefer alternatives to the corporate CSD brands. This market is</td>
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Table II. Relationship between brand narratives expressed through each brand’s traditional marketing mix, their brand web site and consumer postings on their corporate Facebook site (continued)
driven by trendy, young consumers looking for a distinctive tonality in their beverage choices” (Jones & Co, 2012).

Thrust: defined as an “attack” on the marketplace through alternative distribution strategy and close contact with consumers: “Jones Soda has always been about the people and interacting with the consumer” (Jones & Co, 2014). “People get fired up about Jones because it’s theirs” (Underwood, 2005)

Burt’s Bees

Product: Strong focus on natural basis for the product: “Our ingredients – right down to the packaging – are simple, natural, and responsible. We practice what we preach—and we hope to set the example for others to follow.” (Burt’s Bees, 2014)

Products reflect core brand values expressed in: “Nature knows best” and no animal testing (Burt’s Bees, 2014).

Focus on product lifecycle in relation to sustainability

Place: Specialty stores, health stores, drug stores. Web sales with large number of reviews (typically 500+ for each product)

The brand’s *functional* value comes from the company’s production of earth friendly, natural personal care products to help consumers maximize their well-being.

The retailer’s web site has a strong product focus in which products are categorized by demographics (“For Mum”, “Bath Time for Baby Bees”, “Men”), functions (“Lips”, “Face”, “Body”, “Hands & Feet”, “Hair”) and benefits (“Boost Your Glow”, “Smooth and Firm”)

Burt’s Bees products are high in *hedonic* value because they are experiential products for which the consumption experience is the end in itself (Cooper-Martin, 1991)

The *emotional* value of the brand is attached to the brand personalities perceived as honest, genuine, responsible and dependable

Four themes conveyed a strong focus on product usage experience

“Skin” – consumers noted that their skin felt soft, clean and fresh after they used the product

“Products” – focussed on how consumers loved natural products

“Samples” – a discussion about the involvement in the BzzAgent campaign and trying out new products

“use” – focussed on different types of users (loyal vs first-time users) and different usage experiences (positive vs negative)

The four themes “skin”, “products”, “samples”, and “use” reinforced the experiential value of the brand

The brand personality was reflected in the Facebook postings around concepts such as “soft”, “love”, “natural”, and “excited”

Table II. (continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Traditional Marketing Mix</th>
<th>Brand web site</th>
<th>Facebook site</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Price: Premium pricing. (Bertini and Wathieu, 2010) Promotion: Slogan: “To make people’s lives better every day – naturally”. Strong emphasis on WOM but supported through traditional print advertising, outdoor, innovative use of viral marketing (Tooley, 2014). Involvement of customers in campaigns Strategic Positioning: Strongly positioned as sustainably produced products based on their business model called The Greater Good: “Most companies look out for the bottom line. We do, too. In fact, we have a triple bottom line: people, profit, planet” (Burt’s Bees, 2014) Strategic Thrust: Company mantra: “We care.” (Molitor, 2009). Core values are “no animal testing, sustainability and a love of nature”</td>
<td>These personalities are clearly reflected in the brand’s mission and vision statements (<a href="http://www.burtsbees.com">www.burtsbees.com</a>): “To make certain that all our products meet the highest standards, [...] our products are carefully crafted using ingredients that are the best nature has to offer, [...] these safe, effective ingredients have withstood the test of time” The web site appears warm and inviting with a soft yellow background. The visual appeal of the web site reflects the core brand value of caring for the well-being of people and that of society</td>
<td>“Soft” – “I love that it is all natural and that my sensitive skin feels so soft” “Love” – “I just love your products” “Natural” – “All natural means no rash or itching and that makes it worth its weight in gold” “Excited” – “So excited to and thrilled to try out this product thru BzzAgent”</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonobos Product: Male fashion retail. Strong focus on product and service: “You’ve got to focus on the product, not the marketing.” (Kinsey, 2009) Place: Sales are almost entirely online. They have 8 “guideshops”: “Guideshops are the Bonobos answer to brick-and-mortar retail. We offer a one-on-one experience with a Guide who will go through the product line with you. We’ll find your sizes, you pick the colors, and we place your order, no shopping bags necessary.” (Bonobos, 2014). Also at selected Nordstrom department stores</td>
<td>The brand has a functional positioning as a smarter fit. The web site has a simple structure with large pictures of the products (pants) The hedonic value is associated with the pleasure of wearing a pair of better-fitting pants</td>
<td>Two themes were related to the function of the corporate web site “Order” – Facebook postings related to the difficulties consumers had with placing orders using a promotion code “Carts” – focussed on online stock-out experiences One theme reflected the functional positioning of the brand “Pants” – a discussion about the brand promise: a pair of better-fitting pants</td>
<td>(continued) Table II.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
through webpage and guerilla marketing as no advertising is undertaken. Promotional activities include P-O-S, events and sponsorship of “alternative sports athletes”. In summary, the brand’s strategic positioning is summarized in the following statement. “We have built our brand to a large extent on our independent counter-culture image as well as by providing unique and exciting flavors that appeal to consumers who prefer alternatives to the corporate CSD brands. This market is driven by trendy, young consumers looking for a distinctive tonality in their beverage choices” (Jones & Co, 2012).

**Brand web site.** The brand web site espouses the following functional, hedonic and emotional values. The espoused functional value of the brand resides in the soda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Traditional Marketing Mix</th>
<th>Brand web site</th>
<th>Facebook site (Leximancer map)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Price: Competitive pricing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion: Exclusively online banner and Facebook advertising, Emphasizes fit as the key POD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategic Positioning: “Style shouldn’t be complicated. Looking your best doesn’t need to be hard. It’s really about being yourself and finding what fits. We created Bonobos to help with both, offering well-crafted, great-fitting clothing and a top-notch shopping experience that’s simple and painless” (Bonobos, 2014)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategic Thrust: “Our mission became about delivering two things that men want that no other company is providing: excellence in fit and excellence in service.” (Kinsey, 2009). Bonobos is “a highly data driven and very customer-centric organization [...]”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Since our inception in 2007, we’ve relied heavily on customer feedback and have consistently leveraged it to make core marketing decisions. Responses make customers ‘come alive’ for our marketing team, which helps us in terms of hyper-targeting for actionable ad spends” (Retailtouchpoints, 2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The emotional value is created by the brand personalities perceived as genuine, rugged, dependable and reliable. These brand personalities are inferred because Bonobos is solely an online company and the web site mainly uses gray and dark blue colors and the models in the pictures are masculine and wear smart but conservative outfits. The web site is functional with few frills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concepts such as “fit”, “pair”, and “pants” reflected the hedonic value of the brand. “Fit” – “The fit is like I have an in-house tailor making pants for me”, “Pair” and “pants” – “I may never buy a pair of pants from anybody but Bonobos again!”, Three themes were aligned with the brand personality as being reliable and dependable. “Bonobos” – focused on consumer trust in the ability of the ninjas (customer service personnel) to solve the problem, “Guys” – informal discussions between the consumer and the service provider regarding the service, “Best” – a discussion that Bonobos provides the best customer service</td>
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flavors such as Green Apple and Crushed Lemon, and untraditional flavors, such as Turkey and Gravy, Dirt and Perspiration. Consumers derive hedonic value from the brand’s web site through their involvement in the individualization and customization of the brand’s labels created from consumer-provided photos. The web site promotes emotional bonding between consumer and brand through the genuine, spirited and outdoorsy espoused characteristics of the brand.

Facebook site. Figure 2 shows the Leximancer map for Jones Soda. Four main themes emerged from the Facebook interactions – namely, “soda”, “Jones Soda”, “flavor”, and “stores” – followed by a few less prominent themes (e.g. “photo”, “cans”, “guys”). The interpretation of the themes (circles) was based on a detailed analysis of the concepts (dots) that were strongly and semantically linked to one another.

Reflecting the functional positioning of the brand in their traditional marketing mix, Facebook postings for Jones Soda were strongly focussed on the discussion of flavors. In the Leximancer map, the themes of “soda” and “flavor” reflected a discussion among consumers about their favorite flavors and their addiction to flavored soda. The two

![Figure 2. Leximancer map for Jones Soda](image-url)
themes intersect on the concepts of “love” and “favorite”. Analysis revealed that many Facebook postings around these themes were typical expressions of customer delight over their favorite flavors.

Jones Soda relies on physical distribution, making their products available in both unique venues (e.g. snowboarding shops) and larger chain stores (e.g. Target). Although the product is highly offline, members of the brand community are sharing their purchase experience online. In the Leximancer map, the themes of “stores” and “guys” represented a dialogue where consumers were concerned about the retiring of soda flavors and the lack of product distribution. For example, one consumer asked, “Why are you guys retiring so many flavors?” Another consumer complained, “As soon as I fell in love with the cream soda, they stopped selling it in all together [...] how can I get it back around here???” The use of the term “guys” strongly reflected the brand meanings of informality on the retail webpage. A typical posting was: “What happened to you guys? I’ve looked in over 30 different stores and traveled to 2 different states to try to find some jones soda [...] every walmart [...] winn dixie [...] walgreens [...] cvs [...] ingles [...] publix [...] chevron [...] shell [...] racetrac [...] 7 eleven [...] texaco [...] and other random stores don’t have them [...] it’s depressing really: I need some jones you guys!!”

Since the beginning, the Jones Soda brand has had a strong focus on the co-creation of brand meaning. The photo gallery on the company’s web site allows for community members to submit their own label photos, which increases the connectivity between the brand and the brand community. In the Leximancer map, the themes of “Jones Soda” and “photo” and the key concepts of “bottles” and “picture” within the themes represent the intensive discussions online about the Jones Soda bottles and labels. A typical posting was “Thank you so much jones for picking our picture to grace the front of one of your bottles. We love give back to our community and we love Jones Soda.” Many discussions focussed around these themes were laden with emotions, for example, “Is it legal to marry a soda bottle?” and “I’ve tied so many memories to bottles of Jones Soda.” At the time of the study, the company re-introduced cans of soda; thus, the theme of “cans” reflected a discussion of the soda can, “which features YOUR photos!”

Jones Soda research findings. For the sake of clarity, and to enable the comparison of corporate-generated and consumer-generated brand messages, the findings of this research are modeled in Figure 3. Clearly, in Figure 3, the connection between the marketing mix variables and the expression of brand meaning through the Jones Soda web site is evident. For example, the flavors in the product mix, the individualism of the premium price and non-traditional distribution channels and the brand’s positioning based on counter-culture are all articulated in the functional, hedonic and emotional aspects of the brand’s web site. However, the key aim of this research is to compare the corporate espoused brand meaning with that generated from the consumer-dominant online forum i.e. Facebook. Figure 3 demonstrates there is quite strong alignment between consumer and corporate-generated brand messages. In fact, the themes of product flavors, distribution, customization, individualism (or uniqueness) are all reflected in the social media forum. While the brand personality characteristics (i.e. outdoorsy, alternate, genuine) are not explicitly reflected in the consumer-generated discourse, they may indeed by reflected in the personality profiles of the brand’s advocates (i.e. beyond this scope of this study). Furthermore, the emotional themes of love, memories and brand preference may well be a consequence of personality
(or image) alignment between brand and consumer. Finally, it is interesting to note that the notion of distribution (i.e. non-traditional avenues of distribution) was strongly reflected in the consumer data, albeit in a negative fashion. Consumers appeared to be disadvantaged somewhat by distribution factors. This may well flag a brand strategy, which is not entirely working in favor of the brand.

**Results: Burt’s Bees**

*Traditional marketing mix.* The product is differentiated on the basis of respect and sustainability of the environment evidenced through the manufacturing and packaging processes. This being the case, the physical products reflect core brand values such as “Nature knows best” and no animal testing (Burt’s Bees, 2014) with a focus on product lifecycle in relation to sustainability. Marketed at a premium price, the brand is sold via specialty and health related stores and via the Internet. Print and outdoor advertising support the strong focus on word-of-mouth communications, with viral marketing being encouraged through consumer involvement in campaigns. Strongly positioned as sustainably produced products, the strategic focus is espoused though the brand’s business model labeled The Greater Good: “Most companies look out for the bottom line. We do, too. In fact, we have a triple bottom line: people, profit, planet” (Burt’s Bees, 2014).

*Brand web site.* The web site espouses the brand’s functionality stemming from the company’s production processes i.e. being earth friendly, using natural ingredients to produce personal care products to help consumers maximize their well-being. The retailer’s web site has a strong product focus in which products are categorized by users and usage situations (“For Mum”, “Bath Time for Baby Bees”, “Men”), functions (“Lips”, “Face”, “Body”, “Hands & Feet”, “Hair”) and benefits (“Boost Your Glow”, “Smooth and Firm”). Burt’s Bees products are communicated as high in hedonic value because they are experiential products for which the consumption experience is the end
in itself (Cooper-Martin, 1991). The brand is espoused as being honest, genuine, responsible and dependable and these form the basis of the emotional connection with consumer. For example, the web site appears warm and inviting using a soft yellow background communicating the core brand value of caring for the well-being of people and that of society.

Facebook site. Figure 4 shows the Leximancer map of Facebook interactions for Burt’s Bees, including four prominent themes (i.e. “skin”, “products”, “samples”, and “use”) and a few less prominent themes (i.e. “product”, “cream”, and “lip”).

The four prominent themes of “skin”, “product”, “samples” and “use” conveyed a strong focus on product usage experience; also reflected in the traditional marketing mix’s focus on “Our ingredients”. Specifically, analysis of “skin” and “use” indicated a positive experience; consumers noted that their skin felt soft, clean and fresh after they used the product. However, some negative comments were also present (e.g. “I started trying acne line last week, but now I have three large and very painful cysts”). The theme of “products” focussed on how consumers loved natural products (e.g. “I just love your products”, “All natural means no rash or itching and that makes it worth its weight in gold!!”); again reflected in their slogan: “Nature knows best.” It is in this context that Burt’s Bees brand values are strongly reflected in the Facebook interactions. The retailer web site states that “We make people’s lives better every day – naturally”. Facebook interactions echoed the functional brand benefits espoused on the corporate web site. Such postings also indicate that the emotional value of the brand remains true in the Facebook interactions.

The theme of “samples” featured a series of discussions, which had to do with the BzzAgent campaign. BzzAgent was a word-of-mouth campaign to encourage new product trial and consumer feedback. The social media site allowed these experiences to be exchanged real time and with users around the globe, significantly strengthening the word-of-mouth communication of the brand experience. Analysis showed consumers’
excitement with this campaign. A typical posting was “So excited and thrilled to try out this product thru BzzAgent.” As shown in the Leximancer map, BzzAgent prompted many discussions, which increased the connectivity between the brand and the Facebook brand community.

**Burt’s Bees research findings.** Figure 5 shows the comparative results between the corporate-generated and consumer-generated media associated with Burt’s Bees. The marketing mix variables associated with the product (natural ingredients), price (premium) place (Web and health outlets) and promotion/positioning (environment care and sustainability) are reflected by the functional (natural, healthy), hedonic (experience – usage benefits) and emotional (honest, dependable, responsible) elements of the brand’s web site. When comparing the brand’s web site with the thematic analyses of the social media site clear commonalities emerge. For example, consumer discourse reflected the natural and health properties of the product, the experience of different users and different usage situations and the evoked expressions of love, confidence and enthusiasm with the brand. Overall, the alignment was very strong between corporate-generated and consumer-generated brand expressions of Burt’s Bees.

**Results: Bonobos**

*Traditional marketing mix.* Bonobos is a competitively priced range of men’s clothing that has a strong focus on product and service, with a strong point of differentiation being placed on product fit. Distribution is predominantly through “guideshops”. “Guideshops are the Bonobos answer to brick-and-mortar retail. We offer a one-on-one experience with a Guide who will go through the product line with you. We’ll find your sizes, you pick the colors, and we place your order, no shopping bags necessary” (Bonobos, 2014). In addition, Bonobos clothing is also distributed through selected
Nordstrom department stores. Advertising is exclusive to online banner and Facebook advertising. The following positioning statement summarizes the brand’s strategic focus. “Style shouldn’t be complicated. Looking your best doesn’t need to be hard. It’s really about being yourself and finding what fits. We created Bonobos to help with both, offering well-crafted, great-fitting clothing and a top-notch shopping experience that’s simple and painless” (Bonobos, 2014).

**Brand website.** The brand’s web site has a quite simple structure which espouses the functionality of the brand through an emphasis on garment fit and clear communication of garment aesthetics though large product photos. Hedonic value is espoused through the association of garment comfort through better fit. The web site is functional (i.e. with no frills), mainly comprised of gray and dark blue colors, and displays masculine models wearing smart but conservative outfits. Thus, emotional bonding with the brand is encouraged through the brand’s inferred nature (or personality) as being genuine, rugged, dependable and reliable.

**Facebook site.** The Leximancer map of consumer interactions on the Bonobos Facebook page shows three prominent themes – namely, “order”, “Bonobos”, and “cart” – followed by a few less prominent themes (e.g. “e-mail”, “guys”, “pants”, “best”; see Figure 6).

Bonobos is almost entirely an online company, with a marketing mix strongly focussed on one key product attribute (fit). Accordingly, we found that Bonobos Facebook interactions were predominantly service oriented (online with the “Ninjas” and offline with the “Guidestores”). In the Leximancer map, the three most prominent

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**Figure 6.** Leximancer map for Bonobos
themes of “order”, “Bonobos”, and “cart” were exclusively related to online purchase experiences. Specifically, the theme of “order” reflected postings related to the difficulties consumers had with placing orders using a promotion code. The large red circle as shown in Figure 6 was symptomatic of the tremendous amount of discussions about the technical failure of the online retail web site during the sale promotion.

The theme of “cart” was focussed on online stock-out experiences. Analysis showed that items in the shopping cart could soon be out of stock if the customer decided not to check out immediately. Some consumers even suspected that the company purposefully created the stock-out experience. For example, one consumer asked, “Any chance of getting any more Jawbone Jamboxes in stock before the sale ends? Or are they purposefully out of stock for the sale?”

We also found that though consumers experienced difficulties with online purchase, they were not necessarily unhappy with the company. The theme of “Bonobos” was effectively an expression of brand love and customer loyalty. In the theme of “e-mail”, consumers praised the Ninjas (customer service personnel) for working hard to fix the problem. Examples are “I have faith the Ninjas will solve our worries”; “Know that everyone is a little panicked about the promo code not working, but HUGE shout out to the ninjas for their great customer service and urgency to resolve the problem”; “The Bonobos Ninjas could do anything short of murdering someone and still have my vote as the best customer service around”. The theme of “best” revealed further evidence of consumer support and recognition that Bonobos provides the best customer service. The themes representing consumers’ confidence with the ninjas’ role to solve their issues were clearly aligned with the brand personality and the strategic thrust of the firm as being reliable and dependable. It is clear that the ninjas are not only a service role, but also an important connection between the brand and the brand community. In addition, the theme of “guys” was primarily an informal but extensive dialogue between the service provider and the consumers regarding online customer service.

The theme of “pants” emerging from the Facebook interactions strongly reflected the functional positioning of the brand. The key concepts of “fit”, “pair” and “pants” within the theme clearly underscored the brand promise of wearing a pair of better-fitting pants. Examples are “The fit is like I have an in-house tailor making pants for me” and “Safe to say it is the BEST pair of pants I have ever worn.”

**Bonobos research findings.** The findings associated with a comparative analysis undertaken on the corporate-generated and consumer-generated media content are graphically depicted in Figure 7. The key corporate-driven differentiating factors in relation to the Bonobos brand (i.e. men’s clothing line) was fit and service. This positioning is well defined in the marketing mix and espoused via the elements of the brand’s web site (refer Figure 7). In functional terms, the brand is positioned on fit; hedonically it is experienced through service and comfort in wear; and emotionally the brand is characterized by genuineness, ruggedness and dependability. All these elements are evident in consumer discourse (i.e. from Facebook) with the emotional consequences of espoused brand personality (i.e. genuine, rugged and dependable) being as expected i.e. trust, loyalty and brand preference. Interestingly, the consumer-generated discourse reflected brand perceptions not only in relation to the functionality of the product (i.e. fit) but also the functionality of the web site (i.e. order placing, stock shortages, interactions etc.). Given that the brand can only be purchased online, functionality issues related to the only purchase mechanism available to consumers (i.e. the web site), influence consumers’ perception of the reliability and dependability of the brand.
On this basis, service-focused brands should be approaching functionality not only for a product perspective but also a product-access perspective.

**Discussion**

The literature is in strong agreement that for online marketers, a major challenge of the expansion of social media is the loss of control over key brand expressions (Fisher and Smith, 2011; Brodie and de Chernatony, 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2010). In our consideration of the issue surrounding brand governance, we focussed on the role of the consumer in co-creating brand meaning (i.e. within social media) as opposed to the brand values espoused by the company’s strategy and corporate web site. Thus we posed the question: To what extent does consumer-generated online media (e.g. Facebook) create brand impressions that differ from those espoused through the brand’s marketing mix and its corporate-generated online media (e.g. web site).

In our analysis we found that brand expressions varied considerably across the chosen retail brands, but in all cases strong integration and alignment were present between the corporate web site and the Facebook site. Specifically, we found that Facebook interactions echoed the brand values espoused on the corporate web sites. For example, Jones Soda is the web site that is most directly concerned with co-creation through personalized labels and voting on flavors. These elements were central themes in the interactive postings on the Facebook site, which strengthened the brand’s focus on co-creation and its values of informality and giving a voice to “the little guy.” Burt’s Bees web site is structured around its product portfolio. Accordingly, Burt’s Bees Facebook interactions were heavily and distinctively focussed on discussions of product experiences. With Bonobos, which only has a virtual presence as a retail sales site, analyses show that the Facebook site has become a key customer service touchpoint and the customer service role is played out by the ninjas. Importantly, the
concepts of “ninjas” and “guys” in the Leximancer map indicate that there are informal, but intimate relationships between the service provider and the consumers.

Overall, this research demonstrates significant consistency between corporate-generated and consumer-generated brand messages in the online environment. As a result, we argue that our results contradict the notion that co-creation is chaotic (Fisher and Smith, 2011). Instead, this research indicates that Facebook interactions are central to the co-creation of intended brand meaning and thus central to the development and sustainability of the brand itself. As such, Facebook interactions provide important touchpoints for brand managers wishing to effectively nurture their brands in the online domain.

Nature of interactions in Facebook brand communities

Through a detailed analysis of Facebook postings we observed a few distinct characteristics that are peculiar to Facebook brand community interactions. First, Facebook interactions were informal and they were mediated through written words and other user-generated contents such as videos and images. Second, Facebook interactions were always one-to-many or many-to-many and they always related to one of several themes present on the Facebook wall. In other words, Facebook postings were not directed at any one person, and they only formed part of often intermittent, incoherent interactions. Third, in Facebook interactions there were strong elements of self-expression, such as expressions of members’ favorite flavor, or expressions of delight (i.e. “This makes my skin looks soft!”). Fourth, several themes were occurring at the same time and the users chose which one theme to join in when choosing their interactions. These themes existed concurrently, where each was defined by common frames of reference such as flavors, product usage, and service experience.

This is similar to Fisher and Smith’s (2011) findings where they describe the Indiana Jones communities as a postmodern network. They found that the network interactions were not centered on any particular member or set of consumer experts. We found that consumers established social links through the sharing of consumption-related experiences. However, these social relationships were characterized by their arm’s length nature. We, therefore, consider that the nature of interactions in Facebook brand community interactions should not be viewed as conversations, but rather as interactive postings in that community members express their opinions in response to other members of the Facebook brand community. Fisher and Smith (2011) argue that social media encourage communication between many more weak connections. There is increasing evidence that the crucial links in a social network are in fact the weak links between members (Fisher and Smith, 2011; Watts and Dodds, 2007; Granovetter, 1983). We believe that future research should focus on weak ties rather than strong ties among participants (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010) in the formation of a successful social media based brand community.

Brand co-creation

In this research we examined three retail brands on Facebook. What we found through our Leximancer analysis was that for each brand Facebook postings were centered on a few key themes. Each theme represented a unique set of meanings. This finding suggests that brand meaning is open to interpretation in Facebook brand communities. We agree with Fisher and Smith (2011) that making the brand meaning ‘flexible’ in the eyes of the consumer is very important to consumers who are seeking and finding
individual differences. Confirming the brand co-creation literature (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2003), we found that Facebook interactions were predominately focussed on consumer experiences of a functional, hedonic and/or emotional nature. Significantly these types of experiences were different for each brand: Jones Soda focussed on flavor and bottles, Burt’s Bees Facebook was buzzing with product usage experiences, and Bonobos’ fans were mainly concerned with their online purchase experiences.

We also found that Facebook postings presented both favorable and unfavorable experiences. This is not an unexpected finding because Hatch and Schultz (2009) argue that social media has exposed company culture and management practices to close scrutiny. Thus, in the co-creation literature, research has mainly focussed on consumer empowerment through co-creation activities, emphasizing that power is shifting from the company to the consumers (Fisher and Smith, 2011; Fournier and Avery, 2011; Kozinets, 1999).

However, unlike previous research, this research suggests that online marketers can define the nature of brand co-creation, especially in the context of Facebook interactions. For example, during the time sampled enormous problems arose with Bonobos’ online ordering system. However, as soon as members of the community realized that the ninjas were working hard to fix these problems, a sense of community developed around the problem, and a strong sense of empathy emerged between the community members and the service staff, which enabled the co-creation of brand meaning.

Fisher and Smith (2011) argue that co-creation is chaotic as consumers are seizing a significant control of different aspects of the marketing process (Fisher and Smith, 2011). This is an important argument, but not one that our data supports. In this research, the overall analyses indicate a strong alignment of brand meaning expressed on the Facebook site with that expressed in the traditional marketing mix. Although previous research suggests that consumers are getting the upper hand in brand co-creation, our research shed some light on the balance of power between companies and consumers in value co-creation. This research shows that in a Facebook brand community empowered consumers are meeting with equally empowered companies and both parties have the access to knowledge and skills that are developed, transmitted, and maintained in the social networks.

Managerial implications
We found that the brands studied here adopted strongly interactive social media strategies be it through functional integration of customer service through the Facebook site or more hedonically oriented strategies encouraging customer self-presentation and expression. Such levels of interaction and integration between the consumer and the brand are clearly attributable to the characteristics of social media and the design of the respective sites in terms of their aesthetics, functionality and interactivity. However they also represent key brand attributes that each brand strives to define itself by. This close alignment between brand meaning across functional, hedonic and emotional elements has not been noted explicitly in the literature before. It is significant in that it indicates that control over brand meanings is possible.

Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) suggest that brands should view their manifestation on social media as interactive performances that should constantly evolve: “Brand owners have to keep the performance going as co-creation can abate because of uninteresting stories. Therefore, owners may need to reanimate the brand performance by fostering diversity of opinions and stories that challenge one another” (p. 192). We found that the Facebook narratives told stories focussed around recognizable
archetypes (Woodside et al., 2008): nostalgia stories (“memories to bottles of Jones Soda”), brand heroes (Ninjas), the helping hand (customer recommendations), self-fulfillment (Jones flavors, soft skin), and mother of goodness (Burts Bees). Each brand successfully reinforced these archetypes suggesting that successful brand meaning alignment rests on defining the brand in terms of relatively simple narrative archetypes that allow for diffusion of brand meaning across corporate and consumer-generated media. We find support for Woodside et al.’s (2008) proposition that: “Consumption stories protagonists tell about themselves consciously and/or unconsciously often match the plot lines scripted by brand controllers” (p. 107). Thus, as companies are advised to loosen their control over the brand and open up to co-creation (Fisher and Smith, 2011), it appears that these brands (Jones Soda, Burt’s Bees, Bonobos) have maintained a strong influence over the brand narratives and the core brand values. Our findings also suggest that brand managers are doing a fairly good job of connecting and engaging consumers in social media to give their brands a more human voice and more credibility.

In line with Christodoulides (2009), our findings suggest that branding in social media is about facilitating the co-creation of meaning. Social media is not a broadcast tool. Brands that are domineering or trying to take over the interactions have no place in social media. Our findings indicate that brands that consumers would like to engage with the most in social media are the ones that can listen to what their consumers are saying, add to what they say, and bring up new topics that interest their consumers.

In today’s modern networked society, marketers are eager to take the advantage of Web 2.0 to build their brand (Fournier and Lee, 2009). Our findings suggest that brand managers are still firmly in control over their brands. All of this seems to contradict the notion of control loss (Hatch and Schultz, 2009). Barwise and Meehan (2010) argue that the key to successful branding in social media is the brand promise. They argue that companies that can consistently deliver what they promise can use social media to amplify their reputation. Thus, the role of the brand manager is not to control word-of-mouth, but to facilitate the sharing of brand experiences and to monitor whether the brand promise is delivered. In doing so, brand managers can determine the nature and direction of brand co-creation in social media.

**Limitations and future research**

A number of limitations exist on the generalization of the results presented here. First, we stress the exploratory nature of the study. Second, we gathered data from three online brand communities that exist on Facebook. We note that the Facebook site is paid, promoted and owned by the brand. Thus the generalizability of the finding is limited to the brand community that is sponsored by a corporate sponsor. Third, we note that in this research, a possible confounding factor concerns the activity of the brand manager on Facebook. One would expect that the brand values inferred via Facebook with a more active brand manager will have better alignment with the intended brand. There is a clear need to develop future research to investigate the processes associated with brand co-creation and control and the details of how online brand communities operate. Such research should examine a wider range of organizations and business sectors. Some potential areas of investigation include:

- investigate brand community success factors from the brand manager’s perspective and from the consumer’s perspective;
- investigate the role of the brand manager as a significant influence on social media interactions around the brand;
understand the co-creation process in corporate-sponsored brand communities as compared to user-generated only communities;

generalize the findings of this research by testing the conceptual framework across a number of different social media sites (e.g. Twitter, YouTube); and

analyze the nature of relationship and the importance of weak ties vs strong ties in the formation of a successful online brand community that exist in the social media sphere.

Incorporating these themes in future research will move us closer to understanding the co-creation process associated with brands and, in doing so, assist practitioners to effectively capitalization on their brands.

Note

1. Please note: in order to capture the interactional nature of the data, all text on the social media sites were included in the analyses regardless of whether they were corporate or consumer-generated. However, as the corporate-generated text represented less than 5 per cent of the textual data (in all three cases), we argue that the analyses of these social media sites represents predominantly consumer-generated media.

References


**Further reading**


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