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Mapping users' participation in brand publics: toward a typology of styles of digital consumption*

Alessandro Caliandro**
Università degli Studi di Pavia

Guido Anselmi***
Università degli Studi di Catania

Adam Arvidsson****
Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

This is a methodological contribution aimed at providing researchers with some practical guidance to better and more thoroughly map brand publics. The notion of brand public is steadily gaining traction in digital media and consumer culture research, especially so in studies that address liquid and platformized forms of consumption characteristic of social media. However, despite the growing academic interest in this concept, there is still a lack of methodological research in this area. In particular, one of the major methodological gaps consists in the fact that studies on brand publics fail in proposing a typology of the different kinds of users participating in them. In order to fill this gap, we propose an ad hoc typology of users participating in a brand public based on the different digital practices through which they use the digital devices that structure the public itself – rather than on users' individual status. To this purpose we identify three main types of styles of participation in brand publics: *brand loving*, *visibility seeking*, *everyday storytelling*. To do that we draw on a dataset of 488,365 Instagram posts marked with the hashtag #starbucks, that we explored using digital methods. The article contribution is twofold: it provides the reader with systematic methodological guidelines and it expands the theoretical boundaries of the brand public's notion.

Keywords: brand public, digital methods, big data, Instagram, user typology

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** alessandro.caliandro@unipv.it
*** guido.anselmi@unict.it
**** adamerik.arvidsson.unina@gmail.com

Introduction

Brand publics are collections of dispersed consumers, typically thriving on social media platforms, that are kept together by the mediation of a digital device (e.g., a branded hashtag like #louisvuitton) - rather than direct forms of interactions and deliberations (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). In the last decade, the concept has gained a considerable attention by digital media scholars (Arnould et al., 2023; Moufahim et al., 2018), inspiring further theorization on 'natively digital' forms of social aggregations around consumer products on social media platforms: such as brand crowds (Minocher, 2018), memetic brand publics (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021; Schöps et al., 2024), floating digital collectives (Colleoni et al., 2021), hybrid influencer publics (Caliandro et al., 2024a), online consumer counterpublics (Rosenthal & Airoldi, 2024a). Despite its theoretical success, literature on brand publics lacks critical contributions addressing some of its inherent conceptual gaps, and especially proposing methodological strategies to overcome them. Therefore, the present article consists in a methodological contribution aimed at providing researchers with ad hoc strategies to better, and more thoroughly, map brand publics as well as understand their forms of cultural production. Specifically, the present article addresses a major methodological gap in the brand public literature, that is, the lack of topologies for segmenting different categories of consumers belonging to a brand public. To feel this gap, this article proposes a typology of users belonging to a brand public based on the different digital practices through which they use the digital devices structuring the public itself. That is, such typology configures as an analytical tool that focuses on what users *do* within a brand public (e.g., how they use the hashtags composing a brand public), rather than what they *are* within a brand public (e.g. individual status, socio-demographic profile, etc.). To this purpose, three main types of styles of participation in brand publics are identified: *brand loving*, *visibility seeking*, *and everyday storytelling*. To do that we draw on a dataset of 488,365 Instagram posts marked with the hashtag #starbucks, that we explored using digital methods (Rogers, 2019).

The article contribution is twofold. First, we provide a systematic and replicable methodology to segment consumers belonging to a given brand public. Second, based on our results regarding an ad hoc case study (#starbucks on Instagram), we expand the original brand public theory, by showing that: a) while the branded hashtag *direct* consumers' focus of *attention*, at the same time consumers *manipulate* that hashtag to *modulate* their own focus of attention; b) although consumers use the focal brand as a *platform* to stage their private identities, those private identities manifest through *platformized* forms - (that is, through standardised formats driven by social media affordances).

This article is structured as follows. First, we discuss the literature on brand public and address its main conceptual and methodological gaps. Subsequently, we discuss the literature about consumers' typologies within online brand communities, this in comparison (and contrast) with the literature on digital publics and the related practices of identity

construction. Then, we describe our methodology and discuss our main results against the original formulation of the brand public theory. Finally, we discuss the limits of our research.

Brand publics (and its conceptual ambiguities and methodological gaps)

In the last decade media and consumer research has focused on online communities as privileged digital sites for consumers and admirers of brands to develop social bonds and shared identities (Brodie et al., 2013). Nevertheless, more recently, scholars have started questioning the heuristic force of the category of community for understanding collective forms of interaction and culture emerging around brands within digital environments (Hine, 2008) – and especially on social media like Twitter or Instagram, which configure themselves as dispersed environments where social interactions play out on a mass scale and at high speed. To this purpose, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) introduced the notion of *brand public*, as a useful analytical category to "better describe current modes of online consumer participation" (Moufahim et al., 2018: 559). A brand public is a form of consumer collective that emerges around brands on social media, whose members' interaction is not based on direct conversations but rather on the mediation of the same digital device, like an hashtag (e.g. #louisvuitton), on which their attention is focused and that they use as a platform to stage private emotions and identities (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).

The notion of brand public is gaining traction in consumer culture and digital media research (Moufahim et al., 2018), especially for framing liquid forms of consumption in digital environments (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017) and platformized forms of cultural production on social media (Duffy et al., 2019; Caliandro et al., 2024a; Drenten et al., 2024; Gandini et al. 2024). According to Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) the concept of brand public usefully captures the liquid forms of identity that consumers develop around brands on social media platforms. Brand publics, they argue, are not "source[s] of identity, or even a platform of interaction, but [are] primarily a medium for individual publicity" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), through which social media users can showcase their self-brand (Bainotti, 2023). Drawing on these theoretical premises, scholars have used the concept of brand public to address 'traditional' topics in both marketing and digital culture research from novel perspectives, such as brand reputation (Etter et al., 2017), word-of-mouth (Eelen et al., 2017), engagement (Biraghi et al., 2018), brand relations (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021), fake news (Caliandro et al., 2024a), social imaginaries (Schöps et al., 2020), influencer culture (Drenten et al., 2024; Rosenthal & Airoldi, 2024b), or algorithmic culture (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022).

Anyway, as Rosenthal and Airoldi (2024a) argued, the concept of brand public - and that of consumer collectives more broadly (Arnould et al., 2021) - brings along some intrinsic contradictions that the current literature has not systematically addressed yet. Specifically, the two scholars point out that, on the one hand, as Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) maintain, brand publics are united by an affective intensity that is directed towards a

common branded device and/or social imaginary (see also Arvidsson, 2013). On the other hand, other scholars like Colleoni et al. (2021: 491) sustain that "individuals aggregate despite not sharing a common identity", but through the ephemeral and contextual diffusion of empty signifiers - "broad terms whose meaning remains open". In both cases, the process of aggregation of online consumer publics as well as consumers within brand publics remains partially unclear – and indeed in need of further empirical explorations. In our opinion, such a contradiction lies in some ambiguities inscribed in Arvidsson and Caliandro's original formulation. In fact, one of the main features of brand publics is that members use the focal brand as a public platform to stage private identities (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). This condition implies that each member of the brand public is able to express her own idiosyncratic representation of the brand. In turn, all those heterogeneous representations of the brand are, by default, incapable of coalescing into any kind of common cultural form (such as, for instance, a 'social imaginary'). Anyhow, this assumption has been widely contradicted by recent empirical studies on brand publics that took the dimension of social media affordances seriously. In fact, social media affordances - intended as the intersection between "platforms' technical infrastructures and the digital participatory cultures populating (and using) them" (Caliandro et al., 2024b: 9) - de facto, shape and limit the users' creative possibilities in terms of cultural production (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Schöps et al., 2020; Rosenthal & Airoldi, 2024a). Emblematic in this sense is the work of Caliandro and Anselmi (2021), who demonstrate that the affordances of Instagram make cultural production on brand publics basically 'memefied', that is, characterised by the collective production of standardised visual templates that repeat themselves (almost identical) among a dispersed set of heterogeneous users. Such insight, has been further expanded by Schöps et al.'s (2024) study on the hashtag #fitness on Instagram; Schöps and colleagues (2024: 67) come to the conclusion that memetic logics of consumer participation do not manifest only around branded material consumption, but also in "consumer embodiments emerging through sociocultural practices, for example, postures and gestures, which are central to the digital fitness body culture".

Nevertheless, although advanced, those contributions put forth another assumption that is sociologically problematic: that is, that the brand public has a flat ontology; meaning that all the (heterogeneous) members of a brand public have the same focus of attention toward the brand and contribute equally to its construction as well as the production of its imaginary. Drawing on qualitative research, based on a small sample of social media users, we know that this is quite unlikely, since different consumers assign different values to brands, and, consequently, use them for different identity projects (Thompson, 2014). Literature demonstrates an extreme variety in this sense: celebrities use brands as devices to get visibility (Abidin, 2019); micro influencers use brands to trigger productive forms of conspicuous consumption (Bainotti, 2023); hipster entrepreneurs use niche brands to showcase an authentic persona and teste (Gerosa, 2024) - etcetera. By the way, it is safe to assume that as affordances shape collective forms of cultural production in brand publics, then they should shape forms of consumers' aggregation within brand publics too, thus favouring different user relations with the same focal brand. Furthermore, such different

relations should not assume random forms but rather structured ones - as shaped by digital affordances. But again, no study (to our knowledge) has taken this research path so far.

In our opinion such a cluster of conceptual contradictions and ambiguities is rooted in a methodological gap that lies at the core of Arvidsson and Caliandro original work; basically, the authors (along with other scholars exploring the same topic) fail in providing a *typology* of users participating in a brand public. In comparison with literature about brand communities (from which the brand public theory takes an explicit distance) this sounds as a major gap. In fact, one of the main empirical goals when studying an online brand community is to identify a typology of users belonging to it. This operation amounts to be crucial, since it allows to unearth key cultural mechanisms underpinning the functioning of the community itself, such as processes of networking, sub-cultural production, or value co-creation (Kozinets, 2019) - which would be useful to explore in relation to brand publics too. Therefore, departing from this gap, in the present article we try to answer the following research questions: *Do users participate differently in the construction of a brand public? And if so, which are the main categories of users emerging from this process? Which are the most suitable methodological strategies to map this process?*

Anyway, before answering this research question, let us take a last theoretical step and discuss the literature on consumers' typologies within online brand communities - this in comparison and contrast with the literature on digital publics and the related practices of identity construction. Such discussion will be crucial to introduce our methodological strategies to segment consumers within brand publics.

Online brand communities and users' typologies

In simplest terms, an online brand community is a virtual gathering made by like-minded consumers who share the same interest and/or passion towards the same brand, which exists or is specifically located on the Internet. In fact, in online brand communities "interaction between members is often computer-mediated, members meet rarely face-to-face, but still share a social identity and a consciousness of kind" (Ozboluk and Dursun, 2017: 2). Furthermore, participation in online brand communities is consistent and stable over time (Caliandro, 2018). One of the main approaches to explore empirically brand communities is that of netnography (Kozinets, 2010), which can be defined as a qualitative method that "uses naturalistic analysis techniques (that are immersive and not intrusive) allowing the researcher to empathetically enter the (consumers') online conversations" (Caliandro 2014: 743-4). To this purpose, Kozinets proposes an invaluable methodological strategy to frame and understand the socio-cultural dynamics playing out in brand communities, that is, segmenting users through ad hoc typologies. Specifically, Kozinests (2010) introduces a 'universal' typology that features four key roles: *insiders*, *devotees*, *minglers*, *newbies*. Each ideal type corresponds to the kind of social involvement and consumer expertise that each member transfers to the community (Caliandro, 2018). Anyway, as further netnographic research demonstrated, each online brand community

tends to develop its own 'fixed roles', with some types converging to the original typology of Kozinets, and others diverging from it. To this purpose, let's remember, among the many, the Özbölük and Dursun's typology (2017), which distinguished different levels of engagement users show towards the Apple brand, and comprises: *learner*, *pragmatist*, *opinion leader*, *evangelist*, *activist*. Or the Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder' typology (2011), distinguishing the different communicative efforts put by members in constructing the culture (and the myth) of the Liverpool Football Club brand, which entails: *creative poster*, *brand warrior*, *moderator*. From a methodological point of view, these typologies are particularly useful to: a) bring order to the messiness of conversations going on within communities by associating each online message to a specific kind of poster; and b) to efficiently identify the different kind of meanings and cultural content that different users associate with brands and, eventually, the specific kind of value they co-create around them (Schau et al., 2009).

Although extremely useful, it is not possible (and it would be methodologically naïve) to translate these 'netnographic' typologies into the context of brand publics. Therefore, let's try to seek some further inputs from digital public and science and technology studies (STS) literature.

Digital publics and strategies of self-presentation

A digital public is a collection of heterogeneous and dispersed Internet users that are connected by the mediation of some kind of digital devices (e.g., #s, RTs, @s, etc.) (Arvidsson, 2013) as well as common expressions of sentiment they direct towards the same object (e.g, a brand, issue, celebrity, etc.) (Papacharissi, 2016). As a matter of fact, the brand public is a form of digital public whose main hinge of mediation is a branded-device (e.g., #cocacola). Although at present there does not exist a standard methodology for exploring consumer identity within brand publics, we can draw on methodological inputs from the literature on self-presentation in digital publics to fill this gap.

Prominent scholars in the field of social media theory, such as danah boyd (2011) or Alice Marwick (2015), tend to frame social identity within digital publics as set of digital practices that define a particular use of digital media, rather than an inherent personal status or a precise individual identity (Khamis et al. 2016). The notion of *micro-celebrity* is the best example of this tendency. Micro-celebrity can be understood as a "mindset and set of practices in which the audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others" (Marwick & boyd, 2011: 140). Hence, micro-celebrity is something that one *does*, rather than something that one *is* (Senft 2013). As long as one complies with the procedural use of digital platforms as well as the associated culturally codified set of social practices, anyone can be a micro-celebrity: be they high school student or popstar (Marwick 2015), or even an AI character (Drenten & Brooks, 2020; Mouritzen et al. 2024). In general, the literature on micro-celebrity tends to frame such practices as cultural strategies. That is,

mainly as strategies of online self-presentation (Abidin, 2016). Nevertheless, other scholars have observed how micro-celebrity can be also manufactured by manipulating the technical infrastructures of digital environments (e.g., by leveraging hashtags and/or retweets in order to amass followers) (Arvidsson et al., 2016) .

The last piece of literature to consider to complete the discussion can be found in STS literature addressing online controversies (e.g., #climatechange) (Marres & Moats, 2015; Venturini & Munk, 2021; Moosederand 2023), which produced pioneering contributions in the field of issue mapping and, consequently, in the empirical exploration of digital publics (Marres, 2017). Drawing on computational techniques, STS scholars identify different possible strategies to empirically track users' digital practices (Airoldi, 2021). Specifically, it is particularly useful to look at the strategies that those scholars use to map online discourses emerging around political issues (Marres, 2015). To map the positioning of specific actors within an online discourse and understand the actors' purposes in participating in such discourse, STS scholars use a strategy called *profiling* (Gerlitz & Rieder, 2018). Profiling consists in distinguishing different actors based on the use they make of the digital devices constituting and structuring online discourse (i.e., keywords, hashtags, RTs, Urls, etc.). There exist various practical techniques for implementing this strategy. For example, to map an online controversy emerging around a political issue (e.g., Climate Change), Rogers (2018) suggests focusing on two key dimensions, which he calls *concern* and *commitment*. The notion of 'concern' allows the researcher to address questions such as: "to which actor/s is an issue a matter of concern?" (Rogers 2018: 458); while that of 'commitment' provides scope for asking questions like: "for how long is an issue a matter of concern to the actors?" (Rogers 2018: 459). Thus, for example, focusing on a specific issue (e.g., #climatechange), it is possible to compare how many times two different groups of users (e.g. humans vs bots) tweet by using a specific hashtags (e.g., #pollution vs #conspiracy) and for how long (e.g., consistently over time or just in conjunction with some trending event?) (Marres & Gerlitz, 2016). Therefore, following the afore-mentioned methodological inputs, we can say that a good strategy to segment users within a brand public would include: a) distinguishing users according to their digital practices, rather than their personal status; b) focusing on the uses made of the digital devices structuring the public itself; c) measuring the users' concern and/or commitment in the use of such devices.

Methodological framework

In order to devise a viable strategy to segment different users belonging to a brand public, we drew on *digital methods*, which employ "online tools and data for the purposes of social and medium research" (Rogers, 2017: 75). More than a set of techniques to manage digital data, digital methods consist in a broader epistemological paradigm, which is premised on the principle of *following the medium* (Rogers, 2019). To follow the medium means to take advantage of the natively digital methods that digital environments, such as social media platforms, use to organise their digital data – as with algorithms or hashtags (Caliandro,

2014). More specifically, we adopted a qualitative approach to digital methods (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017), meaning that, on the one hand, we *followed the medium* to observe how digital devices structure flows of communication (Rogers, 2019), and, on the other hand, we *followed the users* to understand how they manipulate those devices for their communicative purposes (Caliandro, 2018). Empirically, we followed the medium by taking advantage of computational techniques (i.e., API calling, automated metadata analysis), while we followed the users by means of qualitative techniques (i.e., qualitative content analysis).

Data collection and techniques of analysis

Our research project is based on a dataset of 488,365 Instagram posts marked with the hashtag #starbucks. On the one hand, we picked Instagram since it is a very popular social media that concentrates a huge quantity and variety of consumer processes and activities (WeAreSocial, 2024). On the other hand, we chose Starbucks as a case study because it is a mainstream and worldwide known brand, which, thus, guaranteed us to run into a large enough group of users that matches the characteristics of a brand public. As a matter of fact, from a preliminary statistical analysis, it resulted that on average each user receives and/or sends 0.8 mentions (@). This datum indicates that users are socially disconnected and do not indulge in conversations with one another; therefore they are kept together by the mere mediation of the hashtag #starbucks.

We collected the data from Instagram by using a custom-built piece of software: a Python script programmed for interrogating the Instagram API (Russell, 2013). At the time we launched our software (December 2015), the Instagram API was fully open (Smith, 2018) and allowed users to retrieve data from hashtag and/or users' profiles with no limitation in terms of quantity and time frame. In our case, we programmed the software for collecting all the photos containing the hashtags #starbucks within the following time frame: 30 November – 31 December 2015. We deemed this time frame more than adequate, since over just one month of data collection we were able to gather a large dataset of 488,065 posts. Then we submitted this big dataset to the following kinds of analysis:

Automated metadata analysis. We used an ad hoc Python script to extract hashtags and explore their association (Marres & Gerlitz, 2016). The software also executed some basic statistical analysis, such as the mean and the calculus of percentiles for certain distributions (e.g., frequency of posts posted by each user).

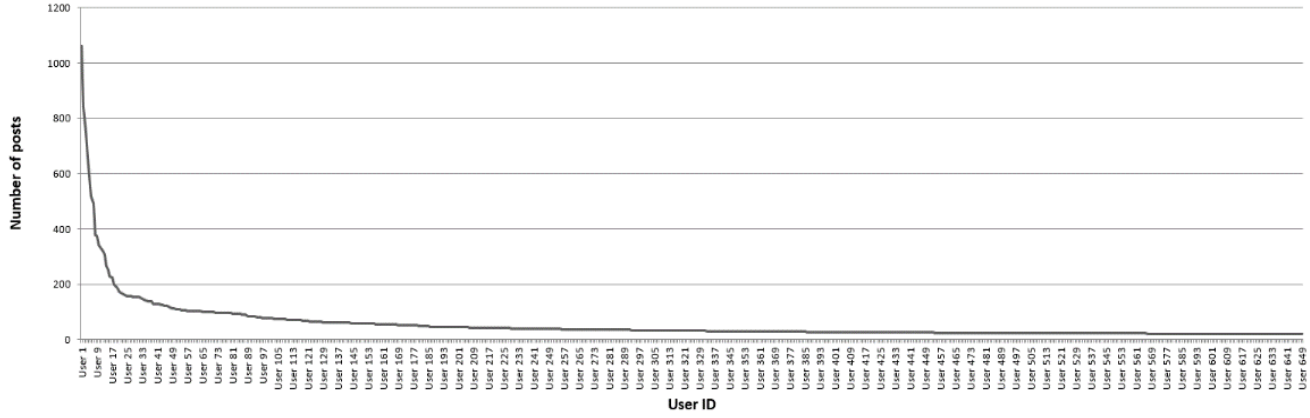
Qualitative content analysis. To understand how different types of users used the hashtag #starbucks in their posts and, ultimately, how they related to the Starbucks brand on Instagram, we manually explored the content of the photos' captions. Specifically, in our in-depth exploration of Instagram's captions, we identified three main uses of the hashtag #starbucks, which we named: *passionate*, *instrumental*, *narrative* (see the next paragraph for further details).These three labels served as coding categories through which we analysed the text of the captions. The construction of such coding categories followed a grounded and iterative process (Glaser & Strauss, 2009), insofar as the categories were not

defined a priori but instead gradually emerged during the observation of the texts through a constant and collaborative examination by the three authors (Altheide, 1987). The qualitative content analysis was developed on a random sample of 600 posts (200 for each user type; see the next paragraph for further detail) - a number reached by saturation (Weber 2005). It is important to specify that we borrowed these categories from Caliandro and Anselmi's (2021) study of memetic brands on Instagram, where they speak of 'passionate captions', 'promotional captions', 'narrative captions'. Anyway, differently from Caliandro and Anselmi, we drew on the categories of passionate, instrumental, and narrative to construct a typology of different types of users belong to the #starbucks public - which is the ultimate scope of this paper. Viceversa, Caliandro and Anselmi employed those categories for mere content analysis purposes - that is to map the imaginary of six brand publics: #starbucks, #mcdonalds, #smirnoff, #greygoose, #zara, #louisvuitton. Furthermore, they focus all their analysis on the 'narrative caption' category, in order to better exemplify their concept of 'consumer vernacular creativity'. In this sense, we aimed at expanding the work of Caliandro and Anselmi, which, on the one hand, shed an important light upon collective processes of cultural production within brand publics, but, on the other hand, did not account on how these processes diversify according to different users at play[1].

User segmentation: creating ad hoc categories for distinguishing users participating in the #starbucks brand public

As a first step to segment users belonging to the #starbucks brand public, we calculated the frequency distribution of posts per user. As one can see from Figure 1, such distribution assumes the shape of a heavy tail distribution (Lazer et al., 2009), with a small core of users (the 1% - 3,493 users) posting more than eight times and a long tail of users (the 99% - 341,665 users) posting very few times (mostly once or twice). By simply following the medium, we immediately realised that users split, quite naturally, into two main groups: a small core with a high commitment towards #starbucks (the 1%, or the head), and a long tail with a low commitment towards #starbucks.

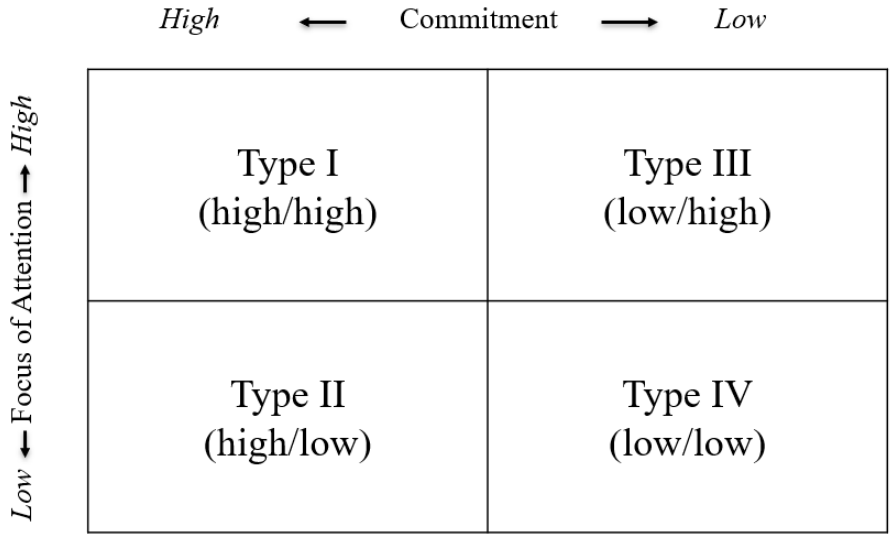
Figure 1. Distribution of posting per users



Subsequently, in order to come up with more nuanced and meaningful categories, we decided to follow the brand public theory and add another dimension to the above segmentation. We distinguished between users with a high or low focus of attention towards the #starbucks brand - (we operationalised the focus of attention (and its intensity) by looking at how frequently users used branded-hashtags other than #starbucks). In this way we established four different user types (Figure 2):

- *Type I*: a user posting a lot using only the hashtag #starbucks (high commitment / high focus of attention) – (2,835 users, 0.8% of the population, 81.2% of the head).
- *Type II*: a user posting a lot but also using hashtags related to other brands, at least 5 (high commitment / low focus of attention) – (658 users, 0.2% of the population, 18.8% of the head).
- *Type III*: a user posting few times (only 1 post) using only the hashtag #starbucks (low commitment / high focus of attention) – (288,358 users, 83.5% of the population, 84.4% of the tail).
- *Type IV*: a user posting few times (only 1 post) but also using hashtags related to other brands, at least 5 (low commitment / low focus of attention) – (198 users, 0.057% of the population, 0.058% of the tail).

Figure 2. Typology of users



The last step was to associate a meaningful label to each Type, in order to create ad hoc categories that make sense from a sociological point of view and helped us to better frame different styles of participation within a brand public. By close reading the text of the captions, we identified three main uses of the hashtag #starbucks: *passionate*, *instrumental*, *narrative*. Let us see how these uses fit with each type, and so converge into specific consumer categories.

Type I: Brand Loving

Starting from Type I (high/high), we observed that users falling into this Type use #starbucks to signal to the public a passion (or at list some sort of interest) towards Starbucks and/or some form of identification with the brand. In other words, Type 1 makes a passionate use of #starbucks. Such use is expressed by many different practices. For example, there are users composing the caption by using, quite exclusively, branded hashtags: *"starbucks taiwan #starbucks #starbuckscup #starbucksmugs #starbucksbottle #starbuckscollection #starbuckslovers #starbuckscard #starbucksusa*". Other users express an explicit appreciation towards the Starbucks brand and/or its products: "*I like #starbucks, students always in here working*". Others associate their identity as coffee lovers/addicts to the Starbucks brand: "*Good afternoon, wednesday! buenas tardes, miercoles! #coffee #cafe # #macaron #starbucks #ipad #coffeetime #horadecafe #coffeelover #coffeeholic #coffeeaddict #coffeeislife #relaxing #reading #wednseday #miercoles #december #diciembre #winter #invierno*". We labelled this style of participation *Brand Loving*, to signify a set of practices through which users signal some sort of emotional connection towards the brand. As shown by Figure 3, during this analysis we saw other usages of #starbucks emerging, which were peripheral for Type I but central for the other types; namely an *instrumental* use (where the hashtag #starbucks is used to attract attention and gain visibility) and a *narrative use* (where the #starbucks seems to be a generic semantic element, which stays in the background of a micro-narration depicting a specific moment in the everyday life of users).

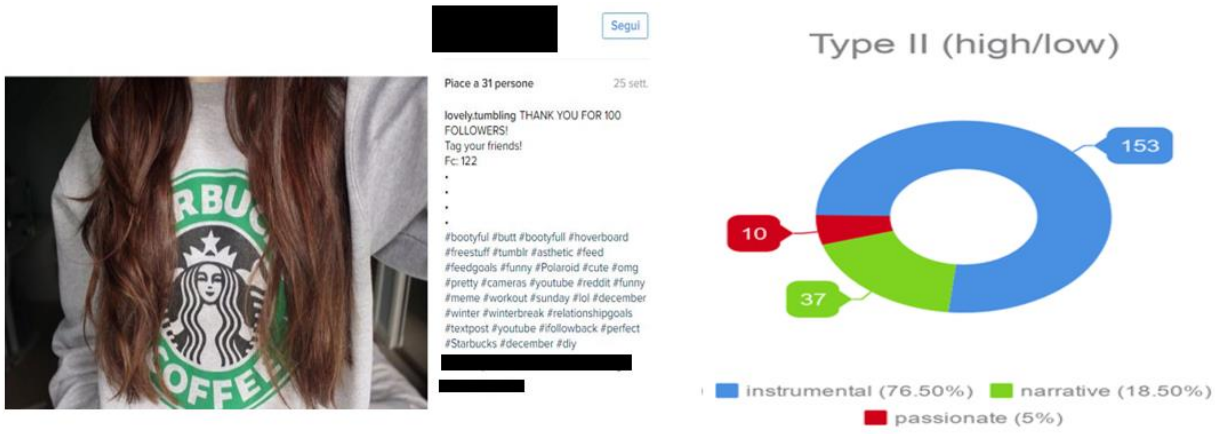
Figure 3. Type I (Example & Distribution of brand uses)

Type II: Visibility Seeking

Users belonging to Type II (high/low) preeminently embrace an instrumental use of #starbucks, hijacking the #starbucks brand to exploit its popularity and gain visibility for themselves (Figure 4). Some users exploit #starbucks blatantly to sell their products, in

many cases not even related to the coffee industry: "*#featurepoints download free apps and earn amazing rewards! click the link in my bio - install the featurepoints app - download the free apps they have to offer - earn points & redeem your rewards this app is not a scam, it is 100% legit. #featurepoints #appnana #money #followforfollow #follow4follow #like4like #likeforlike #l4l #f4f #starbucks #pokemon #starwars #fifa #art #dragonballz #anime #playstation #gta5*". Others use #starbucks paired with a collection of other hashtags that, usually, serve to increase one's own following: "*#tumblr #followforfollow #starbucks #spamforspam #follow4follow #ifollowback #followback #like4like #f4f #louisvutton #gucci #xbox*". We name this style *Visibility Seeking*, to indicate a set of digital practices through which users don't signal any emotional connection towards #starbucks, choosing rather to exploit it for personal visibility.

Figure 4. Type II (Example & Distribution of brand uses)

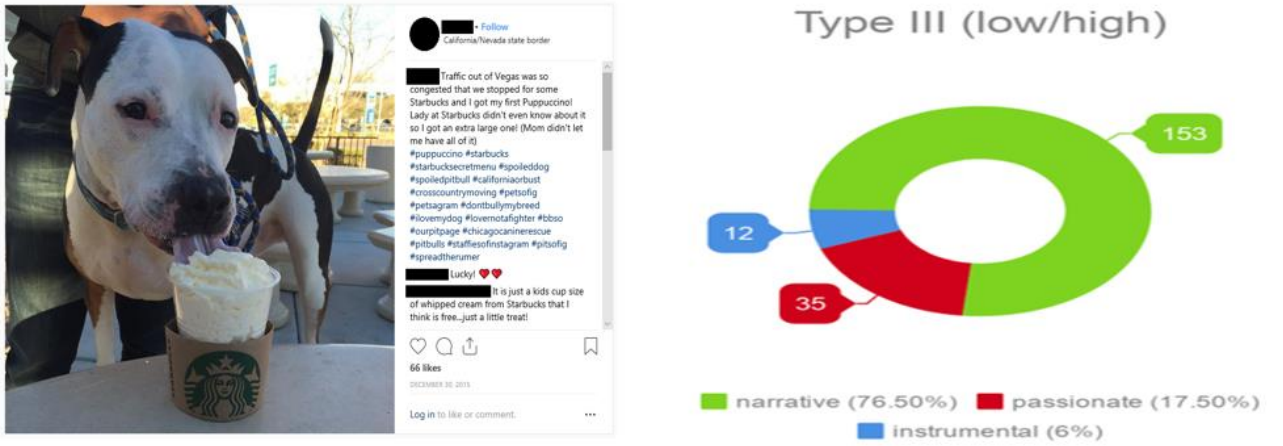


Type III: Everyday Storytelling

Type III (high/low) presents some very interesting and peculiar characteristics. Users falling into this category primarily make a narrative use of the hashtag #starbucks. In their captions the brand plays the role of a 'semantic anchor' (just like a hashtag) that helps users to better describe the geographic, social and emotional context in which the Instagram photo is taken and the consumption of a Starbucks product takes place. In such narrative usage, #starbucks is less an object of affection or identification, more a peripheral but also material entity: a digital meta-datum around which users articulate the micro-narration of ordinary moments in their everyday life. As shown in Figure 5, we see that the hashtag #starbucks is (simply) used to signal to an external observer that, during their #crosscountrymoving, @User31 and her/his dog made a stop at #starbucks, where they tasted a #puppuccino (which is a drink specifically designed for dogs). Nevertheless, differently to the other hashtags, #starbucks also seems to bring an added-value to the user's practices. It fulfils a function that would not be easily attainable by using other generic hashtags – something that goes beyond the mere signalling of a geographical location (not least because not all

the photos marked with the hashtag #starbucks have been taken in the premises of a Starbucks store). Specifically, it seems that the hashtag #starbucks is able to capture and signify a particular 'affective intensity' embedded in the photo, something that would be difficult to communicate in 'plain words' (Döveling et al, 2018). In this case it could be related to the excitement of a road trip or the hilarious (and cute) situation of a dog enjoying a 'puppuccino'. In this regard, we observed two interesting occurrences in our sample. On the one hand, #starbucks appears in micro-narrations where users attempt to capture and communicate the evanescent feeling of finding themselves in a relaxing moment with family or friends ("*Breakfast date with my little love at Starbucks this morning. #momlife #toddlerlife*"). On the other hand, #starbucks often appears in micro-narrations related to travel moments ("*The journey changes you; it should change you. #London #holiday #starbucks*"). In this scenario #starbucks is a helpful tool for communicating the pleasures of finding oneself in the condition of a traveller - in this case, the sense of liberation one attaches to doing ordinary things (having a cup of coffee) in extraordinary contexts (e.g., a vacation in London). After this analysis we decided to name this third style *Everyday Storytelling*, to indicate a set of digital practices through which users use the brand as a semantic device through which they can articulate a micro-narration of ordinary moments in their everyday life – making them meaningful and extraordinary in some way.

Figure 5. Type III (Example & Distribution of brand uses)



Caption: Traffic out of Vegas was so congested that we stopped for some Starbucks and I got my first Puppuccino! Lady at Starbucks didn't even know about it so I got an extra large one! (Mom didn't let me have all of it) #puppuccino #starbucks #starbucksecretmenu #spoileddog #spoiledpitbull maliforniaorbust #crosscountrymoving #petsofig #petsagram #dontbullymybreed #ilovemydog #lovernotafighter #bbso #ourpitpage chicagocaninerescue #pitbulls #staffiesofinstagram #pitsofig #spreadtherumer.

Finally, after exploring the Type IV (low/low), we took the drastic (but rational) decision to exclude it from our segmentation. This is because this Type behaves exactly as Type II, but only on a smaller scale. Quantitatively it seems irrelevant too (0.058% of the long tail). Therefore, we didn't make any category out of Type IV, because it didn't tell us anything new or meaningful on how users relate to brands within a brand public.

Discussion and conclusion

Through the present contribution, we tried to answer the following research questions: *Do users participate differently in the construction of a brand public? And if so, which are the main categories of users emerging from this process? Which are the most suitable methodological strategies to map this process?* Let us focus on the first two for now.

Drawing on the existing literature, we hypothesised that as social media affordances shape the construction of consumer imaginaries within brand publics, similarly they should shape forms of users' aggregation too. As a matter of fact, based on our data, it is possible to affirm that not only users participate in different ways in the #starbucks brand public, but also that such distinct types of participation tend to coalesce into three main cultural forms, that we labelled: *brand loving*, *visibility seeking*, *everyday storytelling*. More specifically:

- *Brand loving*: users belonging to this category count only for 0.8% of the population but post a lot with the #starbucks hashtag (not less than 8 times), and use it to express an emotional connection to and identification with the brand. For these users the brand seems to be 'phenomenologically significant' to their sense of selfhood (Fournier, 1998), since they publicly attach their identity to it as well as extend their 'selves' online through it.
- *Visibility seeking*: users belonging to this category count only for 0.2% of the population but post a lot with the #starbucks hashtag (not less than 8 times); furthermore, they associate to #starbucks other branded hashtags (at least 5). Basically they hijack the #starbucks brand to exploit its popularity and gain visibility for themselves. For these users the brand operates as a device to reinforce the power and the visibility of their self-brand (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016).
- *Everyday storytelling*: users belonging to this category count for 83.5% of the whole population and post very few time with the hashtag #starbucks (only once). They mainly use the brand as a narrative device to showcase mundane experiences in their everyday life. For these users the brand does not seem to be an object of identification, nor a tool for self-promotion; instead it seems to work much like a meta-datum that allows users to capture and 'materialise' ephemeral everyday moments, and thus make them communicable to a wider audience (Gibbs et al., 2015).

These results expand the original brand public theory in two important respects. First, it is true that the #starbucks hashtag aggregates disperse consumers and directs their focus of attention toward the same brand; nevertheless, at the same time, consumers manipulate that very same hashtag to modulate their own focus of attention (i.e., brand lovers and visibility seekers have a high focus of attention, while everyday storytellers have a low one). Secondly, although consumers use the Starbucks brand as a platform to 'stage private identity', it seems that those private identities become platformized (Poell et al., 2019); that is, users express their own identities through common and (few) standard imaginaries and practices, that conform with specific *platform vernaculars* (Niederer & Colombo, 2019); that is, "narrative patterns that shape content and the flow of information" that are in turn shaped by the "specificities of the platform, its material architecture, and the collective cultural

practices that operate on and through it" (Gibbs et al., 2015: 257–258). In sum, the forms of identity that consumers express within a brand public, rather than being liquid *per se*, seem to be caught into the 'typical' tension between *liquification* (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017) and *datafication* (Van Dijck, 2014) that, according to Caliandro et al. (2024b), characterise processes of platformization of consumer culture[2] on social media (see also Rokka, 2021; Airoldi & Rokka, 2022).

As far as the last research question is concerned, in this article we developed a methodological strategy useful to map users participation within brand publics and identify typologies - thus filling a major methodological gap in the literature. Moving on from typologies of brand communities' members as well as drawing on the notions of *micro-celebrity* and *profiling*, this strategy allowed us to identify three key dimensions to intersect to build typologies of brand publics' users : a) a high or low commitment towards the brand; b) a high or low focus of attention towards the brand; c) the use of the brand – which we framed as passionate, instrumental, narrative. After triangulating these dimensions in relation to an ad hoc case study (#starbucks on Instagram), we came up with the three consumer types described above.

As we showed, these types capture different styles of participation within a brand public as well as relations with the focal brand. Specifically, as shown in our case study, such styles of participation hinge on practices of manipulation of the #starbucks hashtag and re-semantization of the brand Starbucks – rather than on specific fixed social roles played in a given social group. We deem that this interplay between infrastructure manipulation and cultural appropriation (Bonini & Treré, 2024) makes our typology particularly helpful to explore the effects of affordances on processes of sociality's construction on social media, also beyond brand publics.

Limits

Although we believe we have presented our typology based on a solid and transparent methodology, our work is not without limitations. The main one is that it is based on a single case study, developed on a single platform: #starbucks on Instagram. Further research should test our methodology and our typology confronting it against different brands on Instagram and/or the same brand across different platforms. Also, we acknowledge that with the closure of the Meta APIs, our research looks hardly replicable (Bruns, 2019). Anyway, luckily, there still exist tools (e.g., IGHashtagExport[3], Instaloader, Zeeschuimer[4]) that allow users to access Instagram data for free - even though with some limitations (Achmann-Denkler, 2023; Caliandro et al., 2024a). Finally, we acknowledge that our data might look 'old', being gathered in 2015. Anyhow, given the already mentioned closure of Meta APIs, it has become particularly hard to get a complete and reliable big dataset of Instagram posts, therefore we saw having an 'old' dataset at disposal as a good research opportunity - rather than a major disadvantage. By the way, beyond matters of convenience, we are aware that

some of the practices we have observed through our dataset might have changed overtime. Consider, for example, 'hashtags stuffing' (Rogers, 2019): a practice consisting in amassing unrelated hashtags under an Instagram post to get visibility - something that our 'visibility seekers' are particularly prone to do. Given the various changes of the Instagram algorithm (which, simply put, tends to reward organic and original content) (Gagliardi, 2024), hashtags stuffing is an habit destined to disappear, since it is explicitly discouraged by the platform itself as well as several marketing gurus (Sproutsocial, 2023). Nevertheless, we do not think that this would invalidate the effectiveness of our methodology nor the heuristic force of our typology, which hinges on users' practices of hashtags manipulation and brand re-semantization - rather than specific consumer categories per se. This makes our typology flexible enough to be applied to any kind of brand, platform, and time period.

Bios

Alessandro Caliandro (PhD, University of Milan) is an Associate Professor in Sociology of Culture and Communication at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Pavia. His current research focuses on digital methods, digital consumer culture, platformisation of culture, surveillance capitalism, ageing and digital media.

Guido Anselmi (PhD, University of Milano-Bicocca) is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology of Culture and Communication at the Department of Humanities at the University of Catania. His work focuses on digital and computational methods, platform capitalism, and the impact of digital platforms on cities.

Adam Arvidsson is a Professor of Sociology at Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, Italy.

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Notes

[1] It is also due to mention that the present contribution draws on the previous work of two of the authors on the #starbucks brand public. The previous work was aimed at addressing a major ambiguity in the notion of brand public, that is, the capacity of disconnected consumers to generate a common imaginary; a possibility that was mentioned by Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) (as well as by Arvidsson 2013), but not empirically demonstrated. Instead, the present study aims at addressing a methodological gap in the brand public literature: the lack of a typology of users.

[2] Caliandro and colleagues (2024b: 12) define the process of platformization of consumer culture as "the progressive penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in consumers' everyday lives. Such a penetration influences and reorganizes the cultural practices through which consumers use objects of consumption to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their experiences and lives, across the online and offline domains".

[3] See: https://chromewebstore.google.com/detail/hashtag-scraper-for-ig/iipdaboioekmdfhpgbanbbjpfkmandfm?pli=1.

[4] See https://social-media-lab.net/data-collection/ig-stories.html.