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Complexity, Hybridity, Liminality: Challenges of Researching Contemporary Promotional Cultures

Editors
Ian Somerville and Lee Edwards

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Editorial

Researching the Complex, Hybrid, and Liminal Nature of Contemporary Promotional Cultures

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Abstract
This thematic issue invited submissions that address the challenges of researching the complex, hybrid, and liminal nature of promotional cultures and the published articles include studies which reflect on the structures, technologies, agents, representations, effects, and ethics of promotion. They are united by a central question: What strategies do we use to explore and attempt to understand the assemblages of technologies, texts, networks, and actors in contemporary promotion? We hope the collection of perspectives gathered here help to address the challenges of researching the digital, excavating promotional ideologies, confronting professions, engaging audiences through academic work, and confronting the risks and realities of research that can equally promote change or speak into a vacuum.

Keywords
complexity; hybridity; liminality; promotional cultures; promotional ethics

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Complexity, Hybridity, Liminality: Challenges of Researching Contemporary Promotional Cultures" edited by Ian Somerville (University of Leicester, UK) and Lee Edwards (London School of Economics and Political Science, UK).

We live in a time characterised by uncertainty, hybridity, and complexity, when the powerful dualisms that characterised the post-Enlightenment era (e.g., nature/society, human/machine, male/female) are being problematised in a fundamental way. This thematic issue of *Media and Communication* explores how we research the promotional cultures that have become central to the liminal times in which we live. The majority of the contributions originated as papers presented at a European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) conference in February 2020, co-sponsored by ECREA's Organisational and Strategic Communication Section, the Department of Media and Communications, LSE, and the School of Media, Communication and Sociology, University of Leicester. They are united by a central question: What strategies do we use to explore and attempt to understand the assemblages of technologies, texts, networks, and actors in contemporary promotion?

The moniker 'promotional culture' is now well-established as a way of describing the ubiquitous presence of promotional work—whether public relations, branding, advertising, or other forms—in all aspects of our lives (Davis, 2013). It is enacted by organisations working in all sectors, from politics to the arts, in non-profit and commercial environments, while individuals also adopt promotional techniques in the ways they present themselves and their lives to others (Edwards, 2018). However, the singularity of the term 'culture' belies the fluid and complex worlds on which promotion is built, with which it engages, and that it perpetuates. Organisations that use promotional tools in their strategic communication can be implicated in the worst excesses of persuasion and propaganda, but can also contribute to positive social change (Demetrious, 2013; Somerville & Aroussi, 2013). Communication campaigns track, survey, and instrumentalise our lives through their endless appetite for data, yet ensure organisations can deliver convenience and interest precisely because they know us so well (Turow, 2017). Mainstream public relations and advertising tactics are used to sell us cars, face creams and holidays, and are deployed to greenwash environmental damage, whitewash corporate corruption, woke-wash social causes, and frame political opportunism as strategic thinking (Aronczyk & Espinoza, 2021; Lounasmeri, 2018; Sobande, 2019). Promotional culture cannot be pinned down to one form, process, or purpose, so how do we account for its complex modes of production and deployment in our research questions, methods, and sites?

To talk about promotional *culture* is to acknowledge the deep embeddedness of promotion in quotidian life and the importance of its circulatory dynamics (Aronczyk, 2013). Just as Williams (1981) argued that culture is a 'whole way of life' rather than an elite set of activities, when individuals use promotional tools and tactics on their own terms, those tools are transformed from being a mechanism of elite power and repurposed to serve our own agency. Agentic power circulates through promotional work, via digital and analogue channels, and with unpredictable outcomes (Collister, 2016; Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). In this sense, promotional culture is a continually emergent manifestation of the struggle between agency and structure, a hybrid form of power where the outcome is never certain. Can research adequately address the tensions and power struggles that underpin all promotional work, including inequalities within and between nations and regions in the Global North and the Global South? To what extent do we incorporate a wide range of sites, voices and articulations of its effects, and where are the gaps in our current practice?

The articles in this thematic issue address a range of topics, from popular culture, to the tensions between agency and structure, to methodological and conceptual issues. Popular culture is the focus for Kolotouchkina et al. (2021), for Wu (2021) and for Edlom and Karlsson (2021), who all engage with popular culture case studies to explore the effects of promotional culture on the ways in which we see ourselves and others. In "Disability Narratives in Sports Communication: Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games' Best Practices and Implications," Kolotouchkina et al. (2021) analyse the Paralympic Games as a critical moment for communication that has the potential to enhance global awareness and understanding about disability. They argue that the increasing visibility of this kind of global spectacle and the efforts of public authorities to raise the standards of accessibility in their host cities, evidence a shift to new, urban barrier-free experiences and discourses concerning disability. Their exploratory case study assesses disability representation and narratives within the context of the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games and their analysis of innovative communication strategies fostering the visibility of disability reveals a series of effective practices implemented in Japan.

Yuqing Wu's (2021) "Can Pop Culture Allay Resentment? Japan's Influence in China Today" notes that in China, despite the traumatic collective memory relating to the militaristic Japan during World War II, an increasing number of Chinese young adults have developed an obsession with Japanese culture largely due to the anime, movies, pop music, and other popular culture that Japan exports. Her interview-based article examines how the co-existence of contemporary pop culture and historical war memory related to Japan allows Chinese young adults to reconcile their contradictory sentiments toward the Japanese government, Japanese people, and Japanese culture. She concludes that the success of Japanese pop culture in China demonstrates how the allegedly apolitical, virtual sphere of entertainment has helped build Japan's soft power through shaping a cool image of Japan in Asia and worldwide.

In "Keep the Fire Burning: Exploring the Hierarchies of Music Fandom and the Motivations of Superfans," Edlom and Karlsson (2021) start from the position that the Internet has changed how music fans come together and how the music industry connects to and communicates with these fans. Extending existing research on fan hierarchies in digital promotional culture, they use a qualitative and digital ethnographic approach in both online and offline contexts to analyse the case of the Swedish music artist Robyn and her Facebook fan community Konichiwa Bitches. Their analysis of fan hierarchies focuses on the incentives for engagement by the superfans and executive fans at the top of the hierarchy. They conclude that these 'high-level fans' function as a key connecting point between the brand management and the fans more widely.

Camille Reyes and Emily West both focus on the tensions between agency and structure that emerge in the context of promotional work. Reyes' (2021) "Spinning at the Border: Employee Activism in 'Big PR,''' develops and extends Coombs and Holladay's social issues management model to provide new perspectives on activism and public relations. The study fills a gap in the literature on internal activism by analysing the case of The Ogilvy Group and their employees, many of whom pushed for the agency to resign its work for U.S. Customs and Border Protection during President Trump's period in office. Reyes' study uses a textual analysis of a leaked transcript which documents a meeting between Ogilvy management and internal activist employees to examine how the communicative tasks of definition, legitimation, and awareness are explored in a way that complicates identity and power.

In West's (2021) "Review Pollution: Pedagogy for a Post-Truth Society" she notes that today consumer reviews on platforms like Amazon are summarised into star ratings, used to weight search results, and consulted by consumers to guide purchase decisions. She suggests such reviews are emblematic of the interactive digital environment that has purportedly transferred power from marketers to 'regular people,' and yet at the same time they represent the infiltration of promotional concerns into online information. Thus, consumers' ratings and reviews do promotional work for brands and the platforms that host reviews and any gains in power by consumers are quickly met with new strategies of control by companies who depend on reviews for reputational capital. West's study focuses on ecommerce giant Amazon to explore the complexities of online reviews and examines how individual efforts to provide product feedback and help others make choices become transformed into an information commodity and promotional vehicle.

Olaf Hoffjann (2021), in "The Innovation Function of Hybridization in Public Relations," notes that marketing and public relations literature focused on strategic communication contains many examples of hybrid structures, and that this raises the key question of what problems these hybrid structures solve. Public relations is itself the result of a hybridization process, he argues, and exemplifies hybridization as a process by which a social system adopts program structures of another system, in processes of strategic innovation. He concludes that in order to be able to continue to influence decisions in the interest of those it serves, public relations unscrupulously adopts structures of journalism, advertising, and entertainment, in order to strategically address challenges relating to the trustworthiness, attention, and relevance of its communication objects.

Our final article tackles head on the complex methodological demands of promotional research. Bengtsson and Edlom's (2021) "Mapping Transmedia Marketing in the Music Industry: A Methodology" begins with the observation that over the last decade, the music industry has adapted its promotional strategy to take advantage of the fluid, contemporary, platform-based transmedia landscape, and the multiplicity of promotional activities creates substantial methodological challenges. Guided by the Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR) ethical guidelines, they explore two data collection strategies—reversed engineering and live capturing—and apply two analytical approaches—visual mapping and time-based layering. Reflecting on the findings from these case studies, they argue for three methodological principles to be applied to such sites. First, for the importance of manual capturing and coding in data collection, especially when working around data access limitations imposed by platforms. Second, to use reversed engineering and live capturing as methods of capturing fragmented data in contemporary promotional campaigns. Finally, they suggest visual mapping and time-based layering of data to enable researchers to oscillate between qualitative and quantitative data. They suggest that researchers should be ready to share research experiences and resources regarding how to transcend platform limitations and be willing to question any lack of transparency while respecting ethical norms and guidelines.

This thematic issue invited submissions that address the challenges of researching the complex, hybrid, and liminal nature of promotion in a range of ways and the published articles include studies that reflect on the structures, technologies, agents, representations, effects, and ethics of promotion. We hope the collection of perspectives gathered here help to address the challenges of researching the digital, excavating promotional ideologies, confronting professions, engaging audiences through academic work, and confronting the risks and realities of research that can equally promote change or speak into a vacuum.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Disability Narratives in Sports Communication: Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games' Best Practices and Implications

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Abstract
The Paralympic Games have become a relevant social and communication tool for the enhancement of global awareness and understanding of disability. The increasing visibility of this kind of global sports event, as well as the efforts of public authorities to make their host cities more accessible, evidence a relevant shift to new urban barrier-free experiences and discourses concerning disability. This research is guided by an exploratory case study approach to assess the disability representation and narratives within the context of the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games. The examination of some innovative communication strategies fostering the visibility of disability reveals a series of effective practices implemented in Japan. The focus on the personification of para-athletes, the celebration of public events to experience first-hand para-sports disciplines, as well as the engagement of school children and young people in para-sports initiatives are predominant in the communication efforts of Tokyo 2020 in the pre-games period.

Keywords
disability; Paralympic Games; media; sports communication; Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games; Japan

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1. Introduction

Fair representation of disability, avoiding the temptation of generalizing health conditions, simplistic discourses and stereotyped iconography is far from common in media (Bruce, 2014; Silva & Howe, 2012; Vázquez-Barrio et al., 2021). Prevailing values of youth, physical beauty, and virility related to the aspirational personal appearance are not easily reconcilable with a range of health conditions, leading to marginalization and social exclusion of people with disabilities from public life (DePauw, 1997; Ellis, 2009; Lord et al., 2014). The portrayal of people with disabilities as "the objects of pity, charity and professional intervention and leeches on the ever-receding systems of welfare, health and social care" is still a common practice in media narratives and cultural reproduction (Goodley et al., 2019, p. 983).

The Paralympic Games are a relevant social and communication tool for drawing global attention toward the need for greater awareness and understanding of disability (Bush et al., 2013; Pullen & Silk, 2020; Purdue & Howe, 2012). The increasing visibility of the event through its global media coverage, as well as the efforts of public authorities to make their host cities accessible and inclusive places led by technological innovation and connectivity, evidence a relevant shift toward new urban experiences and discourses (Andranovich & Burbank, 2011; Essex & Chalkley, 1999; Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Kassens-Noor & Fukushige, 2016). McPherson et al. (2016) highlight the particularly important role of organizing committees and government stakeholders in setting global standards of media visibility and the representation of disability, of showcasing accessibility and promoting meaningful narratives about disability. Even though the understanding of disability and the social perception of people with disability cannot be dramatically improved by the impact of a single global event, the contribution of the Paralympic movement to the change in attitudes towards disability is noteworthy (Beckett, 2014; Ribeiro et al., 2020). Furthermore, the hosting of global para-sports events provides greater employment opportunities for those with disabilities in their cities and countries (International Paralympic Committee, 2019a). A significant impact on the visibility of achievements and challenges faced by people with disabilities in the media and on digital platforms is also acknowledged (McGillivray et al., 2021).

After the first Paralympic Games held in Japan in 1964, Tokyo will again host the global Paralympic event aimed at fostering a better understanding of disability and normalizing an effective accessibility in Japan through a barrier-free environment and a barrier-free mindset of the Games (Lavier, personal communication, August 1, 2019; Tokyo 2020, n.d.-a). Citizen engagement strategy plays a key role in making the Tokyo 2020 Games an inclusive and sustainable event with a long-lasting legacy on community empowerment and commitment of younger generations with critical social issues (Kolotouchkina, 2018).

This article aims to (1) better understand the framework of the representation and visibility of disability in the context of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, (2) identify best communication practices in the pre-games period, and (3) provide further insight into the research of the complexities of the para-sports communication.

The structure of this article comprises four main sections. The next section outlines the disability context in Japan. Then, Section 3 analyzes the prevailing narratives and representation of the Paralympic Games and para-athletes, reviewing the evolution of media coverage, media models, and main stereotypes linked to the global para-sports event. After presenting the research method and materials in Section 4, some remarkable practices focused on fostering the visibility and normalization of disability from Tokyo 2020 Paralympics are discussed in Section 5, identifying their social impact and implication on the further research agenda.

2. Disability in Japan

The visibility and active participation in social life of people with disability is still scarce in Japanese society. Poor planning resulting in a high number of physical barriers on urban space and overcrowding on public transport, the high density and the ageing of the population, as well as social discrimination, pose many obstacles for the effective exercise of citizenship rights of people with disabilities in Japan (Stevens, 2007). Even though the employment of people with disabilities in Japan is slightly increasing under the law obliging companies and government organizations to hire workers with impairment to a level of up to 2.5 percent of total staff ("More jobs for disabled people," 2018; Mori & Sakamoto, 2018), segregation persists through a separate world of special schools, professional workshops, and social welfare companies for their education and employment (Heyer, 2000, 2015).

Hayashi and Okuhira (2001) argue that in traditional Japanese society physical and financial support from family and siblings was considered a norm for people with disabilities. The dependence on parents and segregation from society was also common with many spending their lives either isolated and hidden by their shamed families (Stibbe, 2004) or confined for life in residential institutions under harsh conditions and, in some cases, systematic violation of human rights (Hayashi & Okuhira, 2001).

The emergence of the disability rights movement in Japan in the 1970s initiated a gradual change in social norms, policies and perception of disability, fostering changes in education, the welfare system, and independent living of people with disabilities. Heyer (2000, 2015) argues that disability policy and legislation in Japan have strong roots in the welfare model focused on ensuring sophisticated institutions for people with disabilities. While the assertion of special needs of people with disabilities allows the development of well-equipped welfare and rehabilitation facilities, the challenge of their full integration into society is still critical in Japan.

The invisibility, under-representation and persisting stereotypes of people with disabilities in Japanese media were revealed by Shinichi Saito and Ishiyama (2005) who found that, while five percent of the population in Japan has a disability, only 1.7 percent of popular TV-drama characters feature any disability on screen. Among these marginalized exceptions is the *Beautiful Life* serial drama, featuring an attractive, well-spoken and well-educated young female protagonist in a wheelchair. Notwithstanding her physical impairment, the idealized character and her love story with an able-bodied man fall short of reflecting critical aspects of daily life and hardships of people with disabilities in urban Japan (Stevens, 2007). Stibbe (2004) argues that television dramas in Japan featuring disabled female characters persistently represent disability based on the medical model and reinforce social stereotypes and discriminating prejudice of women with disabilities as powerless and passive victims of circumstance. While disabled characters are still marginal and often stigmatized in TV serial dramas, Valentine (2001) highlights their impact on raising the social profile of a traditionally invisible and unmentioned minority in Japanese society.

Although many challenges still remain to be addressed, the 2013 Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities, the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the revision of the Act on Employment Promotion of Persons with Disabilities in 2014 became significant milestones in Japanese legislation. Furthermore, some recent news from the political and social sphere in Japan evidence encouraging progress. In the 2019 elections to Japan's Upper House, two lawmakers with severe disabilities won their seats representing the opposition party Reiwa Shinsengum. One of them is an ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) patient who, using a wheelchair equipped with an artificial respirator, can only communicate through computer assistive technology (Nogi, 2019; Tomoyo, 2019). The first talent agency for people with disabilities was established in Tokyo in 2019 featuring around 30 registered profiles of models and artists with different health conditions for advertising and entertainment productions (Yukari, 2019).

In parallel with the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics organization, a series of cultural performances staged by artists with impairments and members of the LGBT community are held to reinforce the visibility, diversity, and inclusivity challenge of the games (Tokyo 2020, n.d.-b). On the same date when the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics were originally scheduled before the Covid-19 pandemic, a virtual fashion show "Amputee Venus" with the participation of Paralympic female athletes took place in Tokyo. The show was streamed live on YouTube, featuring the latest fashion trends and prosthetic legs of the models ("Amputee fashion show," 2020). Such new kind of media narratives in Japan about people with disabilities and their social engagement was also identified by Shek-Noble (2020), who highlights, in particular, the attention of media to the critical issues of their employment and the enabling role of robot technologies in this field.

3. Media Representation of the Paralympic Games and Para-Athletes

DePauw (1997) argues that historically sport and athletic performance were considered the domain of an enhanced physical condition, masculinity, and a beautiful able body. Women, people of color, and people with disability were excluded from this context as not fitting in these traditional and generally accepted views. Although some significant advances have occurred recently, mostly on account of the International Paralympic Movement, the heritage of that marginality, social exclusion, vulnerability, and stigma still exerts a strong influence on the visibility and the representation of disability in the media (Beckett, 2006; Bush et al., 2013; Goffman, 1963; Goodley et al., 2019; Solves et al., 2018; Sutherland, 1997; Tsatsou, 2020). Ellis (2009, p. 25) argues that "the media has an integral role in both reflecting and reinforcing social disablement and imagining people with disability as a vulnerable group."

Since the first Paralympic Games took place in Rome in 1960, the 60-year history of this global para-sports event evidences its ever-increasing social impact on the visibility and understanding of disability as well as confirms a steady growth in the global number of para-athletes and Paralympic disciplines (Bailey, 2008; International Paralympic Committee, n.d.-a; Martin & Vitali, 2014). The globalization of the Paralympic movement is closely linked to the increasing broadcasting coverage of the event and the dizzying spread of new digital media and social networking sites featuring live and deferred competitions (Bernstein, 2000; Creedon, 2014; Whannel, 2013).

From the first daily television coverage of the 1976 Toronto Games that reached over 600,000 viewers in Canada, there has since been an estimated cumulative audience of 1,85 billion people during Athens 2004, and 3,8 billion in Beijing 2008 and London 2012. The role of digital media is also remarkable: from 120,000 daily hits on the website of the Atlanta 1996 Games, to webcasts to over 100 countries, reaching over 300 million hits during the Sydney 2000 Games and engaging one billion people in digital media activities during the Rio 2016 Paralympics (International Paralympic Committee, n.d.-b).

While media coverage and global audiences of the Paralympic Games experience constant growth, there are many challenges facing the communication of disability in sports. The role of Public Service Media and their commitment to ensuring diversity and promoting cultural citizenship through the coverage of underrepresented sports and athletes with disabilities is particularly significant in this regard (Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021). The disparity between the global media spectacle of the ephemeral Paralympic event and the tough daily experience of disabled athletes is highlighted by Bush et al. (2013, p. 644), who stress the need to "create a new discourse from a coalition of voices that reimagine citizenship, human rights, democracy and well-being for those (athletes) with impairments." The objective representation of Paralympic sports and para-athletes, avoiding stigma (Goffman, 1963) remains critical for the normalization of visibility and fair representation of disability in media (DePauw, 1997; Kolotouchkina et al., 2021; Silva & Howe, 2012). Critical intersections of disability with ablenationalism (Bruce, 2014; Campbell, 2009; Snyder & Mitchell, 2015), gender (Gerschick, 2000; McPherson et al., 2016; McRuer, 2006; Pullen & Silk, 2020), and assistive technologies (Berger, 2008; Clogston, 1990; Quinlan & Bates, 2009) underpin simplistic and discriminating stereotypes that distort the image of athletes with disabilities and hinder the visibility of their sports achievements (Bruce, 2009; Carter & Williams, 2012; De Léséleuc et al., 2010).

The origin of the Paralympic Movement at Stoke Mandeville Hospital as a rehabilitation therapy for spinal cord injuries of World War II veterans conditioned the prevailing medical model of disability representation (Brown & Smith, 1989; Cologon & Thomas, 2014) with an excessive attention to physical impairment and personal tragedies of para-athletes in the media coverage of the Paralympic Games until the beginning the 21st century (Berger, 2008; Goggin & Newell, 2000). Spinal cord injury was the only disability included in the first five editions of the Paralympic Games of Rome 1960, Tokyo 1964, Tel Aviv 1968, and Heidelberg 1972. From the 1976 Paralympic Games in Örnsköldsvik and Toronto blind and amputee athletes were also admitted. Finally, in 1980 athletes with cerebral palsy joined the competition at Arnhem Games. Notwithstanding the extensive current range of Paralympic sports, accounting for 22 summer and 6 winter disciplines, the global visibility of these disciplines is uneven during the Games celebration, with a predominant media focus on the technologically enhanced disabled athletes and socially accepted disabled bodies (Bush et al., 2013). The use of sophisticated prosthetics such as fiber carbon blades and racing wheelchairs has become a key element of the superhuman or supercrip representation (Clogston, 1990) of Paralympic athletes, enhancing their exceptional abilities and extraordinary results (Berger, 2008; Pullen et al., 2020).

London 2012 Paralympics signaled a significant change in media coverage and visibility of disability before, during, and after the Games, gathering the attention of scholars to the impact of the event and its key narratives moving away from para-sport as therapy to elite-level competition (Bush et al., 2013; Hodges et al., 2014; Pullen et al., 2019). The role of the UK television broadcaster Channel 4 was particularly acknowledged for the content quantity and quality of the event, fostering a social change in the framing of disability in the UK (Pullen et al., 2019). The adverts launched by Channel 4 for the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Games released a new powerful narrative, depicting feats and personal everyday experiences of elite para-athletes (McGillivray et al., 2021), engaging the audience with backstories of Paralympians in their everyday life. In parallel, the number of employees with disabilities at Channel 4 both on and off-screen was also increased.

Some remarkable practices have been identified recently in different countries in cultural discourses and media narratives of Paralympic Games and athletes with disabilities. Although those practices are still far from common, their contribution to normalizing social perception of disability and fostering full inclusion while challenging stereotypes and negative attitudes deserves special attention. The release of the Spanish movie *Champions*, featuring a team of basketball players with different kinds of disability, became one of the most seen Spanish movies of all time with over 3 million viewers. One of its lead actors, Jesus Vidal, was awarded the Best Newcomer actor at the National Movie Awards in 2019 and shortly after became one of the hosts of a popular variety talk show at the La Sexta Spanish broadcaster. In the UK, the award-winning producer Nikki Fox, born with muscular dystrophy, became in 2014 the first BBC disability correspondent, covering a wide range of news on disability and social inclusivity. A former Paralympic wheelchair basketball player Ade Adepitan is a popular face on British television, presenting Paralympic events on British Channel 4 and other programs focused on people with impairments. Furthermore, global attention was drawn toward the Paralympic Games in August 2020 by the *Rising Phoenix* documentary, launched on the Netflix platform in 190 countries which depicts personal stories of nine Paralympic athletes from different countries within the historical context of the Paralympic Games and their remaining future challenges.

4. Materials and Method

The main research goals are aimed at identifying communication tools and best practices put in place by the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games in order to create a truly inclusive and accessible global para-sports event. The research is guided by the exploratory case study approach, structured as an empirical inquiry focused on the in-depth analysis of a specific contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context (Yin, 2009). Research data were gathered through the review of Tokyo 2020 Paralympic documents, an extensive literature review, as well as monitoring of digital platforms in the pre-game period. In addition, four in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts in the Paralympic movement and Paralympic broadcasting were conducted to gather insights from the perspective of news-makers and communication experts involved in the communication of the Paralympic Games. Personal meetings and online interviews were held by the authors with: Tristan Lavier, Manager of International Communications Section, Tokyo Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games; Masashi Nonaka, Vice President, Weber Shandwick Japan; Kazutake Hiramatsu, Managing Director of Corporate Communications Division, Dentsu; and Yolanda García, Sports Editor-in-Chief of the Spanish National Broadcasting Services, RTVE.

The identification of innovative practices in the visibility of disability, specific tools, and narratives was guided by four issues addressed in extant research in the field of Paralympic studies:

- The role of national broadcasters in the Paralympics' coverage and narratives (Kolotouchkina et al., 2021; McGillivray et al., 2021; Pullen et al., 2019);
- The impact of assistive and enabling technologies on the visibility of para-athletes and Paralympics (Quinlan & Bates, 2009; Silva & Howe, 2012);
- Citizen engagement and participation research (Kolotouchkina, 2018; Misener & Mason, 2006);
- Cultural legacy of the global sports events (Bush et al., 2013; García, 2012; Grix & Brannagan, 2016).

Key research findings outline a series of remarkable initiatives focused on raising the awareness and further understanding of disability in Japan through disruptive communication narratives, citizen engagement actions, and the use of advanced assistive technologies in the context of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. In particular, this article illustrates some innovative communication narratives of disability representation, as well as reviews a series of educational and engagement initiatives focused on school children and young people in Japan in the pre-game period of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. The study aims to contribute to further academic discussion and effective practice of fostering a fair representation of disability and effective inclusion of people with disabilities in public life.

5. Best Practices of Visibility and Representation of Disability From the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics

The guiding vision of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games identifies ‘achieving personal best,’ ‘unity in diversity,’ and ‘connecting to tomorrow’ as three key strategic pillars aimed at ensuring an inclusive nature of the event. 4,350 athletes from 165 countries are expected to join the competitions (Tokyo 2020, n.d.-a).

While the exceptional conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the postponement of the global Paralympic event, some initial impact on the disability context has been already observed in Japan. Over 70 companies have become Paralympic partners and supporters of the Games, evidencing the commitment of the international and Japanese business sector to the global para-sports event. In 2019, Haneda Airport was recognized as the World’s Best Airport for its universal design facilities and services for people with disabilities and the elderly. For the Games celebration, all transport hubs should be 100 percent accessible (International Paralympic Committee, 2019b). Internet of Things solutions are also expected to play a key role in Tokyo 2020, enabling smart maintenance of public transport accessibility and facilitating energy-saving measures targeted at making the Olympic village a zero-emission hydrogen-powered smart district (Hallett, 2020).

The examination of some of the innovative communication strategies fostering visibility, inclusiveness, and normalization of disability representation already implemented in Japan in anticipation of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics, reveals a series of meaningful actors and tools of this strategic approach.

5.1. NHK Coverage and Innovative Paralympic Narratives

The role of the National Broadcasting Services NHK, the primary national broadcaster in Japan and a key global news channel in Japan and Asia, with 250 million viewers in 140 countries (Snow, 2019), is particularly remarkable in the pre-game period of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. The first aspect to highlight is the expected worldwide coverage of the event by NHK. Tokyo 2020 will, live, show 21 disciplines from 19 sports, the largest broadcast live in the history of the Paralympics. Sports Editor-in-Chief of the Spanish National Broadcasting Services RTVE, argues that the availability of live-action in a wide variety of sports from the host city is essential to enhance the global visibility of the Paralympics event and to engage the event’s global audience (García, personal communication, November 14, 2019). Furthermore, the coverage of the 2020 Paralympic news and events at the NHK will be conducted by three presenters with disabilities. These news anchors have different kinds of impairment (hearing disability, cerebral palsy, and limb disability) and have been involved in the competitions at the 2018 PyeongChang Paralympic Winter Games, the 2019 London World Para Swimming Championship, and the 2019 Dubai World Para Athletics Championship (International Paralympic Committee, 2019c).

The prominent role of the national Japanese broadcaster NHK in the normalization and mediation of disability also takes on particular importance on account of its innovative approach to the Paralympic narratives. From 2017, NHK has launched a series *Animation x Paralympic: Who is your Hero?* introducing Japanese anonymous and famous para-athletes of 11 Paralympic sports categories with the anime-style narratives. The episodes also feature popular anime characters from the most famous Japanese series (*KochiKame*, *Baby Steps*, *Yowamushi Pedal*, *Hotaru’s Way*, *Mashirohi* and *Dear Boys*) placed in the context of different Paralympic sports. Each episode is developed with a particular manga style by famous Japanese artists Kouji Seo, Masahito Kagawa, Wakasa, Yoichi Takahashi, Eisaku Kubonouchi, Hiroki Yagami, and Masayoshi Ozaki, as well as featuring music by famous pop singers Sakura Fujiwara, Lisa, Daichi Miura, and rock band Okamoto, all of which contribute to the high-quality production and high visibility rates of the series in Japan (International Paralympic Committee, 2018).

The combination in the narrative of popular fictional characters with real para-athletes (the most famous Japanese Paralympic tennis champion and former world number one Shingo Kunieda and para-cyclist Shota Kawamoto) provides an entertaining and first-hand inspirational experience of the challenges and peculiarities of each para-sports discipline. While, for a long time, disability representation in the manga genre was biased and stigmatized, the contribution of prominent manga artists with disabilities such as Yamamoto Osamu and Kobayashi Yoshinori addressing issues of discrimination against people with disabilities in their manga books, signals a potential to influence the perception of disability among manga readers (Gottlieb, 2001). The value of the manga and anime genres in raising awareness and understanding about disability is particularly remarkable due to the fluid and relational nature of the characters and their strong connection with fandom through:

> The blurred boundaries between media on the screen, whether packaged, broadcast, theatrically released or streamed on the Internet, and the

> emergent potential of character-related businesses and activities later, from lucrative licensing deals with pachinko manufacturers to non-commercial fan uses as cosplay. (Condry, 2009, p. 143)

Furthermore, manga and anime are indisputable icons of Cool Japan's global cultural influence, highly popular with young people both at home and abroad (McGray, 2009; Snow, 2013).

5.2. Citizen Engagement in Paralympic Projects

Citizen engagement in sports global events is a critical factor in maximizing the network of local supporters, building shared experiences, and fostering creative communication action at the collective and individual level (Garcia, 2012; Girginova, 2017). A wide range of different options to get involved in the celebration of the sports event always emerges for local communities (Misener & Mason, 2006). Citizen participation in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics is an important issue as the initial public support to the celebration of the second Olympic Games in the city was very low (Kietlinski, 2011; Kolotouchkina, 2018; Shimizu, 2014). In this regard, some specific targets of communication and engagement strategies put in place by Tokyo 2020 become particularly relevant. The focus on families, school children and young people is predominant in communication actions and engagement initiatives in the pre-games Paralympic narratives.

Educational programs focused on the history of the Olympic movement and aimed at spreading the Olympic values as an inspiration for younger generations is a common practice from the Olympic host cities. These programs usually include sports activities and cultural events with Olympic athletes, as well as specific access to a wide range of Olympic knowledge and educational resources (Ribeiro et al., 2020). Educational pillars of the Paralympic movement play a significant role as facilitators of understanding and first-hand personal experience of disability, in particular for children and young people. Beckett (2014) argues that non-disabled children "enact cultural schemas that both sustain their privileged position as non-disabled people and the subordinate position of disabled people" (p. 871).

Three years ahead of the Games, the education project YoiDon! aimed at fostering Olympic knowledge among Japanese school children was launched by Tokyo 2020. Through a designed thematic collection of textbooks on Olympic and Paralympic studies, and a digital platform featuring a wide range of Olympic and Paralympic content, school children were given access to the extensive collection of resources, stories and data. Moreover, since the designation of Tokyo as the host city of the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, Japanese elite athletes and para-athletes make regular visits to schools all over Japan to share their personal experiences and encourage younger generations to take an active part in the Olympic and Paralympic movement (Hiramatsu, personal communication, August 11, 2017; Nonaka, personal communication, July 8, 2017).

The Olympic and Paralympic mascot selection process became another relevant milestone in school children engagement in the Olympic experience. The most charming characters of the 2020 Tokyo Games, Miraitowa and Someity, were selected by children from over 14,000 schools in Japan through classroom debates and a collective voting process on the winners of the open design competition. Children with visual impairment were provided specific 3D models of each mascot to facilitate their touch and feel assessment (Lavier, personal communication, July 27, 2017). The mascot selection and voting process had a strong impact on the personal attachment and interest of school children towards the Olympic and Paralympic movement, making them active supporters and ambassadors of the mascots who went on to spread their enthusiasm and engagement within their families and groups of friends (Kolotouchkina, 2018).

Fostering school children's knowledge and active engagement in the Paralympic movement, the Agitos Foundation of the International Paralympic Committee, will present its first winners of the *I'm POSSIBLE* award at the Closing Ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. The award is a global recognition of the outstanding achievement in inclusivity made by schools in Japan and overseas, that follows a specific inclusive teaching program developed by the Agitos Foundation. The educational program is aimed at promoting social inclusion and knowledge of the Paralympic Movement through a wide range of educational tools, digital resources, and teaching methodologies. The final purpose of the program is to influence perceptions about people with disabilities and to educate new generations with inspiration in Paralympic values (Agitos Foundation, 2019).

Moreover, events regularly take place in the Greater Tokyo area to provide families and children with a direct and entertaining encounter with the general knowledge and direct experience of different para-sports categories. These events are usually jointly hosted by the Tokyo organizing committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games as well as by Tokyo Metropolitan Government (Tokyo 2020, 2019a). The event program comprises trials of Paralympic sports such as wheelchair basketball, wheelchair marathon, badminton and triathlon—joined by elite para-athletes who explain the rules of each specific para-sports category and the equipment required. Another remarkable feature of the events is the active participation of Japanese celebrities with or without disability who contribute their personal support and visibility in mass media and social networking sites to the Paralympic movement.

5.3. Assistive and Enabling Technologies

The dizzying pace of continuous advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) is changing the daily routines and civic life of people with disabilities. The flexible and adaptive nature of digital and assistive technologies levels the playing field across key social, economic, and civic domains, enabling people with disabilities to fully enjoy their fundamental citizenship rights and their independence (Samant Raja, 2016). Bennet and Segerberg (2013) identify a new logic of connective action in the digitally mediated social context. Emerging urban practices around the globe addressing the digital divide and social exclusion (Mervyn et al., 2014), as well as fostering an effective engagement and empowerment of people with disabilities in public life through ICTs, evidence the essential role of cities to lead a major paradigm shift in the inclusive digital placemaking (Bartolome Muñoz de Luna & Kolotouchkina, 2020). Inspired by the remarkable technological prowess of the previous Tokyo 1964 Games, the 2020 edition will deploy a state-of-the-art innovation in spatial information systems, new generation robots, advanced video analytics, and ultra-high-definition television (Kassens-Noor & Fukushige, 2016).

Among the assistive technologies implemented by Tokyo 2020, Human Support Robots will gain a particular role in providing support for wheelchair users through offering delivery of goods and guidance to seats at the sports venues. Miraitowa and Someity, the Olympic and Paralympic mascots will also have their robot versions, able to greet visitors and athletes, shake hands, and interact through a variety of facial expressions. This mascot-robot experience is particularly aimed at children and their families. The T-HR3 Humanoid Robot will assume the role of transmitting sounds and images of the competitions from the Games locations to other partner robots, providing an in-situ sports immersive virtual reality experience. Two other robot categories T-TR1 and Field Support Robot will be in charge of, respectively, facilitating virtual representation of the games for people who are not able to attend the venue, and to retrieve athletic equipment thrown by athletes or staff through the competition fields. Robots will have also the role of being multilingual guides and security and accessibility assistants (Hallett, 2020; Tokyo 2020, 2019b).

Furthermore, Tokyo 2020 published an Accessibility Handbook to be used by staff attending visitors and participants of the Games (Tokyo 2020, 2018). The book provides a detailed description of all potential accessibility needs, identifying specific behaviour and attention protocol expected from the staff to facilitate accessibility for people with a disability or a health condition requiring some kind of support.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this exploratory and interpretive case study methodology on the generalizability of the results. Thus, the conclusions should be considered suggestive. Furthermore, the research has been conducted in the pre-game period of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. These Games are expected to set a new standard in the visibility of the Paralympic Movement, therefore this research will be further developed to assess media visibility of disability as well as best practices of accessibility and inclusion of Tokyo 2020 Paralympics.

In order to normalize the social perception of disability, fostering inclusion and full accessibility of people with impairment, the World Health Organization (2011) recommends increasing public awareness and understanding about disability, confronting negative perceptions and prejudices, and representing disability fairly. Paralympic global sports events have a strong potential to become social catalysts in their host cities and countries, promoting the understanding of the complexities of disability, breaking perception barriers and fostering the social inclusion of people with disabilities into public life.

Notwithstanding many remaining challenges underpinned by traditional social distance with disability in Japan (Heyer, 2000, 2015; Stevens, 2007), the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games have triggered some remarkable progress towards a barrier-free mindset. In particular, the engagement of younger generations through educational and entertainment initiatives, social events, and fun group activities focused on the practice of Paralympic sports and the discovery of para-athletes, have provided children and young people with a new first-hand inspirational experience of disability, free of prejudice and stigma. Opposite to the usual representation of disability as a lack of something, failure, or deviance (Goodley et al., 2019), the depiction of para-athletes as manga and anime iconic main characters in the *Animation x Paralympic: Who is your Hero?* series has offered a fresh and disruptive perspective, understanding disability as involving personal identity, empowerment, and community. This kind of personal involvement and critical engagement of children and young people in the experience of disability and its cultural schemas is particularly significant as a transformative impact on the social perception of people with disability (Beckett, 2014).

Furthermore, the engagement of the Paralympic athletes in public meetings and events, as well as the advertising support they receive from the Games' official sponsors contribute to making Paralympic athletes abandon their usual anonymity to raise the awareness of their achievements in para-sports disciplines. This personification and public visibility of the Paralympic athletes is essential for attracting fans and sponsors, and for broadening the social relevance of the para-sports.

The review of some innovative practices that emerged in the pre-game period of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics sheds light on new inspirational narratives of disability representation and highlights the importance of assistive technologies in facilitating truly inclusive and accessible environments. The interconnection of Paralympic discourses and narratives of Tokyo 2020 with a broader cultural and social context is particularly significant as a signal of a paradigm shift away from the traditional invisibility and isolation of people with disabilities in Japan.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Can Pop Culture Allay Resentment? Japan’s Influence in China Today

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Abstract

In China, despite the traumatic collective memory relating to militaristic Japan during World War II, an increasing number of Chinese young adults have developed an obsession with Japanese culture, due to its export of anime, movies, pop music, and other popular culture. Based on interviews with 40 Chinese and Japanese young adults, this work examines how contemporary pop culture and historical war memories related to Japan influenced Chinese young adults, who had to reconcile their contradictory sentiments toward the Japanese government, people, and culture. The success of Japanese pop culture in China also shows how the allegedly apolitical, virtual sphere of entertainment has helped build Japan’s soft power through shaping a cool image of Japan in Asia and worldwide.

Keywords

China; East Asia; Japan; national image; pop culture; soft power

Issue

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1. Introduction

China today occupies the center of global attention as a rising power that may challenge the US-centric world order. With substantial economic and military strength, China nonetheless does not evoke either admiration or trust internationally (Shambaugh, 2015). Ever since 2004, the Chinese Ministry of Education has been trying to build Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese language and culture globally (Hartig, 2012). Since 2007, Beijing has invested billions of dollars into building ‘the Chinese dream’ and ‘the Asia-Pacific dream’ (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 100). But still, China’s image remains mostly negative, especially among the wealthier parts of the world (Silver et al., 2019). Apparently, what China lacks is not hard power that can scare people away but the cultural influence to convincingly tell its own side of the story. In other words, China is in shortage of soft power—the persuasive approach to exert influence without force (Nye, 2012).

China’s neighbor Japan, in contrast, has questionable hard power but a very appealing contemporary culture. A defeated country of WWII, Japan left unresolved scars among its many Asian neighbors. Postwar Japan also does not have an autonomous military due to American occupation (Schaller, 1985). Despite its militaristic past and a continued lack of apology deemed acceptable by the countries it victimized (Qiu, 2006; Ward & Lay, 2016), contemporary Japan is nevertheless widely acknowledged to be “one of the world’s leading diplomatic, cultural and soft power players” (Burney & Donaldson, 2018).

Particularly in China, despite the institutionalized effort to preserve the traumatic memory through history textbooks and anti-Japan war dramas, an increasing number of Chinese young adults have developed an obsession with Japanese culture, due to its export of anime, movies, music, and other pop culture. This sense of affiliation with the non-serious, apolitical sphere of Japanese culture, as my article will later show, contributes to a political outcome that the Japanese government desires: A favorable perception of Japan as an advanced, attractive, and innocuous country—the opposite of what it once was. As pop culture serves as an important cultural repertoire for young people's self-identification and socialization (Duff, 2002), we cannot help but wonder, what if such repertoire comes from a foreign country with whom your own country has a disturbing history?

Nye first coined the term 'soft power' in 1990 (Nye, 1990a). By far, soft power has been mostly theorized in political sciences (Ang et al., 2016; Holm, 2016; Nye, 1990a) and understood via the macro lenses of foreign investment, education, developmental aid, public policy, and ideology (Holm, 2016). In Nye's original discussion of soft power, he also did not give much weight to the commercial entertainment sphere but placed much more importance on national values and political ideologies (Nye, 1990b). Likewise, past scholars have mostly attributed China's soft power failure as China's fundamental lack of attractive political values (Paradise, 2009).

The overt emphasis on political values, however, ignores the fact that people's trust in political institutions has been decreasing, and they increasingly seek meanings and identifications in consumption culture, entertainment industry, and everyday life (Cronin, 2018). Focusing heavily on the political realm also renders the building of soft power susceptible to accusations of propaganda, brainwashing (Belmonte, 2013; Snow & Taylor, 2006), verbal fighting (Mattern, 2005), and America-centrism (Hayden, 2012). Via interviews with 20 Chinese young adults as my main focus and interviews with 20 Japanese young adults as a comparison, my article offers a sociological conceptualization of soft power via a micro, cultural lens with two specific goals: (1) contrasting the national images of China and Japan; and (2) understanding this contrast, especially the success of Japanese pop culture which occurred even while Chinese young adults had to reconcile their attraction to Japanese culture with historical resentment. My analyses demonstrate the political effect of the apolitical, entertainment realm of popular culture, and how favorable sentiments toward a country can develop despite political resentment.

2. Japan: Small Brother, Cruel Invader, or Aesthetic Symbol?

The contact between China and Japan can be traced back to about 2,000 years ago in AD 57, when the emperor of the Han dynasty gave a golden seal to Japan. During China's prosperous Sui (隋) and Tang (唐) dynasties (AD 581–907), Japan sent students and imperial embassies to China to learn about state-building and brought back the Chinese writing system, bureaucratic structure, art style, and customs, as well as philosophical thoughts.

In 1839, the opium war between China and Great Britain signaled the beginning of '100 years of humiliation' of modern China by various invasions, exploitation, and colonial activities from not only Western Imperials but also Japan, a 'small brother' in China's perspective. In 1894, Japan won the First Sino-Japanese War, and during WWII, among many of Japan's atrocities in Asia was the Nanjing Massacre, a six-week killing and raping spree which started December 13, 1937, and led to the death of more than 300,000 Chinese citizens, according to Chinese official records (Liu et al., 1997).

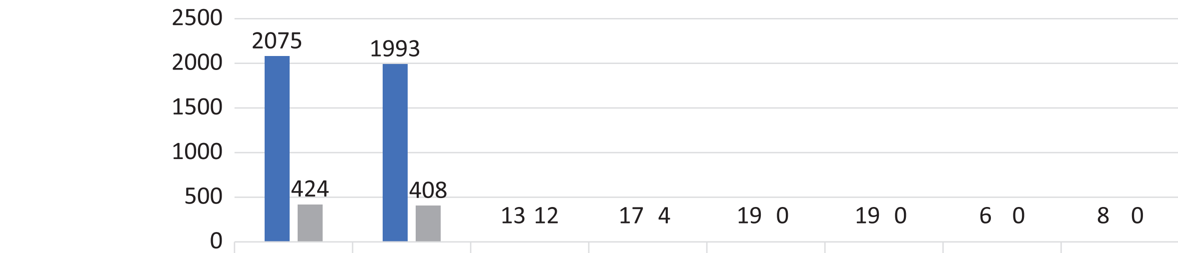
The eighth-grade Chinese history textbook (Institute of Curriculum and Textbook, 2009) does not portray the Nanjing Massacre with mere descriptive texts—the time, the location, and the impact—but also pictures of the scalps of Chinese people clumping together like a mountain; the smiles of Japanese soldiers when they pierced through pregnant women's wombs to stab the baby; and the game played by Japanese soldiers to see who could kill the most Chinese in one day. Images, with their unique suggestibility and internal logic, shrink and intensify any temporal sequence to moments and easily provoke emotions (Alexander et al., 2012). For every 12 or 13-year-old Chinese middle school student, images from the textbook are routes of references and totems of causes from which they construct a sense of the past (Sontag, 2004).

The twenty-first-century China–Japan relationship remains contentious with: (1) Japan's textbook controversy (Gries et al., 2009; Qiu, 2006); (2) Japanese politicians' frequent visits to Yasukuni Shrine (a memorial for dead Japanese soldiers, many of whom were classed as war criminals; Qiu, 2006); as well as (3) territorial disputes, such as those over Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Nevertheless, political conflicts merely serve as one source of Chinese people's perceptions of Japan. Ever since the 1990s, the rise of Japanese pop culture has established Japan as a major pop culture export country. Soap operas such as *Tokyo Love Story* and *Long Vacation* have achieved tremendous popularity in China, South Korea, and Thailand (Leung, 2004). In Taiwan, after the removal of the ban on broadcasting Japanese drama and songs in 1993, demand exploded (Iwabuchi, 1998; Yueh, 2016) to the extent that the term 'hari' was invented to describe the booming Japan mania (Lee & Han, 2013). In Thailand, chains of Japanese restaurants and fashion stores mushroomed. At a glance, teenage shoppers "look as though they have popped out of Japanese fashion magazines" (Siriyuvasak, 2004, p. 184). At the same time, Thai youths' memory of the Japanese invasion in the 1940s was fading. Few could describe exactly what had happened, and in their everyday life, Japanese pop culture provided an important source to find, express, and live their self-identities (Siriyuvasak, 2004, p. 197). Bilibili, one of the biggest video platforms in China and what is now recognized as 'China's YouTube,' was initially founded as a fandom community for a virtual Japanese character Hatsune Miku. Even today, most videos on this site theme around Japanese animation, comics, and games.

It is, therefore, no surprise that today, the information and the media sector is the biggest contributor to Japan's GDP. As an 878-billion-dollar industry that constitutes 9.6%, the information and the media sector create profits surpassing business (9.3%), real-estate (7.5%), and healthcare (7.2%; Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2018).

Given Japan's image jump from Samurai to 'cute,' philosopher Simon May (2019) points out that in contrast to Germany's unambivalent apologetic attitudes about WWII, Japan, with the elusiveness of cute, manages to avoid direct answers to questions of morality, responsibility, and sincerity. To other Asian nations, contemporary Japan is both 'one of us'—a positive, normative model for nation-building (Avenell, 2013)—and an 'other' to be wary of. In fact, Japan's national identity has always existed in a triad with 'the inferior Asia' and 'the advanced West' (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 7; Tanaka, 1995). 'The inferior Asia' casts Japan's past and stands in contrast to Japan's progress in emulating the West (Takeuchi, 1993). In contrast to Japan's cultural power, China had not exported much of its cultural content. The import and export of mass media between China and Japan is highly unbalanced (Figure 1).

This unbalance might explain the survey result by Japan's The Genron NPO (2019), where the Chinese views toward Japan had been continuously improving after the trough of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute in 2013, as shown in Figure 2. By 2019, about half of the Chinese people surveyed viewed Japan favorably, while the Japanese views toward China had consistently been



	Total	Book	Audio	Video	E-Journal	Software	Movie	TV Show
Import from Japan	2075	1993	13	17	19	19	6	8
Export to Japan	424	408	12	14	0	0	0	0

Figure 1. Copyrights import and export by media genre in China 2018. Note: Unit = piece. Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China (2019).

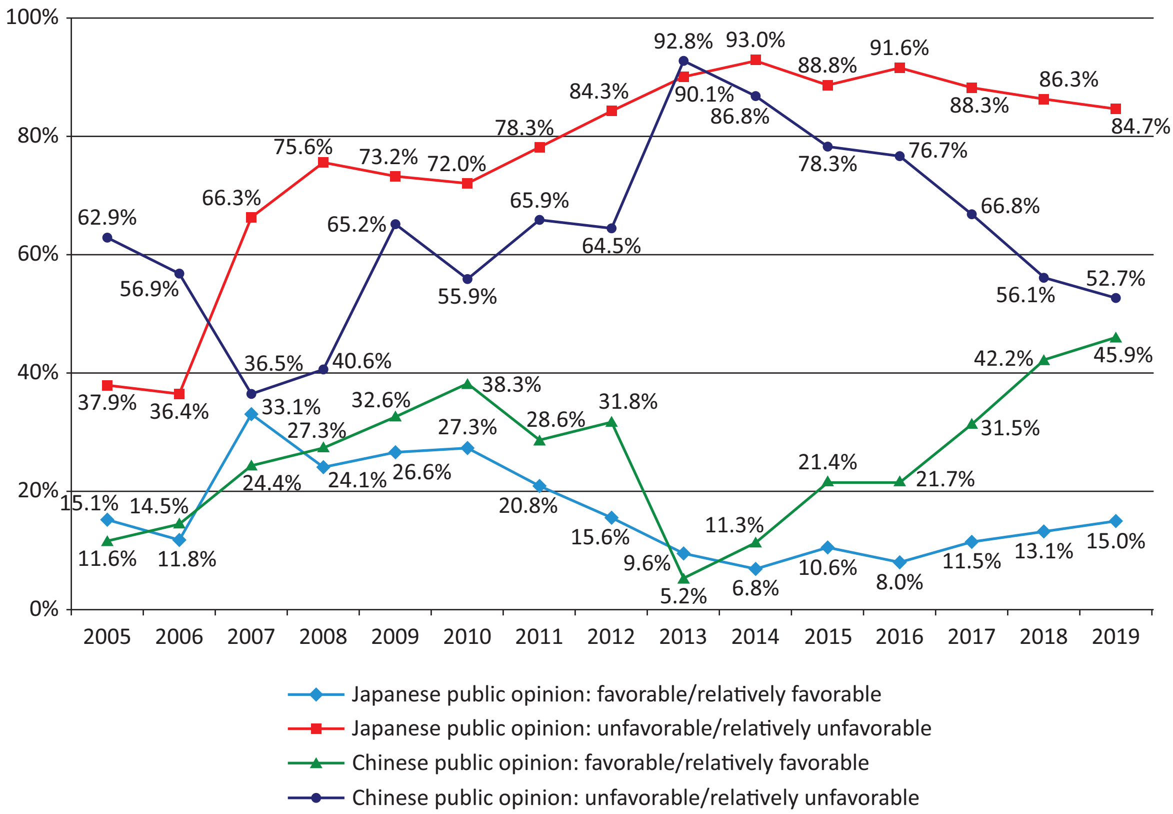


Figure 2. Genron NPO Japan–China Public Opinion Survey, 2005–2019. Source: The Genron NPO (2019).

unfavorable. Nonetheless, another survey conducted by Pew Research Center in 2016 showed that the Chinese views toward Japan were equally unfavorable. Only 14% of the Chinese respondents viewed Japan favorably, and 90% of the Chinese respondents still believed Japan had not apologized enough, compared to only 11% of the Japanese respondents who viewed China favorably.

Therefore, findings in different national public surveys tend to vary. In addition, in Lee's interviews with Taiwanese young adults on their impressions toward Japan, she observed a flexible switch of persona between the (private) fan and the (public) nationalist (Lee & Han, 2013). Switch of persona helps resolve contradictory sentiments by separating entertainment from politics, and personal fascination from the nationalistic norm. It also exposes the risk of public surveys only capturing the nationalistic, public side of respondents. Therefore, the interview data from my study can further explain the potential inconsistency and add depth to the survey results.

3. Methods

My study draws on interviews with 40 participants in total: 20 from China and 20 from Japan, all aged 18–30 and college-educated. The gender distribution is fairly balanced in both the Chinese (M = 9) and the Japanese sample (M = 8). Interviews with Chinese participants were conducted in Chinese, and those with Japanese participants were conducted in Japanese or English. All interviews were conducted between August 2019 and August 2020.

The Chinese sample consists of a convenience sample selected based on a knowledge of their different attitudes toward Japan (antagonistic, uninterested, interested). I intended to collect a sample with various attitudes toward Japan as opposed to a volunteer sample, as those attracted would tend to already have strong opinions toward Japan and thus leave out the uninterested respondents. 10 out of 20 Chinese participants can be characterized as more cosmopolitan, as they had the experience of studying abroad either short-term or long-term in places such as the US, Canada, or Europe. The other half did not have much experience abroad, attending colleges of varying levels of prestige in China. 5 out of the 20 respondents had been to Japan in the past, and two of them had had an experience of living or studying in Japan for two months and one year, respectively.

The Japanese sample consisted of 5 college students in the US and 15 college students in Japan (8 from Tokyo and 7 from Kyoto). Students came from colleges of varying levels of prestige and were recruited via snowball sampling. 3 research assistants located in Japan helped me recruit and conduct the 12 interviews. 7 out of 20 of the Japanese participants can be characterized as more cosmopolitan, with the experience of having studied in the US or Australia, and the rest had never been abroad. 4 out of the 20 respondents had been to China, and one of them had had the experience of living in China for about two months.

The limitations of my sample need to be noted, as 20 young people from each country can hardly be representative of the whole young population, even given the efforts made to ensure diversity. The point, however, is not to provide a quantitative opinion polling but to probe the reasons why young people may feel a certain way toward the country of interest, as well as the sources of information that may have prompted them to do so.

Each interview is semi-structured with 18 prepared questions and lasted on average for about an hour. Interview questions are largely comprised of three parts. In the first part (questions 1–5), participants are asked about their general impressions of the country of interest as a political entity, such as what they think of upon hearing its name, the adjectives they would use to describe it, and what they like and dislike about it. The second part (questions 6–8) tries to prompt participants to address the country as an aesthetic product, by asking about their experiences with the country's pop culture and travel experiences. The third part (questions 10–15) prompts participants to give their impressions of various other aspects of the country, such as its people, government, culture, food, sometimes with scenario questions such as "How do you feel when you see a Japanese person on the street in China," or "How do you feel when seeing the Japanese team in the Olympics." The point is to get a comprehensive picture of a respondent's sentiments toward different aspects of the country, which may be congruent or incongruent. Finally (questions 16–18), respondents are asked about their knowledge and views toward WWII, in terms of their own country and the target country.

During each interview, the interviewer typed down notes while the interviewee was speaking. Everything was also audio-recorded and transcribed afterward. Participant information and answers were documented in a spreadsheet, and all interview transcripts were stored, coded, and analyzed in NVivo.

4. Results

4.1. Scratching the Surface: General Impressions

Most Chinese respondents reported their impressions of Japan as 'neutral' or 'favorable.' In contrast to a 1996 survey in which 84% of the Chinese respondents gave the 'Nanjing Massacre' as their most immediate association upon hearing the word 'Japan' (Qiu, 2006), in my interviews, only two interviewees mentioned Japan's relationship with China as their immediate impression, and half of the Chinese respondents said 'anime.'

Another common association was Japan's aesthetic aspects, such as its fashion style (suits, uniforms, Lolita), aesthetic symbols (Fuji Mountain and cherry blossom), and the fact that Japan is a good tourist spot for shopping. Respondents frequently cited the beautiful scenery, architecture, and fashion as reasons for their favorable views toward Japan. Besides, almost every Chinese respondent talked about Japan's status as a developed country to explain their favorable views—specifically—Japan's high standard of living, its polite citizens, advanced technology, clean streets, and environmental awareness. Good preservation of traditional culture and vibrant contemporary anime industry were also two important reasons for favorable views:

> I think [Japanese people] are very polite. They like to simplify complicated questions, which is similar to my personality—I am a minimalist. I am very curious about Japan. I hope to work there sometime in the future. I don't know why but I have the impression—maybe from Japanese dramas—that their buildings and decorations have a good style—simple and useful. I also like their food. They respect the natural taste of the food rather than adding a lot of sauces like Chinese cuisine does. (Interviewee 18)

In contrast to Chinese respondents who mostly reported neutral or favorable attitudes toward Japan, most Japanese respondents reported neutral or unfavorable views toward China. The aspects they like and dislike about China are similar across all interviewees. What they like can be mainly summarized by (1) Chinese traditional culture, and (2) China's contribution to Japan's economy, such as investment and tourism. What they dislike also relates mainly to two points: (1) the Chinese communist government being aggressive toward Japan, and (2) the bad manners of Chinese people as exemplified by loud and rule-defying tourists.

On the one hand, some of them claimed that "I cannot dislike Chinese culture because Japan built its own culture based on it." On the other hand, it is not uncommon for Japanese respondents to understand the political relationship with China as mutual hatred:

> The media often portrays protests against Japan in China. It seems to happen regularly. I remember a year ago, there was a huge protest where Chinese people were crashing Uniqlo and messing up everything….I guess these protests happen either because of WWII or Chinese young people inheriting the mindset of hating Japanese people. (Interviewee 1)

4.2. Sources of Information: How Do We Know About a Country?

The 2019 China–Japan Joint Opinion Survey (The Genron NPO, 2019) shows that 14.4% of 1,000 Japanese respondents have traveled to China, and 20.2% of 1,597 Chinese respondents have traveled to Japan. Traveling, in general, helps enhance the feeling of closeness toward a country. Chinese respondents who have been to Japan frequently cited their first-hand experiences that involve micro, detailed information of specific settings when asked to comment on Japan:

> It is a place where you can go anywhere on foot. Different from China where streets are so wide, traffic is so heavy, and there are so many red lights to wait for, Tokyo is very suitable for walking… sometimes when you walk aimlessly you can see small temples that melt very well with the street scene, different from China's big temples. The street is full of surprises for foreigners like me. (Interviewee 8)

> Convenient stores are really convenient. Transportation is also very convenient. The living environment seems really fine. Many things seem to be prepared for individuals, such as individual seats at restaurants, perhaps reflecting a lack of sense of community. But for people like me who may live alone, that's convenient. (Interviewee 6)

Among the 20 Chinese respondents, 15 had never been to Japan, so their sources of information about Japan were also inquired about. The most commonly mentioned source is Japanese pop culture: dramas, anime, and variety shows. The next common source is the introductory articles on popular Chinese social media (such as Weibo, Wechat public account, Zhihu, and Douyin) made by Chinese bloggers or video makers. In a positive tone, these contents mostly portray the beautiful scenery, interesting cultural practices, and popular celebrities in Japan. It is common that these articles excessively idolize Japan to the extent that Chinese tourists might experience disillusion upon seeing the real Japan, as one of the respondents commented,

> Some Chinese public intellectuals are really into writing articles that idolize Japan, saying that they have such a wonderful welfare system and they are so clean and self-disciplined. Actually, when I was in Japan, I went to their night markets. Japanese people there showed another side of their personality. Things were dirty and messy. (Interviewee 13)

Other sources of knowledge include official news on Chinese media, conversations with friends who have been to Japan, serious Japanese literature (usually by Murakami Haruki or Watanabe Junichi). The anti-Japan war drama, a TV genre in China that tended to depict WWII in a lighthearted, comical way, had only one mention. In contrast to the common conception that Chinese people mainly take information from governmental or other official channels, the most common sources of knowledge about Japan are apolitical and entertaining, often adopting a positive tone, being produced by either the Japanese pop culture industry itself or Chinese online influencers who mostly hold favorable attitudes toward Japan. In addition, the widespread admiration toward the 'advanced' or 'civilized' aspects of Japan among the Chinese interviewees may also reflect the heavy discourses on the need to improve 'civilian quality' by the socialist state (Chu, 2016). In some way, young Chinese are projecting their received notions of idealized nationhood onto Japan and view Japan as a positive model of nation-building. Figure 3 shows the frequencies of different sources of knowledge about Japan that appeared in my interviews with Chinese respondents.

In contrast, Japanese youths mostly understand China via official channels, such as history textbooks and TV news. The textbook mainly introduces about ancient China without much relevance to today, and the news report is often negative:

> In Japan, you basically only hear about two things related to China. One is that their patrol aircrafts are lingering around our borders again. I don't know why but it seems they intend to invade or something. Another is the bad manners of Chinese people. Like, oh, some tourists are having serious conflicts with Japanese people somewhere again. It's in the news a lot. (Interviewee 2)

Counterintuitively, given the heavy state control in China, Japanese respondents' source of knowledge toward China is nonetheless more official and limited than that of the Chinese respondents. One reason may be that people in the wealthier, capitalistic parts of the world tend to trust their government more and do not doubt the truthfulness of such coverage (Silver et al., 2019). In addition, while many Chinese youths actively search for information about Japan out of personal interest or curiosity, there seems to be nothing attractive about contemporary Chinese culture that would draw foreigners to dig in by themselves.

4.3. From Pop to Highbrow

Most Japanese respondents reported no contact with or memory of Chinese pop culture, being unable to recall even one Chinese drama, movie, or piece of music. Their contact with Chinese pop culture included "the vague memory of hearing some random Chinese song on the street," "a Kungfu movie," and "a documentary about Chinese traditional culture that teacher showed us in class." When asked to reflect on the lack of contact with Chinese pop culture, many Japanese respondents concluded that the Japanese entertainment market was already saturated and foreign content was generally not needed. Nonetheless, Korean and American pop culture had large fan bases in Japan.

When asked what they thought of at the mention of 'Chinese culture,' all Japanese answered only the highbrow, ancient aspect about China that they had to learn during history lessons at school. This observation further illustrated that contemporary China is not perceived as 'cultured,' so that Japanese respondents had to resort to historical China when asked about Chinese culture.

Even though many Japanese respondents expressed their fondness for Chinese traditional culture, such as by saying, "The Chinese architecture and historical sites are amazing. I think they embody the wisdom of ancient Chinese people." They had no problem reconciling a positive view toward historical China and a negative view toward today's China, since "China fell behind." Therefore, no matter how successful Confucius Institutes become at spreading Chinese traditional values, the world may not necessarily acknowledge China's contemporary values, since people can view the highbrow, cultured part of China as completely separate from today's crude, politicized China, as my Japanese interviewees do.

In stark contrast, at the mention of 'Japanese culture,' all Chinese respondents mentioned some aspect of Japan's contemporary culture, most frequently anime and sometimes fashion. When several Chinese participants mentioned their interest in the serious, highbrow aspects of Japanese culture, all of them claimed that this interest originated from their interest in Japanese pop culture:

> My knowledge of Japan proceeds in an anti-chronological way. I am not interested in their traditional culture. It's my interest in anime that motivates me to trace back to its ancient culture. Many people who want to understand Japan would buy the book

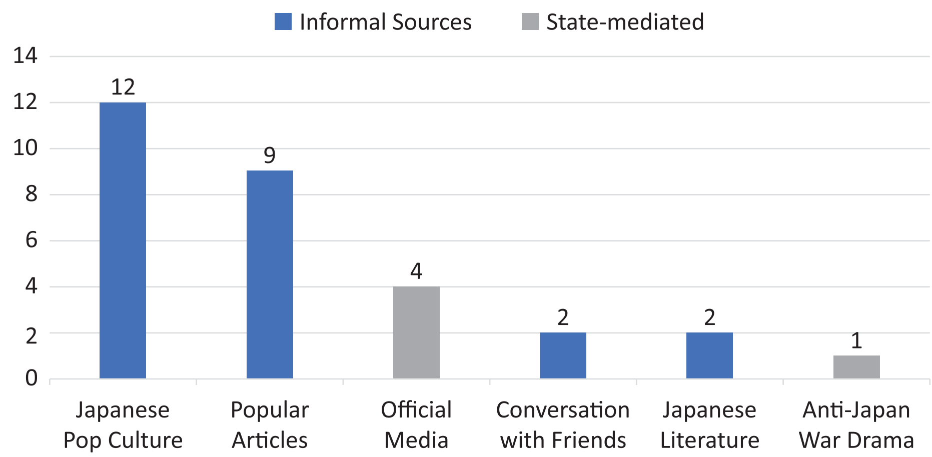


Figure 3. Sources of knowledge: Chinese respondents on Japan.

> *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. I've not even read that book. (Interviewee 3)

> Previously I had neither interests nor opinions on Japanese buildings or arts. I thought ukiyo-e looked strange and their obsession with robots was weird. But later I came to accept and understand all these things because I watched anime so often. (Interviewee 12)

Therefore, pop culture not only creates commercial profit, escapes censorship skepticism, but can also channel foreigners' interests toward the more serious, highbrow aspects of a nation's culture. We cannot help but wonder, what is the charm of Japanese pop culture that attracts the Chinese audience to such an extent?

4.4. Japanese Pop Culture Appeal Explained

All of the Chinese respondents were born in the 1990s, a time when Japanese pop culture flourished in Asia (Iwabuchi, 1998). All of the Chinese respondents first got in touch with Japanese anime during primary school, since it was aired by the children's channel of China Central Television (CCTV), a television network officially owned by the PRC State Council. CCTV broadcasted Japanese anime simply for its high quality or profitability, but at the same time, a sense of familiarity with Japanese culture was cultivated. Anime like *Digimon*, *Case Closed*, *Chibi Maruko-chan*, and *Doraemon* were common childhood memories shared by many Chinese children. Today, even having entered adulthood, my respondents are still passive or active consumers of Japanese pop culture, 'passive' meaning that they frequently get recommendations in the news feed online, and 'active' in the sense that more than half of them actively search for Japanese pop culture on a regular basis: "My impression of Japan is favorable because even though Japan has done bad things in the past, I think my most prominent impression of Japan is anime. It makes me feel a sense of closeness, at least not dislike" (Interviewee 15).

One interviewee, who prefers Korean pop culture to Japanese pop culture because she prefers "real celebrities over fantasy characters," still acknowledges the deep impression left by a childhood anime:

> When I was in primary school, I liked to read *Inuyasha*, where characters could travel across time. The bookstore near my home had manga so I read there every day after school. It's all a precious childhood memory to me. People always feel warm and special to things in their memories. (Interviewee 14)

When Chinese children grow to be adolescents, Japanese pop culture continues to offer attractive content with more explicit depictions of romance, sex, violence, and complicated story plots that Chinese media cannot offer due to either skill inadequacy or strict censorship. The teen dramas were not aired officially, but Chinese young adults usually had ways to find them on the internet.

Answering "what type of anime do you like to watch," Interviewee 10 replied:

> Right now, I like the funny and inspiring ones. When I was a kid, I liked anime about adventures and exploration. When I went to middle school, I liked to watch high school romance. At different stages of your life, you have different preferences, but Japanese anime covers everything. Whatever age you are, they offer so many themes for you to pick from.

Therefore, as a mainstream entertainment for children and a subculture for teens, Japanese pop culture accompanies the growth of Chinese young adults all the way into adulthood, many of whom may carry their passion and fascination into middle-age or beyond. Along the way, Japanese pop culture shapes Chinese young adults' life values and cultivates a strong sense of appreciation for Japan.

When further prompted to explain how the feelings of closeness and curiosity were generated, respondents gave reasons falling into four general categories, ordered from micro to macro:

1. Pleasant psychological effects: "You watch anime to entertain and relax yourself. Just like novels or movies, anime is an effective art form to make you feel good" (Interviewee 15).
2. Aesthetics and relatable narratives: "Japanese anime is really beautiful. Every frame is like a picture….I like the drama *Unnatural* because the characters in it feel a sense of mission for their careers. I also want to feel a pure sense of passion for my job" (Interviewee 5).
3. Cultural odor: "In dramas and anime, Japanese people are the carriers of plots. Because people are the subjects, or the centers, of the interesting storylines, I grow to like Japanese people and Japan in general" (Interviewee 18).
4. Cultural proximity: "Japan shares many aspects of culture with China. American dramas are too foreign for me, but Japanese dramas contain a satisfying mix of novelty and familiarity" (Interviewee 4).

Cultural odor, a term coined by Iwabuchi (1998), refers to the ability of a cultural product to provoke people's positive associations of the product with the country of origin and its lifestyle. Before the 1990s, when Japan's main overseas exports largely consisted of consumer machinery, Japan was a faceless economic superpower that easily fell prey to a Western Orientalist discourse (Iwabuchi, 1998, p. 165). But after the 1990s, things changed. In addition, some scholars argued that Japanese pop culture was particularly appealing in today's postmodern world (Allison, 2006; Azuma, 2009), where capitalism and advanced technology have led to a sense of alienation from the past and loss of community (Allison, 2006). Japanese anime creates fantasy worlds with friendly characters in an age lacking meaningful social contact, with sophisticated plots beyond Disney's simplistic nostalgia (Allison, 2006). The phenomena of Otaku and Hikikomori—people who lock themselves in their rooms for years and seek refuge in the immersive worlds of anime, comics, and games—also grow to be a worrying social issue in Japan (Tamaki, 2013).

4.5. Views on History: Mechanisms for Reconciling Contradictory Sentiments

About half of the Chinese respondents expressed unequivocal anger toward Japan's handling of issues relating to WWII. The other half expressed more nuanced attitudes, by (1) separating the present from the past, and (2) separating a nation's behavior from its culture and people:

> What happened in the past always happened in a very specific historical context. As I mature, I tend not to see things in black-and-white. (Interviewee 6)

> Just like Americans hate the Chinese government but like the small decorations I brought from China, I feel the same toward Japan. (Interviewee 17)

None of the Chinese respondents here ever actively boycotted Japanese goods due to the troubling history or island conflicts. Nonetheless, there had been instances of large-scale boycotting of Japanese goods in China in 2006 and 2013 in response to Japan's textbook controversy and island disputes (Gries et al., 2016; Qiu, 2006). Most interviewees in my sample, however, claimed that product quality was the major concern when they were shopping. As one respondent explained, "When you shop in your daily life, history or international relation does not really pop up in your head, because it's not directly related."

Clearly, the traumatic history was neither forgotten nor denied, but some of my respondents struggled mentally to reconcile the hatred they were 'supposed' to feel and their personal fondness toward Japan. In describing their sentiments, one used the metaphor of "falling in love with your enemy's daughter." In this sense, the cute, contemporary Japan is perceived as connected to but also distinct from the militaristic Japan, as 'his daughter.' Another respondent used the metaphor of "Japan is like your poor neighbor who got rich, and in the process of getting rich, he hurt you." These metaphors reflect a perception of Japan as an 'other,' but at the same time an 'other' that the 'self' feels close to, not only physically (as reflected by 'neighbor') but also mentally (as reflected by 'falling in love').

On the Japanese side, more than half of the respondents reported their lack of any knowledge of what had happened between Japan and China during WWII. A typical response was, "Japan is a perpetrator in the sense that it attacked Pearl Harbor, but it's more like a victim because it was bombed by the US," demonstrating a general understanding of Japan's involvement in WWII as a victim of atomic bombs. Among the respondents who are knowledgeable of Japan's imperialist activities, several thought the Japanese government should apologize, with twice as many thinking that there was no concrete evidence for Japan's violence, or that the current generation shall not bear responsibility for the past. In general, the more historical details a respondent knew about concerning WWII, the more sense of responsibility he or she felt Japan should bear.

An interviewee who had actively researched Japan's war involvement said:

> In high school, teachers specifically avoided mentioning the relationship between Japan and China during WWII because it's too problematic. They just dive into the air bombing in Japan and how we were victimized by America. One justification [of the invasion] is that the Japanese military was liberating Asian countries from Western imperialists since Western countries were invading and dividing China….I definitely think that we need a historical narrative acceptable for the Chinese, Korean, and other people victimized by Japan, because it's insane how Japan is denying the responsibility….For the Japanese government there are many things they should do. One is to compensate the victims. That's urgent. We should acknowledge the truth, make an apology, and establish a great educational system so that we don't repeat the same approach again….Some people feel if they learn about the negative things about their country it will affect their sense of identity and pride. But if you want your country to be great in a real sense, your country needs to be just. (Interviewee 4)

But in general, my results corroborate the view that the Japanese educational system failed at properly informing the younger generation of the basic historical facts that occurred during WWII (Qiu, 2006; Schneider, 2008). My data on the Chinese side has also shown that if Japan were able to sincerely reflect on its past wrongdoings, there would be few reasons for Japan to be perceived negatively. Instrumentally, it would also improve Japan's economic and political interests, as it would facilitate better cooperation with neighboring countries.

5. Conclusion

While China is a rising hard power in Asia and beyond, the media flow between China and Japan still tends to be one-way, in that China is a heavy importer of Japanese media content. While the Chinese history textbook and anti-Japan war dramas endeavor to pass on the collective memory of WWII, Japanese pop culture exports Japan's own representation of itself as innocuous and appealing.

As early as the 1920s, when Japan aspired to be an imperial power, it already understood the power of pop culture and media, using them strategically to build support domestically (Iwabuchi, 2002). For example, pictures and narratives of children were used to moralize and humanize war given the assumed purity and innocence of children (Fruhstuck, 2017). Eager to reinvent itself and create a benign image of postwar Japan, since the 1980s, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has run the Cool Japan project, using pop culture to build Japan's cool.

People are not mere exercisers of calculation rationality with passively received information but are drawn by a need to feel affect, pleasure, and a sense of solidarity (Alexander et al., 2012). Since pop culture is good at constructing and selling both aesthetics and narratives, many Japanese pop culture symbols have become totems—sources of emotional energy that excite and unite (Collins, 2004; Durkheim, 1995). These symbols have now attained cult status, such as the anime character Hatsune Miku, who inspired 'China's YouTube' Bilibili today. So have the shooting locations of dramas and anime, which continuously draw tourists from all over the world to visit (Lee & Han, 2013). These pop-culture symbols also contain a strong cultural odor—effectively evoking an affiliative association with Japan itself and a Japanese way of life (Iwabuchi, 1998). Therefore, the sacredness attached to these elements of Japanese pop culture is also successfully transferred to the political entity of Japan itself.

Thus, even though there has been an analytical tradition (such as the Kantian one) to separate the aesthetic and the moral (Kuipers, 2019), my article offers an example where the aesthetic might, to a certain degree, cleanse the moral. As Japan gradually builds its image as a developed, modern country via pop culture (an interesting, relatable dreamland with all the possibilities portrayed in its anime and drama), the image built by the virtual media has, at least in part, countered the sentiments shaped by traumatic historical events. In this process, 'Japan' as constructed by its pop culture acquires its own autonomy different from 'Japan' the political representation; it reshapes the image of Japan, transforming it from the profane (in Chinese historical, collective memory) into the sacred (a modern, fashionable symbol that Chinese youth aspire to).

In contrast, the second largest economy China faces tremendous difficulty presenting itself as benign and trustworthy to the global community (Hartig, 2016). In 2004, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a division of Public Diplomacy to broadcast Chinese political ideologies abroad, especially among developing countries (Thussu et al., 2017). In 2009, the Chinese State Council formally declared culture as a strategic industry, ready to invest 45 million yuan for the state media to run overseas to compete with BBC and CNN (Thussu et al., 2017). But these efforts were not very successful, as foreign audiences were quick to condemn them as propaganda (Shambaugh, 2015). While some scholars explain this soft power failure as due to China's fundamental lack of attractive political values (Paradise, 2009), my article nonetheless suggests that developing an attractive pop culture in the entertainment sphere may, counterintuitively, achieve the desired political effect of articulating national values, at least toward the public.

In conclusion, pop culture does not generate power in the conventional sense of authority or dominance (Otmazgin, 2008). With the universal appeal of entertainment and propelled by commerce, pop culture relaxes vigilance, escapes censorship, and bypasses nation-state boundaries to effectively distribute values. Pop culture is often viewed as lowbrow and crude in comparison to highbrow culture, which is arguably consumed by individuals as a means of acquiring status (Bourdieu, 1984; Levine, 1990). Yet in a transnational context, pop culture carries surprising political influences that 'the Chinese Dream' or Confucius Institutes cannot achieve. Countries that have recognized this point have started to develop sophisticated pop culture industries early on (such as the US, Japan, and South Korea) and have been more successful at building their national image.

In terms of China's national image, we need to note that the data collection of this article was completed before the spread of Covid-19. China aroused a great deal of hostility around the globe as it was perceived to be the country of origin, but also it demonstrated leadership by recovering quickly (Salzberger et al., 2020) and aiding foreign countries (Kurtzer, 2020). Future research should look further into how Covid-19 has changed China's national image and the global dynamics.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Article

Keep the Fire Burning: Exploring the Hierarchies of Music Fandom and the Motivations of Superfans

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Abstract
The Internet has changed how music fans come together and how the music industry connects to and communicates with fans. To understand the incentives for becoming a fan and why fans take part in an artist brand, this article considers the diversity in a particular fan community, including its hierarchy and roles. Fans have different levels of engagement, knowledge, and status, both inside and outside a fan community. To extend the existing research on fan hierarchies into the digital promotional culture, this study focuses on the case of the Swedish music artist Robyn and her Facebook fan community Konichiwa Bitches. To gain insights into a complex online research arena, we use a qualitative and digital ethnographic approach in both online and offline contexts. The article provides an understanding and conceptualization of fan hierarchies, focusing on the top of the hierarchy, superfans and executive fans, and on their incentives for engagement. These high-level fans function as a key connecting point between the brand management and the fans, thus taking fandom a step further and enhancing the brand.

Keywords
fandom; fan community; fan hierarchy; engagement; music industry; superfan; value co-creation

Issue
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1. Introduction

Music fans are not all the same; they have different levels of engagement, knowledge, and status, both inside and outside a fan community, as well as online and offline. Digitalization, marketization, and globalization have altered the conditions of the music industry, one that has adapted to the online environment and realized the benefits that social media can provide (Baym, 2012; Choi & Burnes, 2013; Wikström, 2009). Because of the high level of consumer interaction (Gamble & Gilmore, 2013), music actors have become deeply dependent on engaging with audiences and fans. Active, co-creative audiences are sought after and used to foster communication in transmedia marketing campaigns (Zeiser, 2015), which encourage fan engagement both online and offline. The goal is to induce fans to act in accordance with the marketing strategy and work within the campaign both as individuals and as a group. However, in the highly commercialized and strategized music market, there is a lack of knowledge on the music fan's perspective of being part of a fan community (Baym, 2012), and previous research has called for a better comprehension of fans in the digital era (Schrøder, 2019; Schroeder, 2014; Ytre-Arne & Das, 2019). A deeper understanding is therefore needed of fan communities' close cooperation with music artists/brands and of fans' experiences of engagement and what this gives them, as well as of the fans' various roles (as suggested by, for example, Galuszka, 2015) in promotional cultures. In the music industry, the term *superfan* is increasingly used to describe highly engaged fans, who are seen as the most important to reach and use as drivers in marketing campaigns. This label is also used among fans. We argue that this term has not been rigorously analyzed or conceptualized in previous research. The aim of the article is twofold: to explore and conceptualize fan hierarchies within fan communities, and to create an understanding of superfans that encompasses their engagement and their relations with other fans and the music artist.

The following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What is a superfan?

RQ2: How are fan hierarchies formed within a fan group?

RQ3: What do the most engaged fans contribute to the fan community (and to the brand) both online and offline?

The article draws on digital ethnography (Hine, 2015; O'Reilly, 2012) following the fan group of music artist Robyn, both online and offline, with a special focus on her Facebook fan community Konichiwa Bitches (KB). The rationale behind this design is to discover the meaning of a cultural phenomenon (Markham, 2017) and to gain multidisciplinary and in-depth insights into fans' social lives as they unfold, in other words, how fans act, feel, and engage in relation to the actual context and community (O'Reilly, 2012). In so doing, we provide an understanding and conceptualization of a fan hierarchy, focusing on the top of the hierarchy, the superfans, and also identifying the top superfans—the so-called *executive fans*—and the fans' incentives for engagement. This article proceeds as follows: In the next section, we review the literature on fan hierarchy and fan engagement that we draw on in our analysis. We continue by presenting the methodology used and how the study was conducted, followed by a description of the findings. The article ends by discussing the results and contributions of our study in relation to the previous research.

2. Theory

2.1. Fan Hierarchy

Duffett (2013, p. 2) defines a fan as someone having a "positive, personal, relatively deep emotional connection" with an artist or a brand. In the later part of the 20th century, the interest in fandom increased to encompass fans having engaging relationships with popular culture and mediated artefacts (Holt, 2004), with other fans (in fan communities; Jenkins, 1992), and as consumers with a unifying interest (brand communities; Cova et al., 2011; Sandvoss, 2005). Hao (2020, p. 25) focuses on so-called consumer fandom and argues for further conceptualizations of fandom in order to understand "the role of individual characteristics and social related variables as the drivers of consumer fandom" within promotional industries.

Social interaction is central in fandom, and fan communities offer fans a sense of belonging (Jenkins, 1992, 2006), provide structures for collectiveness, and become a "close-knit network of people who look after each other on the basis of shared interest and values" (Duffett, 2013, p. 246). Gathering, sharing, and spreading information about the object of interest is central to forming affective links among the members of fan communities (Hoxter, 2000). The collection of knowledge is also a way to gain power over less educated fans and elevate one's status in the group (Kermode, 1997). There is a social hierarchy based on the fans' level of knowledge of and access to the object of fandom (Hills, 2002). MacDonald (1998) defines five distinct types of hierarchy based on knowledge, access, leadership, venue, and fandom level or quality, and argues that fans who are at the top of all five hierarchies are executive fans. Tulloch and Jenkins (1995, p. 149) refer to executive fans as those who are "executives of the fan clubs and magazines." Jenkins (1992) notes that fan knowledge serves to distinguish people within the fan community. The experts—those who have accumulated the most knowledge—gain prestige within the group and act as opinion leaders. These senior or expert fans within the group thus acquire a kind of discursive power. According to Tulloch and Jenkins (1995), they establish, form, and control how the other fans in the group read and interpret fan objects. In this way, executive fans are "able to control topics of discussion and maintain their own high level of discursive power" (Williams, 2004, p. 4).

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984/2010) work on the processes of cultural distinction contributes to the analysis of how fan "status" is built up. The "capital" of being a fan consists of tacitly recognizing the "rules" of a fan culture and of attempting to build up various types of skills, knowledge, and distinction within that context, also called "fan cultural capital" (by Fiske, 1992). Hills (2002, p. 57) expands on this by suggesting that "fan social capital" must be taken into consideration when researching fans, defining it as "the network of fan friends and acquaintances that a fan possesses, as well as their access to media producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom." Fan social capital cannot be entirely divorced from fan cultural capital, as it is likely that fans with very high fan cultural capital will become executive fans and will therefore possess a high level of fan social capital (Hills, 2002) and identify with others who are like them.

Milne and McDonald (1999) argue that fan identification can be divided into three levels: low (social fans), medium (focused fans), and high (vested fans). Fans characterized as high are the most loyal and engaged, spending considerable time and money on their favorite artist in long-time relationships. They see themselves as a part of an artist's extended family, which they have a vested interest in protecting and supporting. These high-level fans are increasingly referred to as superfans. This term refers to Duffett's (2013) definition of a fan, but the superfan has a much deeper connection with the brand than a lower hierarchy fan. Adams (2013), who studied the role of superfans in sports (and their trademark infringement of the sports brands they are connected to) refers to them as "die-hard fans" who cheer on their team "from the first play until the game clock expires" (2013, p. 631). Van den Bulck et al. (2016) studied loyalty and fan emotion intensity among superfans in a television context. Liang and Shen (2016) studied how feedback from superfans can propel the revenue of creative industries—referring to superfans as highly vested fans. However, although the term superfans is increasingly used in the media and music industry, it has not yet been thoroughly described and conceptualized in the previous research.

In a talk at a music industry conference in Midem, France, Hyatt (Midem, 2013) described a hierarchy of fandom comprised of superfans at the top, followed by engaged fans and ambient fans. The superfans are those within a community who are considered to be potentially the most lucrative, those who will "pay you the most" (Midem, 2013). The engaged fans are those who are somewhat aware of the brand. They may go to one show and buy a couple of downloads per year, but the brand is probably not in their top 10. They 'like' the brand on social media and follow it online but probably not very often. Ambient fans are any people in the brand's network; they may be a friend on Facebook or follow the brand on Twitter, but they are not consumed by it. Hyatt argues that, from the industry perspective, it is vital to know who the superfans are—those who share and comment on everything—because it is important to involve fans in promotions, such as contests, in order to move them from level 3 (ambient fans) to level 2 (engaged fans), and from level 2 to level 1 (superfans), so as to create dedicated followers and customers. It is therefore important to nurture the superfans among the overall customers by creating customer experiences that make them loyal, lifelong fans (see, for example, Wu, 2012), who are also influential within their social networks. Thus, although constituting only a small percentage of a fan community, superfans are highly important in driving and controlling the community and also central to marketing the brand.

Relating to the different conceptualizations of fan hierarchies, we build on Hyatt's (Midem, 2013) and MacDonald's (1998) terminology in this study and argue that it reflects fandom within contemporary promotional cultures. However, the understanding of fandom in the previous research primarily takes an industry perspective, and insights from the fans' own perspectives are limited as to how fan hierarchies are formed within a fan group and how fans engage with and contribute to each other, to the community, and to the artist.

2.2. Fan Engagement and Value Co-Creation

The transformation of the music industry and the transition of communication channels toward digital media platforms allow music fans to access and enjoy music, even by-passing the music labels and sharing and creating content with each other at no or little cost (Wikström, 2009). Fans can also engage with other fans and with the music artists in new ways (Baym, 2018). Regarding fan and audience engagement, there are two sides: engagement as an audience experience; and engagement as an industry concept, in which the engagement is used as a means of value creation and marketing, and as a measure of success in these endeavors (Jenkins et al., 2013). Audience engagement on social media is often characterized by low to high activity (see Malthouse et al., 2013; Muntinga et al., 2011), and engagement behavior can be positively and negatively valenced and categorized according to level of intensity (Dolan et al., 2015). Generally, music fans are highly active and loyal in their engagement around the object of their affection (Chung et al., 2018; Fiske, 1992; Gray et al., 2017).

Through the use of social media, the brand/firm has the opportunity to follow and learn from the actions and interactions of customers (fans) and, in the process, gain information that can be valuable to their goals, but that can also be misused in certain instances, such as creating working consumers (see for example, Fast et al., 2016; Terranova, 2000). Diverse actors (advertisers, platform owners, music labels, etc.) profit on users' engagement, conducting what several scholars have identified as a type of unpaid work (see, for example, Morris, 2014). Baym (2015, 2018) calls this "relational labor," referring not only to audience engagement but also to the work conducted by musicians and artists toward building and maintaining relationships with their fans. Despite this risk of misusing users' engagement, social media also provides an opportunity for value co-creation, both for audiences and the industry.

Rather than being produced by an artist, for example, and delivered to and consumed by fans, value is co-created mutually between different actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016). Thus, members of brand communities contribute to co-creating a brand (Ind et al., 2013) and its content, playing an important and dynamic role in the value co-creation process (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Moreover, participation in online communities often leads to positive fan experiences that "bring value through enhancing an individual's sense of social identity" (Choi & Burnes, 2013, p. 47). This desire of fans for interaction makes it important to understand not only the artist/fan relationship but also the fan/fan relationship.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design and Case Selection

To get closer to the experience of the fan hierarchy phenomenon (Markham, 2017) and to gain an understanding of superfans within fan communities, we used a combined research methodology and selected the case of the fan universe of the Swedish music artist Robyn. The case was selected for three reasons: First, Robyn is a well-known Scandinavian artist with a large fan base; second, Robyn made a comeback in late 2018 and created a new Facebook fan community that quickly grew to include fans from all over the world; and third, this case provides a rich empirical context because the artist uses social media to communicate with her fans, who are also active in their relationships both with the artist and among themselves.

The main focus is on the Robyn fans' Facebook group KB, created by Robyn's management in August 2018 as part of the release campaign for her new album *Honey* and the marketing events connected to the release. At first, the group's content focused primarily on branded items and information about campaign events—for example, a gamified competition that gave fans the opportunity to win tickets to a secret gig and priority in relation to upcoming concerts. The game was directed at Swedish fans, but functioned as an enticement even for fans outside Sweden when introducing the Facebook group. When KB started, it filled a gap in Robyn's existing fan community by providing a digital forum for fans to engage with other fans and the artist. Since then, the group has grown and expanded to include fans from all over the world, and, by the end of 2020, over 3,500 fans were members of the community. Although it started as a management-led branded community, KB is now partly administered by fans and is focused mainly on fan activity: fan conversations, sharing of information, videos, and 'Robyn news.' Activities also include arranging fan concerts and initiating get-togethers.

An ethnographic approach facilitates getting close to and deeply understand the object of study (Hine, 2015), and, in this study, it fostered an understanding of Robyn's fans and the fan hierarchies in the community. Marcus (1995) stresses the need to follow "the thing" to understand it, and a multi-sited ethnography is crucial in doing that. Investigating a digital, networked object of study should focus on mobility in relation to what is happening across platforms during the study period, resulting in a multi-sited digital ethnography (Hine, 2015; Pink, 2016). This method makes it possible to focus on the social spaces that emerge through the use of the Internet and also on those existing beyond it (Hine, 2015). In contemporary social life, people combine online and offline experiences, as the Internet is so built into our everyday lives that we hardly recognize it. Yet, it can also be challenging to research as it is complex, moving, and ever-changing. Therefore, to gain a holistic understanding of the actual context and community (O'Reilly, 2012), we followed the fans' activities both online and offline.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Empirical data were collected between May 2018 and December 2020. As digital ethnography involves engaging in the field, watching what happens, and listening to what is said (Hine, 2015; O'Reilly, 2012), we searched for Robyn-related content in social channels and digital news media. We also followed and participated in blogs on social media platforms to gather relevant online media material (see, for example, Pink, 2016; Postill & Pink, 2012). In addition, since the researcher should "immerse herself in the setting, and… try to see life from the point of view of those who habitually populate that setting" (Hine, 2015, p. 19), we actively listened, watched, discussed, participated, and shared information in forums, digital sets, and offline. On a daily basis, we scanned KB and studied its posts, pictures, texts, activities, and conversations, taking several hundred screenshots in the process. All data were analyzed in a qualitative content analysis that identified similarities and relevant topics and themes, which were then described and interpreted.

In addition, we negotiated access with the key gatekeepers and made ourselves socially acceptable, as Hine (2015) suggested. To gain insight into the members' feelings and experiences of being fans and members of the group, we conducted a survey on KB in 2018. It was designed with 10 questions, both multiple-choice and open-ended; the latter were intended to encourage the fans to elaborate on their thoughts, feelings, and experiences so that we could reflect on what is valuable to them. 18 responses to the survey and many posted comments were collected. A total of 11 interviews were conducted with fans at diverse engagement levels, from regular listeners to active superfans. The fans on KB were invited to take part in the study, as well as the fans we met in the offline setting of the Robyn concert in Stockholm in August 2019. Attending the live concert also allowed us to gain an understanding of how fans interact with one another and with the artist. The selection of fans was based on our decision to approach individuals who were purchasing Robyn merchandise, as we believed that fans were more likely to buy merchandise than non-fans/regular listeners. Some were also approached after other fans suggested them as superfans. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 14 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted with both men and women (seven men and four women), aged 17 to 49, from three countries, Canada, the United States, and Sweden.

Ethnography as a method and process is explorative and adaptive, and the researcher should be open and agile in both the research strategy and the process and adopt a reflexive approach throughout (Hine, 2015). Iteration between the data collection and analysis characterized our research process. Inspired by the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we began analyzing the data by identifying open codes. This was followed by axial coding, which uncovered the key themes for each research question. These are described in the findings section and elaborated upon in the discussion section. We continued by using selective coding to integrate our themes with the theories on fandom, fan engagement, and fan hierarchies to create an understanding of superfans and their motivations, actions, and value co-creation.

3.3. Validation of Results (Trustworthiness)

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is the most important criterion for assessing the quality of qualitative research. As recommended by Wallendorf and Belk (1989), the findings of this study have been validated by triangulation across the methods, researchers, respondents, and sources. This article is based on data from a single case study, but, as the online community is rich and vibrant, these data provide fruitful insights into our understanding of the superfans and hierarchies of the music fandom phenomenon. The case study took place in the context of the music industry; however, as the focus of the study is fans and superfans, we believe that its results may be applicable and transferable to other contexts having a focal actor and fans. The aim is not to generate a statistical generalization but rather to reap fruitful insights into the studied phenomena and to contribute to the development of the concept as an analytical generalization (Yin, 2013).

The massive amount of online data has implications and challenges for research as it can affect the choice of appropriate data and how it is gathered (Boyd, 2015). Knowing where to find information and possessing the related knowledge of how to understand it contributed to our selection of data appropriate to the study and to our gaining access to the data. Furthermore, the data were analyzed and categorized independently by the researchers and then compared and cross-checked to make sure that the findings represented the various types of respondents/fans.

A main concern, beyond being open and transparent about our intentions, related to the fans' privacy and preserving their anonymity. It is useful to show content from social media in presenting the results, but the ethics of digital ethnography, as outlined by the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Franzke et al., 2020; Markham & Buchanan, 2012), proscribe the showing of content that can be traced online. In this case, we studied a closed Facebook group, which made the content untraceable. Furthermore, the quotes are presented with pseudonyms. The respondents' anonymity contributed to their giving honest answers. In addition, as the respondents' remarks were probed during the interviews, misunderstandings could be minimized because they were able to elaborate on their answers and explanations as well as their posts, which also positively influenced the study's credibility. These various factors contributed to the data's confirmability.

4. Findings

This section discusses the perceived hierarchies of fandom, with a focus on superfans and executive fans. It also reports on how fans build hierarchies and on what, how, and why superfans contribute to the fan community.

4.1. Blow My Mind: Incentives for Deep Engagement

The incentives of Robyn's fans include enjoying the relationship with other fans and engaging with each other both online and offline. Fans in the community build a common fandom together over time and create memories together: "I feel like a part of something. I feel less alone and less weird when I know that others are obsessed as well" (Robin, 2019). Another superfan stated, "It is important to share anything you feel passionate about, and I am passionate about Robyn's music" (Bella, 2019). KB provides the opportunity for fans to meet like-minded people, especially when they lack peers in physical proximity.

Fans are active in sharing, commenting, starting conversations, and arranging events. These activities are intended to provide value for themselves, the community, and the artist, with the aim of cultivating fandom within the community: "I want to try and do something to make everyone interact. Like bonding over stuff… or like, what's your favorite memory with stuff from Robyn?" (Bill, 2019). Arranged meetups online and offline also provide a space for fans to co-create value with each other; for example, in relation to upcoming concerts, fans invite others to share apartments and travel together to venues. Another example relates to a game conducted, both online and offline, for fans to win tickets to a secret gig. As Elisabeth (2019) described, "Three weeks of fun, swap meets, making new friends! We still keep in contact!" In general, Robyn fans show an openness and a deep interest in Robyn and her artistry but also an interest in each other.

The majority of the respondents described a fandom that has been going on for many years and involves following the artist in numerous ways, such as collecting things, following news, going to concerts, mimicking styles, and so forth. For example, Maria (2019) cuts her hair in the same style as Robyn and collects "all that I can get a hold of." Pictures of her collection are shared on KB for others to enjoy; they are requested by other fans and are a focus for interaction and value co-creation as they provide specific insights into Robyn's history, which is valuable for superfans in allowing them to come closer and 'get to know her.' Coming near to Robyn (both physically and emotionally) is central to her fandom and to dedicated superfans. James (2019) states, "She did touch my head when she crowd-surfed at one point, but yeah….Patted me on the head… I'm that sort of fan… it became like a… religion and I was like, oh my God—this is amazing!" For others, Robyn is a long-time inspiration in other ways; as Bill (2019) explains, "You could say that if there was no Robyn there would be no me….Influenced by Robyn, I also started my own record label and gave out my own music. She is an inspiration." Fandom thus functions not only as a way to draw closer to and find similarities with the artist but also as encouragement for fans to be creative and go their own way.

4.2. Stars 4-Ever: Conceptualizing the Hierarchy of Fandom

There is generally high activity by fans in the Robyn social channels. However, community data shows that some fans are clearly more active and influential than others, which indicates that there are different types of fans. The least engaged are the ambient fans, such as Lars (2019), who went to a Robyn concert and liked her music but did not label himself as a fan, even though he bought a Robyn t-shirt at the venue. Ambient fans listen to and like the music, but they typically do not become dedicated. The ambient fans of the KB group are not very active; they follow the discussions and news without participating much in interactions.

On another level, many of the group members in KB act as engaged fans who express their affection for the artist in various ways. Studying Robyn's official social channels shows that many fans are highly active in liking, commenting, sharing, and so on. Their engagement can also involve being active in real life, for example by going to concerts, listening to music, meeting other fans, and collecting things. Carl (2019) claimed not to be a "huge fan, but I have probably been one anyways because I have listened a lot to her." Many are faithful and come back again and again, which also suggests that they are engaged with their object of fandom.

Other members of KB see themselves as superfans and are part of a community of deeply invested fans. As Elisabeth (2019) stated, "We are an 'elite' group of Robyn diehard fans," and James (2019) added, "It is where the hardcore superfans are," fans who share a great deal of news with each other and find, for example, old videos, interviews, and fan artefacts of various kinds and share experiences related to Robyn. Some people more or less *live* Robyn and her values and explain that she is highly important to them. According to several of the respondents, a superfan is somebody who is highly invested in the fan object and can be so in various ways: by being very engaged, and (relating to quality/level in Hills's [2002] typology) by possessing deep knowledge and a high fan social and cultural capital. The community data also shows that superfans are the drivers of new offerings in the fan community, for example by initiating activities, such as challenges between fans and meetups with fans, and by starting discussions in which fans are invited to share their personal experiences of fandom and other aspects of their private life with their fandom friends. The superfan can thus be seen as an important driving force in the fan community in the sense of contributing to interaction and building the community culture. These fans are often seen as leaders, influencers, and experts by others in the group.

Superfans also arrange special Robyn events on their own, investing their own time to make them happen. For example, since 2011, three superfans have organized the Robyn celebratory party, 'This Party Is Killing You,' to bring fans together, which, in the beginning, was free (although today a small fee makes it possible to continue). As Nancy (2019) explains, "None of us are full-time DJs. We all have other jobs, so this is something we do because we love it… as people started showing up, we were like, oh yeah, we are here to party. This is great!….We felt energized. The excitement with the people that came." Brian (2019), one of the founders explained, "We did it for fun. People kept coming, we had a good time, we kept doing more of it. We became really invested in her career, her fans, and everything she was doing." These events play an important role for fans by demonstrating that they are part of something bigger, and this sense of group inclusiveness often evolves into friendships between superfans in real life. The Robyn management discovered the parties, via the superfans' high engagement with the artist, and started supporting them with, for example, merchandise and attention. This management intervention led to Robyn eventually attending one party, causing great joy among her fans: "Suddenly we see her walk into the venue. It was so cool; you could hear the roar….It was really above and beyond our expectations" (Brian, 2019). Her attendance created yet another enticement for the community. As these celebratory parties build both the Robyn community and brand, this implies that superfans can act as amplifiers of the brand, inviting other fans to take part in the experience. Although these parties are created by superfans, and they were even before the management learned about them, the brand definitely benefits from such events. The management could potentially use them as a sophisticated marketing avenue, although our results show no such interference or involvement.

Related to the descriptions of the levels and hierarchy of fans (Hills, 2002; MacDonald, 1998; Midem, 2013; Milne & McDonald, 1999), the empirical data suggest various levels of superfans: Some are deep in their knowledge and the quality of their fandom, and others are highly active in spreading news, stirring conversations, and being central in the fan group. There is also a clear distinction between being a superfan and an executive fan, the latter being on top of all dimensions of fandom. The most active superfans in the group have a clearly elevated status within it. They are often seen as leaders and as possessing greater fan social and cultural capital. Others in the group could readily point out who these people were: "Yeah, there are definitely a few, and I can't name them right now, but obviously X is very active on there" (James, 2019). As reflected in the community data, the executive fans steer a large amount of content in the KB group and are sometimes invited by the management to become administrators. When this happens, it indicates that the executive fans have climbed to the highest level in the fan hierarchy. Despite their new status in the group, however, they are free to act without the management steering their engagement although, from time to time, the management encourages the executive fans to arrange activities connected to the artist.

4.3. Monument: Formation of Hierarchies Within the Fan Group

Advancing in the fan hierarchy happens over time, either intentionally or not. Some fans seem to actively strive to gain a higher position and status within the group. This can be obtained by recognizing the rules of fan culture and building up skills, knowledge, and distinction, which can lead to the associated greater fan cultural capital and fan social capital. Having a social network of other fans as well as professional actors is important when one is high in the hierarchy, but fan cultural capital is seen as more important to becoming a top-level superfan or executive fan. The incentives can also be about self-branding; that is, they promote themselves within the community as the most engaged, as leaders or spokespersons in the group. Other members of the group also acknowledge this and recognize those whom they see as important influencers in the group.

Several respondents expressed that they became more active over time, for example by spreading content and working on events. Many in the group have been Robyn fans for a long time, even before the advent of social media, but the KB group gives them the opportunity to build relationships with other fans and express their increasing fandom over time, thus potentially leading to higher fan social and cultural capital and advancement in the hierarchy. However, none of the respondents expressed that they intentionally climbed the fan hierarchy. In fact, the friendly and like-minded atmosphere in the group makes the potential competition between members less of a motivation for doing this. Several members expressed that the group is "warm and giving" (Eric, 2019). Therefore, spreading content, etc. is not done to draw attention to oneself or improve one's status, but rather to share and co-create value. Nancy (2019) explains:

> It is like sharing it with a group of friends….It's just like, oh, everyone in the community would like to see that, I have to share it immediately. It's really an authentic affection, and probably it does, of course, promote her brand, but you know it's less about that and more about our genuine love for her music.

The group shows a closeness in sharing what they believe is important for others to know, but some take it a step further. For example, the superfans that have been the most active over a long period of time have developed friendships, some even buying Robyn merchandise to give to each other as birthday gifts.

We observed a few potential tensions in the group hierarchy and in the creation of it. However, when a negative comment occurs, the members remind each other of the importance of maintaining a positive attitude and culture. Some fans do advance to having strong fan cultural and social capital and are seen as the most knowledgeable, as leaders and even executives, but there is the possibility that others will not succeed in this potential aspiration. Nevertheless, the empirical data suggest that it is closeness with the artist and with the community that is the central value for engagement, not the striving to advance in the fan hierarchy.

5. Results and Discussion

The article contributes by enlarging the understanding of the most engaged fans within the fan community, what constitutes a superfan and an executive fan, and how to become one. Even though the present study focuses on the top of the fan hierarchy, it also contributes by conceptualizing various levels of fans (see Figure 1): Ambient fans listen to and like the music but are not very active, following discussions and news without engaging; engaged fans are active and participatory within the fan group; and superfans are highly engaged and seen as experts who are central to the fan group. They are also influential and drive new offerings in the fan community that contribute to interactions and to building the community culture. Executive fans, the top-level superfans, are the opinion leaders and, at times, the administrators, who have discursive power in the group.

Climbing the steps of the fan hierarchy can take time, and some fans actively strive to gain position and status. In the context of the hierarchy of fandom (MacDonald, 1998), the most engaged, knowledgeable, and influential fans are the executive fans (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995), those highest in the fan hierarchy in terms of knowledge, quality/level, and high fan social and cultural capital, as well as having access to the artist's sphere, stirring conversations, and being leaders. However, MacDonald (1998) and Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) do not agree on the relationship between superfans and executive fans and how they differ from each other. We argue that a superfan is at the top of the knowledge, quality of fandom, and fan social and cultural capital scales. The superfan is also seen as an expert and therefore often enjoys high status within the group. However, to reach the next level of superfandom, as an executive fan, the fan must also be on top of the scale regarding access to the object of fandom or the object's management, must be a facilitator of access to other fans, and must be regarded as a leader in the fan community. The findings show that the most active and engaged fans can become executive fans who may be designated by the artist's

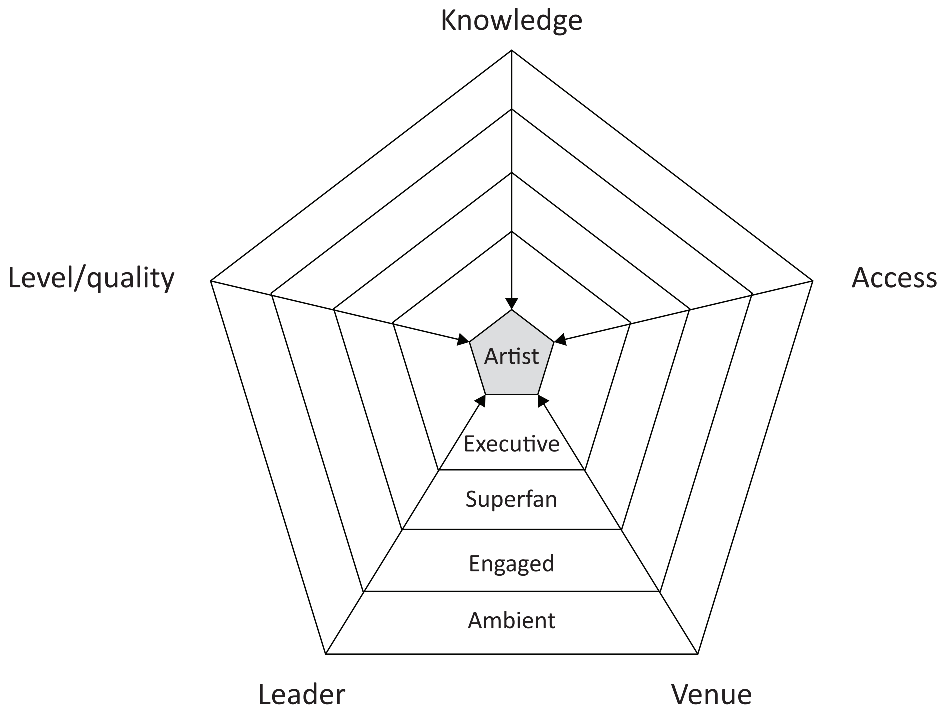

Figure 1. Hierarchies of fandom. Source: Adapted from Hyatt (Midem, 2013) and MacDonald (1998).

management as administrators of the fan page/brand community. As well as being high in knowledge and quality and possessing considerable social and cultural capital, executive fans initiate activities, create events, and have access to venues.

By rising in the hierarchy, the fans gain status, develop relationships with other fans, gain deeper knowledge, reach a higher fan quality level, and are seen as leaders in the community. They also come closer to and gain access to the artist/brand, with the possibility of influencing and extending the brand. These are the incentives for deep fan engagement as well as the drivers for changes in the hierarchy.

For the brands, deep fan engagement bridges the larger fan community and the brand. Superfans and executive fans are often used as mediators to initiate activities, gain access to the fan community, and build the brand. The risk of fans being misused via their engagement, such as in the case of working consumers, has been raised in previous research (e.g., Baym, 2015; Fast et al., 2016). However, the results of our study do not show the fans feeling used or exploited. At the same time, to our knowledge, the fans' engagement is unpaid, regardless of where they are in the hierarchy, including the executive fans who lead and administer the group.

Previous research suggests the need to advance the understanding of value co-creation (cf. Choi & Burnes, 2013) and audience and fan engagement (cf. Galuszka, 2015; Ytre-Arne & Das, 2019) by conducting fan-centric research with a focus on interactive experiences, integration, and co-creation between actors, as well as engagement practices that explore fans'/audiences' roles and efforts. The existing research mainly has an industry focus, whereas this study sets out to understand superfans and their motivations. This article explores the iterative and interactive nature of engagement and value co-creation in digital promotional cultures, by focusing on how fans engage both on social media platforms and in real life.

The article also provides an understanding of the distinctions between superfans and executive fans. The latter take fandom a step further by assuming leadership roles in the fan community and by creating relations with the artist brand's management, through which both the executive fans and the brand profit. The executive fan makes a personal business of the brand and can extend it into new venues, for example by organizing events and parties with merchandise related to the music artist. Such an expansion of the existing system of actors implies new ways of integrating resources and co-creating value, in which superfans and executive fans act as facilitators of value co-creation for the brand, whose management may or may not opt to monetize the relations and the engagement. The superfans and executive fans are the drivers and catalysts within the fan community, facilitating fan-to-fan interactions, relations, and engagement. However, previous research has identified a potential risk with fans that are too autonomous and engaged, at the expense of the brand (cf. Adams, 2013, regarding infringement), even though the findings of the present study indicate a balanced relationship.

The results of this article raise new questions about the motivations of those who are high in the hierarchy compared to those who are relatively low on the scale, and the possible tensions between them, a topic that is not discussed in our study but could be explored in future research. Further studies could also focus on the time aspect in fandom (i.e., the time spent as a fan), to discover if the time spent relates to one's status in the group and potential advancement in the hierarchy. We also recommend that the results of this study can be explored beyond the music scenario into other organizational and brand contexts.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Spinning at the Border: Employee Activism in 'Big PR'

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Abstract

This article extends Coombs and Holladay's (2018) social issues management model to provide new perspectives on activism and public relations. It also fills a gap in the literature on internal activism by analyzing the case of The Ogilvy Group and their employees, many of whom pushed for the agency to resign its work for U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Through a textual analysis of a leaked transcript documenting a meeting between Ogilvy management and internal activist employees, the communicative tasks of definition, legitimation, and awareness (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) are explored in a way that complicates identity and power. As public relations practitioners are increasingly called upon to either advocate for or against social issues, this study provides an interesting contrast, showing one interpretation of what happens when there is dissension in the ranks.

Keywords

employee activism; immigration; Ogilvy; promotional culture; public relations

Issue

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1. Introduction

In July 2019, The Ogilvy Group (Ogilvy) and Edelman, two titans of the persuasion industries, faced protest from their own employees regarding client-work related to the migration crisis at the Mexico/U.S. border. Employees of both agencies, as internal stakeholders, asked to be excluded from the respective accounts. As of this writing, Ogilvy leadership has refused to resign its work for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), while Edelman executives chose to end a new relationship with GEO Group, a prison operator running detention facilities at the border (Hsu, 2019). In both instances, employees turned activists were counting on negative publicity, or the threat of it, to create change within their respective organizations. Edelman received condemnation from the abandoned client, GEO Group, with executives there complaining of a "chilling" effect from "politically motivated attacks" (Moore, 2019). Other than this momentary derision (confined to trade press), Edelman emerged seemingly unscathed by capitulating to internal activists; whereas, Ogilvy experienced more furor.

In a leaked transcript of a meeting about CBP between Ogilvy CEO John Seifert and employees, *Buzzfeed*'s Vo and Vu (2019, p. 12) quoted one employee as saying, "What I'm mostly hearing is that we're willing to work with companies that are allowing children to die and that are running concentration camps." In response, Seifert said that car companies "allow people to die every single year" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 12). External stakeholders such as the immigrant rights group Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), amplified and supported the employee protests at Ogilvy by publishing an open letter to the agency's president on Twitter. In one of many follow up tweets, RAICES (2019) encouraged endurance on the part of the agency employees, writing, "Companies won't change plans after a few negative media cycles. Workers need to consistently organize for months, maybe years, for change to happen. #CanceltheContract."

Both Ogilvy and Edelman provide promotional services in what could be called 'Big PR,' or the combined $68,7 billion (Miller, 2020, 2021) global landscape of influence. The difference in decisions regarding border work might be attributed to the fact that Ogilvy is owned by mega conglomerate WPP while Edelman remains independent. Regardless, this study is more concerned with the crisis communication and the agentic possibilities engaged after the Ogilvy decision to retain CBP was made. The strategies at play for internal activist stakeholders and Ogilvy management, examined through a textual analysis of the leaked transcript, offer an opportunity to increase understanding of social issues management in the understudied area of internal activism by extending the social issues management model (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). The study will also consider briefly the role of the external activist group, RAICES, since they ignited the crisis for Ogilvy when they publicly misattributed a border video to the agency.

In public relations, a crisis is a conflict that forces practitioners to manage disputes in the best interest of their organization, and if possible, in the interests of other stakeholders (Wilcox et al., 2013). Issues management, a related process, has grown from its corporate advocacy roots in public policy (Heath, 1988) to include social issues (Coombs et al., 2019). With social issues management, a company must communicate and attempt to shape a public stance on a social problem (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Ogilvy's promotional work for CBP—designed to encourage new recruits in patriotic service—arguably helped shape an image for CBP in conflict with reportage concerning contentious social issues at the border. This work, although not a direct statement of corporate advocacy, was also challenged by the internal activists. Once the transcript was leaked, the potential conflict between image and social reality was exposed. Such unmasking threatened the neoliberal order inherent in corporate promotional production. This order prioritizes "profit over people" (Chomsky, 1999) and wields power behind a veil of seeming common sense and individual responsibility. In such an environment, promotional agencies as organizations, not individuals, are often not held to account because it is business as usual, even when, as some employee activists argued, human rights are at stake.

2. Literature Review

In a critique of public relations scholarship that arguably marginalized activist publics, Coombs and Holladay (2012) advanced the role of activism as central to the question of power in public relations research. Rather than confining power to the C-suite and activists as always in opposition to the corporate interest, activist publics also offer opportunities to study the "potential to create power and salience through advocacy" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 885). Since their critique, the literature has widened to include consideration of activism in/as public relations from further critical cultural perspectives (see, for example, Demetrious, 2013; Holtzhausen, 2012; Vardeman et al., 2020), and to nuanced corporate contexts (Pompper, 2015). Summarily, these studies all treat activism as a rich site of public relations understood "to be fundamentally about producing, sustaining, and regulating… meaning" (Edwards & Hodges, 2011, p. 3).

The study also intersects with employee relations, specifically tensions between upper-management and account staff. Histories of employee relations within the profession (Curtin, 2020; Miller, 1999) traced ways in which public relation's role as the voice of business was predicated on its ability to control its own intermediaries. With Ogilvy, we see some of these attempts at control in action in the contemporary moment. While many of the dynamics were antagonistic, the text reveals that some of these activists and possibly some senior leaders were morally conflicted about the border work. A similar tension concerning values was found by Hill (2020), who examined strategic communication in the context of corporate political advocacy, a growing trend that she argued "creates expectations and pressures on commercial organizations without addressing persistent mismatches between market and civic concerns" (p. 325).

The majority of the literature treats activists as a force against these expert persuaders. According to Heath and Waymer (2009), activists "employ the strategy of 'incremental erosion'… challeng[ing] the legitimacy of its target by chipping away at premises that are needed by the business to sustain its current means for generating revenue" (p. 197). While this is certainly true for external stakeholders, the situation is different for internal stakeholders, such as employees. Reducing revenue, for example, would not be in the employees' best interests.

There have been few studies of internal activism. Curtin (2016) published one such study, examining the case of two Girl Scouts who launched a campaign to persuade their organization and related companies to stop using palm oil in their products. When internal stakeholders wished to remain with an organization and to create change, the complexities revealed the limitations of a frame that posits activism as diametrically opposed to corporate interests (Curtin, 2016). In another case study examining internal stakeholders, Henderson et al. (2015) found that insiders may define values and relationships vis a vis a social issue differently from the external, organizational voice.

2.1. Social Issues Management

Social issues management, the primary model used to analyze the case, is deeply interrelated with crisis communication and risk communication (Coombs et al., 2019). Risk communication concerns the management of real or perceived harms and hinges upon "interactivity," "awareness," "tolerance," and comprehending "perceptions of risk" (Coombs et al., 2019, p. 32). Issues management, among many factors, "requires balancing the interests of organizations and stakeholders to facilitate mutually beneficial relationships" (Coombs et al., 2019, p. 33). Mutuality relates to the dynamic of power in issues management.

Many scholars within critical public relations have asserted that power heavily favors the interests of organizations over other stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Roper, 2005). Still others have claimed that putting the client interest above all others might damage long-term relationships (Heath & Palenchar, 2009) and such an outcome might encourage balance. Also relevant is the position of activists as publics. Instead of the typical assumption of activists as always/only organizations, Dougall (2005) disrupted this notion by theorizing activists as publics that are not necessarily organized into groups. This perspective shares the idea that identity itself is fluid and deeply contextual (e.g., Curtin, 2016; Demetrious, 2013; Motion & Weaver, 2005). The positioning of activists as dynamic, contextual publics opens space to consider better the work of communication in social issues management.

Coombs and Holladay (2018) developed their social issues management theory by modifying the catalytic model, which tracks a crisis through its life cycle, examining key communication strategies in a non-linear process. Their model arguably better addresses the dynamism that social conflict and social media introduce to the management process (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Though inspired by the catalytic model, the social issues management model moves away from the idea of stages to focus on the communicative tasks facing firms. The social issues management model seeks to explain how various communicative tasks are used to influence the debate and possible resolution of social issues.

Coombs and Holladay (2018) divide the communicative tasks in their social issues management model into three areas: definition, legitimacy, and awareness. All three tasks at various non-linear stages in the management process invite contestation given the inherent polarization of social issues (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Definition is a battle for setting the terms of the issue with the firm's issue manager confronted by activist stakeholders who wish to challenge the framing of the debate in either nuanced or oppositional ways.

Legitimacy is interrelated with the task of definition; however, it is broader in scope. For example, a manager not only must define the contours of the debate, they must also contest the standing to speak on the issue in the first place. Coombs and Holladay (2018) assert that legitimacy represents a key difference between companies and activists in that the former "can face intense scrutiny for supporting a social issue that is unrelated to their core business" (p. 83). Whereas activist stakeholders, especially those representing formal organizations, strive to embody a mission predicated on the very social issue at hand (Coombs & Holladay, 2018).

Related, in a study featuring interviews with 21 activist organizations, Woods (2019) extended Coombs' (1992) typologies of legitimation strategies and made two key findings: 1) Activists who tie values to the issue manager increase legitimacy; and 2) activists have an opportunity to increase legitimacy by harnessing media coverage of the issue in a way that emphasizes misdeeds by corporate actors.

Finally, awareness represents both task and stage in the model because Coombs and Holladay (2018) recognized that the "loci for decision making" for social issues management and traditional issues management was markedly different. Company leaders make the decision on how or if they should address a social issue, rendering moot agenda setting from the catalytic model (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Therefore, Coombs and Holladay (2018) "collapse the current and critical stages into one stage that we label awareness" (p. 84).

Importantly, the case to be analyzed addresses the reputational harms that are sometimes generated through the process of awareness. In short, the social issues management model explains what seems like a simple statement of beliefs on the part of a company and activists, revealing the complex power dynamics at play (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). The following case study will be used to analyze such complexity using the model. First, however, it is useful to provide political economic context on both the issue of migration and the business of 'Big PR.'

3. Political Economic Context

The current crisis is but one of many at the Mexico/U.S. border over the course of more than a century. However, we start with President Obama because it is his policies which President Trump has by turns abolished or re-interpreted. In what was a controversial strategy, Obama sought to aggressively crack down on illegal immigration to the U.S. (Young, 2011) with deportations reaching record levels during many years of the Obama administration, "including a three-year period between fiscal 2012 and 2014 when there were more than 400,000 per year" (Gramlich, 2020). In 2012, finding Congress unwilling to legislate, Obama passed an executive order to help the children of undocumented parents become citizens in a relatively short time; this policy was called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

One of Trump's early actions was to reverse DACA, claiming he had no choice and that he was simply enforcing the policies Obama had established. Trump could have influenced Congress, then controlled by the GOP in both houses, to pass legislation similar to DACA, but this was not his strategy. Instead, Trump, along with Attorney General Sessions, would proceed to reinterpret Obama-era legislation in even more anti-immigrant fashion, including new executive orders (e.g., the 'Muslim Ban').

The Trump administration re-framed claiming asylum to the U.S. as a largely illegal activity. For example, Sessions declared that women fleeing abuse did not meet the legal bar for a valid asylum claim. The next significant re-interpretation of Obama-era law came in the form of the Trump administration's "zero tolerance policy." Suddenly the debate over the wall between the two countries seemed like a sideshow as thousands of children were forcibly removed from their parents and placed in separate custody. As of 2020, more than 100 children have yet to be reunited with their families (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020). That summer, before the midterm elections in fall of 2018, the American press was awash with stories of protests about the separations, the squalid conditions at the detention centers, and deaths at these facilities. These protests subsided somewhat after a judge declared a halt to the zero tolerance policy.

In January of 2019, the administration moved to a new tact, known as "Remain in Mexico." Under this policy, "more than 50,000 people have been told to wait there for weeks or months for U.S. court dates" (Merchant & Spagat, 2020). Mexico complied, likely due to the importance of the trade pact between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. The policy, among the first rescinded by the Biden administration in 2021, did not lead to less work for CBP. According to a Pew Research report based on CBP data, "the number of migrant apprehensions at the U.S.–Mexico border rose in fiscal 2019 to its highest annual level in 12 years" (Gramlich, 2020, p. 1).

The image of CBP has suffered amidst these controversies (see, for example, Fernandez et. al, 2019). In a survey of residents along the border, Wong (2019) found "a lack of trust that Border Patrol officials" will serve and protect people and that those officers "who abuse their authority will be held accountable for their abuses" (p. 2). Harnessing public sentiment, various protest groups have persuaded companies to stop doing business related to the border (from banks to furniture makers) and disrupted several Immigration and Customs Enforcement deportation raids.

3.1. 'Big PR' by the Numbers

The Ogilvy Group, headquartered in New York City, is a subsidiary of the conglomerate WPP, headquartered in London. U.S. revenues account for the largest share of income for the holding company (Miller, 2021). Although The Ogilvy Group is primarily categorized as an advertising agency, they do list public relations among their services on their website; this despite having a separate firm called Ogilvy Public Relations. The Ogilvy Group is examined in the context of public relations in this study because crisis communication is a subset of public relations.

Major clients for The Ogilvy Group include Cadbury, Pizza Hut, and Samsung with Publicis and BBDO identified as competitors (Dun & Bradstreet Hoovers, 2021b). Publicis, one of the 'big four' agency holding companies along with WPP, IPG, and Omnicom, has faced rapidly declining growth as the entire sector copes with a radically transformed environment where Google and Facebook dominate the advertising business (Barker & Agnew, 2019). WPP is in third place by market share at 5.6% (Miller, 2021).

Operating in 85 countries, The Ogilvy Group garnered approximately $308 million in revenue during the most recent fiscal year (Dun & Bradstreet Hoovers, 2021b). This figure, while significant, is dwarfed by the $16 billion in revenue generated by the parent company, WPP, as a whole (Dun & Bradstreet Hoovers, 2021b). By contrast, Edelman, the largest independent public relations firm in the country (O'Dwyers, 2021) will generate a projected $420 million in annual sales (Dun & Bradstreet Hoovers, 2021a). Clearly, conglomeration pays, but at what ethical cost? Edelman was arguably freer than Ogilvy to, as the activists might frame it, do the right thing and walk away from a controversial client. As will be discussed, the Ogilvy contract with CBP represented a small piece of the larger, lucrative government sector. Furthermore, the economic pressures of the 'big four' agency race were immense. Through this political economic lens and the analysis of the case through the social issues management model, we see communication tasks deployed in the liminal space between 'good' and 'bad' practitioners or organizations.

4. Method

The researcher was made aware of the Ogilvy case through routine reading of trade publications. The leaked transcript of the Ogilvy meeting provided a lengthy (35 pages) document for close reading. Furthermore, the Ogilvy example offered an opportunity to expand the social issues management model. Since the textual analysis method must consider context (Allen, 2017), the researcher also conducted a political economic analysis of the migration issue and of the agency using a variety of press, think tank research, social media, and databases. Drilling down on the database work, the researcher used Hoovers to find revenue information and relevant corporate relationships. IBISWorld was then employed to situate Ogilvy within the advertising and public relations industries broadly. The information on federal contracts was obtained using the software GovTribe. Social media, specifically Twitter, was searched using the hashtags established by RAICES, the external stakeholder most relevant to the case.

Data analysis of the primary text, the leaked transcript, involved numerous close readings to identify patterns or themes. Since textual analysis is an interpretative method, the researcher began from a poststructuralist standpoint, viewing all texts as polysemic and situated within crucial contexts that aid understanding of phenomena. Furthermore, the researcher interpreted the transcript with insider knowledge of the general culture of global agencies, based on her decade-plus experience as a public relations practitioner with a top multi-national firm. This subject position advanced the ideological interpretations of the promotional logics of the case, as well.

After the initial readings of the text, the researcher selected the social issues management model (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) as a suitable lens for analysis. She chose this particular theory due to its relevance to the case and to the recognition of a gap in the model to be filled, pointed out in a question posed by the theorists themselves (Coombs et al., 2019, p. 43). The analysis then continued deductively, searching for evidence that did or did not complement the existing typologies. This pattern recognition occurred at many levels, including: (1) individual words and phrases (repetition, contextual meanings, elision, etc.); (2) general subjectivity of the speakers (employee or CEO); (3) any non-verbal responses (e.g., clapping, interruption when indicated); (4) themes (e.g., values talk); and (5) the order of presentation. The researcher's interpretation also contributed to theoretical implications of the analysis.

The analysis was guided by the model and the following research questions:

> RQ1: How was the social issue addressed or not addressed by the stakeholders engaged?

> RQ2: How might social issues management with employees (internal stakeholders) differ from similar communication processes with external stakeholders?

5. Case Study: Ogilvy Border Woes

In a transcript leaked to *BuzzFeed News* (Vo & Vu, 2019) of a meeting between Ogilvy CEO John Seifert and a group of employees, the tensions between management and employee activists were palpable. Siefert opened, saying they were there to talk about:

> What we know is happening broadly in our reality of the immigration issues going on in the country and the border specifically, the southern border specifically, and how that may or may not be connected to the work we're doing [for CBP]. (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 2)

Although a couple of employee comments would later come to define "the issues," Siefert never named them, relying instead on terms such as: "issues," "things that are happening," "today's environment," "situations like this." The closest he came to specificity was in this moment early in his opening remarks:

> My first wife was Mexican American. Both of my sons are fifty percent Mexican as far as I'm concerned. I find what is going on in the immigration debate broadly and what is going on in particular in terms of the horrific human situation going on at the southern border abhorrent. So I suspect I feel almost as passionate as many of you to see a country that is as wealthy as the United States, as I would hope as progressive as the United States, confront these challenges so badly. (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 3)

Seifert continued: "Whatever my personal views are of what's happening around the world, what I am paid to do is represent the company to the best of my ability" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 3).

He stated that he had worked for the agency for 40 of its 70 years and that he was mentored by founder David Ogilvy. After invoking the founding father, Seifert's opening remarks in the transcript proceeded another four pages without directly mentioning CBP or the crisis at the border.

Instead, Seifert shifted to the existential importance of maintaining confidentiality with clients. For example, he said, "It has always been true… that we only have the right to exist if clients could trust us" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 4). He bemoaned the outsized liability of agencies these days concluding: "We either agree, or they don't assign the business to us" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 5).

Seifert finally addressed the reason for the meeting:

> Now, I know that in some cases, there is a view of, you have to have something that, the point of view is, is sometimes bigger than the money, and I get that. But the fact is, $25 million here, means probably 150 jobs, or more. (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 8)

Seifert then turned to CBP specifically and hit upon another theme of his legitimation: the work done for this client is limited to recruitment advertising only. He returned to the subject of risk: "But it's a very important assignment because it is a prestigious piece of business in Washington….We have government service contracts that represent about 80% of our Washington, DC, operation" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 8).

The first question during the Q&A with Seifert was essentially: At what point as the leader do you decide the negative publicity makes a client not worth having? Seifert responded with a defense invoking previous problematic Ogilvy client industries such as 'Big Oil' (BP, the corporation held primarily responsible for the largest maritime oil spill in U.S. history, was an Ogilvy client at the time), 'Big Tobacco,' and sugary beverages (Coca-Cola). Seifert summarized, "But in the main we have tried to find and see the good side in most clients and work with them to mitigate things that over time might be deemed negative" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 11).

Seifert then returned to individual employee liberty (to protest, to vote), but implied that the workplace was not such a democratic space. Then, Seifert stated, "The work we were doing for CBP is advancing the good of what that organization can and should be doing by getting the most diverse people with the right set of skills serving the needs of that organization" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 13).

Following this, an employee said, "I love the fact that you talked about learning from David Ogilvy because in his books" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 18), and continued to offer a different interpretation of the wisdom of the founder than did Seifert, asserting that Ogilvy had a "moral ground" that put people first. The difference between BP and Coca Cola, the employee argued, is that those companies make products that consumers may choose not to buy, whereas the actions of CBP constitute "a human rights problem" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 18). The employee concluded their comment by saying, "This is about people not just about money" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 19). According to the transcript, this was immediately followed by applause from the other employees.

In another signal of dissent, an employee asked, who will work with Ogilvy now that every media piece about the agency will say "last known for its work with the CBP" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 21). The CEO responded: "This is where you need to stand up for the brand" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 21). The employee interrupted Seifert: "I've worked here for nine years and I've never not been proud until Monday to come to work" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 21). Seifert, unphased, invoked the values of the company to which the employee responded, "I'm not sure what those values are" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 21).

Seifert again reframed the crisis, this time as Utilitarian moral dilemma: "I don't believe it's responsible to ask or expect the company to make a choice at an individual level when we're trying to weigh a whole set of factors for the collective good of the company at large" (Vo & Vu, 2019, pp. 22–23). After several more rounds with the activist, Siefert said: "If your line is we should not work for clients at that risk level, then you shouldn't be here" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 24).

The meeting turned again on a comment from another employee who asserted that they'd rather have Ogilvy helping to recruit good people—people with a conscience—to CBP than not. This inspired another employee to agree, but then raise the practical question as yet unanswered, how much business will we lose before we drop CBP as a client? This prompted an employee to opine about the larger consumer climate:

> Purpose is also very very big in today's world. I'm not sure on a good day….Ogilvy knows or fully knows its purpose—to clients yes but to social in the social realm of things—we don't stand for sustainability [for example]. (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 28)

Siefert disagreed by immediately pointing to pro bono work and asserted: "We are a purpose driven company. We serve communities, we serve brands" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 29)

The exchange with this employee climaxed with the employee saying, "And my point about [Ogilvy's purpose], before you interrupted me" was that the Ogilvy brand is not synonymous with social good (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 30). Perhaps sensing an impasse, Seifert soon suggested to all employees: "If any of you personally feel that your livelihood…[has] been damaged… come see me. I'll be your personal public relations advisor because there's nothing that we have done… that I wouldn't defend go defend to anybody" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 33). He closed the meeting with remarks that included: "[If] someone thinks that I'm not upholding the brand they should shoot me. I mean that with all seriousness" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 34).

The repercussions of the leaked transcript were not confined to the press. RAICES, an immigrants' rights organization that sparked the crisis for Ogilvy, wrote an open letter to Ogilvy President, Lauren Crampsie, demanding that they terminate the contract. The account NotColumbia (2019) directly challenged Crampsie to respond to the RAICES letter. He tagged a number of accounts in this message including media such as *Adweek* and the *Wall Street Journal*. RAICES continued to tweet and added the hashtag: #cancelthecontract. Union organizer Thompson (2019) investigated and tweeted this take: "They [Ogilvy] made 20M+ to make CBP appear palatable to the public."

6. Discussion

First, it should be acknowledged that Ogilvy did not willingly enter into the public discourse about the border crisis; in this sense, the case does not qualify with traditional social issues management in which firms take a more proactive, advocacy role. However, the model still works well to explain the management process from the perspective of multiple stakeholders and the case suggests that it is useful for understanding internal activism, as well. The discussion section is presented by order of the communication tasks specified in the non-linear model: definition, legitimation, and awareness.

6.1. Definition

Siefert avoids specificity when defining the issue(s) related to doing work on behalf of clients engaged with the crisis at the Mexico/U.S. border. In other words, he does not directly define the issue. The resulting ambiguity is lessened when the internal employee activists begin to define the issue as one of human rights. This definition is contested by Seifert in indirect ways through diversity and values talk, all of which foreground the primacy of the profit motive based on his remarks.

The work of 'Big PR' delivers value in the form of profit, however, as Aronczyk (2013) asserted in the context of nation branding, "this position does not map well onto ideas of the collective good in terms of our moral and ethical responsibilities and relationships" (p. 79). Seifert tried to smooth out that map. It was a struggle with many discursive weapons at his disposal, including ironically, diversity. Seifert deployed diversity as a means of (re)defining the social issue in at least two instances: 1) To establish common ground with the marginalized ("my family is Mexican American"); and 2) to lessen the moral turpitude of CBP, positioning Ogilvy as savior—we will recruit diverse people. The employee response was mixed.

Seifert, a white, wealthy man attempted to identify with the victims—mostly Mexicans in the public imagination—of the new anti-immigration policies.

In reality, the majority of the migrants seeking entry to the U.S. at the Southern border at this time were from other Central American countries (Passel & Cohn, 2019). "Unauthorized immigration" by Mexicans to the U.S. was at historic lows (Passel & Cohn, 2019). However, Seifert likely understood that many Americans do not make such distinctions. 'Mexican' in the current discourse in the U.S. is a substitute for all Latinx migrants.

After establishing his Mexican American credentials, Seifert described a passive tragedy—no one was actively doing the "abhorrent" deeds at the border. When he did ascribe blame, it was the "country" at fault, not the Trump administration, not the American people, and definitely not Ogilvy's client in charge of separating children from families at the border. His words were likely meant to establish common ground with his employees, suggesting he was one of them, united in passion and progressive values.

Seifert likely wished to construct a divide between the two spheres of public/private. Public, in this case, meaning all activity outside of the agency, and private meaning personal views. He would return to this regulation of speech—who gets to say what when—throughout the meeting. He claimed that not even the CEO is allowed to let personal beliefs interfere with the profit of the company. This is in line with Banet-Weiser (2012):

> Advanced capitalism not only is a political economic condition but also functions as a political rationality, one that works as a system of governmentality and management that not only builds culture but also reimagines definitions of the state and the individual. (p. 130)

Here the corporation is the state and the individual may only exercise power in restricted ways when the corporation is seemingly separate from the state, e.g., government elections.

In his opening remarks, Seifert introduced values talk—or rhetoric that refers to an organization's core beliefs—through an invocation of the founding father, David Ogilvy. He does not define said values at any point, nor does he refer to any corporate statements on the matter. Instead, he attempts to let the mythology of the founder as a great man be self-evident. However, an activist employee offers a contrasting definition of David Ogilvy as putting people before profit—the implication being that Seifert and the agency were not, in fact, living up to the values previously suggested.

Seifert doubled down on the ambiguity by once again referring to values without naming them and asserting that Ogilvy is a purpose driven company. This leads to an employee expressing shame for the firm's involvement with CBP. Not to be outdone, Seifert summons his theatricality, saying if we're not living up to our (ambiguous) values, then someone should shoot him.

It is interesting, although not surprising given their profession, that many of the activist employees appear to be more concerned about the appearance of wrongdoing, rather than any actual human rights abuses with which the company may be associated. To paraphrase one employee, the Ogilvy *brand* is not synonymous with social good (Vo & Vu, 2019). Seifert himself uses the concept of service to apply equally to communities and to brands.

As to the problematic brands of the past that Ogilvy has served such as BP and Coca-Cola, one activist employee attempts to deposition this work as not akin to the current crisis because the latter companies sell products that involve consumer choice, whereas the issue at hand is related to human rights. Of course, this definitional work is reductive as BP and Coca Cola have both been accused of human rights abuses in various scandals. The larger point of the activist however was that values should demand that people come before profit. Seifert, as one might expect from a managerial perspective, redefines the issue, asserting that Ogilvy serves even flawed clients by finding the good in them and mitigating the risk of negative appearances (again, not actual harms).

Finally, once the transcript is leaked, RAICES enters the space of definition with an automatic standing based on their mission. They define the crisis, as expected, in a wholly oppositional manner, writing an open letter demanding that Ogilvy resign from the account. Other activist accounts on Twitter echoed this definition—that the work was immoral—and added to the legitimation process by external stakeholders.

6.2. Legitimation

The first point of legitimation to be considered is that of trust and how it is bound to risk. Seifert specifically calls out the importance of trust in the client-agency relationship and the liability of agencies that break this trust. The question of should the agency trust the client is not entertained. To do so would challenge an assumption of public relations work that the client relationship is paramount among agency stakeholders (Wilcox et al., 2013). The employee activists who speak in opposition to Seifert, and therefore the managerial status quo, are potentially risking their jobs. Seifert foregrounds this risk when he suggests that if employees are so opposed to the CBP work, then maybe they should not work at Ogilvy.

The most significant point of legitimation for management, based on frequency and substance of the references, is this: Ogilvy must continue this controversial work for the financial health of the company. According to a software that tracks federal contracts, the CBP account had an "obligated" value of $40,7 million and a potential value of $52,5 million (Nash & Hariani, 2021). For 'Big PR' this is not a significant amount. However, the sector of the CBP work, public affairs, is important to consider. Seifert underscores this fact himself when he shares the value in both money and jobs of their contracts in D.C., not to mention the lost revenue from potential government clients should Ogilvy face any backlash if they decided to resign. This scenario is far from abstract, as Edelman faced public backlash from GEO Group in the trade press when that agency made the decision to resign from the controversial work at the border. As of March 2021, The Ogilvy Group and Ogilvy Public Relations have 27 active federal contracts (Nash & Hariani, 2021). The combined obligated funds from federal awards total $425,5 million since 2001 with 75% of that figure coming from the "Executive Office of the President" (Nash & Hariani, 2021), or the branch wherein the Department of Homeland Security (and thus CBP) sits. In short, meeting the demands of some internal stakeholders to resign the CBP account would indeed threaten a significant revenue source for the holding company, WPP.

With the financial stakes somewhat expressed to employees, Seifert moves to a different kind of legitimation in an effort to persuade more employees to the side of management. Seifert attempts to separate the problematic enforcement work of CBP from the seemingly benign work of Ogilvy for the client. In other words, he suggests, improving recruitment to CBP—the purpose of the contract—has nothing to do with, as RAICES and some employee activists insist, kidnapping and caging children at the border.

Woods' (2019) finding about the utility of the strategy to associate values with issue manager legitimacy is applicable to this case. Although the stakeholders examined here employed values talk to persuade in relation to their respective sides, the employee activists might have gained more legitimacy by repeating the disconnect between Ogilvy's values (never defined) and what they argued were human rights abuses. As it happened, the employee activists in the meeting largely kept to the same vagaries of the purpose driven brand rhetoric used by management. This is perhaps not surprising as their position as internal stakeholders signals some level of identification with the corporate ethos. In other words, clearly defining corporate values might have seemed too obvious to a group of insiders; however, Woods' (2019) approach, offered in a different context, would seem beneficial to the employee activists in this case given the opportunity to highlight the disconnect. The strategic ambiguity afforded by not specifying values would seem here only to favor the decision of management in this case.

Woods' (2019) other contribution to the literature is also applicable, again more so to the employee activist contingent. Activists striving to sustain interest in a given issue might attempt to connect better to the larger social narratives in circulation as an organic way of "demonstrating the relevancy of the issue, fostering support, and encouraging action" (Woods, 2019, p. 344). The employee activists did the latter to a limited extent in the meeting, but then largely let the leaking to the press do the talking. This suggested connecting approach would entail increased risk however, and might therefore be impractical. It should be noted that RAICES is arguably adept at this approach and as an external stakeholder in the issue does not face the same level of risk as do employees.

6.3. Awareness

The building of legitimacy also speaks to the communication task of awareness in social issues management. Activist groups, when faced with a credibility challenge, attempt to increase awareness, deliver accurate information, harness news coverage, and celebrate wins (Woods, 2019). In this case, given the mission-level connection with immigration issues, RAICES is arguably the most credible issue manager of the three stakeholders, i.e., the most authorized to speak. Perhaps this is why the credibility of the organization did not appear to be damaged, at least in the press, when they shared the inaccurate information that sparked the crisis for Ogilvy. However, the misattribution of the detention center video did damage Ogilvy's credibility among employees and in the press.

RAICES could have addressed the open letter sent via Twitter to Seifert, especially since he was the face of management in the leaked transcript. However, the choice of Crampsie, Ogilvy's president, seemed strategic as she is a woman who sits on the board of social justice organizations such as Makers and TimesUp. Posters on Twitter made much of what they viewed as hypocrisy becoming especially agitated in replies when Crampsie tweeted in support of gun control legislation.

It is presumed that an employee activist leaked the transcript in part to gain negative publicity that might shame Ogilvy into resigning the account, the desired result of those opposed to management. When the employee in the meeting mentions the negative press that will follow the work for CBP, she is likely attempting to persuade management to make an ethical decision, a textbook maneuver (Wilcox et al., 2013). Her prediction came true. At Ogilvy, Seifert later shared news over email of a 3.7% reduction of the agency's U.S. workforce due to "volatility in our diverse client portfolio" (Smiley, 2020). That email was leaked to the press. *Adweek* included information about the CBP controversy at the end of the story (Smiley, 2020).

This multi-faceted case illustrates the complexities of social issues management, as well as risk communication for managers in particular. Seifert's meeting with employee stakeholders demonstrates the key components of risk communication (Coombs et al., 2019). He, more or less, engages in dialogue with the risk bearers he manages, and attempts to raise their awareness to the threat posed by resigning the account. Although the process itself is non-linear, Seifert fulfills the last element of risk communication by basing his remarks on understanding the position of the employees agitating for change (whether or not he is perceived as authentic is another matter). The efficacy of the communicative tasks in the case cannot be evaluated by the method and is thus a limitation of this study.

7. Conclusion

The internal activists in this case attempted to define the border issue as one of human rights, but then did not define the company values that might be in conflict with this definition. Aside from the leak of the transcript, they took no known public action to raise awareness of the issue, likely due to the precarity of their employment. Seifert decided maintaining the CBP account was worth the risk of continued publicity and found ways to make the moral quandary more palatable personally. He reasoned that: 1) his personal beliefs were subordinated to the good of shareholders; 2) CBP did good deeds elsewhere; 3) the firm could help CBP hire more compassionate people; 4) his client was blameless as the American system of immigration was at fault. However, social issues management moves responsibility away from the government and to firm managers. This is not to say that Ogilvy is somehow to blame for the migration crisis as a whole, but rather to suggest that the communicative tasks demonstrated by management may, in this case, prove counterproductive in managing the reputational crisis borne of a social issue.

As Edwards (2018) wrote, "Paying attention to the promotional culture in which public relations thrives prompts ethical questions about the kind of world that we want to live in and public relations' role in constructing (or obstructing) it" (pp. 211–212). While most people will agree that the kidnapping and caging of children is wrong, larger debates concerning migration and immigration are much more nuanced. In this case, even indefensible conduct of the CBP is rationalized in the context of promotional work. Far from being merely philosophical, such promotional logics constrict the agentic possibilities of even internal activists. Public relations practitioners and scholars alike should be vigilant about the relativism that often excuses the profit motive at the expense of social justice.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Review Pollution: Pedagogy for a Post-Truth Society

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Abstract
Consumer reviews on platforms like Amazon are summarized into star ratings, used to weight search results, and consulted by consumers to guide purchase decisions. They are emblematic of the interactive digital environment that has purportedly transferred power from marketers to ‘regular people,’ and yet they represent the infiltration of promotional concerns into online information, as has occurred in search and social media content. Consumers’ ratings and reviews do promotional work for brands—not just for products but the platforms that host reviews—that money can’t always buy. Gains in power by consumers are quickly met with new strategies of control by companies who depend on reviews for reputational capital. Focusing on ecommerce giant Amazon, this article examines the complexities of online reviews, where individual efforts to provide product feedback and help others make choices become transformed into an information commodity and promotional vehicle. It acknowledges the ambiguous nature of reviews due to the rise of industries and business practices that influence or fake reviews as a promotional strategy. In response are yet other business practices and platform policies aiming to provide better information to consumers, protect the image of platforms that host reviews, and punish ‘bad actors’ in competitive markets. The complexity in the production, regulation, and manipulation of product ratings and reviews illustrates how the high stakes of attention in digital spaces create fertile ground for disinformation, which only emphasizes to users that they inhabit a ‘post-truth’ reality online.

Keywords
consumer empowerment; disinformation; online reviews; platforms; reputation economy

Issue
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1. Introduction

Consumer reviews seem to fulfill the promise of an interactive digital environment transferring power from marketers to ‘regular people’ (Kuehn, 2017; Novak, 2021). The ubiquitous gold and red stars representing user ratings are a constant in the aesthetics and rhetorics of digital space being more user-centered and democratic than pre-digital markets. Feedback from ordinary users represents the values of Web 2.0, a metaphor describing how the web has steadily offered more interactivity, making the internet a more participatory and democratic space (DiNucci, 1999; O’Reilly, 2005). Yelp, a reviewing app for restaurants and other local businesses, used the slogan “Real People, Real Reviews” for a time, presenting itself—Kuehn (2017) argues—as a “review democracy” (p. 206).

Ratings and reviews did not originate with Web 2.0, even if they seem native to this era. Travel guidebooks from the 19th century introduced a star-rating system to indicate sights of special interest and hotels of quality (Bruce, 2010). Star rating systems were then adopted by restaurant and film reviewers in the first half of the 20th century (Bialik, 2009; Harp, 2002). Whereas star ratings historically were a summary of an individual reviewer’s evaluation, decades later, websites like Metacritic and Rotten Tomatoes added the innovation of aggregating critic ratings, just as consumer ratings were being datafied on sites like Amazon. As with so much that accrues value online, it’s through aggregation that ratings acquire their impact, providing an impression-at-a-glance to the prospective consumer, bragging rights or a tarnished image for the product brand, a valuable information commodity for the platform, and a key data point for the platform's algorithms. By quantifying subjective responses to a product, be it a book or a household item, star-ratings flatten the qualitative differences among products and place them for linear comparison, be it on number of stars, number of ratings, or a combination of both. While this might be frustrating to producers and brands, it's also understandable that consumers seek out and rely on these ratings to navigate an ecommerce environment of overwhelming abundance (Graham & Henman, 2019).

Consumer reviews reflect theorizations of late capitalism that focus on the circulation of information and affect. Political theorist Dean (2005) has warned against the fantasies of abundance and participation offered by the current state of "communicative capitalism." Whereas in previous communication environments, Dean argues, we would communicate "messages" with a particular use-value to which we expected some kind of response, in a socially-networked setting of abundance, we make "contributions" that through their circulation acquire exchange value, but to which we are much less likely to get a response (p. 58). Leaving online reviews and ratings on ecommerce sites very much fits Dean's critique, where we may feel called on to participate, even though our individual contribution is unlikely to register. It is only at volume and wide circulation that reviews in aggregate begin to 'count.' In fact, the more reviews are created, the less likely one particular review will be read or make an impact. Dean's concern is that these voluminous expressions of popular will in the marketplace are embraced as 'democratic' when actual political governance is far from it. In communicative capitalism, Dean writes, "commercial choices" are treated as "the paradigmatic form of choice per se" (p. 55). "Communicative exchanges," commonly understood to be foundational to the working of democracy, actually uphold "capitalist production" rather than democratic governance (p. 56).

Communication scholar Hearn (2010) offers a similar critique, adding a focus on affect as central to how markets work in late, and particularly digital, capitalism: "If markets are conversations, then value must be generated through our visible, affective and quantifiable participation in these conversations" (pp. 421–422). This "fragile, fluid enactment of value" is reputational capital, a component of symbolic capital, argues Cronin (2016), that must be continuously accumulated and circulated, rather than earned once and for all (p. 399). Hearn (2010) identifies online rating and ranking systems as "places where the expression of feeling is ostensibly constituted as 'reputation' and then mined for value" (p. 422).

Reviews are both informational and affective, and affect drives attention. Tech theorist Goldhaber (1997) offers the attention economy as a fundamental concept for understanding the internet's impact on the circulation of value, suggesting that the scarcity of attention resulting from the explosion in information has become a significant shaper of society relative even to the scarcity of money or natural resources. Attention breeds attention, to the point that attention becomes its own currency. The star rating purports to index both attention and affect, and has become practically a pre-requisite to selling on Amazon.

As Dean and Hearn imply, consumer ratings and reviews are an example of the "free labor" that ordinary users perform that creates value, for platforms especially (Terranova, 2000). Critical scholars studying this online practice question how users are encouraged to 'participate' in ways that primarily benefit large corporations, cultivating an ethos or aesthetic of democratization rather than concrete gains in the distribution of power (Kuehn, 2017; Novak, 2021). Hearn (2010), for example, questions whether the 'wisdom of the crowd' really "signals the rise of a new form of ethical politics," since digital reputation functions "through forms of market discipline and affective conditioning… which work to direct human meaning-making and self-identity in highly motivated and profitable ways" (p. 423).

On the other hand, consumer reviews do level the playing field between business and consumers at least to an extent, allowing consumers to warn others about bad products and services, or rave about those that shine. Based on interviews with Yelp reviewers, Kuehn reports that "participants were committed to empowering consumers to make the best of available choices," describing their reviews as a "public service" and even a "job" (2017, pp. 212–213). Sellers are certainly very aware of the newly empowered consumer, and seem to dispute the concern that a single online review has no impact. A book aimed at prospective sellers on Amazon observes:

> Never before has a single consumer-driven action had this kind of immediate weight and capability to catapult a new brand to success. In the days before eComm and social media, consumers who bought your product in a store could love it or hate it but you might never know exactly what they thought or why. Now, one product review can reach the entire world, and the impact this has on your brand reputation cannot be overstated. (McGinn & Segal, 2019, p. 76)

But as in so many power relationships, gains by consumers are quickly met with strategies of control. Consumer review spaces initially granted more voice to consumers to punish and reward market actors. But as the promotional value of consumer ratings has become clearer, especially for new players with less brand recognition who see the opportunity in ecommerce to compete in many product areas, the businesses being reviewed have sought to exert greater control over them, whether subtly incentivizing high ratings, or blatantly gaming the system with fraudulent content.

Both product brands and platform brands encourage consumers to provide reviews and consult others' feedback in their purchase decisions. But when it comes to the quality of reviews, platforms generally prioritize authenticity, since the success of their brands depends on trust. There are exceptions, since positive reviews can ingratiate ad-buying clients (e.g., allegations that Yelp adjusted positive vs. negative reviews depending on whether businesses advertised on the site; Tsukayama, 2013), and well-reviewed products drive sales of which the platform may take a cut. While platform brands balance their desire for authentic reviews with these other considerations, many sellers do whatever it takes to create more and better reviews that trigger advantageous search results and sales (He et al., 2020).

What has emerged is a field within the reputation economy where the promotional value of a four- or five-star rating and glowing reviews in a consumer's authentic voice is a central contested resource. As with information disorder more generally, the decline of gatekeepers like buyers at large retailers and arms-length review publications like *Consumer Reports* initially democratized the sphere of product evaluation and helped many more players enter the marketplace. However, the decline of gatekeepers has also sown chaos in the information environment. In the realm of consumer reviews, this has resulted in layers of rules, regulations, and ways to evaluate the authenticity of reviews by a variety of organizations, followed by efforts to game and circumvent those structures by sellers and reviewers-for-hire. The contested space of product reviews is also a contested space in terms of who wins the consumer's trust, and whose version of the 'truth' prevails. From the consumer's perspective, either they proceed with little knowledge of review pollution and end up sometimes purchasing poor quality products as a result, or, if informed about the push-and-pull around consumer ratings and reviews, they learn how fierce the jockeying is when consumer attention is at stake. Although social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube have attracted the most attention as sites of information disorder, ecommerce platforms like Amazon should not get a pass, especially when the ratings and reviews being gamed send unsafe products, or books and films with disinformation about health, history, and science to the top of the search results (DiResta, 2019). "Computational propaganda and influence operations," DiResta (2018) points out, "are inexpensive, they appear to be effective, and the tech platforms that built the infrastructure are having a very difficult time stopping them" (p. 25). We'll see that this is certainly true for Amazon, which increasingly struggles to manage its reviews space.

The rise of disinformation is associated with what some describe as our contemporary 'post-truth' era. However, to some extent, consumer ratings and reviews are not trading in 'truth.' Esposito and Stark (2019) argue that users recognize that, as "second-order observations" of reality, reviews will be rife with subjectivity and error, but their utility in the face of complexity overrides that concern (p. 12). But even if the relationship between product ratings and 'reality' is tenuous, the relative position of whatever is rated within a given system comes to have the force of empirical comparison, creating its own promotional reality (Cronin, 2016). The term 'post-truth,' identified by the Oxford Dictionaries (Oxford Languages, 2016) as Word of the Year in 2016, is understood in a variety of ways, from the downgrading of facts and evidence in favor of beliefs and emotion, and the prevalence of lies and "bullshit" in public life, to the use of distractions and strategic silences to divert audiences from uncomfortable facts (Keane, 2018, para. 13). The muddying of information and promotion is just one variant of 'post-truth,' and not a new one. While consumers have always been wary of the ways promotion can manipulate, digital space presents users with the blending of information and promotion at every turn. We see it in search results, recommendation algorithms, undisclosed promotional considerations from influencers, and native advertising. Even when it's just everyday products with manipulated ratings, the disinformation that creeps into almost every corner of online activity teaches a broader lesson about the state of our 'post-truth' society to consumers. The sense that all digital information is rife with manipulation and promotionalism erodes trust in platforms, fellow participants, and information itself (Amazeen & Muddiman, 2018; DiResta, 2018; Kozinets, et al., 2020).

This article examines the complexities of product reviews and ratings on Amazon, where individual efforts to provide businesses with feedback and help others make consumer choices become transformed into an information commodity and promotional vehicle. With estimates of Amazon's market dominance ranging between 37% and 50% of US ecommerce sales, every decision that Amazon makes regarding its reviews is consequential for the fortunes of sellers and the information available to consumers (eMarketer Editors, 2020; Wells et al., 2019). A close examination of Amazon's reviews space reveals an ongoing tug-of-war between a tech giant that recognizes the value of reviews for driving sales and for the platform's informational value to consumers, and the third-party sellers for whom Amazon is practically the only game in town.

2. Amazon Ratings in the Reputation Economy

Hearn writes, "reputation is a cultural product, and as such is conditioned by its mode of production" (2010, pp. 423–444). So, what is the mode of production for Amazon reviews, and how has this changed over time? Amazon was one of the first commercial spaces to allow users to post their own reviews, doing so since the site's launch in 1995. These reviews appeared alongside editorial content that Amazon invested in heavily in its early years, in order to make its site feel like a legitimate place that provided useful information to the consumer who couldn't leaf through books or consult a sales associate. Amazon offered both these "modalities of truth" to users, based in authoritative expertise as well as the experiences of ordinary consumers, in order to build much-needed trust and overcome hesitancy in the early days of online shopping (Graham & Henman, 2019, pp. 2015–2016). Amazon invited site users to indicate if consumer reviews were 'Helpful' or 'Not Helpful,' and also allowed them to comment on them (the option to 'downvote' a review was phased out starting in 2016, see Marth, 2016; and the comment feature was removed in 2020, see Dawson, 2020; although a 'Report Abuse' button appears under each review). In the earliest days of ecommerce, Amazon's review architecture anticipated the world of likes and hearts and upvotes that we now inhabit online.

By the late 1990s, the expense of hiring editors and book reviewers compared to the efficiency of free crowdsourced reviews became clearer to the company that has consistently favored platform logics of 'self-service' over paying people to do things (Marcus, 2004). For many years, consumer reviews were a useful but rarely remarked upon feature of the site, as indicated by press coverage. But a number of developments made reviews a target for manipulation. In 1999, Amazon opened its platform up to third-party sellers. Then, in 2005 with the development of the Prime membership, where consumers in the US (at least, initially) could pay an annual fee for free two-day shipping, vastly more consumers and sellers flocked to the site, soon making Amazon the first stop for online shoppers. The product selection exploded again in the mid-2010's when Amazon made it easier for foreign companies to use its marketplace, and Chinese sellers in particular flooded the site with new products (Shepard, 2017). The advantage that a platform accrues due to network effects—the greatest number of sellers, the biggest variety of products, and the largest crowd of shoppers—made a product's rating on Amazon disproportionately impactful on sales, both on and off Amazon's site since shoppers may do product research on Amazon but buy elsewhere. As articulated in the business literature, "there is no other platform with Amazon's scale, reach, and buying intent" (McGinn & Segal, 2019, pp. 15–16).

Third-party sellers are right to be concerned about the volume and quality of reviews for their products. According to a 2018 survey by Pew, 93% of Americans consult customer reviews when buying a product for the first time (Turner & Rainie, 2020). Ratings make a measurable difference in sales, especially for new or lesser-known products and brands. One ecommerce consultant even argues that "reviews are more important than a brand," observing that "there's major brands that are being crushed by small direct-to-Amazon or direct-to-consumer brands" (Matsakis, 2019, para. 6). Business scholar Luca (2011) found that a one-star difference in Yelp ratings was associated with a 5 to 9% increase in revenue for Seattle-area restaurants. In contrast, an ecommerce consultant estimates that a one-star rating increase results in a 26% increase in product sales on Amazon (Nguyen, 2019b), a claim reinforced by He et al.'s (2020) findings of large and statistically significant improvements in product sales and search ranking after sellers bought fake reviews on Facebook groups, at least in the short term. The importance of Amazon reviews and ratings for new products is clear from the frequency with which press releases tout a new product's star ratings and reviews (e.g., "Reusable kids' icePack,'' 2020).

Ranking high in search on Amazon is crucial for visibility, or 'discoverability,' and therefore for sales. According to Amazon, "70% of customers never click past the first page of search results," and "the first three items displayed in search results account for 64% of clicks" (CPC Strategy, 2018, p. 22). Although the specifics of the A9 ranking algorithm, Amazon's search algorithm, are proprietary, the received wisdom among sellers is that the primary factors driving search ranking are: relevance of product key terms to search terms, sales velocity, price, and product availability (Dod, n.d.; Feedvisor, n.d.; McGinn & Segal, 2019). Opinion differs on whether ratings (both the volume of ratings and the average rating) are directly considered by the algorithm, or whether their influence is indirect via impact on sales. Regardless of whether star ratings factor in directly or indirectly, it's clear from the trade press and business services companies targeting Amazon sellers that this constituency believes they matter, making them part of Amazon's "algorithmic imaginary" (Bucher, 2017). In many ways Amazon's site has opened the world of retail up to more sellers, particularly small businesses, by allowing them to circumvent the gatekeeping of retail buyers and limited distribution networks. However, as Andrejevic et al. (2015) have pointed out, "information organizers" like Amazon are "the new gatekeepers," and their control over the information used in these algorithms and the priorities "baked into" them shape our information landscape just as traditional gatekeepers did, but in different ways (p. 386).

Product reviews suffer from serious grade inflation. A 2014 study found a sample of Amazon books were reviewed with five stars on average 59% of the time, with only 4.8% of the reviews having only one star (Anderson & Simester, 2014). And average ratings have only been going up since then, correlating with an increase in efforts to produce incentivized reviews as the number of sellers on Amazon's marketplace has exploded over the last decade (Nguyen, 2018a). He et al. (2020) found that a large sample of more than 200,000 products listed on Amazon had a mean rating of 4.2. Many consumers are mistrustful of products with less than a four-star rating. Kennedy and Hill (2018) argue that "emotions matter for everyday engagements with data," and that data visualizations, such as star ratings, are read not just cognitively but affectively (p. 844). The frequency with which we see products associated with star ratings of four or more has likely imprinted that range as a marker of acceptable quality, conveying comfort and confidence to most consumers.

Leveraging consumers' positive affect towards the image of the star rating, Amazon has leaned into four or more stars as core to its brand value and identity by opening a new brick-and-mortar store concept called Amazon 4-Star in 2018. As the name suggests, these stores feature products that have received ratings of at least four stars; many products display a favorable customer review in addition to the star rating (see Figure 1). The digital price tags show the exact rating out of five, as well as the number of reviews, just as products appear online.

This store concept instantiates Amazon's desire to be a destination for highly-rated products, and sends the message that the signal of quality is a four- to five-star rating.

3. Review Pollution

For the first 10 to 15 years of Amazon's history, its consumer reviews did not attract a great deal of attention, other than being mentioned as an attractive bonus feature of the site. When they did attract attention, it was typically for being humorous, used for 'culture jamming'—a trend that took off in the early 2000s—as in the scathing and hilarious reviews of "Bic Pens for Her," or unintentionally funny, such as reviews for classic books by unimpressed readers (Suddath, 2005).

In 2005 publicly visible concerns about the manipulation of consumer reviews on Amazon's retail platform started to arise. A study by David and Pinch (2006) estimating that 1% of book reviews on Amazon were, at least in part, copied from other reviews received a fair amount of press attention. By 2010, as Amazon's dominance of ecommerce became undeniable, attention to manipulated reviews started exploding, especially for books. Stories started emerging with some frequency about individual authors covertly writing reviews for their own books as well as their rivals, as well as systematic efforts to game the system through companies whose sole purpose was to produce fake reviews (e.g., Charman-Anderson, 2012; Katz, 2010). Newspapers and magazines started to feature regular pieces on how to spot fake product reviews (e.g., Hagemeier, 2012; The Better Business Bureau, 2017).

Amazon's own rules at this time merely stated that no reviews should be posted by someone with a conflict of interest, and that any form of financial compensation had to be clearly disclosed in the review. In other words, the site did not allow "anyone to write reviews as a form of promotion" without disclosing it as such (Amazon, 2020b, para. 3). But with few monitoring systems and a structure that allowed anyone with a customer account to post a review, regardless of whether they had bought the product, the feature was ripe for exploitation.

Around the time of Prime's launch in 2005, social media platforms began to explode. Facebook groups and other online spaces, eventually including Slack, Discord, Telegram, and subreddits, became convenient places to recruit people willing to write glowing reviews and leave five-star ratings in exchange for a fee, or even just for the free product or a rebate (Nguyen, 2018a). Sellers also buy Facebook ads offering free products, linking users to chatbots that organize the entire transaction (Nguyen, 2019a).

Figure 1. Signage at Amazon 4-Star in New York City. Photos by author.

By the early 2010s, Amazon started to crack down on review pollution. Since at least 2011, if Amazon has a record of the person leaving the review having actually bought the item, it is labeled as a 'Verified Purchase,' to give users confidence in its authenticity (e.g., Mooney, 2011); consumers can filter reviews so they only see the verified purchases (see Figure 2). In 2015, Amazon launched high-profile lawsuits against individuals and websites known to be posting or facilitating compensated reviews (Mendoza, 2015), and in 2016 Amazon banned reviews incentivized with compensation, even if disclosed (Dwoskin & Timberg, 2018). Amazon regularly blocks shoppers who are caught or suspected of writing inauthentic or compensated reviews (Dwoskin & Timberg, 2018). Also since 2015, verified purchases have greater weight in a product's average rating (Rubin, 2015). Today Amazon explains that a product's average star rating is not a simple mean, but is determined by machine learning that takes into account "how recent the rating or review is and verified purchase status," as well as "multiple criteria that establish the authenticity of the feedback" (Amazon, 2020c, para. 1), including the number of 'helpful' upvotes by site users (Rubin, 2015). Reviews from unverified purchasers are not calculated into a product's average without "more details in the form of text, image, or video" (Amazon, 2020c, para. 2). And now, to even be eligible to post a review, a customer must have spent at least $50 on Amazon in the previous 12 months (Amazon, 2020a).

However, Amazon's regulatory moves have merely shaped how companies game the system. Instead of just paying people to post authentic-sounding reviews, sellers now find Amazon account-holders willing to buy the item with their own credit card, leave a review (often after a waiting period, so the review looks more authentic and avoids Amazon's automated systems that flag suspicious review behavior), and then get reimbursed from the company once the review is posted (DiResta, 2019; He et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2018a). Sometimes these arrangements involve a small payment on top of the reimbursement. The expense to the seller is considerable (free goods and shipping, even payments), but both research and industry experience show that, in the short-term at least, it is effective in improving placement in search rankings and increasing sales (DiResta, 2019; He et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2018a).

The term platform evokes a foundation—some kind of digital space or software capability—that allows different stakeholders (consumers and sellers, or users and advertisers) to interact (Srnicek, 2017). As a platform, Amazon is always serving two constituencies. Amazon's 'number one principle' is customer obsession, but it also needs to serve sellers. As Amazon became more aware of how important consumer reviews were for third-party sellers, it developed in-house programs to connect sellers with reviewers, allowing what the company's rules have not since 2016: giving free products to consumers with the hope of getting them reviewed on Amazon's platform (with the exception of books, since distributing free books to generate reviews is an industry-standard practice). Amazon Vine, launched in 2007, enrolls 'super reviewers' by Amazon's invitation only. The program rewards the company's most enthusiastic and consistent reviewers, while also providing a much-needed opportunity to gain review momentum for sellers. In addition, in 2017 Amazon started the Early Reviewing program that allowed sellers to ask Amazon to contact customers who have purchased a new product and ask them to write an honest review in exchange for a modest ($1–3) Amazon gift card (Kelley, 2017; but this program was discontinued in 2021, see Masters, 2021).

Amazon is cracking down on fake and incentivized reviews not only because they undermine its most important asset—consumer trust of its brand—but because it wants to funnel these illicit marketing dollars away from third-parties and towards its own advertising platforms.

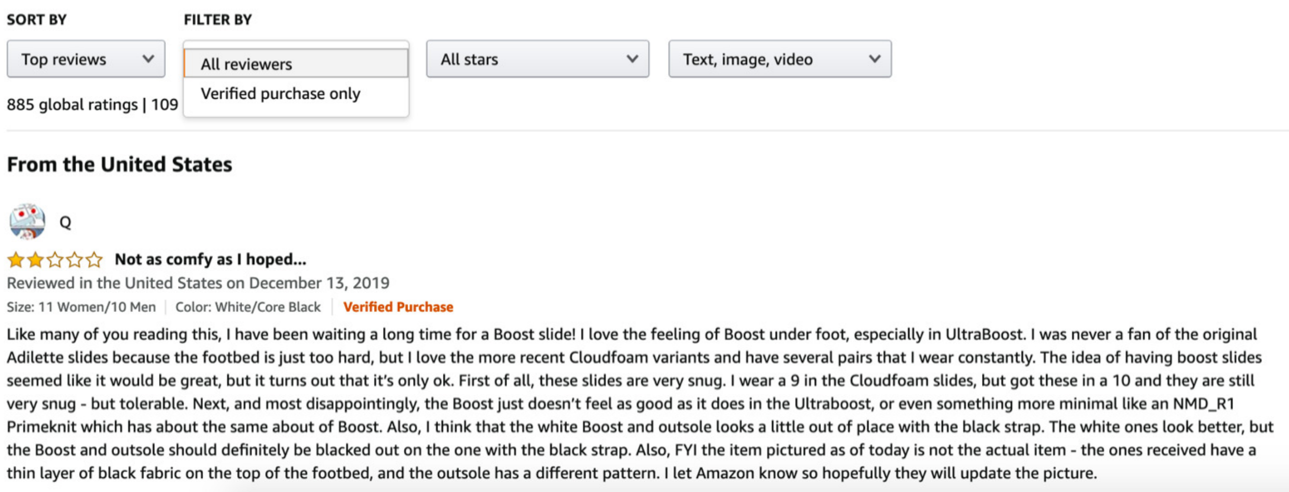

Figure 2. Sorting by Verified Purchases only is one of the options for sorting reviews on Amazon's site. Screenshot by author.

Amazon would rather sellers pay for Sponsored Products (ads for particular search terms) or Sponsored Brands (banner at top of page after search) or use Amazon's DSP (Demand Side Platform) to buy individually targeted ads. Or, Amazon would rather use sellers' desire for a critical mass of consumer reviews to drive them into expensive Amazon programs like Brand Registry, a prerequisite for enrolling in Amazon's Vine and Early Reviewer programs.

When sellers or government officials complain about fake reviews, Amazon says it spends millions of dollars to ensure their authenticity, including refining machine learning that spots fake reviews by their language, timing, or patterns in customer accounts (DiResta, 2019; Dzieza, 2018; Masters, 2021; Nguyen, 2019b). Over time, Amazon has slowly become a reluctant governor of its reviews space. For example, in 2015 Amazon was heavily criticized for allowing conspiracy theorist 'brigading' in reviews for books written by survivors and parents of victims of the Sandy Hook school shooting in Newtown, CT. Amazon's position was that any authentic reviews should stand on the site, whether the book had been purchased by the reviewer on Amazon or not (many of those posting had certainly neither purchased nor read the books; Greene, 2015). Coordinated campaigns to boost or tank a product (and its associated ideas) weren't a problem, as long as the reviews were real people's real opinions (Greene, 2015). But by 2020, when the novel *American Dirt* was attracting critical reviews due to its depiction of a Mexican immigrant's experience by a White author, Amazon restricted what reviews could appear to verified purchases, in an effort to prevent the reviews section becoming a forum for political debate, a decision also made for *A Very Stable Genius*, a book critical of President Trump (Scott, 2020).

In 2019 Amazon made it easier for consumers to give feedback about products, with 'One-Tap Ratings.' This feature, which invites users to rate a product they have purchased with just 'one tap,' rather than the more unwieldy process that required written feedback in order to leave a rating, would seem to invite more fake reviews, and some critics say this has been the outcome ("Report: Fake online reviews," 2020). But Amazon's intent was to get more participation from legitimate, representative purchasers that would hopefully drown out the fake and incentivized reviews that unscrupulous sellers are buying (Del Ray, 2020). This move signals that Amazon thinks there's only so much that can be done about the compensated reviews solicited in Facebook groups and other hard-to-track places on the web. The 'one-tap' solution seeks to turn those reviews into 'noise,' as well as build confidence among consumers from the greater volume of ratings. Some products, particularly popular tech products, have tens of thousands of ratings, such as the Kindle Paperwhite with more than 83,000 ratings, much more than its 28,905 reviews.

The sheer abundance of ratings lends a sheen of democratic authenticity to the aggregated rating, just as Dean (2005) predicts that the abundance of communication facilitated by digital technologies will be leveraged by capital. We're invited to 'participate,' and Amazon has made it as easy as possible, primarily to protect its reputation as a platform with reliable product information from real customers. More ratings, even if they're not connected to written reviews, make sellers happy, build confidence in consumers, and cement Amazon's dominance in product ratings as an information commodity, which in turn contributes to its monopoly-like control of ecommerce in many markets.

Despite Amazon's regulatory efforts, observers say that review pollution is getting worse. Amazon may not be trying hard enough. As DiResta points out, many of the Facebook groups that recruit reviewers are very easy to find (as cited in Dwoskin & Timberg, 2018), and the changes Amazon has made don't seem proportionate to the scale of the problem (DiResta, 2019). But it's also the case that the strategies sellers use create a game of whack-a-mole for the platform. In addition to the techniques already described, sellers place negative reviews on their competitors' products, engage in suspicious reviewing behavior (such as rapidly posting many 5-star reviews) on their competitors' listings in the hopes of Amazon removing them from the platform (Masters, 2021), hijack well-rated products' listings with their own products (Nguyen, 2018b), create dummy accounts using people's real names and addresses to post fake reviews (Masters, 2021), and hire click-farms to show activity on a product listing in relation to search terms or to vote particular reviews as 'helpful.' As one journalist put it, Amazon "must constantly implement new rules and penalties, which in turn, become tools for new abuses, which require yet more rules to police" (Dzieza, 2018, para. 7).

4. Conclusions: Governing Review Disinformation

Amazon's sheer size and dominance of ecommerce make it effectively its own field, in which multiple players vie to come out on top in relation to the company's rules and incentives. Because of Amazon's devotion to automation, a cottage industry of companies has sprung up to help sellers navigate the platform. Often populated by former Amazon employees, companies like Feedvisor and Buy Box Experts help with product listing content, pricing, search engine optimization, advertising strategies, and fulfillment through Amazon. A subset of these companies focus specifically on helping sellers get the critical mass of consumer reviews to boost them in search by using Amazon's automated services that send messages to customers who have bought their product, including Salesbacker and eComEngine. These companies openly advertise their services and operate within the letter—if not always the spirit—of Amazon's rules, unlike the countless entities operating in Facebook groups or other hard-to-track places who solicit reviews in contravention of the rules.

While these third-party companies are seller-facing, others have arisen to help the average consumer interpret the authenticity of product reviews. Fakespot and ReviewMeta both offer this service, using data science to estimate which reviews are untrustworthy. Fakespot evaluates the reliability of reviews with a letter grade, while ReviewMeta re-calculates a product's average rating with the suspect reviews removed or weighted less. ReviewMeta considers 12 factors in its review evaluations, including the average difference in verified vs. unverified purchases, the degree of phrase repetition in the reviews, past reviewing behavior of the reviewer, and the distribution of reviews over time. These review adjusters aim for transparency in how they judge reviews to be unreliable and how that impacts their overall evaluation, while acknowledging, as ReviewMeta founder Noonan (2016) does, that "unnatural review detection is not an exact science." Indeed, the two services sometimes arrive at different evaluations of the same set of reviews, indicating the degree of interpretation involved (Broida, 2019).

In 2020, with more consumers than ever turning to online shopping during the Covid-19 pandemic, review manipulation appeared to reach, itself, epidemic proportions. Fakespot estimated that 42% of Amazon reviews from March to September of 2020 were unreliable, up from 36% in the same period the previous year, a rate previously only seen in peak shopping seasons ("Report: Fake online reviews," 2020). ReviewMeta estimates that the average number of suspicious reviews is higher, greater than 50% and as high as 2/3 for particular product categories, such as electronics and health aids (including weight-loss pills, testosterone boosters; Dwoskin & Timberg, 2018). According to testimony from many small sellers, paying for reviews is increasingly seen as just part of the cost of doing business on the platform.

Greater manipulation of its ratings and reviews, combined with more frequent PR challenges around the authenticity of consumer feedback, have pushed Amazon into undertaking greater governance of this aspect of its platform. Amazon knows that "perceived review manipulation" is a threat to the value that consumers see in their ecommerce brand (Xu, 2021, p. 4). Amazon's governance of reviews provides the appearance of action for public relations purposes, and aims also to be pre-emptive against government—the Federal Trade Commission in the US context—taking a greater interest in review authenticity. But the steps Amazon has taken stay within its preferred ways of operating and skew towards systems that tie sellers closer to the company and its paid services. Rather than focusing solely on preventing fraudulent reviews, Amazon has lowered the bar for more consumers to rate the products they buy, consistent with every platform's bias towards greater engagement. Amazon may have disallowed consumers writing reviews for products they received free, or at a deep discount, but they facilitate this exact process for the sellers who participate in paid programs that pull them deeper into Amazon's seller ecosystem. Amazon has built tremendous trust with consumers after 25 years of 'customer obsession,' and it depends on this reserve of trust in the midst of an explosion of review pollution on its platform.

Critiques of how exactly Amazon governs its reviews space and whether its rules are effective in reducing review pollution may be relevant for third-party sellers and concerned shoppers, but they don't address the bigger picture. It's only because Amazon is so dominant in ecommerce, akin to "essential infrastructure" (Khan, 2017, p. 803) at least in the US, that the ways it shapes and constrains consumer reviews become so high stakes, making or breaking some businesses, for example, or allowing significant numbers of faulty or dangerous products to circulate in the marketplace, despite seemingly rave reviews. The US Federal Trade Commission, whose purview includes truth-in-advertising, has made stern inquiries and even brought a case against a company selling on Amazon in relation to manipulated reviews and false claims for its products (Musil, 2019). The Commission also insists that compensated reviews always be disclosed. But on balance, in the US at least, governance is ceded to the platforms, with some movement in just the last few years from both the House Judiciary Committee and Trade Commission to investigate the major tech platforms for practices that are anti-competitive or hurt small businesses. On March 25th, 2021, the House Energy and Commerce Committee conducted a hearing with the CEOs of Facebook, Google, and Twitter on the topic of "Disinformation Nation: Social Media's Role in Promoting Extremism and Misinformation." Notably absent was Amazon, despite the fact that its reviews space, content platforms, and recommendation algorithms have been implicated in the distribution and amplification of disinformation (DiResta, 2019). While regulators are starting to take notice of the most spectacular and brazen abuses of tech platforms, the broader issues of the outsized power of information gatekeepers like Amazon, and the ways they police themselves and others in situations when they have conflicting business incentives, seem currently beyond their reach. Meanwhile, the everyday, routinized nature of disinformation like review pollution contributes to the steady erosion of social trust in information, institutions, and other people. The damage done to our information environment by something as seemingly trivial as manipulated product reviews points to the need for systemic responses to the oligopolistic, infrastructural, and self-serving nature of tech platforms.

While consumer reviews were at one time a key reason for the trust that people developed for Amazon's ecommerce site, those same review spaces now threaten that trust. The star ratings only serve as effective promotion when people think they have informational value. Trust is, itself, a valuable commodity, but it's also more than that. Trust is fundamental to the social contract, and to our ability to communicate with and coordinate with others. As consumers become used to the idea that they have to be everyday detectives, combing through reviews or using third-party browser extensions to estimate which reviews are genuine in order to make a simple online shopping decision, they become more firmly interpellated into an emerging common sense about the contemporary internet: that no one can be trusted, and everything found online is the result of a complex, never-ending contest for reputational capital among competing interests and powerful organizations. It's a lesson about being small and powerless, even though it all began as an effort to make the consumer feel like their voice, and the voices of their fellow consumers, mattered.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

The Innovation Function of Hybridization in Public Relations

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Abstract

From content marketing and corporate publishing to storytelling and brand PR—the literature contains many examples of hybrid structures in strategic communication in general and more specifically in public relations (PR). The question that arises is which problem these hybrid structures solve. This article focuses on a systems theoretical basis on the function of these hybrid structures. Hybridization is understood as a process by which a social system adopts program structures of another system. Hybridization as a strategy assumes an innovation function in systems and facilitates learning. Hybridizations can be observed in PR on two logical levels: Firstly, PR is itself the result of a hybridization process. This is an example of how differentiated systems can originate from hybrid structures. Secondly, like every form of strategic communication, PR suffers from a lack of trustworthiness, attention and relevance of its communication objects. In order to be able to continue to influence decisions in the interest of those described positively, PR unscrupulously adopts structures of journalism, advertising and entertainment.

Keywords

advertising; entertainment; hybridization; public relations; public sphere; strategic communication; systems theory

Issue

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1. Introduction

In recent years, hybrid structures in strategic communication have been described many times (e.g., Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Taiminen et al., 2015). While the respective advantages and opportunities offered by practices such as content marketing, corporate publishing, storytelling or brand PR have been described, there is still no convincing answer to the question: What problem do hybridization processes solve in general and in strategic communication and public relations (PR) specifically? This is the question of the function of hybridization and hybrid structures. This question will be answered in the article using PR as an example.

The theoretical basis of the contribution is systems theory (Luhmann, 1995; Schoeneborn, 2011). The central assumption of systems theory is the operative unity of social systems. Systems do not mix in hybridizations, but one system adopts structures of the other system. To be more precise: Hybridization is understood as a process in which a social system adopts program structures of an environmental system, i.e., a system in the environment (Görke, 2009). Hybridization as a strategy thus assumes an innovation function in systems and enables learning. Hybridizations can be described in PR on two logical levels: Firstly, PR is itself the result of a hybridization process (Section 4). This is an example of how differentiated systems can originate from hybrid structures. Secondly, like every form of strategic communication, PR suffers from a lack of trustworthiness, attention and relevance among its communication objects. In order to be able to continue to influence decisions in the interest of those described positively, PR unscrupulously adopts structures of journalism, advertising and entertainment (Section 5). Examples of such hybrid structures include content marketing, brand journalism, storytelling or campaigning. In this article, a systemic perspective is chosen to describe the multitude of hybrid structures in a larger context and thus make connections visible.

What is the specific perspective of this article? First, the function of hybridizations and hybrid structures is explained on the basis of systems theory. Second, it follows from the systems theory perspective that the following considerations can be assigned to the so-called either-or-logic, which excludes mixtures. Thirdly, the present discussion is largely based on German-speaking authors, because questions of hybridization and de-differentiation have been the subject of intensive discussion in German-language communication research in recent years. The fourth distinctive feature is that hybridization is described for PR starting in Section 4. This seems to make sense, because a large number of hybrid structures have emerged in PR, among others, vis-à-vis journalism, advertising and entertainment.

2. Literature Review

Hybridization and hybrid forms have experienced a real boom in research in recent years (Battilana et al., 2017, p. 131). In social science analyses, there are two opposing paradigms: the either-or-logic and the as-well-as-logic (Beck & Grande, 2004, p. 51; Kron & Berger, 2015, p. 7). The as-well-as-logic is primarily interested in mergers (Beck & Grande, 2004, p. 51; Kron & Berger, 2015, p. 7). This paradigm includes, for example, the actor–network theory of Latour (1986, 1996; Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005) and Parsons' interpenetration zones (Parsons, 1959). The as-well-as-logic usually assumes that the process of hybridization has led to the emergence of something new, which can then be described as a hybrid system or hybrid practice.

This article focuses on the either-or-logic (Figure 1). The either-or-logic adheres to differences between two systems or practices. Therefore, the hybridization concept is usually at the center of the either-or-logic. Hybridization is generally understood as a process in which something is adopted based on specific requirements. Thus, Boyer (1998) distinguishes it from diffusion, in which, for example, an innovation is adopted in a dominant manner:

> Hybridization occurs when firms attempt to make principles or models drawn from one social and economic space compatible with the constraints and opportunities of another. This is a dynamic process which can eventually result in new forms of organization and, potentially, new productive models. The concept of hybridization facilitates the exploration of the space between 'one best way' theories of scientific management and contingency or 'societal effect' theories. Hybridization may simply be local and transitory adoptions to special conditions. But even such adoptions may cumulate in wholly unforeseen ways to become new systems. (Tolliday et al., 1998, p. 6)

In a similar way, neo-institutionalism addresses hybridization in the context of the translation of managerial ideas. Similar concepts include recombination, editing and accretion. Hybridization emphasizes the performative role of those who produce, diffuse and adopt such institutional ideas and models (Fredriksson et al., 2013, p. 190; Hedmo et al., 2006). Either-or-logic also incorporates Niklas Luhmann's system theory, which will be the chosen perspective of this article and is discussed in more detail in the next Section.

The literature on hybrid forms and processes of hybridization can be systematized as follows: the literature on (a) hybridizations between different forms of strategic communication (e.g., PR and advertising), and (b) between strategic communication and publicity. Hybridizations between different forms of strategic communication have been described in greater depth for several years now. On the one hand, this has to be observed in the context of digitization: If users cannot assign online offers to different fields such as marketing, human resources or investor relations or—in the case of critics—do not want to, painstakingly established organizational structures of strategic communication may come under pressure (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Social media newsrooms can be interpreted as a reaction to these hybrid users (Zerfass & Schramm, 2014). On the other hand, the hybrid nature of corporate social responsibility reports has been explained as follows:

> [Corporate social responsibility], as a generic construct in its hybrid form, seems a 'typification' of three interdiscourses—discourses of promotion, goodwill, and self-justification—sociopragmatically co-constructed within an interdiscursive space. The purity of this genre lies in its hybridization, primarily in the integration of promotional cues in reporting genre, illustrating how interdiscursivity can explore the interrelationship between discursive and

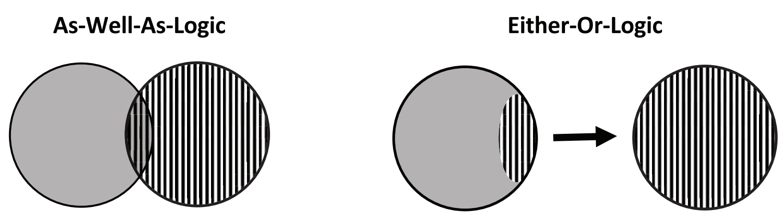

Figure 1. The as-well-as-logic and the either-or-logic. Source: Adapted from Kron and Berger (2015, p. 7) and Beck and Grande (2004, p. 51).

> professional practices. The limitation of the study was the limited choice of countries and sample size. (Bhatia, 2012, p. 221)

Hybrid forms and processes of hybridization between strategic communication and other forms, such as publicity, have been discussed more intensively. Since the 1990s, there has been talk of "hybrid messages" (Balasubramanian, 1994, p. 30) at the boundary between journalism and advertising. The hybrid character here aims at not recognizing the paid or strategic character when hybrid messages are defined as:

> All paid attempts to influence audiences for commercial benefit using communications that project a noncommercial character; under these circumstances, audiences are likely to be unaware of the commercial influence attempt and/or to process the content of such communications differently than they process commercial messages. (Balasubramanian, 1994, p. 30)

Examples of hybrid advertising formats are, in addition to product placement, masked-art such as sculptures, songs, literature and images that present products but do not have an obvious commercial character (Balasubramanian, 1994). Hybrid formats intermingle with their environments by adopting the external features of other communicative genres and by obliterating contextual clues (Matteo & Zotto, 2015). In the context of these hybrid advertising formats, the advantage or function of hybridity has also been explicitly explained: "Mimicry strategies offer marketeers the advantage of higher efficiency due to greater effectiveness" (Borchers, 2016, p. 201). With the advent of content marketing, the products of which appear more similar to journalistic products and, indeed, compete with them the debate has gained new importance (Taiminen et al., 2015; Zeng, 2018).

While hybridization in hybrid advertising formats was investigated from the perspective of advertising, it has been investigated in the relations between media and politics, including political PR, from the perspective of media and journalism (e.g., Hoffmann, 2003). The theory-oriented publications on hybridization and de-differentiation in journalism research (Görke, 2009; Loosen, 2015; in general: Görke & Scholl, 2006) can also be included. Early examples of hybrid journalism included infotainment, edutainment, emotainment, confrontainment, advertainment, computainment or reality TV (Weischenberg, 2001, p. 69). These studies provide an important starting point for the considerations presented in this article.

3. Hybridization and Hybrid Structures: A Theoretical Framework

When the function of hybridizations and hybrid structures are elaborated in the following, the specific perspective has to be stated. Firstly, the following considerations are based on the systems theory of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995, 2006), which is the third school of the "communication constitutes organization" perspective (Cooren et al., 2011; Schoeneborn, 2011) and has garnered growing attention in international strategic communication research in recent years (Blaschke, 2015; Holmström, 2005; Seidl, 2018). The central basic assumption of systems theory is that social systems are non-trivial systems that are self-referential closed and autopoietic (Luhmann, 1995). From the system theoretical perspective, therefore, it follows that the following considerations can be assigned to the either-or-logic. Thirdly, the authors are largely German-speaking, because questions of hybridization and de-differentiation have been discussed intensively in German-language communication research in recent years. The fourth characteristic is to be found in the fact that hybridization is described from the perspective of PR starting in Section 4.

One central advantage of the either-or-logic is identified in the articles on hybridizations, which often do not clearly state the two systems being hybridized. However, it is not possible to describe changes or even something completely 'new' if the (initial) systems have not been determined beforehand. Therefore, Section 4 explains the systems that hybridize. Among other things, the function and the binary code with which functional systems differentiate themselves from their environment must be mentioned (Luhmann, 1995). While the function designates which social problem a social system exclusively deals with, the binary code is the distinction with which a social system observes the environment. Thus, the function of science is to expand knowledge and it operates with the code true vs. untrue. Since in systems theory everything counts as part of a system or its environment, mixing zones or interpenetration zones *à la* Parsons are not conceivable.

While the function and code of a functional system are stable, systems continuously change their structures. Therefore, hybridizations are located below the functional and code level at the structural and program level. In business, scientific progress is observed with a view to future product innovations; journalism observes politics in search of current events. Hybridization means more than this observation of the environment: In hybridization, a system adopts program structures that are alien to that system (Görke, 2009, p. 84). One example of this is entertainment journalism, in which journalism adopts practices of the entertainment system.

Like mediatization (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999), hybridization can be understood both as a process and as a description of a state. Hybridization as a process means that a system has adopted external program structures over a period of time. The state description 'hybridized' describes the extent of hybridization (Zucker, 1983) in a general way, following neo-institutionalist considerations. Specifically, we can speak of a hybridized system according to Schneider (2000, p. 183), if one system with its program structures refers decisively to another system without violating its own autopoietic mode of operation. Finally, hybrid structures are external structures that a system has adopted.

What problems do hybridizations solve, what is their function? Social systems tend to stick to proven structures, which was what Luhmann (1971) described as *praise of routine*. As much as such redundant structures are suitable for reducing complexity, they may also lead to problems if the system observes that they invariably lead to disappointment in the environment. Hybrid structures can help here. Since disappointments of the environment are observed primarily at the system periphery, hybridization is usually more likely to be observed at the periphery than at the system core. While the system core can remain unchanged, the system periphery can react to perceived problems by adopting external program structures (Görke, 2009). Hybridization as a strategy thus assumes an innovative function in systems and enables learning. Consequently, hybridizations strengthen the evolutionary ability of systems, but at the same time represent challenges by the system periphery to the core, in that they require it to reflect identity (Görke, 2009). To put it more bluntly: The periphery raises the question of whether it will be the new system core in the future—or whether it will remain a (temporary) marginal phenomenon.

Although all these changes take place merely at the structural level of a system and do not affect its function and code, the question of the risks of hybridization presents itself. Strong adoption of external program structures can lead to a "creeping loss of identity" (Marcinkowski, 1993, p. 228). From there, it is but a small step to de-differentiation. In the end, a hybridization process can "lead to the paradox that a system loses its specific function when it connects with another system" (Schneider, 2000, p. 186–187). A de-differentiation is present if there is actually a (partial or temporary) loss of function of a system—if, for example, journalism is integrated into the entertainment system. Gerhards (1991, p. 271) speaks of de-differentiation analogous to functional differentiation, when a "suspension of a permanently given system/environment distinction and its replacement by a new difference" is given. New forms of functional differentiation exist if, for example, hybridizations lead to the emergence of new systems or organizational subsystems. It becomes clear that the periphery with hybridizations can provoke the system core through too great a proximity to an environmental system and too great a distance to the system core.

4. PR as a Result of a Hybridization Process

Content marketing, corporate publishing, storytelling or brand PR: The practices behind these terms can be interpreted as examples of how media relations in particular adopts external structural elements. One could describe all these practices separately, which would result in an impressive variety of examples of hybridization. Instead, these practices will be presented in a wider context (Hoffjann, in press). First of all, the functional system of the public sphere is outlined, in which the differentiation of the PR itself can be understood as the result of a hybridization process. The differentiated PR service system makes unrestrained use of the program structures of journalism (Section 5.1), entertainment (Section 5.2) and advertising (Section 5.3).

PR have been deliberately chosen to explain hybridizations in strategic communication. On the one hand, PR is traditionally characterized by its close orientation towards journalism, as evidenced in the numerous journalistic practices constantly imitated in PR. On the other hand, current developments, such as the economic crisis facing journalism, or digitization, present new challenges for PR. The article explores how PR attempts to solve these problems by means of orientation towards entertainment and advertising.

Pursuant to Hoffjann and Arlt (2015), PR can be conceived of as one of several service systems in the public sphere. In the following, the functional system of the public sphere will first be outlined before showing how a process of hybridization has led to the differentiation of PR.

The social functional system of the public sphere enables society to observe itself, to orient itself and to synchronize itself momentarily (Görke, 1999; Marcinkowski, 1993). In the public sphere, as in other social functional systems, internal variations led to the emergence of service systems. Like Görke (2007), Hoffjann and Arlt (2015) identify four service systems: journalism, advertising, PR and entertainment. All four service systems publish collective messages. The central difference is found in the different programming of the code. This is the secondary code of the service systems. Journalism operates with the secondary code 'actuality'; entertainment with the secondary code 'pleasant experience'; for PR, the secondary code is 'convincing'; while for advertising it is 'seducing'.

Further relevant differences between the four service systems are highlighted by two additional distinctions. First comes the question of whether their public descriptions refer primarily to themselves or to others. Second, is the question of binding character. Journalism can be understood as binding external representation and entertainment as non-binding external representation. PR and advertising, on the other hand, serve the purpose of self-representation with the aim of influencing decisions in the interest of the positively described. While in advertising, as a non-binding self-representation, the fade-out rule is largely accepted (Schmidt, 2007), in the binding self-representation of PR it is normatively expected that the publications are factually appropriate. Accordingly, PR and advertising are oriented, for example, towards the presentation forms and aesthetics of their counterparts on the external representation side, i.e., PR to journalism and advertising to entertainment.

Binding PR is primarily assigned to instruments such as media relations, customer and employee magazines or most organizational content in social media; these are essentially the areas of owned and earned media (Xie et al., 2018, p. 168).

This is the identity of the differentiated PR service system. Looking at the emergence of PR, it becomes clear how differentiated systems can originate as hybrid structures. For PR work, this is to be located in Germany in the 19th century, when journalism was beginning to blossom, and the public began to observe organizations more and more critically (Bentele & Wehmeier, 2003). The advertising that existed at that time (Zurstiege, 2011) quickly reached its limits with its non-binding nature, leading to the adoption of journalistic program structures. It was from these that the new PR service system subsequently emerged.

5. Hybridization in PR

Like any form of self-representation, PR suffers from the problems of a lack of trustworthiness, attention and relevance of its communication objects. In order to be able to continue to influence decisions in the interest of the positively described, PR unscrupulously adopts program structures of journalism, advertising and entertainment (Figure 2). If one views the aforementioned examples in this context, it becomes clear to what extent some peripheral areas of PR have already hybridized. Conversely, hybridizations—e.g., of journalism versus PR, entertainment and advertising—could also be identified, thus making it clear that hybridizations are always a challenge for both sides (Görke, 2009, p. 79).

5.1. Hybridization of PR versus Journalism

By orienting itself towards journalism, PR tries above all to solve its trustworthiness problems and the resulting problem of a lack of outreach. While (a) media relations aims to ensure that journalism transforms self-representations into more credible external representations or at least takes self-representations into account, (b) corporate publishing aims to bypass or replace journalism with quasi-journalistic content. For a long time, this orientation towards journalism and the adoption of journalistic structures were central to PR.

If one understands *(a) media relations* as attempts to steer towards the intermediate target group of journalists, it simulates journalistic selection criteria or modes of operation such as news factors and journalistic work routines in order to influence reporting in its own interests. In terms of systems theory, this can be conceived as external context steering vis-à-vis journalism, in which PR attempts to steer journalism by setting incentives (Willke, 1995). Thus, media relations can hardly be successful without hybrid structures, i.e., the adoption of

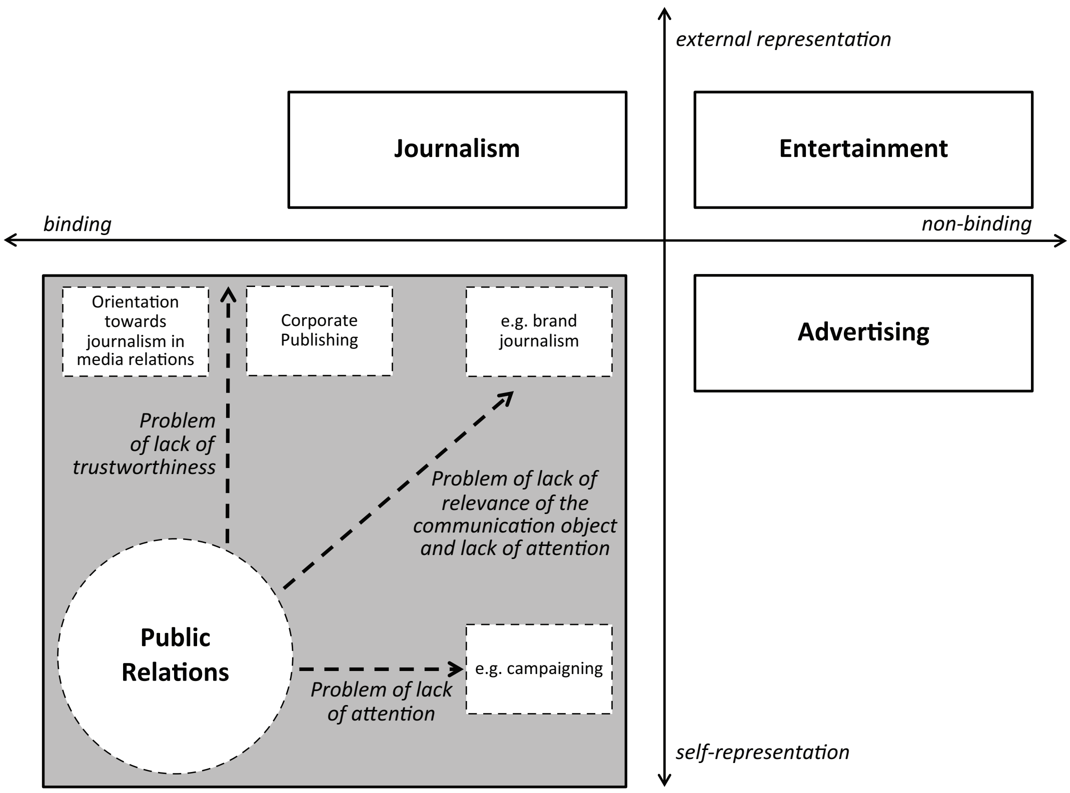

Figure 2. Hybridization of PR with other service systems in the public sphere. Source: Addapted from Hoffjann and Arlt (2015, p. 92).

journalistic structures. This adoption of journalistic program structures can be deconstructed at all levels, while at the same time preserving functional autonomy.

The adoption of journalistic structures begins with concrete activities such as research and the selection of topics and facts. The decisive difference lies in the fact that all this is done under strategic aspects in PR. This applies equally to the content level, at which media relations instrumentalizes journalistic news factors (Schwarz, 2006). In all this, media relations' services can be limited to offering topics on which journalism is actively carrying out research (e.g., through invitations to press conferences). Especially in times of economic crisis in journalism, an alternative is being observed increasingly often: Media relations offers ready-produced articles that journalists can publish unedited, thus saving them resources. The various adoptions are continued in organizational structures. Although the hope of efficiency gains is central to the increasing adoption of newsroom concepts, press and media relations also expect a greater media presence.

A special aspect here is the personal level. In a functionally differentiated society, the assumption of roles is a self-evident part of all functional systems. However, due to inter-role conflicts (Obermaier & Koch, 2015) it is viewed very critically when journalists are also active in PR. From a PR perspective, the advantage of so called 'PR-journalists' is that they are still anchored in journalism. Similarly, this applies to career-changers who switch from journalism to PR. The relatively high numbers who do this can be explained first and foremost by the hope that former journalists can simulate journalism more successfully.

In so-called *(b) corporate publishing* as part of content marketing, PR goes one step further than in media relations. The aim is no longer to influence journalism, but to bypass journalism by addressing target groups directly. For this purpose, binding self-representations are disguised as binding external representations. Content marketing and specifically corporate publishing use journalism to attract the attention of their target groups. Pursuant to a communication research understanding, strategic communication simulates journalism and entertainment in content marketing. From a marketing research perspective, content marketing is the analysis, planning, execution and control of strategic communication activities (offline and online) that pursue their goal with relevant maintenance, information and service offers that the target group perceives, recommends or actively seeks. Content marketing is thus a typical example of hybridization between advertising and PR, as well as between journalism and entertainment. This process may ultimately result in large companies themselves becoming media houses with magazines, television channels and various web offerings (e.g., Red Bull).

In media relations, hybrid structures can increase the likelihood of their offerings being adopted or at least used by journalism. Particularly in times of declining editorial budgets, the increasing professionalization of offers further improves publication opportunities. In corporate publishing, the adoption of journalistic structures also aims at mimicry in the sense of "hybrid messages" (Balasubramanian, 1994, p. 30), such that self-representations are ultimately 'misunderstood' as representations by others, giving rise to journalistic follow-up communications (Görke, 2009).

5.2. Hybridization of PR Versus Entertainment

PR suffers from a lack of relevance of the communication object and a lack of attention. It attempts to solve these problems by adopting the structures of entertainment. While the adoption of entertainment elements has always been a matter of course for advertising (Russel, 2007), this is also being seen increasingly often in PR. Similar to entertainment-oriented journalism (e.g., infotainment), this is intended to address additional audiences (e.g., Görke, 2009). In PR, entertainment orientation is particularly pronounced, e.g., in brand PR on consumer goods (Bull, 2013), when, for example, media presence is to be created with the help of celebrities or PR stunts. Storytelling (Gill, 2011; Kent, 2015), which is used to imbue brands with an emotionally charge, is also strongly represented in this area. The entertainment orientation is also reflected in the growing number of events and their increasingly elaborate staging—known as eventization.

On the one hand, PR has increasingly oriented itself towards entertainment in recent years; on the other hand, one particular risk of PR is evident here: Similar to journalism, too much focus on entertainment in PR has been linked with the risk of undermining the promise of bindingness.

5.3. Hybridization of PR Versus Advertising

The competitive situation between organizations with their PR and advertising activities leads to a struggle for attention and a struggle for trustworthiness. Consequently, PR and advertising are constantly on the lookout for new attention-generating and trustworthiness-boosting strategies. It can be observed that PR and advertising use structural elements from the other side to solve these problems.

In principle, PR is concerned with differentiation from advertising since both differ in the aspect of (lacking) bindingness. A PR strategy that employs a large quantity of advertising elements would quickly lose trustworthiness. Thus, the described adoption of journalistic selection and construction criteria is precisely the attempt to be evaluated by journalists as appropriate and relevant. This orientation towards journalistic selection and construction criteria can, however, lead to PR restricting itself to such an extent that it no longer penetrates with its actual goals or messages—in other words, it no longer achieves attention for its strategic goals. Advertising elements or advertising itself can help to eliminate these attention deficits. PR primarily uses campaigns for this purpose. According to Wiencierz et al. (2015), campaigns can be understood as dramaturgy-based, thematically limited and time-limited communicative strategies for generating public attention. Such campaigns have long been taken for granted in advertising because efficiency and effectiveness issues were raised at an early stage as a result of the high costs involved (e.g., Hallemann, 2008; Zielske, 1959). Accordingly, a precise target group approach, a focus on a product or a topic and, above all, the exact timing of the advertising circuit are all incorporated as a matter of course. With appropriate campaign planning, PR adopts a central structural element of advertising (Hoffjann & Arlt, 2015, p. 97). Attention problems may also lead an organization to decide that it can no longer achieve the necessary attention or reach using PR measures. Large classical advertising campaigns by associations can be interpreted as a response to this problem.

Conversely, the lack of binding character of advertising exacerbates the credibility problem in a special way. As much as advertising can enjoy the fool's freedom that nobody expects it to be true (Luhmann, 2000), it becomes difficult whenever it tries to do so. Since the 1970s, factual advertising has been observed as an alternative strategy to eliminate credibility deficits in advertising (Willems & Kautt, 2003). Examples of this are advertisements in the form of management letters and advertorials, which at first glance are indistinguishable from editorial content and are only recognizable as advertising at second glance. These can be interpreted as advertising strategies aimed at adopting structural elements of PR.

6. Conclusions

PR has been described as the result of hybridization processes. Thus, PR is an example of how hybridization plays a central role in the process of differentiating social systems. However, the diversity and special relevance of hybridization has been worked out for the existing PR system.

This article focuses on PR because it has traditionally been oriented in a special way toward journalism and, in recent years, increasingly toward advertising and entertainment and has adopted their structures. Similarly, the theoretical framework could be used to describe hybridizations for the other service systems. Journalism takes over the campaign format from advertising—similar to PR: Campaign journalism attempts to dramaturgically build coverage of scoops over a longer period of time and is thus oriented toward advertising. The goal: to generate attention for an exclusive story. Journalism adopts elements of PR when it tries to emphasize its own performance strengths, e.g., by highlighting exclusive stories or its worldwide network of correspondents. By using such adoptions, editorial offices try to bind their readers, viewers and listeners. Finally, advertising traditionally orients itself to entertainment in order to solve the problem of the lack of relevance of the communication object. It tries to compensate the problem of a lack of credibility by taking its cue from journalism. It uses such hybrid advertising in an attempt to be perceived as publicity.

This highlights the advantage of locating hybridizations in the context of a theory of the public sphere: Each service system faces specific problems and attempts to solve these problems by adopting foreign structural elements. It can thus be used as a framework for future research projects. This would have the particular advantage that specific hybridization processes could be compared with each other and thus explored in context.

Hybrid structures provide an opportunity for learning and innovation as an adoption of external program structures. The system theoretical function of hybridization is to be found here, but is afforded little attention in current amendments: Hybridization makes it possible for social systems to try something new on the periphery without immediately surrendering their identity. Such a perspective focuses less on the threat of hybrid—and, thus, ambiguous—structures than on the effects on the ability of systems to change. Using the strategy of hybridization, PR remains capable of evolution (Görke, 2009, p. 86) and, in the face of a changing environment, can attempt to continue to influence decisions in the interest of the positively described. It is to be expected that the pressure to legitimate will continue to increase, as will the struggle for public attention. This will only further increase the need for hybrid structures, which is why it can be expected that we will see the emergence of growing numbers of hybrid structures in the future.

The question is whether such hybridizations lead to the emergence of new systems or, conversely, to the de-differentiation of existing systems. In PR, the boundaries between journalism and PR still seem to be relatively stable, because the value of largely independent information is evident, especially in core areas of journalism such as political news journalism. The situation is less clear on the journalistic periphery in topics such as fashion, beauty and travel, as the success of social media influencers with their sometimes nontransparent approach to the character of texts demonstrates. The boundary between binding PR and non-binding advertising seems to be coming under growing pressure due to phenomena such as fake news and bullshitting in political strategic communication. This raises the question of the extent to which the regular and, for the most part, openly displayed violation of the binding norm can lead to the de-differentiation or emergence of a new self-representation service system.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Mapping Transmedia Marketing in the Music Industry: A Methodology

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Abstract
Over the last decade, the music industry has adapted its promotional strategy to take advantage of the fluid, contemporary, platform-based transmedia landscape. For researchers of contemporary culture, the multiplicity of promotional activities creates substantial methodological challenges. In this article, we present and discuss such methodological approaches using two studies of contemporary promotional music campaigns as illustrative cases. Inspired by digital and innovative methods and guided by the Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR's) ethical guidelines, we developed two data collection strategies—reversed engineering and live capturing—and applied two analytical approaches—visual mapping and time-based layering. The first case study traced already staged music marketing campaigns across multiple online media platforms, and the second followed an online promotional campaign in real time for six months. Based on these case studies, we first argue for the importance of grounded manual capturing and coding in data collection, especially when working around data access limitations imposed by platforms. Second, we propose reversed engineering and live capturing as methods of capturing fragmented data, in contemporary promotional campaigns. Third, we suggest the visual mapping and time-based layering of data, enabling researchers to oscillate between qualitative and quantitative data. Finally, we argue that researchers must pool their experiences and resources regarding how to transcend platform limitations and question a lack of transparency while respecting ethical norms and guidelines. With these arguments, we assert the researcher's necessary role in understanding and explaining the complex and hybrid contemporary promotional landscape and provide tools and strategies for further research.

Keywords
digital methods; engagement; ethics; innovative methods; music industry; promotional culture; transmedia marketing

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the music industry has adapted a specific promotional strategy to take advantage of the fluid and dynamic contemporary platform-based media landscape. Such transmedia campaigns are continuously in motion and carried out with significant crossover between online and offline activities with multiple platforms and venues. The term 'transmedia' relates to *transmedia storytelling*, referring to Jenkins' (2006) concept of how narratives expand and are co-created with audiences across different media forms. *Transmedia marketing* refers to promotional campaigns using a range of media formats and activities to provide a coherent marketing narrative that is co-created with an audience (Scolari, 2009; Zeiser, 2015). Contemporary digital campaigns are often strategically planned to engage audiences across diverse platforms with the intention to generate market value (cf. Jenkins et al., 2013). This allows diverse actors (e.g., advertisers, platform owners, content distributors) to profit from users' activities, i.e., so-called free labour (cf. Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Morris, 2014; Terranova, 2000), but it simultaneously offers people experiences of community, belonging, and joy (Baym, 2018; Duffett, 2013). Promotional transmedia music campaigns are such hybrid spaces of online and offline practises mixing commercial and cultural expressions to form materialised instances of promotional culture.

However, for researchers of promotional culture, the multiplicity of promotional activities across diverse media outlets creates substantial methodological challenges. The wide range of content and media formats (e.g., shares, likes, written text, memes, visuals, hashtags, emojis, videos, apps, games and animations, in any combination), the distance between qualitative elements and quantitative data strands (from punctuation to thousands of posts and reposting across platforms), and grasping and selecting among the wide range of data scraping and analyse tools accessible can be overwhelming (Rieder & Röhle, 2017). These challenges are multiplied by the assertion of proprietary control by platforms over online-generated data (Gillespie, 2018). We argue that, in order to pose a wider range of questions about online promotions and the relations between audiences, cultural producers, and platforms, we must be innovative in both our data collection and data analysis methods. New methods may involve skating close to the edge of the platform terms of service, and, as a field, we must thoroughly try to understand the ethical challenges posed by proprietary restrictions placed on social data. To understand a media landscape in flux therefore calls for innovative and sometimes unconventional methods (see, for example, Eriksson et al., 2019).

This article addresses this call by developing methodological strategies for capturing complex promotional campaigns across different media formats as well as how to analyse fragmented qualitative and quantitative data of different formats, forms, and scales and collected from different platforms, all of which have specific affordances and conditions for data collection. The methodological strategies draw on knowledge gained from two large-scale case studies on transmedia campaigns within the music industry. Inspired by innovative (cf. Kubitschko & Kaun, 2016) and digital methods (cf. Pink et al., 2016; Rogers, 2013; Venturini et al., 2018), and guided by the Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR's) ethical guidelines for internet research (Franzke et al., 2020), we developed two data collection strategies, reversed engineering and live capturing, and applied two analytical approaches, visual mapping and time-based layering. We will argue that reversed engendering and visual mapping are applicable when tracing and analysing already staged promotional campaigns and that live capturing and time-based layering are beneficial when studying ongoing campaigns. We will use two case studies of music marketing campaigns to illustrate our developed methodological strategies. The reason for this is twofold: First, inspired by Pink et al. (2016), these cases can be understood as templates for future studies as well as give insight into promotional campaigns' entanglement with a variety of media platforms and user practices. Second, the cases demonstrate the complexity in collecting and navigating diverse strands of data as well as any challenges emerging throughout the study that demand innovative measures.

This article initially accounts for the growing body of work on digital methods and innovative methods. Thereafter, we account for the grounded and iterative processes of refining our methodological strategies. The following section discusses the practical and ethical challenges of identifying and applying methods when studying contemporary promotional campaigns. In the concluding section of the article, we formulate four methodological strategies that we argue will aid researchers in conducting future studies on promotional transmedia campaigns.

2. Digital and Innovative Methods

The shift from network-based web structures to the platformisation of communication (Arvidsson, 2016; Helmond, 2015; Van Dijk, 2012) has elevated and enabled the use of digital data as scientific data, especially in regard to data produced through social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017). This development has called for new methods of capturing, handling, and analysing digital data in a transparent and replicable way. This has prompted interdisciplinary approaches bridging social and computational sciences and the combination of techniques from computer science and theories from social sciences (Tinati et al., 2014), resulting in a range of qualitative and quantitative methods as well as tools for data collection and visualization. These methods are specifically engaged with ways in which to capture and analyse online content; however, their intention is not to study internet culture per se, but rather for social and cultural research. Rogers (2013) therefore formulates digital methods as a 'research practice that learns from the methods of online devices, repurposes them, and seeks to ground claims about cultural change and societal conditions in web data' (p. 19). The study of digital data—or traces of actions—can then be twofold: to study the actions themselves as part of the specific phenomenon studied or as proxies of other actions outside the medium (Venturini et al., 2018).

There is a growing body of guidelines and handbooks for digital methods of conducting, sampling, collecting, and storing data (cf. Hurwitz et al., 2018; Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017; Venturini et al., 2018). These guidelines are also a consequence of a range of implications that challenge empirical investigations through digital methods, such as data richness, limitations in data access, policies, privacy issues, and algorithms (cf. Gerlitz & Rieder, 2013; Gillespie, 2018; Rieder & Röhle, 2012). Platforms are gatekeepers determining the scope and quality of accessible data and may even deny data access (Gerlitz & Rieder, 2013; Venturini et al., 2018). Data is formatted to favour specific types of analysis beneficial to the platform, such as users' networks, actor influence, and content reach, which limit the questions the data can answer (Gitelman, 2013; Marres & Gerlitz, 2016). Also, determining how algorithms, for example, sort, filter, relate, recommend, and organise content on platforms and search engines is often difficult for researchers (Bucher, 2016; Gillespie, 2018). Instead, researchers need to use unconventional methods to investigate platforms in depth (see, for example, Eriksson et al., 2019, exploring the music distribution platform Spotify). Guidelines have also been developed to ensure the ethical handling of data (cf. Ess, 2013; Zimmer & Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017). Ethical considerations are always central when conducting research. However, within online research, there are certain additional ethical aspects that need to be taken into account. Accessibility in digital data has also prompted political discussions, resulting in policies and laws (for example, Regulation of 27 April 2016, 2016, within the EU) that need consideration. One of the most thorough guidelines for ethical decision-making while conducting research was developed by the AoIR through their Ethics Working Committee (reports 2002, 2012, and 2020). Their most recent report (Franzke et al., 2020) focuses primarily on ethical pluralism and cultural awareness and emphasizes that ethics should be oriented around critical questioning rather than rules. When collecting online data, ethics needs to be addressed throughout the process, from the first initial research design to the end of the project. It demands a bottom-up approach, as there are new considerations to take into account with each case (Franzke et al., 2020).

Digital methods include both qualitative and quantitative methods; however, digital methods have been accused of being biased towards quantitative data (big data), especially because many digital methods borrow methods and analytical tools from computational sciences (further discussed by, for example, Venturini et al., 2018). It is also within the area of extracting and analysing grand volumes of data that we have seen significant development in supportive tools. However, researchers have raised concerns regarding the risk of these tools being applied without substantial understanding of the analytical rationale behind methods rendered in software or seeing its full potential (Rieder & Röhle, 2017; van Geenen, 2020). A consequent critique of digital methods has been that they have a tendency to be not research-driven, but data-driven (cf. Tinati et al., 2014), where the research question is defined through what different tools can do rather than a specific research question. However, Kitchin (2017) argues that digital methods allow researchers to find new insights that arise within the data rather than through theory, promoting a grounded approach which Rogers (2013) calls 'online groundedness.' Along with Kitchin (2017) and Rogers' (2013) arguments, we want to emphasize the grounded qualities of working with digital methods. The complexities of handling different interfaces, affordances and data accessibilities, and asynchronous timelines and data formats call for a grounded and adaptive approach (Lury & Wakeford, 2012). We call this 'being with the data' to bring attention to the necessity of being responsive, adaptive, and grounded while collecting and handling digital data.

When researching contemporary promotional transmedia campaigns, digital methods are close at hand, as they provide guidance and tools for data collection and analysis. Carah and Angus (2018), for example, used quantitative data gathering to capture branded activities on Instagram through hashtags, and Kjus (2016) used quantitative data from WiMP/Tidal to investigate how music is discovered on streaming platforms. Both these studies discuss the role of strategies and algorithms in orchestrating activities to promote participation. Both studies also complemented digital quantitative studies by using qualitative data collection, specifically highlighting the need for different types of data to study the interconnections between media platforms' infrastructures, cultural experiences, cultural consumption, and promotion practices. The most prominent digital qualitative method is digital ethnography, which offers guidance in studying digital social spaces and digital practises embodied in the everyday (Hine, 2015; Pink et al., 2016). Digital ethnography as a method and process offers an explorative, adaptive, and reflexive approach, where the research design and selection of methods should evolve if necessary as the study progresses (Hine, 2015; O'Reilly, 2012; Pink, 2016). Digital ethnography is applicable when, for example, locating and exploring online brand communities. For example, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) applied digital ethnography to perform a qualitative analysis of a large twitter data set when studying brand-related communication across social media. Armstrong et al. (2016) examined the innovative marketing practices of the Los Angeles Kings hockey organization and fans' reactions to it. Chang and Park (2019) used digital ethnography to examine the fan club of the music group BTS and its social media activities in connection to its brand. The method repertoire of digital ethnography includes activities such as observations, taking part in and recording activities, interviewing informants, distributing questionnaires, gathering data and artefacts, mapping and visualizing data, and interpreting results. Digital ethnography is a matter of engaging with the field, watching what happens, and listening to what is said (Hine, 2015; O'Reilly, 2012; Pink, 2016).

Kubitschko and Kaun (2016) suggest that researchers need to allow themselves to apply innovation to 'widening and rethinking research methods to further understand the role that media technologies and infrastructures play in society' (p. 4), applying a more pragmatic approach to conducting research in the contemporary media landscape (see also Lury & Wakeford, 2012; Snee et al., 2016). Innovative methods acknowledge the complexity of following pre-defined methodological paths when studying ever-changing contemporary media phenomena. Innovative methods allow researchers to explore methods—by both extending existing methods and developing new methods—while conducting their research (Kubitschko & Kaun, 2016). The innovative methods initiative allowed for the combining of digital methods with other methods as well as analytical system re-framing methods to be adjusted according to the research question. The ability to be sensitive to the case is crucial when studying digital promotional campaigns (see also Brodmerkel & Carah, 2016; Lury, 2009). Digital promotional campaigns are staged to move across different platforms and between offline and online activities. Brembilla (2019) studied artist Beyoncé to illustrate how, for example, a matrix of narratives are formed using multiple platforms that, in the end, point to content streaming. Cross-platform data collection, as discussed by Venturini et al. (2018), makes data collection even more complicated, as it involves taking the nature of different platforms into account and simultaneously identify a consistency to enable a common analytical frame. Each platform has different limitations and possibilities regarding the capturing of data, and there is always a risk that the platform will shift its conditions or not provide data. Limited data access prompted, for example, Eriksson et al. (2019) to use an interventionist research design to study the music streaming service Spotify, which led to Spotify claiming that the researchers violated their terms of use (Eriksson et al., 2019). Online campaigns often—if not always—intersect promotional content with user-generated content and individual (media) practices, prompting research questions that integrate qualitative and quantitative data. In addition, as Brodmerkel and Carah (2016) conclude, management and brands often analyse user-generated digital data to experiment with and calibrate their campaigns according to users' activity and responses. This indicates that we, as researchers, need to be innovative alongside the innovative campaigns we examine.

3. Two Methodological Approaches for Studying Digital Promotional Transmedia Campaigns

The following section of the article will present and discuss methodological approaches to studying promotional transmedia campaigns. Unfolding of campaigns aims to investigate a wide range of issues of promotional culture, such as engagement, promotional strategies, co-creation, fan/brand cultures, blurred boundaries between professional and unprofessional content, content circulation, transmediality, ethics, and power relations. However, while campaigns are interesting sites of studies, the complexity of how digital campaigns unfold across diverse media outlets and platforms control over online-generated data makes such studies methodologically challenging. In the following section, we propose two different ways of capturing and organising data when studying digital promotional transmedia campaigns. The first section addresses how to approach already conducted campaigns and re-create the outline of a campaign in time and space. The second approach involves the real-time capturing of a promotional campaign as making suggestions of how to organize and analyse large strands of qualitative and quantitative data of different formats.

3.1. Reversed Engineering and Visual Mapping

In this study, we aimed to scrutinize how promotional transmedia campaigns play out within the online environment and capture audiences' reactions, specifically campaigns that sought new grounds with online marketing and employed live events and social media platforms in addition to traditional media coverage. Evidence of audience engagement is for example, web traffic, visitors, shares, likes, downloads, uploads, etc. The methodological challenge was to gather data associated with promotional campaigns that had already taken place. One suggested approach is to use existing data collecting tools for scraping platforms and websites of data (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017). However, studying a range of differently designed campaigns using various media platforms demands the use of different tools depending on platform. In addition, we risked gathering an overwhelming amount of data—and data in different formats—which would make it difficult to handle and analyse. Instead, inspired by Suchman's (2012) notion of 'reversed engineering,' we decided to manually trace how each campaign unfolded. Suchman (2012) suggests that the relationships between technology and users (machines and humans) are configurations. By conducting reversed engineering, researchers can understand the components of such relationships and how relations are constructed (Suchman, 2012). When approaching a transmedia marketing campaign as a configuration, reversed engineering brings specific attention to the components and construction of engagement. We thereby reversed the campaigns, capturing the campaigns different types of activities, where those activities took place, and how they were constructed as well as how the campaign was laid out by its management across platforms, events, and time. Reversed engineering allows for gathering data traces of audiences' presence (or absence) and their activities to indicate indifference toward, for example, conducting interviews with management. As a result, we were able to study their actions to understand their nature as well as the proxies of the management's strategies (Venturini et al., 2018). Furthermore, we were able to see and access the same actions as the audience/consumers—or, in other words, be with the data.

3.1.1. Data Collection and Sampling

The reversed engineering process became, in many ways, a manual exercise. The report description gave us a point of entry into each campaign—for example, a website, YouTube clip, or Facebook address. We took screenshots of the websites, platform activities, and other media outlets to which the campaign directed us. We followed trails that ran from online spaces to offline activities or from virtual to physical places (e.g., from Facebook to a festival site or a radio show to a campaign site and then a streaming service). Following these traces across diverse platforms, we captured what kinds of actions and interactions consumers were asked to undertake (e.g., sharing, liking, contributing content, etc.), as well as the 'promises' that those actions hold for them—that is, what they are offered in return for their (inter-)actions (e.g., 'exclusive' content, a prize, the ability to impact the order of songs appearing on an album, etc.). Simultaneously, we described each event (e.g., 'the user was asked to follow a link and a hashtag that directed them from Instagram to iTunes') to capture the connection between different media outlets and events. The intention was to ensure that the activity was captured within its context, especially as most of these activities were combinations of text, images, and responses. Finally, the data gathered consisted of screen shots of different campaign activities and audience responses accompanied by textual descriptions of each activity and response.

3.1.2. Visual Mapping for Data Analysis

The next step was to identify a way to organise the collected data. Returning back to how reversed engineering is formulated by Suchman (2012), there was a need to re-configure the relationship between technology and users. The descriptions of each activity combined with screenshots facilitated a recreation of the campaigns activities and movement across platforms. Each campaigns' activities could be mapped out in relation to each other modelling a visual map of the whole campaign. An example of a part of a campaign map is presented in Figure 1 below. The campaign starts from the top right and then evolves following the arrows. The arrows were given different colours to separate campaign activities and fan responses. Constructing a visual map of campaigns allows for a reconstruction of activities, comparison between campaigns, identification of the relation between the campaign activities and audience responses, and organising activities in time and place (e.g., platforms, another media outlet, or off-line). Stieglitz et al. (2018) point out that visualization of data should not only be a way to communicate results but should also be integrated into the research process. This was not a clear intention when we defined our approach to gathering data, but it became central to our discovering and organizing topics and events relevant to our research question and then explore them further. By mapping activities, we identified how users move through the campaign's time-space and how the campaign prepared trails to guide the consumer to various media platforms (from an official website to Instagram, Spotify, etc.). The map then described how the campaign narrative unfolded and identified interconnections and collaborations with other organizations and events,

Figure 1. An example of a visual map for the One Direction marketing campaign.

for example, how boyband One Direction built partnerships with Google Street View, Twitter, iTunes, and local radio channels around the world for audience engagement activities as part of their campaign (Figure 1). Hand (2017) emphasises the importance of contextualising activities (especially in regard to images), as they are situated in a complex combination of users, devices, platforms and produced and consumed with different purposes. Mapping campaign enabled the realization of these complexities. Specifically, mapping through screenshots and observational descriptions served in this case to examine the transmediality within these campaigns. It also gave evidence of transspatiality, recognizing that consumers' mobility also potentially stretches beyond the media. Constructing a map thereby visualised a 'transmediascape' interlinking presumption and free labour and suggesting that users are 'workers' cultivating the digital soil along a controlled path across the transmediascape (Fast et al., 2017; Fast & Jansson, 2019).

3.1.3. Challenges and Limitations of Reversed Engineering and Visual Mapping

Using reversed engineering to gather data and reconstructing campaigns using visual mapping offer researchers a way to study already conducted campaigns. However, there are also limitations to this method. Specifically, there is an overwhelming risk when reversing a campaign that the data has been tampered with (Gerlitz & Rieder, 2013). Platforms as well as the campaign management—or even users—could have curated the content. Following a completed marketing campaign also means that researchers can only capture activities incorporated in the campaign—not any live changes made to it, only traces of the audience's reaction to the campaign in real time. Fan activities and responses to a campaign may occur in other forums or platforms that are not interlinked with the campaign. In that regard, the starting point of the reversed engineering is crucial to the data gathering and mapping enfolds. However, reversed engineering combined with visual mapping offers a richness in data and a grounded approach to how promotional transmedia campaigns unfold.

3.2. Live Capturing and Time-Based Layering of Data

While above we have engaged with the methodological challenges of studying an already conducted campaign, the following section will focus on how to methodologically approach an ongoing transmedia campaign. The intention is to investigate how a transmedia marketing campaign plays out in real time. Although backtracking completed campaigns offers valuable insights into how a transmedia campaign unfolds, we here seek to identify ways to capture audiences' reactions to campaign activities more accurately. In this section, we therefore address a way with which to follow a specific promotional campaign, capturing the audience's actions and interactions, and do so in relation to how the campaign moved across a transmediascape in time and space. Again, we use a specific case study as an illustrative case, a promotional campaign staged in conjunction with the release of Taylor Swift's album *Reputation*. The case illustrates the complexity of contemporary transmedia campaigns at the intersection of cultural expression, branding, and promotion as well as how a campaign is not a standalone entity but highly integrated with previous campaigns and dialogs with audiences/fans.

3.2.1. Data Collection and Sampling

Approaching a promotional campaign demands an initial recognition of the object of study's current platform presence. In this case, we identified official accounts on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. On Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, we also detected a double presence: one personal account and one management account. These, along with an official website and presence on iTunes, formed the basis of the campaign. However, during the study, the campaign also entered new platforms, in this case the social media platforms Tumblr and TikTok, in addition to launching a standalone proprietary app. This highlights the importance of a data collection approach with the ability to adapt to the course of the campaign.

There are existing tools for abstracting data from, for example, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; however, there are as noted above limits to the access of data and some platforms prohibit data access (Gerlitz & Rieder, 2013). Capturing a campaign with such extensive use of social media platforms therefore demands a variety of approaches to collecting data. As access and policies shift over time, researchers are often dependent on the tools accessible at the time of the study. In addition, there is the risk that access to data changes during the course of a study. During the Taylor Swift campaign study, Instagram shut down their Application Programming Interface (API), prohibiting us from retrieving data from the platform. Such an uncertainty of data access suggests the necessity of a multi-approach to ensure rigid data collection. In the Taylor Swift case, we used the Twitter data collection tool Mecodify (Al-Saqaf, 2016). Mecodify captures twitter data following hashtags defined by the researcher and creates a timeline over published twitter posts. In this case, we also used downloaded data from Swift's Facebook account using Netvizz (Rieder, 2013). Netvizz captures posts as well as likes, shares and comments associated with the post and associated with the specific users. It also collects the location of the user—if accessible. We also collected data from Taylor Swift's YouTube account through a transcript scraper, collecting video posts, comments, likes, and shares associated with a specific account (Rieder, 2015).

The gathered data offered insights into activity and individual user data; however, one should not neglect the importance of how content appears and is organized within the interface of a platform. The interface also offers an overview of how dialogues and relationships emerge between activities. Most importantly, it also represents with what the user is confronted as well as how the campaign aims their activities to be seen. Therefore, along with scraping data, we observed the campaign as it developed by capturing screenshots of different events that took place throughout and followed up with links or activities posted by the campaign, especially those interlinking with other platforms. Furthermore, we solved the problem of the closure of Instagram's API by taking screenshots of posts and user responses throughout the campaign. We therefore manually followed Swift's official Instagram accounts (@taylorswift and @taylornation) throughout the study. This became crucial to the study when the campaign moved to other platforms that we could not access through scraping. Real-time observations of ongoing practices allowed us as researchers to, at least partially, transcend the data access limitations set by the platforms (Gerlitz & Rieder, 2013) and capture data before it was (possibly) cleaned by the campaign.

3.2.2. Time-Based Data Layering for Analysis

When live sampling a campaign, it is difficult to foresee its duration and course. After only a few weeks of sampling, and still before the actual release of the album, we had already gathered large amounts of data (quantitative data using scraping tools and qualitative data consisting of screen shots), and we realized that we had to start analysing our data in parallel with data collection. Using the data from the first six weeks of the campaign, we explored different types of analytical approaches. We used Gephi to conduct a network analysis of Swift's Facebook account, which indicated her position as a hub in the music industry social media network. We also explored visualizations of different types of data (e.g., location of users); however, it was difficult to draw any further conclusions from this. With limited insight into the analytical tools' functions and handling of the data (Rieder & Röhle, 2017), it proved to be difficult to ask the questions we wanted to of the data. Instead, it was when we explored diagrams of likes, shares, and comments from the Facebook data as well as a diagram of Twitter activity that we started to see patterns and shapes (Figure 2). We overlayered the Twitter data with the Facebook data and could see that they were interrelated over time. Then, we organized our qualitative data along a timeline, visually over-layering this qualitative data with the quantitative data (see example below). We could then oscillate our analysis between a macro and micro level. Layering the data illustrated the interconnectedness between the campaign activities and audience engagement and highlighted specific

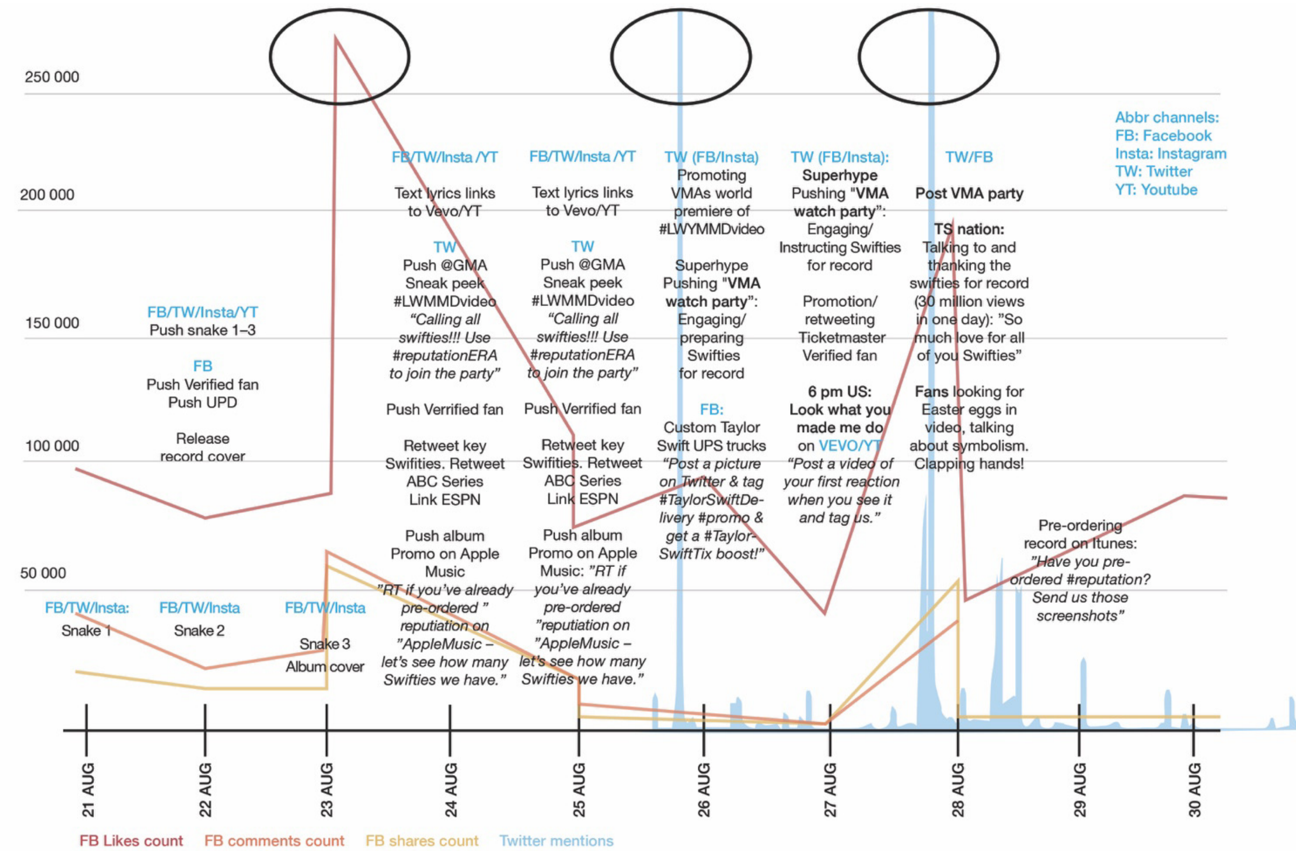

Figure 2. Example of visual layering of qualitative and quantitative data in regard to specific campaign activities and layering data from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.

events that require further study. One example was a post that was posted both on Twitter and Facebook that was largely shared and liked. The post contained only three images and, unlike most of the other posts, had no additional text, links, or hashtags. To attempt to understand the audience's excitement, we followed up on several of the Facebook accounts that had liked and shared this image. In doing so, we could identify that these accounts had shifted their Facebook headings and account images using the visual expression of the upcoming album. Conducting this form of qualitative content analysis allowed for 'categories to emerge out of data and on recognizing the significance for understanding meaning in the context in which an item being analysed (and the categories derived from it) appeared' (Bryman, 2012, p. 291). Performing content analysis, especially regarding studying media-rich content, comes with certain challenges (e.g., collecting and handling ever-changing media formats; see, for example, Hurwitz et al., 2018); however, this study benefitted from reformatting the data to allow for coding and synthesizing it more deeply.

At this point, we realised that we would not be able to handle the overwhelming amount of data collected through the scraping tools. Instead, we needed to identify a more effective way to gather data. After the first analysis, we revisited our research question, which directed our efforts to specifically focusing on instances of cross-platform and offline activities. Performing data collection and analysis in parallel here proved central to focusing on data gathering along with the research question. Our findings showed a close interconnection between fan culture and promotion. In our study we found that the music industry feeds fan culture events around established music events (e.g., the MTV Video Music Awards), and mobilizes to take control of audience participation by playing into existing fan expressions, making use of platforms' affordances and actively seeking audiences on new platforms. The manner in which to participate is defined by the industry and echoed and amplified among fans.

3.2.3. Challenges and Implications of Live Capturing

Following a global marketing campaign in real time can come with several challenges. The amount of data that can be collected is almost endless, and there are many considerations and decisions to make during the process. Such considerations include which platforms to follow and during which time period and time zone they should be followed, what to do with the enormous amount of data that is collected, how to know whether the data collected is the right data and that some central aspects have not been missed, and how to store the data in a way that is feasible in terms of both storage space/place and ethical aspects. When live capturing, these decisions are the researchers' responsibility and can involve possible dead ends. However, live capturing can also facilitate being open and explorative during the process, as the route is not decided in advance. This way of examining is suitable for a promotional cross-media campaign, which in itself also needs to be iterative and follow and adapt to audience engagement—the campaign in itself is evolving during the process, and so is the research to be conducted.

4. Ethical Challenges

Capturing promotional transmedia campaigns across different media formats poses many new challenges for researchers—not in the least of which are ethical challenges. During our studies, we followed the AoiR Ethics Working Committee guidelines for internet research (Franzke et al., 2020), and several ethical issues were considered, especially those concerning data storage, privacy issues, and the visualization/representation of our findings. Researching over a more extended period and working across platforms added to the complexity to data storage. Scraping tools for established platforms (Twitter and Facebook in this case) collect data onto a defined server, limiting external access. However, visiting different platforms and conducting manual data collection makes it complicated (or even impossible) to maintain control of the data. When following the guidelines for data storage from the AoIR (Franzke et al., 2020), special measures are required to store data in a secure, disconnected way. However, live capturing a campaign makes this quite difficult to accomplish. For example, several apps often used in campaigns are only accessible through a mobile phone. In retrospect, this activity should have been conducted in a more systematic and controlled way and on specific devices during our study. However, we were unable to foresee this development in the campaign. The measures we did take included focusing only on specific activities, in agreement with the rule of data minimization as per the General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation of 27 April 2016, 2016), and only collecting data relevant to the research question.

In both the studies, we followed links and captured data partially by taking screenshots, as described above. In a way, we were 'lurkers,' observing ongoing activities and conducting observations without users consent. Observations are not necessarily problematic as such (as discussed by Murthy, 2008); However, the screenshots visually depict individuals' somewhat private activities and expressions. Screenshots are beneficial for analysis, as they are representations of ongoing activities at a particular time. Also, in this case, we can assume that the social media feeds are controlled and possibly tampered with by, for example, the management team in addition to the platform's own monitoring and manipulation of content (for further discussions on the limitations of data scraping, see, for example, Gerlitz & Rieder, 2013). With uncertainty regarding to what extent we can rely on the data provided from a commercial platform, as suggested by Karlsson (2012), screenshots can then represent what is published—at least at that specific moment. However, working with visuals in a digital context is a sensitive matter. We as researchers give individuals' (inter)actions meaning through our analysis. Sensitivity pertains not only to the topic of study (e.g., sexual preferences, political affiliation, mental health or other medical issues) but also to the nature of the study itself. In our illustrated cases above, we used screen shots to critically engage with user practises without their consent. Following the ethics outlined by the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Franzke et al., 2020), it is therefore of great importance to not use specific examples or dialogues nor show content that could be traced online in academic texts. However, the concept of anonymity partially contradicts our willingness to be transparent. It prohibits us from fully accounting for our visual mapping and overlying of data, as posts and comments need to be neutralized.

5. Conclusions: Adaptation and Openness by Being with Data

We propose two approaches to data collection and ways to sort and analyse large strands of diverse data. We thereby want to bring attention to alternative and grounded ways to access, gather, combine, and analyse diverse strands of data. Reversed engineering can be applied to trace already conducted transmedia marketing campaigns across multiple media platforms, on campaign websites, and in web-based games and apps. The collected data can then be organized in time and space through visual mapping, thus re-creating the campaigns for analysis. Live capturing enables researchers to follow a promotional campaign in real time and over time as well as across promotional material, concerts, and events mixing both offline and online audience-targeted and audience-generated activities. Moreover, live capturing generates qualitative and quantitative data of different formats and scales, which can then be interconnected, structured, and analysed using time-based layering.

Throughout our work, it became obvious that conducting online research demands openness and adaptation to the situation grounded in the case (or cases). While the need to be adaptive and innovative is strongly articulated within digital as well as innovative methods, we wanted to emphasize the notion of 'being with the data.' It is key to not get lost in the data, to be responsive to new turns and activities, and to avoid being distracted from the issue at hand. We therefore argue that studying online content is not only a scraping issue; manual capturing and coding can be just as useful for the purpose of such a study, as it allows the researcher to be adaptive and grounded. While it might demand a greater amount of work, manual capturing and coding also might also bring the analysis closer to the data. Moreover, it also allows researchers to engage with rich data sets without being dependent on complex analytical tools. In line with Bucher (2016) and Eriksson et al. (2019), we argue that it becomes the researcher's task to restructure how platform logic plays into the shaping of society. These methodological approaches offer ways to penetrate the limitations and specifications of platforms in order to examine such phenomena in depth.

Based on the methodological approaches presented above, we first argue that manual capturing and coding have an important function in data collection—both alone and in combination with technical processes, such as scraping and using complex analytical data tools. Manual processes are especially important when working around data access limitations imposed by platforms and when handling diverse data formatting. Second, we propose two ways to conduct manual data collection—reversed engineering and live capturing or capturing fragmented data as in contemporary campaigns. Combining manual capturing and scraping ensure data richness and facilitate the contextualisation of campaign activities (Hand, 2017). Third, we suggest the visual mapping and time-based layering of data, as this enables researchers to bring together data of different formats as well as oscillate between qualitative and quantitative data in the analysis. As a part of the innovative methods approach (Kubitschko & Kaun, 2016), the researcher can oscillate between collecting data, organizing it, and analysing it and collecting more data in new ways. This is an iterative and analytical process that is not set from the start but changes throughout the researcher's work. We therefore want to emphasise the importance of conducting data collection and analysis in parallel, as analysis gives insight into the strategic changes of the study design.

Finally, researchers must pool their experiences and resources on how to transcend platform limitations and question platforms' lack of transparency while respecting ethical norms and guidelines. New methods may involve skating close to the edge of platforms' terms of service, and, as a field, we must also understand the ethical challenges posed by proprietary restrictions on social data. With these arguments, we assert the researcher's necessary role in understanding and explaining the complex and hybrid contemporary promotional landscape and provide further tools and strategies for researching the embeddedness of promotion in everyday life.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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