

*“I am just posting myself online”*  
Instagram and Prosumer Identity Practices

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## Abstract

This study examines the ways in which prosumers (co-)produce their personal identity while generating branded content on Instagram. The research looks at how certain brands are related to the daily production of consumers' identities and discusses the positive and negative experiences associated with their involvements in such practices.

In order to answer the research question, the study employed in-depth interviews and netnographic like observations of participants' branded Instagram content. The combination of both methods allowed for clarity and deeper understanding of the phenomena studied.

The findings of this research show that participants tend to generate branded content on Instagram for positive self-presentation. Irving Goffman's (1959) academic work on impression management is one of the underlying theories in this research in order to present the different ways in which people adjust their behaviour when around other people. Goffman's work on self-presentation was then transferred to the social media context, in which participants in this research produce branded content, and, therefore, shape their identities. Interviewees prefer to produce their identities through generating and sharing branded content, to which values they want to identify with, which very often were big and prominent brands, such as Mercedes or Starbucks. As a result, a tension between who one is online and offline occurs. In order to interact with certain brands, respondents are likely to "exchange symbolic knowledge and emotional value" with them, which creates value on a primary level which was transferred to the market level through appropriation by brands (Cova & Dalli, 2009). Interactive practices of consumers with brands online are examined in relation to notions of "immaterial" (Lazzarato, 1997) and "social labour" (Anderson et al., 2016). Even though many theorists argue that such practices are forms of exploitation (Fuchs, 2011, 2014; Hardt & Negri, 2004; Tapscott & Williams, 2008), participants feel empowered by brands. This empowerment has been related to the variety of opportunities for access, autonomy and recognition brands offer to their customers, and, thus, the latter are not critical when prosuming online.

Last but not least, limitations of the study and implications for further research are proposed.

Key words: identity, Instagram, prosumption, brands, social media.

## 1. Introduction

With the advent of social media, the ways in which individuals express and shape their identities have changed dramatically. People are on an endless identity pursuit today – a pursuit to give meaning to their existence and for which is increasingly found in variety of consumption practices (Slater, 1997). However, the role of the consumer has been gradually changing. Terms such as “prosumer” (Toffler, 1980) and “value co-creator” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) have been used to describe the “new consumer” (Cova & Dalli, 2009) who is more active and engaged in market experiences and communication with brands. Recent studies regarding consumption practices have noted that consumers are increasingly creating value and content for brands – practices which are described as “prosumption” (John, 2012; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Anderson et al. (2016: 3) define this phenomenon as a form of work – “social labour”, arguing that it is “the means by which consumers add value to their identities and social relationships through producing and sharing cultural and affective content.” The authors suggest that through practices of social labour prosumers are able to choose the ways in which to shape their identity (ibid.).

This project focuses on user-generated content on the internet as a form of ‘social labour’ that is both connected to personal identity and how this is produced in connection to particular brands. As such, I will try to understand what role prosumption plays in the struggles of individuals to express and form identity when they produce user generated content on the internet. Although “prosumption” may not have emerged only with the advent of Web 2.0, the participation in and acceptance of the interactive practices of Web 2.0, including, for instance, social networking sites, the internet has been presently both the most dominant locus of prosumption and its most significant tool as a “means of prosumption” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010: 19). The internet has become more collaborative and social than ever, creating a space for consumers and producers and the intersection of both - prosumers. In those virtual spaces, people choose how they desire to show themselves and adjust their appearance in ways that fit with the identity they desire to have and the expectations of the people around them (Goffman, 1959).

Brands play an essential role in such practices of (co-)producing prosumers’ identities. One prominent example of how prosumers are involved in practices of prosumption is seen in the sports apparel company Nike, which offers customers the ability to customise their own trainers, apparel and accessories. The NikeID feature proposes a variety of sole designs, laces, forms and

other kinds of shoe personalisation. The consumer is able to prosume these products by going on the brand's website and choosing from the multitude of designs, colours and details in order to design their desired product. After that, they can see the three dimensional image of their own creation on the website, and if satisfied, they can order it for only a small percent more than the original piece without this customisation – it is the creation of their own personalised product representing their own design. Nike also gives these prosumers the opportunity to share their individualised product on a variety of social media platforms. In this process the consumers are able to participate in the production of their own identity when affiliating with the Nike brand and portraying certain personal characteristics.

Such presumptive practices are considered to be a form of 'immaterial' labour which is very beneficial not only for consumers but also for brands (Cova & Dalli, 2009). The "immaterial labour" concept was first introduced by Lazzarato (1997) who defined it as a kind of labour in which consumers not only work but they also create value for themselves and society. At the core of this idea is the understanding that communication and information systems as well as knowledge are the foremost sources for production (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1997). The "new consumers" are devoted to prosumption practices and enjoying the freedoms and access brands offer them with (Cova & Dalli, 2009). Many theorists criticise the notion that brands offer freedom and choices to their customers by explaining that those notions are most of the time related to exploitation (Fuchs, 2014) and surveillance (Andrejevic, 2005). Looking further into these issues will allow me to gain additional insights into the ways in which consumers identify themselves through their interaction and communication with brands.

In the context of this study, such practices of prosumption will be connected to how consumers generate branded content on the social medium of the free photo and video sharing application - Instagram. Consumers are on a constant journey for looking for the 'right' characteristics to add to their identities through the production generation of certain branded content. Essentially this study examines these trends, highlighting the importance of understanding prosumers' strongest motives for creating branded content online. Presumably those motives include the associations brands bring to their identities and the many opportunities for choice, interaction and recognition.

This project examines these types of practices – practices of 'immaterial' and 'social' labour – by looking specifically at how prosumers' interactions and displays of branded content

serve to participate in the production of personal identity within mediated content. As the concept of identity is extensive and broad, this research project emphasises the flexibility and complexity of identity, and its sensitivity to not only individual emotional but also cultural and social impacts. Identity formation can be understood as a constant process, but is susceptible to the multifaceted heterogeneity and fast speed of contemporary life and consumerism (Schechtman et al., 2013). Consumers are constantly trying to fit in this image created by brands and, on the other hand, in order to benefit from and contribute to identity development, brands have begun to allow their customers to be strongly involved in participation in activities of acknowledgement, interaction, identification, and consumption (Lury, 2009).

With the increasing participation of prosumers with branded content and the role of social media for producing personal identity, this research examines the following research question:

*RQ: How are practices of prosumption on Instagram contributing to the (co-)production of personal identity?*

In order to understand this more fully, this research will look at two related subquestions:

*SQ1: How are certain brands involved in the daily production of consumers' identity?*

*SQ2: What are the struggles consumers experience when immersing themselves in practices of prosumption?*

These research questions focus not only on the labour itself but also on how brands are part of shaping prosumers' identities through the variety of choices and freedoms they offer their customers. The fact that brands have progressively started to engage online and much of their participation is concerned with discovering more creative techniques to interact with their consumers with the purpose of extracting value from them and profiting from this novel opportunity will be additionally examined (Cova & Cova, 2012). Jansen & Zhang (2009) suggest that in conjunction with the omnipresent online access, the customisation and sharing services that brands offer customers deliver continuous connectivity among individuals that was until recent times incomparable. Taking this into consideration, these social communication facilities have the power to considerably influence the company–customer relationship positively by allowing customers engage in prosuming practices (Jansen & Zhang, 2009).

This study concentrates on the prosumers' perspective to examine their personal interpretations of their own “social labour” practices by studying and comparing their individual experiences of how they identify themselves in the process of prosumption. The research maps



out a bit more clearly the intersections between online identity practices and those that occur outside or at a distance from digital practices by engaging in semi-structured interviews with prosumers. To do that, in addition to in-depth interviews, netnographic like observations are employed in order to more fully allow an immersion into the visual context of this study (Kozinetz, 2002). By netnographic like observations I mean that while discussing their ‘prosumption’ practices on Instagram, interviewees were kindly asked to discuss their motivations for generating own branded content. In such way, I was able to obtain in-depth information and understanding of participants’ social worlds – including self-presentational practices, relating to particular brands and the struggles they experience while prosuming online.

The role of consumers has changed dramatically with the rise of Web 2.0 and, with it, the ways in which brands and customers communicate with each other. This research focuses on individuals’ prosumption practices online which contribute to the (co-)production of their personal identity while interacting with certain brands. The longing for association with these brands encourages prosumers to get involved in practices of ‘immaterial’ and ‘social’ labour that benefit both prosumers and brands. In addition, this study has the purpose to map out a bit more clearly the in-depth experiences of prosumers which is an exciting opportunity to understand whether or not their identity practices differ and in relation to what factors.

## **2. Literature review**

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of my research. It introduces the literature the study relies on in order to communicate the main concepts of the phenomena analysed. A significant amount of academic work argue that generating online content is about self-presentation and brands play a big part in it. For the most part, these have been studied separately, however this study is asking about the intentional connections of generating branded content on social media.

### **2.1 An overview of social media**

The tools and techniques for interaction and communication with consumers have changed considerably with the appearance of social media, also referred to as consumer-generated media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Many critics argue that the Internet has been transformed in the past years from a structure that is mainly concerned with the delivery and dissemination of information into a structure that is more focused on communication, user-generated content, data sharing, and community formation (Castells, 2009; O'Reilly, 2005; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Social media has been described as “a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues” (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004: 2). The notions of ‘web 2.0’, ‘social software’, and ‘social network(ing) sites’ have appeared in this setting. Web platforms such as Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube, Google, Blogger, WordPress, LinkedIn, and Instagram, are considered to be characteristic for this transformation of the Internet. Tim O'Reilly explains ‘web 2.0’ this way:

Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an “architecture of participation”, and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences. (2005, n.p.)

Such “architecture of participation” which aids in delivering “rich user experiences” provoked a lot of theorists to discuss consumption habits and identity formation in relation to brands. For example, Mangold & Faulds (2009) argue that the development of Internet-based social media has made it easy for users to interact with a multitude of other people about the goods and services brands offer. Therefore, the influence of consumer-to-consumer communications has been significantly improved in the marketplace and the authors elaborate on the notion that social media is a hybrid component of the promotion mix as it gives brands opportunities to communicate with the customers and vice versa (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Castells (2009) describes Web 2.0 communication in the following quote.

is mass communication because it can potentially reach a global audience, as in the posting of a video on YouTube, a blog with RSS links to a number of web sources, or a message to a massive e-mail list. At the same time, it is self-communication because the production of the message is self-generated, the definition of the potential receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content from the World Wide Web and electronic networks is self-selected (Castells, 2009: 55).

Castells’ (2009) explanation of web 2.0 communication is very much in line with the function of the social media studied in this research – Instagram due to the fact that one is able to take part in mass communications or practice self-communication.

Instagram has been a free photo and video sharing application available on mobile devices and desktop with more than 400 million active users monthly who share around 80 million photos daily. On the platform, users who are called ‘instagrammers’, can upload photos or videos to the service and share them with their followers or with a selected group of friends. After one logs in, she is presented with their profile page, which consists of all the generated content by her. There is a feed which chronologically loads the visual content of all of the people who one is following and one’s content gets posted there for other people to see. She can get ‘red hearts’ or likes, comments on her visuals and direct message from other users. If someone is following her whom she does not want to be followed by, she can block them, which means that both users would not be able to see each other’s content. Moreover, her personal account can be public or private and with the latter it depends on the person from the other side to decide whether they will ‘accept’

you as a follower or not. Other instagrammers who the user decides to share their content with are able to view, comment and like her posts. Moreover, with hashtags (#) one is able to categorise their pictures and help them show more easily in the Instagram Search (an idea that was adopted from Twitter). When one clicks on a hashtagged word, Instagram shows all other images that were marked with that keyword. Furthermore, one can tag a place, 'mention' a person or a brand and write a caption. All those features are used to facilitate users' experiences, providing a platform for interaction and collaboration online.

This study calls Instagram a 'microblogging' service due to its functions similar to other social media. The definition of 'microblogging' was originally used for Twitter by Murthy (2012) who argued that 'microblogging' involves having a social media account in which users share "short public messages or updates" whether or not those are targeted to a specific public (Murthy, 2012: 1061). In addition, those messages and updates need to be:

publicly aggregated together across users, and users can decide whose messages they wish to receive, but not necessarily who can receive their messages; this is in distinction to most social networks where following each other is bi-directional (i.e. mutual). (Murthy, 2012: 1061)

This is very much in line with the notion of Instagram as a microblogging service due to the fact that one can create an account on which they can publicly share updates in the form of images or videos that are visible to anyone on this social media. In addition, according to boyd & Ellison (2008: 211) social networking sites, which include Instagram, are web services that enable users to maintain a "public or semi-public profile within a bounded system" and through which they can "articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection". The "social" part of social media denotes to its difference from "traditional" media (Murthy, 2011) which is intended to assist public communication, self-expression, the input of digital media, and cooperation.

## **2.2 Self-presentation on social media**

Irving Goffman's theory on impression management has been one of the most important theories for the development of this study. In his work, *The presentation of self in everyday life*, Goffman (1959) explains how the individual in usual work circumstances presents herself and her

actions to other people, directing the impression others have of her and the behaviour she may or may not have in front of them. He describes how the person becomes a performer who acts in real time for the audience that observes her. The sociologist defines “performance” as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman, 1959: 8). Performance is formed by environment and audience, assembled to offer others with “impressions” that are in agreement with the preferred objectives of the actor (ibid.). When a person performs her staged play she indirectly demands that the audience believe the impression that is brought up in front of them and that she possesses all of the characteristics she seems to have and that, overall, matters are as they seem to be (ibid.).

In using such model Goffman explains that the “stage” presents matters that are pretended; apparently life situations very often embrace matters that are real and sometimes not well rehearsed (ibid.). More essentially, according to Goffman (ibid.), on the stage the performer presents themselves in the facade of a character to characters anticipated by other performers; the spectators account for a third party to the communication that is very important and yet, given the stage act were genuine, the spectators would not be there. Very often the performance of the actor will be carefully governed and managed, presenting themselves in a certain manner just because they desire to give the kind of impression to other people that is probable to provoke a particular reaction she wants to attain (ibid.).

From time to time the performer will be designing her actions but then again be comparatively unconscious that they are doing so (ibid.). Very often the person will deliberately and purposefully present herself in a certain way, but mainly due to the notion that the practice of her community or social status need this sort of appearance and not for the reason that they need any specific reaction (other than ambiguous recognition or support) that is possible to be evoked from those impressed by the presentation (ibid.). The spectators, then, may perhaps be appropriately impressed by the performer’s attempts to express something, or may dubiously observe parts of their actions of whose impact she is not mindful, or may misapprehend the situation and come to assumptions that are justified neither by the performer’s purposes nor by the facts (ibid.).

This theatrical approach is also explained in Goffman’s (1961) piece *Encounters*, whereby he describes what he calls ‘focused’ and ‘unfocused’ interactions. According to the author, “focused interaction occurs when people effectively agree to sustain for a time a single

focus of cognitive and visual attention” (Goffman, 1961: 7). But then “unfocused interaction” happens, for example, “when two strangers across the room from each other ... (each) modifies his own demeanour because he himself is under observation” (Goffman, 1961: 7). In order to present herself in front of her audience she needs to put on certain kind of appearance that Goffman names ‘front’ (1959). The dramaturgical approach of Goffman, which embraces the ideas of “fronts” involves the recurrent amendment and regulation of self-presentation practices centred on the company of others whereby the main idea is that people place particular facades and adjust alleged facades for the constant observation of viewers (ibid.). There is the common understanding that the performer offers her act for the ‘benefit of other people’ (ibid.). However, sometimes the performer can be completely obsessed by her own performance and by the reactions of her audience, that she can be “sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which she stages is the real reality” (Goffman, 1959: 10). Goffman’s model could be very much applied to online settings whereby social media present the modern networked space enabling self-presentation to a multiple number of interrelated audiences and that is why individuals tend to present an extremely selective stories of themselves. In his work, Goffman argues that self-presentation can be divided into performances, which happen in synchronous “situations,” and artefacts, which happen in asynchronous “exhibitions” (see Hogan’s (2010) interpretation of Goffman’s work). The artefact is the outcome of a previous act and is present for other people to observe on their time. Social media, on the flip side, commonly engages exhibitions, such as sets of images, together with situational actions, such as commenting or putting a caption. An important difference in exhibitions is the virtual “curator” that generates and shares this digital content, with the purpose to produce their identity.

Goffman’s impression management (or self-presentation) theory has been at the heart of academic works examining online communication and the usage of social media (boyd, 2007; Schroeder, 2002; Sheane, 2012; Tufekci, 2008). After Goffman’s seminal works on self-presentation Leary argues that self-presentation is “the process by which people convey to others that they are a certain kind of person or possess certain characteristics” (Leary, 1996: 17). More precisely, self-presentation is a form of impression management (ibid.), which could be done intentionally or unintentionally. It is to a certain degree important for the non-problematic functioning of social communications (ibid.).

Ralph Schroeder (2002) explains that the ways in which we communicate and behave in society have changed thanks to the digital technologies and the internet in social “virtual environments”. He describes “virtual environments” as “computer-generated display that allows or compels the user (or users) to have a sense of being present in an environment other than the one they are actually in, and to interact with that environment” (Schroeder, 1996: 25). Schroeder also discusses “presence, copresence, communication, and small and large group dynamics across a variety of virtual reality” and different circumstances under which they are employed (2002: 1). The author employs Goffman’s (1974) work on the “frames” in order to communicate the “frames” of social interaction which are the stages on which we perform our social roles and argues that understanding previous research, such as Goffman’s, can help us understand social communications on social media (Schroeder, 2002).

boyd interestingly embraces Goffman’s theory of impression management by explaining how by communicating with people who are unfamiliar to them, teenagers are socialised into society and without audiences who recognise them, there would not be a proper society (boyd, 2007). Regarding self-presentation of teenagers on social media, boyd (2008) argues that younger individuals are those who are most absorbed and knowledgeable about different kinds of social media and its functionality. She explains that teenagers tend to interact with their peers in order to be recognised (ibid.). Teenagers’ audiences play significant role in the development of their personalities, and as Nancy Fraser argues, “they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities” (1990: 68).

What is more, Tufekci (2008) also employs Goffman’s work on self-presentation in order to explore the boundaries between social and personal in the online landscapes. She digs into the privacy issues of expressing oneself when young people use social media such as Facebook and MySpace and she does not find significant relationship between online privacy fears and information sharing on social media. Thus, students can freely represent themselves by either using a pseudonym or adjusting their online but not by limiting the information they share online (Tufekci, 2008).

Additionally, Sheane (2012) bases her ideas on Goffman’s academic efforts on self-presentation (1959) and interactional behaviour (1967), arguing that what she calls presentational labour is a manageable skill that workers achieve using emotional and aesthetic interactive skills to present the social attributes that are reinforced by companies. Using hairstylists as exemplars,

Sheane (2012: 145) discovers that emotional and aesthetic literacy are essentially communication perceptions demanding “sophisticated perceptual as well as messaging skills.”

Goffman’s theory of self-presentation is considered to be very useful for the development of this study. Goffman’s body of interactionist work have offered a very good basis to comprehend how consumers use social media platforms such as Instagram to communicate and represent themselves. Indeed, recent work like that of Knorr Cetina (2009) and Mendelson & Papacharissi (2010) have contended that Goffman’s work has been valuable for acknowledging how mediated interactions work. In the case of Instagram, the work of Goffman is beneficial for understanding the conceptions regarding identity production.

### **2.3 In pursuit of identity**

Most identity theories (Belk, 1988; James, 1890; Mead, 1935/2003) suggest that people mainly rely on relationships with others to construct, preserve, and develop their self-identities. Within many of these theories, according to Strannegård & Dobers, “identity is a matter of negotiation ... different social roles are learned in relations with others ... (and) individuals are engaged in identity-creating interactions every day” (2005: 119). Burdsey (as cited in Cashmore, 2010: 4) claims that identity is shaped in the way one perceives themselves as a unique individual and yet related to others. As a result, identity production can be understood as a sense making practice by which individuals selectively bring together their involvements into a comprehensible sense of personality (Giddens, 1991; Somers, 1994; Ricouer, 1985).

Increasingly consumption has become means for developing social relations, and with the use of social media, production and prosumption have become serious factors in individual and shared identity developments across the world – more obviously so in individualist societies (Ruvio & Belk, 2013). The rise of individualism in Western societies (Lyotard, 1979) and the increasing importance of consumption (Baudrillard, 1970) have developed to be important topics for academic research to study and understand. The concept of postmodernity, for instance, which is based in part on a consumerist society, has created the peak of individuals’ pursuit for freedom and choice (Elias, 1991; Jameson, 1991; Lipovetsky, 1983).

The right to choose, specifically identity, which up to that point in modernity had been socially restricted within financial, political, and knowledge-related fields, would rapidly be observed as something that was fixed (Jameson, 1991). Foucault et al. (1988) argued that our



society performs as a public space which requires and creates a “choosing self”, instead of creating one in which a certainly choosing self is freed. Consequently, a postmodern situation has emerged where people, are freed from social standards and from the limitations of education, family, and sexuality (Jameson, 1991), and accept an individualisation course, which as a result turns out to be a method for managing and shaping their behaviour through the right to choose selectively how they would like to appear when consuming (Firat, 1991; Van Raaij, 1993). In connection to this, Giddens has argued that:

The project of the self becomes translated into one of the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life... the consumption of ever novel goods becomes in some part a substitute for the genuine development of the self (1991: 198).

Giddens’ work shows that identity is constantly improved and adjusted by new consumption trends and our own consumption habits. Moreover, identity is very often the result from our choices and every person is able to exchange manifold and opposing identities as they go over dissimilar social (mediated) and private spheres of influence, each with their diverse principles and values (ibid.).

Similarly to the late-modernity position of Giddens (1991), postmodern authors such as Jameson (1991) positioned “mediated experience” at the core of public life. According to Jameson (1991), there is no unmediated identity in a sense that advertising and the media regularly propose inspiring stories of the self – images of ways of life, products and guidance – with which the consumer can recognise themselves or want to associate themselves with (Slater, 1997). Through marketing and advertising, and their commercialisation of intermediated practice, this multiplicity of contemporary life has been transformed into consumer choices which automatically means that the more we consume the more power we possess (Jameson, 1991). The notion of mediated consumer experience coupled with identity formation theories very well fit in my research because they help me examine the ways in which consumers mix and match selected stories from certain brands and identify with them. The ways in which consumers do so will be presented theoretically in the next section.

## 2.4 The “new consumer” and “immaterial labour”

The changing nature of modern production and consumption has increased the importance of instable, fluid and immaterial work actions (Wood & Ball, 2013). The idea of immaterial labour was advanced to explain the cumulative intangibility of facility field work where communication, information systems and knowledge are considered to be the foremost sources of production (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt & Negri, 2000, 2004, 2009; Hardt, 1999; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Cova & Dalli, 2009; Brizarelli, 2014).

Maurizio Lazzarato first introduced the term “immaterial labour” and defined it as the activity “that produces ‘the cultural content’ of the commodity”, observing that it

involves a series of activities that are normally recognised at work – in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion (1996: 137).

After Lazzarato (1996) introduced the term of immaterial labour, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have made it popular by calling it a labour “that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response” (Hardt & Negri 2004: 108). For Hardt & Negri, it is the “key characteristic of immaterial labour to produce communication, social relations, and cooperation” (Hardt & Negri 2004: 113). Hardt & Negri (2000) also argued that immaterial labour can produce two kinds of performed work; “cultural content” which recognises the production of customer perceptions, social standards and aesthetic values, and “affective content” through which consumers are able to work at the emotional level, shifting their moods and affective appearances. What follows from this description of immaterial labour is that it uses intangible abilities that are seen as always a part of the worker who happens to be the consumer also. This kind of labour links to what Hardt labels an affective form of immaterial labour which is “the production and manipulation of affects, which requires (virtual or actual) human contact and proximity” (1999: 93). As a result, value can be “transferred from the primary to secondary level of sociality (market level) through appropriation by companies” (Anderson et al., 2016). Gerlitz & Helmond (2013) consider this transition from primary social activity to secondary market activity as the ‘Like economy’, whereby through the use of ‘Like’

and 'share' buttons, consumers' communications are converted into data which indicates engagement and traffic that has economic significance to other companies.

A very interesting and beneficial alternative to "immaterial labour" is Harvey et al.'s (2009) "commonwealth", which means a society formed by collective ownership and co-operative production. The ideas of commonwealth is applicable for the virtual sphere:

Freedom of the common is essential for production. As Internet and software practitioners and scholars often point out, access to the common in the network environment – common knowledges, common codes, and common communication – is essential for creativity and growth (Harvey et al., 2009: 282).

The Internet is a shared information infrastructure due to the notion that in its core, it is part of the commons since all people need to interact so they can live effectively (Fuchs, 2011). Nevertheless the authors highly criticise the idea of commonly generated knowledge due to the notion that it would be exploited by capital: "The common (...) has become the locus of surplus value. Exploitation is the private appropriation of part or all of the value that has been produced as common" (Hardt & Negri, 2004: 114). The reality about the Internet is that big portions of it are managed by businesses and "immaterial" digital labour is exploited and transformed into extra value in the form of the commercialised Internet prosumer commodity.

Fuchs & Zimmermann (2009) maintain that it is to some extent problematic to speak of "immaterial labour" because this suggests that there are two elements of the world – matter and mind – which does not clarify how the world is satisfactorily grounded, which consequences in an idealistic and consequently and eventually to a religious understanding of the world. Instead, they propose to distinguish online labour as (mostly) knowledge labour. Even so the essence of Hardt's and Negri's (2004) dispute, that social, communicative, and collaborative labour is exploited and turned into "surplus value" in exploitation courses, is accurate.

Mark Coté and Jennifer Pybus (2007) discussed the concept of immaterial labour in relation to web 2.0 practices in MySpace. They talk about immaterial labour 2.0 and describe it as a "more accelerated, intensified, and indeed inscrutable variant" (Coté & Pybus, 2007: 89) of immaterial labour. Immaterial labour 2.0 is a specific form of the immaterial labour Hardt, Negri and Lazzarato speak of because it would be about "the active and ongoing construction of virtual subjectivities" (Coté & Pybus, 2007: 90) and the production of surplus value by activities focuses

on affects online and user-generated content. The approach by Coté & Pybus is significant since it functions on a very solid level (web 2.0) than the one described by Hardt & Negri (2004), but it shares with the second the problematic consequences from making use of the term “immaterial”. The relationship between consumers and companies has been criticised by Cova & Dalli’s (2009) who rely on post-Marxian theory to hypothesise the “new consumer” character as the “working consumer”, depicting consumers who involve in “immaterial” labour practices that generate value to market contributions. Cova & Dalli (2009: 315) emphasise on consumers’ work at the interpersonal level of sociality where knowledge and emotional values are exchanged and “are therefore beyond producers’ control”. Nevertheless, assumed certain circumstances, businesses seize such value when it moves in the second level of sociality (the market) (ibid.). The notion of the ‘working consumer’ encapsulates and enhances existing attitudes to consumer production, whereas perplexing prevalent advances, such as the service-dominant logic of marketing, which tries to generate/build an ethereal marketspace, whereby consumers and producers live in agreement (ibid.).

According to Fuchs (2008), the labour that is typical for Web 2.0 structures is labour that is concerned with the production of affects, fantasy (cognitive labour) and social interactions (communicative, co-operative labour) and it is like all labour material due to the notion that it is a practice that alters the position of real world arrangements. However, what the difference between material and immaterial labour is the notion the latter does not change the physical settings of things, rather it provokes emotional and communicative characteristics of social affairs. Moreover, the difference between both kinds of labour is the fact that one is oriented towards producing economic profit. Fuchs (2008: 300) argues that the improved concept for immaterial labour 2.0 should be “cognitive, communicative, and co-operative labour – informational labour” (in contrast to manual labour, see Fuchs, 2008 for this distinction).

Consumers are driven to contribute content to social networking sites for entertaining themselves, escaping from reality and identifying online (Belk, 2013). Anderson et al. define this as “social labour” and describe it as:

(T)he means by which consumers add value to their identities and social relationships through producing and sharing cultural and affective content. This

is driven by observational vigilance and conspicuous presence, and is rewarded by social capital (2015: 3).

This is according to the cultural change which distinguishes the role of material goods in identity production (Thompson, 2014). The “social labour” practices of consumers are closely related to what Brizarelli (2014: 20) defines as “digital” labour, which he argues continuously comprises of “a dialectic between commodification and emancipation, estrangement and reconnection, coercion and consent”. Brizarelli (2014: 20) names the productive action endorsed in social media as a kind of “social working” that is involved in the alienation of unpaid labour where the worker is sold as a commodity to the market.

Nevertheless, it is significant to understand the “double character” of social media sites in that the products generated both please profitmaking interests and consumers’ personal desires (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013: 260). Fuchs & Sevignani (2013) also emphasise on the notion of ‘digital work’ which they base on reasoning, communicative and cooperative processes to produce use-value. As online networking has the power to produce value, consumers have increasingly started engaging in practices of “affective” or “immaterial” labour: not the creation of tangible goods, but instead, the production of networks of sociability, taste, identification and communication (Andrejevic, 2010).

King (2010) underlines the discourse of creativity that is around digital labour as communicative practice of labour, which connects to Thrift’s evaluation of capitalism as not just “dead labour haunting the living” but possessing “a kind of unholy vitality, a kind of double duty, to possess but also to create, to accumulate but also to overflow, to organise but also to improvise” (Thrift, 2005: 17). This “double duty” is obvious within the environment of social media and is connected to “playbour” where online digital action is deliberated as a form of labour (Lund, 2014: 735). It is important to include Lund’s (2014) notion of “playbour” which explains there is a clear boundary between play and work in the digital milieu as it might include a component of entertainment and also the establishment of use value and identity for either brands or consumers. For instance, consumer generated content is powerfully connected to play but is known to be more “profitable for producers” than for consumers who are also fans (Milner, 2009: 506).

Online labour is very often related to notions such as entertainment, play, and fun – usually the area of leisure away from wage labour (Fuchs, 2011). Modern capitalism and present-day internet have brought about a confusion between production and consumption and consequently also between entertainment time and labour time. Fuchs explicitly argues that:

Leisure, pleasure, play, and entertainment have become incorporated under capital – there is the exploitation and expropriation of the online commons of communication. Labour and play intersect, they create new forms of exploitation (Fuchs, 2011: 304).

Due to the notion that consumers generate content on the internet voluntarily and for free a lot of scholars argue that companies exploit their “immaterial labour”. In placing labour into the digital environment, Fuchs (2014: 4) proposes that digital labour includes the exploitation of people’s labour power “in a way that monetary benefits information and communications technology corporations and has negative impacts on the lives, bodies or minds of workers”. For Illouz (2007) theorises this as emotional capitalism, where the reasoning and masculinisation of work routines have initiated relations to be calculated by financial means. Tiziana Terranova (2000: 36), such tendencies remind of a public place of work in which “work processes have shifted from the workshop to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine”. Terranova (2004), by means of the idea of immaterial labour, pronounces the emergence of individuals who work voluntarily in the “social fabric” of the net:

Simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited, free labour on the Net includes the activity of building Web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists, and building virtual spaces (Terranova, 2004: 74).

Those activities are a manifestation of the co-operative productive capabilities of immaterial labour. The idea of free labour has become incredibly important with the rise of the internet where capital is accumulated by offering free access. Accumulation is reliant on the quantity of workers and the content they deliver (Terranova, 2004). They are not rewarded for the content, however the more they produce and the more workers join the more income can be made

by commercials (ibid.). Therefore the workers are exploited because they voluntarily create digital content in non-wage labour interactions (ibid.).

Basically, these different viewpoints recognise that production has become entrenched into everyday sociality (Rey, 2012) and plays an essential role in constructing consumers' identities due to the fact that the shifting nature of modern production and consumption has increased the importance of instable, fluid and immaterial work actions (Wood & Ball, 2013). Social media usage is consequently contended to be equally work and labour at the same time as it generates use-values for single customers together with profitable exchange-value (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). In this thesis, I acknowledge the "double character" of social media but also pay attention to the primary level of sociality and reflect on the necessity to go further than the digital in theorising new consumers' work and other labour practices through demonstrating their wider social understanding.

The central point in all those texts is the notion that consumers are devoted to work 'immaterially' in order to be recognised by either other consumers or by brands. Moreover, the concept of "social labour", developed by Anderson et al. (2016), adds to the notion of "immaterial labour" by describing how through such intangible practices, specifically interaction and communication with individuals or brands online, one is able to add to their identity different characteristics they desire to possess. Nevertheless, there are some detrimental effects that consumers are not fully aware of, and those are specifically the notion that brands ruthlessly exploit their devoted workers. Due to the notion that human beings are social beings and like it when they feel appreciated and recognised, working for free for brands is acceptable until they provide them with the opportunities of freedom and choice.

## **2.5 The concept of prosumption**

All of these immaterial and social labour practices can be seen as prosumption. Toffler (1980) coined the term "prosumer" in order to classify consumers' participation in product design and manufacture in his book *The Third Wave*. He claimed prosumption was principal in preindustrial cultures; this he called the "first wave" (ibid.). Then, in the "second wave", marketisation drove "a wedge into society that separated these two functions, thereby giving birth to what we now call producers and consumers" (Toffler, 1980: 266). Consequently, the primal profitable method is neither production nor consumption, but instead it is prosumption (ibid.).

Though, according to Toffler, modern society is trying to escape from the unusual parting of production and consumption and is heading towards a “third wave” that, in part, signals their rejuvenation in “the rise of the prosumer” (Toffler, 1980: 265).

After Toffler’s explicit description of the prosumption phenomenon, a great number of scholars started examining it, however, some of them created their own concepts for it. This ultimately led to an assemblage of analogous conceptions that many failed to notice the common pattern. For instance, among those conceptions are the notions of value co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004); prosumer capitalism (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010); Dan Laughey’s (2010) productive consumption; Beer & Burrows’ (2007) cultural digitisation; do-it-yourself (DIY) (Watson and Shove, 2008); Zwick’s et al. (2008) link of prosumption to Foucauldian and neo-Marxian model; “wikinomics” based at least in part on the idea that businesses put consumers to work on the internet (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Despite this theoretical abundance, it is prosumption that is still the most common and valuable notion for understanding the full degree of the shifting nature of this phenomenon.

Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) discuss prosumption as a notion of “value co-creation” and maintain that the importance of value and the process of value creation are quickly changing from a product- and firm-oriented understanding to individualised consumer experiences which make one self-recognised (ibid.). They also argue that the prosumer today is a knowledgeable, interacted, enabled, and dynamic individual who is constantly co-creating values and identities with the support and help from brands (ibid.). The communication between the brand and the prosumers has developed to be the locus of value creation and value extraction (ibid.).

As mentioned before, consumers have been constantly producing value and content for other consumers or for brands which classifies them as prosumers, producers and co-creators (John, 2012; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010) support the notion that prosumption includes equally production and consumption rather than concentrating on any one or the other. They hypothesise that the growing participation of consumers in activities of consumption and production blurs the lines between both (ibid.). According to them, the developing significance of prosumption and the ways in which consumers have been put to work developed with the rise of fast food restaurants in the fifties (ibid.).

Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010) argue that former forms of capitalism (producer and consumer capitalism) were themselves categorised as prosumption. Assumed the current outburst of user-



generated content online, Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010) have motivation to consider prosumption as more and more fundamental. They argue that in prosumer capitalism, control and exploitation take on a different character than in the other forms of capitalism: there is a tendency toward free rather than rewarded labour and toward offering goods for free, and the system is distinct by a new “abundance where scarcity once predominated” (ibid.). These tendencies even put forward the prospect of a novel, prosumer, capitalism (ibid.).

The consumption/production dualism discussed by Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010) is also the main point in the contribution of Dan Laughey (2010). His academic work involves the case of eBay, discussing practices of use and other means to advance an understanding of the ways in which the co-operative and communicative forms of consumption happening in this online landscapes are changing consumer cultures. Laughey goes into details of the associations between retailers and consumers within these online consumer exchanges. The empirical element offered by Laughey generates some awareness into what he refers to as the ‘producer–consumer interface’ that are critical in acknowledging some of these broader makeovers in consumer culture. Laughey’s (2010) input to these discussions is to deliver some rich image of the nature of this boundary between production and consumption understood as an assemblage of ‘mediated interactions’ between individuals.

As prosumption is done in conjunction with online practices, Beer & Burrows (2007) found new connections between production and consumption developing in the digital space. They examined the production and consumption of consumer generated content for brands and their social and personal outcomes for those consumers such as the expression and shaping of their identities (ibid.). This is of great importance for my project because what this thesis examines is how consumers shape their identities through practices of prosumption.

Watson & Shove (2005) argued that DIY (do it yourself) has progressed from a generally undesirable obligation to an anticipated leisure for individuals, allowing a relief from everyday paid labour through taking part in a part-time craft practises. Contemporary DIY tasks seem to represent expression of one’s identity and to represent an adjustment from indifferent goods into items with personal relations and memories; contemporary DIY moreover speaks to free time recreations, the wish to be creative and innovative and the necessity for economy (Edwards, 2006). Inspirations for participating in DIY activities can also be associated with postmodern consumption whereby the consumer is also a manipulator of the representational properties

offered by commodities, thanks to which DIY can be a practice via which one can communicate their personality and self-identity (Woodward, 2003). This might even embrace media-inspired consumption and production practices through which one can present their identity in the most genuine form.

On the other hand, a number of scholars criticise prosumption by indicating the detrimental effects of such practices. This brings me to Zwick's et al. (2008) link of prosumption to Foucauldian and neo-Marxian model, arguing that prosumption is connected to the idea that businesses are allowing new choices, freedom and more power to consumers. They contend that "the ideological recruitment of consumers into productive co-creation relationships hinges on accommodating consumers' needs for recognition, freedom, and agency" and doubt the notion that consumers have actually more freedom in their choices (2008: 185). They argue that managing consumption in ways that permit the incessant occurrence and exploitation of creative and valued forms of consumer labour is the real definition of the conception of value co-creation (Zwick et al., 2008). In addition, Andrew Keen (2007) in his book *Cult of the Amateur* also criticises Web 2.0 for being like Marxism and depending on consumers to produce, for abolishing expertise and for making it incredibly hard to discover high quality material among all of the user-generated content in the virtual sphere.

In addition, Tapscott & Williams (2008) perceive the prosumer as a segment of a novel "wikinomic" model where companies make consumers work for them. According to the authors, this "wikinomic" model is not only an indirect form of exploitation of unpaid work, but also an ideology with the key awareness to outsource labour to internationally dispersed clients and collaborators who are prosumers so that labour and other expenses are minimised (Tapscott & Williams, 2008). Tapscott & Williams (2006: 207), in a breakdown of *Wikinomics* explain that: 'calling it exploitation goes too far'. They give example with the case of Lego's Mindstorm, arguing that customers improve Lego's products and services by posting novel applications of the product. The customers who post these submissions are anticipated to be satisfied with the delights of understanding that they have enhanced Mindstorm. Tapscott & Williams (2006: 193) realise the necessity to go further than 'the culture of generosity' that wins out in the domain of wikinomics. According to them, individuals are anticipated to play a part in contributions in order to associate with and reach out to other people, to generate a digitised self for themselves, to present themselves, to be noticed, but not to share in whatever earnings can be obtained from

their generosity (*ibid.*). The authors contend that the structure will function in an enhanced way provided that consumers are ‘adequately’ compensated (*ibid.*). This is logical for a capitalist society (even though the capitalists’ understanding of what a sufficient compensation is very narrow), and consequently Tapscott and Williams are in contention that wikinomic structures need to be more capitalistic (*ibid.*).

In sum, this section justifies the importance of prosumption theory for this research. Many scholars argue that prosumption is done in conjunction with online practices (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2008, 2010; Laughey, 2010; Beer & Burrows, 2007; Watson & Shove, 2005; Zwick et al. 2008; Tapscott & Williams, 2008) which facilitates prosumers experiences of shaping their identities in relation to brands. What is more, scholars argue that the freedom brands offer them with is not truly genuine (Zwick et al., 2008) and discuss prosumption as a subtle exploitation approach (Tapscott & Williams, 2006).

## **2.6 Visibility on social media**

In order to prosume on social media prosumers need to be visible, which means that they have to be active on a variety of digital platforms. Web 2.0 platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, that have information sharing, communication, community, and co-production at their core, are preferred by social media users due to the variety of ways they offer the visibility their users look for. The visibility of social media enables self-branding by which the virtual representation of the person turns into intangible, exhibited and consequently sold to the public story (Illouz, 2007; Shepherd, 2005). Such notions are advanced by theories that consumers need to be visible in order to be recognised (Pempek et al., 2009) and to share pieces of their everyday routines (John, 2012; Yau & Schneider, 2009) which are based on a variety of consumption and production practices. The standardisation of such sharing on social media has made it very common to give up control over private information (Dubrofsky, 2011).

Online technologies offer visibility through which they collect vast amounts of private information in order to operate which has led to surveillance concerns. Lyon (1994: 225) argues that “contemporary surveillance must be understood in the light of changed circumstances, especially the growing centrality of consumption and the adoption of information technologies”. In a later piece, Lyon (2001) describes surveillance as the concealed, continuous, and targeted gathering of information of a singular person or a group of people. Andrejevic (2005) then

presented his idea of “lateral” surveillance or “the work of watching one another” on the internet in order to gain more information of individuals they are interested in. Trottier & Lyon (2012) similarly discuss social surveillance where consumers unnoticeably observe, calculate and look for other people’s actions on social media. Those academic works of surveillance are very similar to each other because they describe how prosumers adjust their social media presence according to the audience that observes them and in the same time surveil other people in order to keep updated to matters that is of interest to them.

Regarding the surveillance of bigger entities, Roger Clarke introduced the notion of “dataveillance” as he defines it as the “systematic monitoring of people’s actions or communications through the application of information technology” (Clarke, 1988: 500). Clarke (1994) makes a distinction between private dataveillance that observes the practices of one or more individuals and mass dataveillance, whereby a big population is watched in order to identify persons of interest. Nevertheless, in the internet era, there is no distinct differentiation between both kinds of surveillance because, for example, targeted advertising deals with the big quantity of social media users due to the notion that they, by agreeing to the terms and conditions online, give consent about third parties surveilling their private information and their custom activities (Fuchs, 2011). Web 2.0 surveillance, as Fuchs (2011) named it, is consequently a system of mass personal dataveillance (ibid.). This surveillance is able to identify and collect the specific differences and to target each user with a personalised amount of commercialised content (ibid.). The topic of surveillance is important for this study due to the notion that Web 2.0 surveillance is focused on big user crowds who assist to hegemonically produce and reproduce surveillance by offering user-generated content (Fuchs, 2011). Due to the notion that contemporary societies are “stratified”, meaning that particular groups and individuals compete with others for the power over resources, taking other people as their rivals, data about private choices and individual actions can “cause harm to individuals if it gets into the hand of their opponents or others who might have an interest in harming them” (Fuchs, 2011: 293). Huge amounts of data collection and surveillance in a society centred on the principle of competition positions certain pressures to the protection and happiness of people which for that reason, requires special privacy security tools (Fuchs, 2011).

What all the discussed texts in this section have in common is the notion that through the desire to present themselves in the best possible way by interacting and associating with brands,

prosumers reveal a big amount of personal information about themselves which is for sure very valuable for the brands that offer them the opportunity to freely prosume. In order to be present on social media one needs to be visible and active which automatically leads to the notion that one is surveilled – by followers, advertisers, companies and so forth. Looking further in how prosumers experience surveillance is important for understanding their practices of (co-)producing their identities.

### **3. Research design and argumentation**

Based on the research questions and the theory above this chapter presents the methodological approaches which are used in this research. In-depth interviews and nethnographic like observations are the qualitative research techniques that are employed in this study in order data to be obtained are explained. The relevance of those methodological approaches to this study are justified and additional details about the motivation of the researcher for using specifically these methodological approaches is explained. Moreover, the data analysis process is clarified and described in order to create a better understanding of the results and discussion afterwards. Last but not least, the ethical implications for this study are highlighted.

#### **3.1 Methods**

This study takes an interpretivist perspective on research in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, comprehended, experienced and produced by the research subjects (Mason, 2002). In order to understand this best, qualitative research methods were employed as this focuses on how individuals may ‘create’ their own ‘social reality.’ These methods allow for the examination of these processes of social construction (Boeije, 2010). Qualitative methods are specifically appropriate for illuminating the meaning of the rich symbolic world that incites needs, desires, meanings and choice (Levy, 1959). As language has been considered to be the most significant instrument to convey meaning, I decided to explore people’s practices of (co-)producing identity through the primary use of in-depth semi-structured interviews and nethnographic-like observations of their branded content on Instagram. Even though Kozinets (2002) warns that netnography researchers need to be mindful that they only study the content of a group’s communicative practices instead of the whole set of observed actions of prosumers in real life, my assumption is that coupling these observations with semi-structured interviews creates a fuller understanding of the phenomenon that is observed.

The in-depth interviews and nethnographic style observations of the participants in this research were analysed using a grounded theory based coding approach to evaluate data centred on the use of open, axial and selective coding. Grounded theory offers a way of looking carefully at qualitatively obtained data to develop analytically theories about the observed cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To make the process of coding and analysis easier, the qualitative data analysis and

research software Atlas.ti was used which allowed me to organise the big amounts of raw data and create a thorough analysis of the issues this project studies.

### 3.1.1 Sampling

The sample consists of twelve people. Three participants were male and nine were female, all aged between 22 and 28 years. Participants represented various international backgrounds, being persons born in Austria, Germany, UK, Bulgaria and China, but all living in countries other than their birthplace. All of them were students or young professionals, possessing the knowledge and eagerness to use a variety of social media platforms. The recruited participants were individuals who were able to go into detail about their behaviour online and offline (Coyne, 1997). Those people were indicative of the “new consumers” or “prosumers” who demonstrate comprehension of social media and because of that are inclined to constantly struggle in the processes of expressing and producing their identity online. This particular demographic was chosen because people in this age range are among the most common social media users (Ellison et al., 2011). Below a table with the pseudonyms, personal details and social media characteristics of participants is included.

*Table 3.1*

NAME	AGE	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN/RESIDENCE	OCCUPATION	USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA	FREQUENCY
BENJAMIN	24	Bulgaria/ Germany	Master’s student	Connect with people, follow the news, get information, like posts	Daily
BRIGITTE	22	UK/ Germany	Social media strategist and blogger	Sharing content, publishing blog posts, portray/express oneself	24/7
JENNA	24	Germany/ UK	Master’s student/ TV intern	Communicate on various levels as being words, visuals, sounds, private communication, blogging, browsing, pinning	A lot of hours daily
ZENDAYA	25	Germany/ Netherlands	Master’s student	Connect with each other, share information, communicate, inform themselves, follow the news, follow group meetings and events	At least three times a day

TONY	22	China/ Netherlands	Master's student	Communicate, keep in touch, construct an image	Very frequently
PETRA	22	Bulgaria/ Bulgaria	Designer/ Bachelor's student	Connect with people, socialise, to keep a private diary, something to describe and share with my family, find new contacts, share branded content.	10 hours a day/Non-stop receiving notifications
GIGI	28	Bulgaria/ UK	Research assistant	Communicate with people who are far away, share content.	Daily
DAYA	24	Bulgaria/ UK	Teacher	Express thoughts, share content.	Daily, once every three hours
GRETA	24	Bulgaria/UK	Master's student	Connect with, follow, message people/companies/celebrities.	Daily
JANINE	25	Austria/ Netherlands	Master's student	Capture my life, daily communication, share content.	Too often
ANTON	25	Bulgaria/ Netherlands	Account manager	Communicate with people, reaching out to people, share content and personal experience.	Constantly
VERA	22	Bulgaria/ UK	Bachelor's student	Connect with people friends or new friends that you make there, sharing your passions, watch content, share experience.	Majority of free time

Initial contacts with individuals fitting my research criteria were based on personal relationships. Consequently five interviewees were purposefully recruited based on my judgement (Tongco, 2007). Due to continuous observation of those people's sharing practices on Instagram I thought they would be useful and interesting sources of information for my research. From this follows that a part of the sample was deliberately chosen according to the requirements of this study and embraced "purposive selection" of participants (Boeije, 2010: 35). What also needs to be noted is that one of the participants was recruited through snowball sampling in order to discover more participants with the help of the first recruited ones (Cronin, 2008). Six other participants were recruited online after I posted that interviewees are needed for my thesis project on three social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Several people wrote to me



personally, expressing eagerness to take part in my research, however I chose the ones that fitted my criteria, specifically the ones that were active Instagram users who generate branded content. Both sampling approaches, namely purposive selection and snowball sampling have been advocated by Shankar et al. (2001) for building trust in consumption contexts that are highly personal but not overly sensitive in topic. A variety in the fields of interests of respondents was achieved as there were respondents generating and sharing content related to healthy living, food, lifestyle, sports and fashion.

Although the participation in my research did not involve any incentives, people were very enthusiastic about participating. For example, when I posted a message on Facebook which called for participation in my research, one of the respondents commented that the topic “sounds great, count me in!” and another expressed eagerness to partake saying “not sure if I identify as an ‘active’ user on Instagram, but count me in if you need help”. Seeing that people are excited about sharing their social media involvements with me was also very exciting because only then I was able to conduct interesting interviews full with valuable insights.

### **3.1.2 In-depth interviews**

Semi structured in-depth interviewing was chosen as a primary method for this study. Interviews often are described as “a conversation with a purpose” (Webb & Webb, 1932: 130) or as a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher gradually brings together novel elements to help respondents to reply as such (Spradley, 1979). The motivation for choosing this method is great because it is a method which allows for an in-depth understanding of prosumers’ involvements and identification practices on social media by placing the interview course in the prosumption setting (Sherman Heyl, 2008; Holt, 1997) with the help of an approachable discussion (Spradley, 1979). This procedure permitted the emic-etic dialogue from both researcher and partaker to occur which allowed me to probe emic relations to obtain a richer understanding of the connotations shaped by the contributors and to avoid unseemly etic notions (Anderson et al., 2016).

In the course of interviewing, I guided the direction of the interviews to keep the dialogue on related themes, being conscious not to interfere too much and reassure contribution with open questions (Cronin, 2008). In addition, I made sure to use a variety of probes and other techniques to attain depth of responses. For this purpose, I asked follow-up questions to obtain a more

complete understanding of interviewees' ideas and experiences. The in-depth arrangement likewise allowed me to discover thoroughly all the issues that reinforce contributors' responses: motives, feelings, sentiments and beliefs (Legard et al., 2009). In such way the dialogue between me and the respondents did not lead to distracting subjects and focused only on the relevant themes for this research. Such communication process was important as it helped me understand my interviewees' viewpoints and perceptions of the surrounding world (Burgess, 1982).

Reflexivity has been considered highly important for this study in order to minimise as much as possible researcher's bias and therefore to assure the accuracy of the qualitative research findings – that is, the social contact element of my relationship with the interviewee, or, in the words of Steinar Kvale, “the asymmetrical power relations of the research interviewer and the interviewed subject” (2002: 9). The act of reflexivity allowed me to carefully reflect on this asymmetrical relation and think on the ways my relation with the interviewee may have been aggravated by assumptions ascending from evident sources, such as certain demographics (age, gender, and race), or more delicate indications such as socio-economic position, social context, or political beliefs (Kvale, 2002).

The structure of the interviews was flexible enough to allow themes to be covered in the direction most appropriate for the interviewees, to let replies and reactions be fully probed and examined and to permit me to be responsive to relevant issues that were brought up naturally by the participants (Legard et al., 2009). Participants were also asked to propose thoughts and recommendations on the themes discussed in the interviews and suggest explanations for problems that emerged throughout the process of interviewing.

Eleven of the interviews were conducted in English and one in Bulgarian. The interview conducted in Bulgarian was later translated and added to the whole document of transcripts. Because of the easy access to social networking sites, the interviews were conducted in public places, such as silent cafes and on campus, or via skype.

### **3.1.3 Netnographic observations**

This research embraced ‘netnographic’ style observations of participants' Instagram content as a secondary research technique. Additionally to the responses of their interview questions the participants were kindly asked to comment on several of their latest posts on Instagram in order to map out a bit more clearly how they experience the (co-)production of their

identities on the internet. Moreover, netnographic style observations was a helpful research method, being used in parallel with the in-depth interviews, because it allowed me understand whether or not participants' identity practices differ and in relation to what factors.

Netnography is a term deriving from the words 'internet' and 'ethnography' and it is a comparatively novel technique to study online communities systematically (Kozinets, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2010). Netnography "adopts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets, 2002: 2; Belz & Baumbach, 2010). Due to the fact that netnography is a market research technique it makes use of publicly accessible data in social media groups to examine consumer desires, consumer tendencies, consumer behaviour and its effects (Kozinets, 2002).

I believe that the use of netnography for the study of these perfect cybercultural communities and displays is most applicable in this context as a methodology per se. Because these phenomena are entirely grounded on groups formed from computer mediate communications, the employment of immersive netnographic procedures permit me to systematically cover the whole social context of "life on the screen." (Kozinets, 1988: n.p.) Therefore, netnography is methodologically very strong as a required element, if not the main element, when explaining any consumer behaviour demonstrated in a pure virtual community context (ibid.).

The netnographic style observations of participants' personal Instagram accounts permitted me to become involved deeply in the virtual context of the study (Kozinets, 2002). Empirical work shows that prosumers take part in online communications within online communities to add information about current goods and services, to collaborate with brands and each other, to exchange experiences in the use of certain products, or communicate needs and preferences regarding products (Anderson et al., 2016). This research technique was very useful in helping me obtain a profounder knowledge of broader prosumption themes and social practices as I was able to observe both the micro-behaviours of my interviewees and the macro social themes and issues that shaped social tendencies such as the factors that affect the production of their identity on Instagram (Soukup, 2012).

As encouraged by Fisher & Smith (2011), the data obtained from the interviews and the netnographic style observations was compared to examine both the participants' behaviours and

their own descriptions of their social media prosumption habits. This was a helpful approach for studying the resemblances and dissimilarities between the online practices of participants and their conveyed life experience, between how they describe themselves in person and how they present themselves through mediated practices.

### **3.2 Choice of methods**

The purpose of this study is to find out how practices of user generated content online are contributing to the (co-)production of personal identity through exploring the ways in which certain brands are related to the daily production of my interviewees' identities and discussing the positive and negative experiences of their involvements in prosumption practices. The study was complemented by in-depth interviews with the people whose profiles were netnographically observed and by extensive literature. Most of the Instagram accounts that were netnographically observed were publicly available. Those participants, whose Instagram accounts were restricted, accepted me as their follower so I would be able to see their content. In sum, the cultural entree to this study agrees with Kozinets' (2002) recommendations for netnographic observations.

With regard to my choice of social medium, Instagram was considered as a convenient social media platform as it consists of many consumers who generate visual content and interact with brands there.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

The data collection period lasted for approximately one month, with all twelve interviews completed by the end of April. An average number of ten visuals were chosen from each participant's Instagram account in order to be discussed with them as part of the netnographic like observations. Throughout the process, participants were asked to show and describe their private Instagram posts by using a laptop, tablet or smartphone device.

For the data collection, particular branded content was specifically selected from participants' Instagram accounts. Then, participants were kindly asked to discuss their visuals in relation to my interview questions regarding their content generating practices on Instagram (see Appendix 1). Memos were taken during the process of the interviews to make sure that the analysis later on would be as objective and truthfully represented as possible. The approximate estimated duration of all twelve interviews is 43 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded. After each interview, the data was carefully transcribed, coded and analysed. All contributions

have been coded and categorised by the researcher with the help of the Atlas.ti software before additional analysis and interpretation.

### **3.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The data analysis was conducted by means of the software program Atlas.ti in order to ‘code’ the data and categorise the codes which derived from both in-depth interviews and netnographic like observations (see Appendix 2). Strauss & Corbin, (2007: 61) argue that coding is the “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data” which means that all the data that was collected by the beginning of data analysis should have been read very carefully and separated into patterns. Through the coding process I was able to create order in terms of dividing and reconstructing the data and extracting the most important information from the huge amount of data (Boeije, 2010).

A constant comparative method based on grounded theory was employed in order to analytically understand the interviewees’ responses independently and in comparison to the netnographic-like observations (Boeije, 2002). In such way, it was easy to recognise common topics which lead to a pattern (code) in interviewees’ responses (Boeije, 2002). What is more, when coding I used my contextual understanding about the perception of the issues being studied and, generally, my knowledge about the field of study as recommended by Flick et al. (2004). Therefore, the theoretical framework of coding was employed to direct this study and also to guide its analysis. Three types of coding were recognised that, to some extent, were considered as stages in the research development (Flick et al., 2004). Specifically these stages are open, axial and selective coding.

#### **3.4.1 Open coding**

After I transcribed all of the twelve interviews I input them in the coding software Atlas.ti because it provided me with easier outlook and organisation of the transcripts, memos and codes. The transcripts of the interviews were read through several times while making sense of the visuals which complemented them. Appearing new conceptualisations were reformed on consecutive readings. The material, which consisted of transcripts and images, was organised, coded and summarised, then described and interpreted. Numerous coding of the relevant focus of the postings was supplemented with frequency coding for several aspects, such as ‘positive self-representation on social media’ or ‘oversharing as a disadvantage’. In such way one could notice

what the most common patterns and interpretations from interviewees were. Consequently, if decided by the researcher later on in the analysis, this commonality would be noted. I open coded all of the things that I found interesting and eventually came up with 682 open codes. The consequence of open coding was a list of codes, named “coding scheme”, and ultimately all significant data was enclosed with codes until saturation in analysis was reached (Boeije, 2010: 98). After carefully eliminating the codes that were irrelevant, repeating and unnecessary, a number of 588 codes remained. Open coding logically directed me to axial coding, as the raw data (interview transcripts) needed to be converted into a more nonfigurative framework.

### **3.4.2 Axial coding**

Axial coding was the next step in the data analysis process. According to Strauss & Corbin (2007: 96) axial coding is “a set of procedures whereby the data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories”. It is a more abstract process and contains coding around a number of solitary groups of axes. Here, reasoning moved from data to codes. The most important reason why axial coding was employed in this research is the fact that it drew on the open codes to indicate which categories are central and which are not. As a result, eight core categories were established which then needed to be narrowed down in a smaller number of themes - also my selective codes.

### **3.4.3 Selective coding**

The last and most logical stage of my analysis process was selective coding (Boeije, 2010). During the process selective coding, formerly recognised distinct conceptions and categories were further defined, and developed, and then tied together to tell a broader story (Flick et al., 2004). Three main categories were decided, namely ‘self-representation on social media’, ‘relationships with brands’ and ‘identity struggles’. In order those three themes to be understood, they were described, their relationships observed and ultimately the research questions were answered (Boeije, 2010). With selective coding, I was able to seek relations between the categories so I could make sense of what is happening when active Instagram users are (co-)producing their identities through the generation of branded content on Instagram.

### 3.5 Research Ethics

Ethical implications must be taken into consideration when conducting qualitative research in order the confidentiality and safety of participants to be honoured. According to the research ethics introduced by Kozinets (2002, 2010) regarding netnographic observations, all of the participants of the study were informed about the research purpose and promised that they would be provided with all of the research text after the completion of the research. Interviewees who were quoted in the study were informed and asked for consent to use direct quotations and their visuals in the research. Moreover, all of the names of the participants were changed and names and faces of commenters on the images blurred, as full anonymity was promised.

Online communication and collaboration between interviewees and brands has been examined by using in-depth interviews and netnographic style observations in order to grasp their outlooks, opinions, visuals, and emotions regarding the phenomenon studied (Kozinets, 2002). As Kozinets (1998, 1999) argues, the internet proposes better chances for social community involvement, where consumers form online groups of consumption so they could proclaim social power, to get together, and to assert symbols and lifestyles that are important to them and the groups they form. Therefore, netnographic studies appear to be capable to offer those “thick descriptions” of the life worlds of consumers which also tend to be my interviewees (Elliott and Jankell-Elliott, 2003).

The findings for this study are based on these in-depth ethnographic interviews and netnographic-like observations as this twofold method offers a deeper understanding of the ways in which prosumers act and identify themselves on numerous prosumption sites (Fisher & Smith, 2011). It helps to create an understanding of prosumption as a twofold process in which both brands and prosumers who are sharing prolific amount of branded content shape their identities and reputation. This methodology permits to realise how brands could produce the sense of who people are while also involving them in marketing efforts. Further this also helps indicate whether or not there is an actual difference between prosumers’ identification practices online and their behaviour in real world.

#### 4. Findings & Discussion

This study sought to discover how generating branded content online contributes to the (co-)production of personal identity of prosumers. Social media has become a space where users can easily communicate with brands through the consumption and production of content. Technological advances have encouraged such practices of consumption and production, also known as “prosumption” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). The practice which is described as “prosumption” is the practice in which consumers are increasingly creating value and content for brands (John, 2012; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). The findings of this research highlight the interconnections between such practices of prosumption, which result in the production of interviewees’ identities, while focusing on the activities that trigger them.

Twelve people in total were interviewed and netnographically observed. This means that additionally to answering the interview questions regarding this study, participants were also asked to discuss their Instagram branded content in relation to their online habits and struggles associated with the production of their identity. In such way I was able to understand how such online practices communicate connections between identity and brands. My interpretation of the netnographic-like observations emphasises the content consumers share and create online. Eventually, after all the data was gathered, a level of saturation in the data was reached, as no new information was yielded in the coding process. As a result, an interesting and unique analysis was produced, based on the interview data, netnographic-like observations and relevant theory. Within the study three key themes emerged as the central answer to the research question and its sub questions.

First, the findings show that my interviewees tend to use the social medium Instagram mainly for positive self-presentation through the generation of branded content. Through both branded and aesthetic content production, people in this study tended to produce selves that appear as ‘positive’. Second, the findings regarding how active Instagram users, in the face of my respondents, connect to brands through different practices of content generation are presented. Interaction between ‘prosumers’ and brands was observed to be an essential part in identity production practices. Interviewees also tended to ‘work’ for “exchanging symbolic knowledge and emotional value” which created value on a primary level which was transferred to the market level through appropriation by brands (Cova & Dalli, 2009). Third, the struggles respondents experience when using social media for producing content and, consequently, shaping their



identity, are depicted, such as the restrictions and negative experiences the interviewees have had during their practices of generating content online.

This study's findings and analysis highlight that as 'prosumers', my interviewees shared either huge and prominent brands with positive brand reputation such as Coca Cola, Mercedes, BMW and Starbucks or not so popular and local productions such as small Bulgarian brands, local cafes in London and "hipster" products in Berlin. Moreover, a tendency was noticed that the interviewees are likely to generate content related to different brands where each brand corresponds to different sides of their identity. The intentionality in sharing user generated content of either prominent brands or small local brands and the intimacy that is evident between the interviewees and their content certainly link to the self they (co-)produce on social media. In short, this chapter aims to communicate how the participants in my research generate branded content on Instagram and the ways in which such practices contribute to the production of their identity.

#### **4.1 Self-representation on Social Media**

As theorised before, positive self-presentation has been one of prosumers' strongest motive for using social media services. Impressions need to be constantly adjusted, regulated and refined in order people to be positively recognised. This chapter shows interviewees' self-presentational habits in relation to brands on the social medium Instagram.

##### **4.1.1 I share therefore I am**

All of the respondents in this study indicated that they use social media on a daily basis, some more often than others. For example, Jenna, a 24-year-old food blogger, said that she uses social media "a lot of hours during the day" because it brings her "comfort". Vera, a 22-year-old student, indicated that she spends the "majority of her free time" on social media and it is her main way of entertainment. Brigitte, a 22-year-old social media strategist and blogger, indicated that for her social media has taken "a massive part of my life and I'm kind of on it 24/7 monitoring, strategizing large company and then I check my own social media, my personal social media on regular basis as well outside of work", calling it "refreshing" and even "therapeutic". And Petra, a 22-year-old lifestyle Instagram blogger, claimed that she is "pinned to all my social media apps nonstop to get updates and notifications". Essentially, Instagram depends on a recurrent feed of user generated content and it has created a number of social norms

that inspire involvement by consumers (Anderson et al, 2016). Such statements show the important part social media plays in people's life no matter the reasons why they use it.

For some users, social media was considered a great source of independence. For instance, most of the respondents indicated that they travel a lot, therefore their main motive to use social media is to keep in touch with friends in other countries or to communicate with friends they "made along the way" (Janine). Furthermore, Benjamin, a 24-year-old business student, goes to Instagram "to keep up with all the information like what's happening to everybody and what are they up to right now". Petra and Brigitte, both lifestyle bloggers, shared that they use Instagram to interact with brands and "promote them in not an overly promotional way". Jenna is engaged with social media and active on many current social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook and Twitter. She claimed that she enjoys the freedom and the positive energy that she receives from the online food community and uses Instagram to communicate with brands and her followers. Jenna says:

(M)aybe for a while it was a bit of an escape from the real like where it was all just about this one to picture that was nice and positive. That's maybe why I joined this specific (food) community as opposed to fashion because fashion is all about being pretentious pretending to have money, and be pretty and look amazing all the time. And this is...people are really raw, people talk about their problems, that they are not feeling great every day and I liked that and I liked that people were honest with these things, but you can never know.

This quote supports the observation that my interviewees are driven to contribute to social networking sites such as Instagram for "escape from reality" and belonging to a certain community (Jenna), "entertaining" (Vera), interaction with brands (Anton, Petra, Brigitte, Jenna) and as most of the interviewees clarified, to represent themselves in a desired way (Janine, Petra, Zendaya, Greta, Benjamin, Tony). Such descriptions of why individuals use social media very well correspond with the cultural turn which distinguishes the role of marketplace assets in identity production (Thompson, 2014). Interviewees' responses also connect to Lund's (2014) notion of "playbour" which explains there is not a clear boundary between play and work in the digital milieu as it might include a component of entertainment and also the establishment of use value and identity for either brands or consumers. For example, note how in the following quote

Benjamin feels the urge to share branded content, while creating a “positive” and “cool” image of himself, and enjoying it.

Well, there is a rapper who says “we all self-conscious I’m just the first to admit it” and kinda agree cause everybody loves it when people have this positive image of you and I think that sharing cool things makes you cool kid or something like that so you want to show the world or your friends or people you know. When they see it I don’t really think how they feel about it or anything but I don’t know, it’s just for the sake of sharing. Everybody does that, I do that every now and then.

Social media proposes novel opportunities for sharing self-presentational content, which might sometimes be described as “branding” oneself online by becoming a “micro-celebrity” (Senft, 2012). The “micro-celebrity” concept was defined as “the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same” (Senft, 2012) or:

An emerging online practice that involves creating a persona, sharing personal information about oneself with others, performing intimate connections to create the illusion of friendship or closeness, acknowledging an audience and viewing them as fans, and using strategic reveal of information to increase or maintain this audience (Marwick, 2010: 13).

Marwick (2010) observes these activities among Silicon Valley “tech scene” members, explaining the labour that it takes in executing apparently trustworthy brand management of one’s identity online on a daily basis. Marwick & Boyd (2011) refer to contradictory interpretations of the micro-celebrity and its activities among their epitomes, some of whom noticed the opportunity to obtain attention as a pointer of prominence and “coolness”. Moreover, the phenomenon of micro-celebrity has been perceived as false, pretentious, and overtly self-promotional. Marwick & Boyd’s (2011) arguments emphasise one of the struggles connected with producing the self-online: the eagerness to be realistic juxtaposed with the necessity to communicate to several audiences (related to various personal objectives), as well as unidentified audiences, while involving in self-presentational (and promotional) activities. Such struggles

connected with producing the self were clearly evident in this research as interviewees considered generation of content on social media as a way of self-presentation which was not always genuine.

#### 4.1.2 Producing the self online

The creation of branded content on social media has become an indispensable part of many people's lives. However banal or boring one's content seems, scholars argue that in the case of the visual online platform Instagram, such social media posts function as an essential driver of self-affirmation (Murthy, 2012). What this research shows is that social media users mainly produce content to present themselves in a certain way to their audience. Creating an online image has gradually developed to be very important for the production of identity. Zendaya uses Instagram not only for "self-presentation" but also for "telling her life" and to "see what other people are doing and experiencing". Brigitte supported Zendaya's view by explaining:

I will share things like my lettering that I do or food I eat, or blog posts that I published, and kind of generally represent my lifestyle. And my interests are the ones of a creative individual, I guess, and it accurately portrays me as I am - not like a false version of me.

In such way, by sharing certain content instagrammers show that their identities are changing - they demonstrate that they are following the social trends and are always up to date with them. For example, Brigitte who referred to *Type Hype* as "her favourite" coffee place, when asked whether the picture she took said something specific about her, she went into detail: "Yeah, oh definitely! Because it has to do with typography and flowers and coffee and they are really three things that represent me as a person". What follows from this is that my respondents like to produce their identities through generating and sharing branded content to which values they want to identify with. Murthy (2012) also argues that the act of producing content online is created from singular contributions and, it is very much about self-production.

Instagram has been a communication tool that plays a huge role in the formation of my interviewees' social worlds due to the notion that self-presentation is at its core. The immediate publicity it offers has obviously triggered a "passion" (Vera) or "urge to share" (Tony) in order to be a "figure on social media" (Vera). This desire for sharing is also created by "exotic foreign

experiences that one's followers haven't seen" and "unforgettable moments" in order to "construct a positive image" of oneself (Tony). Tony, a 22-year-old international student, explained that he generates branded content, such as an image taken in a Starbucks coffee shop, in order to create a certain image of himself and, more specifically, of who he aspires to be. Brigitte also claimed that social media's purpose is one of "portraying yourself, how you want to look to the world". Moreover, Vera elaborated on Brigitte's statement by saying that:

(I) am the same (on social media) as I am offline. I am not trying to be more special, I'm not trying to create a different image of myself. I'm just posting myself online, if that makes any sense.

However, Vera's response implies for tensions between her online and offline identity. While she claims that she feels "comfortable sharing her content on Instagram" and being the "same" person as she is offline, Anton's view on the topic differs. In an explanation what drew him to take a picture of a dish in a very expensive and popular Japanese restaurant, he shares:

(T)o an extent (I shared this picture) because of the fact that it is a well-known restaurant and it is kind of high class restaurant. I'm personally not that kind of person but I realise that on social media I am actually a different person, unfortunately (...) (emphasis added by the researcher).

Such understanding that one does not possess the image they have built on social media and still continue producing this image is an interesting paradox. Gigi also supported the notion that is not necessarily the same person on Instagram by saying that the online presentation of who she is online is not real. She continued her explanation by saying that she mostly shared moments that "made an impression on her" and that social media is not about insignificant things such as sharing your food online - "it's about bigger things".

Due to the fact that social media users choose to publicly share their lives, other users are able to learn about their lives, behaviours, undertakings, and the places they visit through the content they generate online. Or, it is very possible that we are presented with purposeful images by the individuals we follow on social media: we observe what they want us or allow us to observe. Erving Goffman's (1959) work on self-presentation has been very useful to understand the identity impressions we share with other people, both consciously and unconsciously, and the

ways in which those practices are influenced by the ways we perceive ourselves and want to be seen by others. Goffman (1959) emphasises on the ways in which deliberate presentation is a very straightforward identity-shaping approach, even if immature or uninformed identity practices are at all times as well a part of self-actualisation (Manning, 1992). When observing content on social media, users use Instagram as a space to promote unconscious self-expression and similarly allowing conscious self-promotion.

Participants in this research have modified such tactics during the years, as they developed to be savvier in positioning these novel “technologies of the self” (Foucault as cited in van Dijck, 2013). Foucault defined “technologies of the self” as certain techniques that permit people themselves to influence operations on their own bodies and minds so they can adjust themselves in order to achieve a certain state of contentment, and quality of life (1988). The idea of the self which appears in Foucault’s scholarship is linked to the course of subjectification, the multifaceted ways in which personal identity is created and incorporated by social powers (Foucault et al., 1988). This theorisation of the self allows Foucault to hypothesise forms of individuality, and more specifically the variety of conducts in which people establish their identities in a “creative and a constructive fashion and at the same time identify those modalities of power that constrain, limit or repress forms of self-expression” (Foucault, as cited in Elliot, 2013: 110). He advances the idea of “technologies of self” to connect the positive and negative forms of identity production, which in turn is associated with an examination of the wider discursive power relations functioning within contemporary societies (Foucault et al., 1988).

Such “technologies of self” remind me of Goffman’s work on self-presentation whereby he adopts the metaphor of the “stage” to exemplify the dissimilarities between situations in which self-presentation struggles are noticeable and those in which they are less distinct. Goffman (1959) explains that when a person is around many people, they employ a particular impression which he calls “front stage”. Consequently, the unpretentious and ‘real’ self an individual possess in life he calls their “back stage” (ibid.). Such metaphors can be transferred to the social media context in which prosumers produce content and, therefore, their identity. Several interviewees claimed that they were the same as who they were offline, however several other respondents realised that generating content online presented them in a different light than who they actually were in the real world. As a result, a tension between who one is online and offline occurred. Such tension was clearly evident when the direction of the interviews turned to talking about their

Instagram visuals. Tony explained that most of the time people generated content online in a way that was not necessarily open and genuine.

I think it (self-representation on social media) is different from the reality mostly because for me what I wanna share is something really fancy. Or if I feel happy or if I find something interesting or fancy I have the urge to share. But if I feel sad or like if I find something boring then I won't share because I don't really wanna share something not very good. I wanna construct an image like a positive person but that's for me and I also know some of my friends who have really fancy profiles and, oh, they are doing amazing jobs and it feels like they are really good but actually when I really get to work with them they are not that good as I expected. So, I think for me and also for most of the people what they share online is mostly positive and what makes them good. So, the content they post online is usually a content which is over exaggerated and just makes them look better but actually is sort of different from the reality maybe and in reality they are not as good as what they are posting online.

In the quote above Tony emphasised on the fact that he intentionally created content on Instagram which presented him in a positive light and this was a practice that “most people” were actually having. Greta also added to this matter by explaining the pretentious nature of Instagram users' online.

(O)n Instagram, if someone posts an image and they filter it and then it looks really nice and then other people get jealous because this girl or guy is having fun but actually they are at home doing nothing, so (...) you never know if this is right or this is true (...)

Due to the bipolarity of self-presentation discussed above, identity has been a very hard topic for scholars to define and examine. Identity is obviously a diverse historical and cultural condition which is recognised and accepted instead of a prearranged mental state (Ellison, 2013). This was exactly the beginning for understanding what online identity is. Sherry Turkle (1984) in her work *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, which was the first important piece preceding the rise of the web 2.0, proposed that experiments in online identity extended this

experience of offline identity as manifold, fluid, temporary and contextual. In online settings such as Instagram identity processes are complex since numerous identity traces (such as one's age) are camouflaged and can be decisively shared, preserved, or maintained. In social media, identity is fundamentally translated into being (Sunden, 2003). Persons can embrace manifold online personalities, and online actions frequently leave noticeable "traces which can be captured, tracked, packaged, and shared" (Ellison, 2013: 2). Such selective self-presentation also has consequences for how we perceive ourselves. Very often, in both online and offline settings, people create positive impressions by covering-up certain disclosures which may reveal too much of a side that they do not want to reveal so they focus on sharing the content that is mainly positive (Goffman, 1959). Ellison (2013) describes selective self-presentation as a presentation of self where one is able to choose and curate their identity, adding positive features and eliminating negative ones. Such type of self-presentation is the most common type on social media. As Joseph Walther wrote:

Online, one may transmit only cues that an individual desires others to have... computer-mediated communication senders may construct messages that portray themselves in preferential ways, emphasizing desirable characteristics and communicating in a manner that invites preferential reactions (2011: 461).

This is in line with the notion that my interviewees have generated content online to shape a certain image of themselves that other users can observe online. There is a constant process of identity reinforcement on social media so the ultimate influence over other users to be imposed. Zendaya, one of the interviewees, supported Tony's and Greta's points of view by stating that social media involvement "is really like a performance - you have to be an actor and you have to be always prepared for this". This kind of performance took active users a huge amount of time and effort in order to appear in the way they want or would allow their public to see them.

Long before the emergence of online communication, Erving Goffman (1959) theorised self-presentation as a "performance"; the need for a multiple, composite self has only increased since public communication moved to an online space. A "performance" may be described as all the doings of a certain member of society in a certain instance which works to affect in any way the other members of society (Goffman, 1969). In Ichheiser's words, the person will have to perform so that he consciously or unconsciously expresses himself, and the others will in turn



have to be fascinated by him (1949). This is very much in line with the findings of this study which present the fact that what users mainly generate branded content online for is the production of their selves.

This research highlights the idea that most people produce a self-online that is always maintained and shaped in order to be reinforced through the production of precisely selected branded content, which almost in all of the interviewees responses developed to be a common pattern. The production of the positive self of my interviewees has been evident thanks to the constant addition of positive features to their profiles. This is surely not a difficult thing to do especially when on Instagram everyone can choose in what light the wish to present themselves.

#### **4.1.3 Aesthetic Staging**

Impression management is important in social media landscapes because of the notion that everyone can create the best version of themselves which leads to positive outcomes for them. As mentioned above, everyone is able to choose the light in which they want to be presented and doing it beautifully can only be of benefit for the presentation of one's self. In line with this, aesthetic staging developed to be an important and thought-provoking theme in the course of the twelve interviews. Many of the respondents indicated that they felt that they were expected to share aesthetically pleasing content on Instagram which means that they felt expected to produce content that brings value to other people's newsfeeds but also it is fitting into the understanding of what 'pretty' in the minds of one's followers is. Brigitte's responses of how she uses Instagram, demonstrated her concerns to conform to a specific aesthetic value.

So, I don't really necessarily have a pattern but I think I've got a consistent aesthetic so I will share things like my lettering that I do or food I eat or blog posts that I published and kind of generally represent my lifestyle. And my interests are creative individual I guess and it accurately portrays me as I am not like a false version of me.

Brigitte's concern closely links to Featherstone' (1991) "aestheticisation of daily life" whereby the aestheticisation of consumption is perhaps the most robust feature of post-modern European cultures. The scholar goes into detail by explaining that postmodernism infers a breakdown of the boundaries and differences between art and life and the things we consume

every day (ibid.) to deliver “an easily recognizable and reproducible art form” (Schroeder, 1997: 477). As a result, boundaries between art and consumption have been being destroyed - art can “be anywhere and anything” (Featherstone 1991: 268); aesthetic gratification can be captured from the consumption of objects, similarly as art can reproduce, reflect and evaluate consumption. Participants in this research felt the public nature of Instagram had created an aesthetic demand to post visually attractive images of the self, consuming a certain brand. Ten out of twelve respondents claimed that they feel that they are expected or they felt the “urge” to share “pretty” content. Responses like the one of Petra were not uncommon:

First, I want to like the visual picture itself because I have some criteria of how my profile pictures should look. I’m always sharing stuff which would be useful or just something beautiful, something good and positive (...)

Presenting oneself in a positive and aesthetic light through sharing branded content on Instagram developed to be repeatedly observed tendency in this study. Interviewees’ presentational labour was observed to be achieved by means of emotional and aesthetic interactive abilities to present the social characteristics that are fixed by brands and identify with them (Sheane, 2012). In order for this aesthetic staging to be achieved, what was also a common in interviewees’ responses was the notion of ‘putting a lot of effort’ into creating the best possible image of oneself online. Answers like the one of Anton’s perfectly describe this phenomenon:

This was just after I finished with the yacht show because I went to the yacht show in Monaco it was very interesting so I kind of thought I can show that as well as an experience. So it was a nice background the sand, to be honest I put some effort how to arrange everything so I wanted to make a nice picture so if I have to be very honest, which is probably the point, I really wanted to just post something on that day, I was “okay, I need to post something” so I thought “okay, what do I post?!” and I remember that I did several pictures and I didn’t really like many of them and I was like “oh, okay, I will just put the magazines on the sand and whatever” so I can make a nice picture of it so I was also like “oh, that looks like a good colour combination!” so I posted it.



Figure 4.1

On the picture above one can also notice that the person who posted it, Anton, was a visitor to the yacht show in Monaco. This added cultural value to the situation that Anton was in at that moment. Together with the hashtags, the image creates an overall impression in observers' minds which probably would be that Anton is a businessman who visits "cool places". However, when asked why he uses those particular hashtags in almost every picture, he said that he just "learned them from his girlfriend" and this is a way to "get more likes". Therefore, "putting thought" and "effort" in what to post on a regular basis coupled with the idea that it should be beautifully presented and most of the time include particular branded content developed to be an often appearing trend in the responses of interviewees. The obligation to comply with such standards made them "work" without even realizing it. Through such constant and devoted "work" they were able to create eye pleasing and valuable end products for both them and the brands they are supporting. This also links to what Lazzarato (1997) called "immaterial labour" or to what Anderson et al. (2016) described as "social labour". Through practices of those forms of online labour, my interviewees were not really aware that they work, due to the notion that they were able to produce their own identities. Boon & Sinclair (2009) supported those claims by

stating that as users on social media continue sharing content frequently, those activities and their meaning become an important part of their identities.

Turner (2010: 2) discusses that new media forms have experienced a “demotic turn”, which relates to the growing visibility of the “ordinary person” whose identity becomes more and more mediated due to the endless consumption of TV, advertisements and the like. According to Jameson (1991), there is no unmediated identity in a sense that advertising and the media regularly propose inspiring stories of the self – images of a way of life, products and guidance – with which the consumer can recognise themselves or want to associate themselves with (Slater, 1997). Moreover, according to Murthy (2012: 1061), such practices of self-affirmation develop to be a key instrument to say “look at me” or “I exist”. Turner (2010: 3) clarifies that the media have possibly experienced a change from “broadcaster of cultural identities” to “a translator or even an author of identities”. What follows from this is that interviewees who generate branded content on social media produce their identities in the eyes of their observers thanks to their devoted and unstoppable practices of self-actualisation. All of this is part of what Gackenbach (2007) calls “inventing the self” which would not be possible if interviewees did not identify themselves through aesthetic presentation of content which most of the time involves certain brands. The relationship my interviewees have with brands is going to be explained in the next section explaining how participants collaborate with brands and use them for self-presentational practices.

## **4.2 Relationship with brands**

The findings of this research show that respondents pursue particular purposes, such as gratification, pleasure, commitment, social contact and recognition in their everyday interaction with brands. People chose to ‘collaborate’ with brands in order to identify themselves with the lifestyle or values those brands represent. Moreover, people are devoted in their work for and collaboration with brands because they long to be acknowledged by the brand. Walker (2008) supports my findings by arguing that the longing to be a brand collaborator might very often be consumers’ reaction to feelings of helplessness, invisibility, and disconnectedness – a part of their “struggle for recognition” (Honneth, 2000). Other critics argue that “the more the consumer works the more he/she identifies him/herself to his/her production” (Dujarier, 2008: 135) and that such co-creative experiences provide him/her with “psychological benefits independently of the

nature of goods or services created in the process” (Etgar, 2008: 103). A huge part in how respondents collaborate with brands on Instagram consists of their communicative efforts towards brands, due to the fact that several respondents who generated branded content on Instagram considered it to be a place where such interaction is mainly done there these days.

#### **4.2.1 Associating self with brands**

In contrast with social network platforms where users often communicate with individuals they are familiar with offline (boyd, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007), instagrammers frequently consume media generated by other users or brands they are interested in. Anyone can easily mention or post to @richardbranson or @nike, with the purpose to comment and be noticed or even endorsed by the certain person or brand. On Instagram, this works similarly when you tag a location, ‘mention’ a certain name or hashtag a certain word or phrase. This makes one’s generated content noticeable and discoverable for the other users. As Brigitte explained, ‘mentioning’ the brand of a product and adding hashtags to the image has the purpose to “increase the discovery of the image”. When discussing another picture and why she included certain hashtags, tagged the location and mentioned the name of the brand, she elaborated that she usually does those things in order to “promote a brand in not an overly promotional way”, to “interact with the brand” or even to show other people where a certain product of the brand is located and “could be found”.

A common tendency was that interviewees chose to “collaborate” with brands in their Instagram involvements to represent the lifestyle or values they aspire to have. Identifying with a particular brand and its values on social media easily seems to develop a staged image of the person who created the content. When asking Tony why he shared a picture he took in a Starbucks café he said:

(I) really like the Starbucks logo so that’s why I took a picture of it and also Starbucks represents something because the brand is promoting something good. Starbucks in China actually really represents high class lifestyle and many young people post pictures when they are drinking coffee or posting the pictures with the logo inside, so that’s why I was thinking to post it. At that moment, that was what I was pursuing so that’s why I posted this picture of Starbucks.



Figure 4.2

This leads to the assumption that one shapes part of their own identity by choosing specifically who they want to be through generating content related to a certain brand while relating to the lifestyle or views this brand represents. This is also noticeable in the choice of Tony's hashtags, which are the key words next to the image. The three of them were chosen specifically not only to improve the discovery of the picture but also to present a precisely chosen sides of the person Tony aspires to be or, specifically, one who is having afternoon breaks at Starbucks in New York city. Similarly, Berthon et al. (2008) propose that consumer generation is likely to be determined by three main elements: personal satisfaction when users generate branded content even just for the sake of the creation itself – what occurs to the creation and the result of the creation is less important; self-promotion when individuals generate branded content with the precise aim of self-promotion – identification with the brand or product occurs together with the associations that come with it; and alter perceptions when persons create since they expect to have a particular influence on a target addressees – the purpose of the creation is to affect people.

An affiliation to the lifestyle a brand represents was similarly noticed in the ethnographic-like observation of Zendaya’s Instagram account. When discussing a picture of her Nike sneakers, she explained that Nike is her “favourite brand of shoes”. In addition, after explaining that Zendaya loves to do different kinds of sports “like running, playing tennis, skiing”, she said that the only brand of shoes she has is Nike. In explaining the next image, she also specified that on the picture there are Nike’s “limited edition” shoes for which she needed to “fight hard”. What is more, she received several comments which praised her shoes or asked certain flattering questions which she said made her “feel good”. When describing the comments she explained:

(A)nd then I got a comment which says “oh my god, they are perfect!” and the other said “is this limited edition?” and I said “ yeah, I thought because I bought these shoes, after I got my bachelor’s degree and then I could buy them to treat myself after the bachelor’s degree. And then she said “yeah, it’s great!”.



Figure 4.3

Tony's case is another example of how prosumers connect their selves to brands and the "good" those brands represent. When describing the photograph he took of a Coca Cola can he explained that he supported the "inspiring" campaign of the brand. On the can one can read a text in Chinese that states "I believe in tomorrow" and the caption next to it says "I really do". The positive message on the can was the main reason that Tony shared this specific image. He also stated that he desired to be as positive as he could and that he wanted:

Other people to know that I'm feeling positively and I look up to the future, because as I said, I really wanna share pictures that produce positive feeling not only for myself but also for other people.



Figure 4.4

As a prosumer, Tony is active and engaged in market experiences and communication with brands on social media (Cova & Dalli, 2009). In addition to the fact that Tony clearly wants to affiliate to the values of the Coca Cola brand, several other interviewees expressed desire to be acknowledged by brands when collaborating with them and generating branded content on



Instagram. According to Banks & Humphreys, there is a vibrant interrelationship concerning social networks and market-based enterprise because certainly:

Rather than non-market, these (social networks) formations can be seen as emerging markets consisting of new collectives that do not fit comfortably with our current understandings of work and labour relations. (2008: 406)

The shifting nature of modern production and consumption has emphasised on the importance of unbalanced, fluid and intangible work practices (Wood & Ball, 2013). Current research highlights the influence of consumers' immaterial labour for brands (Andrejevic, 2010; Fuchs, 2010; Cova & Dalli, 2009) which is a kind of labour in which consumers not only work but they also create value for themselves and society (Lazzarato, 1997). In the heart of this idea is the understanding that communication and information systems as well as knowledge are the foremost sources for production (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1997) which is evident in all of the respondents' interviews. In addition, Fuchs & Sevignani (2013) develop the idea of digital labour which they base in rational, communicative and collaborative practices to create use-value. Essentially, these different viewpoints recognise productivity has become entrenched in everyday sociality (Rey, 2012) as brands can benefit from user-generated content as they take advantage over cultural value (Andrejevic, 2010). The subsequent reward for prosumers is cultural capital or, more specifically, feelings of gratitude, happiness and inclusion to the brand community. On a question that asked how he felt when he received likes on his picture from the official Instagram account of Audi and Audi France, Benjamin replied:

Yeah, it is kind of cool cause they are Audi and they actually follow the people who post pictures with that hashtag and I am part of this community, you know... of the drivers and it is nice to know that.

When observing Benjamin's behaviour, what could be noticed was his love to the Audi brand and his pride when he received the likes from the official pages of the brand, respectively Audi France and audi\_official. Coupled with the hashtags on his picture, namely #truelove and #Audi, the picture increased its value for both the brand and Benjamin, who serves as a brand ambassador to Audi.

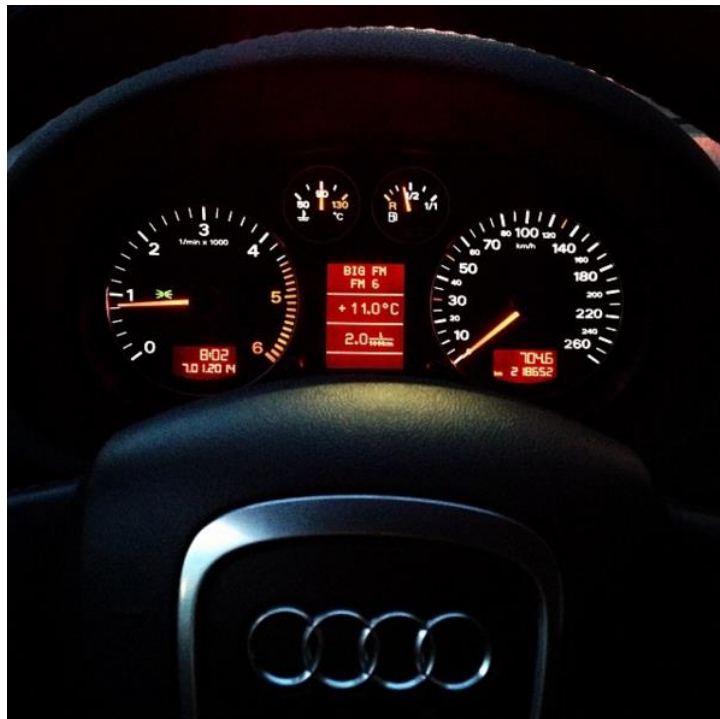


Figure 4.5

Similar collaboration with a brand happened with Jenna, who as a food blogger and a devoted photographer has been a member of the vegan food community on Instagram. In an effort to reach out to the brand and again say ‘thank you’, my interviewee tagged lovechoc – a vegan chocolate brand. As a result, lovechoc noticed Jenna’s post and efforts, and commented on it. Regarding to this experience, Jenna said:

(I) tagged lovechoc because, first of all, I wanted them to know that I’m using their chocolate and I kinda... because it’s pretty brilliant chocolate they put a little note on it – it is really cute. So, for me it is just giving back to them and telling them like “hi, I’m using your chocolate it’s really cool” so I think it is nice for them to see that. And then also of course because I know that on their account they sometimes share these pictures when people use their product so obviously if they share your picture you are seen by a different community or other people who will hopefully go back to your profile and see it and it’s a bit about that as well. And then they’ve commented as well actually saying “can we regram?”

Jenna's experience is one that is interesting because she was looking for an interaction with the brand on Instagram with the intention to be featured on their account. She actually achieved reaching out and interacting with them and she explained that she felt "nice" when in return to hers "hey, I like your chocolate" she received a comment which said "looks delicious, can we regram?" which according to Jenna meant "hey, we liked your picture" from the brand's side.

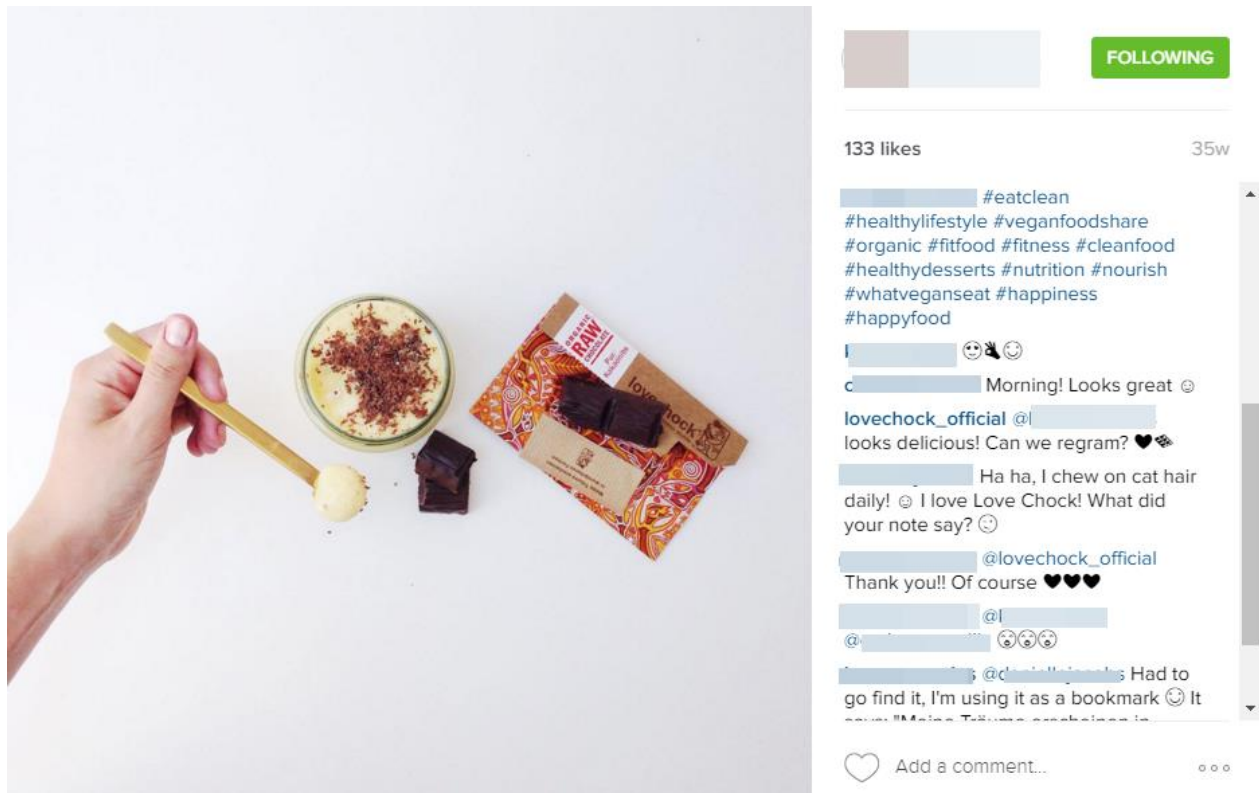


Figure 4.6

Also, starting similar conversations and communicating with brands on Instagram occurred to be important part of Brigitte's usage of Instagram. She shared a picture of a small and local business named *Type Hype* in Berlin and tagged it. She said it is a "favourite" place of hers, and wrote "*Type Hype*, you are my favourite" "to kind of interact with them what they are doing and they seemed to respond and this extends the experience as a customer as well". She later described that she specifically posted this picture because it "has to do with typography and flowers and coffee and they are really three things that represent me as a person". This refers to

the previous point made regarding the generation of branded content in order to shape one's self while connecting to brands and affiliating to their views.

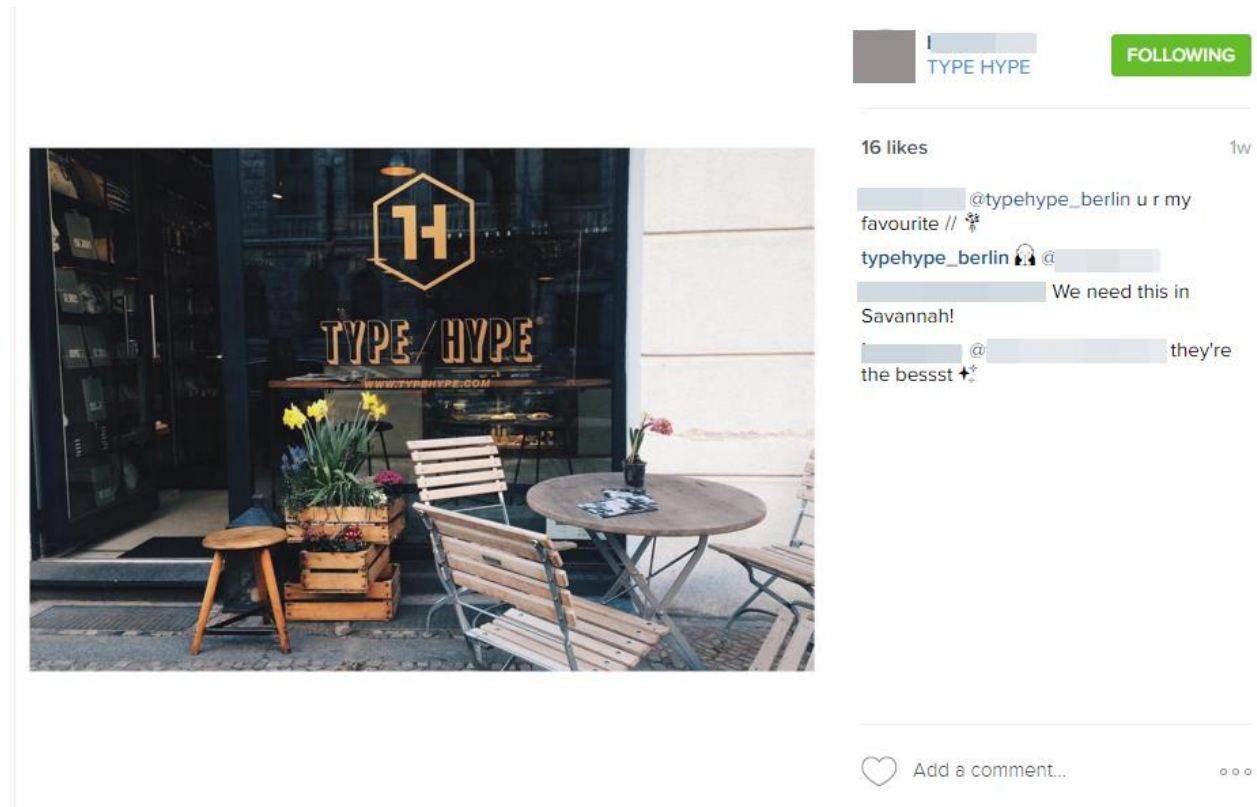


Figure 4.7

Communication and collaboration with brands is related to Anderson et al.'s interpretation of such activities as an illustration of consumer work, carried out to satisfy consumers' social desires and named "social labour" (2016). Social labour is defined as the tool by which users "add value to their identities and social relationships through producing and sharing cultural and affective content" (Anderson et al, 2016: 2). Social labour, as mentioned earlier, is different from other kinds of labour because it is principally voluntary in itself and not mainly determined by profitmaking interests (Anderson et al, 2016). Though, this research recognised that interviewees experience a social duty to keenly take part in social labour practices. Anderson et al.'s theorisation of social labour embraces a course of motivations, actions and reward (2016). The two motivations that go hand in hand with the continuous flow of social media through users' participation the authors define as "observational vigilance" and "conspicuous presence", which are terms related to the urge to observe other people' new social media content and the normative burden to uphold social activity and presence within the social

media domain (Anderson et al., 2016). Anderson et al.'s idea of observational vigilance is suggested so prosumers can keep up to date with social events and guarantee social presence (2016). Together these drivers function as continuous practices that call for regular consideration and maintenance and form the main activities that social labour involves in itself. What a social media 'worker' is rewarded after their "social labour", Anderson et al. (2016) define as "social value" and is described by the authors as an "exchange of social value, visible in acts of social reciprocity" (2016: 2).

Observational vigilance and conspicuous presence that are rewarded by social value are specifically illustrated in Petra's case. When discussing a picture of hers showing a personalised gift for St. Valentine's Day by Mercedes, Petra described her acknowledgement by the brand as a "unique feeling to see when such a prominent brand wrote to you personally". Later during the interview she explained that the picture she shared, coupled with hashtags and the tag she put of the official Instagram profile of Mercedes, was an expression of her gratitude towards the brand. She said: "(E)ven in the caption of the image I wrote, "Thank you, Mercedes" and this image is to thank them for the kind gesture they made for me".



Figure 4.8

Connecting prosumers' selves to certain brands constitutes in itself their desire to interact with brands, affiliate with the values those brands have or the lifestyle they represent, with the

purpose of eventually being noticed by those brands and appropriate the cultural value Anderson et al. are discussing in their very recent paper (2016). In such way prosumers feel thankful and recognised, forgetting about the efforts they invest and the “immaterial work” or “social labour” they do for those brands. In relation to such immaterial work, Cova & Dalli (2009) argue that consumers truly work and it does not matter if they are aware of being ‘workers’, they do work. The academics add to the satisfaction social media users feel when consuming or prosuming in a way that the value of that involvement is determined by their input (ibid.).

In addition, Cova & Dalli (2009) argue that consumers are empowered when they can work and even produce distinctive spaces within the marketplace where they can build their social and cultural identity. What follows from here is that consumers who are empowered to prosume are not certainly critical because they aim for supreme pleasure from the consumption practice, and the more brands empower them, the better their pleasure would be (Wright et al., 2006). As a result, prosumers are empowered as soon as they are given the resources to consume more and to a greater degree (Cova & Dalli, 2009). A lot of critics argue that the more affirmative and progressive the communications between prosumers is, the better the supposed value of the product as stated regarding gratification, encouraging word-of-mouth, and satisfaction (Moore et al., 2005; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007). This suggests that when consumers are integrated in a product or brand production at the social level by refining the degree of customer-to-customer communication, this improves the customer–company collaboration outcome (Cova & Dalli, 2009).

All in all, consumers work “hard” by collaborating with brands and each other so they could feel satisfied, gratified (on the personal level) and, sometimes, included and socially recognised (on the market level). Such initiatives are not typically measured financially but they are certainly concerned with the boost in the value of the assets on which customers’ work, which are most of the time products and services (Cova & Dalli, 2009). Hence consumers work hard not only to produce the value brands are looking for but also to create the identity they desire to have.

#### **4.2.2 “Because Instagram is more like... sharing material possessions”**

Many respondents in this study claimed that the main purpose for their generation of branded content on Instagram is to “show off” their new possessions (Benjamin, Zendaya, Greta, Petra) or to give update that they are at a certain fancy place for the first time (Tony, Greta,

Anton, Petra, Daya, Gigi). In addition, when asked why they shared particular branded content on Instagram but not on other social media such as Facebook or Twitter, interviewees replied that Instagram has been the place where people like to communicate and collaborate with brands by producing branded content. The Instagram platform, according to Benjamin, is the perfect place for him to “show off” his new material possessions such as his new *Yves Saint Laurent* sunglasses. He explains:

(I)’ve been waiting for these sunglasses cause I had them ordered online and ones they just came, I really liked them cause didn’t see them live before and this brand is actually really cool, (...) a picture of something which says “check this out, I got me this thing which was this brand” and (...) I would only share these pictures on Instagram, I think, cause I wouldn’t share it on Facebook cause that’s like kind of showing off, and in Facebook you have got many people who can check you and many people now have Facebook, but I don’t wanna create that image but in Instagram I really like when I enjoy having that kind of possession like material possessions I really like I will share on Instagram. Because Instagram is more like... sharing material possessions, I guess. This is how I see it.



Figure 4.9

In his statement Benjamin shows his enjoyment in dematerialising the fancy and so desired branded product. If we pay close attention to the current consumer environment, a growing number of consumer domains are embracing digitalisation and kinds of dematerialisation (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), for example, in the case of “digital virtual consumption” (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010). Regarding the music industry, Magaudda (2011) has examined dematerialisation of objects and material items in the music industry and their reduction to digital material. This reduction to digital material is an applicable and up-to-date issue, particularly when the consumption of cultural goods is studied more generally, where the more apparent consequences of digitalisation are becoming evident. Magaudda (2011) states that the dematerialisation of musical products do not indicate less materiality and do not hint at a less significant social role for material goods within consumption practices. This could be transferred to Benjamin’s case who consciously shared a photograph specifically of his high-end sunglasses with the brand which is visible as well. Maggauda’s research indicates that the practices of digitalisation have not resulted in the dematerialisation of consumption and to the loss of material items, however, novel kinds of ‘re-materialisation’ are produced, or specifically



the “re-articulation of the relationships among materiality, cultural meanings and people’s pragmatic activities” (2011: 31). Therefore, the consequences of dematerialisation of products are delicate and multifaceted. Watson stressed on the fact that “the role of materiality in consumer studies still remains to be explored and further developed” (2008, as cited in Maggauda, 2011: 17).

My nethnographic analysis highlights the fact that shared posts were mostly visual, including exactly such material possessions, as in the case of Benjamin. Also, the differentiation of Instagram as a platform for sharing “fancy” and expensive “material” items is interesting for this study and implies that people are inclined to shape their online image in relation to unique and “high class” possessions and fancy places. Zendaya explained that she shared her favourite “limited edition” Nike sneakers in order to “show off a little bit”. Tony also elaborated on this tendency by stating that the image-based nature of Instagram makes him want to take pictures of “really interesting and really fancy and beautiful” things and follow “some very famous users, who post some really beautiful pictures and I feel like “oh, I really wanna learn something from them, because that’s so great because I really like fancy pictures”.

Such desire to show off with something that is positive and fancy closely links to Kierkegaard & Dru’s notion that there is certainly an “immediate publicity everywhere” in that everything from one’s daily routine or contemplations come to be a part of a publicity-inspired society (1962: 35 as cited in Murthy, 2012). Interviewees put a great amount of effort in all of their activities so they could be easily recognised by the audiences that observe them. Huissen in his description of a term introduced by Therborn (2000: 42) “society of experience” or *Erlebnisgesellschaft*, explains that we live in a “society that privileges intense but superficial experiences oriented toward instant happening in the present and consumption of goods, cultural events, and mass-marketed lifestyles” (2000: 25). That is why there is no doubt in the fact that many of the respondents indicated that they enjoy shaping their identity through generating branded content specifically on Instagram. The visibility the platform allows for its users and the fact that interviewees can display their staged personality creates a desire for constantly appearing online. In such way, the intimacy between prosumers and their branded possessions, coupled with their huge desire to affiliate themselves with the lifestyle those possessions represent, can be easily noticed.

### **4.3 Identity Struggles**

During the course of the interviews I noticed that people were not satisfied with some of their experiences when generating branded content on Instagram. Three subthemes emerged related to the struggles one faces when prosuming online. The first concern is related to interviewees' notions that a lot of people "overshare" branded content on social media and therefore the shared content loses its value. Respondents also felt that they were expected by their followers to share quality content which created a paradox between enjoying the freedoms technology provides and loathing the pressure that makes them feel obliged to use technology (Anderson et al., 2016). The last concern relates to the privacy struggles some of the respondents have faced and the ambivalence in my interviewees' responses regarding the issue.

#### **4.3.1 Finding the balance between quality and quantity**

During the course of the interviews, respondents were asked to discuss whether they had any negative experiences related to their social media practices. Some of them thought that generating branded content on Instagram sometimes has its own disadvantages. For instance, several respondents indicated that content loses its value people start "oversharing" or it is "too much". Certainly, microblogging services such as Instagram rely heavily on consistent posting of content by instagrammers, and when such balance is absent, the value of social media reduces considerably (Murthy, 2012). So, interviewees proposed that there is a need to balance sharing valuable content that upholds a positive self-image and captures users' attention without the potential for oversharing (Brigitte, Petra, Daya, Greta).

Content generation has to be continuous, yet as Petra's profile shows, it should add value to the common feed. Petra argues that everything she shares needs to be "useful" to her followers, while being always "positive", "beautiful" and "sincere". This is supported by research on self-disclosure that proposed that we like another person more when we share, but then on the flipside, revelations that are perceived as socially incongruous lead to less liking (Collins & Miller, 1994). This notion could be applied to the social media setting in which there is indication of great "affirmation seeking" (Belk, 2013) and due to the notion that human attention is the commodity in short supply nowadays (Lanham, 2006) prosumers become more and more creative in their efforts to capture the attention of their publics.

However, this sometimes lead to users who produced too much branded content which turned out to be irritating to respondents. For example, Brigitte found oversharing as a disadvantage to her prosumption practices and discussed the active Instagram users who “are constantly being present in the online world”. She also expressed concern about people who create content specifically for the virtual world without enjoying the present moment and living their lives.

(T)o me there is a line between sharing and constantly sharing, constantly being present in the online world, rather than being in the offline world so I use it as a means of being in the offline world, taking photos of the offline world and then you might take a selected curated version of them online rather than taking photos specifically to be presented online. So I kind of make sure that in my personal life that it doesn't concern my existence is more about enjoying the moment and if that happens to them goes on social media rather than the other way around.

In the above quote Brigitte is anxious about people who do not enjoy real life and instead enjoy their lives behind the screen which is intolerable to her. Several other respondents indicated that they unfollowed people who overshare on Instagram as calling them “annoying” (Greta) and unfriended users who posted too much irrelevant information (Daya). This exclusion of annoying and oversharing Instagram users refers to the constant search for useful and aesthetical content which once delivered in surplus, becomes irritating and irrelevant. In addition this emphasises on the intended nature of my respondents’ identity management and self-surveillance (Owen & Imre, 2013) where they attach value to their Instagram individualities by presenting the right social image through quality production and quantity management. This links to Sheane’s (2012) conceptualisation of presentational labour into the social media landscape who explains that a social media user should make the most of emotional and aesthetic literacy in order to be successful in their relationship with brands and other social media users. Anderson et al.’s study explains that such literacy could be visible through “consumers’ calculation and manipulation of the quality, quantity and level of aestheticisation in the content produced” (2016: 10). This research and also Anderson and colleagues’ (2016) work consider such practices as instances of consumer labour through which such undertakings are seen as voluntary, nonetheless embrace a degree of productivity to generate extra value.

Another disadvantage that was discussed by respondents was the notion of feeling obliged to deliver regular and valuable content to their followers. Petra stated that she, as a blogger, “has followers who have expectations and, therefore, you have a responsibility” to produce valuable and likeable content on a regular basis. Jenna added to that by explaining that what she did not like about her experience as an Instagram blogger is the urgency and expectations from her followers online. Consequently, if she did not live up to her followers’ expectations, she could lose them easily. She exclaimed:

(I)if you haven’t posted in a week there would definitely be some people who will unfollow so you know when twenty people unfollow you at a time you feel uncomfortable, you are like “what have I done wrong?!”, you know?

However, in the end of her interview, Jenna “confessed” that due to her followers’ huge expectations of her to generate pretty and regular content she became tired of conforming to such social media norms.

(I) kinda stopped posting because I don’t feel like setting up things sometimes I do, and I also think the whole pressure behind it kind of annoyed me because you have to spend a lot of time talking to people on Instagram.

She specified that she felt also tired and “bored” from “spending hours sitting there liking and commenting pictures of others, replying to comments”. Such statements created a paradox between enjoying the freedoms social media provides and not liking the idea of feeling obliged of producing content online.

In sum, the most common disadvantages related to the generation of branded content, according to interviewees, were two. Firstly, the notion of people who share too much was considered to be irritating and resulted in bad consequences for the person who overshares, such as unfriending or deleting the person. Secondly, the fact that prosumers felt that their followers expected them to be continuous in their sharing practices but also to be careful in what they share made several of the respondents frustrated by the fact that they have a huge responsibility that comes along with using social media. So, the fact that interviewees felt obliged to find balance of sharing the right amount of quality content to their followers on a regular basis is what they found

as disadvantage and sometimes (in the case of Jenna) resulted in boredom and unwillingness to participate in social media involvements.

#### **4.3.2 Observed? Maybe not!**

In addition to feelings of obligation to produce regular and aesthetic content for some of the interviewees, respondents indicated that social media has some other disadvantages, too. For instance, when asked whether they felt observed or uncomfortable when prosuming on Instagram, some of the respondents answered that they felt uncomfortable with the comparatively new feature on several social media platforms - tagging one's location (Anton, Petra, Zendaya). They indicated that they don't feel at ease when knowing that everyone from their followers can be aware of their location at the moment. This connects negatively with the surveillance aspects of finding out what people are "up to". It also connects to Trottier & Lyon's (2012) notion of social surveillance where consumers unnoticeably observe, calculate and look for other people's actions on social media. Together with both self-examination, and observing over followers upload as this might affect other's users opinion of oneself (Trottier, 2012), interpersonal online surveillance makes users observable to one another which calls for a continuous maintenance of the digital self (Whitson & Haggerty, 2008). So far, even such maintenance of the self is perplexed by the development of social media – online visibility makes this maintenance required but not enough (Trottier, 2012). This connects to Illouz (2007) and Shepherd's (2005) work on the visibility social media offers, which turns the virtual representation of the user into intangible, displayed and consequently sold to the public story.

Nevertheless, such were not the responses that were common and expected. Most of the respondents indicated that they do not think about being observed or that they do not perceive using social media and particularly, producing content, as observation. The notion that users can choose to observe others and also that they allow to be visible adds an empowering aspect to this surveillance (Albrechtslund, 2008). What is interesting to be noted here is that my interviewees were very comfortable with some sides of this visibility. Benjamin stated that he tries "to always set location" and "it doesn't really matter where I check in, I guess". With a similar viewpoint, Vera supported Benjamin's ambivalence to feeling observed by explaining that having her profile publicly available "doesn't bother" her because she "knows that your content is out there in the

world and anyone can see and anyone can follow your content”. Note how in the next quote Vera felt totally at ease with the fact that her Instagram account is public.

Of course, but who is not (observed) nowadays, we are being observed every day every minute in our daily routine, we can't go out and not being observed through CCTV, someone can hack in our laptop and computer and observe us. It is just a personal and a consent form of posting things online, because you can be observed without your consent but social media is a place where you are “okay, I give my consent, I am posting those pictures online, I am building a certain image for myself and it is okay for people to view my content”. I don't think that when I post pictures, I don't feel like “oh I'm going to be looked and observed by millions of people”. I just post it because of myself. I don't necessarily think of the whole concept of being observed and being judged.

Even though, she claims that she posts content online “for herself”, her Instagram profile is public and everyone who has the intention to see her images can do so. Greta also claims that she is not feeling observed because of the fact that “if you think about it you can always take a screenshot, you can always download the picture and if you really don't want to show this picture even to your close network you wouldn't share it”. She feels responsible for her presence but is conscious that maintaining this presence is beyond her control. Likewise Brigitte stated that she feels comfortable generating content on Instagram by explaining:

(I) don't put myself out so often that anything can be used in way to my detriment in a way that's negative for me. You need to be aware when you are engaging with social media world but yeah I'm quite, as I said, with what I share, also spontaneous I share selfies but they are not super serious and I make them less serious with the caption I use and I kind of I'm aware of what I'm doing.

Brigitte's response was supported by Anton, who claimed that he has “never felt observed or I never felt uncomfortable posting anything and I never thought about it”. So, what follows from this is that some respondents seemed to be comfortable generating content and sharing it with their followers, but then at the same time are concerned with the increasing exposure of those followers. Interviewees expressed some ambivalence in their answers. In line with his

arguments concerning surveillance on Facebook, Trottier (2012) also argues that users become more and more comfortable to the visibility social media offers, nevertheless its consequences remain disturbing. Interviewees had an increasing understanding of social surveillance online, but this understanding was most of the time associated with doubts and tensions.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the ways, in which prosumers' practices of content generation online are contributing to the (co-)production of personal identity. This was done by exploring how certain brands are related to the daily production of my interviewees' identities and discussing the positive and negative experiences of their involvements in such practices. In order to answer the research questions, this study employed in-depth interviews and netnographic like observations of participants' Instagram branded visual content. With regard to my choice of social medium, Instagram was considered as a convenient social media platform, due to my own experience with the medium using it mainly to create visual aesthetic content and communicate with brands there.

The findings of this study show that participants in this research tend to use Instagram for positive self-presentation through generation of branded content. Irving Goffman's (1959) work on impression management was one of the underlying theories in this research in order to assist me present the different ways in which people adjusts their behaviour and conduct when around other people. Goffman's work on self-presentation was then transferred to the social media context in which my interviewees produce branded content and, therefore, (co-)produce their identity.

Sharing branded content was found to be important part in participants' daily routines due to the desire for self-presentation, checking up on each other, or updating others on their current status and location. Most people claimed that they used Instagram for entertainment, relaxation, obtaining their daily dose of art or just a medium, which brings them pleasure and comfort. As an outcome people feel the "urge" or "passion" to share positive and inspiring stories of one's self, and expected from other instagrammers to do the same. No matter how banal or boring one's content may seem, Murthy (2012) argue that in the case of social media, such posts function as an essential driver of self-affirmation. In such way, interviewees have shown that their identities are changing by demonstrating that they are following the social trends and are always up to date with them.

Participants felt the public nature of Instagram had created an aesthetic demand to post visually attractive images of the self, consuming a certain brand. Very often, in both online and offline settings, interviewees created positive impressions by covering-up certain disclosures



which may reveal too much of a side that they do not want to reveal, so they focused on sharing the content that is mainly positive and beautifully presented (Goffman, 1959). An interesting finding, therefore, was that most of my interviewees claimed to be the same as who they were offline, yet several other respondents stated that generating content online presented them in a completely different light than who they actually were in the real world. As a result, a tension between who one is online and offline occurred. Consequently, this research highlighted the idea that most people produce a self online that is always maintained and shaped in order to be reinforced through the production of precisely selected branded content, which almost in all of the interviewees responses developed to be a common pattern.

Interaction between my interviewees and brands was observed to be an essential part in identity production practices. My interviewees preferred to produce their identities through generating and sharing branded content to which values they want to identify with. This relates to Murthy's (2012) argument that the act of producing content online is created from singular contributions and, it is very much about self-production. Furthermore, a trend was noticed in interviewees' inclinations to produce content related to a variety of brands where each brand corresponded to different parts of their identity, which were in the case of this study either prominent brands such as Coca Cola, Mercedes, BMW and Starbucks, or small productions, local London cafes and 'hipster' products in Berlin. While there was an interesting finding in my study that some participants tended to generate branded content in relation to small and not commercialised brand, the larger part of my respondents were more interested in generating content related to huge and established brands, representing high quality, expensiveness and fancy way of living. In such way, Instagram was differentiated as a platform for sharing "fancy" and expensive "material" items. This has been an interesting outcome from this study because it implies that people like to shape their online image in relation to unique and "high class" possessions and fancy places. In addition, the intentionality behind my interviewees' creation of particular content of either prominent brands or small brands, and the intimacy that was evident between my interviewees and their branded content, I found linked to identity production practices on Instagram.

In order to associate with those brands, interviewees tended to "exchange symbolic knowledge and emotional value" with them (Cova & Dall'i, 2009). Such identity production practices were considered by scholars to be practices of "immaterial labour" (Cova & Dall'i,

2009) and “social labour” (Anderson et al., 2016) that are both forms of prosumption which are voluntary in itself and not mainly determined by profitmaking interests (Anderson et al., 2016). This research recognised that interviewees experience a social duty to keenly take part in social labour practices. A common tendency was that interviewees chose to “collaborate” with brands in their Instagram involvements to represent the lifestyle or values participants in this study have aspired to have. Identifying with a particular brand and its values on social media easily seems to develop the desired image of the person who created the content. Most of the participants in this study indicated that they “put a lot of effort” in thinking what would be the most representative for them content to post on social media. This, coupled with the notion that the generated content should be include particular branded content that is aesthetically presented, developed to be an often appearing trend in interviewees responses. In such way they were able to produce eye pleasing and valuable content for both them and the brands they are interacting with. Several theorists supported those claims by stating that as users on social media continue sharing content often, this activity and its meaning become an important part of their identities (Boon & Sinclair, 2009).

Such initiatives of labour are not typically measured financially but they are certainly concerned with the boost in the value of the assets on which consumers work (Cova & Dalli, 2009). This provoked many theorists in arguing that such practices are forms of exploitation (Fuchs, 2011, 2014; Hardt & Negri, 2004; Tapscott & Williams, 2008). What was found in this study, however, was due to the autonomy, recognition and access that brands offer their customers, interviewees felt empowered and were not critical about having to generate branded content. This was in relation to Wright et al.’s (2006) argument that the more brands empower their customers, the more customers would produce. Therefore, the better customers’ pleasure is, the more brands will exploit those. So, what this study showed is that the motives my interviewees had for ‘working’ for brands include the associations brands bring to their identities and the many opportunities for choice, autonomy, interaction and recognition. Having those opportunities in the grasp of my interviewees’ hands was enough to feel good about the idea of ‘working’ for brands.

Participants in this research indicated that during their practices of prosumption, they experienced certain struggles related to their social media involvements. Firstly, interviewees were irritated by users who tend to “overshare” branded content on social media and, therefore,

the shared content often loses its value. Such practices of “oversharing”, made my interviewees unfollow or even block those people. Secondly, interviewees also felt pressured to share quality content on a regular basis. By quality content is meant a content which is aesthetically presented and adding value to the Instagram feeds of others. This created a certain paradox between enjoying the freedoms technology provides and hating the pressure that makes my respondents feel obligated to use technology in specific way. The fact that prosumers felt that their followers expected them to be persistent in their sharing practices but also to be careful in what they share, made several of the respondents frustrated by the idea that they have responsibilities that come along with using social media.

The last concern was related to privacy issues. What was interesting was the ambivalence in my interviewees’ responses. Two interviewees stated that they do not feel at ease with the notion that everyone is able to see their pictures, or even worse, to be able to know where they are at this certain moment. This negatively connected with the surveillance aspects of checking what people are “up to”, corresponding with Trottier & Lyon’s (2012) notion of social surveillance where consumers invisibly observe, calculate and look for other people’ actions on social media. Surprisingly, most of the respondents indicated that they do not think about being observed or that they do not perceive producing content on social media as having negative outcomes. The notion that my interviewees were able to choose who to observe and, also, that they allow to be observable, added an empowering aspect to this surveillance (Albrechtslund, 2008).

## **5.1 Limitations**

The subjective nature of qualitative research is considered to be one limitation for this study. Scheurich (1994) explained that a researcher’s historical location, class, race, sexual characteristics, religious beliefs, and so forth can cooperate and affect, limit and restrict the creation of knowledge. I am fully aware of the fact that due to my background, personal characteristics, such as gender, and previous knowledge and experience, the chance to be biased in many of my arguments made in this text is high. Also, because of the fact that I, myself, am an instagrammer, and have my own experience of shaping my identity through sharing branded content and interacting with other prosumers and brands on this particular platform, might make me subjective in this research. However, as Mehra (2002) argues, the researcher has the most

significant role in the qualitative research process and she cannot detach herself from the issues she is studying, because it is in the relations between the researcher and the studied that the knowledge is produced. Nevertheless, I can assure that the analyses have been indicated as transparent as possible to guarantee precision and reliability of the choices made.

Another limitation of my research is considered to be the fact that full netnographic study was not possible to be conducted. Netnographic style observations were very useful in helping me obtain a profounder knowledge of broader presumption themes and social practices as I was able to observe both the micro-behaviours of my interviewees and the macro social themes and issues that shaped social tendencies such as the factors that affect the production of their identity on Instagram (Soukup, 2012). Nevertheless, the scope of my sample was very small (twelve individuals), which, coupled with the period of time given for the completion of this project, limited me in conducting a full netnographic study. However, I am sure that combining netnographic observations with in-depth interviews compensated in a way that a full netnographic study was not conducted.

Moreover, similarly to Kozinets (2002), what I find as limitations of my secondary research method - “netnography”, are its narrow concentration on virtual groups, the necessity for researcher interpretative ability, and the absence of informant identifiers existing in the virtual context. Kozinets (1998) also argued that notions of representativeness of sample may limit the probable usefulness and reduce the transferability of netnographic findings. This can result in struggles to generalise findings to groups external to the online community sample. For this reason, Kozinets (2002) recommends that marketing researchers who want to generalise the results of a netnographic research of a particular online community to other communities must for that reason apply cautious assessments of comparison and utilise manifold techniques for triangulation.

What is more, I am aware of the fact that my sample could be a limitation for this study. My target group was purposefully chosen to be young professional or students, between the age of 22 and 28, all possessing the knowledge to use a variety of social media tools. The reason for that purposeful choice was the notion that those people are considered to be the most active on social media (Ellison et al., 2011). Nevertheless, there has been quite a long time since the emergence of social media and internet technologies, which means that people beyond the age of

22 could also be interesting, more technologically advanced and useful units of analysis for this research. This could be one recommendation for further research.

Furthermore, the number of participants who were male and female differed, by having three male respondents and nine female respondents. Even though reflexivity was assured throughout my research, gender bias in my analysis related to consumer research could still be present because of the idea that women are considered as “naturally” more emotional, expressive” and being more inclined to consume than men (Bristor & Fischer, 1991: 118). Due to the notion that gender biases are a “subtle, unexamined part of our cultural and institutional world view, and research tradition, they are difficult to identify and problematic to correct” (Bristor & Fischer, 1991: 115). However, because of the fact that this study employed several different sampling techniques and needed to be conducted in a small period of time, the gender of the respondents was impossible to be predicted and determined by me. In my opinion, all of the respondents had colourful social media experiences which were valuable to my research regardless of gender or age.

## **5.2 Recommendations for further research**

The sample consisted of consumers that like to associate themselves and collaborate with different brands. The brands ranged from small local cafes, hipster products or big established and luxurious brands. This made my sample diversified and interesting for research. However, a recommendation for future research could be for scholars to concentrate on one type of brands that are underestimated in research. Those could be ‘hipster’ brands, or small brands which are not well-represented in the mediated area. In such way, scholars would have the opportunity to understand why prosumers like to associate and collaborate specifically with those undervalued brands and give food for thought for not only researchers but also for future participants in such research.

What could be also interesting for scholars is to compare how prosumers shape their identities on different social media platforms. The newly introduced messaging application Snapchat, professional networking platforms such as LinkedIn, or microblogging services such as Tumblr. The purposes of those social media platforms are very different at their core, however, the purpose of the people who use them is one – self-presentation. This could help researchers

discover unnoticed patterns in impression management and interaction with brands due to the unusual nature of the platforms in mind.

An exciting opportunity for further research could be for researchers to employ a quantitative approach in addition to the qualitative analysis of this study in order to test and quantitatively evaluate to what extent prosumers rely on social media to co-produce their identities in relation to brands. Combining both methods would strengthen the findings of the study and create more reliable and trustworthy outcomes.

Last but not least, a recommendation for marketers would be to consider academic research like this one, which studies consumers' perspective on interaction with brands on Instagram with the aim of (co-)producing their identity. Instagram is becoming more and more popular which means that more and more people are active on it. A lot of scholars argue that the more affirmative and progressive the communications between prosumers is regarding a certain product, the better the supposed value of the product as stated regarding gratification, encouraging word-of-mouth, and satisfaction (Moore et al., 2005; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007). This suggests that when consumers are integrated in a product or brand production at the social level by refining the degree of customer-to-customer communication, this improves the customer-company collaboration outcome (Cova & Dalli, 2009). Using Instagram as a platform for social media campaigns and communication with customers would be valuable for the future of the brands employing it in their marketing efforts. In addition, brands can benefit even more by looking at how consumers use the facilities they offer them in creative and innovative ways and employ them in their future marketing campaigns.

To end on a positive note, this study has been an exciting opportunity to look at phenomena that was partially explored in previous studies. Due to the rise of Instagram and, with it, the tendency of consumers to use it as a platform where they can express their identities, share opinions, communicate and interact with other people, brands and celebrities, my motivation for doing this research has been great. Nevertheless, literature on prosumption habits of young people on Instagram was very limited which pushed me to make creative decisions of incorporating literature from different spheres, tying everything up together in one consistent and interesting narrative.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview guide

RQ: How are practices of user generating content online contributing to the (co-)production of personal identity?

SQ1: What are the positive and negative experiences of consumers' involvement in prosumption practices?

SQ2: How are certain brands involved in the daily production of consumers' identity?

1. Could you introduce yourself please?

2. How do you understand social media?

3. How is this part of your everyday life?

- Which social media platforms do you prefer the most and why?

- How often do you go to social media?

- What do you do on social media?

- What do you do mainly on social media? Do you share content, post, like, comment, all of the above?

4. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of you sharing and posting online?

- Have you ever felt uncomfortable on social media - blocked people, unfriended people?

- Is your Instagram account public or private?

5. Is there a pattern in what you post on Instagram?

- What are your reasons behind it?

- How does this make you feel?

6. Let's look at your Instagram profile.

- What are the reasons behind using exactly Instagram as a social media platform to share those visuals instead, for example, Facebook?

- What does this picture say about you?

- Why did you post it?

- What happens when you receive more likes/shares than usual?

- How do you think the sharing of particularly this picture shapes or adds to your identity?

7. What is your experience with share and likes?

- I noticed there are a lot of brands with lots of likes/comments. How do you feel when you receive more likes/shares/comments on an image than usual?

-Why did you share exactly this branded content with exactly those hashtags/caption/mentions?

- You mentioned X brand... What are your relations to it?

- Tell me more about what this brand signifies to you?

8. What choices do you make when sharing content on Instagram?

- Do you have any personal restrictions for what to share online?

9. Are there any negative experiences that you want to share with me regarding your usage of social media?

- Do you feel observed in a way when you generate content online?

- How is this making you feel?

10. Tell me about a situation when you felt that you need to post something urgently, what was it, what happened and what were the outcomes of it?

11. To end on a positive note, can you tell me what were your best experiences or a favourite story that involves social media?

## Appendix 2

Open, axial and selective codes

As mentioned in the Methods' chapter above the open coded were 682. However, here I show ten open codes per an axial code in order to present how the process of coding led to the selective codes, also my main themes of analysis.

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
Feel good Feel positive Feel happy Feel appreciated Feel part of community Good time Make me laugh Feel confident Enjoy life Feel euphoria	<b>Positive feelings on social media</b>	<b>Self-representation on social media</b>
Communicate with people Communicate with brands Talk to stakeholders Share passions Share memories See what others do Show off	<b>Personal usage of Instagram</b>	

<p>Keep in touch</p> <p>Share 'fancy'</p> <p>Share photography</p>		
<p>Discovering the world</p> <p>Collecting stuff</p> <p>Big accomplishment</p> <p>Find inspiration</p> <p>Healthy lifestyle</p> <p>First time doing something cool/being somewhere fancy</p> <p>Showing friendship</p> <p>Put effort</p> <p>Nice way of thinking</p> <p>Dream come true</p>	<p>Positive representation of self</p>	
<p>Being authentic</p> <p>Construct good-looking and artsy profile</p> <p>Company which I work for</p> <p>Product that I use</p> <p>Check in to places</p> <p>Big fan</p> <p>Beautiful packaging</p> <p>Being hipster</p>	<p>Producing self through brands</p>	<p>Relationship with brands</p>

Communication between brands and bloggers Classy		
Very pleased with product Wholehearted support Recommend to others Says a lot about me Useful service Indispensable part of life Brand is everywhere First time having a brand Good quality Good technology	Connection to brands	
Taking a lot of time Addictive Fights and disputes Being observed Know location Not genuine Omnipresence of content Oversharing Annoying people Anonymity	Disadvantages of social media/Instagram	Identity struggles
Not concerned about privacy	External validation	

<p>Always tag a place/share location</p> <p>Do not care about likes</p> <p>Not a false version of me</p> <p>Do not exaggerate on social media</p> <p>Do not feel observed</p> <p>Do not have restrictions</p> <p>Was not offended online</p>		
<p>Not posting personal</p> <p>Not overshare</p> <p>Not reveal myself</p> <p>Not want to create confusion</p> <p>Not share sponsored</p> <p>Not share boring</p> <p>Not share religion/politics</p>	<p>Restrictions on Instagram</p>	