

## **Building Brands through Online Communities**

A Rhetorical Analysis of the Case of Benefit Cosmetics

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**ABSTRACT**

*Digital branding is fading traditional marketing approaches and influencing consumer-brand relationships. Consumers' attention is being caught differently, and therefore they have started to rely on interaction and engagement. As little research was conducted regarding digital branding in relation to identification in the always-changing beauty industry, this research focusses on how the digital beauty brand Benefit Cosmetics operates under digital branding and in what ways identification helps to capture the consumers' attention in order to persuade them. Benefit has built a brand community that represents not only their brand identity and value but also the identity of the loyal supporters of the brand. This study puts theories together regarding digital branding, identification, brand identity and brand community, and cultural branding. It aims to answer how Benefit influences their consumer-brand relationship by promoting identification through their digital media channels. The study involved a qualitative research method, namely rhetorical analysis, which was guided by the identification theory to provide more insight into Benefit Cosmetics' communication messages and the context of the brand in the beauty industry. The analysis included 150 Instagram posts (visual and textual elements) from Benefit's Instagram accounts and 25 textual and visual aspects of Benefit Cosmetics' website were added to support triangulation. The main findings included five patterns that were repeatedly exposed throughout the dataset, and therefore, it was anticipated they represented the brand's identity and the community's main values. These patterns were focused around femininity, maintaining and creating friendships, levels of comfort and wealth, laughter being best cosmetic, and creating goodwill. The conclusion highlighted that Benefit Cosmetics influences their consumer-brand relationship through their strong brand-community that is built on trust and loyalty. The community represents explicit values where consumers can identify with on different levels. Benefit approaches the audience through different identification strategies and appeals, but mainly via mechanical identification through similarity while appealing to pathos. Benefit tries to break grounds with normative gender roles and tries to divide focus between external and inner beauty. However, Benefit could become more iconic when implementing more cultural branding tactics in line with the paradigm shift that is happening in the beauty industry. Subsequently, the brand could reach a broader audience, which indirectly would dissociate fewer individuals.*

**KEYWORDS:** *consumer-brand relationship, digital branding, identification, online brand community, cultural branding*

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, consumers seem to have different relationships with brands because of digital technologies. Due to digital technologies, consumers' attention is caught differently, as well as how consumers are being persuaded by brands. Hence, a consumer's decision process is influenced and changed by digitalization. Furthermore, the market has become more competitive due to new technologies such as the internet. The interactive nature of the internet has created possibilities for (new) brands to engage and build relationships (Chan-Olmsted, 2002).

The web made it possible for institutions and citizens to engage in dialogues with each other (Davis, 2013). Brands now connect, interact, and build relationships with consumers. Consumers even started to depend on digital interactions and continuous engagement with brands on social media platforms (Edelman, 2010). Therefore, brands are integrated into people's everyday life through digital branding. People become more deeply connected to brands as they feel like the brand is part of the representation of who they are as individuals (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Thus, brands are also relevant for consumers to support the expression of one's identity (Trump, 2010). Due to the shift that technology triggers, companies do not just deliver messages anymore, they integrate their communications throughout their company and identity, as technologies give consumers more control (Mulhern, 2009). In essence, traditional marketing and branding strategies are complemented by digital strategies, or even suppressed, and focus on building a strong consumer-brand relationship.

The relationship between brands and consumers is among others built upon brand identity, which includes "how a company seeks to identify itself [...] based on means of communicating and trying to convey its identity and values to consumers and stakeholders" (Nandan, 2005, p. 265). Additionally, consumers can be more concerned about the personality of a brand rather than the product (Nandan, 2005). Hence, it is interesting to study how brands frame their identities and thus design their communication efforts to attract consumers and keep their loyalty through a process of rhetorical identification (Burke, 1969). Also, the identification between the consumer and the brand is essential as consumers prefer products, and thus brands, that carry the same principles as they do (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005). However, identification also includes dissociation. When dissociation occurs, a consumer detaches from expressed values and principles rather than carrying the same values (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

When it comes to implementing digital strategies, one of the goals of a brand is to

ensure the consumer-brand relationship consists of a loyal online audience (Nandan, 2005). The formation of this loyal audience, also referred to as a digital crowd, can be classified as brand communities and crowdcultures. Crowdcultures influence the traditional way of branding and are the primary drivers of cultural branding (Holt, 2016). Cultural branding is related to the formation of brand communities (Holt, 2016). Within brand communities, consumers share similar identities, ideologies, and values of a brand (Holt, 2016; Fujita, Harrigan, & Soutar, 2018). Additionally, identification and communities are part of the aspects observed by the theory of identification (Burke, 1969). Identification is relevant for this study as brands are markers of identity and can help to build deeper connections, which can result in becoming a part of a consumer its identity (Reed & Forehand, 2019).

One of the brands that operate under digital branding is Benefit Cosmetics. Benefit is part of one of the fastest-growing industries, one that is often familiar with the newest digital branding techniques; the beauty industry (Hsu & Ngamnat, 2018). This study zooms in on Benefit rather than other beauty brands because they are expected to represent a shift in beauty ideals as their history includes the remarkable story about providing an exotic dancer with nipple stain, when other stores were not able or not willing to help (Benefit, n.d.), which made them a progressive brand. Benefit is especially interesting because they have built their visible community called ‘Benebabes’, with whom they focus on engagement (Vizard, 2014). Benefit’s focus seems not solely fixed on beauty on the outside as they also have their own charity, and they occasionally highlight their mission statement that laughter is the best cosmetic, which represents a feeling on the inside rather than one’s appearance. It seems that they carry out a clear brand identity on their website, in their campaigns, and on their social media platforms. Also, the communication efforts of Benefit to the audience exemplifies the power it can provide when including cultural branding in the context of beauty brands.

### *1.1. Research question*

By taking the example of Benefit’s online presence and community and putting together theories of digital branding, identification, brand identity and communities, and cultural branding, this research aims at answering the following research question: “How does Benefit influence their consumer-brand relationship by promoting identification through their digital media channels?”

Moreover, in order to answer the research question, the following sub-questions have been developed:

SQ1: How does Benefit design its messages to frame their brand community?

SQ2: How might dissociation with Benefit occur?

SQ3: How does Benefit use cultural branding towards common identities?

The study is guided by the theory of identification, a different approach to rhetoric when compared with classical rhetoric analysis, proposed by Burke (1969). The study implements a qualitative research approach, whereas the taxonomies of identification, rhetorical situations, and rhetoric appeals will guide the analysis, to provide more insight into Benefit and the context of the brand in the beauty industry.

### *1.2. Scientific relevance and social relevance*

Scientifically, studying this consumer-brand relationship via identification contributes to combining the fields of marketing, rhetoric, and communication. Furthermore, it adds to the literature of digital branding in the beauty industry. This research is academically relevant because adding to the literature provides insight into how businesses support their relationships with consumers and how this is represented in a digitalized world.

Some studies highlight similar brand concepts concerning online brand communities in different sectors, such as the fashion industry and tourism (Brogi et al., 2013; Hede & Kellett, 2012). Moreover, the study of Papista and Dimitriadis (2012) highlights that little research about consumer-brand relationships based on identification was conducted. Papista and Dimitriadis (2012) also include similar concepts in their study about cosmetic brands and identification and confirm that brand communities from cosmetic brands can influence, e.g., trust and loyalty, but do not relate it to the rhetoric of identification. Kamboj and Rahman's (2017) meta-analysis included a suggestion for more detailed research on brand community-related determinants such as identification. Furthermore, only a few studies included analyses on beauty companies and their online branding strategies to connect with consumers and increase brand loyalty (Shen & Bissell, 2013). Therefore, it is worthy of addressing how beauty brands design their online branding strategies to improve on consumer-brand relationship because previously named studies show overlap between concepts of digital branding, identification, brand community, and cultural branding.

Moreover, for researchers to include a broader picture and take different concepts related to each other into consideration, studies could be more applicable or provide tools to paint a more comprehensive view of communication studies. Also, it could offer tools to researchers to interpret and understand the concepts better that play an important role in branding and communication. This enables the researchers to incorporate the concepts in different studies

to study different point of views into more detail, in the beauty industry, due to the consideration of the influence of identification processes.

This study's social relevance can be linked to the paradigm shift in the beauty industry throughout the years. In the past, advertising showed picture-perfect models to women and succeeded in selling them the thought you can buy perfection based on the claims made by beauty brands. However, it can be considered remarkable that the current shift in the beauty industry focuses more on natural beauty, beauty for everyone, or beauty even without make-up (Moore, 2019). The shift reflects the awareness of consumers regarding advertising and branding techniques. Brands currently act as symbols conveying social information (Trump, 2010), and Aggarwal (2004) highlights that consumers' relationships with brands can be based on shared principles. Thus, social factors drive the relationship. Therefore, the social relevance of this paper is to explore how beauty brands adapt their brand management with the help of identification in relation to the current shift and focus on breaking with the traditional conventions of beauty.

Taking all into account, this research is relevant regarding digital branding in the beauty industry. Consumer-brand relationships, digital branding, and the rhetoric of branding through identification processes have been studied before; however, little research on the rhetoric of branding through the identification of the audience with brands in the beauty industry was conducted. Therefore, it is interesting to study how audiences are persuaded in the beauty industry through the rhetoric of branding and identification, mainly considering the paradigm shift in the beauty market. Because the paradigm shift aims at empowering women and move away from ideas of standardized beauty norms (Jones, 2010). Therefore, new cultural implications can be considered, and new insights can be provided, for example, for brand managers and content managers in the beauty industry.

#### *1.4. Thesis outline*

Further theory and previous research will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. This includes theories on digital branding and the identification theory; that consists of dissociation, taxonomies of identification, rhetorical situation, and rhetorical appeals. Also, the theory is complemented by previous research on brand communities and cultural branding towards crowdcultures. Then, chapter three will address the qualitative research approach and will go more into depth regarding the process of gathering data up to an explanation of the implementation of the taxonomies of identification, rhetorical situation, and rhetorical appeals. Chapter four provides an overview of each main pattern that was found throughout



the data. The main patterns were designed around Benefit being a feminine brand that values friendships, indicates wealth, focusses on inner beauty as well, and creating a humanitarian image of the brand. After the description of each pattern, the overview is supported and discussed based on theory. The last chapter will answer the sub-questions based on the main concepts of brand community, dissociation, and cultural branding. Furthermore, the last chapter will answer the main research question on how Benefit influences its consumer-brand relationship through identification and highlight some theoretical and managerial implications, encountered limitations and suggestions for further research.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This chapter provides an outline of the relevant concepts for this study. Digital branding functions as an umbrella concept for this research and is discussed first. Moreover, identification, brand communities, and cultural branding are relevant concepts in order to examine the digital brand Benefit. Therefore, after digital branding, the theory of identification is explained, followed by an overview of the elements that rhetorical identification consists of, which are the taxonomies of identification, the rhetorical situation, and rhetorical appeals. Thirdly, the concept of brand communities in relation to the identification is discussed. Lastly, cultural branding, and thus crowdcultures, and their potential to convey a shift in society and communities are explained. This section addresses several studies, including an evaluation of the relevant addressed theories, and it shows the interconnectedness between concepts.

### *2.1. Digital branding*

Many studies have been conducted throughout the years regarding digital branding, as it is a broad concept. Digital branding is a well-discussed topic, as it disturbs traditional business models, strategies, and identity values due to fading traditional boundaries (Vernuccio & Vescovi, 2016; Edelman, 2010). While the traditional point of view regarding branding highlights that the information follows a top-down approach, in which a brand generates and controls content to reach the consumer, digital branding builds content and meanings based on a rather collective setting (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). It means that the type of information and how the information is spread is not only determined by, e.g., Benefit itself, but also by consumers. Due to the user-generated content, the information is less controlled (Vernuccio & Vescovi, 2016). As a consequence of digitalization, and thus less-controlled information, brands nowadays face challenges to keep track of their reputation, searches, advertising, content creation, and online and offline communication (Vernuccio & Vescovi, 2016). Consumers are continually influencing the brand and its meaning and vice-versa.

As the number of people using the internet and spending time on social media is on a continuous rise (Stephen, 2016), it is essential that digital brands try to manage the experience that consumers are having with the brand to maintain a positive perception of the brand (Dayal, Landesberg & Zeisser, 2000). Research was conducted regarding digital branding, advertising, the effect of electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM), and online reviews (You, Vadakkepatt & Joshi 2015; Moore, 2015; Chen & Lurie, 2013; He & Bond, 2013). E-WOM is the ongoing online communication between different (interpersonal) sources, which can

influence consumer loyalty (Moore, 2015; Parka & Lee, 2009). The ongoing communication can be a representation of the consumer-brand relationship. Nevertheless, Stephen (2016) highlights in his research the gap between how consumers experience the online environment and how brands can approach this besides, e.g., e-WOM. Therefore, he suggested to conduct another research in order to study the relationship between the content creator and receiver from another point of view while taking contextual factors into account. Therefore, the current study includes the concept of brand community as a representation of the consumer-brand relationship. Furthermore, building consumer-brand relationships through digital branding has been studied for different types of consumers and industries (Confos & Davis, 2016; Hudson, Huang, Roth & Madden, 2016). This study builds upon previously named studies as it shows how digital branding can influence the consumer-brand relationships for beauty brands and, thus, cosmetics.

When reflecting on the previous named studies, it is important to bear in mind that digital branding includes building content and meanings based on a collective setting while facing multiple challenges. However, this does not mean that the information is necessarily less controlled as, for example, Benefit posts and frame its messages to transfer specific (identity) values. Thus, how Benefit builds meaning with digital branding, considering potential affection by the mutual influence, was examined.

## *2.2. Identification and dissociation*

As it appears, brands and consumers are interconnected in the process of identity formation and imply identification with one and another (Von Wallpach, Hemetsberger & Espersen, 2017). Thus, an aspect within the consumer-brand relationship is identification. Identification is a socially constructed act, when an individual admits into a relation to something else, it becomes part of the message (Davis, 2008). Freud (1900) illustrates that “identification is not simple imitation but assimilation on the basis of a similar etiological pretension; it expresses a resemblance and is derived from a common element which remains in the unconscious” (p. 150). In other words, Freud (1900) explains identification as something where individuals do not identify with each other by imitating the one or the other because they do the exact same thing. Individuals rather unconsciously express overlap and similarities in what they do. Freud was an influence on Burke’s (1969) rhetorical view on identification (Wright, 1994; Davis, 2008). Accordingly, Burke (1969) describes identification as a result of persuasion. Burke’s theory also shows an approach to visualize whether the outcomes of the communicated messages influence the receiver (Wright, 1994). Therefore, the current study addresses the

rhetorical theory of identification of Burke (1969). Burke's theory is implemented in the theory and is used as guidance concerning rhetorical analysis's performance.

Rhetoric is described as a persuasive act, and for something to be persuasive, one needs to identify with the act that is being promoted (Davis, 2008). Burke's theory of identification (1969) states that "you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his" (p. 55). Bush and Boller (1991) define rhetorical analysis as seeking to "explicate the manner in which a communicator's rhetorical purpose (i.e. persuasive intent) is manifest in various semantic and structural elements of a persuasive communication" (p. 31).

The identification theory is used because it is argued that identification is the first expression when one feels connected to something (Davis, 2008). Identification, and thus the connection, is important for Benefit because this can result in a commitment by consumers, and therefore, contribute to the shape of the relationship between the brand and its audience. Also, identification can be used to analyze how, in this case, Benefit includes norms and values set by society and how the brand contributes to these ideas (Davis, 2008). Furthermore, a rhetorical analysis is suited to identify how the means of communication try to influence the audience, and thus the consumer (Bush & Boller, 1991).

However, the rhetoric of identification automatically includes dissociation as well. Dissociation encompasses that not everyone identifies with the same messages, values, or associations. It is the initiator where one can be drawn away from their old associations to reach new associations (Burke, 1969). The moments where a brand dissociates an audience are also essential to include when analyzing the rhetoric of identification (Woodward, 2003). Because multiple studies have shown that consumers' identities are influenced by defining what they do not identify with (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Trump, 2010). For example, it is likely that some consumers do not choose to be part of a specific brand because it is not in line with their values (Escalas & Bettman 2005). In this case, possible consumers do not feel similar to or do not want to be associated with Benefit. This study focuses on how Benefit attracts consumers and builds a relationship with a group of consumers and, at the same time excludes other types of consumers. Putting this in a broader perspective, Benefit can be popular due to the current shift happening in society, where many people dissociate themselves with traditional beauty standards and values. On the other hand, regarding Benefit's communication efforts and created community, their identification framework could distance people due to dissociation with the expressed values.

The digital environment is part of the consumer's extended self, and therefore

identification between a consumer and brand can occur. The digital brand of Benefit will be accessed using the rhetoric of identification. If Benefit used identification strategies within its digital branding, this could result in the creation of common ground to persuade the consumer and to increase their commitment and loyalty to the brand. Thus, identification is beneficial for a brand as it influences the level of loyalty (Martínez & del Bosque, 2013; Rubio, Villaseñor & Oubiña, 2015). The increase in loyalty could add on to the benefits for brands as consumers are more willing to buy different products from the brand (cross-buying), they contribute to an increase in word-of-mouth, and they are less receptive to negative publicity of the brand (Rubio et al., 2015). Overall, the theory of identification is used in the context of beauty industries and linked to concepts such as brand community and cultural branding as these are interconnected with identification.

### *2.2.1. Taxonomies of identification*

Identification can happen visibly, as the tip of the iceberg, and more implicitly, as the covered part of the iceberg underwater. As identification is a broad topic, this study includes the taxonomies of identification based on Burke (1969) as part of the framework to study how identification occurs. The taxonomies of identification are categories that support the analysis of how identification appears on the digital media platforms of Benefit. The taxonomies are divided into three categories of identification: mechanical, analogical, and ideological.

Firstly, mechanical identification is a result of a link created, based on an individual's unconscious perspective, between an idea and a subject (Burke, 1969). People anticipate through a biased perspective and act on things without considering it twice because they are familiar with them in a certain way. They view the world through a framework that automatically connects particular meanings and 'cues' to each other (Woodward, 2003). In the case of Benefit, when Benefit, e.g., talks about a collaboration with a beauty influencer, people probably used to automatically imply that this is with a woman because that is what people have been familiar with. However, nowadays, it is not strange if a man is a beauty influencer.

Then, analogical identification includes when the meaning of an order is transferred to another order (Burke, 1969). Analogical identification is used to get a hold on something by using symbolic utterances, to gain new insights in an unusual happening in an environment of what is normal (Woodward, 2003). In relation to Benefit this includes them using food to promote their products as an analogy. They can recontextualize beauty products as products that should not only make one feel good on the outside but also from within.

Lastly, ideological identification is “a system of political or social ideas, framed and propounded for an ulterior purpose” (Burke, 1969, p. 88). Any topic or matter at hand is required to search for overlap in ideas based on values and beliefs (Woodward, 2003 referring to Burke, 1969). This can, for example, encompass that Benefit their digital media platforms contribute to the representation of a bigger system, an ideology. The brand can attract consumers by communicating an ideological system that matches the shift in the beauty industry. When the consumers are part of the community of Benefit, they will view things and operate through the ideological framework that is offered. Ideological frameworks are especially suited to create an understanding of phenomena that are open for discussion as their connotation is not set (Burke, 1969). For these different types of identification, Benefit can use different strategies in order to lure consumers and influence the consumer-brand relationship. The identification strategies will be discussed in the methodology.

### *2.2.2. Rhetorical situation and rhetorical appeals*

It is essential to access the rhetorical situation to understand in what context meanings are created and to support the analysis of identification. The rhetorical situation can be defined as the elements behind the text that affect the persuasive act (Bitzer, 1968). This study considers the audience and the context as part of the rhetorical situation, which can influence the persuasive act.

Both branding and identification are focused on consumers. Therefore, understanding the audience is central to this study. Identification is about the connection between the audience and the source regarding the outcome as well as the process (Woodward, 2003). The initiation of identification is when one’s self, the audience, is aligned with the expressions and ideas of others (Woodward, 2003); in this case, others implies the brand of Benefit. A brand will be able to address identification if it is able to call on a feel or tone that one is already familiar with to subsequently create a loyal community around itself, which can, in its turn, lead to crowdcultures (Holt, 2016). A brand represents its communications, which, in the end, transmits an experience to a consumer (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010) and can influence the consumer-brand relationship. Furthermore, rhetoric initiates the persuasion of the audience through different forms of communication (Leach, 2000). For the consumers, who are the audience of the messages, the communication efforts can be the building blocks or an indication to which they can relate to and thus, identify with.

Also, it is important to put branding and identification, as works of rhetoric, into context. To include an overview of the context is necessary because it can influence the

communications and especially it can show the reason behind the communications and how Benefit designs its online messages (Bitzer, 1968). Context is important because it can provide background information and add value and meaning to the analysis (Leach, 2000). Moreover, it can support the analysis as also arguments are being analyzed and interpreted with the context kept in mind (Leach, 2000). Additionally, the paradigm shift in the beauty industry could be a contextual influence on how Benefit influences their consumer-brand relationships because of the idea of what it entails to be beautiful changes for different countries as well as for brands and consumers (Jones, 2010).

Furthermore, rhetorical analysis helps to identify how communication efforts appeal to consumers, such as addressing emotion or rational. Thus, rhetoric appeals are also included in the analysis, as these support the evaluation of the purpose of the message (Leach, 2000). The core of persuasion includes building on arguments. Benefit can make arguments in a way that the audience already complies with them. By doing this, Benefit creates common ground and subsequently initiates the first step towards identification between the brand and the audience in order to influence them.

Moreover, arguments help to create a better understanding of the appeals that are used in association with the identification theories. Therefore, the concepts of ethos, pathos, and logos will be observed (Leach, 2000). Ethos establishes the credibility of the source. It includes that Benefit could reason less rational and rather reason based on, e.g., the fact of them being a famous brand and how this positions them. A more rational approach would consider such personal aspects as irrelevant and would exclude ethos as it can also be considered an appeal that lacks the ability to refer to a complex situated context of something (Leff, 2009). Then pathos appeals to emotion. Pathos is also a non-argumentative form of persuasion (Braet, 1992). However, ethos and pathos are still considered as argumentative techniques, thus ways to persuade (Braet, 1992) and therefore included in this study. Lastly, logos addresses whether the argument makes sense and is valid. Logos exemplifies an argument that initiates logic and reasoning, showing 'real' argumentation (Gottweis, 2006). Based on the convincing nature of the argument, these elements can contribute to the process of identification and in what way identification is guided based on the convincing nature of the argument (Leach, 2000).

### *2.3. Brand communities*

As the chapter on digital branding already stated, brands can influence consumers, but consumers can also influence brands. One example of this influence is a brand community. A brand community can be defined as a "self-selected group of consumers with a shared

emotional attachment to a brand, shared values, social identity where consumers engage jointly to accomplish a common goal” (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015, p. 387). The consumers can build relationships within the brand community, with different parties, for example, with other consumers, the brand itself, or the products (Mcalexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). However, identification in this study focuses on collective identification, based on the relationship between the consumers and the brand. The collective setting is vital because, among others, the social identity theory highlights that generally, a person needs to feel part of a social group to form its own identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, a brand community is an expression of identification and an opportunity for Benefit to influence the consumer-brand relationship through identification.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of why Benefit would build brand communities, a few studies are included. Brand communities are co-created, by consumers and brands (Hajli et al., 2017; Mcalexander et al., 2002). Due to the enabled engagement, it can quickly provide insight in what consumers wish for and what they need (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Online brand communities create a place where consumers and brands can interact and build towards stronger connections (Hajli et al., 2017), and thus relationships.

In general, consumers seek for connections, and within online brand communities, consumers can share their thoughts, meanings, and experiences of the brand they admire (Muniz & O’guinn, 2001). Also, consumers’ social needs can be satisfied through brand communities (Zhou, Zhang, Su & Zhou, 2012). Brand communities can arise from the feeling of ‘we’, which includes the connection between other consumers and being part of the brand (Muniz & O’guinn, 2001; Brogi et al., 2013). If Benefit writes in the first person, using e.g. ‘we’ in their captions, this could result in a feeling of community and identification. Moreover, little rituals or traditions are initiated within brand communities (Muniz & O’guinn, 2001; Brogi et al., 2013). For example, highlighting the history of the company initiates the reproduction of the culture (Muniz & O’guinn, 2001), such as, when Benefit echoes its company’s history and how it all began in several posts or on multiple online platforms.

Also, attention is paid to the moral responsibility to integrate and retain the members of the community (Muniz & O’guinn, 2001; Brogi et al., 2013). Therefore, Benefit needs to maintain the relationship with its consumers by expressing their thoughts and undertaken actions on how it tries to contribute to the principal concern of ethics. Furthermore, to maintain a strong brand community Benefit should consistently carry out its mission, vision, and representation of the community in different posts and on different channels. Additionally, Benefit can elevate itself in posts and thus remember its community why they should remain



part of the community. These examples of how brand communities are created and how they are maintained are relevant to understand how brand communities generate and influence brand relationships.

Research has shown that a community is important for a brand in order to build more reliable consumer-brand relationships (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015; Hajli et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2012; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012). Relationships are a two-way street; therefore, it can be anticipated that an online brand community can influence the brand. Furthermore, prior research shows that brand communities are created to strengthen competitive positions (Mcalexander et al., 2002). Brand communities can increase brand trust and subsequently, brand loyalty (Laroche, Habibi, Richard & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Mcalexander et al., 2002; Zhou et al., 2012; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010; Brogi et al., 2013; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012). However, in contrary to the strong consumer-brand relationship, also dissociation as a result of communities occur. Dissociation contributes to excluding a range of consumers, as consumers show, by not joining the community, what they do not want to be part of, and to what values they do not want to be related to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

Overall, for Benefit, a brand community is an example of how identification can be achieved and how the formation of the sense of community is created by rhetoric (Jackson, 2013). This research analyses how the acts on identification are used and this will be related to the brand community that is carried out by Benefit because none of the previously named studies included the construct of the rhetoric of identification and then related it to brand communities in a specific industry. Moreover, the social identity theory and descriptions regarding consumers wanting to share their thoughts and values do not cover enough ground for the current study as the objective of the study is to analyze how Benefit uses identification for collective purposes, rather than examining the needs of the individual. However, departing from the perspective of the consumers of Benefit, it includes that consumers want to be associated with the brand, and they want to identify with Benefit's image and the messages it carries out. Thus, it is interesting to include how the brand community is framed to connect this concept to the theory of identification.

#### *2.4. Cultural branding towards crowdcultures*

Social media includes platforms where cultural branding happens. Cultural branding is defined as a strategy where one adapts their branding into a specific ideology and breaks with standards (Holt, 2016). Moreover, it enables brands to become iconic (Holt, 2016). Smith and

Speed (2011) state that “the strength of a brand derives from the use to which consumers can put the brand, and its cultural values, in attempting to design and communicate their identity” (p. 1307). Meaning to what extent brands contribute to the identity formation of consumers due to maintaining and communicating certain values. This can initiate identification, which in turn reflects the brand its success. Cultural branding within the beauty industry can be especially successful because many consumers feel they cannot ‘meet’ the beauty standards set by society, which leaves many consumers dissatisfied and opens doors to disruption by beauty brands (Smith & Speed, 2011). Reflecting on cultural branding adds value to the analysis as it can put the beauty paradigm in a broader context and show relevant links to crowdcultures and communities. Moreover, cultural branding can represent the beauty paradigm as an influence on the consumer-brand relationship.

Additionally, cultural branding constitutes the basis for crowdcultures, which are related to brand communities (Holt, 2016). They are related because, in both, consumers used to be remoted and are now bound by social media. Cultural branding towards crowdcultures adds on to the value of communities. According to Holt (2016), brands should include crowdcultures in their communications because this includes opportunities for a brand to stand out through disruption – as they show a different point of view than the standardized perspective imposed by society and because they have immediate influences on a cultural level due to cultural branding. Thus, crowdcultures are interesting for Benefit to include because when a brand considers the current culture (via cultural branding) in its communications through crowdcultures, it is likely to be successful (Febriana & Yunus, 2018). However, in general, little research was conducted regarding the use of crowdcultures on digital media platforms, especially in a specific industry which is dealing with regular shifts and changes. The beauty industry in this research is especially interesting as the majority of beauty brands act conform to the cultural expressions of beauty; the standardized norms of what it entails to be beautiful (Smith & Speed, 2011).

In short, the rhetoric of branding is interconnected with the analysis of whether Benefit includes crowdcultures by using cultural branding to convey the shift in current society regarding the beauty industry and to disrupt in order to build towards common identities. Subsequently, because cultural branding enables a brand to create new (disruptive) ideologies, based on the changes in society that are meaningful for consumers, brand loyalty can be improved (Holt, 2016). Consumers can become supporters of Benefit due to the communicated ideology, which is led by persuasion based on identification.

## 2.5. *Summary*

To summarize, the included theories on digital branding and identification are at the core of this study. The identification taxonomies, rhetorical situation, and rhetorical appeals are the decomposition of identification. The theories on digital branding and identification combined give direction to the main concepts of brand community, dissociation, and cultural branding. These concepts are the representation of how identification can occur in a digitalized environment and how Benefit Cosmetics can benefit from these occurrences and persuade, and thus influence, its consumers.

Although many studies have been conducted regarding digital branding and the process and co-construction of identification supported by communities and cultural branding, few studies included the analyses on different rhetoric acts of identification. Moreover, in the previously named studies, there is no focus on beauty brands in an online environment in specific. Therefore, this study analyses the rhetoric acts of identification on different digital platforms to draw a conclusion on the combination of these acts with the focus on the beauty industry.

### **3. Method**

This chapter explains the qualitative approach of the rhetorical analysis guided by the identification theory, as it is designed in order to answer the sub-questions and main research question. The chapter includes a justification of the research design, a detailed description and an explanation of the gathering of the data collection, followed by the operationalization of the concepts and how they are made observable, and the detailed steps for processing the data and data analysis. Lastly, a reflection on the method is provided to address the credibility and reflexivity, and thus, reliability and validity of the study.

#### *3.1. Research design*

To answer the research question of how Benefit influences their consumer-brand relationship by promoting identification through their digital media channels, a qualitative research method was chosen. Qualitative research can be defined as the “examination and interpretation of observations, for the purpose of discovering underlying meanings and patterns” (Babbie, 2017 p. 391). A qualitative approach was suited because it was relevant to study how meanings were created and, rather than focusing on numbers, it went beyond the obvious to systematically describe the meaning of the collected data (Schreier, 2013). Additionally, a qualitative approach was also appropriate because it enabled the researcher to examine and give sense to relationships presented by visual and textual elements (Brennen, 2017). This was important to the current study as it focused on the visual and textual elements as acts of persuasion. Furthermore, as this study aimed to examine how Benefit influences their consumer-brand relationship, the method relied on rhetorical analysis because rhetoric is a form of analysis that fits analyzing the act of persuasive communication (Leach, 2000). Thus, a rhetorical analysis was specifically suited as the question of why something is influential can be answered, and meaning can be described based on ‘rhetorical discourses’ (Leach, 2000).

Furthermore, to answer the sub-questions and after the dataset was observed, a deductive approach was used based on the identification theory. This approach was appropriate because it can “start from general statements and predict specific observations” (Babbie, 2017, p. 29). Thus, the deductive process allowed the researcher to use the identification theory as a framework for the coding process and selecting the relevant components out of the dataset based on the concepts mentioned in the operationalization. This subsequently supported the more specific observations of the sub-questions regarding brand community, dissociation, and cultural branding, as they are based on identification. Meaning, the analysis was guided by the

process of coding, taking rhetorical concepts as a guide. Including that the concepts of brand community, dissociation, and cultural branding and perhaps crowdcultures were going to be discussed in relation to the analysis as outcomes of how Benefit used identification.

Additionally, implicit meanings and values in the images can be found through visual details (Machin & Mayr, 2012) and are discussed in the subsection of data analysis. In short, this study combined the rhetoric and visual analysis tools to develop a coding process to support the observations relating to the sub-questions to answer the research question.

### *3.2. Data collection*

This subchapter highlights a detailed description and explanation of the gathered data. First, a detailed description of the sampling units that formed the dataset is provided. Then, the sampling strategy includes a justification of how the sampling units were selected and which criteria the sampling units complied with. Lastly, a description of the data collection provides insights into how the researcher practically gathered the data. Overall, while the sampling method was carried out, the logic regarding the research question was kept in mind.

#### *3.2.1. Sampling units*

This study relied on media content as data because it contributes to the creation of online brand communities. Additionally, digital media platforms have a facilitating role for brands and consumers to interact (Hajli et al., 2017). Many brands use digital platforms to create and support their brand community (Muniz & O’guinn, 2001.) The sampling units of this research included a dataset that consisted of data from two different digital media channels, including posts from Benefit’s Instagram accounts, and content from the official Benefit Website. Mckenna, Myers, and Newman (2017) suggest when one uses social media data, a researcher should include more than one source and/or type for data collection considering triangulation. The data from Instagram, accompanied by the complementary data from the website, ensured enough information was available to reach saturation. The (textual) content on the website of Benefit was added as additional data because the website explicitly states their core values and what they want to represent as a brand. Every unit provided a different angle, gave information, and complemented the other units.

The posts from Instagram and content from the website must be posted or created by Benefit itself since the research question was about how Benefit influences their relationship with the audience. To include different channels was necessary for an interconnected analysis

and, thus, study. These platforms were analyzed because when the object (brand) correctly uses information and language, identification can occur (Jackson, 2013).

The data items for Instagram included posts. A post entails an image (visual) and a caption (textual). A data item from the website included text boxes and some visuals. All the different forms of created content by Benefit show how the brand frames identification on their digital media channels and thus influences the consumer-brand relationship.

### *3.2.2. Sampling strategy*

The dataset was collected through a purposeful sampling strategy to assure that the selected sampling units from all available data were relevant for the study. Purposeful sampling is a strategy that allows the researcher to include data based on its own criteria to decide what is pertinent to answer the research question (Babbie, 2017). The criteria for Instagram included: 1) Posts should be posted on Benefit's Instagram accounts; 2) Posts needed to be posted by Benefit itself (tagged photos are therefore excluded); 3) Posts need to be created by Benefit or members of Benefit's community (allowed to be from different nationalities); 4) Be posted in the last year; 5) Posts should represent diverse objects; and 6) Posts should represent at least one of the main concepts (brand community, dissociation or cultural branding).

To support the criteria, solely posts from Benefit's Instagram accounts (1), which were posted by Benefit (2), and created by Benefit or members of its community (3) were important because this research aimed at studying how the brand Benefit frames and designs its communication efforts to influence the consumer-brand relationship. Moreover, the dataset was collected over a time frame of a year (4), including data published during the weeks of conducting the current study and the archives, between 01/03/2019-01/03/2020. This time frame was chosen because there is much data available, and, to make it more relevant, new posts were selected rather than images of a few years ago. Including communication efforts of the past year is likely to be more relevant and representative for the current brand identity and consumer-brand relationship. Additionally, not just the first 150 were picked because during a year, multiple events or occurrences need to be taken into consideration, such as seasonal changes and national holidays, which could influence the content of posts of brands. Furthermore, posts needed to include diverse objects to ensure diversity (6). This was important as it could occur that Benefit, for example, released a new product during the last year and therefore posted relatively more posts related to the new product. Moreover, diverse objects could also refer to different settings and saliences. The seventh criterium was

important because the main concepts should be represented in the dataset to ensure relevancy and accuracy concerning the research questions.

Furthermore, the criteria for the additional data that were extracted from Benefit's website included: 1) Should consist of text (> one word); 2) Be nothing product-related, and 3) Should highlight (indirect/ direct) values. These criteria were set to ensure the sampling units from Benefit's website could add value and contribute to the completeness of the dataset.

In total, 150 Instagram posts were collected and analyzed. This sample size ensured enough data was included to perform an in-depth analysis. Additionally, the complementary data included 25 screenshots of textual and some visual content on Benefit's website relating to its history, mission and vision, and culture. By maintaining the Instagram posts as a base and adding relevant and complementary information from a different type of data source, this sample size allowed the dataset to reach saturation.

### *3.2.3. Data gathering*

The initial dataset was gathered in the week of 24/02/2020 - 01/03/2020, taking approximately one week. First, the Instagram posts (visual and text) were collected via the application of Instagram itself and manually selected, saved, and screenshotted with the set criteria taken into account. Then, on the website of <https://www.benefitcosmetics.com/us/en>, screenshots were taken of relevant text boxes, thus including the topics representing their culture, including its vision, mission, history, and employee and company values. Examples of the dataset can be found in figures 4.1 until 4.25.

The main data from Instagram were gathered from several Benefit profiles as they have similar feeds and representations, but they do not post exactly the same pictures. It mostly included posts from Benefit United States, but also United-Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands. This study assumed that the brand shares and carries out the same core values on their digital media platforms throughout the world, therefore the posts were not selected based on origins but whether it could add value to the observation and contribute to answering the research questions. The additional data were gathered from the Benefit Cosmetics official website.

### *3.3. Operationalization*

The concepts that are at the core of this study are consumer-brand relationships and identification. As stated in the theoretical framework, brand communities are a representation of consumer-brand relationships, and dissociation is inextricably linked with identification.

The other way around, brand communities, dissociation, and cultural branding (towards crowdcultures) can also influence the consumer-brand relationship. The bridge between the interconnectedness of the concepts that are highlighted in the current study was identification and the rhetorical aspects it includes.

This study included different types of data, visuals and text, but the coding included a similar approach. The rhetorical analysis was guided by a codebook that is based on visual analysis of Machin and Mayr (2012) and the operationalization of identification. The codebook is included to ensure consistency and can be found in Table 3.1. The analysis was performed based on the three stages of coding. The three steps of coding included: processing data, coding data, and final coding, which are discussed in detail later.

Table 3.1. Codebook of rhetorical analysis

<b>Phase 1</b>		<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Phase 3</b>
<i>Processing data</i>		<i>Coding Data</i>	<i>Final coding – interpretation</i>
<i>Visual</i>	<i>Textual</i>	<i>Visual &amp; Textual</i>	<i>Visual &amp; Textual</i>
<i>Objects</i>		<i>Rhetorical situation</i>	<i>Brand Community</i>
		Audience	
<i>Settings</i>		Context	<i>Dissociation</i>
		<i>Types of Identification</i>	
<i>Saliency</i>		Analogical	<i>Cultural Branding/</i>
Cultural		Mechanical	<i>Crowdcultures</i>
symbols		Ideological	
Size		<i>Identification Strategies</i>	
Color		Similarity	
Tone		Commonality	
Focus		Hidden Division	
Foreground		<i>Rhetorical Appeal</i>	
Overlapping		Ethos	
		Pathos	
		Logos	



The first concept that was observed in the coding process was the *rhetorical situation*. To perform a rhetorical analysis, the analysis needed to be contextualized (Leach, 2000). The rhetorical situation was used to back up the analysis of identification. Therefore, an analysis of the rhetoric situation was performed, which included the audience and the context. The audience is a constituent, which includes individuals who can be influenced by the communication of Benefit. The audience is at the core of what/who visibly shows changes in, e.g., decisions. The second point of the analysis is the context, which can be seen through the concept of constraints given by Bitzer (1968) as “made up of persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation” (p. 8). The set of constraints can be built upon, for example, beliefs, facts, images, and motives.

The second concept that was observed in the coding process was identification itself. The identification taxonomies were used as a coding guide here. An overview of the taxonomies of identification can be found in Table 3.2. Therefore, the *type of identification* was observed. As explained earlier, these can be analogical, mechanical, and ideological. Analogical identification indicates that the context of a subject can be reconsidered based on the context of another subject (Burke, 1969). Here Benefit could recontextualize their product based on the paradigm shift, meaning instead of using beauty products to look good for others, one should use any products to feel good about themselves. Mechanical identification results from the connection, based on an individual’s unconscious perspective, between an idea and, in this case, an image (Burke, 1969). This could have included Benefit using influencers in their posts whom people want to look like because of their beauty or status. Lastly, ideological identification highlights that ideas or signs grouped can be a token of one whole ideology, which is subsequently used to initiate other ideas and signs (Burke, 1969). This is possible because the whole does not have a fixed position. For example, the audience should know the mission and vision of Benefit to connect the funny names of the products (signs) to Benefit’s ideology.

Then the *strategies of identification* were analyzed through the following concepts: similarity, commonality, and hidden division (Burke, 1969). An overview of the identification strategies is shown in Table 3.2. First, similarity appeals to creating common ground and resemblances between people. Additionally, more abstract would be Benefit asking people to put themselves in other people’s shoes or envision other people’s situations for similarities. Second, commonality occurs when individuals share a similar perspective. Here Benefit can initiate identification by bringing people together who usually do not identify with each other but now do since they both do not like the traditional beauty standards. Lastly, hidden division

includes making individuals feel like part of a group or community. Benefit could create identification by, for example, using explicit expressions such as ‘we’, but also by using implicit meanings in their images such as love as the connotation of a symbolic heart.

The last measurement tool was *rhetorical appeal*. As part of the new rhetorical approach, identification is promoted through arguments, which can be analyzed and validated based on the appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos. An overview of the rhetorical appeals is shown in Table 3.2. If Benefit would use ethos, they could already suggestively influence the public as being Benefit, despite that the source of a message does not affect the validation of an argument. If Benefit used pathos in their arguments, they would try to persuade the audience by, for example, showing happy people or someone achieving dreams. Lastly, Benefit could appeal to logic: logos. They could do this by framing their communication in a way that makes sense for their audience.

Table 3.2. Identification taxonomies, identification strategies, and rhetorical appeals

<b>Identification</b>		
Types	Analogical	Recontextualize a subject based on context of another subject
	Mechanical	Unconscious connection between an idea and utterance
	Ideological	Ideas/ signs grouped as a token of one whole ideology
Strategies	Similarity	Common ground and resemblances
	Commonality	Similar perspective (more abstract)
	Hidden Division	Hidden signs make individuals feel part of a group
Appeals	Ethos	Based on the source
	Pathos	Addressing emotions
	Logos	A rational approach

In short, the study included a rhetorical analysis based on new rhetoric. It was complemented by tools provided by traditional rhetoric, such as the appeals based on ethos, pathos, and logos, because Burke's approach on new rhetoric, from a modernized angle, is suited for social media language (Jackson, 2013). Thus, this allowed the researcher to draw an overview of how Benefit uses its online platforms regarding the rhetoric of branding and identification.

### *3.4. Data analysis*

A rhetorical analysis was conducted to analyze the collected data. As previously stated, a rhetorical analysis was suited to answer the question of why something is persuasive and meaning can be described based on the 'rhetorical discourses' (Leach, 2000). As previously shown in Table 3.1. the process of the analysis (both visual and textual) consisted of three 'coding' stages. The process included a merged approach of concept-driven and data-driven, performed by a researcher who has enjoyed a degree in communication sciences. The first step in the process consisted of processing data, where the dataset was examined and coded for their denotation at the same time (data-driven). The second step included coding data, where the data from the first phase were categorized according to the rhetorical situation, taxonomies of identification, identification strategies, and rhetorical appeals (concept-driven). This allowed the researcher to define and select the dominant patterns that arose from the data. Through the final phase of coding, the researcher reflected on the repetitiveness of codes, the main message that was carried out, and the relationship between codes and the main concepts (brand communities, dissociation, and cultural branding) that are highlighted in the sub-question. In short, the dataset was interpreted. Each stage of the process builds further upon the former stage in order to discuss the sub-questions and subsequently answer the main research question. In Table 3.1, a codebook is shown, which provides an overview of the process of analysis.

#### *3.4.1. Processing data*

During the first phase of coding, the dataset was observed and examined discreetly, after reading and going through the dataset a few times. The different sources and types of data were processed separately. First, the Instagram posts were examined based on visual and textual elements, and second the data attained from the website. For the entire dataset (Instagram and the website), the tools to perform the analysis were managed the same way. Visual elements were processed with visual analysis tools based on Machin and Mayr (2012),

and textual elements were assigned a descriptive code. A few examples of the first phase of coding can be found in Appendix A. During this step of the coding process, the visuals were first examined for their denotation and complemented by their connotation while looking closely at objects, settings, and salience. When one looked for denotation and connotation in the images, the researcher ought to describe what was being depicted and subsequently connect this to what ideas and values are perhaps communicated by the components (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For visual analysis, it was important that during the description of denotation and connotation, one paid attention to the objects, settings, and salience to discover what kind of ideas and values the objects represented and what stroke the eye (Machin & Mayr, 2012). With objects, one means to pay attention to objects that can communicate specific (symbolic) values. Regarding settings, these can entail abstract and symbolic settings. Salience includes “certain features in compositions are made to stand out, to draw our attention to foreground certain meanings. Such a feature will have the central symbolic value in the composition” (Machin & Mary, 2012, p.54). Features of salience are cultural symbols, size, color, tone, focus, foreground, and overlapping.

Thus, the first phase was rather descriptive. Due to the careful examination and including all components that ought to be relevant in order to answer the research question, saturation was reached.

#### *3.4.2. Coding data*

During the second phase of coding, attention was paid to connecting the description of data to the theoretical framework of identification. During this stage, the different sources of the data were again processed separately, starting with the platform of Instagram, and ending with data from the website. Here the dataset was approached in a deductive way through identification. How the coding frame of the dataset has been built is in detail explained in the operationalization. To summarize, first, the rhetorical situation was addressed to highlight the types of identification. The data relevant to the rhetorical situation included the aspects addressing the audience and context. Second, data were selected to categorize whether identification occurred rather analogical, mechanical, or ideological. Thirdly, data were selected to observe the identification strategies, categorizing the data into similarity, commonality, or hidden division. The last part of coding the data entailed the rhetorical appeal. Here the data were selected based on whether Benefit included arguments, which subsequently could be categorized as ethos, pathos, or logos.

### *3.4.3. Final coding - interpretation*

The final stage of coding related to the interpretation of the data in relation to the theoretical framework of identification. In this phase, the dataset was categorized based on the identification theory. The data were interpreted and discussed concerning the main concepts of brand community, dissociation, and cultural branding. The interpretation was meant to make connections between the main concepts and the theory of identification and how Benefit designed this. The concepts were interpreted and connected to create an answer to the main research question.

### *3.5. Credibility and reflexivity*

To ensure the quality of the research, credibility is assessed. The researcher had to provide ‘careful scholarship, commitment to a rigorous argument, attending to the links between claims and evidence [...]’ (Seale, 2004, p. 409-410, in Silverman, 2011, p. 359). The researcher provided credibility as the performed results are supported and not solely stated, which convinced the reader through reason. Additionally, the researcher provided proof in terms of transparency by adding examples of the dataset and coding. Also, the methodological procedures and theoretical approaches are described in detail, which also contributed to the transparency of the research. Furthermore, also the feasibility of this study was ensured due to the detailed existing literature on digital branding, the rhetoric of identification, and brand communities, and the researcher its ability to process the literature due to its appropriate academic background in media, communications, and businesses. Additionally, the sub-questions were designed, and the amount of data was set in advance in order to answer the research question and to conduct this study in the timeframe available.

Furthermore, concerning reflexivity, it is relevant to establish the quality of the research. Therefore, validity and reliability need to be considered. For qualitative research to be ‘valid’ it entails “the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenome to which it refers’ (Hammersley, 1990, in Silverman, 2011, p. 367) and whether the researcher its interpretation of the dataset is persuasive and plausible, reasonable, and convincing (Riessman in Silverman, 2011, p.351). The first step that the researcher took to ensure validity was to make sure not ‘anything goes’ and that it did not make unsupported observations. Another tool that was used to support validity was triangulation. The researcher included complementary data that provided additional information and enabled the researcher to reflect on the perspectives presented at different platforms. An additional tool that was used to validate this qualitative study was the active search for and addressing deviant cases, meaning

cases that do not comply with the expectations that were formulated beforehand based on the theory. Furthermore, the entire dataset was treated systematically and put into ATLAS.ti, to ensure that all the data were treated comprehensively, and that the analysis included all the relevant data.

Establishing reliability refers to “the degree to which the findings of a study are independent of accidental circumstances of their production” (Kirk & Miller, in Silverman, 2011, p. 360). To meet the criteria of reliability, the reflection on the role of the researcher was important. As mentioned before, the researcher ensured transparency throughout the research process by providing clear and detailed information regarding the method via descriptions of the research design, data collection, operationalization, and data analysis. Furthermore, the role of the researcher could have influenced the analysis due to, for example, its level of education and cultural background, which could have led to different ways of interpreting the data. Due to the potential subjectivizes, all the steps were explicitly stated in the method and analysis. The researcher provided a clear description of how the theoretical concepts play a role in this study, and the researchers’ theoretical perspective was included as well. In short, mainly through transparency, the researcher provided a sound description of how the specific research was conducted, and the interpretations were formed. The researcher that the reader has enough information to determine the extent to which similar results could be expected in similar studies

Lastly, one could argue that there is an overall lack of generalizability; however, this study aimed to go more in-depth in relation to the brand of Benefit, and thus the main goal was to ensure that the theory was suited for the empirical data and therefore, valid.

### *3.6. Summary*

In brief, the research included a qualitative research design, and the dataset was analyzed through rhetorical analysis. The dataset was gathered through purposeful sampling from Benefit’s Instagram and website, coded during three successive phases, and was a combination of a data-driven and concept-driven approach. For this study, the rhetorical analysis was used as a central point to understand how the audience is persuaded. The operationalization of the theory of identification and rhetorical elements, such as rhetorical situations and rhetorical appeals, was necessary to sustain the analysis. The taxonomies of identification, identification strategies, and rhetorical appeals were included to explore how the previously discussed audience, with the context kept in mind, identified with the brand. During the final phase, the coding was connected to the main concepts of brand community, dissociation, and cultural

branding, to answer the research questions in relation to the identification. Generally, it is anticipated that the type of identification, used identification strategy, and rhetorical appeals that the brand uses helped to answer the research questions on how Benefit designs its messages to persuade its audience and influence the consumer-brand relationship.

#### **4. Results and discussion**

The analysis of 150 Instagram posts, supported with data from Benefit's website, resulted in five main themes, which represented how Benefit seeks to identify itself and how it is trying to convey its identity and values to consumers and stakeholders. It describes how Benefit influences their consumer-brand relationship through identification. The code trees can be found in the appendices. They provide an overview of the approach, with examples, of the rhetorical situation (Appendix B), taxonomies of identification (Appendix C), identification strategies (Appendix D), rhetorical appeals (Appendix E), and the five patterns and main concepts (Appendix F).

The results suggested that Benefit influenced their consumer-brand relationship via the five main themes of femininity, maintaining and creating friendships, level of comfort and wealth, laughter, and goodwill. With their rather feminine approach, they framed their brand identity and community, dissociated people, but at the same time, they created room for cultural branding. Also, the focus on friendship highlighted essential values of their identity and community. Furthermore, due to showing high levels of comfort and wealth, they targeted a specific audience for their community and dissociated a broad range of consumers. Their vision is "Laughter is the best cosmetic" and is thoroughly represented throughout their online presence on the digital media platforms. Lastly, they created goodwill by using their platforms to raise awareness for charities, trying to empower other girls and (young) women.

Additionally, the main concepts of the sub-questions of this research were considered to discover and describe relevant patterns on Benefit's online channels. The interpretations of the patterns were linked to theoretical concepts as they relate, but that does not include that the concepts already defined them. Therefore, the definitions of the patterns are interconnected with theory. These patterns are also explained in relation to identification. Thus, the taxonomies of identification, the identification strategies, the rhetorical appeals, and dissociations that were observed within the patterns are also being discussed to formulate a comprehensive answer to the research question in the conclusion.

To sustain the analysis and to answer the research questions, the rhetorical situation became mostly important as the background, rather than becoming a distinctive part of each pattern. The rhetorical situation included the elements behind the text that affect the persuasive act (Bitzer, 1968). The audience and the context determined the rhetorical situation of this study. The rhetorical situation was used as a framework to perform the analyses to identify the types of identification, strategies, rhetorical appeals, dissociations, and design the patterns. Based on the analyzed rhetorical situations of the dataset, the main characteristic of Benefit's



audience encompassed an interest in beauty. The brand mainly targeted younger girls and women. More specifically, the messages were mostly designed for an audience that was wealthy and characterized by feminine features, had a light skin tone, was slim, and under 30 years old. The context often represented the brand's image and identity, its products, or events. While the rhetorical situation kept in mind, the patterns are explained in detail in the next sections, including a discussion that connects the results and the theory altogether.

#### 4.1. *Dressed in femininity*

Throughout the dataset, an evident brand community was represented. One of the patterns that appeared was closely related to femininity. Femininity is a fluid concept, which is assigned meaning to by society (Taras, Kirkman & Steel, 2010). Characteristics that are nowadays still assigned to the gender role of femininity are relationship-oriented, modesty, lovingly, less work-oriented, but can still hold a high position in the business world; however, this is culturally dependent (Hofstede, 2001; Taras et al., 2010). Furthermore, traits as caring about beauty and make-up are also perceived by society as something feminine (Cahill, 2003). Subthemes that were found within this pattern were female influencers, feminine male influencers, pink, female attributes, and gender-specific language.

The dataset showed rather many female influencers, as shown in figure 4.1. “Social media influencers are referred to as people who have built a sizeable social network of people following them who have built a sizeable social network of people” (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017, p. 798).



Figure 4.1. Female beauty influencers

It was expected that a beauty brand would portray female influencers as women are automatically connected to beauty brands and make-up products. The female influencers were mainly younger than 25-30 years old, rather slender built, had a light skin tone, and a

provocative look. Furthermore, their femininity was sometimes extra emphasized by a society determined feminine appearances such as long lashes, perfectly balanced lips, and smooth skin. These are generally categorized as positive female characteristics as they can reflect one's overall health and studies have shown that men prefer a woman whose eyes look bigger, lips look full, and skin looks smoothly (Mulhern, Fieldman, Hussey, L  v  que & Pineau, 2003; Goodman, Morris & Sutherland, 2008).

In line with traditional marketing strategies, a brand tends to over sexualize those who are professionals and into beauty as their profession because sex 'sells' (Gill, 2008). Based on the provocative looks, Benefit seemed to be conscious of this marketing approach. However, using social media influencers, a brand abandons traditional marketing approaches (De Veirman et al., 2017), thus disturbing traditional boundaries (Vernuccio & Vescovi, 2016; Edelman, 2010).

Additionally, Schouten, Janssen, and Verspagnet (2020) state that incorporating influencers in a brand its marketing strategy adds more value than celebrities to promote a beauty product or a beauty brand. Including social media influencers that are famous on Instagram are, therefore, a substitute for celebrities and are proved to be more effective because consumers have higher levels of trust towards influencers and can better identify with influencers than celebrities (Schouten et al., 2020). Being relatable and building trust is valuable for the relationship between the brand and the consumer (Schouten, et al., 2020).

Although influencers are not gender-specific, concerning beauty, gender considerations are in place because of the portrayed person, the lifestyle, and the kind of intimacy it represents (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Nevertheless, not just the women that were pictured on Benefit's digital media platform were super feminine but also the male influencers. Men were portrayed wearing the same make-up and often with the same sultry look as females did. As shown in figure 4.2, they have the feminine assigned characteristics of big eyes, full lips, and radiant-looking skin.

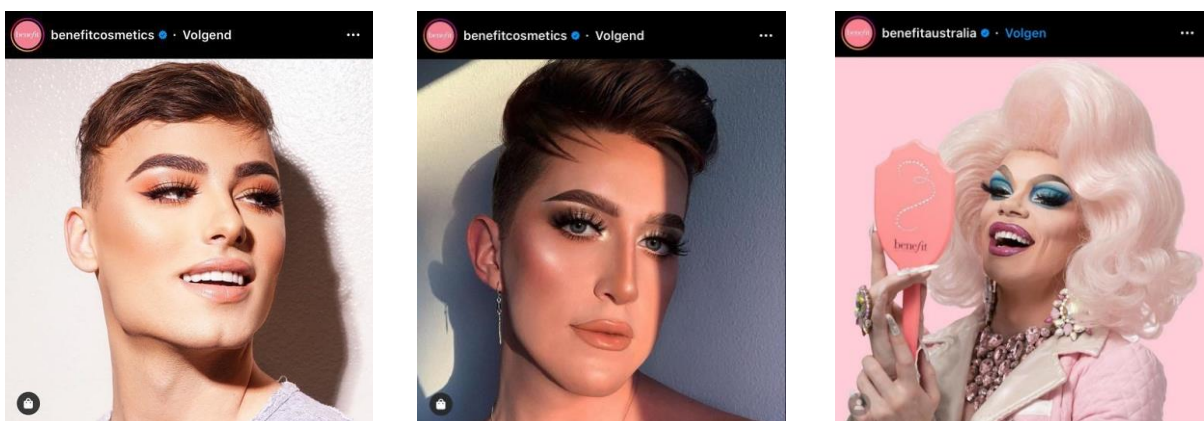


Figure 4.2. Male beauty influencers

Traditionally, the beauty industry is dominated by females, and normative men are not expected to be into beauty. Therefore, it is a stereotype that women have beauty as a hobby, and men are expected to be not in beauty (Black & Sharma, 2001; Cheong & Kaur, 2015). However, there are many male beauty influencers, and the consumer base of men is also on the rise (Hsu & Chanthapratheep, 2018). Gender roles are blurring, as it is a fluid concept, and it is becoming more accepted that men play an active and visible role in the beauty industry (Gill, Henwood & McLean, 2005). Moreover, it can depend on the target audience, whether it is expected and perceived as normal, to include male influencers, because millennials and generation Z are less tied to gender attributed characteristics (Jayson, 2014). But despite these considerations, stereotyping in relation to a gender still happens.

Furthermore, Benefit did not focus on designing their posts for normative ‘masculine’ men. For example, they did not implement a more masculine color such as brown or focus on representing a product more masculine by emphasizing the masculinity of the product through highlighting health benefits rather than visible benefits for one’s appearance (Jankowski, 2018). For example, L’Oréal did this by highlighting the functional aspect of a product (Cheong & Kaur, 2015). Also, Benefit is not the first or the only one who attempted to be a little more inclusive. For example, the beauty brand Panacea even supplies genderless beauty products (Driver, 2019). But surely, some beauty brands did not seem to implement gender-inclusivity without first being criticized for not being inclusive, such as Victoria Secret (Hauser, 2019).

Moreover, instead of implementing different colors, pink was the most used color, as shown in figure 4.3. As pink was the primary color throughout their Instagram channel and website, it indicates that they target a rather feminine audience.

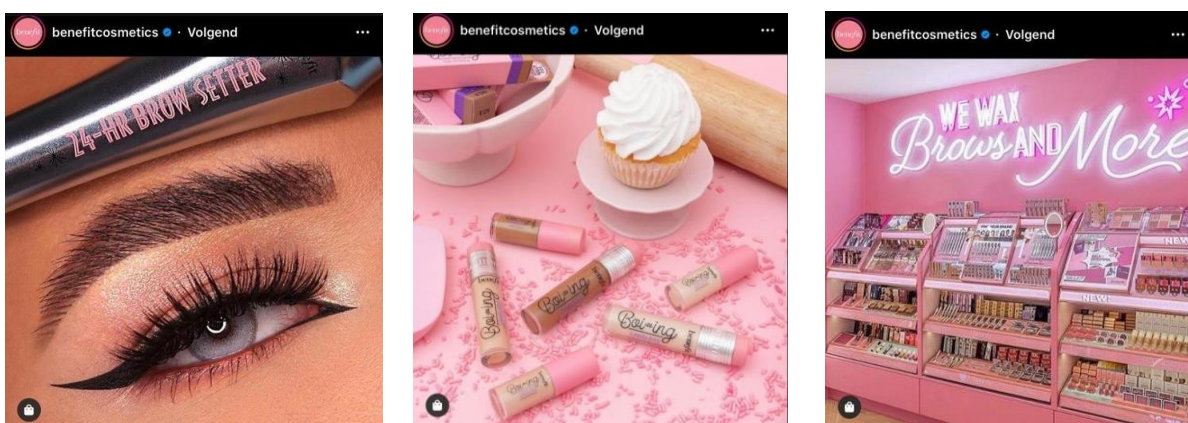


Figure 4.3. Representation pink

Pink is generally more preferred by women as it is considered to be a feminine color, and therefore it is usually also connected to lady products (Dash, 2018). As pictured in figure 4.3, the pink colors were among others represented in make-up products such as eyeshadow on influencers, but also in the packaging of the products, in events and store set-ups on the outside of a shop and the inside. By using mainly pink on their digital media platforms, they transfer a particular message which contains emotions and, in this case, feminine, desired characteristic, thus addressing rather females than males (Petersson McIntyre, 2019).

Also, in contrast to the inclusivity portrayed with the male influencers, Benefit showed parts of bodies, such as hands and waists, as shown in figure 4.4. These posts and the products always showed female bodies or parts of a female body.



Figure 4.4. Representation female bodies

To solely portray selected parts of the female body is normal (Gill, 2008). The waists shown were observed to be feminine shapes as they had skinny waists and breasts. Most of the posts that contained a waist showed a slim girl or young woman with a light skin tone (sometimes medium skin color). Additionally, the hands that were shown were also slim, light, and always contained nail polish, most of them being pink. Values that are assigned to female bodies regarding what is beautiful and not that have been set by western society, include a slim waist (Dixon, Grimshaw, Linklater, & Dixon, 2011).

Furthermore, as shown in figure 4.5, other female attributes also showed femininity.

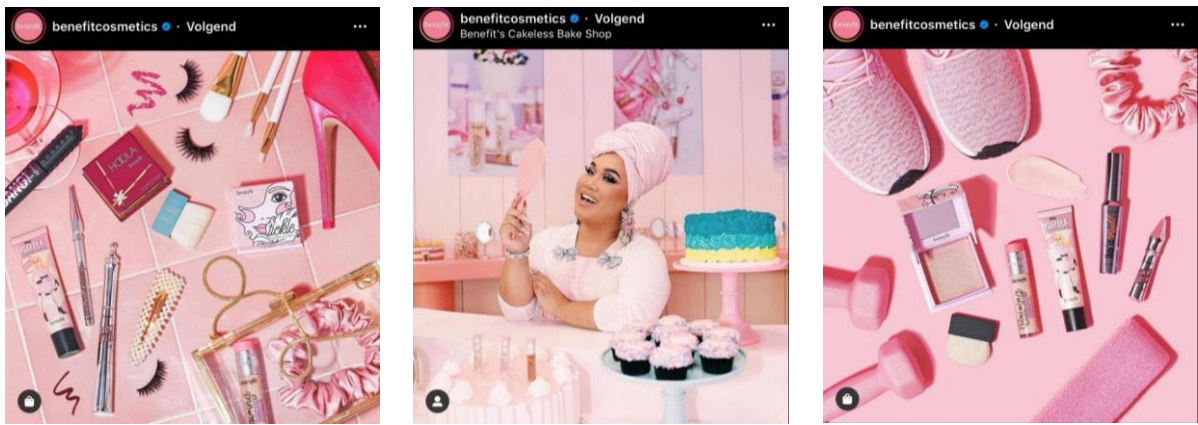


Figure 4.5. Female accessories

The previously discussed hands contained nail polish, which is also part of a normative structure as society assigned it to be something for women only (Edwards, 2010). Some additional details that also can be considered to be feminine were jewelry (Sondhi & Singhvi, 2006), hair accessories suited for longer hair (Cahill, 1989), and light weights for a workout, as men are expected to be strong (Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003).

Other explicit forms of femininity included gender-related words, as shown in figure 4.6.

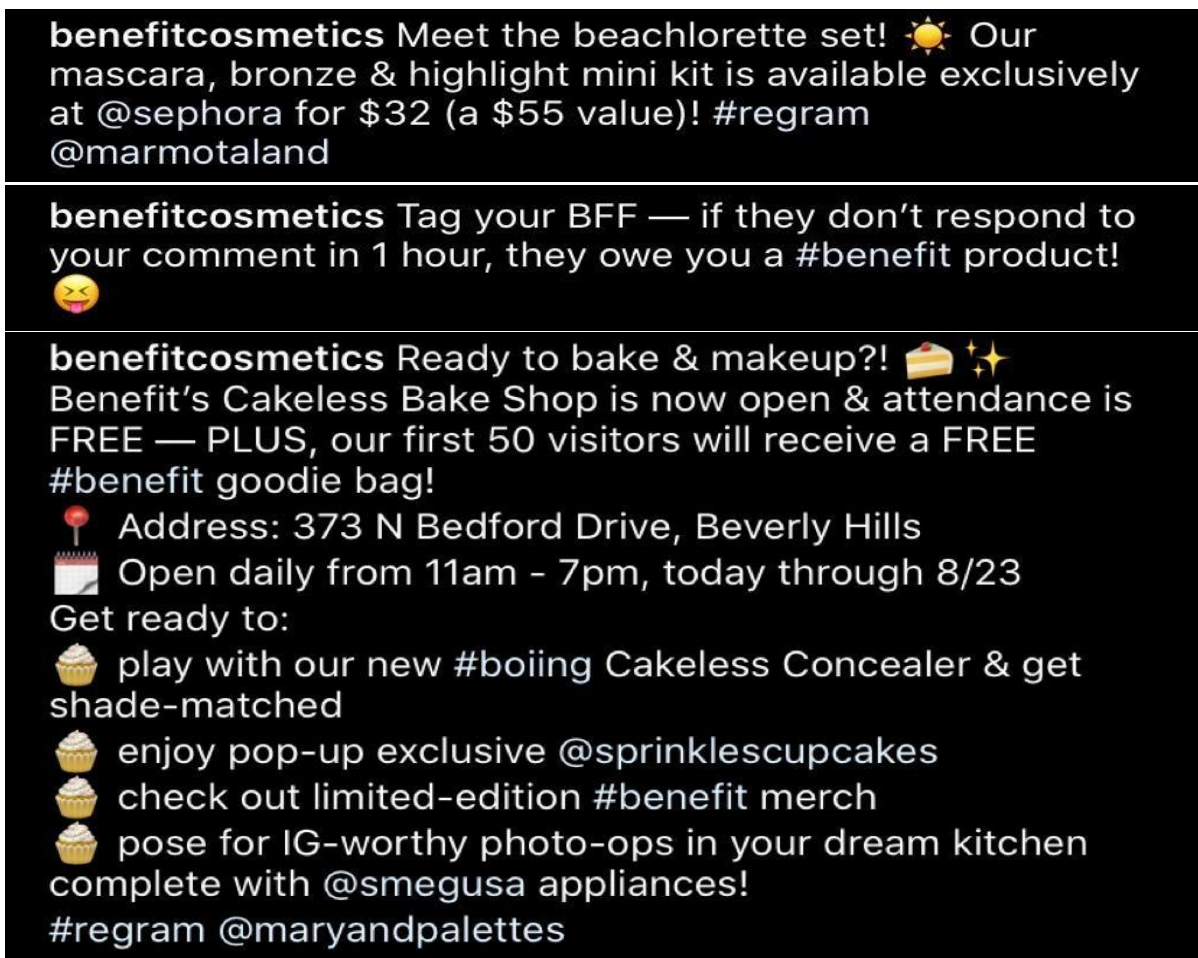


Figure 4.6. Gender-related language

These words are mostly used by women or implied women, such as: “beach”lorette (instead of bachelorette) and ‘BFF’ (best friends forever), and they highlight hobbies in their captions that are traditionally perceived to be feminine, such as talking about knitting and baking. The data from the website also supported the recognition of femininity that was found on their Instagram. For example, the website showed a slightly feminine language such as “faking it ‘til you make it”, “giggles”, and “gals” (Benefit, n.d., para 1.).

#### *4.1.1. Identification taxonomies, strategies, and appeals*

Within the subtheme of femininity, regarding female influencers, mechanical identification occurred. Mechanical identification is a result of a link created, based on an individual’s unconscious perspective, between an idea and a subject (Burke, 1969). Society expects females when representing beauty products and to be into cosmetics. Moreover, people could have similar features or characteristics. Thus, similarity occurred as this strategy is about resemblances between people. Girls or young women who possessed the same look can identify due to similarity. These influencers had an attractive face and appealed to the emotion of consumers, pathos, as one could want to look just as beautiful. With pathos in their arguments, the brand tried to persuade the audience by appealing to one’s emotions. Also, as Benefit most of the time indicated which products the influencers have used, it appealed to logos. Logos appeals to the consumer’s rational. They are being influenced by being told what products they could use to achieve an even more similar look.

Different from the female influencer, within male influencers, a rather ideological type of identification occurred. As males are not perceived by society as ordinary users of make-up, they framed different social ideas. Ideological identification was applicable as it entails “a system of political or social ideas, framed and propounded for an ulterior purpose” (Burke, 1969, p. 88). Here, Benefit used similarity, commonality, and hidden division as strategies to realize identification between consumer and brand. Similarity includes the same explanation as previously mentioned, but here boys and men could possess similar features as the portrayed influencer. Commonality generally includes individuals sharing a similar perspective on a rather abstract level. Benefit used commonality as strategy and created common ground as individuals shared the same perspective on men being able to wear make-up too and looking flawless without being criticized. People who usually do not bother to care about beauty products could care about the abstract idea of breaking with society categorizing and assigning characteristics to men and women. Hidden division is about making individuals feel part of a group or community, and Benefit used it as their approach because including

men could make individuals feel accepted and create an aspiration to become part of this community. They framed the images with captions as if everyone was already part of the group by using personal pronouns and informal approaches. For example, using personal pronouns highlights a connection between the consumer and the brand (Muniz & O’guinn, 2001; Brogi et al., 2013).

Benefit mainly appealed to logos with its identification strategies when using male influencers because they always highlighted the products the influencers used to become ‘perfect looking’. They sometimes appealed to pathos as they tried to persuade the audience by saying that the influencers “deserve the spotlight” or are “naturally gorgeous” and “picture-perfect”.

The type of identification that arose within female bodies, pink, female attributes, and gender-specific language was also mechanical. The audience can relate to femininity unconsciously if they live by norms set by society. Also, society automatically links the connotations of nail polish, pink, jewelry, and hair accessories to femininity or objects that are foremostly represented by females. The components of looking the same, using the same accessories, and the same language approached the resemblances between people that were clearly visible. The consumer could have felt aspiration to become part of this ‘picture-perfect’ feminine group as Benefit also showed it could provide the consumer the tools (their beauty-products) and make the consumer feel that Benefit hands it over to them due to their personal approach in their captions. Thus, also using hidden division. As Benefit showed beautiful, by society defined, feminine (young) women, they appealed to pathos as it addressed feelings towards beauty.

#### *4.1.2. Dissociation*

However, addressing a rather feminine audience and therefore framing their brand community towards femininity, they dissociated a broad audience as they could not identify with the messages. Their brand community mostly represented people dressed in femininity, have light skin, slim posture, and are below 30. The obvious is that Benefit, therefore, excluded a considerable range of consumers as these could include the people who have a darker skin color, different posture, and are older. Due to the stereotypical feminine characteristics that were assigned to the posts, it can dissociate people who do not maintain the same values. This could include feminists, people who do not advocate the beautification of women (Cahill, 2003), and see women as intellectuals and those who can do more than be beautiful and cooking. However, it can also have dissociated people regarding Benefit’s use

of male beauty influencers as it can occur that some consumers cannot be drawn away from their old associations of people into beauty solely being females.

These dissociations did not include all the individuals that were not largely represented, did not check the boxes of the standard targeted audience, or valued the exact opposite of the community values. Different levels of dissociation and a matter of proportionate response did exist. Benefit mainly portrayed people with light skin, but sometimes they included people with olive or medium skin tones, as shown in figure 4.7. This evoked proportional dissociation because they did not exclude everyone who does not have a light skin tone. Yet, they completely dissociated people with black skin as they were never represented. As previously stated, overall, Benefit promoted a very stereotype of girls who wear heels and pearls.



Figure 4.7. Deviations from the standard

Nevertheless, not all messages were dressed in femininity. Occasionally, they stepped away from traditional stereotypes as Benefit included a post where a female is dressed in feminine and masculine characteristics, or they addressed sporty girls. Therefore, women who enjoy more masculine clothing styles or hobbies were not necessarily distanced from the brand, and they still had some common ground. Sometimes, Benefit supported masculine characteristics with posts showing a product called 'badgals', which is, e.g., held by a girl with orange nail polish while highlighting that girls do not always have to behave according to rules and expectations set by society.

#### 4.2. *Maintaining and creating friendships*

Another pattern that was discovered within the dataset was tightly connected to friendships. Friendships are based on sympathy and sentiment. Moreover, they can be formed due to social interaction and are perceived to function in the order of creating and maintaining



social reality (Jerrome, 1984). Friendship is a fluid concept as well. Furthermore, friendships have always been promoted by society and can be seen as wealth and status attributes (Silver, 1990). Subthemes that were found within this pattern were textual elements, including language that calls for action, settings and hobbies, and a variety of symbolic meanings that Benefit created to highlight friendship.

In many posts, Benefit used textual elements in their image or caption to highlight friendship or interaction between friends, as shown in figure 4.8.

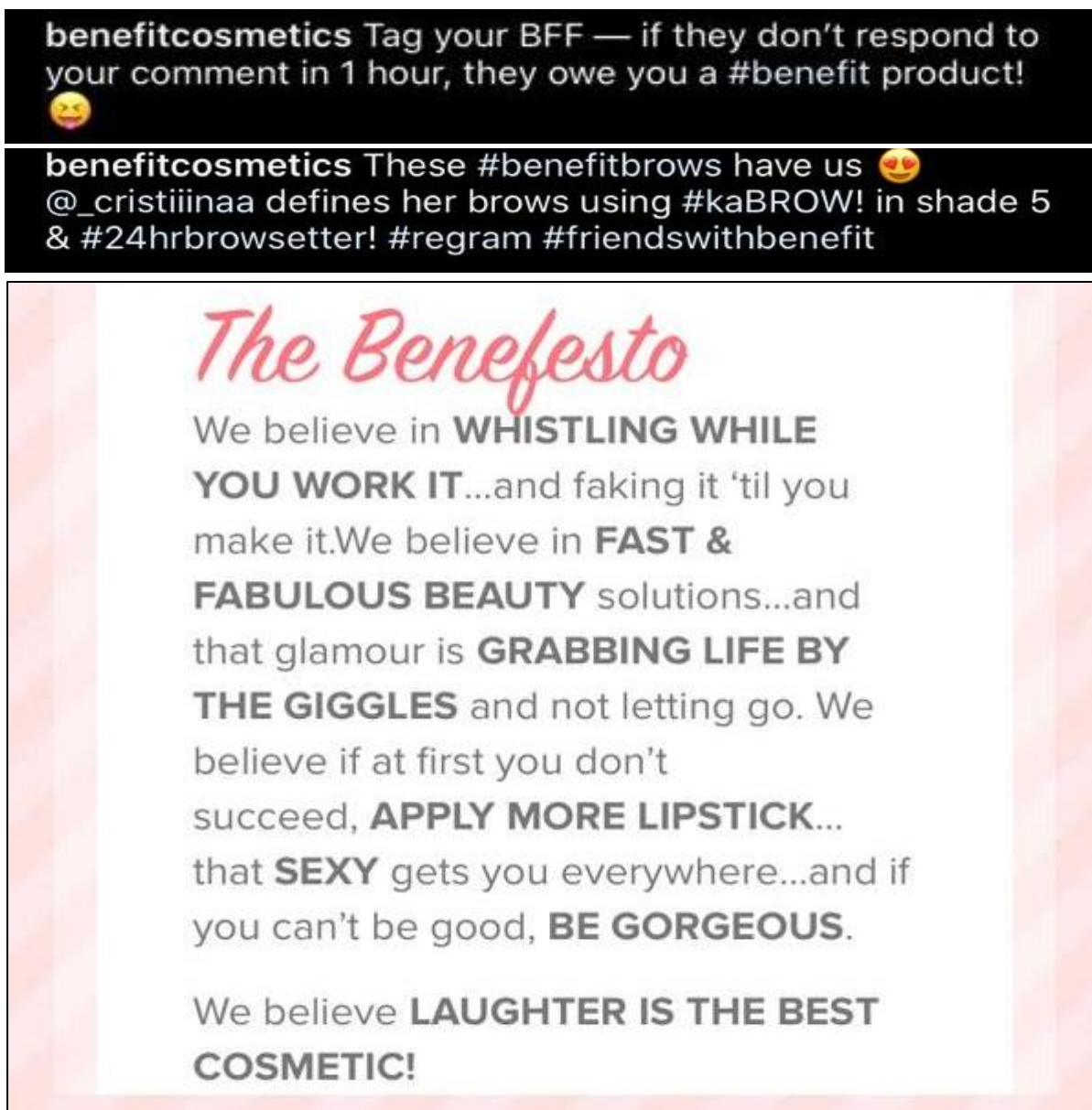


Figure 4.8. Textual elements highlighting friendship

For example, they explicitly used the words 'squad' and 'friend(s)'. In addition to the influencer's posts, these always contained '#friendswithbenefit' in the caption. Also, they

often asked questions that required the consumer to answer. This resulted in an interaction between the brand and the consumer and included a distinctive approach from digital branding where they build content and meanings based on a rather collective setting (Gensler et al., 2013). For example, it asked the consumer: ‘How many #benefitbrows products do you have in your make-up collection?!’ or ‘You can only choose 2: what do you want more of in 2020?!’. Simultaneously, it also created a platform for the consumer to interact with their friends by asking: ‘TAG your BFFs’ or ‘TAG someone who could use some retail therapy’. Moreover, their website stated, “grabbing life by the giggles” (Benefit, n.d., para 1.), and giggles is an activity one usually performs with friends. The representation of their work ethics presented on the website seemed to be focused on creating friendships as they put a focus on, with their text, chatting with each other, having fun, teaming up, and that one will be part of a family.

In general, brands can struggle to create a strong consumer-brand relationship (Fournier & Aver, 2011). As Benefit aims to interact with its audience, the audience needs to trust the brand (Gretry, Horváth, Belei & van Riel, 2017). Not only the explicit use of language, but also non-verbal cues such as informal or formal communication style have a crucial role for interaction and trust to happen (Keeling, Mcgoldrick, & Beatty, 2010). “An informal communication style is defined as “common, nonofficial, familiar, casual, and often colloquial, and contrasts in these senses with formal” (Gretry et al., 2017, p. 77). More concrete, because Benefit included casual, common, non-official words, even slang sometimes, Benefit maintained an informal style of communication with its audience (Gretry et al., 2017). An informal approach is not ground-breaking as most brands implement a rather casual communication style on their digital media platforms (Gretry, et al., 2017). Benefit probably used this informal communication style as it represents a level of intimacy, and therefore it could be the same communication style a consumer maintains with its friends. As Benefit is a known brand and consumers are probably already familiar with the brand, the use of the friendship-oriented textual elements and non-verbal cues increased trust between the audience and the brand (Gretry et al., 2017).

In figure 4.9, visual ways of depicting friendship are shown. These aspects showed settings where Benefit asked what their community has been up to. Also, activities were visualized that one usually performs with two or more people, like getting ready for a party while being on the phone, holiday celebrations, shopping, or other hobbies, going to the beach or swimming pool, or traveling. As studies have shown, friendships are about sharing things and activities. Stereotypes of how friendships are designed to focus on sharing, expressing feelings

and thoughts, and talk about activities they have undertaken or are going to perform (Walker, 1994). Therefore, it is reasonable that Benefit included these specific settings.

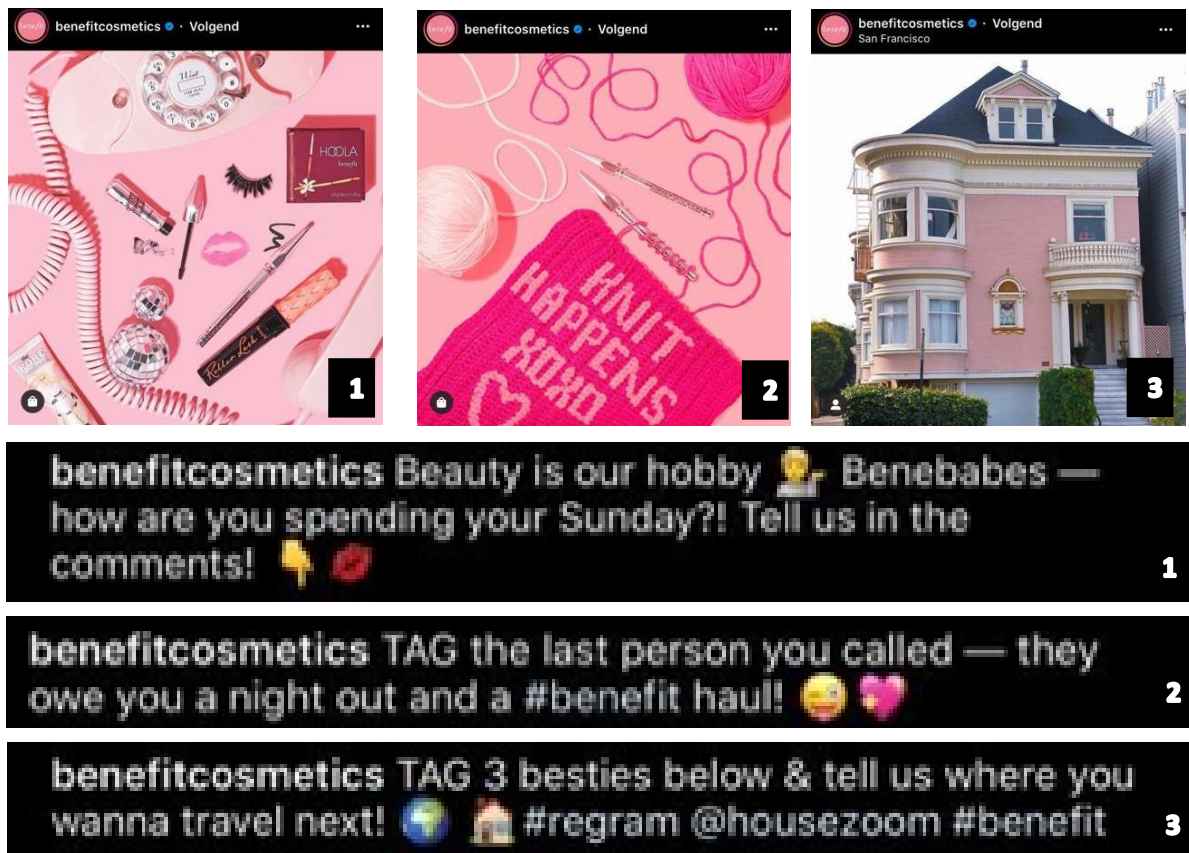


Figure 4.9. Visualizations and indications of friendship-oriented activities

Furthermore, they symbolically used multiple attributes. For example, in addition to the previously mentioned use of the pink color, which represents femininity, love, and romance, it also represents friendship (Dash, 2018). Moreover, they added symbolic values to some posts by picturing girls who formed a human chain (figure 4.4), representing a strong bond between people.

Generally, the concept of friendship is fluid. The forms of friendships that have been highlighted on the platforms of Benefit were expressive and relationship oriented. Therefore, they were considered to be rather feminine due to gender role expectations (Williams, 1985). Other studies suggested that male friendships can occur as less personal, show less shared feelings, and having multiple ‘casual’ friends. Female friendships are more about an emotional tie with one best friend with whom they share thoughts, feelings, and confidential utterances (Williams, 1985).

#### *4.2.1. Identification taxonomies, strategies, and appeals*

Due to the textual elements, including words that call for interaction, settings and hobbies, and symbolic meanings in relation to friendship, Benefit implied ideological identification because friendship is visible within all these pictures. Friendship is part of the social idea that one cannot go without friendships. It is a topic that is based on certain values and beliefs. It can be anticipated that consumers who view friendship as something valuable, operate through the same ideological framework.

As strategies for ideological identification, the brand mostly used commonality, hidden division, and occasional similarity. The commonality strategy appeared when people shared similar perspectives on, for example, ideas of wanting to look good on the outside and feel good on the inside, e.g., ‘When your make-up & workout routines are on point!’. Thus, Benefit bringing people together who also care about their health.

Hidden divisions such as ‘tell us’ or ‘When your brow products are the cherry on top!’ implied a personal way of communicating with the audience. Moreover, they implemented an informal way of communication and many forms of personification of the brand by talking with personal pronouns and first-person pronouns such as ‘we’ and ‘you’. Also, these posts included hidden division as the consumers may want to act the same way and experience the same things as the brand depicts in order to feel part of the community.

A clear example of similarity occurred when the consumer had similar hobbies or similar activities as the brand had and when the hashtag of friends with Benefit was used because a consumer could consider themselves to be friends with Benefit as well. With all strategies, they appealed to pathos because they addressed, for example, feelings of friendship, membership, personal bonding, and sometimes even safety.

All previous named resulted in creating friendships, but also in maintaining those that already existed.

#### *4.2.2. Dissociation*

Concerning friendship and due to hidden division, they did not necessarily dissociate people who do not have a ‘BFF’, because they sometimes included the consumer, making them already feel part of the ‘group of friends’ of Benefit. Also, their ‘#friendwithbenefit’ always occurred when there was an influencer in the post. Creating the aspiration within its consumers to be part of the same community. Moreover, by becoming part of the community of Benefit, an individual could have shown that they value everything that friendship connotes and therefore reject and dissociate with those values that were not implied by Benefit when

addressing friendship (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). They could dissociate with values attached to statements regarding loneliness and outsiders because Benefit inspired them too, or as shown in figure 4.10, Benefit highlighted they do not like bad pick-up lines, meaning an individual could dissociate with misogynistic values.



Figure 4.10. Quote

#### 4.3. Level of comfort and wealth

The third pattern that was found implicated a particular lifestyle and represented comfort in multiple contexts. The level of comfort indicates to which degree one can maintain an adequate or sufficient lifestyle, filled with luxury. Also, wealth supports the level of comfort as it implies the state of being rich and prosperous, which enables one to buy things whenever one desires these. Moreover, as the website of Benefit stated, the brand is also part of the LVMH family, this includes the luxury brands Louis Vuitton, Moët, and Hennessy. Subthemes that were found within this pattern were cross-channel experiences, (wealthy & comfortable) settings, jewelry, and food.

The first visualization of this pattern can be found in the cross-channels experiences, as shown in figure 4.11.

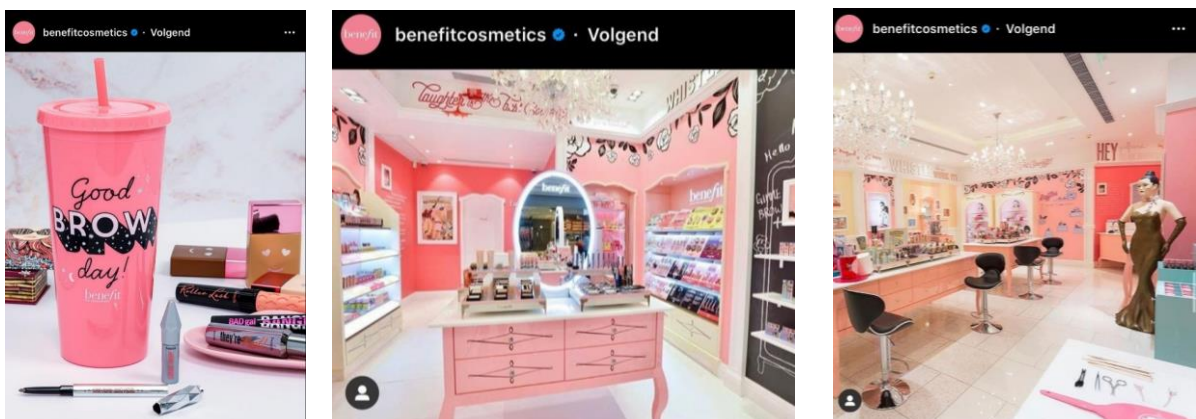


Figure 4.11. Cross-channel experiences

This included the online representation of the offline stores and in-store shops. The price range that Benefit maintains was considered as the most obvious indicator of wealth (online and offline). Overall, their prices are higher than average make-up products that one can buy in the drugstore. Regarding the interiors, the shops on their Instagram had a luxurious appearance because they were rather spacious, had the same calm colors (pink meaning feminine and friendship; white meaning light, goodness, and purity; and a little bit of black meaning elegance and rejuvenation), and showed attributes that connote wealth, such as an apple laptop or a walk-in closet as a store set-up, as shown in figure 4.11. Furthermore, the life-sized dolls (which were also visualized on their website) also radiated wealth, because it wore an evening gown. An evening gown can be considered suitable for formal events which usually include people who are rather wealthy and enjoy a high level of comfort.

The offline situations were in line with the online researched brand community and, therefore, an extension of to what length identification occurred as the identification process happened online on Instagram as well as offline in the stores. In the study of van Bommel, Edelman, and Ungerman (2014) is stated that consumers are continuously interacting with brands and that cross-channel experiences highlight that consumers who have online and offline experiences with brands have a stronger relationship with a brand.

The second indicator of wealth on their online platform were the settings Benefit often included, shown in figure 4.12. These settings were connected to relaxation and to find and enjoy a high level of comfort. For example, white-sanded beaches, swimming pools and tanning beds, manors and airplanes, and specific captions representing traveling.

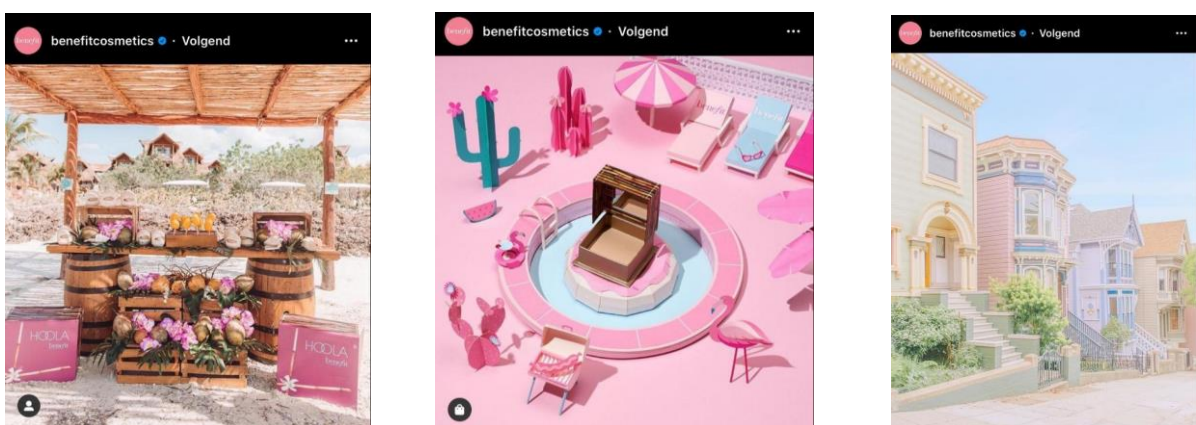


Figure 4.12. Wealthy settings

Generally, traveling and beaches are destined for wealthy consumers (Annesley, 2004.) People are attracted to the idea of sandy beaches and the ocean, as they are representing

extravagant outdoor venues where people can relax and enjoy life (Luong, 2020). Furthermore, Benefit seemed to act persuasively by creating new needs within its audience as the brand focuses on presenting joy in relation to high levels of comfort and luxurious settings. They create settings to justify the consumers' needs and thus persuading them via created meanings outside of the products they offer (Campelo, Aitken & Gnoth, 2011).

Likewise, some objects that were discussed in previous chapters, such as accessories and jewelry, showcased wealth (Sondhi & Singhvi, 2006; Cahill, 1989), as shown in figure 4.13.

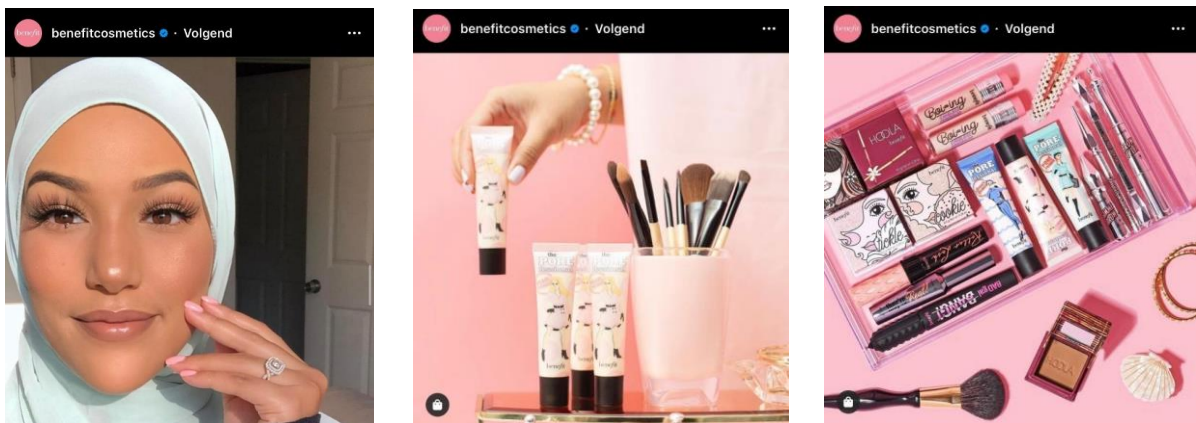


Figure 4.13. Accessories showcasing wealth

Some influencers or hands were portrayed with jewelry mainly covered in pearls. Also, settings that promoted products (in a creative set-up) sometimes included jewelry and pearls as decorations. Jewelry serves as decoration but is also part of a symbolic act that has been assigned value as status symbols and representations of an individual its identity (Den Besten, 2011; Bernabei, 2017).

Another token that indicated a higher level of comfort is the food that was pictured throughout Benefit's Instagram channel, as shown in figure 4.14.



Figure 4.14. Luxury foods

They often portrayed sprinkled cupcakes, glazed donuts, decorated ice cream, and exotic fruits. They mostly portrayed the cupcakes in relation to one of their products. These foods were largely represented throughout the dataset and can be considered as a visualization of wealth as they are not part of someone's basic needs. Hence, they were treated as luxury products.

Moreover, food in branding is a marketing tactic focused on visual seduction and can result in positive attitudes towards the brand when the context is appropriate for the target audience (Poon, 2016). Furthermore, using food in advertising can add a semantic layer regarding taste, it indicates playfulness as it is not traditional and thus less expected (Lazar, 2009). It can be anticipated that Benefit purposively used candy, pastries, and other foods that taste sweet to add a fun-loving attitude in their posts as the targeted audience included younger individuals, who are generally perceived to have a sweet tooth and are not too serious.

#### *4.3.1. Identification taxonomies, strategies, and appeals*

Regarding the cross-channel experience, consumers could identify on a mechanical level as well as on an ideological level. Mechanically there could be a link between the shops and buying products in general or them still wanting to buy a product of Benefit. The consumer could already be familiar with the set up as one previously visited a shop, and they automatically related it to their own experience. Ideological identification could occur as the consumer would love to be part of the experience of being pampered by a beautician to become their most perfect looking self. Benefit communicated with these luxurious offline set-ups that they take good care of their customers and help them to feel beautiful.

Similarity is implemented as a strategy as people can recognize the settings; or look like the girls/ women portrayed on the posters. Commonality could serve Benefit as well, as the audience could have had a low self-esteem and Benefit visualized offline settings where the consumer can 'improve' it looks. It could bring them together or give them a little push to improve on themselves. This appealed to pathos as consumers' personal experiences and feelings were addressed. Benefit also appealed to logos as they sometimes put in a location where one can visit the shop, or they highlighted the prices one must pay to enjoy their services.

Another example of ideological and mechanical identification was found in the discussed settings. However, this example is from a different point of view than cross-channel experiences and thus includes a different process. The cross-channel experience is more focused on visiting shops and the beauty industry, and the identification processes within



settings are more related to an individual its lifestyle. The mechanical identification probably occurred within a smaller group of consumers as it mainly addressed the super-wealthy consumers with these posts. The consumers can anticipate with a biased perspective and act on these aspects without consideration as it is perceived as something normal in their lifestyle.

In contrast, ideological identification occurred. Not concerning the beauty industry, but to personal goals and wanting to reach a certain level of comfort and wealth, obtaining perfection, and perhaps setting unrealistic goals. One operates through the framework that wealth is something desired by all. Identification strategies included, for both mechanical and ideological, commonality, similarity, and hidden division. First, more on the surface, similarity occurred as consumers can like the beach, swimming, tanning, traveling, or live in similar houses. Second, commonality was a strategy as individuals could be brought together based on the value that they assign to living and representing a wealthy life. At first, these individuals would not necessarily identify with each other, but based on the abstract idea of how Benefit represented wealth, they are bound together. Third, hidden division occurred in the captions when Benefit included that the context is something they strive for or wish for, this addressed the consumers who want the same thing. They felt part of the same community as Benefit was symbolizing. When they carried out these strategies, Benefit appealed to pathos as they appealed to the positive feelings one associates the posts with.

As for the type of identification regarding the jewelry, mechanical identification happened as beauty products and pearls are both associated with rather wealthy products. Moreover, similarity occurred as the consumer was also wealthy or found joy in wearing jewelry and pearls and perceived it as a symbol of wealth. Hidden division occurred when Benefit specifically addressed a rather wealthy audience (e.g. highlighting one should possess multiple products, while it is not necessary to have more of one the same) or when their captions used inclusive language with possessive or first person pronouns (e.g. get more brow for your buck). Again, Benefit's arguments mainly consisted of pathos as they tried to persuade them while appealing to the audience its emotions.

The type of identification regarding food was primarily analogical. The different objects transferred the connotation related to food to the meaning of the brand. More concrete, the meaning of sweet treats and luxury food was transferred to the beauty products. Benefit was able to create common ground between individuals based on their love for the (portrayed) celebrative foods, thus through similarity while appealing to pathos. They appealed to pathos as they addressed someone its personal taste, and perhaps initiated connections between intimate moments one experienced with celebrative foods.

#### 4.3.2. *Dissociation*

On the other side of creating common ground and binding groups together, they dissociated a broad audience within this pattern. Due to their lack of portraying situations connected to less luxury and comfort, their approach could have automatically dissociated less wealthy people. This could have included people who earn just enough money to pay the monthly bills, but not make enough money to spend it on beauty products from the LVMH family. Additionally, it dissociated less wealthy people who do not necessarily strive to live a prosperous life. Also, via an outdated approach, people with a light skin tone can be seen, by some people and cultures, as more wealthy than other skin colors (Hunter, 2007). In combination with the target audience of Benefit's community, skin color was also considered as a token of representing wealth. Therefore, they dissociated other skin colors once more.

However, Benefit did not automatically disassociate everyone who was not super-wealthy. Sometimes they tried to build bridges between wealthy and less wealthy by, for example, including pearls in the image but highlighting in the caption some discount codes.

#### 4.4. *"Laughter is the best cosmetic"*

The fourth pattern discovered was in line with the vision statement that was featured by Benefit and is at the core of the brand community: "Laughter is the best cosmetic", which is a good tagline as it is meaningful, motivating and memorable (Till & Heckler, 2009). Laughing is mainly perceived as a visible emotion which one expresses when they find something amusing (funny) and feel joy. Also, a laugh is something natural. The brand claims that when you wear a smile, you are beautiful. On the contrary, beauty products are less natural, but can also result in a beautiful appearance. Generally, the subthemes are all interconnected. The subthemes found within this pattern were an endorsement of fun, product names and product set-ups, clever taglines, and (empowering) light-hearted jokes.

First, some context of the brand is in place. they supported their vision with the following mission statement on their website, underneath benefesto, as previously shown in figure 4.8: "We believe [...] BE GORGEOUS." (Benefit, n.d., para 1.). They called this their 'Benefesto' instead of a manifesto, which is a public declaration of what they are aiming for as a company. It is a form of digital branding. This first example supported the other findings, as it pointed out one should enjoy what they are doing (laugh), one can do anything they want (empowerment), and they offered tools to quickly reach perfection (which is anticipated to be the ultimate goal). Beauty is not solely serious, and there is more to it (reaches further than one's appearance). The statement suggested if things do not work out for one, one should

mainly focus on using make-up to, at least, improve its external beauty. The statement was expressed in a feminine and stereotypical girly way, with girly catchphrases. Through an outdated stereotypical approach, girls can be expected to put a focus on being beautiful on the outside rather than on the inside. The empowerment of the brand only reached so far, before it returned to the focus on one's appearance, therefore being quite contradicting.

On the contrary from appearances and beauty on the outside, fun was endorsed throughout their posts, as shown in figure 4.15.



Figure 4.15. Smiles and having fun

Among others, they created posts portraying hobbies and being happy, such as laughing, being with friends, partying, and the previously discussed knitting and baking. Hobbies can represent fun and laughter as hobbies are activities that people like to do and in what they find pleasure and thus makes them happy, which is something beautiful from the inside.

Furthermore, laughter was represented as Benefit made puns with its products' names, which were highly visible on their digital media platforms. This section highlights the most popular products. The first example included the 'boi-ing' cake less concealer, as shown in figure 4.16.



Figure 4.16. Boi-ing cakeless concealer visualization

Booing is perceived to be the sound of a rubber ball bouncing and refers to the ability to bounce back from everything that crosses your path (Abelman, 2019), which represents a form of empowerment. Also, in many posts regarding the concealer, they usually included a cupcake and other baking utilities because full coverage concealer can look cakey, but this one only needs a thin layer and, therefore, it is cake less. This witty contradiction made the approach original and amusing.

The second product that was also largely represented on their Instagram feed is the POREfessional, as shown in figure 4.17.

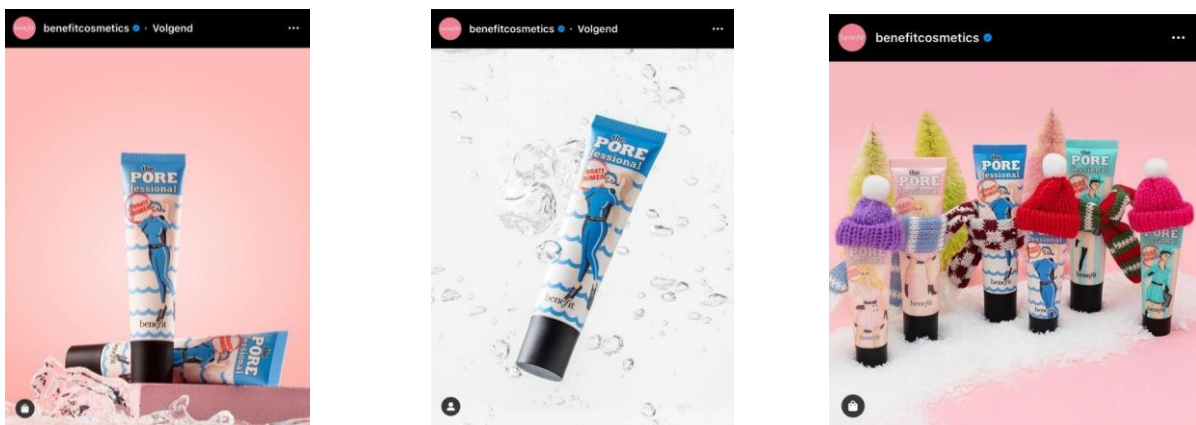


Figure 4.17. POREfessional visualization

This product is a primer, which is meant to hide flaws such as pores. They combined the word pores with professional because it looks similar, but professional connotes that something is very good at doing its job. This is an example of a portmanteau, where two words are combined and result in a new made-up word. The product was among others portrayed with water, meaning hydration, but also in relation to, e.g., seasons. The playful combination of words resulted in a clever composition, which consumers could find entertaining.

The third product is a bronzer, called HOOLA, as shown in figure 4.18.



Figure 4.18. HOOLA visualization

The product is meant to add a little color and shape to your face. The name HOOLA could be derived from the word 'hula', which is a Hawaiian dance performed by women. Therefore, it contributed to the femininity of the brand. Moreover, Hawaii and the settings the product was pictured in connoted beaches, sun, and thus getting a tan. There is a relationship between the manufactured name for the product and its effect, and the true meaning of where the product name is derived from.

The fourth range of products included Benefit's brow products, as shown in figure 4.19.

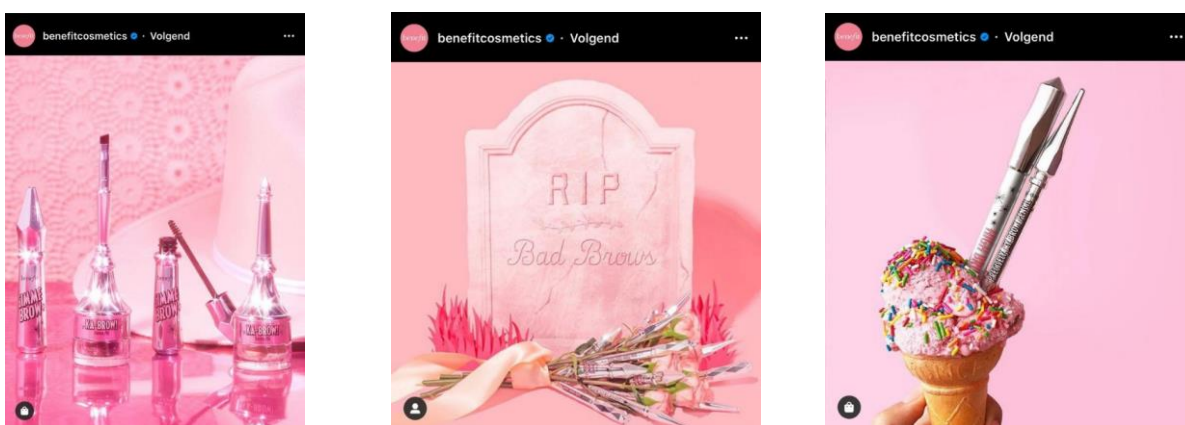


Figure 4.19. Brow products visualizations

They used some playful names such as Ka-BROW!, gimme brow, foolproof brow powder, goof-proof brow pencils, and precisely, my brow pencils. With this product range, they showed again that they are not too serious and included some slang, however, they did not add on an extra layer to the meaning of the names to the same extent of the previously discussed products. Nevertheless, their Instagram feed contained relatively more brow products than other products and in creative settings. This could be because they targeted their brow products on a broader audience. Even though these were not as witty as previously named products, they still highlighted the words of Benefit regarding not taking life too seriously.

The last products that are going to be discussed were not that often represented and showed in distinguishing settings: Benefit's mascara's BADgal BANG, they are real, and roller lash, as shown in figure 4.20.



Figure 4.20. Mascaras visualizations

Just as the brow-products, they did include playfulness, and thus to some extent laughter. However, they were, for the most part, not connected to connotations of other settings, objects, or words similar to other products on their digital media platforms.

Besides the products, they also included clever tag and light-hearted jokes. Clever taglines lines included, for example, ‘The drought is officially over’ when talking about a primer that is depicted with water, and ‘Name a more eye-conic duo...’ when talking about mascara. Furthermore, they included posts with light-hearted jokes, which contained some support and/or empowerment, that only contained text. Examples of such posts were mainly short quotes, as shown in figure 4.21.



Figure 4.21. Supportive light-hearted jokes

These quotes addressed insecurities while highlighting that one should laugh about them. Using clever taglines and quotes can be useful elements for brand identification (Mburu, Matenge, Amanze & Makgosa, 2013). Furthermore, these taglines and quotes contributed to propagating the company its vision, culture, and image (Hatch & Schultz, 2008), thus reinforcing the values assigned to the brand and the brand community.

Overall, the theme around laughter was probably represented to a great extent because carrying out the brand's mission, vision, and identity consistently contributes to maintaining its brand community and offers a framework to control the interaction to some extent (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001). Furthermore, branding is more than just showing the product or name to be recognized and considered. Therefore, a brand needs to ascribe meaning to a set of components in posts (Kladou, Kavartzis, Rigopoulou, & Salonika, 2017). Thus, for identification to happen, Benefit needed to consistently visualize multiple attributes and create meanings that were subsequently connected to the brand and its identity. However, as they put the focus on happiness, encompassing beauty on the inside, they contradicted themselves by posting picture-perfect girls with among others fake lashes. This added on to the view of current standards in beauty, set by society, where the average girls cannot measure up and beauty as being something fake and manufactured, and thus that women can and should enhance their attractiveness by using products (Mulhern, Fieldman, Hussey, Leveque & Pineau, 2003).

#### *4.4.1. Identification taxonomies, strategies, and appeals*

The type of identification that arose within the posts endorsing fun and portraying the products was predominantly analogical. The meaning of several symbolic objects and settings were transferred to the beauty products. This shed new light on the connotations and thus interpretation of the products. Strategies that were used for most of the posts were similarity, hidden division. Occasionally commonality seemed to develop throughout their feed. People could have been bound together and develop positive feelings towards Benefit based on their similar sense of humor, their affinity for sweets and other food, and the pleasure they find in depicted hobbies. Hidden division appeared again in the captions by using personal pronouns, informal communications, and asking questions. Benefit addressed the audience like everyone already had a product or at least wanted a product and was, therefore, already part of their community. Generally, commonality took place when individuals shared similar perspectives on the importance of the divided focus between the inside and the outside, and not only on one or the other. By using creative approaches to reach laughter, which is an emotion, Benefit appealed to pathos. Benefit also called to logos, mainly in the posts that contained products, as they presented factual data such as prices, discounts, and availability.

Furthermore, mechanical identification occurred within the clever-taglines, light-hearted jokes- and quotes. Girls or women are automatically connected to these kinds of quotes, as it is supposed that men do not suffer from such bad pick-up lines and insecurities. Girls and

(young) women could feel similar to the brand when they have experienced comparable pick-up lines and insecurities. This illustrated another appeal to pathos by Benefit as a consumer's feeling is addressed.

#### *4.4.2. Dissociation*

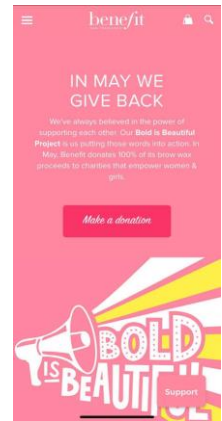
In relation to the concept of dissociation, Benefit used humor, slang, or included jokes that were more relevant for female millennials rather than for older women, very young girls, and men. Therefore, they dissociated a large group of people. Additionally, people could feel like they were not taken seriously by for example the inserted jokes that aimed at waving aside issues and insecurities. People could think that Benefit (unconsciously) acted like they undermine serious problems, such as low self-esteem and the sexualization of women by men.

#### *4.5. Creating goodwill*

The last discovered pattern showed through different ways that Benefit was creating goodwill on their digital media platforms. Besides goodwill being about positive feelings in relation to being friendly and helpful, it can also be perceived as a part of a company's (unmeasurable) values and how well managed its reputation is and how loyal its consumers are.

They raised attention for their charity project called 'Bold is Beautiful', as shown in figure 4.22. On their website, they provided a broader perspective. They explained in detail that the charity entails a philanthropy program that is focused on empowering girls and women and, thus, to act boldly. They highlighted that people should be able to be 100%, meaning one should be able to reach its full potential, and on the other hand, someone should care about helping its surroundings. They support through donations, volunteer work, and raising awareness for rough situations in communities that find girls or/ and women struggling. Their Instagram feed mainly raised awareness for 'Bold is Beautiful', by stating they donate all their proceeds from brow waxes in May. The images matched with the cause as it showed a brow wax set up. Also, on their website, they showed that they partnered up with different charities.





**benefitcosmetics** Did you know that during the month of May, we donate 100% of Benefit's brow wax proceeds to our #BoldisBeautiful Project? 💪💖 Through our partnership with 6 local community partners, we empower women & girls by helping to provide education, access to wellness and financial self-sufficiency. **1**

**benefitcosmetics** YOUR LAST CHANCE! 🙌 During the month of May, we donate 100% of Benefit's proceeds from brow waxes to our #BoldisBeautiful Project, which empowers women & girls with the resources & support they need to succeed. 💖 Click the link in bio to make your **2**

Figure 4.22. Raising awareness bold-is-beautiful project

Moreover, they provided more detailed background information and used examples to showcase how they have been able to help and provide support before, as shown in figure 4.23 and 25. This provided clarity and made it easier for the audience to visualize how the audience can help and how Benefit was trying to contribute to struggling females in society.

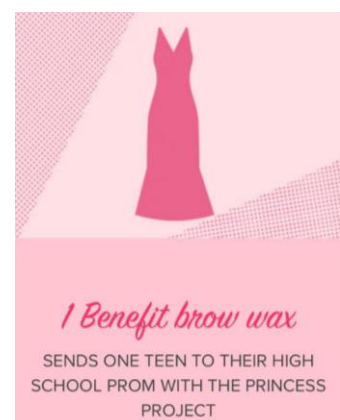


Figure 4.23. Reflection of how help can be applied

All in relation to the charity projects, it was expected for Benefit to pay attention to the moral responsibility to integrate and retain the members of the community (Muniz & O’guinn, 2001; Brogi et al., 2013). Furthermore, the consumer its trust in the brand is influenced by the brand reputation (Afzal, Khan, Rehman, Ali & Wajahat, 2010). Thus, it can be anticipated that doing good and implementing charity projects was good for the brand its reputation and, therefore, for the brand-consumer relationship.

Second, they organized giveaways and contests, as shown in figure 4.24. The giveaways were usually in collaboration with another brand.

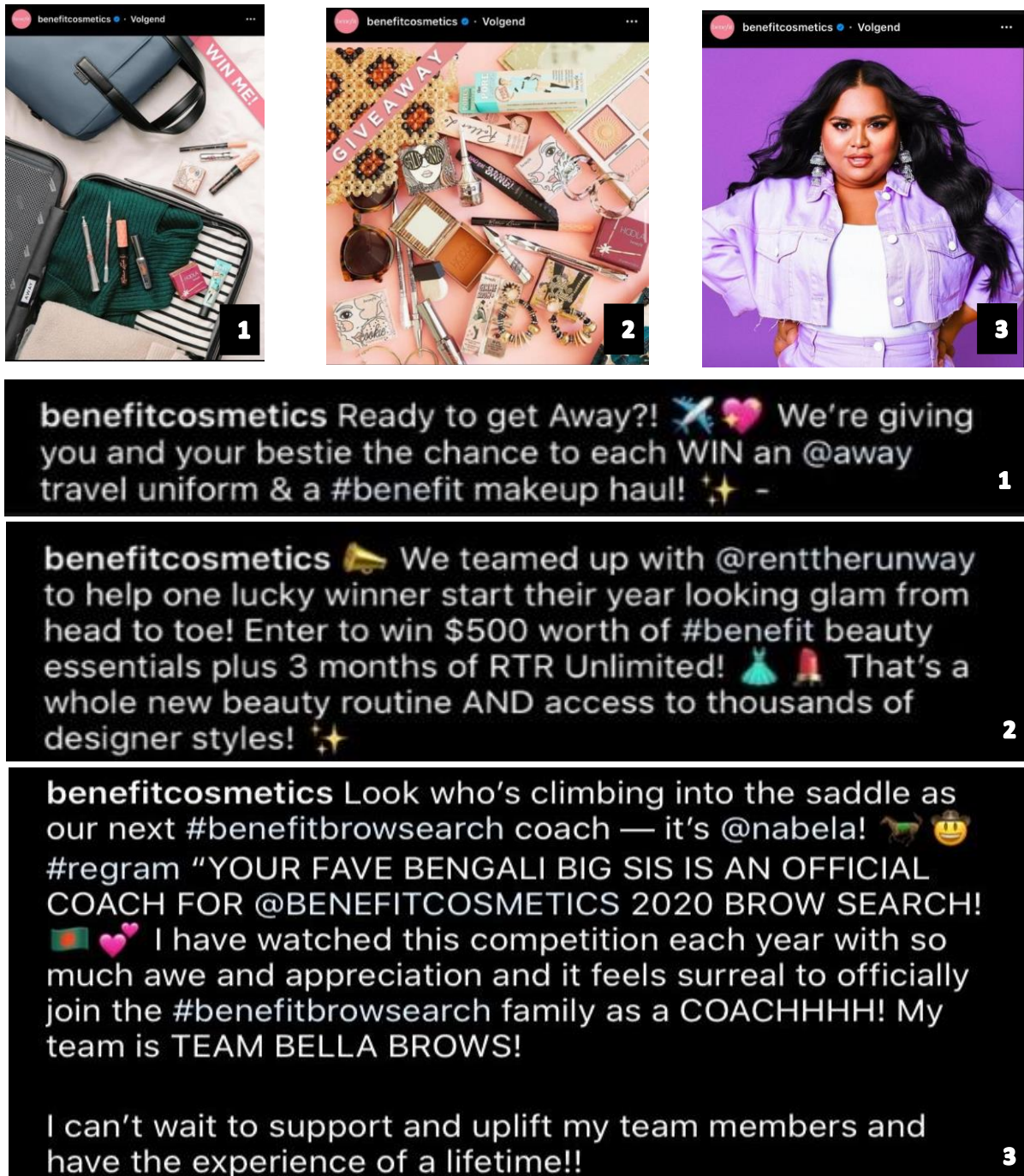


Figure 4.24. Giveaways and contests

These collaborations were also a representation of working together and, thus, friendship. The giveaways were suitable to create goodwill because it gave people a good feeling and a chance to get something for free. Additionally, they promoted one main contest called the 'Benefit Brow Search'. The audience was free to participate, and the lucky ones got chosen to join the real-life contest with a famous beauty influencer (male and female) as a coach. The one who performed the best brows during the contest could win 50 thousand dollars.

Giveaways and contests can lure and excite people to the brand and interact with the brand (Park, Nah, Dewester, Eschenbrenner & Jeon, 2008). A brand can create more brand awareness, which will probably lead to positive attitudes (Park et al., 2008). Due to the initiated interaction through giveaways and contests, the consumer created a positive brand image, which was beneficial for the consumer-brand relationship.

#### *4.5.1. Identification taxonomies, strategies, and appeals*

The type of identification that mainly arose regarding charity was ideological. Benefit contributed to the representation of something bigger, an ideology. They were communicating an ideological system with an ulterior purpose in the way that consumers might feel supported or consumers could empower others. The strategies that were embedded to reach this ideological form of identification were, concerning Instagram, commonality, and hidden division. Commonality appeared when individuals shared a similar perspective on women who should empower other women. Hidden division appeared if one made an appointment and contribute; one would feel part of a community. On their digital media platforms, they appealed to ethos, as Benefit can profit from a good reputation solely for creating a good cause, no matter what kind of good cause it entailed. In a sense, they appealed to pathos, as consumers could feel empathy for those who need help or feel responsible to help. In some posts, they appealed to logos as they gave a precise explanation of what someone can do to contribute to the charity.

Overall, the taxonomies of identification that were occurring within giveaways and contests were mechanical and ideological. Mechanical identification mainly happened because they connected the giveaways and contests to win free things such as, in this case, beauty products and money. People anticipated on the posts because people, in general, are competitive and fond of gifts and winning things. The second type of identification that was showed was ideological. Due to their posts, related to goodwill, containing males, females, and transgender people with different body types and ethnic backgrounds (and skin colors), they communicated that anyone, not only the ones who fit the expectation regarding idealized

images of society, can reach what the illustrated persons have reached and become successful. The strategies that were integrated usually consisted of similarity and hidden division. Similarity was involved if one looked similar to the portrayed influencer. Hidden division occurred as Benefit addressed the audience as if they already knew them. They included sentences such as ‘your fave Bengali big sis’ and ‘5 of you will be chosen to be on my team’ (see figure 4.24). They engaged with the audience like they were having a conversation. The arguments they used appealed to all three rhetorical appeals. First, ethos, as people just wanted to be part of the giveaways and contest because Benefit organized them. Second, pathos, as people like the feeling of winning. Lastly, logos, as they explained how to enter giveaways and contests.

#### 4.5.2. Dissociation

Altogether, they could have distanced men who are part of Benefit’s community, as men are not represented on their digital media platforms. Therefore, they could feel left out or not important enough to provide support. Additionally, they have exemplified some of the help they have given so far, as shown in figure 4.25.

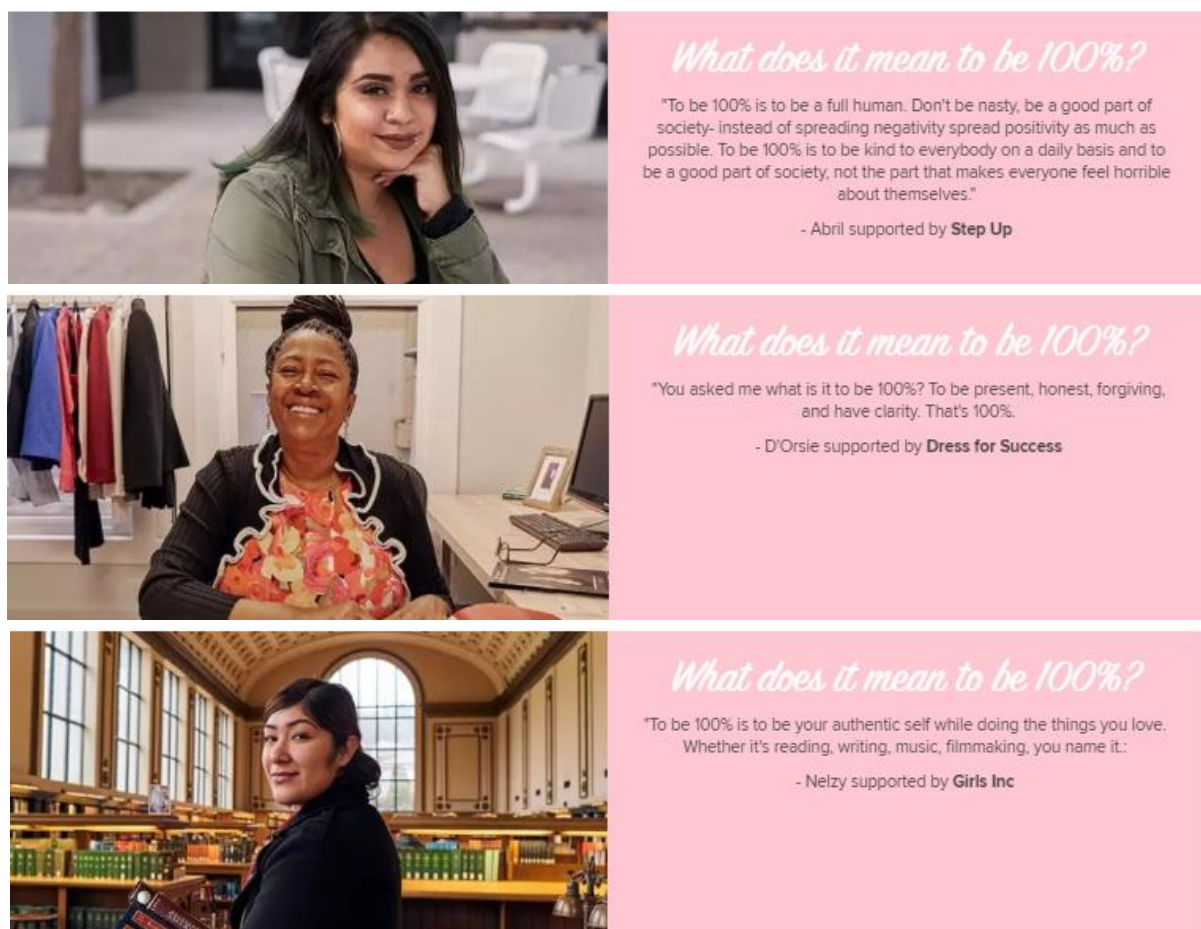


Figure 4.25. Supported girls and women who share their vision on the received help

They included pictures of the woman/ girl who has enjoyed the help of Benefit (and its charity partner), which were usually women and girls with slightly darker skin colors or with different ethnic backgrounds. This approach and visualization of help could dissociate people from different ethnic backgrounds. They could feel represented as being the weaker species, needing help, instead of the target group of the brand that enjoys and pays for Benefit's services and products, thus helping the ones who can use support.

#### *4.6. Summary*

To summarize, the main theme of dressed in femininity could be due to the brand wanting to be associated with a desirable reference group (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Meaning that beauty products and beauty brands are stereotypically related to females and femininity. Also, within this theme specifically, Benefit not only visualized being aware of traditional marketing strategies but also knowing the most current form of selling techniques to influence their audience.

Additionally, despite that grouping feminine and masculine characteristics are culturally dependent, one does not automatically exclude the other (Hofstede, 1996). This seemed to apply to Benefit as they also showed females dressed in some masculine characteristics. However, it was noteworthy that the forms of beauty that were represented on Benefit's digital media platforms were mainly in line with feminine appearances and that the feminine beauty norms were perceived to be set by Western society.

Regarding the second pattern, the values of friendship were largely presented due to the brand wanting to build and enhance trust (Gretry, 2017). To reach higher levels of trust, Benefit used an informal approach throughout its digital media channels. However, as the concept of friendship is fluid, friendships can vary between individuals and perhaps gender. This could include different values for different individuals or groups of friends. Furthermore, it appeared that friendship could not only represent an enactment of gender roles but also of ideologic roles

Furthermore, regarding the third pattern, Benefit showed a high level of comfort. Benefit framing wealth and comfort in their digital media channels and wealth being part of the brand community was not necessarily surprising, as (luxury) cosmetics are part of the representation of a wealthy lifestyle (Chao & Schor, 1996). Via multiple ways, Benefit seduced the consumers. It showed luxurious shops, beautiful jewelry, delicious food, and holiday locations, in which the prosperous consumers were mainly addressed.

Concerning the fourth pattern, laughter was highlighted and represented to a great extent.

As the products of Benefit were largely represented on their digital media channels, they were considered as valuable visualizations of the brand's representation of laughter being the best cosmetic. The results were considered more salient as greater details were provided on the different approaches that Benefit used to represent laughter via its products, and thus via its messages. Additionally, the products had in common having original names and often appearing with clever taglines in creative set-ups that supported the posts' playfulness and humor, as the images and captions of the posts were entertaining. Benefit designed their product names using contradictions, portmanteaus, derivatives, and slang. Despite that most of their products included a creative approach, this was not adapted to every product.

Also, the clever taglines and light-hearted jokes- and quotes were designed in such a way that they made someone laugh and not be taken on a serious note. Benefit's creative approach was necessary because to be considered as important, their branding strategy needed to be more than just showing the product or its name. They attempted to create a platform and a community that was at the same time about feeling good and being beautiful on the outside while emphasizing one can achieve this without losing joy (for beauty), which is a feeling on the inside.

Lastly, the fifth pattern showed that Benefit designed its messages to lure and excite people. It was anticipated that a moral-related theme was going to be represented as this can support their community. By means of charities, giveaways, contests, Benefit was able to hold conversations with its audience and thus initiate interaction.

## 5. Conclusion

As the results supported, the brand and its consumers are interconnected and can imply identification with each other. The theories regarding digital branding, identification and dissociation, brand communities, and cultural branding were proven to be suitable as the statements were relatable to the conclusion. The umbrella concept of this study was digital branding. Digital branding included a brand building content and meaning in a rather collective setting and the information also being influenced by the consumers. Therefore, because people were following the Instagram page of Benefit and they liked and responded to posts, they were taking part in a relationship with the brand. It can be anticipated that they were not only interested in the brand, but they also influenced the brand (Davis, 2008).

Moreover, by admitting into the relationship with Benefit, the consumers carried out an unconscious preference for the themes that were found on the digital media channels of Benefit. Within the patterns, the consumers have found common ground with the brand, and therefore, the communication of Benefit resulted in persuasion. Also, to maintain a consumer-brand relationship, a brand community was important. A brand community included a “self-selected group of consumers with a shared emotional attachment to a brand, shared values, social identity where consumers engage jointly to accomplish a common goal” (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015, p. 387). Brand communities could increase brand trust and brand loyalty. Benefit consistently framed and addressed its brand community by creating posts and captions that included the same language. As a result, the audience identified with the brand on different levels. Thus, the brand community was an example of how identification was achieved, and the formation of the sense of community was created by rhetoric. Benefit created a digital media platform where everyone who maintained the same values, despite whether they have bought something already or not, was enabled to create a deeper connection with the brand. Therefore, identification occurred.

This chapter answers the sub-questions of this research in order to build towards the answer to the main research question of how Benefit influenced their consumer-brand relationship by promoting identification through their digital media channels. The answer to the first sub-question forms a foundation for the other sub-questions. Therefore, the answer is supported by an overview of the taxonomies of identification, strategies, and appeals. As previously mentioned, the rhetorical situation is excluded from the overview as it mainly became to function as a guide to discover the taxonomies of identification, identification strategies, rhetorical appeals, dissociations, and, eventually, the patterns. The first sub-question was “How does Benefit design its messages to frame its brand community?”. As

previously mentioned, the brand community is a co-creation between consumers and a brand and, hence, a representation of the consumer-brand relationship (Hajli et al., 2017; McAlexander et al., 2002). The audience is the representation of the brand community. Therefore, Benefit framed its brand community and designed its messages based on the characteristics of its audience. They designed their messages dressed in femininity, showing females or males with female characteristics or posts that processed typical feminine hobbies and colors (pink) into the posts. Benefit designed its message taking the age of their audience into account, as generation Z is less tied to gender attributed characteristics, and therefore Benefit felt like they can design all their messages relatively feminine, even when portraying men.

Within this theme Benefit mainly incorporated ideological and mechanical identification through all three strategies of similarity, commonality, and hidden division while appealing to pathos, as they often addressed feelings, as well as logos, as they pointed out how the all consumers can reach the same level of beauty as Benefit emphasized what products to use. Benefit could design its messages preferably feminine as its consumers were likely to be part of a generation that is less tied to gender attributed characteristics, and therefore, they felt like they can design all messages rather feminine, even when portraying men.

Moreover, Benefit designed its message also centered around friendships, and everything that the word friendship could imply. Consumers felt part of the community when they assigned similar values to friendship as Benefit did. Within the theme of maintaining and creating friendships Benefit mostly arranged its messages based on ideological identification and partly mechanical identification, again predominantly appealing to pathos and logos. The identification processes can vary based on individual perceptions. However, based on how Benefit designed its messages, also friendship is seen as a characteristic for women and, thus, for the brand.

When designing their communications, they seemed to have implemented elements that appealed to or were distinctive for the wealthy. Benefit's communication efforts addressed the consumers who have a heavy purse, which enables the consumer to enjoy high levels of comfort. Within this pattern, the taxonomies of identification ranged from mechanical, ideological, and analogical. The brand implemented all three strategies to reach all three types of identification. However, for the most prominent part, Benefit implemented similarity, encompassing resemblances between the audience and the messages of the brand. Once more, with the focus of the arguments on pathos and sometimes logos. Comfort and wealth were most likely widely represented as Benefit is part of the LVMH family, which contains solely



luxury brands who enjoy the exclusive image that they are not obtainable for everyone. Also, in general, cosmetics can be perceived as luxury products, when not available in regular drugstores.

Furthermore, their channel was designed to transfer the culture of Benefit. They framed their identity via their manifesto throughout the platform based on light-hearted jokes, initiating laughter. Within the theme that represented the overall culture of Benefit, mechanical and analogical identification were realized. Similarity and hidden division were the main strategies that Benefit used to design its messages. When looking at a large, they also used commonality. The brand mainly appealed to pathos, and sometimes to logos.

Lastly, Benefit designed its messages to create awareness around its charity and highlighted that they care about others as well. They designed their messages to generate goodwill. For this theme, Benefit enabled the consumer to identify with the brand mainly on an ideological level, and occasionally a mechanical level. The brand framed its communication efforts related to charity, giveaways, and contests in such way that the audience identified due to similarity, commonality, and hidden division, while predominantly appealing to ethos and pathos

The second sub-question included: "How does dissociation with Benefit may occur?". Benefit was able to maintain an evident and consistent brand community as part of their digital branding strategy. However, as digital branding includes multiple challenges, Benefit also consistently dissociated a broad audience. As highlighted before, Woodward (2003) states that dissociation encompasses the argument that not everyone identifies with the same messages and values communicated by a brand. Thus, by framing their brand community in a certain way, they automatically dissociated people. Regarding the level of femininity, they likely dissociated modern women. Women who have drifted away from the outdated and stereotypical view that women can solely be beautiful, rather than intellectual, and have 'safe' hobbies, such as knitting and baking.

Furthermore, Benefit distanced people who are introverts and prefer to be alone. This could be due to bad experiences with previous friendships or simply because it is their personal preference. Bluntly, Benefit could have disassociated people who are not able to enjoy the same level of comfort and wealth and perhaps feel jealousy towards those who do. Additionally, people could have distanced themselves from Benefit if they do not level with the jokes or slang Benefit incorporated. Lastly, people with different ethnic backgrounds and the male supporters of the brand could have felt dissociated from the brand based on the charities which and individuals who Benefit provided help to. Altogether, that one does not

feel identified with the brand does not necessarily include brand dislike (Trump, 2010). However, the dissociation that occurred could have initiated a decrease in the brand's success as consumers could have felt like they could not meet the standards that Benefit presented and left the audience dissatisfied (Smith & Speed, 2011).

The third sub-question included: "How does Benefit use cultural branding towards common identities?". As explained in the theoretical framework, cultural branding could support the connection between consumers and Benefit as it is a strategy where a brand adapts its branding into an ideology, which can result in breaking the standards. Benefit used cultural branding as they challenged normative gender roles and often addressed inner beauty. The first strategy of cultural branding that they used on their digital media platforms showed the support of the LGBTQ community. On their platform they showed people who are blurring the normative gender roles. Benefit offered a platform to those who are not largely accepted by society, let alone to play with beauty, reach perfection, and become well-known beauty gurus. Some parts of society and cultures still disapprove of men wearing make-up and view it as an odd phenomenon. Regardless that Benefit implied femininity when they portrayed someone from the LGBTQ community with beauty products, they did not automatically imply that someone from the LGBTQ community wanted to be a woman. They tried to shift the line of normative structures as they showed beauty as a hobby for males and females. They tried to highlight that anyone can use make-up too without being judged and without making assumptions about someone's gender and just keep it on the same level as when women would use make-up. Benefit tried to move towards the assumption that men can wear make-up without clumping them together in sacks and shoeboxes, which is typically something one would do when stereotyping masculinity and femininity.

The second cultural branding strategy was represented when Benefit tried to put the focus on inner beauty. They highlighted that the audience should feel good on the outside and the inside. Via a system that is focused on laughter and making puns, they tried to make the audience feel good about themselves instead of always initiating the infinite comparison between the consumer and the idealized models. Additionally, by implementing the 'Bold is Beautiful' project, they showed that they care for others. Whereas generally, beauty-brands can be perceived as egocentric and appearance-focused, Benefit implied inner beauty as they created new ideologies focused on external and internal beauty.

In short, as Benefit used its digital media platform to communicate ideologies, such as men can be feminine too, and beauty is also derived from doing good and not just looking good. The brand seized some opportunities and tried to stand out through disruption, as they

sometimes showed a different angle on beauty than the traditional standards. However, Benefit only differentiated themselves to some extent by this and thus did not show a radically different point of view than the standardized perspective that is imposed by society. The brand lacked putting the beauty paradigm in a broader context as it did not include crowdcultures, which could have resulted in more considerable disruption in the beauty industry. It was expected that Benefit would be more ground-breaking and would have implemented more cultural branding to move towards crowdcultures. Therefore, exerting more direct influence on a cultural level, via their digital media channels. This was envisioned based on their history of providing in certain products when others declined, e.g., the nipple stain for exotic dancers. However, the audience could still have valued the attempts of cultural branding and move towards common identities. Then, crowdcultures could have been included based on the idea of blurring normative gender roles and blurring the eternal strive for duplicating the unblemished models.

The answer to the main research question, “How does Benefit influence their consumer-brand relationship by promoting identification through their digital media channels?” is based on the rhetorical analysis and the answers of the sub-questions. The rhetorical analysis was suited as identification and persuasion were at the core of Benefit’s relationship with its audience. To start, despite that all types of identification frequently occurred, the main type of identification that arose from the dataset was mechanical. Mechanical identification implied that the consumers operated with a biased perspective because they are already familiar with the idea and the subject. As mechanical identification was represented through each theme, it can be anticipated that Benefit influenced their consumer-brand relationship mainly through using cues that the consumers were already familiar with and by implementing frameworks that are in line with the consumer’s unconsciously biased perspective. Therefore, it was not surprising that Benefit mainly used similarity as a strategy to influence the consumer-brand relationship. As similarity rather happens on the surface and is obvious, the consumer could easier (unconsciously) recognize the cues and frameworks. Mostly, they promoted identification while appealing to pathos. They supported their taxonomies of identification and identification strategies predominantly with arguments that addressed the emotion and feelings of the audience.

When going more into depth regarding the brand-consumer relationship and acts of identification and persuasion, the relationship was mainly centered around the relationship the audience had with Benefit. Therefore, the identification was collective, which was expected based on the study of McAlexander et al. (2002) and Tajfel and Turner (1979). Benefit often

visualized similarities and wrote in first person. Therefore, one could have felt like they were a part of the brand. Benefit echoed its identity and culture; hence, its channels took care of the reproduction of the company's culture, which resulted in a tighter community. Thus, the brand community as a representation of the different types of identification was highly important for influencing the strong consumer-brand relationship.

Moreover, based on Von Wallpach et al. (2017), it can be anticipated that due to the brand community occurring in all the patterns, it was a clear example of how the consumers were continually influencing the brand its meaning and vice-versa. Due to the engagement that Benefit regularly initiated, they tried to manage the experience that consumers are having with the brand (Dayal et al., 2000), which, as discussed, are likely to result in positive feelings towards the brand. Benefit created a platform for the brand and consumers to hold an ongoing conversation to maintain or reach higher levels of consumer loyalty. The consumers probably experienced the online environment of Benefit as a place which is destined for feminine people, where friendship is seen as a key component, in which a relatively wealthy audience is welcomed, but also in which one partly shifts the focus to the inside as well – feeling and radiating positivity through laughter and activities of creating goodwill. Furthermore, this tight brand community where they target one specific group was the representation of high engagement levels. Benefit framed its channels based on certain values, and within this digital platform, the consumer could have acted and responded as it desired. The conversation remained controlled to some level as the brand had set its framework. Therefore, this research showed that there is a consistently carried out brand community (cross-channels) and based on Moore (2015), Parka and Lee (2009), Fetscherin and Heinrich (2015), Hajli et al. (2017), Zhou et al. (2012) and Papista and Dimitriadis (2012), it can be anticipated that the brand community and cultural branding were of great importance for the strong consumer-brand relationship, and to create ongoing online conversation via a two-way street.

Moreover, Benefit influenced the relationship through dissociation as they created a platform where a proportionate response was in place. It remains a disputable subject that can be approached through different points of view. However, it appeared that dissociation as part of identification did influence the relationship between consumers and the brand as they have such a tight brand-community which represented specific values.

Lastly, it was expected that Benefit tried to influence the relationship through cultural branding. Cultural branding was defined as a strategy where one adapts its branding into a specific ideology and breaks with standards (Holt, 2016). Benefit partly succeeded including cultural branding by promoting ideologies. However, as mechanical identification was the

most used type of identification, it was not surprising that they did not regularly break with society's standards. Cultural branding was not represented by all the patterns and not used to include crowdcultures consistently. Benefit accepting, including, and promoting shifted gender norms and roles was one of their most prominent representations of including cultural branding. The divided focus between inner and external beauty was part of their cultural branding techniques to influence the consumer-brand relationship. It could have been beneficial for Benefit if they had included more cultural branding, as it could have influenced the consumer-brand relationship even more. Therefore, it could have enabled Benefit to become more iconic and in relation to its brand community strengthen its competitive position (Holt 2016). However, Benefit did maintain strong cultural values, and they did succeed in designing the communication of their identity, strengthening the brand (Smith & Speed, 2011).

To conclude, Benefit went beyond consumers needing beauty products because without the products consumers would be unattractive. Benefit portrayed that consumers solely needed Benefit's beauty products when they wanted to represent the same values as the brand does. On account of Benefit using different identification strategies, they succeeded in influencing its audience by creating common ground and persuading consumers in different ways on their digital media channels. Eventually, based on the study of Martínez and del Bosque (2013) and Rubio et al. (2015), the platform of Benefit contributed to increasing the loyalty and trust of consumers. Due to the increase in loyalty and trust, consumers were likely to start cross-buying as one aspires to embody the same values regarding femininity, friendship, wealth, laughter, and goodwill. As consumers can identify with the brand and as Benefit tried to make the consumer feel confident, this resulted in positive attitudes towards the brand and, thus, a positively charged consumer-brand relationship. Benefit was expected to be more influential by being ground-breaking and inclusive, generating an even more positive consumer-brand relationship. Therefore, they minimally contributed to the paradigm shift in the beauty market, which aimed to empower women and to move away from ideas regarding standardized beauty norms.

### *5.1. Theoretical and practical managerial implications*

The current study showed findings that could have theoretical implications. The results showed the tight interconnectedness between brand communities and identification taxonomies, strategies, and rhetorical appeals on Benefit's digital media platforms. This exemplified identification as a key factor within online built brand-consumer relationships

through digital branding. Furthermore, the current research offered a rhetorical analysis approach guided by the identification theory in a contemporary environment. Therefore, it showed a clear overview of how digital communication and digital branding can implement persuasion through identification to reach higher levels of trust and strengthen consumer-brand relationships in the beauty industry. Therefore, this study reduced the gap in how relationships between consumers and brands are embodied by offering a different view on how consumers can experience the online environment and be persuaded through identification. However, the findings did not acknowledge the evidence for the strength of the consumer-brand relationship when different taxonomies of identification, strategies, or appeals occurred. Additionally, it also did not prove the implications the specific taxonomies of identification had for loyalty and trust.

Also, the findings from the rhetorical analysis of the consumer-brand relationship through identification could have managerial implications. As Benefit continually targeted an expressly framed audience, they dissociated a broad audience and lacked integrating cultural branding. Benefit could have possibly obtained an even tighter, and at the same time, a bigger community if they had designed their messages differently. The brand could become more iconic, integrating a bigger audience in a broader context through cultural branding. Moreover, Benefit could also use more information from their website on their Instagram channel. This would allow the community to get more insight into the process behind the posts, reflecting the culture and the identity of the brand even to a more considerable extent and support the positive brand identity that Benefit tries to create due to transparent communication. Additionally, this could be a way to decrease the brand image that perhaps negatively reinforces racial stereotypes.

## *5.2. Limitations*

A limitation of the study included the assumption that consumers in a brand community have positive attitudes towards the brand and that this resulted in brand identification and higher loyalty, however, this does not necessarily need to be the case. Furthermore, triangulation was included to ensure validity. Nevertheless, this is not a guarantee for valid results. Moreover, despite that the methodology described purposeful sampling in detail, why and when the data were relevant, the ‘samplable’ units were not theoretically defined (Silverman, 2011). Reflecting on the role of the researcher, although the researcher undertook measures to ensure transparency, the researcher could have been biased. Therefore, the reliability of the study could have been affected. The interpretation of a biased researcher

could lack reasonability (Riesmann, personal correspondence in Silverman, 2011). Also, the findings could be dependent on accidental circumstances when produced (Kirk & Miller, in Silverman, 2011). Other tools to increase reliability could have been including a research diary or an inter-rater-reliability tests.

### *5.3. Further research*

Suggestions for further research include focusing on consumers, the audience, and different kinds of relationships within the community. A difference in age and gender (demographics) could exist, thus contributing to different movements within the brand community. This would imply a more consumer perspective focused research instead of a brand perspective focused research. Also, future research could focus on measuring the strength and quality of the consumer-brand relationship in relation to the identification taxonomies, strategies, and rhetorical appeals and whether this affects to what extent it influences brand identification, trust, and loyalty. Additionally, future research could take a broader approach and design cross-cultural research with different brands and compare the outcomes to paint an overall picture of (different) international digital branding strategies through identification.

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## Appendix A.

### Phase 1: Processing data

Table A1: Codebook overview of the first phase of the rhetorical analysis (example 1)

<b>Phase 1</b>	
<i>Processing data</i>	
<i>Visual</i>	<i>Textual</i>
<p><i>Objects</i></p> <p>Make-up (beauty)</p> <p>Concealer (hide flaws)</p> <p>Cupcake (fun, party, sweet, unhealthy)</p> <p>Frosting (on the cake, just as the concealer on the face/ to make something look perfect)</p> <p>Sprinkles (decoration for younger people)</p> <p>Cherries (perfection, cherry on top)</p> <p><i>Settings</i></p> <p>Party (fun, energetic)</p> <p><i>Salience</i></p> <p><i>Cultural symbols</i></p> <p>Cherry (exotic fruit)</p> <p><i>Size - x</i></p> <p><i>Color</i></p> <p>Pink (Sweet/feminine/friendship)</p> <p>Purple ((feminine/ energy/ romantic/ luxury)</p> <p>Nude (neutral)</p> <p><i>Tone - Fun</i></p> <p><i>Focus - Product (ad)</i></p> <p><i>Foreground</i></p> <p>Concealer (more important than cake)</p> <p><i>Overlapping</i></p> <p>Product &amp; cupcake (names are similar – but at the same time they contradict)</p>	<p>Balanced beauty diet (transferring the meaning of the cupcakes (food) to the beauty product and the cupcakes contradict with what society perceives as ‘diet’)</p> <p>Cakeless Concealer (people do not want their make-up to look like cake (symbolic utterance in beauty industry))</p> <p>Head to (call for action/ engagement)</p>



Table A2: Codebook overview of the first phase of the rhetorical analysis (example 2)

<b>Phase 1</b>	
<i>Processing data</i>	
<i>Visual</i>	<i>Textual</i>
<i>Objects</i>	
Man (beauty influencer)	Selfie (Popular word for, mainly younger, people who engage on social media platforms)
Long lashes & full lips (feminine characteristics & beauty)	
Rosy cheeks (good health & cosmetics)	#friendswithbenefit (funny, highlighting the community & representation of friends)
Red hair (remarkable/ original, red specifically: courage/ sensual)	
<i>Settings</i>	
Living room lighting (at home/ casual)	
<i>Salience</i>	
<i>Cultural symbols - x</i>	
<i>Size - x</i>	
<i>Color</i>	
Neutral/ earth tones (not drawing attention)	
<i>Tone – Sultry (Sexualize)</i>	
<i>Focus – Man (with perfect make-up look)</i>	
<i>Foreground – Face (drawing attention to the make-up)</i>	
<i>Overlapping - x</i>	

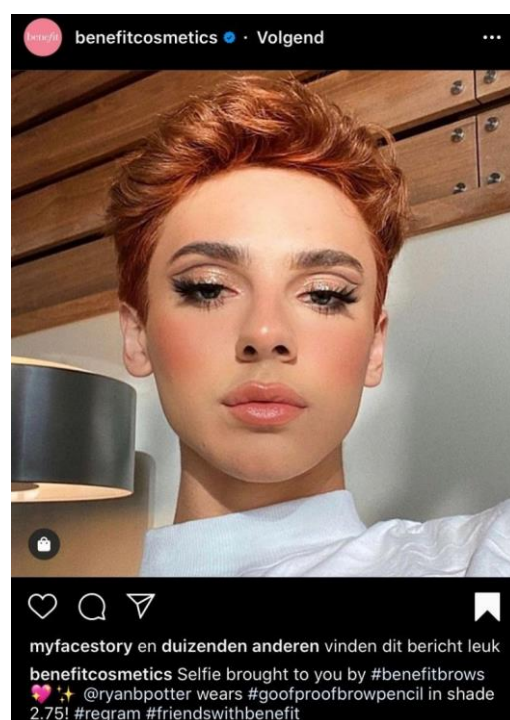
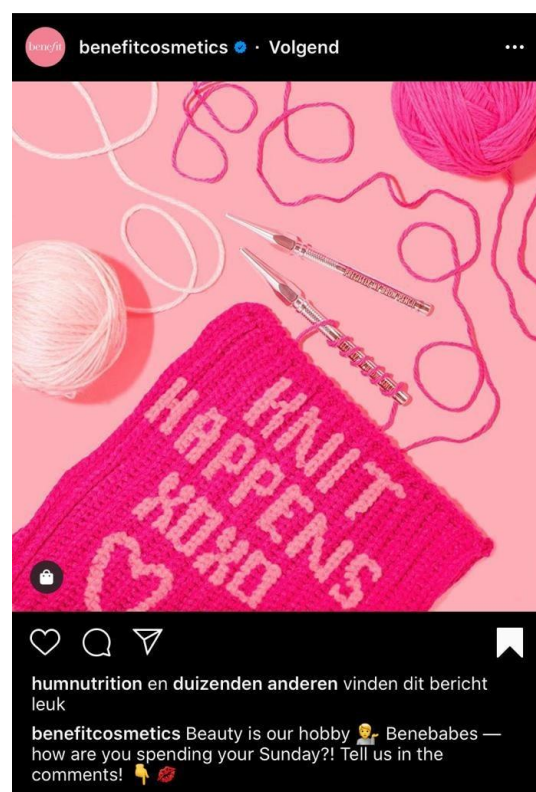


Table A3: Codebook overview of the first phase of the rhetorical analysis (example 3)

<b>Phase 1</b>	
<i>Processing data</i>	
<p><i>Visual</i></p> <p><i>Objects</i> Wool (traditional/ finesses/style)</p> <p>Brow products (visualization product and here; as knitting utensils)</p> <p>Scarf (accessory)</p> <p><i>Settings</i> Knitting (traditionally: ‘decent’ female hobby)</p> <p><i>Saliency</i> <i>Cultural symbols - x</i> <i>Size - x</i> <i>Color</i> Pink (sweet/feminine/friendship) White (innocence/purity/goodness) <i>Tone – Decent &amp; funny</i> <i>Focus – Text on scarf ‘knit happens’ and ‘xoxo’ (joke/ laughter and language used by younger people)</i> <i>Foreground - x</i> <i>Overlapping – wool &amp; brow products (intertwined)</i></p>	<p><i>Textual</i></p> <p>Beauty is our hobby (personal pronoun, informal, and highlighting beauty is just as good a hobby as knitting is)</p> <p>Benebabes (name of the community)</p> <p>How are you spending your Sunday? (personal pronoun &amp; call for action/ engagement)</p>



## Appendix B.

Code tree: Overview rhetorical situation

Table B1: Operationalization elements with examples of categories and open codes

<b>Rhetorical Situation</b>	<b>Category Characteristics</b>	<b>Examples Categories</b>	<b>Examples Open codes</b>
<b>Audience</b>	Individuals who can be influenced by the post	Girls/ (young) women (light skin tone)	Pink
			High heels
			Scrunchie
			Female influencer (light skin tone)
			Female torso (light)
			Nail polish (on light hand)
		Anyone (male/ female) who is into brows	Brow products
			Male Influencer
			Brow contest
			“How many #benefitbrows products do you have in your make-up collection?!”
Brow-products in store			
<b>Context</b>	Context of in which and with what purpose the post is created	Direct promoting product(s)	Product
			Explanation Product
			Price
			Availability (stores)
		Influencer promoting event	Influencer
			Description event
			Location event
			Date Event
		Visualization Store	Chairs

		(offline experience)	Product range
			Chandelier
			Doll statue

## Appendix C.

Code tree: Overview taxonomies of identification

Table C1: Operationalization elements with examples of categories and open codes

Type of Identification	Category Characteristics	Examples Categories	Examples Open codes
<b>Analogical</b>	Meaning of an order is transferred to another order. Symbolic utterances to gain new insights.	Setting	Beach
			Tanning beds
			Manor
		Food	Cupcake
			Ice Cream
			Glazed Bagel
			(exotic) Fruits
<b>Mechanical</b>	An individual unconsciously links or connects an idea and a subject.	female influencer	Eye with long lashes
			Beauty products that make you look perfect
			Desi Perkins
		Winning	Contest
			Reward
			Giveaway
<b>Ideological</b>	A system of social ideas framed for an ulterior purpose. Any topic at hand is required to search for overlap in ideas based on values and beliefs.	Male influencer	Moustache
			Patrick Starr
			His
		Friendship	“Tag someone you’re thankful for this year”
			Squad
			“TAG 3 besties
		Charity	Donate
			Empower women & girls



			<b>Bold is Beautiful</b>
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## Appendix D.

Code tree: Overview identification strategies

Table D1: Operationalization elements with examples of categories and open codes

<b>Identification Strategies</b>	<b>Category Characteristics</b>	<b>Examples Categories</b>	<b>Examples Open codes</b>
<b>Similarity</b>	Creating common ground in a visible and clear way.	Appearance	Selfie
			Skin Color
			Eye Color
			Recent undertaken activities (hobbies)
<b>Commonality</b>	Sharing similar perspectives, based on ideas and the abstract idea of something.	Expression of ideologic system	Sense of humor
			Goals in life
			Supporting LGBTQ
<b>Hidden Division</b>	Individuals feel (aspiration to become) part of a group.	Personal approach/ Inclusion	we/ your/ our
			Team
			Family

## Appendix E.

Code tree: Overview rhetorical appeals

Table E1: Operationalization elements with examples of categories and open codes

<b>Rhetorical Appeals</b>	<b>Category Characteristics</b>	<b>Examples Categories</b>	<b>Examples Open codes</b>
<b>Ethos</b>	Benefit for being Benefit influencing the public in a suggestive way	Bold is Beautiful	Donate
			Inspired
<b>Pathos</b>	Emotional argument, addressing feelings	Feelings towards certain situations (charity, humor, hobbies)	Sympathy (link to charity)
			light-hearted joke
			Smiling
<b>Logos</b>	Rational argument, making sense to the audience	Outcome of using a product	Products used
			Price
			Availability store

## Appendix F.

Code tree: Overview of the five patterns and main concepts

Table F1: Patterns and main concepts with examples of categories and open codes

<b>Patterns</b>	<b>Main Concepts</b>	<b>Most Occurring Categories</b>	<b>Open Codes</b>
<b>Dressed in femininity</b>	Brand Community	Girls/ (young) women (light skin tone)	slim waist
			Female (young)
			Light skin tone
			Pink nail polish
			accessories/ jewelry
	Dissociation	Other	Age
			Skin Color
			Gender
			Posture
			Hobbies
	Cultural Branding	Male influencers	Transgender
			Make-up
Long lashes			
<b>Maintaining and creating friendships</b>	Brand Community	Friendship is important	Better together
			#friendwithbenefit
			TAG 3 besties
	Dissociation	Other	“Badgals”
			Orange nail polish
			Anti-social
<b>Level of comfort and wealth</b>	Brand Community	Enjoying multiple levels of comfort	Pearls
			LIVM Family

			Manors
	Dissociation	Other	Less/ not wealthy
			Not everyone's goal
<b>“Laughter is the best cosmetic”</b>	Brand Community	Light-hearted jokes	Quotes
			Signs
	Dissociation	Other	Too mainstream
	Cultural Branding	Beauty on the inside	Laughter
			Happy
			Self-worth
<b>Creating goodwill</b>	Brand Community	Empower other girls/ women	Empower
			Donate
			Inspire
	Dissociation	Other	Excluding men
			Different Ethnic backgrounds
	Cultural Branding	Charity	Contribute
			Caring for others