

Seek discomfort by saying “Yes!”

A Narrative and Semiotic Analysis on the representation of brand cultures in mediatised environments

Student Name: Elisa da Luz Castilho

Student Number: 616451

Supervisor: Dr. Willemien Sanders

Master Media Studies - Media & Creative Industries
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

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1. Introduction

The rise of digital platforms is reshaping the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural products in profound and complex ways (Duffy et al., 2019). Duffy et al. (2019) state that platformization entails substantial changes in labour, creativity, and citizenship activities. One significant transformation regards the increasing interdependence between producers in the contemporary media ecology. The ever-growing importance of having consumers contribute to the creation and expansion of content prompts media brands to find new means to involve and engage their audience (Jenkins, 2006; Massanari, 2015; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Consequently, scholars argue that contemporary brands do not exist merely as advertising or marketing resources. Instead, they actively seek to cultivate a consumer relationship through and around their symbolic resources, opening themselves up as spaces for the collective construction of social and cultural meanings, resulting in the formation of brand cultures (Scolari, 2009; Banet-Wiser, 2012; Billard & Moran, 2019).

These brand cultures represent values, attitudes, goals, and forms of expression that transcend a simple commodity or a media product and become intertwined with individuals' everyday lives (Banet-Wiser, 2012). In the media environment, this can be achieved by establishing a narrative brand or a content world, concepts proposed by Scolari (2009) and Jenkins (2006). Well-established narrative brands and content worlds represent a set of characteristics that define and differentiate the brand, making it possible to generate a series of stories around it, deriving from both producers and consumers. Therefore, brand cultures in mediatized environments rely on the labour of internet users, defined as user-generated content, and online communities that originate from contemporary participatory spaces (Daugherty et al., 2008; Shao, 2009; Banet-Wiser, 2012).

Accordingly, this study aims to identify the elements that compose a media brand culture by looking at the content and online community established around a particular media brand – Yes Theory. Originally a YouTube channel, Yes Theory is a digital media entity aiming to inspire and empower a global community to live outside their comfort zone (Yes Theory, 2022). Ultimately, the brand places itself as more than a media provider, but rather a philosophy, a way of life, and a community. Correspondently, the viewers and supporters of the brand organize themselves in an online community that takes the form of a Facebook group. Based on these concepts

and information, the study is guided by the following research question: *how is brand culture reflected in Yes Theory's content and community?*

Furthermore, since the content world of Yes Theory is primarily based on narratives, the sub-question is: *which are the shared narratives between the producer and the consumers?* – in this case, the Yes Theory YouTube channel and the Yes Fam community, respectively. Moreover, these narratives must convey the brand cultural and moral framework, which in this study is based on Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) conceptualization of social capital. Thus, the second sub-question becomes: *how do the shared narratives constitute the community's cognitive social capital?*

1.1 Academic and social relevance

Regarding academic relevance, the present study aims to identify the elements that constitute a brand culture in the online media ecology, focusing primarily on the content from a YouTube channel and an online community organized as a Facebook group. Previous research on the development of brand cultures has focused on the investigation of commodity brands, such as Dove (Banet-Wiser, 2012), or content worlds built around fictional production from the legacy media, such as the television series 24 (Scolari, 2009). Conversely, this research analyses brand culture in an entirely online environment, thus contributing to the literature with a theoretical framework that ultimately combines branding strategies with concepts from media studies.

This research is also societally relevant since it is suggested that brand cultures can influence civic, cultural, and political participation by establishing a moral and ethical frame that guides the actions of members (Banet-Wiser, 2012; Billard & Moran, 2019). It is also debated that brand cultures raise current global topics to the awareness of a large audience while leveraging online participatory spaces to discuss relevant issues of concern (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016). Therefore, the study investigates the brand community's potential to prompt the involvement of its participants in civic society. Furthermore, Banet-Wiser (2012) reminds us that the relationship between culture and commercial logic deepens and becomes more entangled as branding strategies become normative contexts for developing personal identities, affect and social relations. Thus, by linking the brand to culture, this research challenges a long-held avoidance of defining culture in economic terms.

1.2 Chapter outline

The present study is structured into five chapters. First, the introduction determined the study's objective through the research question and supporting sub-questions. It has also addressed the research topic and its scientific and societal relevancy. Next, the theoretical background guiding the research is detailed in chapter 2. This study relies mainly on the concept of brand culture, which is then supported by appropriate theories and discussions within media studies. Subsequently, chapter 3 explains and justifies the research design, specifically the use of semiotics and narrative analysis, as well as purposive and homogenous sampling. Moreover, it outlines the instruments of analysis used to explore the concepts that answer the research question and address concerns of qualitative research validity, reliability, and ethics. Next, chapter 4 reports and interprets the analysis results in relation to the research question and theory. Lastly, the conclusion in chapter 5 discusses the implications of the findings and provides an ultimate answer to the central research question. In addition, it considers the limitations of the study while presenting suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides the theoretical framework guiding the research. It aims to present the existing literature that establishes brand culture within media studies. Accordingly, the first section of this chapter introduces the concept of brand culture, which is further detailed and supported by the concepts presented subsequently – namely content worlds, cultural acupuncture, social media entertainment, participatory culture, user-generated content, online communities, and social capital.

2.1 Defining brand cultures

Banet-Wiser (2012) claims that brands emerge from complex relationships between producers, commodities, and consumers. Brands strive to cultivate consumer relationships based on authentic feelings of affect, emotion, and trust. In recent years, these relationships have evolved into cultural contexts for everyday practices, as well as the development of personal identities and affectionate relationships, resulting in the conception of *brand cultures*. Thus, in an attempt to go past the commercial and economic perspectives, Banet-Wiser (2012) reasons that brand cultures are first and foremost *culture*. In this context, culture denotes the values and affects, aspirations and fears, tangible objects, and relationships upon which humans build their individual lives, social groups, and histories.

Branding is described by Banet-Wiser (2012) as the marketing strategy employed to attach social meaning to a commodity and make it more personally resonant with consumers. Since the value of a brand extends beyond a tangible product, successful branding differs from commodification in that it is a cultural phenomenon rather than an economic strategy. Therefore, contemporary brand cultures are so deeply ingrained in a culture that they have become indistinguishable from it. As a result, brand cultures produce – and thus reproduce – a relatively stable set of norms, beliefs, and values that work as a moral framework for the everyday practices of producers and consumers. Nevertheless, the author reasons that not all brand cultures mean the same, culturally or individually. Therefore, not all cultural practices represent opportunity spaces, but some cultural practices have more potential or are simpler to brand than others (Banet-Wiser, 2012).

Accordingly, Billard and Moran (2019) argue that, despite their origin in the marketing context in which they are valued for their persuasive and loyalty-retention functions and their financial worth, brands now act as a universal system of symbolic

expression and collective meaning-making. Thus, the development of brand cultures depends on an accumulation of positive affect originating from shared cultural mythologies, historical nostalgia, personal experiences and memories, and the roles brands play in consumers' everyday lives. Participating in brand cultures is equivalent to joining an ethical and moral frame, which offers endless potential for relief from the "hard, cold world" (Billard & Moran, 2019).

Lastly, Banet-Wiser (2012) explains that brand cultures operate in circular logic: individual consumers who are members of a brand culture have a shared history, which is produced and reproduced in the brand's narrative and tangible objects. This shared history is preserved and expanded as individuals participate and create in the brand culture. Based on this definition, the following sections present and discuss media theories that facilitate this branding circle.

2.2 Establishing a meaningful symbolic universe

Scolari (2009) agrees with the statements presented above by claiming that companies no longer rely on persuasive advertising to market products or services but rather strive to build a meaningful symbolic universe by developing and establishing a solid and consistent brand. Rather than only representing a set of values, the brand must express these values through specific texts. Therefore, a brand also proposes an aesthetic: a set of textures, colours, materials, and styles that set it apart from other brands.

The author differentiates between traditional, online, and narrative brands. Traditional brands are primarily constructed through iconic elements, such as logotypes and graphic design, whereas online brands are founded on users' interactive experiences (Scolari et al., 2012). Finally, *narrative brands* are based on a set of characters, subjects, and an aesthetic style that composes the brand's fictional world (Scolari, 2009). Jenkins (2012) provides a similar definition to narrative brands but refers to them as *content worlds*. According to the author, a content world is a network of characters, settings, situations, and values which can be used to generate a variety of stories.

These new narratives can emerge from commercial producers or communities (Jenkins, 2012). Similarly, Scolari (2009) reminds us that this set of distinguishing attributes that compose narrative brands – and content worlds – can be translated into various languages and media. Thus, it is a transferable set of properties that can be applied to multiple modes of expression. The practice of replicating and adapting

narratives to various media and genres is widely discussed in the literature as *transmedia storytelling* (Jenkins, 2006; Scolari, 2009; Bolin, 2011). In sum, transmedia storytelling involves the progression of texts across multiple technological platforms, taking advantage of each platform's unique qualities and abilities to develop a cohesive narrative.

Both concepts fit well with this study's object of research. First, the Yes Theory YouTube channel is constituted of recurring characters - the creators - and occasional characters. Second, the subject of the videos ranges widely from short travel documentaries to social experiments, extreme sports, and life update vlogs. Third, despite the variety of topics, the pronounced goal of the brand is to "seek discomfort". Still, the broad definition of comfort zone leaves much space for both the producers and viewers to interpret what discomfort means for them.

2.3 Influencing cultural, political, and civic practices

Banet-Weiser (2012) states that brand cultures influence not only consumer habits but also political, cultural, and civic practices. It is possible to draw a parallel between this statement and what Henry Jenkins (2012) calls *cultural acupuncture*. In his research, the author examines the Harry Potter content world – constituted by fictional characters such as Dumbledore, situations such as sorting students into houses, and values such as friendship – and the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) as its correspondent community. It is argued that the HPA engages in cultural acupuncture by using content world elements – and their aggregated meanings – as metaphors for understanding contemporary issues. The author concludes that the practice of cultural acupuncture stimulates civic engagement by mapping content worlds onto real-world problems.

Likewise, Kligler-Vilenchik's (2016) study addresses the role of content worlds in facilitating civic learning and translating youth voices into influence. Her research focuses on an informal group – the Nerdfighters – formed around a YouTube channel – the VlogBrothers. According to the author, the videos shared by the creators combine informal vlogging with broader civic and political issues, discussing relevant public concerns such as environmentalism, democratic processes like the importance of voting, and global issues such as the Arab Spring. By addressing those topics, the creators aim to "decrease world suck" (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016, p.4)

At the same time, the content encourages the viewers to explore their position as social change agents. Therefore, the group also engages in collective acts of "decreasing

world suck" – from setting charity campaigns to voting in elections – making them a successful case of translating cultural participation into real-world influence. Based on their sense of agency and real-world engagement, the author concludes the Nerdfighters go beyond simply being an audience and are instead considered a *public*.

According to Sonia Livingstone (2005), an audience can be conceptualized as public when its activities constitute a form of cultural engagement that matters to the public sphere. Conversely, as media become more integrated into public and civic processes, the diverse media might alter the activities of publics for better or worse. In conclusion, these concepts form a concise framework for identifying political, civic, and cultural practices embedded in brand cultures.

2.4 Building an authentic and intimate consumer-brand relationship

According to Banet-Wiser (2012), the notion of *intimacy* and *authenticity* often attracts and retains consumers as loyal members of brand cultures. As a result, individual consumers trust the affective feeling provided by brand cultures, regardless of their understanding that brand managers carefully cultivate this trust. The author further explains that an inauthentic setting may isolate consumers from social engagement, portraying brand interactions as artificial and dehumanising (Banet-Wiser, 2012).

Cunningham and Craig (2019) take a less nuanced stance by arguing that commercial and marketing strategies inevitably contradict the ideas of authenticity and community. Thus, media contents are understood and experienced as authentic precisely because consumers perceive them as not commercial.

The authors explore *social media entertainment* (SME) as an emergent sector within online media that delivers high levels of authenticity (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). This sector is driven by the professionalisation of amateur content creators who rely on novel entertainment and communicative formats (e.g., vlogging, gameplay, and do-it-yourself) to build potentially sustainable businesses based on large followings that can span multiple online environments. Therefore, SME's infrastructure includes multiple competing platforms that combine online video sharing with social networking features. These platforms provide amateur producers with scale, technological accessibility, and, in the case of YouTube, income and upskilling. They also provide open access to endless information in numerous modalities (e.g., video, image, text) and new formats (e.g., vlogs, gifs, memes) while also promoting social media networking

tools such as comment sections, like and share buttons, as well as friends and followers (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

One of the central actors of SME is the personality video blogger, or vlogger, which the legacy media industry (i.e., the Hollywood film industry) considers to lack storytelling skills and media talent in production and performance. However, as previously discussed, this distinction makes these creators' content stir away from commercial and be perceived as authentic. Instead, vloggers have established a brand based on their personality and the extremely normative authenticity discourses surrounding the practice of vlogging. Rather than a genre, Cunningham and Craig (2019) consider vlogging as "a core SME format that deepens the effect of intimacy between creators and their community" (p. 63). In other words, SME creators convey both authenticity and a sense of closeness and familiarity with their viewers.

Based on this definition, the authors introduce the model of *brand-authenticity-community relationship* based on three fundamental elements. The first is that SME authenticity claims are based on comparisons with the presumed inauthenticity of traditional fictional media formats. Thus, the level of authenticity expected of SME creators and their content rejects well-imagined stories and established narrative-fiction conventions that are produced, written, and acted by trained professionals. The second characteristic regards the distinguished level of interactivity between the creators and their community. Given the affordances of social media platforms, SME creators are subject to real-time fan and subscriber responses and feedback unusual in other screen formats. Finally, the third aspect characterises the two-way communication between creators and fans by the constant practice of relational labour, which is also considered the primary source of authenticity and community building (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

Accordingly, Baym (2015) describes relational labour as consistent and ongoing communication with audiences to develop social relationships that lead to paid work. This practice differs from affective labour – a term most used in most Marxist traditions – since the connections originating from relational labour are always linked to monetary gain. Furthermore, the author reasons that relational labour hints at a future in which even professionals outside the creative context feel obligated to interact with consumers to build social and long-term relationships. Conclusively, the future of work is cultivating audiences that operate as affectively engaging communities.

Abidin (2015) contributes to the authenticity discussion by defining the model of *perceived interconnectedness* that influencers use to communicate intimacy to their followers, or in other words, to cultivate feelings of closeness and familiarity. The author conceptualises influencers as high-profile internet microcelebrities that rely on digital platforms to monetise their personal lives, thus encompassing the work of personality vloggers.

Abidin's (2015) model points out the differences between the "new" digital media and the "old" industry. The author compares the legacy media's parasocial relations – based on Horton & Wohl's (1956) notion of parasocial relations – with influencers' perceived interconnectedness. In her framework, parasocial relations are mediated through a rigid infrastructure of television and radio technology, promoting a hierarchical organisation of actors in which media personalities control the discursive dialogue. These media personalities engage in light conversations that appear informal, relaxed, and responsive, leading to a sense of intimacy. Still, the communication structure is one-to-many, and the level of reciprocity is low once viewers are unable to respond to a unidirectional flow of content. Ultimately, parasocial relations are built around media personalities' impression of rapport and depend heavily on performances to succeed (Abidin, 2015).

On the other hand, perceived interconnectedness is mediated by a more democratic and equalising infrastructure of social media platforms, enabling a horizontal organisation of actors. The communication structure is one-to-many – when influencers publish posts to hundreds of thousands of followers, and one-to-one – when influencers favourite, repost, or reply to individual responses from fans via comments, blog replies, or personal emails. The bidirectional dialogue enables a high level of reciprocity, and consequently, influencers and followers co-produce and shape the conversation. Conclusively, perceived interconnectedness is primarily sustained by intimacy strategies (Abidin, 2015).

The author explains that the intimacies negotiated are impressions felt by followers, regardless of whether these intimacies are genuine or not. Thus, the modifier "perceived" is used instead of "actual" (Abidin, 2015). Influencers directly manage their self-representation and relationships with followers using the features of social media platforms. For instance, one of the most prominent traits is documenting daily routines' trivial and ordinary aspects to display intimacy. These behind-the-scenes depictions of relatable and trivial practices give followers the impression that they can access the

private, typically unreachable, parts of influencers' lives. Undoubtedly, other forms of media, such as fan magazines and behind-the-scenes entertainment news, also reveal the backstage of professional productions. However, these are generally crafted by a production team and distributed with an unavoidable delay.

Conversely, influencers' content is more amateur and rawer, enabling immediate interactivity and response from followers. Hence, interactions with influencers are more personal, direct, fast, and thus intimate once bureaucratic procedures and social distance are removed (Abidin, 2015). Consequently, the author states that influencers are considered more intriguing and compelling than actors because they reflect commonality.

The Yes Theory YouTube channel fits into the conceptualisation of SMEs and influencers – outlined by Cunningham and Craig (2019) and Abidin (2015), respectively – once the creators produce semi-professional videos that are distributed through a digital platform. Therefore, the models presented in this section are essential to understanding the creators' contribution to the authenticity and intimacy expected in brand cultures.

2.5 Co-producing an experience

Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that brands are essentially a story told to the consumer. Successful stories transcend simple identification with tangible or intangible products. Instead, they become familiar, intimate, and personal narratives into which individuals incorporate their own stories – eventually positioning themselves as central characters in the brand's narrative. Consequently, brands interact with consumers in a context of relative freedom, enabling the co-production of an experience with consumers rather than predetermining and dictating such experience.

Billard and Moran (2019) also recognise that brands are co-constructed by firms and consumers. This producer-consumer relationship has further consequences for existing brand culture since it constitutes a new prevailing logic in branding: the co-production of brand meaning. In this scenario, brand meanings no longer derive from a projected brand identity but from a complex and engaged negotiation among actors. As a result, contemporary branding practices rely on a participatory opportunity structure that strengthens the bond between brand communities and the branded entities around which they are assembled.

In media studies, these spaces and opportunities for co-production fall under the broad concept of *participatory culture*. According to Henry Jenkins' (2006) notion of participatory culture, our individual and collective engagement with mass media drastically changed in the early 1990s, when the internet became more widely available in workplaces and homes. However, Massanari (2015) stresses that active participation in popular media is not new. The author notes that fanzines, underground publications, and other audience productions have existed since the 1940s. However, the scale and pervasiveness of consumers' ability to respond to the media and, more importantly, be heard by media producers increased rapidly concurrently with the internet's penetration into people's everyday lives. Correspondingly, Cunningham and Craig (2019) state that the contemporary online domain is characterised by a level of interactivity and audience-centricity unprecedented in media industries.

Deuze (2007) explains that participatory media production and individualised media consumption are two distinct but interconnected trends characterising the new media ecology. Accordingly, the author argues that consuming media also implicates producing some form of media. Consequently, users' online behaviour always seems to involve some level of participation, co-creation, and collaboration, depending on the degree of openness or closedness of the media concerned. Here, the author uses the terms 'open' and 'closed' media to refer to the extent to which a media company shares its operating modes with its viewers (i.e., the level of transparency or agency consumers have over their user experience). Kligler-Vilenchik (2016) also argues that all users in a participatory culture environment are considered potential producers who can contribute creatively to the group, even though this may be a goal to aim for instead of the actual reality of most groups.

From a fan studies perspective, Jenkins (2006) suggests that in participatory culture, consumers organise themselves as a creative social community that employs popular culture as a raw material, which is then reappropriated for their own objectives. In a previous study, Jenkins (1992) describes a fandom as "a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community" (p. 46).

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that contemporary online participatory culture prompts not only the activity of users as producers and thus the creation of new texts, but also the establishment of a particular culture and community around a shared narrative – that can arguably derive from a brand.

2.6 Establishing a brand community

Cova and Cova (2002) define brand communities as "networks of societal micro-groups in which individuals share strong emotional links, a common subculture, and a life vision" (p. 599). Therefore, the affective bond among consumers creates a social network that eventually supports these individuals as loyal members of brand culture, contributing significantly to the brand's value. In this case, the brand acts as the foundation for social interaction and cohesion.

Barnet-Wiser (2012) also states that brand cultures form communities of consumers connected by affect and emotion and a sense of authentic experience and history. Likewise, Billard and Moran (2019) recognise 'affection' towards the community's formation and subsequent endurance as a prominent characteristic of brand cultures. According to the authors, brand communities are attached primarily by shared emotion and passion.

Nevertheless, Billard and Moran's (2019) study contests the current characterisations of branding, including the one established by Barnet-Wiser (2012), which places brand managers at the centre of brand cultures as dominant forces shaping their contours. Instead, the authors propose the term *networked brands*. In their perspective, the branding processes in contemporary culture are not firm-centric because the cultural significance, and both positive and negative affect generated by the brand, are not solely the result of top-down brand management. Rather, the structure of contemporary brand culture allows consumers to participate in the development, maintenance, and transformation of a brand's equity as well as its cultural capital (Billard & Moran, 2019).

Still, the authors stress that brand managers are still involved and play a significant position in the branding process, given their symbolic and financial role in originating the brands around which communities develop and alter and the logic by which contemporary culture is organised (Billard & Moran, 2019). Therefore, Billard and Moran (2019) conclude that modern brands do not exist merely as advertising or marketing resources. Instead, they actively seek to cultivate social connection through and around their symbolic resources, opening themselves up as spaces for exchanging social and cultural meanings.

In media studies, Rheingold (2000) states that virtual communities emerge from lengthy public discussions with sufficient human feelings to build personal relationships

in mediatised environments. In this interactive space, individuals can effortlessly meet others with similar interests and aspirations and share their ideas and concerns in a supportive setting. He reasons that a virtual community can be as accurate and diverse as any physical community, with people talking, arguing, seeking information, organising politically, and falling in love. Furthermore, Shao (2009) mentions that joining an online group provides people with a sense of commitment and belonging and a feeling of importance. Lastly, Kligler-Vilenchik's (2016) study finds that for many participants, an online community is a social space where they can express their true selves among friends.

This study focuses on the Yes Fam, the online community established around the Yes Theory content world. The group's characteristics are detailed in this study's methods chapter. However, it is essential to address its organisation as a community around a media brand and thus its assumed conceptualisation as a brand community.

2.7 Relying on the labour of consumers

According to Banet-Weiser (2012), brand managers are responsible for setting the terms for brand cultures. However, given their cultural foundation, brand cultures rely primarily on the labour of consumers – or ordinary people. The author further elaborates that these practices may also benefit the consumer, even though they mainly contribute to the brand's growth and increase the manager's financial gains. Still, consumers are rewarded for working toward a common goal or creating a networked public with shared knowledge, problem-solving and learning skills.

Banet-Weiser (2012) refers to David Hesmondhalgh's (2010) conceptualization of *free labour*, which states that the internet is primarily constructed by the work of unpaid labourers rather than by paid employees. As previously discussed, media scholars increasingly view audiences as active participants who work for the media text and are thus willing to work for non-monetary rewards, such as social connections with other fans and deeper engagement with the texts themselves (Jenkins, 2006; Massanari, 2015; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). As a result, participatory culture platforms rely heavily on *user-generated content*.

Daugherty et al. (2008) define the term user-generated content (UGC) as "media content created or produced by the general public rather than paid professionals and primarily distributed on the internet" (p. 16). This definition implies that user-generated content is a form of free labour performed by Internet users. Since the present study

uses posts created by Facebook users as part of the dataset, mapping the characteristics of UGC becomes indispensable.

Scholars have created several categories based on the level of interaction between the user and the media. For instance, Shao (2009) proposes a three-figure classification of how individuals deal with UGM: consuming, participating, and producing. The first refers to users who never participate but consume the content by watching, reading, or viewing it. The second includes users that participate in both user-to-user interaction and user-to-content interaction. Lastly, the third form encompasses user-generated content in which the individual produces and shares his personal creations in text, images, audio, or video formats. The three activities represent a gradual path towards UGC behaviour in which consumers may become participants, thus broadening the participating population and assisting in developing online communities (Shao, 2009).

The motivation behind producing UGC is also broadly discussed in the literature. The theoretical assumption is that an individual's attitude towards UGC results from various origins and is most likely driven by different sources (Daugherty et al., 2008). Daugherty et al. (2008) rely on the value-expressive function, which encompasses attitudes that enable individuals to express or relate their self-concepts and values, improving one's image in the eyes of the world by matching moral beliefs. As a result, creators of UGC feel intrinsically gratified with a sense of self-esteem because they have created content and become members of an online community that shares and validates the principles they deem essential.

Similarly, Shao (2009) applies the uses and gratifications perspective. By assuming that humans are self-interested, the author claims that the creation of UGC derives from self-expression and self-actualization. Self-expression refers to the efforts to communicate one's own identity, particularly one's individuality. It can be explicit in blogging, videocasting, and other self-disclosure activities or implicit through the choice of subject, expressions, images, and style. On the other hand, self-actualization focuses on working and reflecting on one's identity. Thus, production is driven by the need to achieve behavioural goals such as seeking recognition, stardom, or personal efficacy (Shao, 2009).

In conclusion, individuals create user-generated content to interact with the content world and other users. This engagement is frequently argued to strengthen social interactions and form online communities. Moreover, the disposition of members

to invest time and effort in developing UGC and responding to other members' UGC is essential to the long-term sustainability of online communities (Shao, 2009).

2.8 Acquiring and developing social capital

As previously mentioned, Banet-Wiser (2012) argues that consumers benefit from participating and creating in brand cultures, even though this activity does not provide them with monetary gains. This notion is comparable to the development of *social capital* in online community participation, subject to many studies once these communities are regarded as online representations of society (Li et al., 2014).

According to Robert Putnam (1995), social capital refers to an individual's network of relationships and the resources ingrained within this network. Individuals are likely to acquire valuable social capital from others who possess qualities, skills, and knowledge that complement their own and are pertinent to solving a specific problem or achieving a goal. However, Bourdieu (1986) argues that this acquisition is inseparable from the context, despite social capital being inherent to the individual. Thus, social capital is embedded in economic, social, and cultural structures that characterize contemporary social relations and is implicated in the reproduction of inequalities and movements attempting to challenge them.

Therefore, the capacity of social capital to aggregate, develop, and distribute information is one of its most significant functions. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) categorized social capital based on the relations among members in the same network into three dimensions: structural, relational, and cognitive. The first dimension implies the general pattern of connections between the network members, while the second dimension indicates the member's relationships with another, for instance, respect or friendship. Finally, the third dimension refers to the member's shared language, codes, and narratives. Moreover, cognitive social capital represents the members' shared values, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as objectives, interests, and aspirations.

Furthermore, Li et al.'s (2014) study reveals that community members' cognitive social capital evolves as they interact with others engaging in the same practice and learn its skills, knowledge, discourses, and norms. Therefore, online communities grow in stages, and members' intentions to create UGC are influenced by various factors depending on the stage of the community development. First, the founders of community managers must establish a clear mission and shared vision at the initial stage and ensure that these two elements are properly articulated and communicated. Then, as

the online community matures, the creation of UGC is fueled by the perceived support for the members' communication rather than a shared vision. Thus, at this stage, managers must invest in expanding the interactive environment – for instance, through forums and other social media platforms – to continue stimulating members' intention to generate UGC (Li et al., 2014).

3. Methodology

This chapter explains the methods used to analyse the data for the study, specifically semiotic analysis and narrative analysis. Moreover, it describes the purposive sampling method and presents a detailed description of the sample used in the research. In addition, the concepts of the analysis are operationalized. Lastly, this chapter addresses concerns of validity, reliability, and the ethics of social media qualitative research.

3.1 Choice of method

This study combines two qualitative methods to answer the research question: semiotic analysis and narrative analysis. The present section clarifies the relationship between the methods, whilst the following subsections explain each of them in detail and their contributions to the analysis.

Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) defines the dialogue between media studies, semiotics, and narratology as *narrative media studies* or *transmedial narratology*. The author argues that a narrative is a textual act of representation. In other words, every narrative encodes a specific type of meaning. However, there is no precise definition of which types of signs are used to encode this meaning.

On the one hand, Ryan (2004) considers verbal language as the main semiotic support of narratives. The logical structure of narratives is articulated mostly through written and spoken words. Thus, language is the primary form of expressing the causal relationships that bind narrative scripts together. On the other hand, a narrative is also a cognitive construct of the interpreter in response to a text. As a result, for a text to be recognized as a narrative, the casual relationships do not have to be communicated explicitly in written or spoken language (Ryan, 2004).

Instead, the author compares the cognitive representation to a multimedia construct. In her opinion, mental images, and comparatively other media, can enhance the overall representation in ways that words cannot. Therefore, some meanings are better expressed visually and musically than verbally. These meanings should not be dismissed as insignificant to the narrative experience (Ryan, 2004). Consequently, Ryan (2004) determines that, in cognitive terms, a narrative is a mental image rather than a linguistic object.

In conclusion, combining these methods is appropriate for this study since the research question intends to uncover the elements present in different media texts –

namely YouTube videos and social media posts – that ultimately express a media brand culture. The narrative analysis focuses on identifying the shared narratives between brand and consumer, whilst the semiotic analysis allows identifying and interpreting signs that contribute to the narrative construction.

3.1.1 Narrative analysis

Research on multimodality – or multimedia – has traditionally focused on the verbal and non-verbal combination of communication processes or the text and image relationship, for instance, the contribution of typography and formatting to newspapers.

Nevertheless, Scolari (2009) argues that transmedia texts are primarily narrative structured rather than simply linguistic and visual. In this case, the narrative is the fundamental structure-creating device to produce meaning. As quoted by Burr (1995), "human beings are fundamentally storytellers who experience themselves and their lives in narrative terms" (p. 137). Thus, the ability to turn experiences into narratives appears to be a fundamental feature of the human urge to make meaning (Chandler, 2017).

Riessman (2008) defines *narrative* as the way the narrator "connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants the listener to take away from the story" (p.3). Essentially, a narrative analysis investigates how the speaker presents events in sequence and uses language to convey a certain point to an audience. Consequently, it allows the distinction between the story – the chronological course of the events – and the plot – the cause-and-effect relationship between them. Furthermore, the author states that stories frequently refer to something beyond themselves, such as social practices and common ways of thinking.

As presented in the previous section, scholars argue that the development of brand cultures is dependent on positive affect that emerge from shared cultural mythologies, historical nostalgia, personal experiences and memories, and the functions that brands play in people's daily lives (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Billard & Moran, 2019). Therefore, the narrative analysis is essential for identifying and classifying the shared narratives surrounding Yes Theory's brand community.

3.1.2 Semiotic analysis

A semiotic analysis can be applied to anything that holds meaning within a culture. Despite its origins in literature, images and moving images are the most

common data analysed with this method (Chandler, 2017). Scolari (2009) argues that semiotics is a valuable tool for researchers who need a unifying conceptual framework to analyse the convergence of different media and languages in a multimodal narrative world.

According to the Saussurean tradition, the task of the semiotician is to look beyond the specific texts or practices to establish their underlying conventions. Semiotics reminds us that we are constantly dealing with signs rather than an unmediated objective reality and that sign systems play a role in constructing meaning (Chandler, 2017). Berger (2010) identifies the sign as the fundamental unit of semiotics, defined conceptually as something that stands in for something else and, more technically, as a spoken or written word, a drawn figure, or a material object associated with a specific cultural concept. Signs have *denotative* meanings, which are the standard definitions recorded in dictionaries and understood by all speakers, and *connotative* meanings, which are associated meanings that, while often recognised by many speakers, may also be more context or group-specific (Berger, 2010).

Therefore, conducting a semiotic analysis involves recognising and listing the signs – verbal and non-verbal – and subsequently adding their corresponding connotations (Chandler, 2017). The signs are then organised into codes, which operate as an interpretative framework that transcends a single text (Chandler, 2017). According to Heath (1981), "a code is distinguished by its coherence, its homogeneity, its systematicity, in the face of the heterogeneity of the message, articulated across several codes" (p. 129). Therefore, coding allows the organisation of signs into relevant categories, ultimately assisting in the interpretation of the findings.

Ultimately, semiotic analysis is a beneficial method to identify and interpret the implicit elements from the dataset – written, spoken, and visual – that reflect brand culture.

3.2 Data collection and sampling

Data collection is critical in research because the dataset is intended to contribute to understanding the theoretical framework and, most importantly, provide an answer to the research question. It is then imperative that the method of obtaining data and the individuals from whom the data will be obtained are chosen with caution (Etikan et al., 2016). This research uses videos uploaded to the Yes Theory YouTube channel and Facebook publications made available by users at the Yes Theory Fam

group as units of analysis. Since this study aims to understand the elements surrounding brand cultures, it must address content produced by both the brand managers and the consumers.

The Yes Theory was chosen since it is an established media brand with an extensive digital footprint derived from its own productions and user-generated content. At the time of writing, the brand's YouTube channel comprises 353 uploaded videos, whereas the Facebook group contains 167.5 thousand members. Their media content also extends to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok accounts and a podcast distributed through music streaming platforms (e.g., Spotify). Moreover, the online community organizes itself in smaller Facebook groups sorted by geographical regions, designated Instagram accounts for in-person meet ups, and a Discord group – a video, voice, and text communication online platform.

Despite the array of productions, the YouTube channel continues to be the brand's primary source of content, and the Yes Fam Facebook group is the largest setting of the brand community. Therefore, the content of these platforms is the most suitable to identify collective narratives, values, and purposes. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that the data available on social media platforms is extensive and thus impossible to collect thoroughly. In addition, Bolin (2011) argues that not all components in multiplatform productions contribute to narrative progression. Thus, it is vital to distinguish between those that expressly contribute to the narrative and those that contribute to the expansion of textual worlds but have little or no impact on the narrative progression.

Consequently, this study employs a *non-probability sampling* method to select both the YouTube videos and the Facebook posts, specifically *purposive sampling* and *homogeneous sampling*. First, this study uses purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling, is the deliberate selection of data based on its contribution to understanding the phenomenon of interest. It is commonly used in qualitative research to identify and select the most information-rich cases to make the best use of available resources (Etikan et al., 2016). Second, the study also relies on homogenous sampling, meaning it focuses on videos that share similar characteristics (Etikan et al., 2016).

After becoming familiar with the channel's videos, the researcher opted to select travel-related videos exclusively. As previously stated, Yes Theory produces videos across various categories, such as travel, social experiments, challenges, and extreme sports. Yet, the travel category is the most complete in terms of narrative and provides a

cohesive dataset for achieving assertive results. Moreover, it is the channel's most relevant category in terms of viewing – eight out of the ten most viewed videos are travel-related.

The length of the videos was also a determining factor in constructing the dataset. The goal was to gather between 90 to 150 minutes – 1.5 to 2.5 hours – of footage for analysis. Thus, the researcher chose videos shorter than 25 minutes to ultimately include a larger number of videos. Conclusively, the nine videos selected total 162 minutes and are presented in the table below in chronological order (Table 1).

Table 1.

Sample of videos

Number	Title	Upload date	Length (minutes)
1	50 Hours In A Country That Doesn't Exist On A Map (Transnistria)	October 2021	21:49
2	Traveling to a Country that was Closed for 40 Years	July 2021	23:15
3	Traveling On The World's Most Dangerous Road	February 2020	12:57
4	Traveling to the Happiest Country in the World!!	December 2019	14:32
5	Traveling 10,000 Miles to Fulfill Subscriber's Dream	November 2019	20:12
6	Traveling to the Least Visited Country in the World	November 2019	17:36
7	Spinning The Globe And Flying Wherever It Lands	June 2019	16:40
8	Throwing a Dart at a Map and Flying Wherever it Lands...	June 2018	13:15
9	Convincing Strangers at Airport to Fly Somewhere Else with us...	November 2018	16:06

Likewise, the data collection for the Facebook posts also relies on a purposive homogenous sampling technique (Etikan et al., 2016). Additionally, Franz et al. (2019) categorize social media qualitative methods into active analysis, passive analysis, and research self-identification. Active analysis involves the communication between the researcher and Facebook users, whereas research self-identification implicates using Facebook as a tool to recruit participants for interviews, focus groups or surveys. This

study employs a *passive analysis*, which comprehends the investigation of information patterns observed on Facebook or the interactions between users in existing Facebook groups.

Although no information is available on the total number of posts since the Yes Fam group foundation, data from Facebook reveals an average of 70 new posts each month, providing plenty suitable material for the data collection. The researcher selected text posts in which members disclose personal stories, extensive enough to undergo a narrative analysis. In the end, 50 posts were selected, manually extracted, and transferred to a Microsoft Word document.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that publicly shared data can be considered biased due to a given participant's social desirability influences or censorship. According to research, both privacy concerns and the user's audience can influence self-disclosure on Facebook (Franz et al., 2019). Therefore, there is no way to judge if the stories presented in the posts used in this study are entirely truthful which can potentially have implications in the research credibility.

3.3 Operationalization

This study relies on the conceptualization of brand culture presented in the theoretical framework. Therefore, in order to identify the core elements that constitute brand culture, the analysis relies mainly on the concept of cognitive social capital of online communities defined by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998). This dimension of social capital contains three main categories, which together offer a coherent framework to analyse the expression of brand cultures in online environments.

First, cognitive social capital refers to the members' shared *language, codes, and narratives* (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Accordingly, this study performs a thematic narrative analysis to identify and organise the stories (Allen, 2017). Lambert and Hessler's (2018) categorization of personal stories in storytelling is used as a preliminary framework to distinguish the different types of narrative. However, the researcher remained open-minded to new classifications that could emerge from the data.

Table 2.

Categorization of personal stories (Lambert & Hessler, 2018)

Category	Description
Character stories	Stories about relationships
Memorial stories	Honoring and remembering people who have passed
Adventure stories	Travel stories
Accomplishment stories	Stories about achieving a goal
Story about a place in my life	Stories about a place you have a connection with
Story about what I do	Stories about professional careers
Recovery stories	Stories about overcoming a challenge
Discovery stories	Stories about the process of learning

Moreover, this study employs a structural narrative analysis to examine specific characteristics of a story, using the six-part Labovian model to code narrative fragments (Riessman, 2002). The chosen videos are extensive with several stories unfolding simultaneously, involving both the creators and occasional characters. One video may present a multitude of stories, and thus the researcher prioritised coding pertinent scenes. Stories from the Facebook publications also overlapped, although it happened less occurrent than the videos given their briefness.

After identifying the fragments, the coding was carried out based on the Labovian model for narrative analysis, which identifies six distinct elements: abstract – summary of the story; orientation – time, place, situation, and participants; complicating action – the plot of the story or sequence of events; evaluation – significance and meaning of the action; and resolution or coda – the outcome of the story (Riessman, 2002). A “complete” story contains all five elements, but researchers may not identify every element in all stories (Allen, 2017).

According to Allen (2017), the structure of a story can elucidate numerous facts, including how the storyteller makes sense of an event temporally. Therefore, together with the semiotic analysis, it is helpful tool to recognise the second and third elements of the community’s cognitive social capital – namely *values, attitudes, and beliefs* and *goals, purposes, and vision* (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Finally, the semiotic analysis also relied on characteristics from Cunningham and Craig’s (2019) *brand-authenticity-community relationship* and Abidin’s (2015) *perceived interconnectedness* for the identification of verbal and nonverbal cues that

deploy authenticity and intimacy within brand culture. For instance, recognising and distinguishing videography features conventionally Hollywoodian from those associated with vlogging.

3.4 Validity and reliability

Credibility is a critical aspect of qualitative research composed by two elements: validity and reliability. It refers to the “careful scholarship, commitment to rigorous argument, attending to the links between claims and evidence” (Seale, 2004, in Silverman, 2011, p. 359). In other words, credibility verifies the quality of the study by ensuring that the findings are logical, trustworthy, and properly grounded in theory.

First, validity determines “the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (Hammersley, 1990, in Silverman, 2011, p. 367). Therefore, it is essential for the findings of the study to properly reflect the elements of brand cultures, as well as indicate those that make no significant contribution. Thus, this research relies on a combination of two qualitative methods – semiotic and narrative – to examine the phenomenon thoroughly, while still focusing on selected media environments – YouTube and Facebook – to draw incisive and detailed conclusions.

Second, reliability concerns the level of independence of the findings from accidental circumstances of their production. It is achieved by making the theoretical perspective and the research design as clear and transparent as possible (Silverman, 2011). Therefore, to ensure reliability, the data collection and analysis of this study followed the steps outlined in the previous sections in a systematic manner. Moreover, the concepts guiding the research derived from previous literature that is relevant in the context of media studies.

3.5 Ethical considerations

This study takes precautions to ensure that it is carried out in the most ethical manner possible. According to the Internet Research Ethical Guidelines 3.0, despite the content being uploaded on social media platforms and publicly released, there is an expectation of privacy (Franzke et al., 2020). Yet, the videos chosen for this study are produced, edited, and uploaded publicly by the media brand Yes Theory, and are thus intended to be viewed by others.

At the same time, the dataset also consists of posts uploaded by users in a private Facebook group – meaning that it is possible to find the group with the search engine. However, the posts are only available to group members. Therefore, to get access to the publications, the researcher must be, and in this case is, a member of the group. The barriers to entry are considerably low since one must only request participation through Facebook and have this request accepted.

The line between private and public Facebook data can be unclear at times. Franz et al.'s (2019) work indicate a scarcity of research on social media users' understanding of privacy literacy. However, the authors explain that most Facebook users know that their data may not be private, mainly if they use Facebook in a public setting (Franz et al., 2019). Regardless, it is still crucial to protect and anonymize internet users' personal information. Therefore, in agreement with the Internet Research Ethical Guidelines 3.0, no personal information other than the text in the publication was collected or used in this research. Moreover, names that were mentioned in the publications were replaced by fictitious names (Franzke et al., 2020).

4. Results

This chapter presents and interprets the findings from the analysis. In order to find an adequate answer to the research question: *how is brand culture reflected in Yes Theory's content and community?*, the analysis relies on two sub-questions: *which are the shared narratives between the producer and the consumers? And how do these narratives constitute the community's cognitive social capital?*

Therefore, the following subsections are divided into core narratives that emerged from the analysis. This study found three predominant narratives shared between the content world and the online community. Firstly, there are the *adventure narratives*, which comprise travelling, moving to a foreign country, and engaging in physically risky activities. Secondly, the *character narratives* encompass meeting new people, developing friendships, and establishing affectional bonds. Thirdly, the *accomplishment narratives* revolve around achieving a goal, fulfilling a dream, or overcoming a personal difficulty. Lastly, the final subsection interprets additional findings regarding the connection between brand and consumer and, most importantly, the relationship amongst consumers.

Each subsection presents the main elements that support the narratives' construction – abstract, orientation, plot, resolution, and evaluation – from both the YouTube videos and the Facebook posts. The goal is to explore the points of connection between the two mediums and interpret them in relation to the concepts explained in the theoretical framework. Additionally, the findings from semiotic analysis demonstrate and decode the signs that expand the narratives' representation and ultimately constitute the community's cognitive social capital.

4.1 Adventure narratives

Adventure narratives were the most prominent type of narrative found in the data. They consist of personal narratives in which the sequence of events revolves around travelling, either to another city or a different country, or moving to a foreign country. They also incorporate plots about engaging in physically risky activities, also referred to as sensation and thrill-seeking.

4.1.1 *Traveling or moving to a foreign country*

Every video in the dataset takes place in a different country, thus the analysis categorized the overarching plot as travelling. Still, the reason of the travels differs

greatly between the nine videos, even though the creators usually employ the same set of visual and verbal elements in the introduction.

Initially, the narrator explains the motivation or decision-making process that led to the destination. The analysis identified two forms the creators orient the videos: inquisitive or circumstantial. It is possible to draw parallels between both orientations and the Facebook posts created by the members of the Yes Fam group – referred to in this study as writers. Therefore, the present section uses these orientations as divisions but also discusses the remaining parts of the narrative.

I. Inquisitive orientation

In most videos, the creators are drawn to the country given a particular characteristic they wish to explore and understand, ranging from historical, social, political, and environmental aspects. For example, in video #4 – Traveling to the Happiest Country in the World!! – the creators visit Bhutan, given its recognition as the happiest country and the only carbon-negative nation in the world. In video #2 – Traveling to a Country that was Closed for 40 Years – the destination is Albania, where the creators intend to explore thousands of abandoned bunkers inherited from the nation's former dictatorship.

To support these claims, the abstract of the videos provides detailed background information on the country. The summary comes alongside visual elements, such as videos of news broadcasts, screen recordings of internet research, and images of news articles that ultimately corroborate the facts disclosed in the narration. For example, in video #6 – Traveling to the Least Visited Country in the World – the creators go as far as asking people on the street if they have ever heard of Tuvalu, which is allegedly the least visited country in the world, to elucidate and validate their choice of destination.

Moreover, the abstract often poses questions that serve as guidance for the travel, thus crucial for the narrative construction. For example, when visiting Bhutan, the narrator makes his goals clear by asking:

What makes this place so special? Are the people there truly the happiest? And what have they understood about the environment the rest of us haven't? (Yes Theory, video #4, 00:56)

Semiotically, the abstract and orientation of adventure narratives assist in placing the reason for the travel as something greater than simply leisure. Contrary to tourism-oriented videos, which provide helpful information for potential visitors, Yes Theory travel stories seemingly aim to spark viewers' curiosity about foreign cultures. In one of the videos, the creator elucidates his intention in documenting and sharing these journeys with the audience, ultimately hoping to stimulate the spectators' interest in other cultures, as demonstrated by the following quote transcribed from video #2.

Making travel films like this one and taking you around the globe alongside me to expand our shared understanding of the world is truly my life's dream. I want to plant the seed of curiosity for culture the way that [Anthony] Bourdain did in previous generations [...]. (Yes Theory, video #2, 21:10)

Correspondingly, Li et al.'s (2014) study considers determining a clear mission and vision the first step toward the development of social capital in online communities. However, the authors also claim that simply establishing the mission and vision is insufficient. Instead, it is also crucial for community managers to construct and convey these elements properly (Li et al., 2014). In this case, after setting the orientation, the complicating action of the videos unfolds around the creators exploring the destination's urban and natural surroundings in an attempt to immerse themselves in the local culture.

A clear example is video #1 – 50 Hours In A Country That Doesn't Exist On A Map – in which the main character and Yes Theory creator, Thomas, visits various places in Transnistria – an internationally unrecognised post-Soviet state. Throughout the video, the creator goes into a barbershop to cut his hair, walks into a store to buy new clothes, tries typical food at a local restaurant, visits a church, and befriends the owner of a small stand, eventually being invited into her house for a meal. Essentially, the creator seeks to form an impression of the country's reality by experiencing the environment, engaging in local activities, and interacting with citizens. This intention is apparent in the following quote transcribed from video #2.

Because no matter how much you hear about a country in the news or in pop culture, you can't properly judge it until you visit. (Yes Theory, video #2, 21:28).

These activities and pronounced purpose fit with Campagna et al.'s (2020) definition of cultural participation, which implicates conscious acts of individuals actively seeking to increase their informational and cultural baggage. These acts include visiting historical sites, attending events, participating in community activities, and consuming artistic productions such as literature or music (Campagna et al., 2020).

Campagna et al.'s (2020) study also reveals that participation in cultural activities contributes to higher engagement in civic society. In other words, participation in cultural life helps the achievement of broader societal goals, for example, combating social exclusion and cultivating active citizenship. Therefore, cultural activities are regarded as having additional social-cultural benefits other than individual leisure and entertainment (Campagna et al., 2020). As exposed by the analysis, the plot of adventure narratives is primarily constituted of cultural participation activities. This connection between the plot and cultural participation is the starting ground for recognising brand cultures as inspiring contexts for cultural, political, and civic practices, as argued by Barnet-Wiser (2012).

In addition, camera work was identified by the semiotic analysis as one of the visual attributes enhancing the representation of adventure narratives, particularly the use of drone shots. These shots offer an extensive aerial view of the urban and natural surroundings. In film studies, aerial perspectives generally work as establishing shots to introduce the overall setting of a scene, eventually preparing the viewers for the following events (Klinger, 2013). Also, according to Vujcic et al. (2022), influencers usually combine drone videos with terrestrial videos to communicate their travel experiences more effectively.

Accordingly, in Yes Theory videos, this property exposes the landscape and surroundings, offering the audience a sense of place and dimension. Moreover, the drone shots allude to movement and travel, indicating that the creators are at a place outside of their routine. Since the destinations are mostly unconventional, the aerial footage helps viewers get a better picture of where the plot is taking place. Therefore, the videography technique employed during the complicating action contributes to the overall narrative construction.

The resolution of adventure narratives emphasises having unique, eye-opening, and life-changing experiences, as well as meeting new people and learning from their personal stories and knowledge. At the end of the videos, the creators demonstrate

happiness, fulfilment, gratitude for the new experiences and connections, enthusiasm for knowledge, and instant nostalgia.

The creators evaluate the journey at the recapitulation of events present at the end of the videos. At this stage, a video montage of the events is shown as the narrator recounts the activities and interactions. From a semiotic perspective, the evaluation contributes to attaching meaning to the narrative (Allen, 2017). In this case, it helps placing ordinary practices, such as getting a haircut or visiting a local store, and casual social encounters in a wider dimension of cultural significance, contributing to building the message of cultural participation (Campagna et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the questions posed at the beginning of the video are also answered in the evaluation. The narrator mentions learning beyond what was initially established as a goal. Therefore, the semiotic analysis understands that despite being drawn to the location with the intention of investigating and understanding a specific aspect, the creators remained open-minded, receptive to many possible answers, and willing to learn from their surroundings and interactions.

Overall, the analysis reveals that the message communicated – by the combination of the five narrative aspects and non-verbal cues such as videography and editing – is that going on a solo journey to an unfamiliar and most likely unexplored destination while actively seeking forms to engage with the surroundings and being open to social interactions, often leads to extraordinary experiences and a broader understanding of the world. First, the abstract and orientation carefully outline and validate the motive behind the travels. Second, the complicating action portrays various acts of cultural participation. Lastly, the resolution and evaluation highlight the positive impact of the journey on the creators' life, both culturally and emotionally.

This narrative structure supports the construction of a symbolic brand universe, outlined by Scolari (2009) and Banet-Wiser (2012) as a prominent branding strategy in the new media landscape. As discussed, a brand universe is composed of an assortment of characters, sceneries, circumstances, and attitudes that distinguish the brand from others (Scolari, 2009; Jenkins, 2012). This unique set of characteristics act as a foundation for the creation of many stories across different media, describing the practice of transmedia storytelling (Scolari, 2009; Jenkins, 2012).

Consistently, visiting or moving to a foreign country was frequently mentioned in the publications retrieved from the Yes Fam Facebook group. However, the orientation in which members deliver these stories differs significantly, as well as the

resolution and evaluation. The analysis identified and classified three predominant orientations for adventure narratives in Facebook publications: educational or career pursuit, discontentment with current life, and life-changing or life-threatening incidents.

From these classifications, pursuing an educational or professional career was deemed the most suitable to associate the brand culture elements identified in this section, namely the inquisitive orientation of travelling or moving to another country. Therefore, the following section discusses this specific orientation, while the remaining are presented subsequently.

A. Educational or career pursuit

Some of the Yes Fam group publications orient the decision of moving to a foreign country as part of an educational or career pursuit. In those cases, the travel is planned, and the members demonstrate being actively interested in moving to a different country. Therefore, curiosity becomes instantly apparent as a shared value between the content world and the community. The following publication illustrates this narrative structure.

I'd like to share my thoughts on the Erasmus program which helped me a lot to become a more open-minded, spontaneous person. [...] For me as a 20 year old guy who never lived abroad it was really a discomfort situation moving to another country in which you don't know anybody and barely speak the language. I studied 5 months in Spain and had the most wonderful time. I've got to know a lot of different culture and people. I made so many friends, we traveled and hanged out a lot just enjoyed life together. I'm sure I will always remember for this experience because I have so many amazing memories of it. (Post #38)

As demonstrated by the quote, most writers address their apprehension of living in an unknown city, most of the time alone, and other concerns such as not speaking the language. In other words, engaging in this activity is considered challenging and outside their comfort zone. In this scenario, the semiotic analysis understands that moving to a foreign country, regardless of the challenge, not only reinforces curiosity as a shared value but also adds open-mindedness and receptiveness to the community's social capital, as they align to the ones identified in the videos. Besides, some writers

explicitly mention becoming more open-minded, interested, and sympathetic towards other cultures in the abstract.

In the resolution, the writers list a series of positive outcomes of their move, such as developing friendships, visiting new places, experiencing other cultures, and having unique experiences. Again, these activities are considered as attendance and involvement in cultural activities, specifically in a different culture than the individual's own (Campagna et al., 2020). Campagna et al. (2020) study defends that this participation increases individuals' attention to or comprehension of civic issues, eventually offering a context for discussions and real-life action.

Therefore, the narrative structure indicates that the creators' goal of fomenting cultural curiosity materialises in community members' adventure narratives. It is possible to argue that the community's members perform cultural acupuncture, essentially applying elements from the brand universe to their personal issues, resulting in individual and collective implications (Jenkins, 2012).

On the one hand, the writers overcome their own discomfort of moving. The writers evaluate their experience as remarkable and beneficial for personal and professional growth. Improving oneself individually and professionally is a common evaluation of adventure narratives, both in the videos and in the publications. Thus, the finding concurs with Banet-Wiser's (2012) affirmation that brand cultures act as a setting for developing personal identities. Scholars argue that, instead of a solid, centred identity, the self is seen as constantly produced or constituted and that participatory culture's allegedly empowering characteristics to co-production are also applied to our mediated self (Blank et al., 2012).

On the other hand, they demonstrate curiosity for different cultures and are involved in activities that stimulate civic engagement (Campagna et al., 2020). Consequently, according to Livingstone's (2005) conceptualisation, Yes Theory's community members can be considered a public instead of an audience since their participation in the brand universe is deemed relevant to the public sphere.

Conclusively, these findings agree with Kligler-Vilenchik's (2016) observation that participatory culture spaces allow individuals to explore their identities, interact with like-minded others, and learn skills to help them participate in causes and communities.

II. *Circumstantial orientation*

In other videos from the dataset the creators end up at a particular destination by chance. For example, in video #7 – *Spinning The Globe And Flying Wherever It Lands* – the creators use the "I'm feeling lucky" feature of Google Maps, which selects a random location of the globe to decide their destination. Another example is video #9 – *Convincing Strangers at Airport to Fly Somewhere Else with us* – in which the destination is unknown until they meet a family that wishes to fly to Hawaii and the group eventually leaves for the island on the same day. Therefore, the analysis concluded that in such videos, the orientation is set by spontaneity once the travel is allegedly last-minute and unplanned.

However, it is understood that the creators actively pursue and fabricate opportunities to act impulsively as part of video narrative construction, and thus, the brand universe (Scolari, 2009, Jenkins, 2012). Still, it represents an efficient way of communicating the message of seeking discomfort, given that comfort connotes familiar and riskless situations. Accordingly, members of the Yes Fam group also share travelling stories that seem unpremeditated, given that the decision to travel or move derives from a particular circumstance. Thus, the following subsections address the two remaining orientations of adventure narratives mentioned beforehand: discontentment with current life and life-changing or life-threatening situations.

B. *Discontentment with current life*

In some publications, the writers demonstrate a lack of motivation in their daily routine and the desire for a change. The complicating action then develops around solving such frustration. In adventure narratives, the solution consists of travelling or moving to a foreign country, usually accompanied by a certain level of uncertainty and instability, such as leaving a stable job behind or missing a place to live and not knowing anyone at the destination. Additionally, in most cases, the individual travels alone, which was also regarded as a reason for concern. Therefore, even though the orientation differs from the videos, spontaneity was identified as collective attitude of the brand community.

Regardless of those issues, the writers commit to the adventure since they conclude that the potential benefits will overcome the downsides. In the end, the narrators evaluate the experience as a positive and pivotal moment in their existence. The following publication illustrates this narrative structure.

Unhappy in a 9-5 job working from home everyday, confined in a mental prison with nothing to look forward to; I knew I needed a change. With the support of my friends and family I took a leap of faith and decided to quit my job. I booked a one way flight to Seattle from Amsterdam with the intentions of buying a car to sleep in and to explore as much as possible. It's safe to say that this solo journey changed my life! [...] I made the most of any opportunity that came about and I learned to take my life day by day, being more present in the moment and grateful to simply be alive. (Post #22)

Becoming enthusiastic about life and taking measures to be more present in the moment – or achieving mindfulness – are two of the most prominent conclusions of adventure narratives, leading to the interpretation that these are two of the brand culture's shared visions. As Billard and Moran (2019) explain, brand cultures have the potential to alleviate the weight the world and society put on individuals. Suitably, the analysis provides enough evidence to demonstrate the role of the brand culture in releasing its members from unsatisfactory and unpleasant circumstances and complex states of mind.

C. Life-changing and life-threatening incidents

The third and final circumstance that orients adventure narratives is the occurrence of life-changing or life-threatening incidents. The writers describe these experiences as eye-opening and thus consider travelling a way to enjoy life to the fullest, which was also determined as a collective purpose. The following quote demonstrates how the decision to go on a solo adventure resulted from an unforeseeable occurrence and, subsequently, a change in the individual's mindset.

4 years ago today, I met with a major motorcycle accident. [...] From that experience, I realized how short life can be, and I am lucky I was not paralyzed from the accident. I was able to go on with my life and was able to do something new, backpack New Zealand by myself. It was a wonderful experience as many of you know and I try to live life to the fullest. (Post #30)

The shared purpose of appreciating life is also voiced by one of the occasional characters from video #9. The man, who spontaneously joined the creators on a trip to Hawaii, uses the “live the dash” metaphor to explain his mindset. He compares life to the dash that is written in between the year an individual is born and the year he dies. Therefore, he emphasizes the importance of enjoying every moment between those years. This specific scene, and personal narrative, contributes significantly to validating the collective purpose.

In conclusion, the narratives analysed in this section are in accordance with one of Banet-Wiser’s (2012) main statements that brand cultures act as settings for an individual’s way of living. In every orientation described above, the writers were confronted with a decision to accept or challenge situations they deemed uncomfortable. Yet every complicating action concerns moving or travelling to a different country. Therefore, determination, courage, open-mindedness, and receptiveness were identified as shared values, with curiosity and spontaneity as the two attitudes leading the narrative. Furthermore, becoming more culturally and civically engaged, having enthusiasm and appreciation for life, and achieving mindfulness were recognised as collective visions and purposes. All these elements constitute the community’s cognitive social capital (Nahapiet and Ghosal, 1998).

4.1.2 Sensation and thrill-seeking

Sensation and thrill-seeking activities were identified in every video from the dataset and consequently regarded as one of the main complicating actions in adventure narratives. For example, in video #1 – 50 Hours In A Country That Doesn't Exist On A Map – the creators stumble across an old and decadent amusement park and decide to ride the attractions, despite the evident lack of safety. The creators' pursuit of reckless activities is even more transparent in video #3 – Traveling On The World's Most Dangerous Road – in which the primary purpose of the travel is to drive down a road in Bolivia known for its safety precariousness.

However, even after expressing concerns for their physical well-being, the creators exhibit excitement and joy in the following scenes. The sequence of shots in which the creators are seen screaming, smiling, and laughing while engaging in such activities is crucial for interpreting the feeling of exhilaration as the result and evaluation of thrill and sensation seeking. Moreover, the creators often carry a camera to record the experience from their point of view. Thus, the camera work offers the

audience a better perception of a person's physical and emotional sensations while jumping off a cliff, for instance.

Taking the narrative structure and the visual cues into account, the videos successfully position performing risky activities as a form of seeking discomfort. Similarly, there are two contexts where the sensation and thrill-seeking stories are delivered in the Facebook posts: self-exposure to fear and overall challenging physical activities.

I. Self-exposure to a fear

One of the main orientations leading the writers to engage in thrill-seeking is having a certain level of fear of a specific situation (e.g., heights, small planes, underwater). The complicating action then involves practising an activity that involves the dreaded situation. For example, people with a fear of underwater take a diving lesson, or people who dread heights go skydiving. Next, the experiences are evaluated as terrifying but empowering nonetheless since the fear exposure eventually helps writers overcome it, or at least represents the first step towards this goal.

Therefore, the encouraging and optimistic result of these narratives contributes to building a positive affect members have towards the brand. As explained by Billard and Moran (2019), this affect comes from personal experiences people have involving the brand. In this case, the thrill-seeking activity was used as a setting to overcome a fear, as exemplified by the quote below.

I have a HUGE fear of bridges! I don't even drive over them. Having to crawl over the rail, and stand on the other side with a tiny cement slab to stand on, turned around, looking over the horizon from 486ft, was terrifying!!! But also felt insane! I seeked discomfort this weekend, and it will continue on this ride!
(Post #41)

II. Challenging and demanding physical activities

However, sequences of events involving sensation and thrill-seeking also comprise physically demanding activities that are not conventionally life-threatening but still challenging, such as hiking. To illustrate, in videos #4 and #10 the creators go on long hikes to reach historical sites or places they intend to explore. The struggle of the hike is evidently communicated as creators not only express their tiredness but also

look physically exhausted, with face redness, sweat and short breath. Nevertheless, the outcome of such practices is discovering unique and astonishing places and views. Therefore, semiotically, the evaluation of these narratives is a feeling of accomplishment and self-realisation.

The same complicating action is described in Facebook posts in which the writers recount going on long hikes whilst travelling. In almost every publication, the authors address a debilitating feeling of self-doubt, in other words, a lack of confidence in their abilities to complete or even to start the activity. Nevertheless, the result is similar to the narratives in the videos, meaning the writers report feeling fulfilled and rewarded with unique experiences and sights. The following quote illustrates this narrative structure.

This week I did something I never thought I would do. I hiked 2 mountains in less than 72 hours at Monterrey, Mexico [...] A total of 10 miles and 14 hours of hiking. It was an incredible experience and something I will always remember. It's true, "Always go the extra mile and you'll be rewarded." This really pushed me out of my comfort zone and into my growth zone! (Post #35)

Again, the subjective memory of completing a challenging activity only contributes to strengthening the role the brand plays in the individuals' lives (Billard and Moran, 2019). Both orientations presented above indicate the existence of a shared history constituted of various activities within sensation and thrill-seeking. The Yes Theory brand can be readily associated with these practices, as they are a prevailing feature in the representation of adventure narratives. Ultimately, the videos and the publications mutually convey values such as being adventurous, fearless, and confident. Moreover, they express the purpose of overcoming one's fears and believing in one's potential. Thus, the brand community is bonded by personal recollections of authentic experiences, supported by emotion and passion, rather than simply an activity or object associated with the brand (Barnet-Wiser, 2012).

In conclusion, adventure narratives demonstrate several elements of brand cultures in mediatised environments. First, they set the scene for several collective values and visions that can be applied to many situations. These aspects are part of the communal social capital, grounded in the brand's pronounced and identified mission and vision (Nahapiet & Ghosal, 1998; Li et al., 2014). Thus, they contribute to cohesively

assembling the brand universe and, consequently, enabling the transportation of the narrative between different media and languages. The brand universe seems to act as the foundation for producers and users to create new stories (Scolari, 2009; Jenkins, 2012).

Second, they appear to prompt civic engagement by disseminating the message of appreciating and participating in foreign cultural activities. Thus, making it possible to interpret the brand culture as a setting for civic learning and involvement (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Jenkins, 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016). Third, adventure narratives display practices of identity construction deriving from members seeking personal and professional development (Banet-Wiser, 2012). In addition, they offer a place of ease for people who strive to achieve a set goal, living condition or mindset. Finally, they contribute to the accumulation of positive affect arising from members' personal experiences and memories involving the brand (Billard & Moran, 2019).

4.2 Character narratives

Character narratives constitute the second category identified within the content world and online community. These narratives comprehend plots that develop around approaching and meeting new people, often resulting in the development of meaningful social connections such as friendships and romantic relationships.

A clear example of a character narrative is video #6 in which Thomas – Yes Theory creator – approaches a group of people playing football in Tuvalu, supposedly the least visited country in the world. After a few minutes of conversation, Thomas is invited for dinner and a tour of their homes, eventually joining these newfound friends on a boat trip to explore the rest of the country the next day. The causality between these two events – approaching strangers and then going on a new adventure the following day – leads to the evaluation that being open and communicative is a way to have new experiences. This interconnection is apparent in many videos from the dataset. The creators frequently discover different places or impulsively join events solely because they were invited or guided by people they met on the street.

Moreover, at the end of video #6 and many other videos, the creators are depicted giving emotional farewells to these people they just met. The sentiment is expressed verbally through words of gratitude and fondness and non-verbally through body language such as hugs and emotional expressions such as crying. Consequently, the parting scenes often imply that the connection between the creators and the secondary characters was indeed meaningful.

Finally, in the evaluation present at the recapitulation of events, the narrator explicitly mentions feeling connected with these people he only knew for a few days. The quote below, transcribed from video #6, exhibits how the narrative structure positions welcoming attitudes as the source for positive outcomes.

From the moment I landed in Tuvalu to the moment I step back onto that plane, people were nothing but smiling, welcoming, and kind. I came as a stranger for only a few days, and left feeling like I've been adopted by this incredible and loving family. (Yes Theory, video #6, 16:59)

I. Loneliness or social anxiety

In the Facebook publications categorized as character narratives, the writers also express their intentions of becoming more communicative, usually aiming to expand their circle of friends and make more meaningful and deeper connections. However, this goal often comes alongside the orientation of experiencing loneliness or having a certain level of social anxiety. Thus, interacting with others in any setting already represents discomfort for these community members, which is only accentuated when it involves approaching strangers. The quote below illustrates one of these social struggles.

In the past, I've struggled with connecting with people because I fear that I'll be rejected, or not know what to say, or that I'm bothering the other person. (Post #42)

Therefore, it is noticeable that the orientation of the publications differs from the videos. The creators actively seek to meet new people to explore the country and immerse themselves culturally. However, the endeavour of approaching strangers is not positioned as a challenge. Conversely, the writers have a much more individual objective in mind and explicitly voice their personal difficulties to achieve it.

This divergence points to the co-production of the brand meaning, outlined by Banet-Wiser (2012) and Billard and Moran (2019), as an indispensable feature of contemporary brand cultures. In character narratives, the community contributes to expanding the meaning of seeking discomfort in social interactions and connections. As argued by Banet-Wiser (2012), members of brand cultures associate their own stories

with the narratives established by the brand, eventually placing themselves as main characters.

Still, the resolution of stepping out of one's comfort zone by becoming more open and vulnerable is fitting to the one displayed in the videos. Ultimately, the outcome is connecting with others and developing meaningful social bonds. Nevertheless, the writers also discuss the improvement of their social skills in their publications. Both results are informed in the following quotes.

But by having the courage to go outside of my comfort zone and find creative excuses to connect, I've made friends from all around the world over the past 2 years. (Post #42)

I have dealt with social anxiety a majority of my life but can confidently say it is something that I have overcome. (Post #17)

In sum, character narratives convey the shared attitudes of being open, communicative, and vulnerable. Furthermore, they indicate the collective vision of connecting with like-minded others, resulting in the development of significant and long-lasting social and affectionate bonds. The narrative structure shows that, when applied to real-world situations, the values and attitudes of character narratives help individuals achieve their social interaction goals, even with loneliness and anxiety reported as potential impediments.

This finding reinforces Li et al.'s (2014) position regarding the evolution of social capital in online communities. As stated by the authors, the social capital advances as members participate in the same activity, learning from those with further knowledge and experience, eventually developing the required set of skills to perform said activity on their own (Li et al., 2014). Furthermore, the participatory affordances of online communities allow an easy, rapid, and wide diffusion of knowledge and information, challenging the socioeconomic structures that constrain the access to social capital (Kwon & Adler, 2014). Conclusively, character narratives demonstrate how members can benefit from brand cultures with shared knowledge and possible solutions to their struggles and difficulties (Banet-Wiser, 2012).

4.3 Accomplishment narratives

Accomplishment narratives are the third and final type of narrative that emerged from the data analysis. These narratives revolve around achieving a goal, fulfilling a dream, or overcoming a difficult situation. In some cases, they overlap with adventure narratives once fulfilling a dream might be going on a trip or moving to another country. They also share similarities with character narratives, given that they also involve personal struggles. However, the main complicating action of accomplishment narratives does not involve travelling as the former or developing a relationship as the latter. Instead, they focus on taking specific measures to overcome a particular struggle or achieving an established goal.

In the YouTube videos, accomplishment narratives emerge either from stories shared by occasional characters or the final video evaluation. Therefore, they differ from adventure narratives which are explicit throughout the entire story. For instance, one of the occasional characters in video #7 – Luke – shares a personal story with the creators that involves a skateboard accident that almost took out his life. He eventually recovered but lives with short term memory and has the movements from the left side of his body compromised. Luke then tells the creators that he never took an opportunity for granted and learned to live one day at a time from the moment of his recovery.

Other examples of accomplishment narratives were identified in the recapitulation of events and concern the endurance of a nation rather than an individual. One example is Tuvalu, the country visited in video #6, which is a sinking island predicted to become uninhabited soon. In the evaluation, the creators accentuate the effort of the islanders to take action and prevent their country from disappearing. Another example is video #1, in which creators highlight the perseverance of the population of Transnistria to remain positive despite living with underprivileged economic conditions.

Unlike the previous narratives and because of the overlapping, the researcher decided that the most appropriate way to demonstrate the contribution of accomplishment narratives to the brand culture was through the shared values they convey. Therefore, the following subsections are divided into empathy and kindness, and resilience and perseverance.

I. Empathy and kindness

In the YouTube videos, the narrator uses Luke's plot to elucidate empathy during the evaluation. The recapitulation of events reminds the viewer that we can never know what the people around us are going through. Furthermore, it elicits that it is easy to forget that individuals are constantly dealing with their own problems. Likewise, the creators unexpectedly met Luke without knowing his past struggles and current challenges. Thus, the narrative prompts viewers to demonstrate kindness towards others.

It must be noted that encouraging the audience's self-reflection is a common feature in the videos' evaluations. The narrator uses expressions asking the viewers to think about the video's main message next time they find themselves in a similar situation or even challenges the audience to engage in a specific activity, such as daily acts of kindness. Ultimately, the analysis understands that these statements intend to enact real-life actions.

Correspondingly, empathy and kindness were also shared attitudes from the personal stories shared by the community members. Writers often describe a complicating action in which others, or themselves, required external assistance. Particularly in accomplishment stories, the emotional support, reassurance, or help from others play a crucial role in helping the writers achieve their goals. The quote below is one example of an accomplishment narrative that demonstrates kindness and empathy transparently.

10 mins to airport and the car broke down. I was on the ramp and uber drivers weren't picking up the location correctly. 25 mins to flight departure, standing on the side of a busy motorway hoping someone would stop and drop me off to airport. 5 mins in and I saw the indicators flashing, a sigh of relief. This kind person who was delivering food agreed to drop me off to airport. I am not someone who would go out of my comfort zone and hitchhike, but the purpose of this tattoo was to get out of my comfort zone! (Post #13)

Besides adding kindness and empathy to the shared values, accomplishment narratives primarily suggest a collective attitude expected from participants of the brand community. Billard and Moran (2019) assert that joining brand cultures is, in some ways, like accepting and adopting a moral and ethical framework. Consequently, the narrative elements of accomplishment narratives prompt members to act a certain way

or at least consider implementing such practices when confronted with a similar situation.

II. Resilience and perseverance

Resilience and perseverance are additional shared values that emerge primarily from accomplishment narratives. In the Facebook publications, the writers disclose their desire to either achieve an objective or overcome a difficult situation in the abstract. However, the complicating action concerning these intentions differs significantly between posts. They range from committing to practising physical activities regularly to running a marathon, pursuing a dream education or a career, or even activities that seem simple, such as starting a new hobby or painting in public.

Following the same pattern as the adventure and character narratives, the writers' ambition comes alongside a personal difficulty, in this case, lack of confidence, lack of self-esteem, and lack of motivation. For example, the following quote illustrates an aspiring artist voicing her anxieties over creating art in a public setting.

Rarely find my art pieces good enough or enjoy myself while creating, I've just put too much pressure on succeeding and becoming a "good" artist, kinda lost the joy of it. [...] Just the thought of creating in public for everyone to see and judge my worth as an artist, my heart started pounding, my hands shaking, all the anxiety. (Post #11)

In accordance with the overarching theme of seeking discomfort, the writers' anxieties are conquered, and the outcome of the narrative is positive, meaning that they ultimately accomplish their objectives. The overall evaluation revolves around the expression of "thriving against the odds", in other words, succeeding despite the difficulties, as illustrated in the videos with the cases of Tuvalu and Transnistria. The continuation of the previous post describes the result adequately.

The moment I arrived at the park I felt relaxed. [...] I felt so relieved, all the anxiety I had before had left my body and I was just fully emerged in the creating process. Some people walked by, sat on a bench behind me or peeked but I wasn't worried about them at all, hardly noticed them actually. The painting

didn't turn out how I wanted but that's okay because that wasn't the goal today, my goal was to feel free painting in public and I succeeded. (Post #11)

Essentially, accomplishment narratives are consistent with Shao's (2009) uses and gratifications perspective that supports the creation of user-generated content. Working and reflecting on one's identity are critical components of self-actualization. The author highlights the users' intention to achieve specific behavioural goals, one being personal efficacy (Shao, 2009). Likewise, accomplishment narratives focus on an individual's or a group's journey of reaching their highest potential, either creatively, socially, intellectually, or physically.

4.4 Triadic relationship of brand and consumers

This section addresses additional findings from the analysis that do not belong to a particular narrative but instead encompass the Yes Theory's entire brand culture. It aims to expose and explore the narrative and semiotic elements that indicate the presence of a triadic relationship between brands and consumers (Billard and Moran, 2019). In this relationship structure, the brand is the bridge sustaining the connection between two consumers. Consequently, consumers develop a one-to-one bond with the brand and a second bond with each other, resulting in the term Billard and Moran (2019) refer to as networked brands. Accordingly, the following subsections are divided into the two types of relationships mentioned: brand-consumer and consumer-consumer.

4.4.1 Brand-consumer relationship

Even though the relationship between the brand and the consumers was primarily established in the previous sections through the identification of the cognitive social capital, this study considered important to cite and interpret further elements that reveal such connection, namely audio-visual elements, the presence of subscribers on videos, and the user-generated posts' inspiration from the content world.

I. Audio-visual elements

First, the analysis identified the format of the audio-visual content as significant for conveying authenticity and intimacy, elements Banet-Wiser (2012) considers indispensable for attracting and keeping consumers as loyal members of brand cultures.

On the one hand, Yes Theory YouTube videos employ various visual and editing practices conventionally attached to professional or semi-professional productions (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). For instance, the abstract of most videos uses external footage of news channels or historical events to endorse the information shared by the narration. Other features worth noting are the use of sequences of aerial shots and the video montage present at the recapitulation of events. These elements were identified as essential non-linguistic contributors to the overall narrative representation.

However, since they are commonly regarded as professional audio-visual practices, their use goes against Cunningham and Craig's (2019) framework of social media entertainment authenticity. The conceptualization claims that practices perceived as derived from the legacy film industry defy the audience's notion of authenticity (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Nevertheless, from a film studies perspective, these attributes are associated mainly with documentaries since the videos are nonfiction representations of reality. Accordingly, there is also a convention of truthfulness that surrounds documentaries (Ellis, 2021).

On the other hand, the creators also fit Cunningham and Craig's (2019) characterization of personality vloggers. During most of the video, the creators manipulate the camera to film themselves, talk directly to the audience and constantly address the viewers. According to the literature, this practice conveys authenticity and shortens the supposed distance between producers and spectators, resulting in a perception of intimacy (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

Intimacy is emphasized in the vlogging moments in which the creators are portrayed in informal settings and situations, for instance, in their apartment, having fun amongst themselves (Abidin, 2015; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Additionally, in almost every video from the dataset, the creators documented and shared the entire journey, from packing their bags to going to the airport, getting on the plane, and arriving at the destination. From the narratology point of view, these scenes do not seem to contribute much to the overall representation of the three identified narratives. However, from a semiotic perspective, they connote intimacy and honesty. The footage lets viewers witness the creators' routines, internal jokes, and relationships. As Abidin (2015) states, audiences can easily relate to influencers performing unexceptional day-to-day activities.

II. Presence of subscribers on videos

Another feature that characterises the intimate and authentic relationship between the creators and the community is the frequent appearance of subscribers in the videos as occasional characters. During the sequence of events, the creators either reach out to subscribers who live in the country so they can act as local guides or organically encounter and interact with the subscribers. To illustrate, in video #2 in which the creators explore many places in Albania guided solely by one of their subscribers. An even more transparent example is video #5 – Traveling 10,000 Miles to Fulfill Subscriber's Dream – in which the creators choose one subscriber from a social media challenge organised by Yes Theory to travel with them to their dream destination.

This practice can be linked with Baym's (2015) theorising of relational labour. The concept delineates consistent and ongoing communication with audiences to establish relationships that bring monetary rewards to the creator. Even though there is no explicit evidence that the interactions in the videos lead to financial gains for the producer, it is essential to acknowledge Banet-Wiser's (2012) statement that brand cultures depend on the labour of consumers. Many media scholars recognise viewers as unpaid labourers willing to contribute to the media text in exchange for non-monetary rewards (Jenkins, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Banet-Wiser, 2012, Massanari, 2015).

Another possible and complementary interpretation is associating the presence of subscribers in videos with the practice of affective labour (Baym, 2015). This dimension considers social interactions as a form of immaterial labour which produce emotional outcomes, including a sense of connectedness. Ultimately, affective labour results in the development of social networks and forms of community (Hardt, 1999, as cited in Siapera & Iliadi, 2015).

Moreover, Abidin's (2015) theory of perceived interconnectedness states that influencers are expected to behave in accordance with the personas they portray in their media productions. In that sense, in-person interactions are complementary to digital space interactions. As a result, the intimacy developed and negotiated on digital platforms is carried over to real-world settings, creating a loop that intensifies viewers' feelings of intimacy toward influencers (Abidin, 2015).

III. UGC inspired by the content world

Lastly, in almost every Facebook publication, the writers reference the content world as an orientation for engaging in the most diverse activities. Mentioning the Yes Theory videos as an inspiration for daily practices and life decisions signals the brand's

presence and importance in constructing the members' identity (Banet-Wiser, 2012). This role is transparent in the following quote retrieved from one of the publications in the Yes Fam group.

I had watched Yes Theory before the pandemic, but found myself fully immersed in their videos these past few years. I was inspired by their sense of adventure and their friendships. I was blown away by their bravery, kindness, and enthusiasm for life. [...] Yes Theory's videos kept me going. But, it was also forcing me to look inward at my own relationship with seeking discomfort — something I seldom did. (Post #15)

Conclusively, the relationship between the brand and the consumers foments the creation of user-generated content, arguably reinforcing social interactions and expanding the online brand community (Shao, 2009). Thus, it enhances the brand's narrative and digital presence, resulting in financial gains for the brand manager (Banet-Wiser, 2012). Still, Jenkins (2012) and Shao (2009) assert that users produce user-generated content to interact with the content and with other users. Therefore, the following section discusses aspects of the user-generated content that indicate a connection amongst users.

4.4.2 Consumer-consumer relationship

The narrative analysis of the Facebook posts suggests a supportive relationship between the brand community members. The connection is materialised in the form of frequent citations of other members' publications as a source of inspiration either for pursuits of seeking discomfort or for the creation of UGC. In the former, the writers mention that reading other people's stories motivated them to engage in similar practices, usually indicating something outside their comfort zone that contributed to their personal growth. The following quotes illustrate this causality.

I just wanted to share that I did my first seek discomfort mission and that I'm grateful for all of you who've shared your own missions too because they inspired me to conquer mine. (Post #11)

Thank you everybody for sharing your stories, it helped me to step out of my comfort zone instead of staying in really bad circle of crying and not sleeping.
(Post #47)

In the latter, the writers refer to other publications as encouragements to share their personal stories in the Facebook group and get more involved with the community. The finding aligns with Daugherty et al.'s (2008) conceptualization of the value-expressive function as the driver for creating UGC. According to the authors, members of online communities are most likely to share content with people with corresponding values and beliefs. The supportive environment stimulates the creation of UGC since the writer feels gratified with self-confidence for sharing relatable and significant materials (Daugherty et al., 2008). The following publication exemplifies this connection amongst members.

My name is [Emma] and sending this post is pretty scary but I recently joined this group and I really want to get more involved with this community! I've started watching and falling in love with Yes Theory and what they stand for, for a pretty long time. Now that I'm older I really wanted to get even more involved so I joined Facebook and joined a bunch of Yes Theory groups! (Post #33)

Therefore, it is possible to infer that the matching moral framework driving the production of UGC derives from the social capital of the brand culture. Billard and Moran (2019) stress that it is just as crucial for community participants to establish affective bonds with one another as the one-to-one relationship with the brand. In that sense, the content world combined with the instruments of online participatory culture act as a space for social cohesion and interaction (Billard & Moran, 2019).

Finally, the additional findings presented in this section complement the overall understanding of brand culture's circular logic (Banet-Wiser, 2012). As individuals, members of a brand culture have a shared history that is developed and replicated in the brand's narrative and, in this case, media productions. As people engage with and contribute to the brand culture, the history is not only maintained but also expanded.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to answer the research question regarding elements that constitute a brand culture in a mediatised environment. This chapter is concerned with providing an answer to this question and supporting sub-questions based on the findings. Furthermore, it discusses the research implications, limitations of the study and potential future research.

The research analysed nine YouTube videos collected from the Yes Theory YouTube channel and 50 Facebook posts from the Yes Fam Facebook group. The analysis relied on a semionarratological approach to identify verbal and non-verbal cues that characterised the brand culture. Subsequently, the findings were categorised into three predominant narratives that emerged from the data. The discussion combined the narrative structure with visual aspects that enrich the narrative representation, aiming to interpret them in relation to the concepts presented in the theoretical framework. The elements of brand culture were largely based on Scolari's (2009), Banet-Wiser's (2012) and Billard and Moran's (2019) contributions to media and branding literature. Additionally, to expand the scope of the research to the digital landscape and conduct the analysis of an entirely digital dataset, the study was also guided by a selection of relevant concepts from media scholarship.

The findings of this research identified the elements that constitute a media brand culture. The analysis of the YouTube content in parallel with user-generated posts from the online community helped us understand how well-constructed content worlds can produce and transport narratives based on a way of approaching life across different media platforms (Scolari, 2009; Jenkins, 2012). Each of the three core narratives shared between producers and consumers, namely adventure, character, and accomplishment, offered distinct contributions to representing the brand culture. Even though the narrative structures of the three sometimes overlap, each conveys a particular set of values, attitudes and beliefs, and goals, visions, and purposes that form and support the brand culture. Altogether, these sets provide a coherent moral framework that allows the creation of various stories from both the producer and the community (Jenkins, 2012; Billard & Moran, 2019).

In the user-generated posts, the inspiration from the content world and the affection towards the brand and the community are evident and explicitly communicated (Banet-Wiser, 2012; Scolari, 2009). However, the word "inspiration" is vital. The collective values, attitudes, goals, and purposes guide every narrative,

although each narrative is structured differently. The brand culture is united by the central message of seeking discomfort, even though discomfort is open to individual interpretation. Therefore, this research confirms Billard and Moran's (2019) argument that brand cultures and their respective spaces for social interaction originate from producers. However, the consumers produce, support, and expand the collective meaning of brand cultures.

The analysis revealed that the narratives shared in the videos are consistent enough and adequately aligned with the brand's message. They are efficiently translated into user-generated posts even though the orientation of the stories differs significantly. In other words, at any given moment, the creators explicitly argue that travelling is the mean of living a fulfilling life, that jumping off a bridge will help overcome a fear of heights, or that being open and communicative can eventually lead to a great adventure. However, the way the narrative is structured successfully conveys such assumptions, according to the resolution and evaluation of most Facebook posts.

Moreover, the combination of professional storytelling strategies, such as exhibiting the decision-making process, reporting the causality between events, and using aerial shots as establishing scenes, with social media entertainment practices that emphasise authenticity and intimacy, assist in developing a conceptual framework for the representation brand cultures in a "new" media environment. Therefore, it differs from the literature existent on legacy media efforts to develop fictional worlds with extended narratives across numerous media, aiming to promote fan participation.

Furthermore, the study testifies the practices of civic learning and cultural participation that arise from brand cultures (Banet-Wiser, 2012; Jenkins, 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016). It distinctly connects the creators' efforts to share their acquired knowledge and incite the audience's curiosity with the personal stories that disclose real-life engagement on the same topic. Consequently, the Yes Fam group members were conceptualised as a public rather than an audience since their individual and collective actions have implications on civic society (Livingstone, 2005).

Nevertheless, this study was limited due to the time and resources required to examine a larger dataset. The established sample provided sufficient and accurate content to identify the elements that constitute a mediated brand culture. However, future research could add the comment section of online communities to the dataset to explore the dimension of networked brands proposed by Billard and Moran (2019) in more detail. To examine this dimension, the analysis should have also looked at the

interactions between the community participants in the Facebook group, particularly the content of the comment section. Furthermore, the pattern of connections and the relationships between network participants refer to Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) first and second dimensions of social capital, namely structural and relational. In contrast, given the aim of this study to identify shared narratives and the attributes that supported them, the analysis focused mainly on the cognitive social capital, known as the third dimension.

In addition, as mentioned in the methods chapter, user-generated posts from Facebook can be considered biased once social media self-disclosure could be sometimes influenced by social desirability or censorship (Franz et al., 2019). Accordingly, future research can benefit ethnographic methods to examine the expansion of content worlds to offline environments to understand how media brand cultures enact real-life engagement and in-person interactions.

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