

Beyond the Drop

A Study of Branding and Fan Engagement in the Dutch Hard Dance Music Industry

Student Name: Lisa-Marie Müller
Student Number: 683917

Supervisor: Dr. Argyrios Emmanouloudis

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

Master's Thesis
26th June 2024

Word Count: 20798

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my partner, Ralph Peters, for his unconditional and loving support during the process of this thesis. In times of stress, fear, anger, anxiety, happiness and joy.

Thank you.

Secondly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Argyrios Emmanouloudis, for the time, guidance and help throughout the process of this master's thesis.

And finally, to put it in the words of Pitbull:

“This is for everybody going through tough times - believe me been there, done that. But everyday above ground is a good day, remember that.” (Pitbull & Ne-Yo, 2014)

BEYOND THE DROP

1. Abstract

This thesis explores the Dutch Hard Dance music community and how branding and engagement are used as tools to create success of artists and brands on social media. Despite its popularity, which can be noted for example by the performance of Hardstyle DJ Coone at the Tomorrowland Mainstage 2018, the scene gained little attention in academic discourse. Furthermore, in recent years, social media has gained significant importance in the repertoire of every marketing manager. A mixed-method approach employing in-depth and expert interviews has collected insights from thirteen participants: six industry professionals and seven fans. Four major themes were derived through textual thematic analysis: 1) Crafting Brand Presentation, 2) Fan Interaction Dynamics, 3) Integration of Presentation and Interaction, and 4) Offline Realm and Markets. The findings of this research reveal, that both branding and engagement are crucial for the success of brands and artists online. Industry professionals not only point out the importance of branding, but also that fan engagement is increasingly becoming a vital element as well. These together nurture brand loyalty, fan-brand connections and therefore the success of brands. Fans view social media, especially Instagram, as an essential tool in creating perceptions about artists. While branding is important to distinguish one's brand in the oversaturated market, fans highly appreciate authenticity, engagement, personal connection, and offline experiences with the music. In addition, there was a small gap in priority for industry professionals; they slightly prioritized brand presentation, while fans tended to focus more on music, general appearance, and personal experience with the brand as a whole. Fans paid attention to the emotional connection with the artist and the brand by fans. In summary, with social media, the way success is obtained has changed both online and offline. Social media in this day and age can help the artist translate online popularity into offline success. The findings of this study provide insights not only into the online success of branding and engagement but also into the balance between tools in the online and offline realms. Whereas the virtual world does play an important role, the real world, with its festivals, music, and personal experiences, can influence online success as much as vice versa. Lastly it is essential to mention that fans want more personal and authentic contact with the brands they admire.

KEYWORDS: *Branding, Music Marketing, Hard Dance Music, Fan Engagement*

Table of Contents

1.	<i>Abstract</i>	3
2.	<i>Introduction</i>	6
	2.1 Hard Dance Music Industry	8
	2.2 History of Music Marketing	8
3.	<i>Theoretical Framework</i>	10
	3.1 Marketing in Music and Event	10
	3.2 Success on Social Media	11
	3.3 Engagement	12
	3.3.1 Fan Engagement on Social Media	12
	3.4 Branding	13
	3.4.1 Brand Identity	14
	3.4.2 Brand Image	14
	3.4.3 Brand Loyalty	15
	3.4.4 Emotional Branding	16
	3.5 Branding and Engagement	17
	3.6 Social Media Branding and Music Industry	17
4.	<i>Methodology</i>	19
	4.1 Data Gathering	19
	4.1.1 Sampling	19
	4.1.2 Data collection	21
	4.2 Operationalization	21
	4.3 Data Analysis	24
	4.3.1 Reliability and Validity	24
5.	<i>Results</i>	26
	5.1 Crafting Brand Presentation	26
	5.1.1 Establishing Visual and Thematic Consistency	26
	5.1.2 Brand Identity	29
	5.1.3 Building Emotional Connection through Branding	31
	5.2 Fan Interaction Dynamics	33
	5.2.1 Emotional Bonds with Fans	33
	5.2.2 Behavioural Participation and Interaction	35

5.2.3 Informative Engagement with Content	36
5.3 Integration of Presentation and Interaction.....	37
5.3.1 Maintaining Authenticity	38
5.3.2 Interaction-driven Brand Adaptation	40
5.3.3 Cultivating long-term Loyalty.....	41
5.4 Offline Realm and Markets	42
5.4.1 Market Dynamics	42
5.4.2 Impact of Music.....	43
5.4.3 Interplay of Offline and Online Realm	44
6. Discussion	47
6.1 Crafting Brand Presentation.....	48
6.2 Fan Interaction Dynamics	49
6.3 Integration of Presentation and Interaction	50
6.4 Offline Realms and Markets	51
7. Conclusion.....	53
7.1 Academical Implications.....	53
7.2 Practical Implications	54
7.3 Limitation.....	54
7.4 Future Research	54
8. Reference List.....	56
<i>Appendix A. Interview Overview</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Appendix B: Final Thematic Map</i>	<i>66</i>
<i>Appendix C. List of Brands in the Hard Dance Music Scene.....</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>Appendix D. Interview Consent Form</i>	<i>68</i>

2. Introduction

In an age, where social media is part of every facet of live, reshaping how people connect, communicate and consume, their influence on marketing and branding is undeniable. The Dutch Hard Dance music community, a dedicated and rapidly growing community, has not been immune to these changes. With festivals drawing thousands of fans and new artists emerging every day the role of effective branding and engagement has become more vital than ever for the success of brands online and offline.

Between the years 2021 and 2023 alone, the export of Dutch Dance music has risen by 231% (NL Times, 2023). This increase shows that the export of Dutch Dance music plays a crucial role in the music industry worldwide (NL Times, 2023). Hard Dance music, also known as Harder Styles or Hardstyle, is part of the Dutch Dance music industry. The term Hard Dance music is an overarching description for an array of Dance music above 150BPM including Hardcore, Hardstyle, and Raw Hardstyle. The Hardcore music genre, where later Hardstyle and further sub-genres originated from, was developed in the underground music scene of Rotterdam, and has gained popularity over the last 25 years (Muhs et al., 2020, p. 166). Additionally, Defqon.1 Weekend Festival, a Harder Styles event, is the largest dance festival in the Netherlands, and the Dutch event organizer Q-dance is credited with coining the term *Hardstyle* (Muhs et al., 2020, p. 166). This further highlights its importance in Dutch society. The growth of the genre is evident, as demonstrated by Hardstyle artists such as Coone headlining Tomorrowland's mainstage and making history. Furthermore, popular artists like Hardwell and Timmy Trumpet are incorporating higher BPMs into their sets, which is contributing to the genre's increasing popularity (Q-dance, 2018). The Dutch Hard Dance music community refers therefore to the music genre, that has spread from the Netherlands all over the world but is nevertheless predominantly popular in the Dutch realm. However, fans, that are part of the community, online and offline can be found in many different countries all over Europe and the world.

Additionally, to the increasing importance of Dutch Hard Dance music in the world, social media has become a leading tool for marketing in the creative industries. It has become more vital than ever for brands, artists and event organizers to be present on social media platforms, like Instagram and TikTok, being able to create a convincing and cohesive online brand presentation. For this, two tools, have become especially significant. On the one hand for the interaction with audiences online, and on the other hand for overall presentation on social media: *branding and engagement*. These are frequently used in creating a successful brand presentation in the online realm and have therefore become vital for the success of brands online.

Research within this community can shed light on the cultural impact of fan engagement and branding in the changing digital landscape. Moreover, it can help to explain how the concepts of engagement contribute to the overall success of brands in the industry, creating a deeper

understanding of how this relates to branding. Due to the oversaturated market in the Electronic Dance music industry in general, branding and engagement have become increasingly important tools to connect with audiences online and therefore create a successful brand. This leads to the objective of this research aiming to understand the relationship between branding, engagement and online success of brands and artists on social media within the Dutch Hard Dance music scene. To successfully examine this topic in a broader manner and gain a deeper understanding about the dynamics in the digital realm it is crucial to examine both fans that are active on social media and industry professionals. Thus, this research addresses the following question:

RQ: How are branding and fan engagement utilized on social media as tools to create success in the Dutch Hard Dance music community?

To provide a more structured answer to this overarching question, two sub-questions are introduced:

- 1) *How is branding and engagement perceived by fans in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene in creating the success of brands?*
- 2) *How is branding and engagement perceived by industry professionals in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene in creating success of brands?*

This research aims to contribute to the academic discussion by examining a music genre that has received little attention despite its growing importance in recent years. Additionally, previous research on engagement and branding in music has primarily focused on platforms such as Myspace and Facebook (Salo et al., 2013, p. 23; Hollebeek, 2014, p. 154; Zheng et al., 2014, p. 90). However, the rise of new social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok has drastically changed the online marketing landscape. Social media platforms are no longer solely for posting holiday photos and funny dance videos. In today's competitive landscape, companies must differentiate themselves, connect with consumers, and build long-term loyalty (Zheng et al., 2014, p. 99). Therefore, the goal is to understand how branding and engagement as tools on social media platforms create the success of brands, including artists, music labels and events online and offline.

As a theoretical base for this research the engagement concepts *Consumer Brand Engagement* (Hollebeek et al., 2014) and *Digital Content Marketing* (Hollebeek et al., 2019) are used, adding the Uses and Gratification theory alongside the four key aspects of online interaction by Smith and Gallicano (2015) to fully grasp the dynamics of engagement online. The concepts of engagement are then translated to the dynamics of the Dutch Hard Dance music community. Furthermore, branding is operationalized through the concepts of brand identity, brand image and brand loyalty as well as emotional branding to create a framework to understand how these overarching aspects of a brands' presence online aid the way they are perceived and therefore how their success is created in this new environment of marketing. Lastly, the theoretical framework delves further into the

interconnectedness of branding and engagement as intertwining concepts and lays a foundation for the understanding of social media marketing in the music industry.

To answer the research question successfully, 13 interviews, with fans and industry professionals in the Dutch Hard Dance music industry were conducted. The data derived from the mixed-method approach of semi-structured expert interviews and in-depths interviews served as the foundation for the subsequent analysis and will be further discussed in the results section of this thesis. The following section of this chapter provides a foundational explanation about the history of the Hard Dance music industry alongside the origin of the signature sound and the history of music marketing.

2.1 Hard Dance Music Industry

Originating from the Netherlands in the 1980s and 1990s, Hardcore music initially reacted to the media attention arising from the House scene found in Amsterdam. DJs in Rotterdam developed a harder style of house music namely Hardcore or Gabberhouse (van der Hoeven, 2012, p. 322). This was fast-paced sound with aggressive beats, quickly gained popularity within the global rave underground. The Gabber culture developed a distinctive style in tracksuits, Nike Air Max trainers, and shaved heads. When mainstream attention and commercial success grew, the scene started to retreat even further underground. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the Gabberhouse legacy continues to influence the Hardcore music scene as part of today's Dutch Electronic music landscape (van der Hoeven, 2012, p. 322). In the early years of the 2000s, Gabberhouse progressed into a more accessible style of music, namely *Hardstyle* (Nye, 2021, p. 149).

In 2002, the Dutch event company Q-dance coined not only the term Hardstyle but also the music genre overall (Muhs et al., 2020, p. 166). This already delivers an explanation on how closely linked the music and event industries are within the country. In their research, Muhs et al. (2020) explain the importance of subcultures, such as the *weekend warriors* of the event Defqon.1 Weekend Festival, as part of the motivation to attend the festival but also to create a sense of belonging and community (p.167). As they further elaborate, these communities form through "collective experiences, the atmosphere of social equality, intimacy, and togetherness" (Muhs et al., 2020, p. 167). While the researchers did not directly interpret how this particular form of branding and fan engagement influences online success, this study aims to extend that research. It seeks to understand how this form of engagement and branding is cultivated into successful online marketing strategies.

2.2 History of Music Marketing

Social media marketing in music is based upon traditional marketing in music. Therefore, for the thorough comprehension of this research it is crucial to provide a basic understanding of the

historical context of music marketing. The historical journey of music dates back to 3000 BC, where it developed until the first noted mass marketing of music following European Christianity. Within this, Georgian music with its set notation was especially open for replication. This allowing the church and other religious authorities to facilitate a unification providing the first form of mass marketing in music due to their promotion as direct words from heaven (Ogden et al., 2011, p. 121). The birth of the recording era in the late 19th century, and later the emergence of radio in 1920, changed entirely the face of music into that of an effectively consumed product by the 20th century. Some milestones, like Napster and the appearance of the first iPod, have further changed consumption and promotional strategies. What used to be an act of performance has now turned into a commodity to sell (Ogden et al., 2011, p. 123). The authors describe the early evolution of music as intended to be people-centric, which helped in accomplishing affective ties with the those (Ogden et al., 2011, p. 124).

The evolution of music into a mass consumed product was followed by a radical shift in the late 70s and early 80s where marketing strategy orientation changed to a more consumer-preferences centric approach. This move included focusing on understanding the consumer, therefore, having greater chances of selling what represented the consumers' demands (Kuyucu, 2021, p. 15). During the 20th century, the differentiation of media from radio, television, and, more recently, digital media has changed the overall approach to marketing in music. Music marketing in the digital age has dramatically transformed since the discovery of the iPod and then the birth of streaming platforms, such as Spotify. It was further developed through the invention of social media platforms (Kuyucu, 2021, p. 16). Whilst traditional marketing was about a message going out to a large audience, followed by a long wait to get a reaction in form of a song or ticket purchase, social media platforms provide a significant shorter feedback loop for brands leading to a more strategic and targeted marketing approach (Kuyucu, 2021, p. 16). This historic evolution underscores the important shift towards consumer-centric approaches, resulting in today's digital age where social media enables more strategic, targeted and immediate music marketing efforts.

In conclusion, Hard Dance music can be characterized by its fast-paced signature sound above 150BPM, originating from the Netherlands. The community is unique and has received little attention in academic discourse, making it an interesting subject to examine. Furthermore, music marketing dates back all the way to early Christianity and has developed through the invention of the first iPod, Napster and Spotify as well as social media platforms. Today these platforms play a crucial role in the way music is consumed, experiences and marketed, creating the foundation of this research. The next chapter focusses on providing the theoretical foundation for the analysis.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter lays the theoretical foundation for this research. Firstly, it explains the concepts of marketing in music and event as well as success on social media. Secondly, it delves into the concept engagement with the three level of engagement and the Uses and Gratification theory; and branding with the theories around brand identity, brand image, brand loyalty and emotional branding. Lastly, this chapter provides a theoretical overview over the connection between branding and engagement before concluding on social media's role in branding within the music and event industry.

3.1 Marketing in Music and Event

Marketing in general is defined as: “the process of identifying needs and satisfying these needs with suitable goods or services, through product design, distribution and promotion, either as a business or as a non-profit-making organisation” (Colin, 2020, p. 167). Furthermore, the last decade has seen the era of internet and social media takeover, completely revolutionizing the traditional marketing landscape, also in music and event. When it comes to social media marketing three critical aspects were found by researchers: “advertising, creating brand presence, and using word-of-mouth for promotion” (Oklobdžija, 2015, p. 585). Additionally, event marketing differs from traditional marketing with the product that is being marketed is an experience. Music festivals are a value-added product, which means the marketing approach has to be different and focus on how its unique values will be passed on to its consumers (Oklobdžija, 2015, p. 587). Such fact emphasizes the importance of experiential marketing, a strategic way of getting the customer involved through immersive and memorable experiences with a product or service. Experiential marketing goes a step further than traditional forms of marketing, verbally embracing emotional connections, smelling, tasting, seeing, or feeling the product (Muthiah & Suja, 2013, p. 33). This approach is considering personal relevance. Experiential marketing tries to make a long-lasting impression, establish brand loyalty, and provoke word-of-mouth praise. The approach harnesses the power of storytelling, sensory stimuli, and interactive elements to evoke positive emotions, foster brand affinity, and set businesses apart in competitive markets (Muthiah & Suja, 2013, p. 33; Oklobdžija, 2015, p. 587).

Furthermore, research has investigated the transformation of digital marketing in the music industry in recent years. They found that it is especially important for music artists to build a successful online presentation to stand out in the competitive online music market (Murphy & Hume, 2023, p. 4). These developments online have created a need for music stakeholders to leverage digital marketing techniques, social media strategies and digital partnerships to succeed in this evolving market (Murphy & Hume, 2023, p. 5). Therefore, it becomes evident, that social media marketing is a crucial aspect in every music stakeholder's career. This means nowadays, artists have to be able to partake in the competition online, creating the need for new skills outside of the traditional music production. (Murphy & Hume, 2023, p. 4). The importance of marketing in the music and event sector

becomes clear through the theories discussed. It differs from traditional marketing primarily in the product that is marketed. Namely an experience and a feeling.

3.2 Success on Social Media

As a brand, including artists and events, success plays the focal role online and offline. Every step of their strategies online and offline is created to sell music, event tickets or other of the brands' products. Therefore, success can be measured through metrics such as likes, shares and comments on social media, but also in form of ticket sales and music streams. However, success is a multi-faced concept, while it is characterized by the increase of monetary reward or listeners, it can also be measured in public appreciation, achieving a professional image as well as creative success (Chețan & Iancu, 2023, p. 119). Music artists and brands can find success through the support and engagement of online communities. These communities foster long-term relationships, resulting in higher levels of brand love and engagement (Guerreiro et al., 2020, p. 481). Furthermore, visual aspects can positively influence how music is perceived by the audience and branding can provide a form of market differentiation, which nowadays is viewed as crucial by industry professionals due to the overflowing market (Chețan & Iancu, 2023, p. 123). Therefore, success of brands in the music industry online, is influenced by the overall brand presentation, as well as engagement of the audience. This shows that success is something subjective. While it can be measured in numbers, such as likes, follows, shares or booking requests for music events, it is an individual and multi-faced concept. In the context of this research, the ideas of Chețan and Iancu (2023) and Guerreiro (2020) will guide the examination of success. Furthermore, the participants personal understanding of success plays a crucial role when trying to understand this concept in the digital realm. Therefore, the perceived success of industry professionals and fans in form of visibility and recognizability creates the fundamental understanding of the concept success in this case.

While the majority of existing research, both inside and outside of the music industry research online is focussing on the metrics of success on social media (Edlom, 2022; Kim & Kang, 2022; Saboo et al., 2016) this research aims to understand what parts of the interactions between brands and fans are factors leading to online and offline success in the Dutch Hard Dance music community. This research delves into understanding success from two key perspectives: the strategies that resonate with fans on social media and capture their attention, as well as the critical elements that industry professionals prioritize. By examining these aspects, the aim is to uncover the nuanced dynamics of branding and engagement as tools to create success of stakeholders in the music industry. The methods chapter will provide a detailed discussion on the operationalization of success measurement as it pertains to this study.

3.3 Engagement

3.3.1 Fan Engagement on Social Media

The term *engagement* represents a mental state resulting from interactive processes between audiences and a brand, developed through cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activities (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 257; Smith & Gallicano, 2015, p. 89; Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154). The significance of engagement lies in its ability to improve brand perceptions, encourage audience participation, and foster loyal followers who work with professionals to enhance the value of the product (Deuze, 2007, p. 246). Engagement is a multifaceted concept, although participants in research studies may not explicitly label it as such. Instead, they commonly describe it using terms like "being involved" or "active" when discussing their interactions on social media platforms (Smith & Gallicano, 2015, p. 84). Hollebeek et al. (2014) identify three aspects of engagement: cognitive, behavioural, and emotional, which explain how consumers and brands interact with each other (p. 154). Cognitive engagement refers to the consumer's thoughts during a specific interaction with a brand. Behavioural engagement refers to actions such as liking, sharing, or commenting. Emotional engagement is the strongest dimension within this concept, elaborating on the level of positive brand-related impact and emotional response caused by a product online (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154). The research of this thesis aims to understand how the three level of engagement are used and perceived by both industry professionals and participating fans in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene. This, for example can be seen in form of likes, shares and comments for behavioural engagement, the aim to seek information about brands within the industry regarding cognitive engagement or emotional responses to content for emotional engagement.

Building on that, when discussing engagement activities, participants highlighted four key concepts central to their online interactions: "(a) *information consumption*, (b) *sense of presence*, (c) *interest immersion*, and (d) *social interaction*" (Smith & Gallicano, 2015, p. 85). Information consumption was described as actively seeking out personally relevant information, reflecting a desire to stay informed and educated (Smith & Gallicano, 2015, p. 85). Sense of presence in this case is defined as a cognitive attachment to online experiences, particularly enjoying deep immersion and awareness of one's connectedness, although this was seen occasionally as habitual. Interest immersion refers to exploring material important to oneself, paired with interaction; this consists of liking, sharing, and advocating for the information/products (Smith & Gallicano, 2015, p. 85). Participants expressed a sense of self-actualization through advocating personal interests and influencing others, especially in cases of dissatisfaction. Lastly, social interaction is a significant driver of engagement, with participants valuing the opportunity to connect with others, share experiences, and communicate in ways not typically possible with offline information (Smith & Gallicano, 2015, p. 85). A significant amount of the engagement is based on a desire for social connection and validation, as participants of the study stated that they were honestly interested in knowing people and sharing things of value with

them (Smith & Gallicano, 2015, p. 85). The four engagement activities noted by Smith & Gallicano (2015) are an extension of Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) three levels of engagement. While these can be sorted within those levels, they give further insight that helps in more profound understanding of the engagement dynamics. Additionally, it is essential to recognize the motives behind social media use when trying to understand engagement online. The *Uses and Gratification* theory explains why individuals use these platforms. The theory is based on the idea that three motives—authenticity, the hedonic, and functional motives—gratify a specific need and desire of an individual when interacting on social media platforms (Demmers et al. 2020, p. 55; Hollebeek et al., 2019, p. 31).

Hollebeek (2019) relates the concept of *Consumer Brand Engagement* to the *Uses and Gratification Theory* and its development connecting the ideas in Digital Content Marketing (p. 33). Thereby, it states that every dimension of engagement is associated with two dominant motives: emotional engagement is led by the authenticity and hedonic motives, whereas cognitive level is related to the authenticity and functional motives. The behavioural dimension, lastly, is associated with the functional and hedonic motive (Demmers et al., 2020, p. 56; Hollebeek et al., 2019, p. 33). Within the framework of the Uses and Gratification theory, the functional motive addresses the desire to gather information about a brand to influence purchase decisions, while the hedonic motive encompasses the emotional aspects and experiential desire for entertainment, diversion, and relaxation among consumers. Moreover, the authenticity motive not only reflects the quest for genuine content in today's information overload but also serves to foster connections, trust, credibility, and sense-making between brands and fans (Hollebeek et al., 2019, p. 31).

This creates new level of depth when examining the concept of engagement. By understanding the psychological motivations that are based on individual social interaction, it is possible to examine not only the impact, but more importantly, its origin of engagement. It therefore explains the needs that are satisfied by interacting with a brand.

To conclude this section, engagement is a multifaced concept. To fully grasp the complex community online and be able to understand the behaviour of fans and the impact of it on engagement strategies online, the three level of engagement by Hollebeek et al. (2014) are provided as the foundation. Building upon that and therefore delivering new layers for the analysis, the key concepts for online interaction by Smith and Gallicano (2015) and the Digital Content Marketing concept by Hollebeek et al. (2019) are introduced. These two concepts aid to further analyse the gathered data of this research and therefore better understand engagement as whole in the Dutch Hard Dance music industry.

3.4 Branding

Branding is a complex concept, which can not only be applied to the traditional way to goods or services, but also to places, events, artists, cultural products and many more. Within that, cultural

products, also including music and events, are categorized as experiential goods prioritizing symbolic, hedonic, and aesthetic qualities over functional attributes during consumption (Fira, 2022, p. 72). These experiential products have a symbolic nature that “conveys ideas, symbols, and ways of life” (Muthiah & Suja, 2013, p. 33; Fira, 2022, p. 72). Relating to this, research has found that both brand attachment, as a crucial part of branding and experiential goods drive through the emotional interaction with a brand (Fira, 2022, p. 72). Branding as a concept encompasses various aspects of a brand's online representation, including brand identity, brand image, and brand loyalty. In recent years, emotional branding has also gained increasing importance. These concepts will be further explained in the following chapter.

3.4.1 Brand Identity

According to D. Aaker, brand identity is a unique set of associations created or intended by the developers of a brand that represents the value of a brand and promises offered to consumers by members of a company (Ianenko et al., 2020, p. 2; Janonis et al., 2007, p. 70). J.-N. Kapferer refers to brand identity as the definition of the uniqueness of the brand's facets and value propositions (Ianenko et al., 2020, p. 2; Janonis et al., 2007, p. 70). L. de Chernatoni refers to the element of differentiation, mentioning that brand identity reflects the character, objectives, and values that uniquely differentiate a given brand (Ianenko et al., 2020, p. 2).

Brand Identity is one of the essential components of a brand and the strategic marketing concept for the organization. There are two steps in creating a brand identity. First and foremost is to make sure that the identity is in line with the marketing strategy and that the unique differences between the company's brand and the competitors are highlighted. Consumers should also be able to objectively identify the brand. Another point is to create a brand identity and develop the perception of a brand the way the developers intended to (Ianenko et al., 2020, p. 2, Janonis et al., 2007, p. 70). Janonis et al. (2007) further discuss this idea and say that brand identity consists of values, goals, and moral perceptions, creating a core body that is different from other brands (p. 70).

3.4.2 Brand Image

That said, a brand's identity is shaped in great detail by a few elements in the brand's ecosystem. Core to the brand's presence is the goods or products that it sells, for not only do they distinguish the brand from all other competitors, but they also act as clarion calls to the consumers of its values and quality standards (Janonis et al., 2007, p. 71). A *brand sign*, usually embodied in a logo or graphical representation, is a critical element in the transmission of brand personality and values that fosters the identification of and connections with the brand by consumers. Some products function as identity prototypes by exemplifying essential brand attributes and providing consistency

across various product categories (Janonis et al., 2007, p. 71). Further, the brand's values, that is, its mission, purpose, and core beliefs from which it emanates, must become the foundation upon which all communication and action arise. Well-thought communication plans that present those values and narratives to the consumer can lead to branding partnerships in the minds of the target audience and customers, promoting strong brand loyalty (Janonis et al., 2007, p. 71). Furthermore, the prominent people involved with the brand, whether the brand ambassadors or the organizational figures have a significant role in implementing the values and personality of the brand in creating human contact with the consumers and in ensuring the brand's identity is reinforced (Janonis et al., 2007, p. 71).

Also, brand identity and brand image play a significant role in the formation of the brand. While brand identity refers to how a brand wants to be perceived by the consumer, brand image, however, refers to how the brand is actually perceived by the consumers based on their interaction and experiences with them (Janonis et al., 2007, p. 75). The two concepts of brand identity and brand image are related, and it is stated that the former forms the basis for the latter. Consistency between brand identity and image becomes critical in developing consumer trust and loyalty (Janonis et al., 2007, 75). It is when a brand's values and beliefs, i.e., its identity, can relate to those consumers perception toward it (its image) that leads to a strong and positive brand reputation. Proper brand management involves maintaining brand identity in all touch points: advertising, packaging, customer services, and the overall brand experience (Janonis et al., 2007, p. 75). The strong point of maintaining the same voice or identity for a brand relevant to consumers is that the brand can somehow inherit the unique and pleasing image that will distinguish it from others and build an excellent brand-to-customer relationship that will last long (Janonis et al., 2007, p. 75).

3.4.3 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is a very integral aspect of the branding concept. The term, when conceptualized, refers to the “ultimate relationship and level of identification between the consumer and the brand” (Keller, 2008, p. 3). Erdoğan and Çiçek (2012) elaborate on how brands create a relationship with consumers and, because of this distinctiveness of being positive and memorable in their minds and among those of a more significant market segment, they develop an attitude of a 'have to' feeling about the brand. This loyalty eventually produces sales revenues, market share, and profitability for the companies, allowing them to expand or at least continue operating in the market (p. 1354).

The value proposition created by the brand extends deep into consumer brand loyalty. It is the values, ideas, benefits, and advantages formed through the interaction with the brand and its products that create loyalty among the consumers. Moreover, with the use of multiple social media venues and applications, brand loyalty is promoted among consumers (Erdoğan & Çiçek 2012, p. 1358). Consumers now expect novelty, variety, and exclusivity in their brand experiences that can be

achieved on social media through more significant interaction with entertaining, participative, and exciting content and applications that organizations can develop to interact with their target audience (Erdoğan & Çiçek 2012, p. 1359). Brands and campaigns must strive to offer humour and originality, experiences that set them apart and connect with the interests of their consumers. This requires brands to keep up to date with their consumer preferences and what is trending to remain relevant and keep contact with the target audience on these multiple social media platforms (Erdoğan & Çiçek, 2012, p. 1359).

Additionally, trust plays a crucial role as a critical precursor to brand loyalty. Online communities, as a social structure, positively impact both trust and loyalty in consumers (Laroche et al., 2013, p. 78). Improved relationships between brand members would increase brand trust among themselves and, through that, directly enhance brand loyalty. This should be interpreted that the moderating effect of brand trust enables the translation of the brand community effect into brand loyalty (Laroche et al., 2013, p. 78).

3.4.4 Emotional Branding

This form of branding has become evidentially more important in recent years within marketing. Emotional branding has increasingly become more important to build a strong brand in the highly competitive online markets of social media platforms, such as Instagram. Utilizing emotions in branding strategies as tool to create a deeper and stronger bond with the audience has become more attractive than ever (Ekber Akgün et al., 2013, p. 504). Considering this, emotional branding can be defined as a “company's approach that appeals to the affective state of its target audience in order to increase brand loyalty” (Kim & Sulliban, 2019, p. 2). These strategies do not only play into the idea of emotional connection between a brand and its consumers, but also into how the consumer feel that they can identify personally with the brand. Authenticity shows to be a crucial part of emotional branding, fostering deeper meaning and increased commitment (Kim & Sulliban, 2019, p. 4). Research on emotional branding mostly refers to how the consumers are attached to the brand, rather than how emotions are used to evoke brand loyalty and engagement from the consumer. However, research conducted on the marketing strategies of Coca Cola provides insight of the positive effects of emotional marketing on brand attachment and brand loyalty. In the case of Coca Cola, the marketing campaign strategically evoked feelings of warmth and happiness in their target audience using specific wording and imagery (Gao, 2022, p. 294). Even though, there is no distinct research on emotional branding in music on social media yet, this example can provide a first glimpse of how a brand can use emotions, such as joy, but also nostalgia, unity, and love to create a deeper and stronger bond with their audience.

3.5 Branding and Engagement

Researchers have found that brand loyalty and engagement have a strong influence on each other (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019, p. 720; Zheng et al., 2014, p. 99). It refers to the need for maintaining a long-term relationship by creating positive associations with a brand and the consumer-brand relationship. This concept can be further divided into two dimensions: behavioural loyalty and attitudinal loyalty (Zheng et al., 2014, p. 92). The behavioural dimension refers to the continuous purchase intentions of a brand's product or service, while attitudinal loyalty identifies the shared values in the relationship with a brand. (Zheng et al., 2014, p. 92). In connection with engagement, research has shown, that community commitment and the way fans are engaged in the brand is strongly influenced by branding (Fira, 2022, p. 89)

Social media offers brands a new way of connecting with their customers, with providing information, customer service, special offers and entertainment (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019, p. 716). Since the introduction of WEB 2.0, the way products are marketed has drastically changed. Platforms like Instagram are no longer just entertainment tools; brands now use brand-hosted social media pages to actively market their products through innovative strategies (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019, p. 716). These new tools have enormous potential to enhance brand loyalty in turn helps to build brand communities through engagement (Zheng et al., 2014, p. 99). Additionally, engaging with customers via social media platforms can improve brand-consumer relations (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019, p. 720). Therefore, users who share values and have favorable beliefs about a brand-hosted account are also emotionally tied and perceive interactions with the brand as rewarding and fulfilling. (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019, p. 722; Park & Ha, 2021, p. 91; Zheng et al., 2014, p. 99).

Furthermore, Samarah et al. (2021) looked at the interplay of brand interactivity and consumer brand engagement. Taking the concept of CBE and examine the interplay with core concepts of branding, this means brand loyalty as well as brand interactivity (p. 651). In their study, they found, that brand interactivity is positively influenced by all three levels of engagement, meaning emotional, cognitive and behaviour. Moreover, they overall found, that engagement is strongly related to the development of brand trust and the behaviour aspect of brand loyalty (Samarah et al., 2021, p. 658). The research revealed that customers are more inclined to interact with a brand on social media when they perceive it as highly engaging (Samarah et al., 2021, p. 658).

3.6 Social Media Branding and Music Industry

Salo et al. (2013) investigated the significance of social media as a marketing tool in the music industry (p. 23). In addition to consumer motives, the quality of content is a crucial factor in successful branding on social media platforms (Salo et al., 2013, p. 23). The authors identified four consumer motives for social media use among participants in music communities: “reinforcement of

social identity, a sense of affinity with other members, participation, and two-way interaction through user-generated content” (p. 26). Salo et al. (2013) explored these aspects in Myspace and Facebook (p. 29), while Donham et al. (2022) expanded the research to include Instagram as a marketing platform in the music industry (p. 326). According to Donham et al. (2022), successful branding within the industry relies on “direct-to-consumer fanbases, hosting conversations, and creating deep, meaningful, and long-lasting connections” (p. 326). Additionally, Hudson et al. (2015) highlight the importance of social media in music festival branding, specifically the direct relevance of emotional attachment for social media marketing (p. 74). They found out, that emotional attachment has a positive influence on word-of-mouth and social interaction as well as brand loyalty and brand relationship quality on social media (Hudson et al., 2015, p. 74). This further underlines the ideas of the importance of emotional branding in the context of the music industry.

In conclusion this framework provides the theoretical fundament of the analysis of this research. To understand the dynamics of the Dutch Hard Dance music community and the importance of branding and engagement as tools to create success of brands online. The concept of Hollebeek et al. (2014) provides the fundament of the theoretical frame of engagement, building upon that, the concept of Smith and Gallicano (2015) provide another nuance to the understanding of the multifaced idea of engagement. Lastly, with adding the Uses and Gratification theory to the definition of engagement, the psychological side of user engagement and their needs behind that creates a deeper layer to examine that topic in the light of the Dutch Hard Dance music community.

Branding as the second concept in this research is differentiated in brand identity, brand image and brand loyalty, three important aspect that shape the brand presentation online. Additionally, to this, the concept of emotional branding is introduced to cater to the specificity of a music community. Since the research is conducted on social media in the music industry, the theoretical ideas of Salo et al. (2013); Donham (2022) and Hudson et al. (2015) provide a theoretical understanding of social media marketing in the music industry.

4. Methodology

To address the research question effectively, a qualitative research approach has been selected. This approach allows for flexible examination of the data and design, enabling a thorough analysis. As Boeijs (2010, p. 32) claims, this approach can be instrumental in probing, clarifying, and portraying new social phenomena, together with the participants' perspective. The research aims to study the relationship between fan engagement and branding in the Dutch Hard Dance music industry and how these tools are utilized to create success in the digital realm. This was realized through semi-structured interviews aimed at collecting the respondents' perceptions regarding the objective of this research. The interviews provided some structured format using a list of specific questions. Yet they were held flexible to further explore the topics in depth and open to eventual changes (Brennen, 2017, p. 33). This was realized through questions being moved around, making more time go into one area or making follow-up questions a little more thorough to clarify an answer (Brennen, 2017, p. 33). The final interview guides for industry professionals and fans can be found in Appendix A. The subsequent methodology chapter guides through the process of data gathering operationalization and data analysis of this research.

4.1 Data Gathering

4.1.1 Sampling

To answer the research question, the sampling incorporated two groups: fans and industry professionals. The selection of these two groups of participants was done based on sampling criteria to best capture a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the online dynamics of industry professionals and fans in the Dutch Hard Dance music community.

4.1.1.1 Rationale for Sampling

Industry professionals, such as artists, event promoters, and organizers, social media managers and content creators, are pivotal stakeholders in influencing and shaping branding strategies and fan engagement practices in the Hard Dance scene. Ultimately, their insights were invaluable in comprehending the overarching strategies employed to foster brand loyalty, cultivate an image, and establish an identity, all with first-hand experience and expertise in handling dynamics of the industry. Additionally, insight into branding—its conceptualization, execution, and perception in the industry—were provided through interviews with industry professionals and how this affect fan engagement and create online success.

It is essential, on the other side, that fans were also included in this study; supporters form an essential piece of the audience ecosystem in the Hard Dance music scene. They actively participate in online talks, share content, and get involved with artists and events over social media. Their voices are

critical in understanding the reception and interpretation of the brand efforts within a fan community. They can provide an understanding of what leads them to engage with the brand, how they perceive brands imagery online and what makes them loyal to a brand. This study interviewed fans active on social media to understand their views on branding within the industry and the effects of branding on their involvement with artists, events, and the larger community.

Hence, the sampling strategy included both industry professionals and fans on social media, which allowed for a broad understanding of how branding and engagement are utilized to create success in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene. The used research approach enhanced depth and breadth of the analysis, therefore successfully covering all aspects of the research question at hand. In this regard, there were six in-depth interviews with professionals and seven with fans conducted. Fans were purposively selected based on their involvement and the integration into the Hard Dance music community and their online activity using social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Furthermore, industry professionals were purposevly selceted based on their profession and significance in the industry (Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 653).

4.1.1.2 Participant Selection Criteria

The selection of participants for this study was purposively and was guided by specific criteria tailored to capture diverse perspectives and experiences within the Dutch Hard Dance music scene. The participants in this study were contacted through the researchers personal network, Instagram, LinkedIn, and E-mail, as well as by accessing active fans and industry professionals who meet the selection criteria. A total of 13 interviews were carried out in this study. Out of these, 12 were held online via Zoom face-to-face, and one in a written form since the time was challenging to be found at the end of the professional. All participants consented to being part of this research by signing the consent form that can be found in Appendix D.

Six of those interviews were expert interviews with industry professionals, in which the interviewees have been carefully chosen based on their significant experience and involvement in the Dutch Hard Dance music industry. This criterion ensured that each participant has deep knowledge and insights into the dynamics of the industry. Furthermore, each industry professional has a direct connection to social media management or marketing, all while still being diverse in the positing in the industry. By recruiting artists, social media managers of music labels, booking agencies, and content creators, there was a better understanding over the dynamics in the digital realm of this music scene created. As such, these critical stakeholders in the scene ensured an in-depth answer to the research.

Furthermore, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with fans that are active on Instagram. The selection criterion for them was the frequency of engagement and their online involvement in the communy. This means that respondents were chosen that are highly involved in

the online community, absorbing and participating with content around the scene and therefore being able to share their perception of branding strategies and engagement online.

Aside from the aforementioned requirements, the focus laid on the significant amount of industry stakeholders they followed on social media platforms. This ensured that consumers were involved in content consumption and that a range of perspectives from artists, event organizers, creative content producers, and other influential figures within the scene were understood. Through the selection of the participants who followed the vast array of key stakeholders, they, by default, are well-informed about industry trends, events, and developments within the Dutch Hard Dance music scene. Such criteria for the selection of participants were adhered to in this research in an attempt to ensure the sample represents a multiplicity of views and experiences within the Dutch Hard Dance music scene.

Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 minutes. The selection of interview participants intentionally did not consider age or gender; instead, the study prioritized capturing diverse perspectives and experiences within the Dutch Hard Dance music scene, focusing solely on active involvement and influence in the industry. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to accumulate a gender-balanced sample so as not to create a bias. All interviews have been conducted in English; however, the participants of this study were originated from the Netherlands, Belgium, German and the UK, who are part and following the Dutch Hard Dance music community on- and offline. A list of the interviewees can be found in Appendix A.

4.1.2 Data collection

The interviews were conducted via Zoom. They were recorded with the aid of the Zoom program and with an iPhone to eliminate the chance of technical failure. Furthermore, the recordings were saved securely on a computer, with a copy on an external hard drive. The recordings were transcribed through Zoom and the transcripts were also stored on a computer along with a copy on an external hard drive. In a second step in the transcribing process, the pre transcribed data was checked by the researcher with the help of the existing recordings. The data was coded and analysed with the help of the program Atlas.ti. The final thematic maps of all four themes can be found in Appendix B. All data will be deleted after the end of this research.

4.2 Operationalization

To be able to successfully analyse the data from the conducted interviews, the concepts of fan engagement, branding and success must be operationalized. It is important to understand how these three concepts, which are heavily theory based, can be understood, and examined within real-life data.

Furthermore, the concepts also provided the base of the questionnaires which aided as guidance for the semi-structured interviews.

The Tables 1 and 2 below depict the concepts engagement and branding with its sub concepts that helped guide the analysis of the gathered data. The indicator was cue that helped identify the individual concept when looking at the datasets.

Table 1: Operationalization of the concept engagement

	Concepts	Sub concepts	Indicator
Engagement	<p>Consumer Brand Engagement <i>“A consumer’s positively valanced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interaction”</i> (Hollebeek, 2014, p. 154)</p> <p>Digital Content Marketing <i>“DCM (like advertising) intents to boost consumer brand perception and ultimately sales, it (unlike advertising) does so by developing consumer engagement, trust, and relationship, which are intended to cultivate sales indirectly and in the long run.”</i> (Hollebeek, 2019, p. 28)</p>	<p>Emotional dimension (authenticity & hedonic motive) <i>“consumer’s degree of positive brand-related affect in particular consumer/brand interaction.”</i> (Hollebeek, 2014, p. 154)</p>	<p>Fans: perceived connection with emotional engagement Professionals: perceived influence of emotional engagement on shaping identity and success</p>
		<p>Cognitive dimension (functional & authenticity motive) <i>“a consumer’s level of brand related thought processing and elaboration in particular consumer/brand interaction”</i> (Hollebeek, 2014, p. 154)</p>	<p>Fans: perceived importance of informational content Professionals: perceived importance of informational content</p>
		<p>Behavioral dimension (functional & hedonic motive) <i>“a consumer’s level of energy, effort and time spent on a brand in a particular consumer/brand interaction.”</i> (Hollebeek, 2014, p. 154)</p>	<p>Fans: active interaction with brand/ brand content Professionals: perceived importance of interaction with fans</p>

Table 2: Operationalization of the concept Branding

	Concept	Indicator
Branding	Brand Loyalty <i>“Brand loyalty is the biased, behavioral response expressed over time by some decision-making unit with respect to one of more alternative brands out of a set of such brands and is a function of psychological processes” (Jacoby & Kynes, 1973, p. 2)</i>	Fans: perceived consistency in visual elements; perceived messaging alignment; perceived unique brand elements
		Professionals: perceived impact of brand elements
	Brand Image <i>“Brand image is defined here as perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory. Brand associations are the other informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers” (Keller, 1993, p. 3)</i>	Fans: perceived authenticity; relationship building
		Professionals: perceived impact of authenticity; relationship-building
	Emotional Branding <i>“Emotional branding is defined as the engagement of consumers in a deep, long-term, intimate emotional connection with the brand, which is beyond the benefit based satisfaction, and which creates a special trust based relationship for the development of a holistic emotional experience” (Morrison and Crane, 2007, as cited in Ekber Akgün et al., 2013, p. 505)</i>	Fans: perceived emotional connection through branded content on social media
		Professionals: perceived importance of emotionally branded content

Additionally, success played a crucial role in the examination of the data of this research and answering the research question. It creates the essence of all social media channels and their interaction with audiences online (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019, p. 716). Since it is a multi-faced concepts and highly subjective it can be measured in different ways. Fans can talk about recognition in terms of artists and brands, that stand out to them. This can be measured as successful, because their strategies online lead to stand out in the online realm towards the audience and create a connection with them. Furthermore, industry professionals can talk about being recognized, being successful in terms of engagement with the audience, but also in terms of being booked by festivals or

achieving ticket sales. Since this is a qualitative interview study, the focus is more on creative and non-numeric success.

4.3 Data Analysis

Within thematic analysis, the goal is to find repeated patterns across a data set, which in this case consists of the sample group fans and industry professionals. Thematic data analysis helps organize and describe rich data and leads to an in-depth interpretation of such (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method, that involves searching for repeated patterns of meaning across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 77). The analysis of the data and therefore the creation of the patterns can be done in a deductive way, meaning driven by theory and concepts provided, or in an inductive way, where the patterns emerged through the data itself. An inductive approach does not try to fit the gathered data into pre-existing theoretical frameworks, however, a theory driven deductive analysis can provide a richer analysis of the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Therefore, this research combined both methods and emerged inductive themes, additionally to the theory-based themes. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 86) describe the themes as “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.”

The analysis itself is a “multi-stage process of coding and categorizing” keeping the principle of flexibility, re-reading and adjusting the developed codes and data in mind (Dumitrica & Pridmore, 2019, p. 1). After a familiarizing phase with the data, the initial coding phase begins, where the data is coded based on the theoretical concepts, but also creating room for data driven codes. Based on these initial codes combining themes are searched, reviewed and defined. Lastly the themes are named and produced into a report that can be accessed in the results section of this research. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) Ultimately the analysis is conducted in six phases, starting with the initial coding phase and ending with the production of the report. Resulting in a final thematic map, with themes and sub-themes that create the base for the results section (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). The final thematic map can be found in Appendix E.

4.3.1 Reliability and Validity

In the process of this thematic textual analysis the concepts of branding and engagement and their influence on the success of brands in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene was analysed. Transparency was periodized for credibility. The discussed analysis steps in the methods section serve to enhance this transparency, enabling readers to trace the research trajectory. According to Silverman (2011, p. 361), transparency is one of the main ways of achieving reliability in qualitative research. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the influence of a confirmation bias due to the researchers personal passion and inclusion in the community. Therefore, there is an automatic

inclination to seek information and draw an opinion in a way that ratifies already established beliefs and experience. This bias may affect the data collection and later analysis and interpretation in an attempt to confirm personal perspectives and beliefs. This acknowledgement is in line with the necessity for reflexivity in qualitative research and, therefore, increases the credibility of the findings in the analysis (Silverman, 2011, p. 373; Tracy, 2010, p. 840). In qualitative research, credibility depends on both reliability and validity (Silverman, 2011, p. 385). Trying to achieve reliability, transparency of the research process and theoretical framework was provided, and ongoing self-reflexivity provided an added layer of depth of these transparency measures. Adding to this, Silverman (2011, p. 384) suggests that using analytic inducting provides additional strength to the validity of the study. The inclusion of tools for validating the research, such as a comprehensive analysis process and the identification of deviant cases, highlights the methodological rigor employed. Although generalizability is often raised as a possible concern with qualitative research, it must be stated that qualitative research focuses more on depth of understanding than generalizability (Silverman, 2011, p. 385). This helped to incorporate the nuances and complexities of branding and engagement of Dutch Hard Dance music to make the research more profound and richer (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). This approach allowed the practical framework for analysing the research subject. A mixed method was used to answer the research question in trying to understand the importance of branding and engagement as tools to create the success of brands on social media. The method contained semi-structured expert interviews, as well as semi-structured in-depth interviews. The participants were carefully gathered based on discussed criteria and the data was collected and analysed with the help of Atlas.ti. A thematic data analysis was conducted based on the ideas of Braun and Clarke (2006) in six phases and the product of the analysis was reported in the following results section of this study.

5. Results

This research consisted of a total of 13 interviews conducted with fans and industry professionals within the Dutch Hard Dance music community. Through the process of the interviews, it became clear, that the community distinguishes itself due to its dedicated and highly connected nature. Furthermore, in recent years the importance of social media marketing and therefore branding and engagement has influenced the dynamics of this community. The following chapter provides the results of the analysed data, answering the research question of this study.

The analysis identified four main themes that contribute to answering the research question: *1. Crafting Brand Presentation; 2. Fan Interaction Dynamics; 3. Integration of Presentation and Interaction; and 4. Offline Realms and Markets.* The four themes and their supporting topics will be discussed in depth in the following section of this thesis.

5.1 Crafting Brand Presentation

Different branding strategies shape the foundation of every brand's presentation online. Within the Dutch Hard Dance music industry brand presentation is crafted through *a) Establishing Visual and Thematic Consistency; b) Brand Identity and c) Building Emotional Connection through Branding.* These three elements of brand presentation will subsequently be discussed.

5.1.1 Establishing Visual and Thematic Consistency

The utilisation of visual element, in form of brand images, such as distinctive colours, overlays, tone of voice and unique branding elements, has become significantly more important in recent years. Before, branding played a minor role in a brand's visual presentation within the Dutch Hard Dance music scene; however, it has now evolved into a pivotal element of the online presentation, alongside the music. "At this point, in the Hardstyle scene, I would say branding is very important" (Professional 3).

Among the 13 participants in this research a compelling social media presence has emerged as crucial element for the success of brands on Instagram. Key brand symbols that were frequently mentioned included colour palettes, specific fonts, overlays for Instagram stories and postings, and the overall tone and vibe of the content produced and presented by brands. Each of these elements contributes to crafting a cohesive brand image that conveys distinct messages. For instance, festival organizer B2s employs a vibrant palette of blue, yellow and pink, instantly recognizable to their fan base.

You have B2S with Decibel, who goes pink, blue, and yellow [...] so you actually associate a colour with the brand, so that is kind of interesting, and is sometimes it's a bit annoying,

cause, you see, like the colour somewhere and you immediately think of the brand, but that just means the branding is done right. (Fan 1)

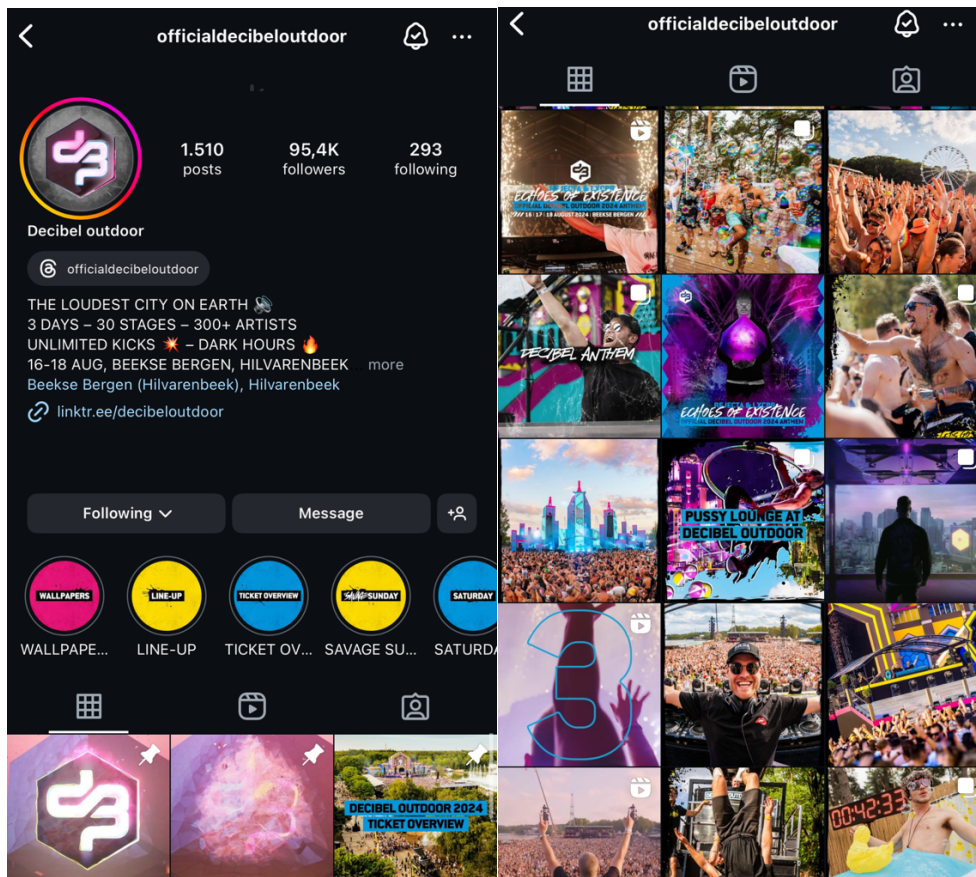


Figure 1 Instagram Feed of Decibel outdoor (Decibel outdoor, n.d.)

One example of effective artist branding discussed by participants was Rawstyle DJ Krueley. His brand revolves around a dark, grungy theme evident in overlays, colour choices, tone of voice and fonts, including the strategic use of emojis that reinforce the brand's identity

The Krueley Project. They really make use of everything: writing style, sub names, even emojis. The chains, for example, he really took them as a part of himself, which is, I think, very interesting. But also, the overlays with the scratches, with the horror type of stuff. With the colour grading like everything matches to the project. And that's exactly what I meant with branding before. If you do it like this, you should match it to your project and what you are. (Professional 3)

Beyond superficial aesthetics, brand images on Instagram delve into deeper layers of meaning and identity, as underscored by industry professionals. They discussed that a brand image not only conveys a visual aspect, but also a thematic one that translates the vibe of the music into images. For Instance:

With the artists, I guess, like the example I gave before with DJ Kruelty. Instantly, when you look at his stuff, you see the gory horror, scary stuff, and you instantly get that feeling, you know, and. I think there's really can enhance your perception of the artist. (Professional 1)

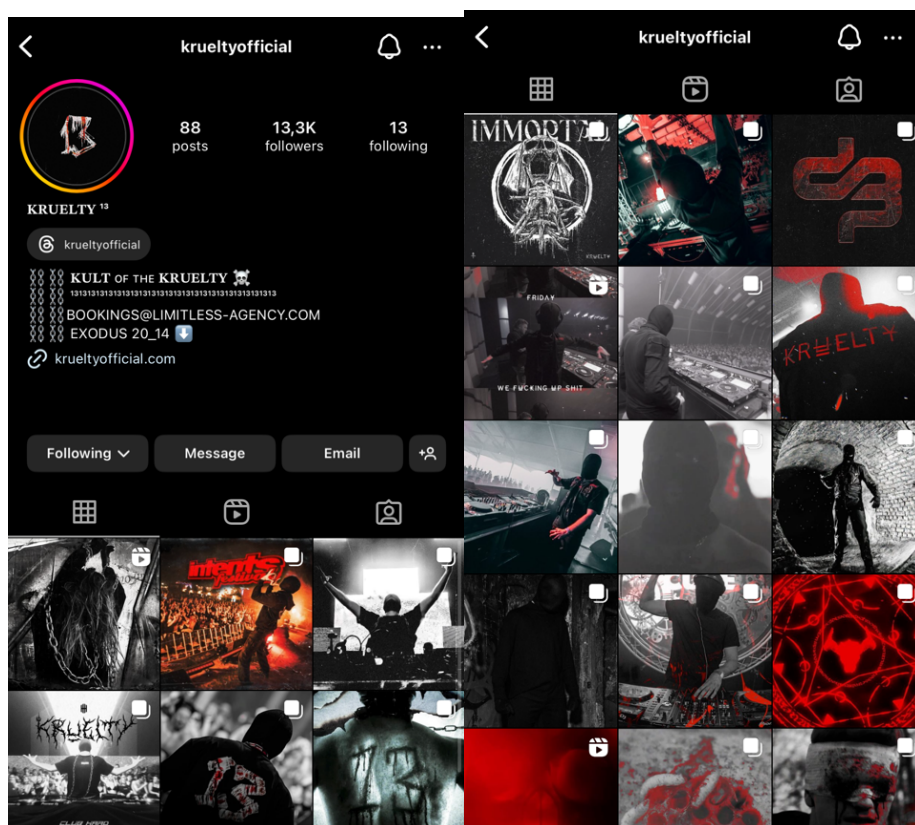


Figure 2 Instagram Feed of DJ Kruelty (Krueley 13, n.d.)

Moreover, the tone of voice in written content on Instagram plays a pivotal role in the brand image and the shaping of the brand-fan connection. Brands like, Spoonstech Records, Q-dance for their weekend festival Defqon.1 or Rebirth Events for REBELLiON Festival, use specific language to foster a sense of community and unity among their fans. In these instances, Spoonstech Records refers to their fans as "spoonies" or "lepelfamilie" (Dutch for "spoon family"), Defqon.1 describes their fans as "weekend warriors," and REBELLiON Festival employs the term "rebels" to describe their attendees.

Yeah, it's like, for example, colours or tone of voice. So, for example, Spoonstech Records. It's like, more society-based tone of voice. So, they pull in like everyone as one big family, and they communicate like that. They use the word spoonies, for example. Yeah, in Dutch: lepelfamilie things like that. So that's kind of noticeable. And it makes people really want to interact with the brand, cause they wanna be part of something that's bigger than them (Fan 1)

Fans noted that such terminology not only cultivates connection, but also aligns seamlessly with overall thematic brand narratives. For example, the use of the term "*weekend warriors*" in the Defqon.1 branding strategy is consistent with the overarching theme of a feral tribe. This branding strategy is further evidenced by the overall presence of the event, which begins with its social media appearance and extends to every detail of the event itself. "Defqon is a major, major example for this. It's all about coming home being united as a tribe." (Fan 2)

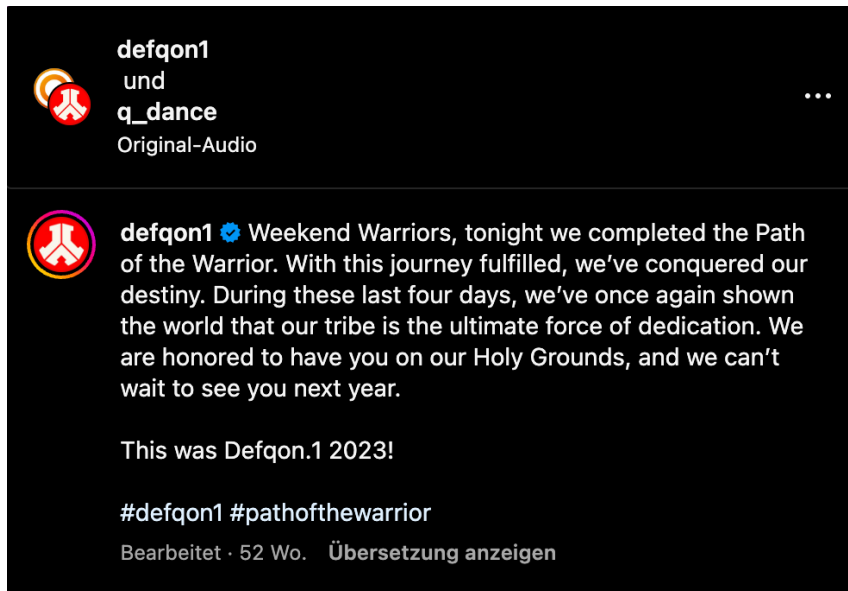


Figure 3 Caption of a social media post from Defqon.1 (Defqon.1, 2023)

These findings align with the ideas of brand image in existing literature. According to Janonis et al. (2007) a brand symbol, such as logo, colour and fonts, is the visual representation of a brand's personality, identity and core values (p. 71). Furthermore, Oklobdžija (2015, p. 587) acknowledges the importance of establishing a brand presence within the social media marketing strategies, especially in the music and event industry. They further argue, that with the growing competition in the industry on social media platforms, such as Instagram, it becomes more important to have a distinguished brand image. While industry professionals and fans do note that it has become a highly competitive market in recent years, they cannot deny the growing importance of brand presentation (Oklobdžija, 2015, p. 587). Overall, the cohesive use of brand imagery, including storytelling and tone of voice has been found in existing literature. It fosters brand affinity and can set businesses apart in a competitive market landscape (Muthiah & Suja, 2013, p. 33; Oklobdžija, 2015, p. 587; Janonis et al., 2017, p. 71). Especially in the social media realm, where captions and appealing visual aspects are crucial, visual and thematic consistency sets brands apart from other competitors.

5.1.2 Brand Identity

When discussing branding, besides a distinctive image presented on social media, it is essential for a brand to also have a brand identity. Brand identity encompasses the distinctive

characteristics and values that define how a brand presents itself to its audience, shaping its overall image and perception. Through the interviews with fans and industry professionals, it becomes evident, that an artists' brand image has to align with its identity. That is not only visible in their social media presence, but also reflected in the music they produce. "Ineffective branding, is, I would say, like imagine you make like the darkest music known to mankind, and your branding is like pink and flowers and stuff like that." (Professional 1)

Moreover, branding plays a pivotal role in shaping expectations towards acts, brands and especially events. It is essential for brands to synchronize its identity with its branding in a way, that it becomes recognizable by its audiences.

Within the Dutch Hard Dance music community, music remains a focal point. An artists' persona extends across all facets of their performance, both online and offline, which is deeply rooted in their brand identity. Industry professionals have noted that a more authentic presence and alignment with personal values not only facilitate long-term sustainability and success, but are more convincing and create a deeper connection with their audience.

In my opinion, if you brand an artist on social media and with like moves and stuff, it really has to fit their identity. You don't have to create an identity. It has to fit to who they are. As people, as artists. It has to fit the music. It has to fit the vibe of the person. (Professional 3)

And later they explained:

What you often see now is, "oh, fuck!" I need a branding. Ok let me just get a designer [...] Yeah, just make something that's cool. And I don't really think it works like that on the long term. You can get success on short term. But on long term it has to fit who you are and what you want to represent (Professional 3)

When considering brand identity, it is always important to understand the brand image as well, since both are closely linked. The brand identity is, what brands intent to be perceived as while brand image is, what they are perceived by the audience (Janonis et al., 2007, p. 75). Spoootech Records, for instances, emphasizes an underground vibe paired with a sense of community and family. This identity influences their branding decisions, including visuals and the messaging on social media. Therefore, brand image is intricately connected to brand identity.

The core identity of the Spoootech brand identity is really build on a few pointers. That first point is the community, the society. One point is the underground vibe that it has and one of the pointers, I think also is that it stands for having fun like just having fun. (Professional 3)



Figure 4 Instagram post Trinity pres. Spoontech Society (Trinity Festival, 2024)

A brand identity, that aligns with the way the brand is perceived online by fans creates a more consistent picture. Furthermore, fans crave to identify with a brand or an artist, therefore, perceiving an identification with the core values of an artists or event. This stronger bond between brand and fans therefore leads to a greater success. These findings align with existing research, a brand identity differentiates a brand from its competitors by emphasizing on core values and beliefs creating a vital part of every company marketing concept (Ianenکو et al., 2020, p.2). In contrast to existing literature, however, is the importance for artists to create a brand identity, that is authentic and aligning with the music and overall act.

5.1.3 Building Emotional Connection through Branding

Instagram has become increasingly competitive as marketing tool in the music industry. With new music being released every day and events every weekend, a brand has to stand out with its branding and presence on social media platforms. “There's so many festivals in the Netherlands. It's insane” (Professional 4) In the saturated market of the Dutch Hard Dance music industry, brands are forced to come up with new and innovative concepts, arising from need to distinguish themselves from the mass of content, impressions and concepts in the market. As a result, brands are continuously pushed to explore unconventional strategies and creative executions to capture and maintain the interest of their target audience.

I really think that the Krueley project is a good one. Because they really thought about doing something obscure and dark and like a little bit over the edge, like pushing the limits of what's possible online. (Professional 2)

A leading factor in the branding strategies of events and artists within the Dutch Hard Dance music scene is the emotional connection to the brands. For many participants within the community, Hard Dance music holds a deep emotional significance, transcending the music itself to influence various aspects of their lives. Participants frequently described their connection to the music as a lifestyle “It's like you get involved with everything that has to do with hardstyle. And yeah, you grow deeper into it over time. And then there actually is no way out” (Fan 1) This emotional attachment is often tied to specific memories associated with events or favourite tracks. Recognizing this, brands use this emotional connection in their branding to foster a stronger brand loyalty and a meaningful bond with their audience

Definitely events cause they post a lot of like pictures from the crowd, and it could be like. I don't know. Sometimes Defqon, when they post like emotional, like people being emotional in the crowd or something. So it helps carry on that sort of family feeling and the emotion. Also, artists as well like they might just like post snippets of upcoming music and be like, I don't know caption it like, this is what hardstyle is about, or I don't know if it's like an emotional song, or yeah, they do try to keep that (Fan 5)

This is illustrated by multiple brands in the community on Instagram. One example being Q-dance's weekend festival Defqon.1. Participants, both fans and industry professionals have noted that the event organizer is especially good in conveying this emotional feeling and connection via their social media channels. The event branding is designed to evoke feelings of coming together, with content frequently showcasing emotional moments.

The love for the music, that is all it takes. That's why also those kind of songs are made and creating like, a group feeling. Also with for example, the Defqon anthems, like the Road of the Warrior, like you feel that you want to be part of it and that's put together so well in their branding. Especially Defqon, has it so so greatly done that they want you to be part of that, that the group of warriors, or to be part of the the event. So it's yeah. Yeah, that branding is spot on. (Professional 2)

Within this research, the importance of creating a connection with the audience through emotions becomes evident (Kim & Sulliban, 2019, p. 4). Brands and artists utilize the dedicated

feeling of the community and the emotional attachment to the music in their branding. This aligns with existing research, but also provides a new nuance to the literature. Music has an important emotional aspect to it, which is successfully utilized in the scene to foster a deeper brand loyalty and fan-brand connection. “I also think that like music speaks to your heart mostly, and if the branding speaks to your mind the same way, the music speaks to your heart. If it all fits together, then it becomes one complete part.” (Professional 3)

Hudson et al. (2015, p. 74) discussed the importance of emotional attachment created through among other things branding of festivals online. Naturally, the evoked emotional attachment of these approaches creates a deeper brand-fan relationship, social interaction and word-of-mouth. Furthermore, the authors discussed the importance of engagement in combination with the emotional attachment found in music marketing, which will be discussed in the next chapter of this results section.

5.2 Fan Interaction Dynamics

The interaction with fans proves as a second important pillar when it comes to the success of brands in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene. This research has revealed that the community is complex and intertwined, which makes engagement a pivotal aspect not only offline, but in the online realm as well. This section delves further in the *Emotional Bonds with Fans; Behavioural Participation and Interaction* and the *Informational Engagement with Content*.

5.2.1 Emotional Bonds with Fans

Emotional engagement plays an important role in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene, fostering deep connections between fans, artists, and brands. This emotional engagement can be observed in different cases throughout the interviews but manifests itself in a deeper and personal connection to brands, events, artists, and their music. Not only is the community highly connected, but the music is important to the audience, which can be observed on social media as well. One participant named a reel as an example. The reel posted by them showcased a song played at Decibel Outdoor Festival, which went viral on Instagram later:

And there was this moment of Audiotricz and Ecstatic playing. And then there's this track that everyone sings along, and it was such a small stage, but the atmosphere was crazy. And I use that as a Instagram reel. And it got shared over and over and over and over again, just because it's track, it was speaking to a certain emotion of being together and creating an atmosphere altogether. (Fan 2)

Throughout the interviews, it becomes clear, that there is one aspect, that is especially important to fans and industry professionals: The personal connection between fans and brands. In times, where personal connection with brands and artists has become a) accessible like that through social media and b) crucial for the sustainability and success of them, fans crave this form of social interaction. This type of emotional engagement can be created through different channels. Personal Instagram stories, posts about memorable music or moments at festivals and new music releases.

Furthermore, emotional engagement can also be evoked through fun and relatable content. Even though Instagram has taken the place of a marketing platform, participants still reach out to it for entertainment purposes. Integrating fun and relatable content in the feed, has shown to be successful. On the one hand it can help conveying the personal identity of an artists. For example, the DJs Sickmode and Rooler, who have created their brand presences on- and offline about memes and humorous content. “Let's make Sickmode the example. He started doing this meme shit, and just strange goofy shit. And he really speaks to fans because it's simple, and it stays close to just fucking around with your friends” (Professional 3)



Figure 5 Humorous content posted by DJ Sickmode and Rooler as co-post (Rooler & Sickmode, 2024)

On the other hand, it can also simply aid to a more enjoyable interaction with the audience. Balancing between fun and humorous content as well as the promotional content can build a deeper connection with fans. Especially, when they can easily relate to the memes, naturally creating behavioural engagement in form of likes, comments, and shares.

Emotional engagement stands out as the most potent form of engagement, capable of naturally fostering behavioural interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154). Consistent with the concept emotional branding as discussed before, emotional engagement plays an important role in cultivating a deeper connection and bond between brands and fans (Donham et al., 2022, p. 326). According to the Digital Content Marketing concept, emotional engagement is driven by the audience's desire for authenticity and hedonic fulfilment. In one aspect, the community seeks a deeper, more personal connection with the brand, evoking feelings towards the content consumed on Instagram. Conversely, this engagement also satisfies their need for entertainment and relaxation (Hollebeek et al., 2019, p. 31). Furthermore, Hudson et al. (2015, p. 74) underline the importance of emotional attachment of brands with its audience for success. Emotional attachment naturally creates word-of-mouth, which can be seen for example with DJ Sickmode who utilizes memes and humorous content, to foster social interaction through relatability and emotionally nuanced content.

5.2.2 Behavioural Participation and Interaction

Behavioural engagement is the most straight forward type of engagement that is used to create success on social media. Additionally, it is also named the easiest, when talking to fans about their interaction with brands on Instagram. Most named are interactions in form of liking, sharing and commenting posts. One fan noted that the community has an especially “low level” type of contact.

It's all really close and really like at a low level of contact. So like in EDM, you can send a DM to a major artist, and they will never respond the 9 to 10 times they won't, and if they do, then it's just luck, probably but in Hardstyle it happens so many times that I send a DM or responded to something and the artist actually responded back to me. (Fan 2)

Underscoring this, an industry professional explains the importance of communication with the fans via direct messages on social media platforms, emphasizing on the idea of “giving something back to the audience” saying:

You have to not only asking for value. [...] If it's just having like a simple conversation with people like. Sometimes I have DMs with fans for like an hour. And it was a really fun conversation. I think that's a cool value for both of us. (Professional 1)

Behavioural engagement plays a pivotal role for online interaction. This can also be in form of feedback to new music or connection with other members of the community, which lead to the creation of friendships or even closer and more meaningful connection with brands and especially artists. During the interview process it became clear, that fans focus on the idea, that DJs are also “just

human beings” and therefore should take the time to connect with their fanbase. Nowadays Instagram and other social media platforms have a variety of tools that can be used on the one platform to initiate behavioural engagement, but also to make it possible in the first place to interact on a closer level. Smith and Gallicano (2015, p. 85) present two of their key features for online interaction within the segment of behavioural engagement. Social interaction and interest immersion can both be observed in the case of the Dutch Hard Dance music industry. Furthermore, the findings align with the ideas of Hollebeek et al. (2019, p. 31), addressing both the functional motive of gathering new information about brands and artists through social interaction and the hedonic motive of being entertained.

5.2.3 Informative Engagement with Content

Recently Instagram has emerged as the new primary platform to obtain information among fans in the Dutch Hard Dance music community. While Facebook still plays a role as well, the focus has shifted to Instagram recently. This may take the form of information regarding ticket sales, festival information, or the release of new music. A distinction can be observed between the responses of the fans in this study with regard to gathering information online. One participant mentions:

Yeah, that's more the new stuff, I think. New video of a track played for the first time, also the line up of for a new party. That's something what I'm very interested in. Also if I want to go or I already go and then to get to know, yeah, who's playing there. (Fan 3)

While some participants indicated that they primarily use social media to stay abreast of their favourite artists' music, festival news, and other informative content, others described the Instagram posts about new music releases or information about events as a source of irritation. Nevertheless, even those participants who are not particularly interested in informational content agree that using Instagram as a promotional and informative platform is an indispensable aspect of the industry. Ultimately, the objective of any brand within the industry is to sell its products and, as a result, to market it successfully. “Personally, I'm not that interested in like a post for every new release. I think that. Yeah, it's something of a must do so people know the track is out there.” (Fan 1)

This perspective can also be derived from the interviews with industry professionals. It is often challenging to balance between authenticity and the constant need to market a product. However, creating cognitive engagement by providing information about the latest releases and/or event information, such as ticket sales or other details, is necessary. The key challenge is to integrate promotional content with other forms of engagement, particularly those that create an emotional response, such as light-hearted, humorous or content to create a personal connection.

The importance of cognitive engagement can also be seen in existing literature. Smith and Gallicano (2015, p. 85) identify information consumption as one of the four key concepts of online interactions, describing it as the need to seek out personally relevant information. In the Dutch Hard Dance music community, fans frequently seek out information about their favourite music artists or upcoming events. Some members of the community even use Instagram primarily for this purpose, reflecting their desire to be informed (Smith & Gallicano, 2015, p.85) about latest releases, event news or other relevant updates. Furthermore, advertisement, in case of the Dutch Hard Dance music industry the promotion of events and music play a crucial role in the success of brands online (Oklobdžija, 2015, p. 585).

Furthermore, cognitive and behavioural engagement are closely linked. One participant noted that behavioural engagement in form of comments, likes and shares often spikes, when there is new information presented, such as new releases or a special act played at a festival.

Well, actually, it can be different things. But the most important thing in my eyes is that it's something you're bringing news, you know, because then the impact of Whoa, this what is this comes in. And if you're posting like, it doesn't matter what content it is. But if you're posting something that is already known or already announced, or already shown before, then, people are gonna interact with less (Professional 1)

This indicates that cognitive engagement, which involves seeking and processing information, often leads to increased behaviour engagement within the industry. This relationship is further supported by Hollebeek et al. (2019, p. 33) concept of engagement levels and the Uses and Gratification theory. According to this idea, cognitive engagement is driven by functional and authenticity motives, where audiences engage with content to make sense of it and gather necessary information. This comes from the idea, that fans interact with content, that they find meaningful and relevant for their personal relationship with brands (Hollebeek et al., 2019, p. 31)

5.3 Integration of Presentation and Interaction

The third main finding of this research is the interconnectedness of the brand presentation and fan interaction in the industry. As artists, event organizers and music labels, the industry professionals all agree upon the importance of an engaged fanbase for the success of their brands. However, engagement as a concept is heavily intertwined with branding, as one participant noted: “I think fan engagement is more important than branding, but through branding you can create more fan engagement.” (Professional 2). This section presents the integration of the brand presentation and fan interactions, and states, why the choice of content produced, branded and posted is crucial for fan

engagement on Instagram. It includes the sub-themes: *Maintaining Authenticity*; *Interaction-driven Brand Adaptation* and *Cultivating Long-term Loyalty*.

5.3.1 Maintaining Authenticity

Delving further into the topic of the emotional connection between brands and audiences, many fans have noted in their interviews, that they frequently seek a deeper connection with their favourite artists. Especially when branding strategies are employed in a way, that they create a more authentic connection between brands and audience. That can be in form of personal Instagram Stories or providing a behind the scenes perspective for the fans. This content has been named frequently by participants in the interviews. Fans are therefore particularly interested in content about build-up of events, or everything it takes to organize a big event, but also fun challenges created with stakeholders in the industry. One participant explains: “I like the behind the scenes a lot, and also those like funny interviews and stuff that they do with the with the artists like Snack of Rage” (Fan 4). While another participant agrees and says:

I'm always very interested in like the before and after of festivals. So what are you gonna do with the build-up? What inspired you. I know Intents did that last year [...] I believe they showed like a lot of things like concepting the stage to actually building it, and then also the festival breaking it down and stuff. I do find it really interesting. (Fan 1)

The key idea here is to engage the audience by letting them be part of the overall experience, that comes with music and events. Nowadays, a lot of fans are not only interested in the final product of a brand, but they want to know how it has been created and what the creative process was. Brands can use social media platforms, like Instagram for that kind of authentic connection.

For instances Rebirth Events for their Weekend Festival REBiRTH Festival utilized their channels on Instagram and TikTok well in their strategies throughout the year. With interviews, behind the scenes content and following trends on social media, they managed to create a more authentic and closer bond with their audience. Talking about a campaign by Rebirth Events on Instagram, one participant mentions:

I think tonight they're going to post with Dual Damage. That they finally got a Kapsalon stand on REBiRTH. So I really like stuff like that, because it also makes the artists not seem that distance from their fans, but rather just also create a connection with the with the artists. (Fan 4)

During the interviews, six out of the seven interviewees from the sample group of the fans have talked about the content of REBiRTH Festival in terms of behind the scenes and interview content as a means to create a closer and authentic connection with the event. It becomes clear, that in the case of authenticity, branding and engagement interplay with each other. Creating content, that is authentic and away from the classic cinematic video content used by a lot of other brands in the industry is a conscious branding choice, which helps standing out in the oversaturated market. Naturally this type of authentic branding evokes emotional and behavioural engagement due to its relatability and shareability.

In maintaining authenticity, two concept play together, emotional branding and emotional engagement. The idea of emotional branding is to create a closer connection with the audience through the presentation of more authentic and emotional content (Ekber Akgün et al., 2013, p. 504), while emotional engagement is the idea that the audience gets engaged on a more affective level (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154). The authors further elope that emotional engagement is created through the authenticity motive of the Uses and gratification theory. This states, that users online emotionally engage with content, that satisfies this need for genuine content, trust, credibility and sense-making (Hollebeek et al., 2019, p. 31). As fans state in the interviews, the content helps create a deeper connection with artists and brands. This aligns with the ideas of Smith and Gallicano (2015, p. 85) and their four key concepts of online interactions (1. Information consumption; 2. Sense of Presence; 3. Interest immersion; and 4. Social interaction). Authenticity also can be portrait in creating a face for the brand, like recording personal Instagram stories or frequent Q&A sessions.

Furthermore, authenticity is a branding choice, not only tying into emotional branding, but also the brand image and identity. By using the power of storytelling, and interactive element the brand evokes positive emotions in the audience (Muthiah & Suja, 2013, p. 33). Industry professionals underline the importance of an authentic presence on social media. One participant describes it as: “I think the most important thing is, always be yourself” (Professional 2).

When it comes to authenticity, it is not only the deeper connection with the audience, that plays an important role, but also the longevity of the brand. With creating a concept, that is authentic to the brands identity in values and beliefs, it become easier for them to be consistent with it.

Yeah, I think especially for artists. If you want to put up an act, you need to think about how you want people to see you, of course, and that can be the same as you are in private, or something completely different. But that's something you really have to choose upfront to be like, hey, this is what I'm gonna do. So this is what I'm gonna be moving forward in the next 10 years, for example. (Professional 2)

And later they add: “I think that in a few years we will see which ones were authentic, and will stay and were like written down for an artist and are not fitting who they are.” (Professional 2)

5.3.2 Interaction-driven Brand Adaptation

As discussed in the section before, branding and engagement heavily interplay with each other in today’s social media landscape. Branding is utilized as a tool to evoke certain forms of engagement and in terms of approachability and the way brands present themselves on these platforms. Branding has equally an impact on engagement, as engagement has on branding. Especially when it comes to the need to cater to the algorithm on social media. Due to its intertwined and connected nature, social media is helpful to bring a closer Fan-DJ-Brand relationship. The industry professionals agree that solid branding increases interaction. One participant says: “And you just want people to connect with you. This, I think, like being interactive as active branding like, just engage with your fans. I think it's the best thing you can do, and also listen to them.” (Professional 4), while another one adds: “If it looks better, people are more tend to engage with it. I guess that's that's something that's that's obvious.” (Professional 2). This further matches with the perception of the fans, one participant agrees: “For me, like I just said, if it's well made, I want to interact with it. If it's not well made, then I just skip it, I and I think that goes for a lot of people.” (Fan 4)

Social media has become a vital factor in all artists’ and brands’ presence online. Fans and industry professionals agree that without a solid online presence, it is almost impossible for brands to become popular and successful in the scene. With this being said, while branding creates the first impression and aids in the sustainability and success of an artists or brand, engagement is, what makes the audience stay in the long run. “I think in the end it pays off, because if people interact with you. And they have like a positive interaction with you. I think they're going to be more inclined to interact with you again in the future.” (Professional 1)

Samarah et al. (2021, p. 651) establish that the interaction of brand interactivity and consumer brand engagement show that emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and behavioural engagement will lead to increasing brand interactivity and trust. As derived from these theoretical insights along with the findings of this research, strong branding on social media not only gets one noticed but also leads to deeper emotional engagement with fans. Industry professionals and fans themselves share that successful branding strategies, such as being able to be visually appealing and interactive, lead to a more engaging experience; thus, it also further advances brand commitment and loyalty from a community (Fira, 2022, p.68; Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019, p.716). Such an interplay between branding and engagement further underlines that emotional and cognitive connections play an important role in driving the loyal fan base sustainment in the music market, highly competitive nowadays.

5.3.3 Cultivating long-term Loyalty

An aspect, that has not been directly discussed in existing literature is loyalty not being a direct result of branding strategies alone but more an outcome of several factors that are created in the interaction with fans and the brand presence online. Brand loyalty emerges when branding and engagement interplay to create a feeling of connectedness. In this case, branding, through a consistent image and identity, sets the fundament on social media for a strong, identifiable, and relatable presence. When the brand's identity is relatable, fans are more inclined to develop a personal relationship with a brand. As one respondent mentioned in this context of DJ Element.

DJ Element is a really good example as well, because he is like visually with the hair he's really known, with his golden teeth he's really known, but also with his appearance being really rough. That attracts people that wants to be like connected (Professional 2).

Moreover, consistent engagement between brands and fans is important to create deep-grounded meaning in this connection. This value in the connection is realized in terms of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural engagements. In fact, in the words of an industry professional:

Whatever festival you are or artist you are, you liked it or just reacting to things answering questions, I don't think it has to be very hard, but I think it's very valuable. Connect your community to it because then they will become loyal to your event. (Professional 4).

Studies suggest that brand loyalty and engagement have a strong co-creational relationship (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019, p. 720; Zheng et al., 2014, p. 99). Brand loyalty can be divided into behavioural loyalty, which is inflected as intentions of continuous purchase, and attitudinal loyalty, that involves shared values in the relationship with a brand (Zheng et al., 2014, p. 92). Fira (2022) also found branding has a strong impact on community commitment and fan engagement, (p. 89). Social media platforms offer new opportunities of interaction where brands can provide information, customer service, special offers and entertainment, which may aid in creating brand loyalty (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019, p. 716).

Additionally, Samarah et al. (2021) researched brand interactivity and consumer brand engagement. They found that consumers' emotional, cognitive and behavioural engagement impact brand interactivity, trust, and loyalty positively (p. 651, 658). From this fact, it can be understood that brand loyalty is due to consistent branding and its interaction to multiple kinds of engagement. Therefore, it stands out, that brand loyalty can be influenced by branding in terms of the personal identification with a brand and visual appearance, but it is simultaneously influenced by engagement

(Erdoğmuş & Çiçek, 2012, p. 1358). In certain cases, engagement can even create a deeper brand loyalty than branding itself.

5.4 Offline Realm and Markets

The Dutch Hard Dance music community is first and foremost an offline community. All participants have described, how their online interactions are heavily influenced by their perception of events and music in the offline realm. Therefore, the final theme of this research is consisting of the *Market Dynamics*; the *Impact of Music* and the *Interplay of Offline and Online Realm*, providing a cohesive picture of the distinct online and offline dynamics in the community.

5.4.1 Market Dynamics

The Dutch Hard Dance market has experienced enormous change over recent years. In the past, artists would simply put their music out there for their audience to experience. However, social media plays a crucial role in today's marketing landscape for all stakeholders in the industry. These new dynamics have transformed the market significantly. It shifted the core components of success, which in turn moved towards the integration approach of branding, engagement, and music. "You really have three very important parts as an artist. That's the music, the branding, and the social media, and they all walk hand by hand. And then also you have the live performances, of course" (Professional 3) They then further add:

Before branding really got a word into our scene, the three key parts were making music; how does something look; and the live performances. So social media and branding basically took over that whole aspect. You can. Now. I mean this seriously, make fucking shitty music that you can still be at the top, and that only comes from social media and branding. (Professional 3)

In the industry, the job of an artist has undergone significant changes, therefore demanding a comprehensive approach that goes much further than just the production of music itself. Furthermore, the overflowing and highly saturated market creates a need for brands to orient themselves toward a more creative approach to concepts related to line up, events, social media content, and so forth, to stay market attuned.

Alongside the new importance of branding and engagement in today's online market, the attention span of the audience has been named by all participants in this study. Due to the rise of Instagram and TikTok accompanied of the rise of short-form content, the audience's attention span

has decreased to a point, that brands are forced to cater to exactly those new needs. Content must be engaging within the first few seconds. One participant note:

Moving content, videos, that's I think that's the only way also to get through the short span of attention that people have right now. So yeah, you need to. If it doesn't move within the first second, they already done. (Professional 2)

This showcases, how the shifting market dynamics, due to the rise of short-form content shapes the success of artists and brands not only online, but also offline. Brands are forced to tailor their content, branding, and engagement strategies to the newly created needs. Coming up with ever more creative strategies and concepts. The oversaturation of the market further creates a pressure to stand out and be recognizable. This is acknowledged by both, fans and professionals as an issue. The need to stand out in the market has been a frequent topic in the discussion with fans and industry professionals. Due to new brands and artists growing on social media, it is crucial to create a branding strategy, that distinct themselves from other competitors.

5.4.2 Impact of Music

Following the discussion with 13 participants, in this research, music continues to occupy a central position in the lives of the majority of those involved in the industry. Different forms of engagement are created through the power of music, emotional connections, behavioural and cognitive engagement all are influenced by the music as focal point. One participant mentions the power of music in creating emotional connections when talking about their favourite artist DJ Phuture Noize:

He keeps the same vibe, even though his music evolves like you can tell between Black Mirror Society and now the Enlightenment. The key is the emotion, and he kept that emotion in there that's like the core of his whole music. (Fan 4)

Even though there have been participants, that noted, that branding has become almost more important than the music itself, and in certain cases that might be true, music still plays a vital role for the audience of this community. Furthermore, music and the performance offline are influenced by the online presences of artists as well. Expectations are being created through online branding, towards how acts are perceived offline. One participant talked about the live act of DJ Thyron *Xtreme Xstasy* being perceived as energetic due to his online presence, which also translates to the act on events:

Artists are using their branding to like, for example, Thyron, with his Xtreme Xtasy, the whole branding about it is very energetic. So I think he made the public like oh. also really energetic, and pushing more energy into the crowd (Fan 1)

Tying into this, industry professionals try to match their music and their online presence:

So that's really something we stand for, like, we like a lot of different music. So we make a lot of different music. That variation thing is really a thing that's yeah, that makes us different than others, I think. And this also what we're also trying to show this in our branding.

(Professional 1)

This leads to the understanding, that for fans especially, the music still plays an important role when it comes to their interaction online, but also at festivals. Experiences, that are created at events are drivers for emotional engagement and the need for information about new music plays a crucial role. Furthermore, branding is influenced by the music as well, as it has to match to create a full picture surrounding the brand presence. Moreover, participants have stated, that they follow brands even when the social media presence is not as consistent, simply if they can gather a deeper connection through the music. However, this is different when observing events in the industry. While for music artists, it can be easier to stand out, simply with the power of their music, events have to make sure their branding and engagement is a complete package. One participant mentioned the overflowing market, combined with the growing inflation:

I think you cannot really sell an event anymore without it (branding and engagement). Even if you have a big name, and I know festivals are struggling right now because people just have less money and festival tickets are so expensive, [...] So you can't just not do branding because you, you have to pull these people that are choosing to go to which festival to your festival (Professional 4)

5.4.3 Interplay of Offline and Online Realm

As aforementioned, the Dutch Hard Dance music community is first and foremost an offline community. However, as much as the offline realm influences the community dynamics in the online realm, it becomes clear, that the online realm also influences the offline dynamics heavily. That can be seen on the example of the DJ Dual Damage, which got named by 10 out of 13 participants in the interviews. Interesting about Dual Damage is the fact, that they first build a strong online community, due to high engagement and branding and then got popular in the context of bookings and playtimes

at festivals. Going in line with the example of Dual Damage is the need of following trends, that expand over the borders of social media into the sphere of festivals.

[...] Trying to go with the new trends. So I think it already plays a big part in the music and then also in the line ups, because, for example, last year, at Intents to stay with the Dual Damage example, they became so big through social media suddenly and they weren't booked at Intents. And everyone's like saying: Why aren't they at Intents? They played like 5 sets, like small sets, but still a trend on social media which they really were, can put an artist on like a big stages fast. (Professional 4)

While another participant talks about the distinct branding strategies Dual Damage uses for their success:

Of course, your branding can grow through your following and whether they like the branding or not. Dual Damage is the perfect example, besides the music, people like the 'simplicity' of the act; the 'kapsalon fans', kloenkie fans, bad English talking. It's perfect branding, but besides that, fans think it's real. (Professional 5).

This quote ties back to the topic of authenticity prior discussed as a driver for the success of brands online, therefore creating the connection between offline and online interactions and success. Participants also reported, that recently, there has been the movement towards rougher and harder music styles, such as Raw Hardstyle. These new trends in the online sphere are now frequently translated to the festival terrain in form of more Raw Hardstyle-heavy line ups and music. This shift in the music landscape can come from the need to stand out in the overflowing social media, and therefore trying to create kicks that are more scandalous and recognizable. In the case of the shift in taste in music it becomes evident, how interconnected both spheres are. Frequently trends are carried from the online realm into the offline world and vice versa. One participant noted about this movement:

So there's been this trend in Hardstyle for this Raw trend which, personally, I don't really like. [...] You see them highlighting all these stuff, Dual Damage, for instance. A real hype. And everyone's been booking them now and highlighting them in their socials. And then, you see, like this little trend which started as a little thing, just get bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and so they have a lot of influence on that. So just a whole raw movement. (Fan 2)

Additionally, it was identified that a significant reason for fans to interact through social media is the memories created at events. For example, an Instagram post depicting moments from an event that the fan physically attended or a set they have seen can evoke an affective connection that motivates the user to like, share, or comment. That means certain online interaction is induced by first-hand experiences and personal feelings that fans generate in festivals.

[...] Typically, would be commenting or tagging them in a story when I'm like on site, especially that when I'm there. And when I do stories, I just tag them in my story. or commenting after the event. If they post like a video or something. Then I comment and I voice my opinion about the about the event. (Fan 4)

Later they add:

If it's a post about an artist that I've seen, then same here, I will voice my opinion about it most of the time. Obviously, it's good. So, I will be like, oh, that was great or just some emojis (Fan 4)

The overall topic on Offline realm and Markets explores the fact, that the community is different to other music communities, very offline driven. That means, that both, the online and offline realm are heavily interconnected. Trends online influence how artists are booked offline, whereas music that gets produced and listened to offline influences a) the branding of artists online and b) the interaction and perception by fans. Furthermore, experiences on festivals and events itself can aid as tool for engagement.

6. Discussion

This research aimed to explore how branding and fan engagement on social media platforms help shape the success of artists, events, and brands within the Dutch Hard Dance music scene. To achieve this, the study focussed on the overarching research question examining how branding and engagement are utilized on social media to create success in the Dutch Hard Dance music community. To provide a structured answer two sub-questions: a) how branding and engagement are perceived by fans in creating success of brands and b) how branding and engagement are perceived by industry professionals in creating success on social media were used. To answer those, 13 interviews were conducted, from which five were face-to-face expert interviews and one written expert interview with industry professionals, as well as seven in-depth face-to-face interviews with fans from the Dutch Hard Dance music industry. The interviews revealed that Instagram is still the most important platform for the scene. Although some participants also mentioned Facebook or TikTok in the process, it became clear that Instagram is still primarily used in the scene for promotion, information exchange and social interaction. In addition, TikTok was mentioned as a new influencing factor. Nevertheless, the instability of the platform and, above all, problems with the monetarisation of music rights have made TikTok relatively unattractive for professionals to date, although its increasing importance should not be disregarded. While this information does not directly take part in answering the research question, it complements it and provides valuable information about the dynamics of this community online.

Through a comprehensive analysis, it was found, that both fans and industry professionals perceive branding and engagement as crucial elements in establishing and maintaining the brand success in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene. Four main topics were found through the analysis, *1. Crafting Brand Presentation; 2. Fan Interaction Dynamics; 3. Integration of Presentation and Interaction and 4. Offline Realm and Markets*. While the topics *Crafting Brand Presentation* and *Fan Interaction Dynamics* were analysed in a theory-deductive manner, leaning on the concepts discussed in the theoretical framework, this research also revealed a more complex and intertwined perspective on the way brands' overall presence online is shaped and success is built in the industry. However, due to its unique community structures, found in this research, the theme *Integration of Presentation and Interaction* was developed from combined approach of deductive and inductive analysis and finally *Offline Realms and Markets* has emerged as an additional theme during the analysis in an inductive approach.

This research provides therefore a comprehensive understanding on how artists and brands utilize branding and engagement on social media in the community to create their success, perceived by industry professionals and fans. In the following section, the results of this study will be discussed in depth and concluded to successfully answer the research question and its sub-questions.

6.1 Crafting Brand Presentation

Due to the shift in market dynamics in recent years, industry professionals, including artists, but also label and social media manager and event organizer face new challenges, when it comes to creating their presentation online. Social media marketing has become a vital part in the repertoire of not only marketing managers, but also old and aspiring artists. Firstly, industry professionals noted the change of the role of branding in the industry. They highlighted its shift from a minor aspect to a pivotal component of a brand's presence online. When talking about brand presentation, three leading sub themes were identified: *Establishing Visual and Thematic Consistency, Brand Identity, and Building Emotional Connection through Branding.*

From the perspective of the industry professionals a cohesive brand image is vital to a brands presentation on social media. It is essentially the brands online business card. Elements such as distinctive colours, overlays, tone of voice and unique branding symbols are now an essential part of a brands overall presence online and is seen as a determining factor for success on social media platforms, like Instagram. As an example, DJ Krueley and his project was named multiple times in the interviews by industry professionals. The Rawstyle DJ stands out on social media for his cohesive and thematic use of dark, gory visuals and consistent tone of voice, including strategic use of emojis. This alignment of visual and tonal elements is seen as enhancing the perception and identity of the artist, making the brand more memorable and impactful.

A constantly recurring theme throughout the analysis is the problematic nature of the overflowing market on social media. This runs through the majority of the arguments and is one of the fundamental drivers for the importance of branding, but also engagement and all the other findings. All industry professionals reported the pressure to stand out as a brand in the scene, which is mostly translated into extreme branding, music and trying to push the limits of what is possible.

Moreover, industry professionals explain the complexity of creating a brand image and presentation that is not merely superficial aesthetics but additionally delving deeper into meaningful imagery. This can be translated by the choice of colour, that conveys a certain meaning all the way to the use of certain wording to deliver a particular feeling towards the audience.

Fans echoed the perception of the industry professionals, recognizing the significant impact of brand image on how brands are recognized on social media. For instance, B2s' use of vibrant colour palettes (blue, yellow and pink) to create a recognizable and memorable brand image. Further, the fans pointed the immediate association of specific colours with brands, exemplifying effective branding through recognition. Additionally, fans talked about the importance of tone of voice used on Instagram by brands in fostering a sense of community and belonging. For example, Defqon.1's "weekend warriors", to underscore the atmosphere of a familial tribe. This sense of belonging is reinforced by the consistent use of thematic language and visuals that align with the brand's overall

narrative, which has been positively mentioned by fans in the interviews. Adding to this, the perspective of the fans highlighted how these branding strategies can aid to consciously and unconsciously stand out in the overflowing marketing.

While brand identity is something vital to the overall brand presentation, both online and offline, fans did not mention aspects of brand identity in the conducted interviews. However, it is important to note, that brand identity is something extremely individual and personal to a brand itself, only being visible through brand image and engagement for fans. Therefore, only industry professionals discussed the importance of a cohesive and well thought through brand identity, matching the personal values, persona and beliefs of brands and artists online. They further agree upon the need to stay consistent and true to the individual brand identity to be successful. Brand identity furthermore also has to align with the music produced.

The need for personal connection drives like a red thread through the results of this study. It is mirrored in the use of emotional content in form of emotional marketing and branding. Artists and events create brand strategies that purposely target the emotional connection with their fans, creating a branding, that conveys the music, into a physical and visual sphere. When it comes to the topic of emotional branding, it becomes especially clear, that branding, and engagement are intertwined with each other. While emotional branding is firstly the act of a brands creating content, it also automatically engages the audience in an affective way.

6.2 Fan Interaction Dynamics

While branding is a theme that is focussed on by industry professionals more than fans, both sample groups agree on the importance of engagement for the success but also sustainability of artists. However, its engagement does not only play a crucial role in the success, but also in the way fans perceive artists and therefore in shaping the identity of brands. All three levels of engagement, discussed among other by Hollebeek et al. (2014; 2019) play together into the success of brands online. Becoming visible in the sub themes: *Emotional Bonds with Fans; Behavioural Participation and Interaction* and *the Informational Engagement with Content*. Emotional engagement, as discussed before can be viewed as the counterpart to emotional branding. When a brand posts emotionally branded content on Instagram, they strategically evoke emotional engagement with their fans. This type of psychological marketing is successful, especially when understanding the deep meaning the music holds for the fans in the community. However, emotional engagement can also be seen in the interaction with relatable and fun content. Since Instagram, until this day, has an entertaining and relaxing factor to it, balancing content, that conveys emotions such as nostalgia, love or dedication with emotions such as laughter, lightness or relatability, does not only help creating a more meaningful connection with brands, but can naturally create success in form of recognition, interaction even numerous successes in form of higher ticket sales and music streams. Moreover,

content, that is highly relatable, such as memes, naturally has a higher chance to create behavioural engagement in form of shares, comments, or likes.

Personal interactions, such as direct messages and Q&A sessions have been named as the most memorable ways of behavioural engagement. Fans feel recognized and appreciated, when brands and artists take the time to interact with them on a personal level. Fans further explain, that in the community it is easier to reach out to brands than in other music industry, which is an aspect, that they value greatly. Also industry professionals agree on the importance of behavioural engagement, stating that providing value for the audience can create a feeling of loyalty. Furthermore, behavioural engagement effectively is the one type of engagement, that can be created by the other two types, cognitive and emotional. If the audience is emotionally or cognitive engaged in form of receiving information about their favourite brand on social media, they are more inclined to like, share or comment. Therefore, on the one side, behavioural engagement can help creating a deeper connection between brand and fans. Further this form of engagement can also be an outcome from successful cognitive and emotional engagement. Fans emphasised on the positive feelings that are evoked through personal interaction with brands. This can be seen as another important tool to shape success online.

Cognitive engagement provides the last layer of engagement analysed in this study. Providing information about music, releases and events is a non-negotiable for brands in the social media realm. Since brand-related Instagram accounts are always a marketing channel, brands are forced to use them as that, even when they do not necessarily want to. However, while the perception of fans is split when it comes to the promotion of events and music, both sides acknowledge the importance of such. One group of fans foremost uses Instagram to receive information and therefore their main intention is the cognitive engagement. These types of fans get excited about new releases and follow their favourite festivals and brands close to not miss any news from them. Contrary to that are the fans, that prefer Instagram as entertainment platform. They describe the informative content as rather irritant, than pleasuring.

6.3 Integration of Presentation and Interaction

As discussed in the sections prior, branding and engagement are two leading subjects when it comes to create success of artists and brands online. Both are heavily interconnected with each other, and it is almost impossible to research them without each other. This interconnectedness can be seen in the three sub themes: *Maintaining Authenticity*; *Interaction-driven Brand Adaptation* and *Cultivating Long-term Loyalty*. Authenticity has been named as important aspect by every single participant in this research. Fans described the wish to move away from the perfect cinematic Instagram style and towards a more authentic and personal type of content. Frequently named were the strategies of REBiRTH Festival in form of behind the scenes content, but also interaction with

artists and simply giving the brand a face. While branding seems to grow in importance as perceived by many industry professionals, it is crucial to find a balance between the perfect persona/ brand and the more authentic approach to fostering engagement.

Nevertheless, being authentic does not immediately mean giving up the idea of beautiful branding. Instagram is a creative space, where it is highly valued by fans when brands try out something new, create content, that is relatable and feels authentic. Within the concept of authenticity, it really becomes evident, how engagement and branding can become one, since authenticity can be a crucial part of branding and therefore naturally fostering engagement in various forms. When REBiRTH Festival for example interviews artists on the campsite of the event, fans are immersed in a new way with artists and brands. Especially with authentic content, fans become the chance to learn new information about their favourite stakeholders in the industry. This automatically creates a closer and more personal bond. Therefore, regarding the issue, that brands need to stand out, authenticity can help with that easily. Individuality in a trend-based community, where millions dance to the same song on social media is an easy and effective way to stand out.

Another finding in this research is, that branding and engagement together foster brand loyalty. While good branding easily can evoke engagement, as perceived by both industry professionals and fans, brand loyalty can primary be created through the interplay of both. Branding strategies can be used as a way to make people related to the persona online. Participants named DJ Element with his distinct personal brand. The DJ makes his audience relate to him and therefore creates loyalty. Nevertheless, branding alone does not shape the perception or fostering brand loyalty. Cohesive and relatable branding paired with ongoing engagement builds a deeper and personal connection with the fans. This relates in long-term brand loyalty, cultivating sustainable success of brands online and offline.

6.4 Offline Realms and Markets

Not only the shift in markets influences the success of branding strategies and brands in the Dutch Hard Dance music industry immensely. The interconnectedness of the offline and online realm due to the unique community plays another significant role. The *Market Dynamics; the Impact of Music* and the *Interplay of Offline and Online Realm* further explain this. Industry professionals acknowledge that nowadays especially artists, which are the key stakeholders in the industry, have to come with a whole new set of skills. Hereby it is important to acknowledge, that artists and their music build the foundation of the entire industry, where other brands and events are built upon.

Industry professionals especially noted the decreased attention span of the audience due to the new type of short-form content and therefore the need to cater to these new needs. While these changes are primarily a more general issue faced by creators on Instagram, unique to the industry is the impact of music and the resulting interconnectedness with the offline realm. Firstly, music still

greatly shapes the success of artists online. Music goes beyond classic branding and even engagement. Although both factors play a very important role, music is a decisive factor for fans as to whether they follow an artist or not. Music also plays an important role offline. New artists are discovered at events and then followed on social media. In this case it does not always matter how good the branding online is. However, this is exclusive to artists. When discussing events, it becomes even more important for them to stand out with good branding and engagement. Due to the oversaturation of the market in the Netherlands and inflation fans need to be convinced more to attend and event.

Trends build the last shaping factor when it comes to success of brands online. Providing the example of Dual Damage, it becomes clear how strong and impactful social media can be when it comes to the success of an artists. However, it is not one-sided, but reciprocal. Because although trends have a strong influence on whether artists become successful, they also have a strong influence on their identity. This can be seen in the growing trend towards harder music, led by trends on Instagram and TikTok. Industry professionals are especially struggling with balancing between the need to follow trends, but also staying authentic to the individual brands. Trends possess great power online as they can be a deciding factor if something goes viral or not. However, industry professionals emphasise the fact that trends are only a momentum and do not provide long-lasting authenticity.

7. Conclusion

To conclude this, and to answer the research question and sub-question of this study, industry professionals perceive branding and fan engagement as two pivotal aspects in creating success of artists and brands on social media. Branding on the one side has become a non-negotiable for brands due to the competition online, and fan engagement is becoming increasingly more important. Together these two concepts build the foundation for fostering brand loyalty and tackling the problems faced in the new and ever-changing online realm. Social media and the way brands present themselves on them has become increasingly important for fans. With Instagram being one of the major marketing platforms in today's digital realm, it impacts the picture fans have of artists and brands immensely. For example, fans turn to social media to gain information about music releases, artists and events. While branding plays an important role especially in the way fans perceive artists and brands online and in to stand out in the overflowing market on Instagram, engagement, personal connection, authenticity and the offline realm play a crucial role for fans. While industry professionals and fans agree in the majority of aspects, fans still hold a very deep connection to the music itself and the resulting community. Industry professionals focus a lot on the brand presentation, while fans do not immediately acknowledge explicit aspects such as certain brand imagery. Fans agree that music, that overall appearance and experience are the main shaping factors in the success of an artist and brand online. Additionally, the offline realm still plays a vital role in the picture and idea fans have of brands in the Dutch Hard Dance community, making that nearly as important as branding and engagement. This leads to the insight that social media has completely changed the way success is created not only online, but also offline. This can be seen in artists gaining offline success solely through their trending status online, but also through the constant need to stand out in the oversaturated market on social media.

7.1 Academical Implications

This research sheds new light on a community, that has not been researched much before. While bigger music industries such as EDM or Pop have been subject of multiple academic studies, there is only limited research on the Dutch Hard Dance music community. This paper helps to understand that branding and engagement are not the only factors in creating success of brands online. Another pivotal aspect is the offline sphere. Furthermore, previous research on branding in the EDM music community has been limited to platforms such as Myspace and Facebook. This study therefore provides a new angle, taking Instagram into account, acknowledging that TikTok as a platform for Hard Dance music is becoming increasingly important. It furthermore provides a new nuance to the concept of emotional branding in music marketing, stating that emotional connection evoked through branding is a successful tool.

7.2 Practical Implications

This research is especially interesting for industry professionals as it provides a comprehensive view on a topic that has become a vital part in the life of every professional stakeholder in the industry. With the rise of social media and the new importance of branding and engagement in the world of Dutch Hard Dance music, industry professionals can take key learnings from this study. Engagement and authenticity but especially the love for the music is still the driving factor for many fans. However, in the current saturated and highly competitive market it is crucial to create a strong and cohesive brand presence online, that fits with music, brand identity and persona. While fans do not directly acknowledge the details of every aspect of branding, it still subconsciously creating recognizability. Nevertheless, fans appreciate the step away from the perfect picture and towards a more personal and individual connection with all brands in the industry.

7.3 Limitation

This research consisted of 13 participants, six industry professionals and seven fans, which might not be representative for the entire Dutch Hard Dance music community. Furthermore, the participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate, which might have introduced a bias. Those, who agreed to participate may have stronger opinions on the topic researched. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the limitation of language barrier. All interviews were held in English, however, besides one participant, none were native speakers which can lead to a more complicated and less flowing conversation.

It is always important to acknowledge the possible biases related to the method and personal situation. The qualitative nature of the interviews can introduce subjectivity, participants might be influenced by their personal experiences and perceptions. Lastly, the research has been conducted on a subject, that is evolving quickly. Social media and branding trends evolve rapidly, the findings of this study reflect the current state of the industry, which may change in the future, affecting the relevance of the conclusion over time.

7.4 Future Research

To gain a deeper understanding on how the information gathered from the interviews translate into practice on social media, a content analysis could be conducted alongside fitting interviews. This would create a deeper and more insightful understanding on how branding and engagement strategies are shown in success in terms of followers, likes, shares and comments. Furthermore, future research could be conducted on a wider range of fans to further understand how branding and engagement are

perceived by this vital aspect of the community. For this, possibly a quantitative approach could be helpful to gather a wide range of data which then could be compared to the findings in this research.

8. Reference List

- Akgün, A. E., Koçoğlu, İ., & İmamoğlu, S. Z. (2013). An Emerging Consumer Experience: Emotional Branding. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 99(1), 503–508
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.10.519>
- Boeije H. (2010). *Analysis in qualitative research*. Sage.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brennen, B. S. (2017). *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315435978>
- Brodie, R. J., Hollebeek, L. D., Jurić, B., & Ilić, A. (2011). Customer Engagement: Conceptual Domain, Fundamental Propositions, and Implications for Research. *Journal of Service Research*, 14(3), 252–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670511411703>
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive Sampling: Complex or Simple? Research Case Examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 25(8), 652–661. NCBI.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>
- Çeçen, A., & Iancu, I. (2023). The Role of Visual Identity in Music Perception : A Talk with Specialists on Song Likability, Perceived Quality and Emotional Reactions. *KOME*, 11(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.17646/kome.75672.94>
- Colin, A. I. M. P. (2020). *Dictionary of marketing* (3rd ed.). Bloomsbury.
- Decibel outdoor. [@officialdecibeloutdoor]. (n.d.). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from <https://www.instagram.com/officialdecibeloutdoor/>
- Defqon.1 Festival. [@defqon1]. (2023, June 26). “Weekend Warriors, tonight we completed the Path of the Warrior. With this journey fulfilled, we’ve conquered our destiny. During these last four days, we’ve once again shown the world that our tribe is the ultimate force of dedication. We are honored to have you on our Holy Grounds, and we can’t wait to see you next year. This was Defqon.1 2023! #defqon1 #pathofthewarrior” [Video]. Instagram. Retrieved June 20, 2024 from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ct7o7zsIhMQ/>
- Demmers, J., Weltevreden, J. W. J., & van Dolen, W. M. (2020). Consumer Engagement with Brand Posts on Social Media in Consecutive Stages of the Customer Journey. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 24(1), 53–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10864415.2019.1683701>
- Deuze, M. (2007). Convergence culture in the creative industries. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 243–263. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877907076793>
- Donham, T., Macy, A. S., & Rolston, C. P. (2022). *Marketing Recorded Music*.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003153511>

- Dumitrica, D., & Pridmore, J. (2019). Qualitative research methods: Thematic Analysis. [Course material]. Retrieved from: Canvas
- Ebrahim, R. S. (2020). The Role of Trust in Understanding the Impact of Social Media Marketing on Brand Equity and Brand Loyalty. *Journal of Relationship Marketing, 19*(4), 1–22.
- Edlom, J. (2022). The Engagement Imperative: Experiences of Communication Practitioners' Brand Work in the Music Industry. *Media and Communication, 10*(1), 66–76.
<https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4448>
- Erdoğmuş, İ. E., & Çiçek, M. (2012). The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Brand Loyalty. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 58*(8), 1353–1360.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.09.1119>
- Fira, M. (2022). Brand Loyalty to Popular Music Group Brands. The Role of Brand Attachment and Brand Community Relationships.
- Gao, W. (2022). Research on Emotional Marketing Based on the Case Study of Coca-Cola. *Applied Economics and Policy Studies, 289–297*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5727-7_30
- Guerreiro, J., Bilro, R. G., Policarpo, P., & Loureiro, S. M. C. (2020). Exploring Young Artists' Digital Performance: The Impact of Online Community Engagement And Co-creation on Brand Love. *Global Fashion Management Conference, 2020*, 480–484.
<https://doi.org/10.15444/gmc2020.04.06.02>
- Helme-Guizon, A., & Magnoni, F. (2019). Consumer Brand Engagement and Its Social Side on brand-hosted Social media: How Do They Contribute to Brand loyalty? *Journal of Marketing Management, 35*(7-8), 716–741. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2019.1599990>
- Hollebeek, L. D., Glynn, M. S., & Brodie, R. J. (2014). Consumer Brand Engagement in Social Media: Conceptualization, Scale Development and Validation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 28*(2), 149–165.
- Hollebeek, L. D., & Macky, K. (2019). Digital Content Marketing's Role in Fostering Consumer Engagement, Trust, and Value: Framework, Fundamental Propositions, and Implications. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 45*(1), 27–41.
- Hudson, S., Roth, M. S., Madden, T. J., & Hudson, R. (2015). The effects of social media on emotions, brand relationship quality, and word of mouth: An empirical study of music festival attendees. *Tourism Management, 47*(0261-5177), 68–76.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.09.001>
- Ianenko, M., Stepanov, M., & Mironova, L. (2020). Brand identity development. *E3S Web of Conferences, 164*(3), 09015. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202016409015>
- Jacoby, J., & Kyner, D. B. (1973). Brand loyalty vs. repeat purchasing behavior. *JMR, Journal of Marketing Research (Pre-1986), 10*(000001),1 <https://www.proquest.com>

- Keller, K. L. (1993). Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity. *Journal of Marketing*, 57(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1252054>
- Kim, J., & Kang, M. Y. (2022). Sustainable success in the music industry: Empirical analysis of music preferences. *Journal of Business Research*, 142, 1068–1076. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.01.021>
- Kim, Y.-K., & Sullivan, P. (2019). Emotional Branding Speaks to Consumers' heart: the Case of Fashion Brands. *Fashion and Textiles*, 6(1), 1–16. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40691-018-0164-y>
- Kruelty. [@krueltyofficial]. (n.d.). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from <https://www.instagram.com/krueltyofficial/>
- Kuyucu, M. (2021). Music marketing evolution from traditional to digital marketing. *Socrates Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Studies*, 9, 14-25.
- Laroche, M., Habibi, M. R., & Richard, M.-O. (2013). To Be or Not to Be in Social media: How Brand Loyalty Is Affected by Social media? *International Journal of Information Management*, 33(1), 76–82.
- Muhs, C., Osinaike, A., & Thomas, L. (2020). Rave and hardstyle festival attendance motivations: a case study of Defqon.1 weekend festival. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print). <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijefm-07-2019-0036>
- Murphy, S., & Hume, M. (2023). The new digital music marketing ecosystem: artist direct. *Creative Industries Journal*, 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2023.2214492>
- Muthiah, K., & Suja, S. (2013). Experiential marketing—a designer of pleasurable and memorable experiences. *Journal of business management & social sciences research*, 2(3), 28-34.
- NL Times . (2023, January 18). *Dutch music bringing in more money abroad, but not back to normal* | NL Times. Nltimes.nl. <https://nltimes.nl/2023/01/18/dutch-music-bringing-money-abroad-back-normal>
- Nye, S. (2021). Dutch Dance, 1988-2018: How the Netherlands Took the Lead in Electronic Music Culture (Mark van Bergen, Trans. Andrew Cartwright). *Dancecult*, 13(1), 148–151. <https://doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2021.13.01.15>
- Ogden, J. R., Ogden, D. T., & Long, K. (2011). Music marketing: A history and landscape. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 18(2), 120–125. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2010.12.002>
- Oklobdžija, S. (2015). The role and importance of social media in promoting music festivals. In *Synthesis 2015-International Scientific Conference of IT and Business-Related Research* (pp. 583-587). Singidunum University.

- Park, J.-S., & Ha, S. (2021). Developing Brand Loyalty through Consumer Engagement with Brand Communities in Social Media. *Asian Journal of Business Research*, 11(1).
<https://doi.org/10.14707/ajbr.210100>
- Pitbull & Ne-Yo. (2014). Time of Our Lives [Song]. On *Globalization*. Mr. 305; Polo Ground Music; RCA Records.
- Q-dance. (2018, August 3). *Top 5 Hardstyle Moments at Tomorrowland*. Q-dance. <https://www.q-dance.com/en/news/top-5-hardstyle-moments-at-tomorrowland>
- Rooler, & Sickmode. [@rooleroofficial; @sickmodedj]. (2024, April 8). “TOO ANGRY 🤡
 OUT THIS THURSDAY ONLY ON AR GANG !! THE PERSON WHO SPAMS THE MOST
 🤡 EMOJIS WINS A GAZILLION EURO 💰💰💰 (lmao jk) ALSO YOU CAN NOW BOOK ME
 AND @SICKMODEDJ TO DANCE AT YOUR BIRTHDAY PARTY 🎉🤡” [Photo]. Instagram.
 Retrived June 20, 2024 from https://www.instagram.com/p/C5fjJWKI01E/?img_index=10
- Saboo, A. R., Kumar, V., & Ramani, G. (2016). Evaluating the impact of social media activities on human brand sales. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 33(3), 524–541.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2015.02.007>
- Salo, J., Lankinen, M., & Mäntymäki, M. (2013). The Use of Social Media for Artist Marketing: Music Industry Perspectives and Consumer Motivations. *International Journal on Media Management*, 15(1), 23–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14241277.2012.755682>
- Samarah, T., Bayram, P., Aljuhmani, H. Y., & Elrehail, H. (2021). The Role of Brand Interactivity and Involvement in Driving Social Media Consumer Brand Engagement and Brand loyalty: the Mediating Effect of Brand Trust. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/jrim-03-2021-0072>
- Smith, B. G., & Gallicano, T. D. (2015). Terms of engagement: Analyzing public engagement with organizations through social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 53, 82–90.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.05.060>
- Trinity Festival. [@trinityfestivalnl]. (2024, June 13). “TRINITY pres. SPOONTECH SOCIETY 🎉🔪
 On October 5th we'll celebrate the biggest Spoonstech gathering in history. Maaspoort,
 Den Bosh will be ground zero for all the blood, sweat and tears that our society has put in
 their dark & funky sounds. 🤡” [Photo]. Instagram. Retrived June 20, 2024 from
<https://www.instagram.com/p/C8KLkTAIOtO/>
- van der Hoeven, A. (2012). Remembering the popular music of the 1990s: dance music and the cultural meanings of decade-based nostalgia. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 20(3), 316–330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2012.738334>
- Zheng, X., Cheung, C. M. K., Lee, M. K. O., & Liang, L. (2015). Building brand loyalty through user engagement in online brand communities in social networking sites. *Information Technology & People*, 28(1), 90–106. <https://doi.org/10.1108/itp-08-2013-0144>

Appendix A. Interview Overview

Table A.1: Interviewed Industry Professionals

Interviewee	Profession	Type of Interview	Length
Professional 1	Artist	Face-to-face via Zoom	60 minutes
Professional 2	Marketing Manager / Booking Agency owner	Face-to-face via Zoom	45 minutes
Professional 3	Marketing and Music Label Manager	Face-to-face via Zoom	60 minutes
Professional 4	Content Creator for Events	Face-to-face via Zoom	45 minutes
Professional 5	Marketing Manager of an Event Organizer	Written Interview	–
Professional 6	Social Media Manager of a Music label	Face-to-face via Zoom	40 minutes

Table A.2: Interviewed Fans

Interviewee	Type of Interview	Length	Nationality
Fan 1	Face-to-face via Zoom	40 minutes	Dutch
Fan 2	Face-to-face via Zoom	65 minutes	Dutch
Fan 3	Face-to-face via Zoom	60 minutes	Dutch
Fan 4	Face-to-face via Zoom	35 minutes	Belgium
Fan 5	Face-to-face via Zoom	60 minutes	UK
Fan 6	Face-to-face via Zoom	45 minutes	German
Fan 7	Face-to-face via Zoom	40 minutes	Dutch

Interview Guide Industry Professionals

Icebreaker:

- 1) Can you tell me about your background and experiences in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene?
- 2) Can you tell me a little bit about what the brand stands for, what values, images etc?

Topic: Perceptions of Branding in the Hard Dance Music Scene:

Main Question:

What do you think about branding in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) What do you consider to be the key elements of successful branding in this scene?
- 2) How does branding affect how artists and events are seen?

- 3) What makes branding effective or not in this scene?
- 4) In your opinion, what distinguishes effective branding from ineffective branding?
- 5) How important do you think good branding on social media is for the industry?
- 6) What role do you believe branding plays in shaping the overall identity and image of an artist, label, event in the scene?
- 7) Does trends on social media influence the branding?
- 8) How do you believe branding shapes the way fans interact with artists, events and labels on social media?
- 9) Can you provide examples of successful branding that have resulted in good fan engagement?

Topic: Approaches to Fan Engagement:

Main Question:

How do you connect with fans in the Dutch Hard Dance music community?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) What works best for engaging fans?
- 2) How do you balance between fostering fan engagement and maintaining authenticity within the community?
- 3) What elements of fan engagement are most important in your opinion?
- 4) What tools on instagram/tiktok do you use to engage with your fans?
- 5) How important is fan engagement for your brand?
- 6) What types of content do you share? Which are most successful?
- 7) How does fan engagement help artists and events succeed?
- 8) What role do you think fan engagement plays in the success and sustainability of artists and events in the Hard Dance music scene?
- 9) How do you think branding influences fan engagement on social media platforms?
- 10) How do you see community interactions shaping the development of the scene over time?
- 11) How is branding influenced by the community?
- 12) How do you perceive the impact of fan engagement on shaping the way branding is used on social media?
- 13) To what extent do you believe fan feedback and interactions on social media influences branding decisions within the scene?

Topic: Industry Perspectives on Community Dynamics:

Main Question:

What's the community like in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) Can you describe the overall vibe of the community, especially on social media?
- 2) How does social media platforms, like instagram, contribute to the community building in the scene?
- 3) How do you create a community feeling through branding?
- 4) How does social media influence the community in the scene?
- 5) What's unique about this community and how does it affect branding and fan engagement?
- 6) How do you and others in the industry help the community grow?

Topic: Reflections on Industry Practices:

Main Question:

When you look back, what have you learned about branding and fan engagement in the Hard Dance music industry?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) Is there something you wish you knew earlier about branding and fan engagement?
- 2) How do you think things will change in the future?

Interview Guide Fans

Icebreaker:

Can you tell me about your experiences in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) What first got you into hardstyle?
- 2) How would you describe the community vibe within the scene?

Topic: Interaction on Social Media:

Main Question:

Share a memorable experience you've had with a brand or event on social media within the dutch hard dance music scene. What aspect of the interaction stood out to you?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) Have you ever joined online discussions or communities related to Hard Dance music? If yes, what was your experience?
- 2) How do you feel when you see photos or videos from other fans on social media about Hard Dance music?

Topic: Branding and Presentation:

Main Question:

How would you describe the way brands present themselves on social media within the Hardstyle scene? Can you provide examples of distinct brand presentation?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) How do you notice brands and events showing up on social media in the scene?
- 2) Can you think of brands, that stand out to you? What do you like about them?
- 3) How do you feel about the stuff brands and events share on social media?
- 4) Can you tell me a little bit about the way you notice brands present themselves on social media? How do they distinguish themselves from others?
- 5) How do you feel about the content shared by brands and events in the Hard Dance music scene on social media?
- 6) Can you think of a social media post or campaign from a brand or event in the Hard Dance music scene that you really liked? What made it stand out to you?
- 7) Have you ever had any trouble interacting with brands or events on social media related to Hard Dance music? Can you tell me about it?

Topic: How Branding Shapes the Hard Dance music Scene:

Main Question:

In your opinion, how does branding influence interactions within the scene? What aspect of branding have the most significant impact?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) Does it seem like it represents what the scene is about? → If so, what aspects in particular represent the scene best?
- 2) How do you think the branding of events like festivals or parties changes the way people experience them?
- 3) What kind of content do you like most? What makes it stand out to you?
- 4) From your perspective, why is branding important for brands and events within the scene? Can you provide examples that highlight its significance?
- 5) Do you believe that the branding used by artists and events helps people feel like they belong to the Hard Dance music community?

Topic: Perceptions of Branding on Social Media:

Main Question:

How do you view the branding efforts of brands and events on social media? What aspects of branding stand out to you the most?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) What aspects of branding on social media do you notice the most when it comes to Hard Dance music brands and events?
- 2) Can you describe a time when you felt particularly connected to an artist or event's brand on social media? What elements of their branding stood out to you?
- 3) How do you think social media platforms contribute to the overall visibility and reach of brands and events within the Hard Dance music scene?
- 4) Do you believe there are any missed opportunities or areas for improvement in how brands and events engage with fans on social media within the Hard Dance music scene?
- 5) Do you have particular brands that do well with branding and promotion? What do they do different to others?
- 6) What brands do you think are especially good in engage with fans? What makes them stand out to you?
- 7) On the flip side, are there any brands that you feel don't use social media effectively? What do you think they could do differently?
- 8) How do you think the way brands interact with fans on social media affects the overall vibe of the Hard Dance music community online?

Topic: Fan Engagement on Social Media:

Main Question:

Describe your typical interactions with brands and events on social media within the scene. What types of content do you engage with the most and why?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) Can you describe how you personally interact with brands and events on social media platforms related to Hard Dance music?
- 2) What types of content do you engage with the most on social media (e.g., event announcements, artist updates, community discussions)?
- 3) How do you feel when brands or events respond to fan comments or feedback on social media platforms? Does it influence your engagement with them?

Topic: Community Dynamics:

Main Question:

How do you observe fans engaging with brands and events within the scene on social media?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) What, in your opinion, makes a brand or event good at engaging with fans on social media?

- 2) Do you feel loyal to any particular brands or events within the Hard Dance music scene on social media? If so, what makes you loyal to them?
- 3) Can you tell me about a brand or event in Hard Dance music that has made you feel like you're part of a community on social media? What did they do to make you feel that way?
- 4) What do you think is hard for brands or events to do when they try to talk to fans on social media about Hard Dance music? Can you give me examples of times when it didn't work out well?

Topic: Influence of Branding on Fan Engagement:

Main Question:

In what ways do you believe branding contributes to the sense of community within the scene? Can you share personal experience that show this influence?

Possible follow-up Questions:

- 1) How do you navigate the balance between being a fan and being marketed to by brands and events on social media? Does it affect your overall experience in the scene?
- 2) Can you describe any instances where your engagement with a brand or event on social media has led to a deeper connection or sense of belonging within the Hard Dance music community?

Topic: Importance of Fan Engagement:

Main Questions:

- 1) From your perspective, why is fan engagement important for brands and events within the scene? Can you provide examples that highlight its significance?
- 2) What makes the community unique for you?
- 3) How does social media play into this perception?

Topic: Suggestions and Improvements:

Main Question:

What recommendations would you offer to brands or events within the Dutch Hard Dance music scene to enhance their interaction with fans on social media platforms?

Appendix B: Final Thematic Map

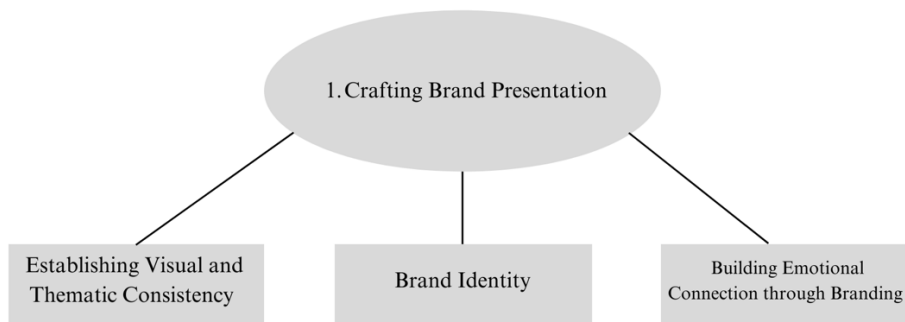


Figure B.1: Final Thematic Map: Crafting Brand Presentation

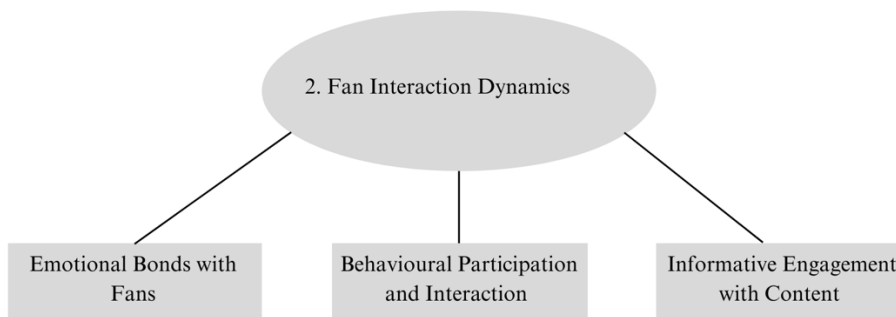


Figure B.2: Final Thematic Map: Fan Interaction Dynamics

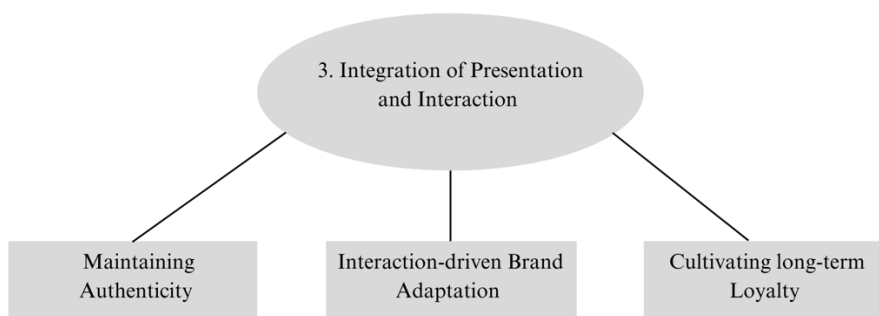


Figure B.3: Final Thematic Map: Integration of Presentation and Interaction

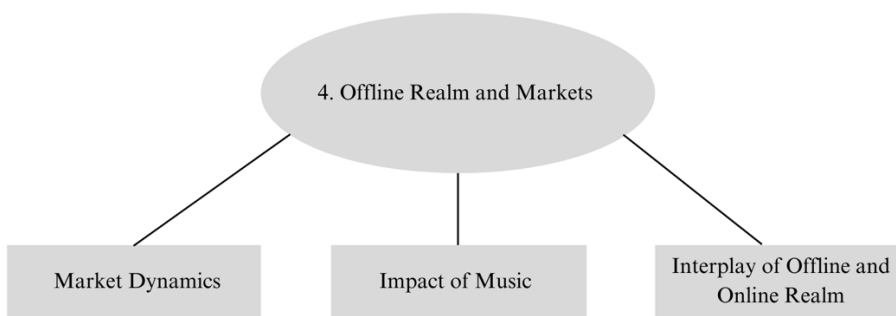


Figure B.4: Final Thematic Map: Offline Realm and Markets

Appendix C. List of Brands in the Hard Dance Music Scene

Table C.1: Brands in the Hard Dance music scene

Brand	Explanation	Instagram Profile Link
Audiotricz	Euphoric Hardstyle DJ Duo	https://www.instagram.com/audiotricz/
Decibel Outdoor Festival	One of the four main Hard Dance only weekend festivals in the scene in the Netherlands. The event takes place in the end of August in Beekse Bergen. Organized by B2s	https://www.instagram.com/officialdecibeloutdoor/
Defqon.1 Weekend Festival	The biggest and oldest Harder Styles Weekend festival in the scene, held during end of June in Biddinghuizen. One of the four main Hard Dance only weekend festivals in the scene in the Netherlands. Organized by Q-dance	https://www.instagram.com/defqon1/
Dual Damage	Upcoming Rawstyle DJ Duo, that gained immense attention due to their social media presence in the last year.	https://www.instagram.com/dualdamage_raw/
Ecstatic	Euphoric Hardstyle DJ	https://www.instagram.com/ecstatic_music/
Intents Festival	One of the four main Hard Dance only weekend festivals in the scene in the Netherlands. The event takes place in Oisterwijk (NL) in the end of May/ beginning of June. Organized by Intents Events BV	https://www.instagram.com/intentsfestival/
Kruelty	Rawstyle DJ that stands out with his especially gory and dark branding.	https://www.instagram.com/krueltyofficial/
REBiRTH Festival	One of the four main Hard Dance only weekend festivals in the scene in the Netherlands. The event takes place in April in Haarem (NL) and is considered as the “ <i>season opener</i> ” of the festival summer each year. Organized by Rebirth Events BV	https://www.instagram.com/rebirthfestival/
Rooler & Sickmode	Rawstyle DJs that are known for their humorous branding on social media.	https://www.instagram.com/rooleroofficial/ https://www.instagram.com/sickmodedj/
Spoontech Records	Rawstyle Music Label	https://www.instagram.com/spoontechrecords/

Appendix D. Interview Consent Form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Lisa-Marie Müller, 683917lm@student.eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about perceived branding and engagement in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene. The purpose of the study is to understand How people in the Hard Dance music scene, including both fans and professionals, see the way artists and events promote themselves and interact with fans on social media?.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make a video recording of the interview.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms:

- my questions will be related to the perceived branding and engagement on social media in the Dutch Hard Dance music scene

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

A. As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information in the study. The participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take 30 - 60mins. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— Argyrios Emmanouloudis,

