

Brand Public

ADAM ARVIDSSON
ALESSANDRO CALIANDRO

The concept of brand community has been used to understand how consumers create value around brands online. Recently consumer researchers have begun to debate the relevance of this concept for understanding brand-related communication on social media. Based on a data set of 8949 tweets about Louis Vuitton gathered on Italian Twitter in 2013, this article addresses these discussions by developing the alternative concept of *brand publics* that differ from brand communities in three important ways. First, brand publics are social formations that are not based on interaction but on a continuous focus of interest and mediation. Second, participation in brand publics is not structured by discussion or deliberation but by individual or collective affect. Third, in brand publics consumers do not develop a collective identity around the focal brand; rather the brand is valuable as a medium that can offer publicity to a multitude of diverse situations of identity. The conclusion suggests that brand publics might be part of a social media-based consumer culture where publicity rather than identity has become a core value.

Keywords: brand, brand community, netnography, social media, digital methods, Twitter, fashion, Louis Vuitton

In this article we suggest that the ways in which consumers create value around brands on social media can be conceptualized as occurring in *brand publics*. A brand public is an organized media space kept together by a continuity of practices of mediation. Brand publics result from an aggregation of a large number of isolated expressions that have a common focus. Contrary to brand communities, they do not build on sustained forms of interaction or any consistent collective identity.

For a long time, the concept of brand community has provided a useful framework for understanding how social

interaction can become a source of value. In brand communities, people form enduring social bonds around brands that add value by sustaining a common identity or experience. However, recent consumer research suggests that on social media like Facebook and Twitter, as well as on blogs, relations among consumers or admirers of brands are less structured and more fleeting and ephemeral. This makes brand-related communication take forms that are difficult to describe as communitarian (Kozinets 2013; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013).

These observations are supported by contemporary media research where the suggestion is that, overall, social media are less conducive to the formation of the kinds of enduring social bonds that are generally understood as the foundation for communities. Instead, more fleeting forms of association together with a publicity-oriented attitude prevail (boyd and Ellison 2007; Raine and Wellman 2012). In Mark Andrejevic's words, social media discourse is "less interactive than more private forms of communication . . . [t]he imperative of social media is one of the hyper-production of opinions, observations and responses, but as the flow of communication increases, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep a coherent conversation going" (Andrejevic 2013, 43). Indeed, there is growing evidence that social media support a publicity-oriented consumer culture, oriented around appearance and visibility rather

Adam Arvidsson (adam.arvidsson@unimi.it) is associate professor of sociology and co-director of the Centre for Digital Ethnography at the State University of Milan, via Conservatorio 7, 20122 Milan, Italy. Alessandro Caliandro (alessandro.caliandro@unimi.it) is a postdoctoral researcher in sociology and director of research at the Centre for Digital Ethnography at the State University of Milan, via Conservatorio 7, 20122, Milan, Italy. The authors acknowledge the helpful input of the editor, associate editors, and reviewers. In addition the authors thank colleagues at the Centre for Digital Ethnography at the University of Milan and participants in the departmental seminar at the School of Management, Royal Holloway College, University of London.

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then identity and belonging, and where value co-creation is structured by private or collective affects, rather than deliberation and common values. This literature has also stressed how social media participation tends to give rise to publics rather than communities (Arvidsson et al. 2015; Marwick 2015; Papacharissi 2014; Senft 2013).

In this article, we draw on this literature to suggest that, on social media, brands can give rise to different kinds of associations where value is added in different ways. We call these *brand publics*. We suggest that brand publics differ from *brand communities* in three crucial ways. First, communities are sustained by interaction, but brand publics are sustained by mediation. People do not interact around the focal brand. Instead, mediation devices like Twitter hashtags aggregate a multitude of private perspectives on, or experiences of the brand, which are given publicity in the brand public. Second, communication in brand communities is structured by discussion or deliberation. In brand publics, participation is structured either by private affects like desire for visibility or an urge to share a point of view or an experience, or by collective affects that drive waves of imitation. In either case there is no deliberation. Third, members of brand communities develop shared meanings that they identify with. In brand publics no coherent collective identity is articulated around the focal brand. Rather the public resonates brand-related meanings and identities that are articulated elsewhere. These come from the brand's own marketing communications but also from the diverse meanings that people associate with brands in the multiplicity of practices and contexts that proliferate throughout their everyday lives.

In this article, our purpose is to develop an empirically grounded theory of brand publics, an "ideal type," to use Weber's terminology (Weber 1978). To do this we build our discussion on a data set of 8949 tweets gathered from Italian Twitter conversations about the Louis Vuitton brand in 2013. Louis Vuitton is admittedly a special case. As a high-profile luxury fashion brand, it is likely to invite the kind of conspicuous consumption that lends itself well to the formation of brand publics. We discuss our reasons for choosing this case in more detail in the methods section. Suffice it to say for now that it lends itself well to our purposes of theory construction: Louis Vuitton on Twitter clearly showcases the features that we identify with brand publics. Communication around other brands may be more communitarian, even on social media, but establishing the general relevance of our ideal type is beyond the scope of this article.

In the next section we build theoretical foundations for our argument. We briefly discuss the existing literature on brand communities in order to draw out a number of features that we will use as a contrasting backdrop in elaborating our theory of brand publics. We then go on to give a first sketch of the concept of publics by drawing on classic and contemporary media research. In the methods section

we describe our methodological strategy and discuss our data and our methods of analysis. In the analysis we first provide an account of the social structure of communications around Louis Vuitton on Twitter. We then go on to present our analysis of the dynamics of participation and the content of postings. In the discussion we build on our analysis of the Louis Vuitton case to flesh out an ideal-typical model of brand publics. In the conclusion we discuss the value that can be derived from participating in brand publics, as well as the possible place of brand publics within a contemporary social media-fueled consumer culture.

COMMUNITIES AND PUBLICS

The concept of brand community was pioneered by Muñiz and O'Guinn in an article from 2001 that built on precedents in consumer research (Arnould and Price 1993; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), sociology (Wellman and Leighton 1979), and cultural studies (Hall and Jefferson 1975; Hebbridge 1979). Together with the parallel concepts of consumer tribes (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007; Maffesoli 1996) and "subcultures of consumption" (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), the concept of brand community highlights how consumers and fans create "structured sets of social relations" (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001, 412) and a coherent set of shared meanings around brands or consumer practices. There are differences between these concepts. In the case of consumer tribes, these social relations are less structured and more ephemeral; like "subcultures of consumption," the concept also tends to focus on practices rather than brands (Canniford 2011b; Cova and Pace 2006). However, all three concepts denote phenomena where consumers create a "consciousness of kind," that is, a sense of common identity that sets off members from others, "shared rituals and traditions" that embody specific meaning systems, and a "sense of moral obligation" that motivates contributions (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001).

From these features consumers derive value in different ways (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009): they derive an enhanced consumer experience (Cova and White 2010; Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig 2007), and they find help and support in using the products associated with the brand in focus (Schau et al. 2009). Most importantly they develop "linking value" in terms of a common identity and social support (Cova 1997; Cova and Cova 2002). In turn, brand managers can use communities as a source of product and brand innovation (McWilliam 2000; von Hippel 2004), experience co-creation (Carù and Cova 2007; Grönroos 2006; Lusch and Vargo 2006), and word-of-mouth marketing (Cova and Dall'Aglio 2009; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008). Brand communities make consumer sociality into a source of both use and exchange value.

Muñiz and O'Guinn's original article focused on brand communities that were located in face-to-face interaction (although they also analyzed brand-related websites). Since then, a wide range of studies have used the concept to describe online consumer interaction (e.g., Muñiz and Schau 2005; Schau et al. 2009, Shouten et al. 2007; cf. Canniford 2011a). Recent scholarship has also focused on the heterogeneous nature of some "complex communities" and how such heterogeneity can work to ensure cooperation and cohesion (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013). Together with the many nuances that the term *community* has acquired in its century-long use within the mainstream social sciences (Colglough and Sitaraman, 2005), the diversity and richness of recent research on online brand communities has given the concept a variety of different connotations. For our purposes it is important to highlight three features generally associated with brand communities.

First, brand communities are based on interaction: core members interact, exchange opinions and ideas, and get to know each other in some way. Interaction can be based on face-to-face encounters or it can be a matter of the "community without propinquity" (Calhoun 1998) of mediated interaction that marks most online brand communities or some mixture of both. Obviously all members of a particular community need not know all other members, and interaction can be more or less frequent, building social bonds that are more or less significant for individual members. That brand communities are "based on interaction" does not mean that everybody necessarily interacts with everybody else all of the time. However that *some do* interact around the brand is crucial. It is what makes the community into a community, and it enables all members to develop a sense of belonging, even if they do not participate or do so only sporadically (McAlexander, Schultz, and Koenig 2002, 38). The existence of interaction, if only among a select group of core members, allows for active participation as a possibility: it makes the brand community into an "imagined community," in Anderson's terms (Anderson 1982).

Second, brand communities provide members with a sense of identity. Again this might be weak or strong, important or unimportant. It can also be a matter of a plurality of identities ordered in some form of hierarchy (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Within brand communities there is a coherent idea of the values and worldviews that mark, or should mark, users. (In the absence of such coherence, members can intervene to preserve basic continuity; Thomas et al. 2013.) These foster "a sense of distinction from non-users of the focal brand" (Canniford 2011b, 594) and support identity work in ways that range from strong "moral protagonism" (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010) to a vague sense of recognition, as when a Saab driver flashes her headlights at another Saab (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001).

Third, the social relations and the shared sense of identity that mark brand communities are constructed by members in their interaction (although brand managers and companies can contribute; Cova and Pace 2006). Once again, even though not all members might participate, and those who participate might do so more or less sporadically, the fact that *some do participate* is the basis for the ability of brand communities to create "linking value" in the form of a common identity and experience (Cova 1997). Consequently a lot of the activity that goes on in brand communities is oriented toward the kinds of communicative action (Habermas 1984) that can build and develop such common meanings through interaction: core members of brand communities discuss, deliberate, or enter into conflict with each other over the correct interpretation of the brand and its values. On forums and mailing lists they respond to and take issue with each other's postings. This means that the dynamics of brand communities are structured by internal discussions among members (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003, Kozinets 2001, 2010; McAlexander et al. 2002). Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter (2008, 843) go as far as suggesting that a moral obligation to contribute to such ongoing deliberation is what mainly motivates participation.

Brand Communities and Social Media

Consumer researchers have successfully located and explored brand communities in online communication. Indeed, popular formats of online communication like mailing lists, websites, forums, Listservs, and chat rooms tend to favor the formation of communities (Kozinets 2002; Slater 1998). Howard Rheingold already famously suggested that a flourishing of "virtual communities" would result from the diffusion of Internet connectivity (Rheingold 1993). However, recent consumer research suggests that on the contemporary web, where forums, Listservs, and mailing lists have found competition from blogs and social media, alternative forms of brand- or consumption-focused sociality also develop. In their study of fashion bloggers, McQuarrie et al. (2013) argue that as bloggers become famous they depart from the community model of interaction: "The early interaction between blogger and follower, then, is consistent with the [model] of virtual community. . . . But this complex of behaviours soon disappears as the blogger begins to build an audience. As her audience grows larger, the blogger's behaviour changes. She stops interacting with her followers." They go on to suggest that "community is not the only thing that consumers seek online" (McQuarrie et al. 2013, 146). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) also note a "deference of brand community" in the case of the Zipcar Internet-based car-sharing service. Similarly, in his recent work Robert Kozinets has suggested that the prevalence of social media, blogs, and a wider diversity of technical formats makes it

necessary to also focus on noncommunitarian forms of consumer sociality (Kozinets 2010, 87; Kozinets 2013). Indeed, in their study of topic networks on Twitter, Smith et al. (2014, n.p.) suggest that such noncommunitarian forms of association are rather the norm in brand-related communication on this web domain.

When well-known products or services or popular subjects like celebrities are discussed in Twitter, there is often commentary from many disconnected participants. . . . Well-known brands and other popular subjects can attract large fragmented Twitter populations who tweet about it but not to each other. The larger the population talking about a brand, the less likely it is that participants are connected to one another. Brand-mentioning participants focus on a topic, but tend not to connect to each other.

This noncommunitarian nature of social media communication is supported by insights from contemporary media and communications research. Several empirical studies, both quantitative and qualitative, have shown that people generally have loose relationships on social networks (Colleoni, Rozza, and Arvidsson 2014; Hansen et al. 2011; Kwak et al. 2010; Parks 2011; Van Dijck 2013). They do so not only or even primarily to use social media to interact and discuss with others, but as a means to maintain and manage their own strategies of self-presentation (Marwick 2013; Marwick and boyd 2011). Communication on social media seems to be mainly devoted to the sharing of private concerns and perspectives, rather than to the collective construction of identities: community, in other words, might no longer be the “killer app” of the web (Zwick and Bradshaw forthcoming).

Publics

Recent media and communications research has begun to use the concept of “publics” to describe the forms of association that develop on social media (Arvidsson 2013; Bastos, Galdini-Raimundo, and Travitzki 2013; boyd 2006; Papacharissi 2014; Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2012). While the concept of community has traditionally been used to describe forms of social interaction, the concept of publics has developed out of a focus on *mediation*. This was the starting point for Gabriel Tarde, who introduced the concept in modern social theory. While crowds have existed throughout history, a public is formed when a crowd is given a lasting direction or focus as it is aggregated around a media device, such as a newspaper, or a mediated event like a public affair or a celebrity. Conversely, the public endures as long as this mechanism of mediation operates: when the newspaper ceases publishing, its public dissolves; when the theater performance ends, the public disbands and joins the urban crowd (Tarde [1898] 1967). This gives us a first defining characteristic of publics: publics are artifacts of mediation, they are born

and kept together by media devices, in some form, and they last as long as these media devices operate. Conversely, one becomes a member of a public by accepting the act of mediation: banally by paying attention (Warner 2002).

To Tarde, publics support shared meaning systems without interaction: A public is a “purely spiritual collectively, a dispersion of individuals who are physically separated and whose cohesion is entirely mental.” Their bond lies in their simultaneous “awareness of sharing at a same time an idea or a wish with a great number of men” (Tarde [1898], 1967, 53). Tarde’s definition is different to Habermas’s (1984) use of “public sphere” by which he intends a space of communicative interaction.

That publics do not develop out of interaction does not mean that members are passive, however. According to Tarde, members of a public engage in conversation that occurs in private networks. Conversation elaborates and reinforces themes of public mediation and consolidates public opinion, but it is not itself public (Tarde [1898], 1967, 54). This duality between public communication and private conversation was subsequently developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) in their famous model of the “two-step flow” of communication.

However, in social media publics, this clear distinction no longer holds. Perspectives and experiences that develop in private networks of conversation are themselves rendered public, as social media enable users to share their private views in tweets and postings, and to retweet those of others while sometimes adding something of their own (Page 2012). Devices like Twitter hashtags enable users to initiate and sustain publics by associating their tweets with a publicly searchable classification (like #Apple or #Occupy; Papacharissi and Oliveira 2012). Often such public sharing occurs without communicative interaction with other members of the public taking place. It is a matter of what Russell Belk (2014) has called pseudo-sharing: Opinions, perspectives, and experiences are shared, but this occurs without an expectation of reciprocity or the formation of community. The possibility of re-mediation without interaction leads to two important characteristics of social media publics.

First, social media publics are in some sense similar to crowds. To Tarde and his contemporaries, crowds were physical aggregations that were energized by affectively driven “waves” of imitation (think about the football crowd that cheers as the home team scores), while publics are built on enduring forms of mediation. On social media this classic distinction between crowds and publics is blurred. The rapid temporality of social media devices, in particular when used on mobile platforms, allows for an experience similar to that created by the physical co-presence that characterized the crowd for Tarde (Stage 2013). A tweet arrives and is quickly retweeted in ways similar to how a member of the crowd imitates his neighbor.

The immediacy of social media participation means that social media publics, like crowds, are largely driven by affective affiliation rather than communicative interaction (Zappavigna 2011). Driven by a common interest, enthusiasm, or concern, participants imitate each other by re-mediating their perspective on an event or issue (Borch 2012). Indeed, Zizzi Papacharissi suggests that social media publics are primarily affective publics where it is the “affective aspects of messages [that] nurture and sustain involvement, connection, and cohesion” (Papacharissi 2012, 279; Papacharissi 2014). Conversely, while social media publics may develop shared meanings, these need not result from communicative action among participants but can instead emerge from their pseudo-sharing of private affects.

Indeed, and this is the second important characteristic, the possibility for public re-mediation without interaction creates a basic orientation toward publicity-oriented sharing of personal views or perspectives (Papacharissi 2012). In her earlier work on blogs, Papacharissi suggested that political communication on blogs were marked by the “narcissistic” sharing of private opinions, without the elaboration of a common perspective. She concluded that this *private sociality*, as she termed it, leads to a new modality of political participation where the nondeliberative, expressive sharing of private experience or perspectives dominates political discourse. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have developed these insights suggesting that social media-based political publics (like the Occupy movement) are primarily marked by the aggregation of inherently private opinions and perspectives around mediation devices like the #Occupy hashtags (cf. Juris 2012). They call this modality of association “connective” and distinguish it from the kinds of “collective” action that has prevailed in modern political movements. Collective action creates common meaning systems that become significant sources of identity. Connective action, in contrast, aggregates perspectives and experiences that originate from a plurality of diverse identities or practices. But these need not be elaborated into a common identity specific to the public itself.

From this discussion we can deduce three heuristic ideas about the differences between communities and publics that will guide our analysis of Louis Vuitton on Twitter. First, a brand community is sustained by interaction. A brand public is characterized by a continuity of mediation with little or no interaction taking place. Participants use a common mediation device (like a hashtag) to create a common discursive focus by re-mediating a coherent set of themes and topics. However they need not discuss, deliberate, or otherwise engage in communicative interaction around these themes or topics. Second, participation in brand communities takes the form of communicative action, of responding to and engaging with other members. Brand publics, in contrast, are structured by collective affective intensities. Participants imitate each other by

sharing their perspectives on a common issue or topic without directly responding to or engaging with each other. Third, in brand communities, members articulate a common identity. A brand public, however, is a place for the public sharing of perspectives and experiences that derive from a plurality of identities and practices, but these are not elaborated into explicitly recognized common values that can provide a source of identification. The overall driver of participation is not identity but publicity.

METHODS AND DATA

In this article we aim at developing the concept of brand public, not to test its overall relevance. To do so we have chosen a case likely to exemplify the features that we associate with this concept. Our choice was Louis Vuitton, a famous and highly conspicuous fashion brand. We chose to focus on the area of fashion because fashion consumption is particularly influenced, and the fashion market is to some extent restructured by social media participation (Dolbec and Fischer 2015). In the world of luxury fashion brands, Louis Vuitton is among the brands that are central to popular aspirations to conspicuous consumption (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). Louis Vuitton is also among the brands that generate the most online participation (Friedman 2014; Kim and Ko 2010). We have focused on Twitter because, along with Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, this web domain is most conducive to fashion-related communication (Phan, Thomas, and Heine 2011; Smith et al. 2014). As in the case of most fashion brands, communication around Louis Vuitton is heavily preoccupied with issues of style, taste, and self-presentation (Arsel and Bean 2013; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Tynan, MacHennie, and Chuon 2009). These issues are central to the kinds of consumer identity work that are crucial to value creation in brand communities (Cova 1997; Luedicke et al. 2010; Schau et al. 2009; Thompson 2011). Together these factors make Louis Vuitton on Twitter a good starting point for developing an ideal-typical account of how valuable forms of consumer sociality and brand-related meaning making can unfold on social media. To prove the general validity of that account, or to say anything about the relative prevalence of brand publics vis-à-vis brand communities on the contemporary web is beyond the scope of this article. Here we simply wish to develop a new concept that might be useful for consumer researchers looking at brand-related communication on the contemporary web.

Netnography on Twitter

Our methodological strategy has aimed at performing a qualitative analysis of a large data set. We wanted to reconstruct the forms of sociality and the webs of significance (Geertz 1988) that develop around Louis Vuitton on

Twitter. In essence we wanted to know how people interact and what they talk about. In so doing we have taken inspiration in the adaptation of interpretative text analysis and participant observation to online environments known as “netnography” (Kozinets 2002, 2010), as well as from the “digital methods” tradition currently developing in the social sciences (Rogers 2013).

Netnography has been developed as a tool for understanding the cultures of online communication from the point of view of participants (Kozinets 2010, 87). Traditionally netnography has focused on mailing lists, forums, and websites (Kozinets 2013). We have developed this approach to fit the environment of Twitter in three ways: first, to netnography’s traditional focus on the webs of significance that structure online communication, we add an open-ended investigation of the social forms in which such communication takes place, reminiscent of the tradition of structural anthropology (Wellman 1988). Second, since our focus is to study a social form with virtually no interaction, we have replaced netnography’s traditional focus on following debates and interactive exchanges on forums and mailing lists with an analysis of the kinds of material shared through hashtags and other mediation devices. In making these additions we have followed Rogers’s call for “online groundedness,” by which he means following the ways in which digital media naturally structure data and seeking to understand the particular social and cultural forms that emerge as sociality is mediated by particular technologies. Third, to analyze the large numbers of tweets in our data, we have combined automatic analyses that use software with a traditional human interpretative approach.

Data Sets and Samples

Our overall approach has been grounded and iterative. In 2012 we gathered and analyzed a first exploratory data set by searching for the keyword Louis Vuitton Twitter. On the basis of this first analysis we developed a series of theoretical and methodological intuitions that we deployed in gathering two additional data sets in 2013. This time we searched for tweets containing the keyword “Louis Vuitton” (7814 tweets) and for tweets marked with the hashtag #louisvuitton (2848 tweets), gathering a total of 8949 tweets in October and November (September 30 to November 30, 2013: there was an overlap of 1713 tweets between the two data sets).

Our discussion in this article draws on the two data sets we gathered in 2013. Mostly we draw on the data set of 2848 tweets with the hashtag #louisvuitton. This gives us an understanding of the public discourse that participants actively associate with the Louis Vuitton brand. Our reasoning here is that because the #louisvuitton hashtag promotes the public visibility of a tweet while at the same time classifying it, tweets marked with the hashtag

#louisvuitton can be safely said to be *intended* to be visible as public discourse that is pertinent to the brand. In other words, the hashtag is a mediation device that creates a public (Bastos et al. 2013; boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2010). Of course simply searching for tweets with the #louisvuitton hashtag does not give us access to all of the Twitter discourse that concerns Louis Vuitton. To address this limitation we use the keyword data set. We gathered this by searching for posting with the keyword “Louis Vuitton” on Twitter. This data gives us an idea of the place of postings marked with the hashtag #louisvuitton relative to overall Twitter communications that mention the brand. From the keyword data set we extracted a sample of the 495 tweets that had been retweeted more than 10 times. This sample was small enough to be subjected to meaningful qualitative analysis, and it gave us an idea of how Louis Vuitton was talked about more widely on Twitter. We mainly draw on the keyword data set for comparative purposes. The lion’s share of our analysis is based on the #louisvuitton data set. Overall we have used keywords, hashtags, and retweets to gather data and extract samples for analysis. These diverse approaches have given us different points of view on Twitter postings relevant to Louis Vuitton. Together they strengthen our confidence in the validity of our analysis.

We chose to search for posting in Italian in order to arrive at a data set of manageable size. (Searching for tweets with the keyword Louis Vuitton in English would have generated around 20,000 tweets per week.)

We have gathered our data using crawlers that interrogate the Search Application Programming Interface (API) of Twitter. For further details and a discussion of the reliability of crawlers and the Twitter API, consult the online appendix.

Analysis

Overall we have chosen our analytical techniques in order to achieve a qualitative analysis of a large data set. Our interest has been to understand the social and cultural forms that develop in this domain.

Our first step was to reconstruct the structure of communication around Louis Vuitton. To do this we first counted the occurrence of postings and linked them to unique user identities. We also performed social network analysis. This consisted of an in-link analysis on retweets and mentions. A python script extracted all tweets from the data sets containing @ or RT and calculated reciprocal links between users. These were subsequently visualized with Gephi (<https://gephi.org/>) (Bastian and Jacomy 2009). To get an idea of the transformation of the social structure, we also subdivided the data in biweekly data sets and performed a separate network analysis for each set. We applied this technique to the keyword as well as the #louisvuitton data sets.

To get an initial understanding of the “webs of significance” that featured in communication around Louis

Vuitton, we performed co-hashtag analysis and URL extraction on the #louisvuitton data set. Co-hashtag analysis is based on analyzing the co-occurrence of hashtags within individual tweets. Rather than simply counting the hashtags, analyzing their co-occurrence provides insights on the conceptual associations that emerge naturally from Twitter use and how these vary or remain stable over time. Co-hashtag analysis was developed by Nortje Marres and Caroline Gertlitz, building on the co-word analysis developed in citation metrics by Michel Callon (Callon, Courtial, and Bauin 1983). Applied to Twitter traffic it enables us “to determine not which terms are becoming popular, but which are becoming active, in terms of their relations to other terms shifting through time” (Marres and Gerlitz 2015, 15; cf. Marres 2013). Our analysis is based on the co-occurrence of hashtags around the #louisvuitton hashtag. We calculated the co-occurrence of all hashtags in our data set using a custom-built python script. These were visualized as a timeline (using the Excel timeline function). To make our figures readable, we excluded hashtags that occurred less than 10 times and hashtags that were only featured during a single day. This way we arrived at a visualization of the enduring conceptual associations that arose around the #louisvuitton hashtag.

URL extraction allows for a simple overview of the imprint of Twitter traffic on the web. This technique builds on the fact that a significant amount of tweets contain URLs that point at other web resources (Kwak et al. 2010). Using a python script we extracted the URLs from all the tweets in the #louisvuitton hashtag data set that we had classified as news, sales, or self-presentation (see later). In total we extracted 2379 URLs. Most of these pointed to major web domains like Instagram and eBay. Those that pointed to minor domains (like websites of women’s magazines) were classified in macro categories like news, fashion blogs, fashion magazines, and personal websites. The URL extraction gave us a bird’s-eye view of the kind of material that was shared in the Louis Vuitton public.

Qualitative Analysis. Our discussion of the content of tweets builds on a qualitative analysis of the entire data set of 2848 tweets with the hashtag #louisvuitton and a sample of 495 retweets from the keyword data set. The authors read these tweets and classified them according to the following criteria: whether they publicized bags or other Louis Vuitton merchandise for sale (*sales*); whether they conveyed information about Louis Vuitton and the world of fashion in general (*news*), or whether they publicized individual points of view or experiences of the brand (*self-presentation*) (Table 1). The classification criteria had developed out of our explorative study from 2012. They fit the 2013 data sets well: only 1% of tweets were classified as uncategorized. Disagreement among the two readers as well as anomalies in the data set and other issues were discussed in weekly meetings throughout the analysis phase.

TABLE 1

ILLUSTRATION OF TAGGING CATEGORIES

“sales”	
Definition:	Tweets that publicize bags or other branded merchandise for sale
Example:	Authentic Louis Vuitton Monogram Cabas Mezzo M51151 Tote Bag LV 3430 http://t.co/fZVLlqo0gj #louisvuitton [Oct 29, 2013]
“news”	
Definition:	Tweets that convey news or information, mostly relevant to the Louis Vuitton brand
Example:	Louis Vuitton window display #louisvuitton #windowdisplay #venice #venezia #fashion #italia #travel ... http://t.co/0ElqtmcHPL [Oct 26, 2013]
“self-presentation”	
Definition:	Tweets that share personal opinions or experiences, often by linking to a picture
Example:	20years that I shop and I still have nothing to wear! #louisvuitton #miumiu #heels http://t.co/oq6TTWk6tO [Oct 24, 2013]

Once all tweets in the two samples had been classified, we decided to give the tweets classified as self-presentation more thorough attention. Our motive was that these tweets conveyed material that was most pertinent to the identity work of participants. We extracted a further subsample of 100 self-expressive tweets from the #louisvuitton data set and reconstructed the context around each tweet. We looked at the identity of the user by looking at other tweets and the general presence on other social media. We looked at the nature of the social network in which the tweet circulated (by following @ mentions and other hashtags). We studied comments and likes on the material that was shared (mostly pictures). Overall this analysis gave us an idea of the practices that structure the sharing of material relevant to user identity. All tweets were translated from Italian by the authors.

LOUIS VUITTON ON TWITTER

Our analysis was guided by the heuristic insight about differences between communities and publics that we described in the theory section. Consequently the first question we asked about the data concerned the overall structure of communication around Louis Vuitton on Twitter. To address this we first looked at the keyword data set. We relied on content analysis of the sample of retweets, a network analysis of the whole sample, and an identification of the most active accounts.

Overall we found that the brand figured in postings about a plurality of different topics, like the purchase and sale of bags, fashion, politics, quasi-sociological observations of other consumers, motherhood, sports, and news about the brand itself. In these postings there was almost no discussion or conversation. Overall the turnover of users was high. Breaking down the data on a biweekly basis,

we saw that none of the users who were among the 10 most active (defined according to the number of tweets sent) or among the 10 most popular (defined according to the number of mentions or retweets received) were still in those positions in the following period. The only exceptions were user accounts strictly linked to Louis Vuitton's corporate communications, like *louisvuitton_it*, *louisvuitton*, *louisvuitton_us*, or YouTube (where Louis Vuitton posts many of its advertising videos).

Overall Louis Vuitton did not generate any communitarian forms of sociality. People associated the brand name with a plurality of different themes and topics. Users posted once or twice and then disappeared. Postings rarely received response and were seldom engaged with. There was little in terms of enduring sets of social relationships and virtually no discussion or deliberation at all.

#louisvuitton

The most prevalent enduring element was that a consistently large number of tweets (22%) in the keyword sample contained the #louisvuitton hashtag. People would often use the #louisvuitton hashtag to classify their tweets publicly as associated with the brand name. In order to understand this better, we subjected the entire #louisvuitton sample to the same combination of content and network analysis.

As in the case of online communication around Louis Vuitton in general, participation around the #louisvuitton hashtag was sporadic. Louis Vuitton's official accounts and bots that retweet ads for Louis Vuitton merchandise for sale had a constant presence. The overwhelming majority of human users only tweeted once or twice in the period we observed. The handful of active users who tweeted around 10 times in the period that we followed also participated rather sporadically. Their tweets were spread out. A fashion blogger tweeted once on October 2, once on October 28, once on November 6, three times on November 11, and once on November 28. They generally did not engage with other users, neither through retweets nor through mentions. Overall the percentage of retweets was 4.5, an extremely low figure in our experience (cf. Arvidsson et al. 2015). Our network analysis shows a highly fragmented network: there were a number of clusters of interaction, but no social relations formed around the brand itself (Figure 1). Moreover those clusters were centered on popular users, like famous fashion bloggers or a model agency. Indeed, apart from Louis Vuitton's official account, all top 10 popular users were fashion celebrity accounts, bloggers, a model account, and @marcjacobs. This suggests that users often did not only or even principally use mentions to initiate or sustain conversations, but they often deployed them as an additional tool for publicizing their tweets by addressing someone famous (a common practice in self-branding on Twitter; cf. Marwick and boyd

2011). Overall no social relations formed around the #louisvuitton hashtag. Rather participation took different forms. The #louisvuitton hashtag provided a space where an otherwise disconnected mass of users could sporadically publicize observations and perspectives that they considered relevant to the brand. It sustained a public rather than a community.

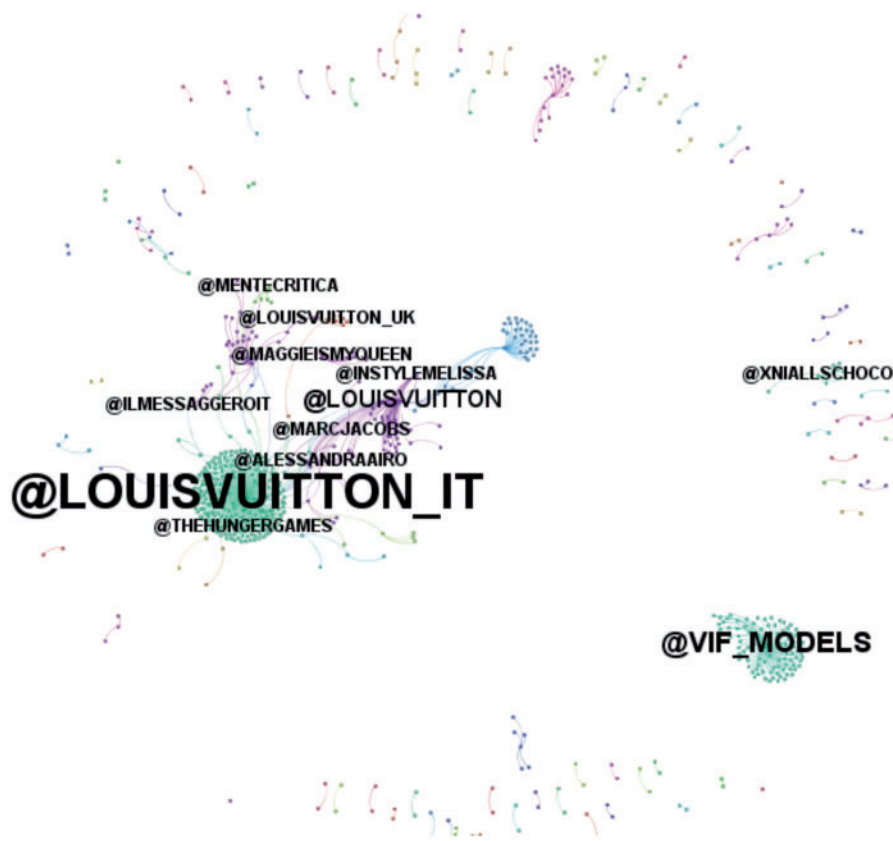
Even if there was no continuous interaction around the brand, the #louisvuitton hashtag was associated with continuous practices of *mediation*. In our qualitative analysis we identified three recurrent kinds of actions that tweets publicly associated with the Louis Vuitton brand could perform. (Combined these accounted for 99% of the entire #louisvuitton data set.) A tweet could publicize a bag for sale (54%); it could make public an act of self-presentation (16%), or it could publicize a piece of news (29%). Looking at the content of the last category we find that the material conveyed can be divided into three areas: news about fashion shows and about Louis Vuitton-related events in the world of fashion (like the designer Marc Jacobs leaving the brand to start his own collection); news about Louis Vuitton's marketing initiatives (like the shop window decorated by Sophia Coppola at Le Bon Marché in Paris); and, to a lesser extent, news about Louis Vuitton as a business (sales figures, profit expectations, etc.). To get a more grounded idea of the kinds of content that tweets could convey, we used URL extraction and co-hashtag analysis.

Almost all tweets (83.5%) with the #louisvuitton hashtag also shared information in the form of an URL that pointed to another web resource. The kinds of material that people shared further confirms our previous analysis: Tweets that shared news mainly linked back to Louis Vuitton's own website (49%), reflecting the constant preoccupation with the brand, its campaigns, and its products. The Apple App store was second (13%), reflecting a period of intense traffic around the launch of the "LV Pass" iPhone app, followed by fashion magazines (11%), Twitter profiles (8%), and ordinary newsmagazines (7%). As could be expected, sales-oriented tweets mainly linked to eBay (73%). Self-expressive tweets linked to Instagram (61%), Twitter profiles (24%), Facebook (3%), Pinterest (3%), personal websites (6%), and fashion blogs (3%) were less common choices. Overall the imprint on the web of the Louis Vuitton public looked something like the depiction in Figure 2.

Of the tweets associated with #louisvuitton, 83% also used other hashtags. These divide in two clusters. A cluster of frequent hashtags (used more than 20 times) relate to the brand and the world of fashion in general, for example, #PFW (Paris Fashion Week), #marcjacobs, #paris, #gucci. The only frequently used hashtag that did not directly relate to the world of fashion was #vintage, which often was featured in sales-oriented tweets. The second cluster consisted of a long tail of hashtags that were used only once or twice. To a large extent these conveyed geographic

FIGURE 1

NETWORK OF USERS OF THE #LOUISVUITTON HASHTAG



The network shows high levels of modularity indicative of a fragmented network. It is structured around a number of clusters each centered on a celebrity (like Marc Jacobs or InStyleMelissa, an influential fashion blogger), but there is little or no communication in between clusters. This indicates that users mainly use mentions to associate their tweets with celebrities and not to initiate or sustain interaction. @louisvuitton is the most connected user but remains a separate cluster. The official brand account does not dominate communication in the public.

(#barcelona), emotional (#wantit), or contextual (#buongiorno [good morning]) context: they were markers that served to give ambience or context to a tweet. They were mainly used in self-expressive tweets on the part of users who would only post once or twice in the period we surveyed.

Overall our analyses suggest that #louisvuitton was used continuously to share information about the sale of bags and other branded items (predominantly on eBay); to share news about the brand and its campaigns (on the Louis Vuitton official site), and to share photos of affectively significant private moments, by linking to Instagram or back to one's Twitter profile. So even if there is very little in terms of interaction, there is a continuity of mediation around #louisvuitton. The same kinds of things were shared throughout the period we studied. There was a consistency of themes.

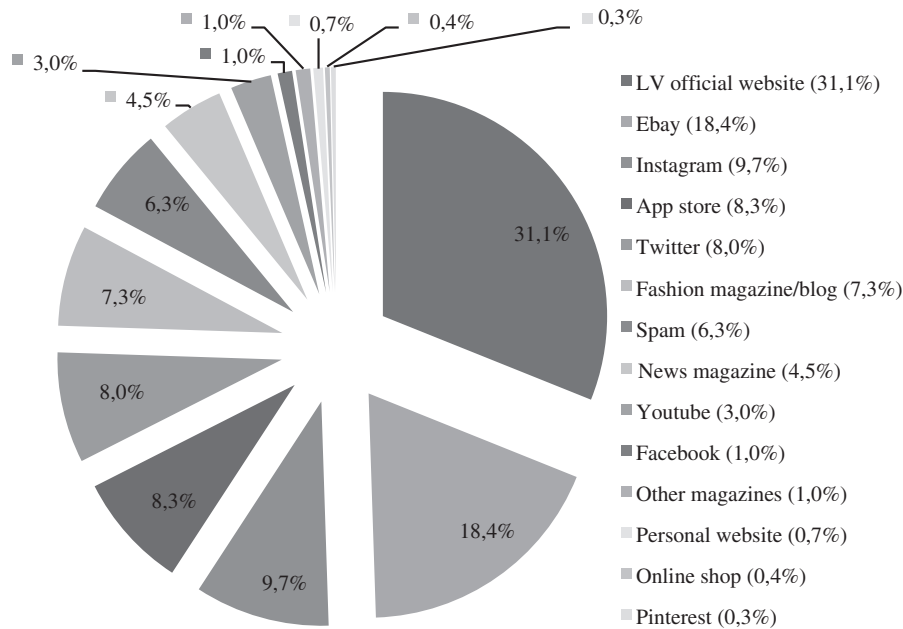
Hashtags, Imitation, and Collective Affect

Levels of participation were by no means constant. Instead they intensified around significant events. In October 2013 activity peaked around the Paris Fashion Week and in particular the news that Marc Jacobs was leaving Louis Vuitton. Traffic in November 2013 instead peaked around the launch of the LVPass iPhone App (#lvpass) and, later, the *Invitation au Voyage* promotional video featuring David Bowie (Figure 3).

Members of the public launched new hashtags around these events. Each persisted for a few days and then lost importance and disappeared. If we look at one of these events, the news of Marc Jacobs leaving Louis Vuitton at the Paris Fashion Week, we can see there that the dynamic driving sharing activity is very different from what would result from the deliberative dynamics usually identified in brand communities (Table 2).

FIGURE 2

COMPOSITION OF URLS IN TWEETS WITH THE #LOUISVUITTON HASHTAG



Distribution of URLs occurring two times or more in the #louisvuitton data set. The Louis Vuitton official site and eBay are the most common destinations. Instagram and Twitter are resources for posting pictures. Fashion blogs and magazines make up the third most popular area. Other social media and personal websites are rare destinations. The many URLs that point to the Apple App store come from a peak in postings around the launch of the Louis Vuitton LVPass iPhone App.

First of all, users do not interact with each other or address each other's tweets. (There is one case where the fashion blogger InStyleMelissa's tweet is retweeted by two other users; however, she does not respond to this. The retweets might simply be part of a publicity-seeking strategy.) Overall mentions (@) are not used to initiate conversations or to respond to other users, but to reinforce the hashtag (people use @louisvuitton in addition to #louisvuitton and @marcjacobs in addition to #marcjacobs). Hashtags attract a cascade of imitations where each user tweets his or her point of view ("In life as in fashion everybody is necessary, nobody is indispensable," "It is confirmed," "The Good-Bye show: fantastic," etc.). Often these private perspectives convey strong emotion ("Marc you can not leave us like this: I am crying"). Additional hashtags (and to some extent mentions) are used to give context and ambience to tweets (#godsavelivestreaming, #pfw, #sadness). Overall the driving dynamic is not discussion or conversation. Rather hashtags like #marcjacobs embody a collective affective ambience (Zappavigna 2011) that spurs members of the public (that is, people who follow the #louisvuitton hashtag) to retweet it while adding their private perspective or experiences. The resulting dynamic is one of imitation without

interaction: people retweet hashtags without entering in discussion or deliberation with others. This ability of hashtags to trigger waves of collective imitation has been well documented in other studies of Twitter-based communication (Arvidsson et al. 2015; Papacharissi 2014). Even when there are no trending hashtags, however, participation in the public remains generally oriented to the nondeliberative sharing (or pseudo-sharing) of private affects. The most important such private affect is the desire for publicity.

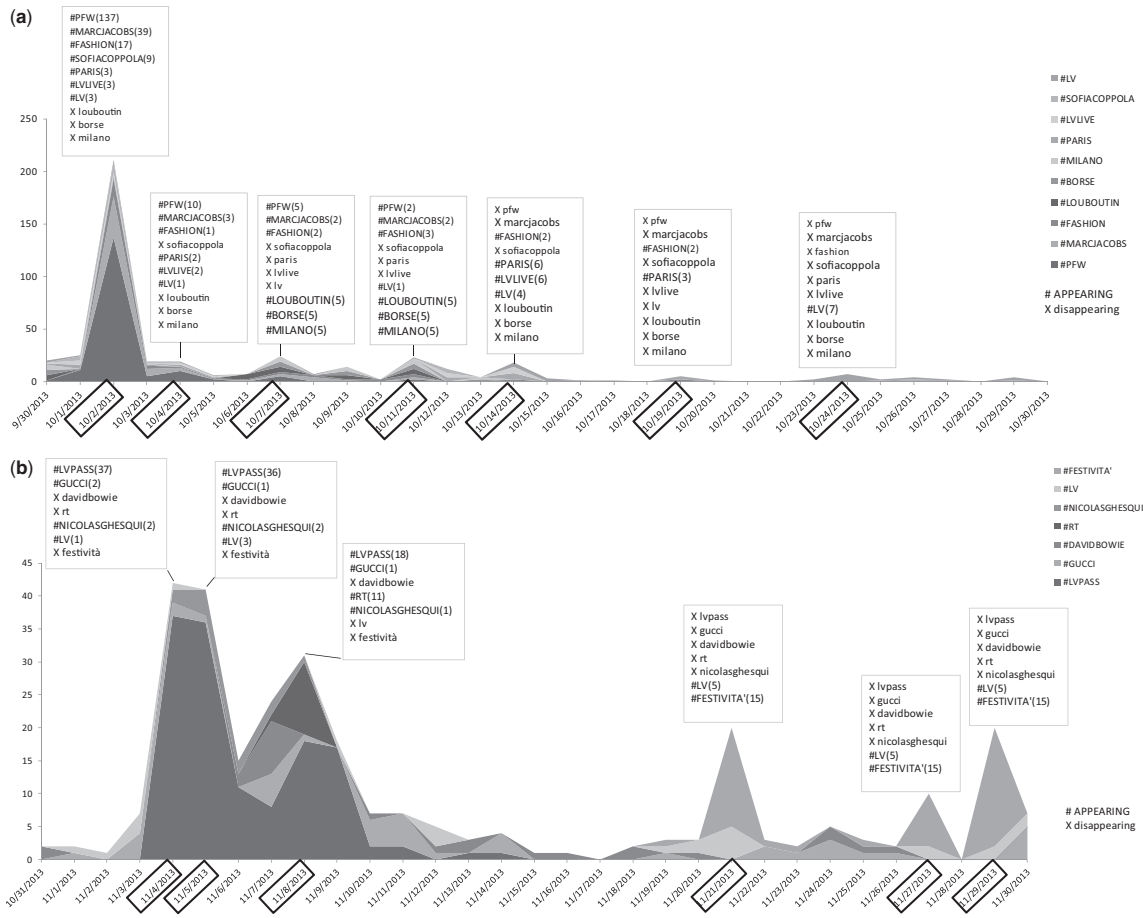
Publicity

That users do not interact around #louisvuitton does not mean there is no interaction at all. Interaction among users takes place in personal networks that happen momentarily to make use of the #louisvuitton hashtag. For example, during a few days in November 2013, networks of teenage celebrity seekers whose main activity is retweeting appeals like "follow me and I follow you" to their peers, kept using the #louisvuitton hashtag.

I need 14 followers to get to 1000 #rt seguimi e ti seguio #LouisVuitton. [Nov 08, 2013]

FIGURE 3

TRAFFIC VOLUME AND CO-OCCURRENCE OF HASHTAGS AROUND THE #LOUISVUITTON HASHTAG



The picture correlates traffic volume with the liveliness of hashtags associated with Louis Vuitton (the Y-axis measures daily volume of traffic). During the first half of the month, captions mark presence (#) or absence (X) of the 10 hashtags that were most popular at the first day of the month. During the second half of the month, captions mark the presence or absence of the 10 hashtags that were most popular on the last day of the month. The result is illustrative and gives the idea of peaks in traffic organized around the temporary prevalence of clusters of trending hashtags.

(seguimi e ti seguì = “follow me and I follow you,” a frequent add-on to these kinds of tweets, either as a hashtag or simply as a phrase)

On other occasions networks of Instagram friends used the #louisvuitton hashtag when distributing selfies featuring a branded product. But using the #louisvuitton hashtag is not by itself a way to initiate interaction with others. It is a way to publicize a piece of information.

In part this is a technological artifact: hashtags work to give public visibility to tweets and make them potentially directed at everybody with an interest in matters related to the theme of the hashtag. They are not communitarian devices (Page 2012, 181). A tweet marked with the #louisvuitton hashtag is rather publicity oriented in

the same way as an advertisement in a mainstream newspaper is oriented toward generic publicity (Wernick 1991).

This publicity orientation is obvious in the case of sales-oriented tweets where the content is simply the name of the product for sale, often with the add-on “authentic” or “genuine,” and a link to the place where the product can be bought, mostly eBay. These tweets are simply about publicizing a commercial opportunity to a generic public of potentially interested buyers. However they are also very similar to the majority of self-expressive tweets.

Some of these self-expressive tweets are simply observations where a personal perspective or attitude is shared

TABLE 2

FIRST TWEETS WITH HASHTAG #MARCJACOBS ON WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2013, FOLLOWING THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF HIS DECISION TO LEAVE LOUIS VUITTON AT THE PARIS FASHION WEEK

User	Message	Time stamp
Fabiomariadamat	In fashion like in life everyone is necessary no one is indispensable #marcjacobs #LouisVuitton #lvrmh #SS14 #goodbye	Oct 02, 2013
Jekajk	#Confirmed! #MarcJacobs leaves #LouisVuitton e #NicolasGhesquiere takes his place - http://t.co/pWjQg5MI14	Oct 02, 2013
SteMaut	The last show Fantastic! #LouisVuitton #MarcJacobs #pfw #godsaveillivestreaming #lameraviglia http://t.co/UhYxIVZ0WT	Oct 02, 2013
InStyleMelissa IAMFASHION	The Finale!!!! @louisvuitton #louisvuitton #pfw #fashion #marcjacobs http://t.co/sldBRi3yXg RT @InStyleMelissa: Final!!!! @louisvuitton #louisvuitton #pfw #fashion #marcjacobs http://t.co/FnYlr6D2qZ?	Oct 02, 2013 Oct 02, 2013
lusciouslips76	RT @IAMFASHION: @InStyleMelissa: Final!!!! @louisvuitton #louisvuitton #pfw #fashion #marcjacobs http://t.co/FnYlr6D2qZ?	Oct 02, 2013
Modaholic	"#MarcJacobs leaves #LouisVuitton. But does anyone have news about #Galliano?"	Oct 02, 2013
TherealLeiweb	#LouisVuitton . #MarcJacobs leaves Vuitton and presents Victorian luxury: http://t.co/tKpgxrtg0T @LouisVuitton #vuitton #pfw	Oct 02, 2013
honey_1049	#MarcJacobs you can't leave us like that. I'm crying! You can't go! You can't leave #LouisVuitton . #sadness #fashion	Oct 02, 2013
Solofateshop	Who knows what will change with the brand! Confirmed: @marcjacobs Is Leaving @LouisVuitton http://t.co/GIPZKLQCKF #MarcJacob #fashion #louisvuitton	Oct 02, 2013
Grazia	Marc Jacobs, goodbye to Vuitton http://t.co/fljazOXkka #marcjacobs #louisvuitton	Oct 02, 2013
Fashionsackerl	"#sofiacoppola #at #louisvuitton #ss14 #marcjacobs #fashionSACKERL Credit: zoemagazine http://t.co/RG3aPTOasR "	Oct 02, 2013
Fashionismyway Ciarachanel88	CLOSED FOR MOURNING. #MARCJACOBS #LOUISVUITTON RT @Grazia: Marc Jacobs, Goodbye Vuitton http://t.co/fljazOXkka #marcjacobs #louisvuitton	Oct 02, 2013 Oct 02, 2013

with the public. These can be simple expressions of desire:

Give me a Sophia Coppola Bag too? #louisvuitton. [Oct 01, 2013]

They can also be more or less insightful and often ironic comments or observations.

They say that at #louisvuitton they burn what they don't sell to keep the prices up #ONM @OraNaMinamu [Oct 01, 2013] [Note: #ONM, OraNaMinamu, is an ironic account used to publicize "news that nobody cares about."]

However the majority of expressive tweets contain a URL that points to a picture uploaded to Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, or Twitter. The tweets serve to give publicity to the picture and to frame the picture by associating it with a number of hashtags that convey a geographic and cultural location (as in #paris) and provide an affective frame (as in #passion, #inlove). This way the tweet provides an interpretative frame around the picture that invites a particular reading with particular connotations.

Some pictures are photos of Louis Vuitton products, shop windows, or installations, like the giant suitcase put up on the Red Square in Moscow in 2013. These reproduce official brand communications with a comment or an ambient hashtag added on by users. Most, however, are pictures of users where branded items feature prominently. A small percentage (3%) of these tweets refers to fashion blogs. Most

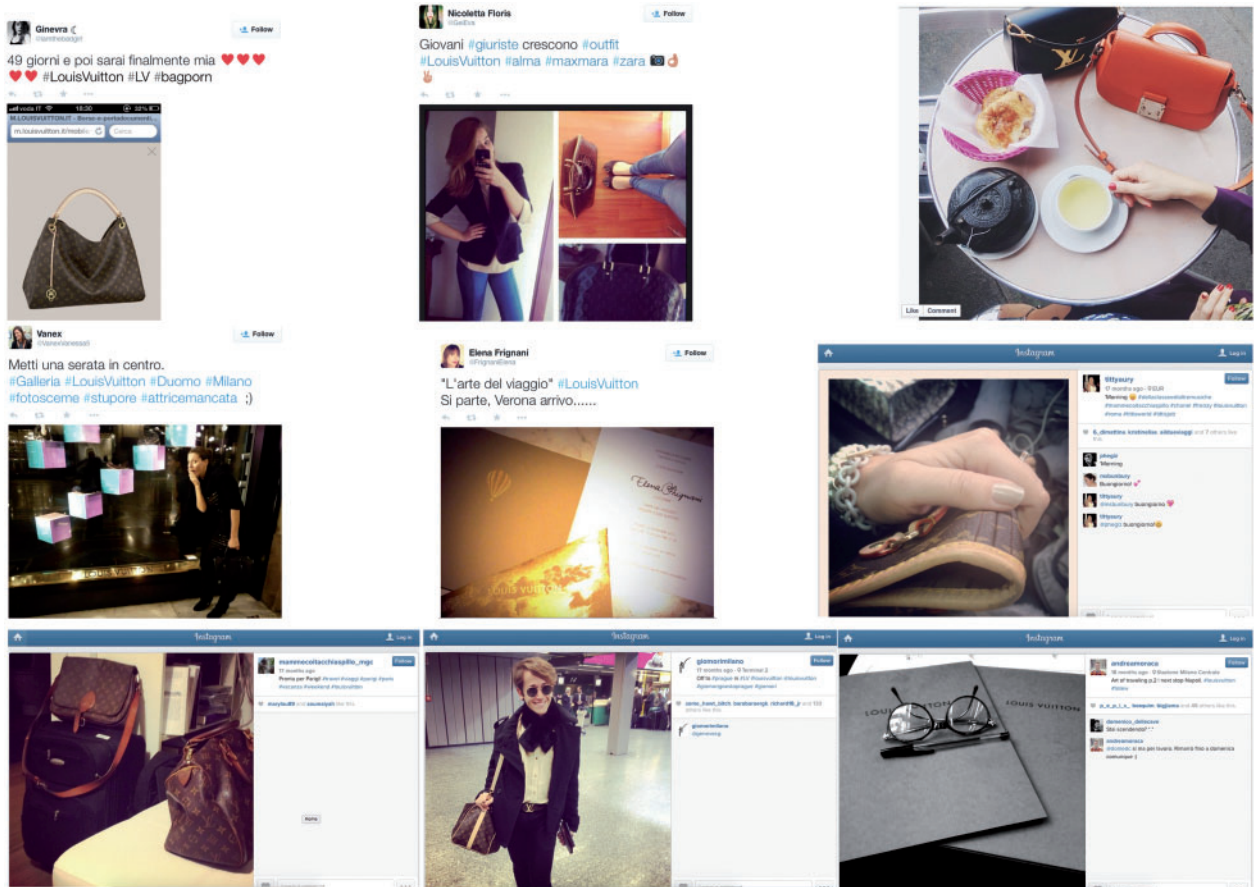
depict personal desires and perspectives, or everyday life situations that users somehow deem to be associated with the Louis Vuitton brand (Figure 4 and Table 3). So while fashion is a prevalent theme in news-related tweets, expressive tweets tend to publicize a wide range of experiences of the brand that come from a variety of everyday life situations.

These pictures reproduce the brand in a plurality of situations (birthday celebrations, graduation, departure, an evening out with friends, starting the day, buying a bag). These situations are all rooted in contexts of interaction that are themselves not centered on the brand: graduating, leaving for Prague, having a birthday. Yet the pictures testify that users considered these situations to be somehow pertinent to the Louis Vuitton brand. Along with other elements, like other items of branded merchandise or significant locations (like airports or a famous shopping street), the brand marks the event as significant (Lury 1999). This function is repeated at the level of mediation where the #louisvuitton hashtag together with other hashtags (#frenzy, #rome, #gallerie) both frame the event and give it public visibility.

This visibility operates at two levels. First, the Louis Vuitton brand features as a material device in a plurality of private networks of conversation where it enters into a plurality of diverse contexts of identity work. It makes events somehow worthy of a picture. Second, the #louisvuitton hashtag provides a space where these significant events can be given public visibility. This way the hashtag

FIGURE 4

COLLAGE OF PICTURES EXTRACTED FROM TWITTER AND INSTAGRAM



aggregates and publicizes the associations around the brand that occur in everyday brand use. The hashtag itself is a medium that gives publicity to events and meanings that result from such private conversation by transforming them into elements of a Louis Vuitton brand public. (Following or searching for the hashtag #louisvuitton, these postings appear in one's Twitter feed.) What we have is something very similar to what Zizzi Papacharissi (2009) describes as private sociality: the public sharing of private affects. As a material object, the brand confers an affective ambience on an event or occasion, which makes it deserving of publicity. As a mediation device (#louisvuitton), it provides publicity to these events.

Identity

The situations depicted in the pictures posted to the Louis Vuitton brand public are clearly relevant to the identity work of posters. The act of publicizing them with the

#louisvuitton hashtag at the same time tends to classify the posters as people for whom the Louis Vuitton brand is relevant or significant. The act of posting a picture shapes the public image of the poster. However, the diverse experiences and perspective of the brand that are shared around the #louisvuitton hashtag are never elaborated into a common set of values or a collective identity. They can be aggregated into a limited set of separate themes, but this heterogeneity is never resolved into a higher order identity (cf. Thomas et al. 2013).

One such persistent theme is that of authenticity. This is perhaps to be expected because the issue of authenticity is important to the aura of luxury brands, and in particular luxury fashion brands (Beverland 2005). Indeed, the issue of authenticity is a common focus to Louis Vuitton's official communications that dominate retweets in the brand public. They all present the brand as a unique and irreproducible object, set in circumstances that confer a unique aura to it, by associating it with historically and culturally significant spaces

TABLE 3
INTERPRETATIONS OF PICTURES IN FIGURE 4

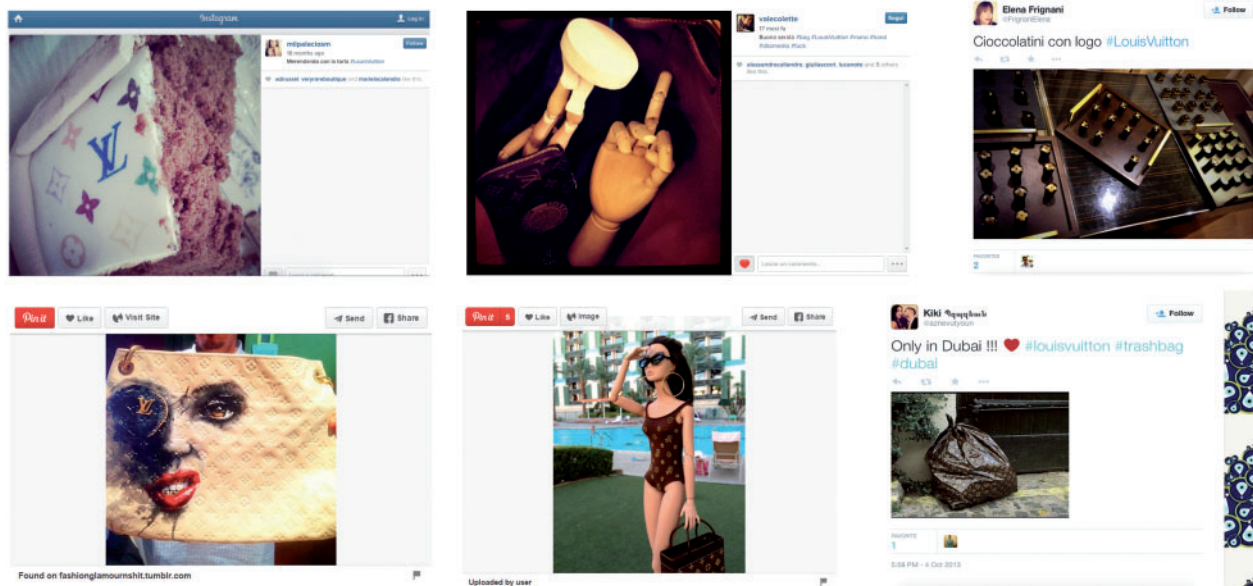
Picture 1.	
Accompanying tweet: 9 days and finally you'll be mine #Louisvuitton #LV #bagporn	
Interpretation	The user publicizes her Twitter profile with a screenshot from her iPhone, reproducing, in turn, a picture of a Louis Vuitton bag found online. The text makes public the user's anticipation for the bag (maybe it will be a birthday gift). The tag #bagporn gives a carnal touch to her consumer desire and introduces an ironic self-reflexive note. The user makes public her desire for a Louis Vuitton bag but also her awareness of herself as a fashion victim.
Picture 2.	
Accompanying tweet: Giovani #giuriste crescono #outfit #LouisVuitton #alma #maxmara #zara	
Interpretation	Picture of young woman with a Louis Vuitton bag photographed from different angles. The text could be interpreted as "young lawyers grow up" (#giuriste appears to be a hashtag used by a group of young female law students). This suggests that the Louis Vuitton bag is presented as a transition to 'adulthood' or professional status. Indeed, it is common for graduates from more elite courses (like law) to receive an expensive bag as an examination gift. The event is shared with the peer community (#giuriste) and publicized to the overall Louis Vuitton public.
Picture 3.	
Accompanying tweet: After the symposium @louisvuitton last breakfast with @alessandraairo and @xlessio #paris #jjlovesparis #louisvuitton.	
Interpretation	The text of the tweet invites two users to share remembrance of a geographically and culturally located common experience, the last breakfast after the symposium, @ louisvuitton (presumably an event organized by Louis Vuitton during the Paris fashion show) the tag jjlovesparis (referring back to the pseudonym of the user, Jou Jou, a fashion blogger) charges the event with a personal affective investment and the picture presents two Louis Vuitton bags as central to the act of having breakfast in an elegant Paris café, presumably with two friends (although only one hand is visible in the picture). This tweet intends publicizing the affectively charged remembrance of a social activity that is represented as having evolved on the premises of the brand, so to speak.
Picture 4.	
Accompanying tweet: let's say that one night in the centre #Galleria #Duomo Milano #fotosceme #stupore #attricemancata	
Interpretation	The user publicizes her Twitter profile with a picture of herself in front of the Louis Vuitton window in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, close to the Duomo in Milan (the first three hashtags provide this location). The last three hashtags give ambience to the event; she is playing at taking a goofy picture (<i>fotosceme</i> = silly pictures), impersonating surprise (<i>stupore</i>). She could have been an actress (<i>attricemancata</i>). The brand is used to publicize the sharing of an ironic and goofy moment, presumably recognized by a small circle of friends who participated in the act or who know the users to be prone to such acts (there are no comments on the profile, however).
Picture 5.	
Accompanying tweet: "The art of travel!" #LouisVuitton Let's go, Verona I'm cominghttp://t.co/PBhEKMVprO	
Interpretation	The fashion blogger Elena Frignani publicizes the fact that she has been invited to the opening of the <i>Invitation au Voyage</i> Louis Vuitton campaign in Verona. The photo of the invitation is put on her Twitter profile. The posting receives one comment from someone she probably knows: "Give my regards to the director." She answers, "Your relative? I'll see her tomorrow morning."
Picture 6.	
Accompanying tweet: Good Morning #dellaclasseedialtremusiche #mammecoitacchiaspillo #chanel #frenzy #louisvuitton #roma #tittisworld #tittisjob	
Interpretation	Tittiary posts a picture of her hand holding a Louis Vuitton purse. Hashtags give context. This is a moment in her life: (tittisworld, tittisjob) she is a mother but still fashion conscious (she associates her picture with the fashion blog mammecoitacchiaspillo, mothersinhighheels), she loves luxury brands (Chanel), she is in Rome, and she is in a hurry (frenzy). The picture receives four comments: People she presumably knows respond to her good morning greeting.
Picture 7.	
Accompanying tweet: Ready for Paris! #travel #viaggi #parigi #paris #vacanza #weekend #louisvuitton	
Interpretation	The Fashion blogger mammecoitacchiaspillo publicizes her luggage as she is leaving for Paris. Two of the otherwise quite ordinary bags are Louis Vuitton. She is going on a weekend holiday.
Picture 8.	
Accompanying tweet: Off to #prague in #LV #louisvuitton @louisvuitton #giomorigoestoprague #giomori	
Interpretation	GioMoriMilano (stylist and host at the Just Cavalli Club according to his Instagram profile) publicizes his departure for Prague, posting a picture of himself at the Linate airport with a Louis Vuitton bag.
Picture 9.	
Accompanying tweet: Art of traveling p. 2 next stop Napoli. #louisvuitton	
Interpretation	A picture geo-localized at the Milan central station uses a pun on the Louis Vuitton campaign to publicize the fact that the user is about to board a train to Naples. Two comments (from his friend) ask him, "When are you coming?"

(Paris, Venice, the Louis Vuitton bag in the Red Square in Moscow) or with unique or charismatic individuals (David Bowie, Sophia Coppola), and by generally developing an aesthetic that presents Louis Vuitton products as uniquely crafted artifacts or, indeed, works of art. There are also particular

pragmatic reasons: Louis Vuitton is among the most copied brands in the world, and e-commerce sales are particularly risky in this respect. (Google Auto Complete gives *replica* as the seventh most associated keyword with Louis Vuitton: with more than 5 million queries in the United States as of

FIGURE 5

SUBVERSIVE ASSOCIATIONS



Legend: 1. Louis Vuitton cake (Instagram); 2. Louis Vuitton brand combined with a hand exposing a raised middle finger (Instagram); 3. Louis Vuitton chocolates (Twitter); 4. Louis Vuitton bag transformed into the face of Zombie (Pinterest); 5. Louis Vuitton Barbie (Pinterest); 6. Louis Vuitton trash bag (Twitter), with the add-on “Only in Dubai!”

March 8, 2013.) Indeed, 30.2% of sales-oriented tweets contain the word (or hashtag) “genuine” or “authentic.”

This constant need to emphasize the authenticity of bags for sale indicates that this is an issue continuously in focus. However the focus on authenticity extends outside sales-oriented discourse to mark a significant part of the personal opinions that are shared in the brand public. Here the authenticity of people using the brand seems to be constantly at issue and far from settled. To some extent this takes the form, common to brand communities (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), of correcting or policing improper usage of the brand: this can be a matter of pointing at inadequate presumptions on the part of users of fake bags.

People with a #LouisVuitton models that don't exist? Convinced that we think that its real! #sieteilTOP#amenonfatefessa [Nov 08, 2013] [#sieteilTOP#amenonfatefessa = #youarethetop#atleastdontaactlikeidiots]

It can also be a matter of singling out inadequate ways of using authentic bags:

excuse me but you cant take out a paper nail file from your #louisvuitton. No you can't. [Nov 08, 2013]

A significant minority of tweets question the authenticity of the brand itself:

All the fake #LouisVuitton make me sick. but also the real ones ... [Nov 08, 2013]

So there aren't any original brands anymore? Why do I ask this #LouisVuitton [Nov 08, 2013]

The most vulgar, chavvy and copied brand on earth: #LouisVuitton [Nov 08, 2013]

Indeed, along with the theme of authenticity there is a persistent focus on extending the domain of associations connected with the brand into the realm of irony and subversion (Figure 5). The Louis Vuitton brand is pasted onto objects like cake, a virtual rendering of a Barbie doll, chocolates, or other inappropriate objects. Alternatively, the brand is deployed in ironic installations where a Louis Vuitton bag is transformed into the face of Zombie, is combined with a hand exposing a raised middle finger, or the logo is simply pasted onto a plain cloth bag.

These tweets do not develop a coherent alternative or doppelgänger image of the brand (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). Rather they simply publicize associations between the brand and meanings that arise from a plurality of more or less critical or ironic discourses rooted in many diverse practices and contexts. Indeed, there are many other ways in which users make public associations with the brand: Some tweets connect the brand to anti-immigrant themes, where it comes to stand for the supposed wealth on the part of Roma beggars (a persistent theme in anti-immigration postings on Twitter).

The gypsy at the traffic light with her #LouisVuitton really stands out ?????? #noncepiumondo [Oct 05, 2013]

Louis Vuitton is associated with the absurd costs and luxury lifestyle of the world of fashion.

RT @AleCavaOfficial: #LouisVuitton tonight the campaign starts: “a kidney for fashion.” Donate a kidney or two and you’ll get a coupon? [Nov 08, 2013]

These are all associations that arise from private conversation networks and are publicized using the #louisvuitton hashtag. They are not elaborated in the public organized around that hashtag. Indeed, the associations formed around the brand in the #louisvuitton public reflect the wide variety of associations attributed to the brand in a diversity of ordinary discourses and practices. We find this diversity of associations also outside of the #louisvuitton public by looking at the plurality of discourses in which the keyword Louis Vuitton figures.

For example, teenage users who chat to each other on Twitter frequently use Louis Vuitton (often simply the word, not the hashtag) to reinforce derogatory comments on girls:

The truth is that you are just as false as your fake Louis Vuitton #sotrua #pessima [Oct 06, 2013]

The ‘you’re beautiful’ that you write on each others pictures are just as fake as you are Louis Vuitton bags [Oct 08, 2013]

In political discourse Louis Vuitton is associated with the excesses of the “caste” (*casta* is a popular Italian term for the corrupt and self-centered political class):

I’m thinking of a Porsche with Louis Vuitton seats and parties with escorts. Apicella wouldn’t you like that?#masterpiece [Nov 24, 2013] [Note: Mariano Apicella was kind of Berlusconi’s personal bard. He engaged in duets with the former prime minister, himself a former nightclub crooner, performing schmalzy Italian schlagers.]

Indeed, these tweets do not so much tell us about Louis Vuitton as much as they tell us about the diverse contexts that make up the Italian society in which they have been generated. Contrary to what we might expect in a brand community, there is no development of common values or a collective identity around the focal brand. Rather the brand acquires its meaning through an assembly of diverse associations that originate in a variety of contexts or practices that, in turn, derive from a diverse range of everyday life situations. This assembly charges the brand with the potential to enhance and empower certain forms of expression, but it does not make the brand a reference for collective belonging. In the brand public, the brand becomes a vehicle for publicity rather than a source of identity.

BRAND PUBLIC

Admittedly, Louis Vuitton constitutes a special case. As a prestigious fashion brand it is highly conducive to the kind of conspicuous consumption where visibility and publicity play a major role. At the same time, many of the phenomena we have observed around Louis Vuitton on Twitter resemble what an emerging literature has identified as key features of social media–based participatory culture. In this section we draw on these communalities to develop an ideal-typical definition of brand public.

What defines a brand public? What keeps it together in the absence of interaction? First of all, a public is primarily a discursive phenomenon, not a form of interaction. People might interact in other networks and contexts and post meanings or perspectives that derive from their interactions—from what Tarde would have called their “private conversations” in the public. They might also post individual perspectives that have been fashioned in solitude or elaborated with the imaginary of other Twitter users in mind. But the public as such does not provide a space for interaction or community. Instead, a public is to be understood as an organized discursive space. The organization is performed by a hashtag, or some other mediation device, which is able to attract and aggregate contributions of a certain kind. In order to create a public, a mediation device needs to be able to attract and sustain a continuity of certain kinds of practices. Indeed, the #louisvuitton hashtag aggregates *certain kinds* of postings. A large number of people post about Louis Vuitton, independently of each other, and most only post once or twice. Yet their postings are about the same things: they are about the sale of bags, they are reactions to or repostings of the brand’s own communication campaigns, and they consist of the public sharing of a number of private movements where the brand figures. And while new themes can be introduced mirroring external events like the Paris Fashion Week or Louis Vuitton’s advertising campaigns, this variation constitutes liveliness around a basic continuity where the prevalence of sales, news, and self-presentation remain central. This leads us to a first definition. A brand public is an organized media space kept together by a continuity of practices of mediation that are centered on a mediation device such as a hashtag.

However this continuity is not guaranteed by the deliberative creation of common values or common rituals. It is rather an effect of diverse meanings that have solidified over time as actors with diverse endowments of discursive power—from Louis Vuitton’s corporate communications to teenagers who use the brand name to insult girls—have managed to anchor the brand in an imaginary that shows some basic coherence. In the public the brand brings together diverse perspectives and experiences without necessarily bringing them into dialogue with each other. It is a matter of what Celia Lury calls the “brand as assemblage,”

rather than the brand as identity: the brand as representative of an imaginary that mirrors the diversity and variety of the mass of its users and which over time comes to develop its own “topological” rules of continuity (Lury 2004).

This construction of an assembly of meanings without the deliberative creation of common values resembles the function of the kinds of empty signifiers—#Occupy, the Che Guevara T-shirt, the Facebook logo hand painted on a placard—that operate as aggregating devices in recent social movements and contribute to drive a mass of otherwise disconnected individuals to contribute with their perspectives (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Like #louisvuitton, these empty signifiers do not stand for any elaborate values, but they manage to aggregate certain kinds of compatible expressions. This way brand publics can be understood as an additional manifestation of the connective logic of co-creation identified in social movement studies. Hashtags are devices to which people can connect their personal experiences or perspectives without these being integrated into higher order collective values. As in the case of social movements like Occupy, the overall meaning of the brand results from this logic of aggregation (Juris 2012). While there are no explicit rules for what kind of expressions can be included in these aggregations, the historical weight of past aggregations creates a selective bias. By means of the meanings that have solidified around it, the brand becomes a platform for action that encourages and attracts certain form of self-expression and not others (Arvidsson 2006). This leads us to a second definition: brand publics are made up of structured aggregations of heterogeneous meanings without the formation of collective values.

This connective logic of aggregation is coupled to a modality of participation that is different from what we would find in brand communities. Participation is both more widespread and more sporadic. Generally more people participate in brand publics than in brand communities, but they participate only once or twice: there are no core members who keep coming back regularly. People also participate without interacting. Instead they are driven by affective ambiances embodied in mediation devices. To some extent this happens as trending hashtags are able to drive waves of imitative behaviors. As we saw in the case of Marc Jacob's *farewell* during the Paris Fashion Week, trending hashtags invite imitation as people retweet them, adding on their own perspectives or comments. The result is that participation is energized as the collective ambience embodied by the hashtag activates otherwise dormant members and triggers them to participate. The resulting dynamic is more similar to that of a crowd than to that of a community. Once again this resembles the dynamic of participation that has been observed in several contexts of social media use, from fashion blogs (Stage 2013) via political mobilization (Papacharissi 2014) to online fan culture (Arvidsson et al.

2015). Indeed, Zappavigna identifies such “ambient affiliation” where users imitate each other in connecting their private perspectives to a hashtag as typical of the dynamics of participation on Twitter overall. In ambient affiliation, “users may not have interacted directly and likely do not know each other, and may not interact again” (Zappavigna 2011, 802).

While external events and trending hashtags sometimes energize participation, normal participation is mainly driven by ambient affiliation triggered by the brand itself. The Louis Vuitton brand seems to be able to render a number of everyday situations worthy of publicity. The brand “marks them” as significant; to use Lury's expression, it fills these situations with a certain gravitas that makes them a suitable object of a picture to be subsequently published on Instagram and publicized as a tweet with the #louisvuitton hashtag. This way the use of the brand resembles the kind of “brandedness” that Nakassis (2012) discusses in relation to his fieldwork on young male consumers in Tamil Nadu: generic logos that look like those of global brands but are not quite the same are worn as visual symbols without a referent: as empty signifiers that are able to enhance the visibility of a garment or intensify the experience of a situation. This function of the brand as something that renders a situation worthy of publicity by its very presence—the selfie at the airport with the Louis Vuitton bag, publicized with the hashtag #louisvuitton—is enhanced by low barriers to media participation enabled by camera equipped smartphones. The result is a brand public where the brand itself, when used in certain situations, embodies an affect strong enough to trigger participation. Our third defining definition is that in brand publics participation is not structured by interaction but by private or collective affect.

From the point of view of participants, the function of the brand public is not to supply a focus for identification, but a vehicle for visibility and publicity. In the Louis Vuitton brand public, the brand does not itself constitute a focus for the elaboration of a specific identity. Contrary to what has been identified in the case of many brand communities, there is no elaboration of a common value system around the brand, no rituals and traditions, no (or at least very little and very sporadic) moral protagonism, no linking value for short. Unlike the seminal studies of Harley Davidson (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), Apple (Muñiz and Schau 2005), or Hummer (Luedicke et al. 2010) that have defined how we understand the dynamics of brand-focused identity work, it is impossible to deduce from our data what it means to be a Louis Vuitton consumer or fan or how Louis Vuitton users are distinct from others. Rather to use the brand Louis Vuitton can mean many different things. There is a certain coherence to the things that the brand can mean: a limited set of themes—authenticity, subversion, publicity—remain co-present. But these are never resolved into a common set

TABLE 4

BRAND COMMUNITY AND BRAND PUBLIC

	Brand community	Brand public
Social form	Structured set of relations sustained by interaction	Common discursive focus sustained by mediation
Mode of participation	Participation structured by interaction among members	Participation structured by private or collective affect
Form of identity	A common understanding of the brand promotes collective identity and a sense of belonging	An aggregation of diverse perspectives on the brand where heterogeneity remains unresolved
Form of value	The brand is a source of identity and linking value	The brand is a medium for publicity

of values. The heterogeneity remains; it is never resolved (Thomas et al. 2013). This does not mean, however, that nothing of value happens. Rather people use social media to speak of the Louis Vuitton brand in other ways, which are nevertheless valuable to them. They do not use the brand as a focus for interaction; nor do they use it to develop social relations or a particular collective identity. Instead the brand principally functions as a medium that is able to give publicity to a variety of identities and experiences that originate in the myriad of networks of conversation that make up everyday life, and where the brand itself might be just a peripheral ingredient. This media function operates by extending the marking function that brands, as material devices, already operate in the lives of consumers, onto social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram. The brand marks a situation as significant two times, a first time by its material presence in real life, and a second time in the form of a branded hashtag (like #louisvuitton) attached to a picture uploaded to Instagram and tweeted to the brand public. This leads to the fourth and final dimension of analysis: brand publics add publicity value to brands.

In Max Weber's usage, the ideal type is not to be understood as a representation of reality but rather as a conceptual tool that facilitates its navigation, much like a map or a compass (Weber 1978). We understand the concept of brand public in a similar way. It synthesizes a way of relating to brands that is different from what we are familiar with from the brand community literature. The two concepts are best understood as points of orientation: dimensions of brand public and dimensions of brand community can coexist empirically, or one might be more pronounced than the other in particular cases (Table 4). With this caveat in mind we would like to conclude by comparing the two concepts along the four dimensions just discussed.

CONCLUSION: PUBLICITY VALUE

Brand communities are integral parts of a circuit of value that has been well documented in consumer research. Simply put, participants derive linking value in the form of common knowledge and a common identity. This is valuable to them because it provides a response to the alienation and fragmentation inherent in postmodern consumer society (Firat and Schultz 1997). Brand managers, in turn, can draw on the meanings that participating consumers create to add dimensions of value to the brand.

Brand publics might be part of a different circuit of value, which in turn might very well be integral to a more publicity-oriented consumer culture. While a detailed theorization of this circuit of publicity value lies beyond the scope of this article, we would like to conclude our study by offering some grounded perspectives for such further research.

That brands and other consumable items serve as media for visibility and publicity is of course not new. Werner Sombart already identified this as a key driver of the development of modern consumer society, and Veblen developed this aspect into a general theory of conspicuous consumption (Sombart [1913] 1967; Veblen 1899). In addition, Celia Lury's work has pointed at the media function that brands normally operate in everyday consumption. Brands and logos are able to mark situations and moments as significant and heighten their visibility (Lury 2004). It would seem logical that these aspects be particularly pronounced for certain kinds of consumer goods like fashion brands and expensive handbags. In short, publicity has been there as a dimension of the value that consumers derive from certain brands and consumer goods throughout modern consumer culture. Possibly this dimension has grown in importance in the postmodern promotional culture that has developed as a key aspect of advanced consumer societies since the 1970s (Wernick 1991).

However, as consumer practices are mediated through the technological nexus of social media and camera-enabled smartphones, they tend to become further oriented toward visibility and self-presentation. This has not only rendered the photographic dimension integral to many areas of consumer practice but has created a widespread orientation toward publicity-oriented photography, toward "documenting the self for the consumption of others" (Schwartz 2010, 165; Winston 2013). Indeed, some argue that an orientation to publicity and self-branding is the natural outcome of the spread of social media and its related "culture of connectivity" (Marwick 2013; van Dijck 2103). Add to this a generally more liquid consumer culture where consumers form more fleeting attachments to brands and practices (Bauman 2000; Eckhardt and Bardh 2015), where brands and other marketplace myths are less able to anchor consumer identity (Arsel and Thompson 2011), and where

an orientation to the singularity of experience prevails (Jameson 2015), it might very well be that the scales are tilting away from identity and toward publicity as the main added value that at least certain brands can convey.

The circuit of publicity value is different from the circuit of linking value in important respects. From the point of view of brand managers, publicity value builds on a greater mass of weaker contributions. Rather than core members making significant investments in time and energy to develop brand identity or brand-related innovation (van Hippel 2004), brand publics allow for the harvesting of a mass of temporary and small contributions. This way the circuit of publicity value should be understood as part of the contemporary resurgence of crowd-based value creation, along with crowd sourcing and crowd funding. Brand managers can harvest innovation and, importantly, quantifiable forms of brand reputation from a large mass of disconnected individuals who contribute only sporadically (Arvidsson and Paitersen 2013).

From the point of view of consumers, the value derived as well as the work done is similarly lighter. Camera-enabled smartphone make it easy to snap a picture and post it to Instagram, to the point that motivations for participation might simply be explained by pointing at the agentic qualities of such new communication technologies (cf. Latour 1990), although empirical studies show that at least “fame seekers” on Instagram invest significant amounts of time in curating the images that they post; Marwick 2015). However it is also possible to imagine additional sources of value. The publicity achieved by participating in brand publics can in some cases be part of a general economy of micro-celebrity where it can be converted into reputational status or social media fame, which can be capitalized on in other pursuits. (Evidence from studies of freelance workers, for example, shows that they put a lot of effort in curating their social media presence, including representations of consumption, in order to create a marketable personal brand; Gandini 2015; Marwick 2013). In other words, publicity can be used as an exchange value in a generalized economy of reputation. For others it might simply be the experience of being seen, the satisfaction, widespread among Instagram users, of knowing that others, also perfect strangers, acknowledge you and “like” you (Marwick 2015). Publicity also operates as use value. As in the case of the reputation economy overall, publicity represents a more liquid and experience-oriented form of the social capital that communities, including brand communities, have traditionally been able to convey. It is the form that trust, recognition, and linking value takes when interacting with strangers. In this sense, publicity as an aspect of brand value would not simply be an effect of a new emphasis on visibility introduced by new technologies, but also related to the fact that social media has extended the reach of, however sporadic, social interaction beyond the boundaries of

community. Seeking and acknowledging publicity becomes a natural way of interacting with strangers on social media, in particular when “social buttons” such as “likes” make the experience objective and measurable (Gerlitz and Lury 2014). How this plays out in the field of brands and consumer practice is an interesting question for further research.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The second author collected the data together with a research assistant. Data collection period was from October 1 to November 31, 2013. Data were collected using a python-based crawler interrogating the Search API of Twitter. The first and second authors analyzed the data.

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