

**What's in it for me?**

**Applying Social Exchange Theory to Beverage Brand Engagement on Facebook**

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## Abstract

Managing engagement with existing and potential consumers on social networking sites has proven to be a challenge for many brands (Gretry et al., 2017). Focusing on the marketing communications of American beverage brands on Facebook, the researcher aimed to learn why some brands earn more engagement than competing brands. To answer this question, the researcher conducted a qualitative study that utilized a content analysis. Social exchange theory was applied to the findings of the content analysis, which allowed the researcher to perceive and interpret the high-value rewards of brand communication. Applying a communication theory that combines behavioral psychology and elementary economics, the researcher sought to identify the most effective strategies for increasing engagement on the social networking site. Researcher-identified strategies address the content of online messages, as well as how these messages are delivered. The findings of this research may benefit marketers, public relations practitioners, and communication theorists within and beyond the beverage industry.

*Keywords:* Brand engagement, Facebook communication, marketing communications, social exchange theory, beverage industry

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my family.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge my dissertation team for their support.

*“A brand is a living entity, and it is enriched or undermined cumulatively overtime, the product of a thousand small gestures.”*

– Michael Eisner

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## **List of Abbreviations**

Corporate Ability (CA)

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Graphic Interchange Formats (GIFs)

## Chapter One: Introduction

As a relatively new form of communication (Hanifawati et al., 2019), brands struggle to successfully interact with existing and potential consumers on social networking sites (Gretry et al., 2017). Social networking sites are online services that enable users to create (at least) semi-public profiles to connect with other users within bounded systems, while also having access to the connections of others. Some examples include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The researcher proposes a study that will identify American beverage brands' communication strategies for increasing Facebook engagement. The opening chapter of the dissertation addresses background information and provides a general outline for doctoral research on communication through social networking sites. Specifically, the researcher will discuss background information on the study and provide the problem statement, the purpose statement, the research questions, the nature of the study, and a summary of the chapter.

### Background

#### *An Introduction to Brands*

McLaughlin (2011) distinguished a brand name as “the source of a product or service” (para. 11). A brand can also be perceived as a company, product, person, or group's reputation. In some cases, a single company may have more than one brand (Indeed Editorial Team, 2022).

**Adapting to Social Networking Sites.** When consumers began spending time on social networking sites, brands not only established an online presence—they adapted their marketing communications. Marketing communications consist of strategic messages conveyed through a combination of channels and tools to help reach a brand's goals (Pearson, 2023). Generic marketing communications focus on describing and promoting products and services, but on social networking sites, brands take a different approach (Vertex Marketing Agency, 2020).

“With the help of social media [social networking sites], businesses can now connect with their customers like a friend who understands their needs and suggests useful products” (Vertex Marketing Agency, 2020, para. 10). By engaging with consumers on social networking sites, brands can foster awareness and relationships (Vertex Marketing Agency, 2020). This friendly approach is made possible through two-way communication, as consumers can directly engage with brand content (Matter, 2023).

The internet has also created highly informed consumers, which gives consumers more power. With their new power (DeLane, 2023), consumers have outlined certain expectations of brands. To begin, consumers expect brands to use their influence for good. Consumers expect brands to show leadership and create a sense of community. Additionally, brands should form a relationship with consumers. By meeting consumers’ expectations, brands can gain loyalty. In fact, 68% of consumers will recommend a brand they have a meaningful relationship with, and this attracts new consumers (Sprout Social, 2023).

### ***An Introduction to Facebook***

“Social media is a new form of engagement, with many opportunities for brands to extract value from their existing and potential consumers” (Hanifawati et al., 2019, p. 184). Facebook is the world’s most popular social networking site, and it allows users to interact with people and organizations through a variety of information resources, such as images and videos (Concordia University Irvine, 2023). Fan pages are business accounts that brands use to communicate on Facebook (Beese, 2016). These pages allow brands to directly reach users and potentially improve brand popularity through electronic word-of-mouth—through posts, shares, and comments (Hanifawati et al., 2019).

For clarity, consumers can engage with Facebook content using three features—the Like button, Comment button, and Share button. The Like button is a tool for communicating positive feedback and signalling preferences to other users. Clicking the Like button, sometimes referred to as “liking” a post, indicates agreement. In other words, the user likes what a brand is saying and wants others to know that he or she likes what a brand is saying (Hanifawati et al., 2019). Extensions of the Like button include the Love button, Care button, Haha button, Wow button, Sad button, and Angry button. As the name of each button suggests, the extensions communicate love, care, laughter, astonishment, sadness, and anger respectively (Meta, 2023a).

Next, the Comment button on Facebook is a tool for communicating with a brand and other followers. Posting a comment, sometimes referred to as “commenting” on a post, allows users to have open discussions. For example, a user might discuss his or her experience with a brand (Hanifawati et al., 2019). Lastly, the Share button is a tool for boosting a post’s influence and visibility (Hanifawati et al., 2019). Clicking the Share button, sometimes referred to as “sharing” a post, allows a post to be seen by a user’s social network.

**Active and Passive Engagement.** Posting popularity, which is the popularity of a Facebook post as measured through brand engagement, is connected to consumer purchases. Specifically, posting popularity can be measured through active engagement (through reactions, shares, and comments) or passive engagement (through clicks and views; Hanifawati et al., 2019). The proposed study will focus on active engagement.

Each variable of active engagement is significant, although some variables are arguably more significant than others, as comments and shares require higher levels of commitment (Capriotti et al., 2019). For example, commenting on a post takes more time and effort than clicking the Like button (Sebate et al., 2014). Based on social exchange theory, users are

exchanging these comments, likes, and shares for whatever perceived reward(s) a post offers. These activities cost the user time, and the amount of time (the amount of commitment) it takes the user to produce an activity, the more that activity is worth (Capriotti et al., 2019).

Although Facebook reactions are not specifically mentioned as a form of active engagement (Hanifawati et al., 2019), these tools are also important variables for calculating brand engagement, as extensions of the Like button express users' specific feelings about a post. A social exchange theorist might refer to these buttons as sentiments. As discussed in the literature review, sentiments can reward or punish an exchange, as their value increases with warmth (Homans, 1961). For instance, clicking the Love button is a more valuable activity than clicking the Like button, as love is a warmer expression of social approval.

### *Classifying the Study*

By examining a social networking site, the current study can be classified under inbound marketing, which is a form of marketing communications. Unlike traditional marketing approaches, inbound marketing focuses on bi-directional (two-way) communication that is conversational and more spontaneous than uni-directional (one-way) communication (Hanifawati et al., 2019). Online communication should foster brand relationships of mutual benefit (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020), and this is the purpose of inbound marketing (Hanifawati et al., 2019). Interestingly, the purpose of inbound marketing aligns with an economic principle of social exchange theory: An exchange will not occur unless each party perceives a potential benefit (Boulding, 1955). In particular, this form of marketing communications strives to promote brand awareness, interest, and trust without spending money (Hanifawati et al., 2019). Furthermore, these relationships should be built on brand engagement. Dialogue is especially significant

toward inbound marketing efforts, since dialogue creates trust, which then becomes the foundation of relationships (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020).

Unfortunately, brands struggle with inbound marketing—specifically with building relationships between themselves and consumers on social networking sites (Gretry et al., 2017). All in all, “it remains unclear how brands should communicate with consumers to foster relationships and, in particular, to gain their trust” (Gretry et al., 2017, p. 77). From a theoretical perspective, it is possible that brands’ messages do not contain the correct stimuli. Based on the first proposition of social exchange theory (explicated in Chapter Two), an individual is more likely to interact with a message the more similar that message is to one that has rewarded his or her engagement in the past (Homans, 1961). However, with a limited amount of research on the topic, it is difficult to identify these stimuli. Moreover, previous research has often been limited by the form of marketing communications studied (Gretry et al., 2017), the social networking site studied (Voorveld, 2019), the culture studied (Yuan, 2019), and/or the industry studied (Kim et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2019; Kim & Rader, 2010).

### ***Gaps in Existing Literature***

“For many brands, the adoption and use of social media constitute a trial-and-error process” (Gretry et al., p. 84). Existing studies can offer some guidelines for effective brand communication in limited contexts, but these findings must be tested to determine transferability (Gretry et al., 2017). Social exchange theory may help explain these guidelines. There are three gaps in the existing literature that the researcher seeks to address. First, the current research project will analyze the Facebook activity of American brands to determine the transferability of specific scholarly findings in global and foreign studies. Second, the current research project will determine the transferability of specific scholarly findings across industries. Third, the current



research project will determine the transferability of specific scholarly findings across social networking sites.

### **Problem Statement**

The general problem to be addressed is the failure of brands to strategically communicate with users on social networking sites, which results in low levels of engagement and the inability to establish relationships with users. Social networking sites are essential channels for brand communication, as more than 50% of internet users visit social networking sites such as Facebook (Langaro et al., 2019). Consequently, this marketplace has become increasingly competitive and difficult for brands to navigate (Feldman, 2018). Brands' difficulty with social networking sites can be blamed, in part, on their communication approaches. Most brands utilize social networking sites for visibility rather than to establish and strengthen relationships (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). This is important, since engagement is a key determinant of a brand's success on social networking sites (Spencer, 2021).

Recent research on the topic has explored brands' reasons for communicating on social networking sites, what brands communicate on social networking sites, and how brands communicate on social networking sites. While the existing literature contributes to scholars' understanding of brand communication, its findings are always limited by the sample selection and scope (Gretry et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2019; Kim & Rader, 2010; Voorveld, 2019; Yuan, 2019). The specific problem to be addressed is the possible failure of American beverage brands to strategically communicate with users on Facebook, resulting in the possible inability to meet or exceed their social media benchmark for engagement.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study will be to examine how beverage brand communication on Facebook fan pages increases engagement with users. In the social media context, brand communication is “any piece of brand-related communication” shared on social networking sites that allows users to interact with a brand (Voorveld, 2019, p. 15) and impacts how consumers perceive and evaluate a brand (Mediavilla & Morillas, 2018). Building upon these definitions of brand communication (Mediavilla & Morillas, 2018; Voorveld, 2019), the researcher will generally define brand communication strategies as the brand-related communication choices used to increase positive brand engagement. George Homans’ social exchange theory will be used to interpret the data, contributing to the field of communication by exploring online communication from a theoretical perspective. The research will benefit beverage brands by identifying the best communication strategies for increasing brand engagement on Facebook. The research may also benefit brands in other industries. The findings of this study may be of interest to marketers, public relations practitioners, and communication theorists.

## **Research Questions**

### ***Research Question One***

What brand communication strategies promote the highest levels of engagement with Facebook users?

### ***Research Question Two***

How can brand communication on Facebook be understood using social exchange theory?

## **Nature of Study**

The researcher has selected a qualitative study due to the method's exploratory nature. The researcher intends to identify categories during the coding process, which is the process of selectively reducing non-numeric data to descriptive categories (Busch et al., 2005; Geisler & Swarts, 2019). More specifically, the research questions will be answered using a qualitative content analysis, which is a research design that methodically examines recorded communication to form inferences on the message itself, the sender(s), the receiver(s), and/or the encompassing culture (Busch et al., 2005; Terrell, 2016). A content analysis is the best design to address the problem statement and research questions because of the proposed study's close examination of brands' strategic communication through Facebook posts (a form of recorded communication). The content analysis will use a conceptual analysis—a common method of content analysis that occurs after coding, in which the existence and frequency of concepts are established. This is also called a thematic analysis (Busch et al., 2005).

The researcher has no need to survey or interview Facebook users. As Homans (1961) explained, students of social behavior (including communication majors) should focus on a person's actions more than their words. This aligns with the famous idiom, "actions speak louder than words." Thus, a research design that allows the researcher to focus on observable behavior is appropriate for the study. Homans' (1961) emphasis on observable behavior reflects the research philosophy of B. F. Skinner, a behavioral psychologist. Skinner can be considered a founder of social exchange theory, since Homans (1961) heavily references Skinner's (1938; 1953; 1957; 1959) work. "As a behaviorist, Skinner believed that it was not really necessary to look at internal thoughts and motivations in order to explain behavior. Instead, he suggested, we should look only at the external, observable causes of human behavior" (Cherry, 2023, para. 4).

### *Content Analysis*

This research design allows the researcher “to make inferences based on the objective and systematic analysis of recorded communication” (Terrell, 2016, p. 161). “Content analysis rests on the assumption that texts are a rich data source with great potential to reveal valuable information about particular phenomena” (Kleinheksel et al., 2020, p. 128). This information is revealed through the presence, meanings, and relationships of certain words or contexts found within recorded communication (Busch et al., 2005). Through a content analysis, apparent and underlying meaning can be identified (Terrell, 2016).

After coding, a conceptual or relational analysis is typically applied, with the former being the more popular (Busch et al., 2005). “Conceptual analysis can be thought of as establishing the existence and frequency of concepts most often represented by words or phrases in a text” (Busch et al., 2005, para. 6). Of course, these concepts must be relevant to the research question(s). By measuring the frequency of concepts, the qualitative approach is given an aspect of quantitative research, which is research that methodically analyzes a problem through numerical data (Terrell, 2016).

**Procedural Guidelines.** There is no concrete procedure for conducting a content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). However, after developing the research question(s) and selecting a sample, Busch and her associates (2005) recommended reducing the recorded communication according to Carley’s (1992) eight-category coding steps. First, a researcher must choose to focus on (1) words or (2) phrases (Busch et al., 2005). A researcher may also decide to analyze visual and auditory artifacts (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). Second, a researcher must identify and define a numbered list of the concepts and categories for the study (Busch et al., 2005). These categories can be based on the data, existing literature, and theory (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). A

researcher can add categories during the coding process, but this flexibility must be disclosed (Busch et al., 2005).

Third, a researcher must choose whether to code for frequency (Busch et al., 2005). Fourth, a researcher must choose “whether concepts are to be coded exactly as they appear, or if they can be coded as the same even when they appear in different forms” (Busch et al., 2005, para. 14). For example, should different tenses and spellings be coded separately? Additionally, a researcher will need to communicate the level of implication. For example, will the researcher code for words that imply a category? Fifth, to ensure validity, a researcher must communicate these decisions through a specialized dictionary or set of translation rules (Busch et al., 2005). Translation rules typically include category names, definitions, and examples. By stating the rules for assigning categories, there will be consistency throughout the coding process (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005).

Sixth, a researcher must state whether irrelevant text will be included during the coding process. Seventh, a researcher must code the recorded communication by hand or computer program (Busch et al., 2005). Bengtsson (2016) provided an example of the analysis schedule. In short, a meaning unit (a portion of text) is condensed and assigned a code. That code is assigned a sub-category, which is assigned a generic category, which is assigned a main category (theme). Lastly, a researcher must analyze the results of the coding process (Busch et al., 2005).

### ***Brief Methodology***

The current research will provide valuable insight for marketers, public relations practitioners, and communication theorists. For the study, the researcher will analyze the communication of beverage brands based in the United States. Given Facebook’s ability to connect users from around the world, it is not practical to limit user engagement by culture.

Therefore, when examining each brand's Facebook posts, all subsequent engagement (regardless of Facebook users' nationality) will be included.

Purposive sampling will be conducted (i.e., brands included in the study must meet specific criteria; Terrell, 2016). Since the researcher wants to explore how brands strategically communicate with Facebook users to promote engagement, only the highest-performing brands will be included. Brands will be identified according to *Beverage Industry Magazine's* (2019) list of the top 10 beverage brands on Facebook. For data collection, the researcher will select each brand's highest-performing posts for each week from January 1, 2023 to October 1, 2023. The highest-performing posts will be identified by average engagement rate percentage, which is the sum of reactions, comments, and shares divided by the number of followers and then communicated as a percentage (multiplied by 100). Before determining engagement rates, the researcher will give each post two weeks to collect reactions, comments, and shares. Posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages will be considered a successful brand's most successful posts, since user-brand relationships should be built on engagement (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). By analyzing these carefully selected posts, the researcher will determine the best communication strategies for increasing brand engagement and improving user-brand relationships.

### **Chapter Summary**

In review, this chapter introduced the research study. Key points of the chapter include the study's background information, problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, and nature. To the benefit of different professions, the researcher will examine the strategic communication of American beverage brands to address the possible failure of brands to communicate with users on Facebook, which may result in the inability to promote brand

engagement. The research will fill gaps in the existing literature by examining how American brands strategically communicate with Facebook users to promote engagement. Indeed, while studies outside of the United States have examined communication approaches (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020) and brand engagement on social networking sites (Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019), it is unclear whether these findings transfer to American culture. Homans' theory also has not been adequately applied to brands' strategic communication on Facebook. However, by conducting a qualitative study that utilizes a content analysis, the researcher will have the opportunity to explore new data, existing literature, and communication theory (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005).

Chapter Two will summarize relevant research on the topic. Scholarly sources introduced in Chapter One will be further discussed, in addition to other reputable books, journal articles, and websites.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Once again, the purpose of this study is to examine how brands' communication on their Facebook pages increases engagement with existing and potential consumers (users). This will address the possible failure of American brands to strategically communicate with these users. Related literature focuses on what information is communicated by brands on social networking sites, as well as how and why this information is communicated. Social exchange theory's origins, propositions, contributors, limitations, and applications are also discussed.

### **Documentation of Literature Search Strategy**

Peer-reviewed journal articles, trade publications, scholarly books, and webpages were located through the Jerry Falwell Library, Google, and Google Scholar. Occasionally, additional sources were found through a selected article's references or under "related articles," as recommended by the search engine. Most sources are from books and journal articles. At the time the literature review was prepared, the majority of included sources were published within the last 10 years. To thoroughly research the topic, various search terms were applied. These search terms are listed in alphabetical order in the following section.

### ***Search Terms***

The following search terms were used: branded Facebook accounts, communication theory, communication traditions, company emojis, content characteristics, corporate social responsibility on Facebook, equity theory, Facebook authenticity, Facebook brand communication using GIFs, Facebook brand post characteristics, Facebook content characteristics, Facebook corporate communications, Facebook posting popularity, Facebook post timing, Facebook public relations, Facebook strategic communication, hard sell Facebook content, posting popularity, promoting a business on Facebook, promotional content on



Facebook, social exchange theory, social media brand, social media public relations, topical content marketing, and topical messages on social media.

### ***Differences Across Social Networking Sites***

Whenever possible, sources were directly connected to engagement on social networking sites, although engagement measurements varied across studies. Since the current study examines engagement on Facebook, studies on this social networking site were selected first. If an adequate number of Facebook-based studies on a sub-topic were not located, studies on other social networking sites were selected. In the latter scenario, the researcher noted the type of social networking site used. After all, “social media platforms [social networking sites] differ in many respects, including modality, private versus public access to content, types of connections, and longevity of content accessibility” (Voorveld, 2019, p. 19). Moreover, users experience social networking sites differently, which may prompt different responses to brand communication (Voorveld, 2019). Based on Voorveld’s (2019) claim, it is not safe to assume that findings from other social networking sites (such as Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube) are relevant to Facebook communication. Findings related to other social networking sites were only included to provide possible insight into Facebook communication when direct insight was unavailable.

### ***Differences Across Cultures***

Many studies the researcher located did not include (or were not limited to) American brands. Just as scholarly findings may change across social networking sites (Voorveld, 2019), communication-based findings have been shown to change across cultures (Yuan, 2019). Thus, cultures are noted in the literature review. Outside studies may provide insight into American

brand communication, but these findings should be tested within American culture (as well as other cultures) to determine generalizability.

### ***Differences Across Industries***

Finally, many of the studies the researcher found analyzed different industries. These differences are noted, as scholarly findings have been shown to vary across industries (Kim et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2019; Kim & Rader, 2010). While communication in one industry may provide insight into the communication of another, the generalizability of industry-specific studies should be tested.

### **The Socio-Psychological Tradition**

Developed from social psychology, the socio-psychological tradition views people as social beings (Littlejohn et al., 2017). More specifically, “the theories of this tradition focus on psychological variables, individual effects, personalities and traits, perception, and cognition” (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 42). The socio-psychological tradition values the individual. In this tradition, communication scholars have studied the development and process of strategic messages. These scholars focus on how messages influence individuals (Littlejohn et al., 2017).

The present study can be classified under the socio-psychological tradition because the researcher will examine how individuals are influenced by the messages of brands. Moreover, social networking sites such as Facebook are perfect examples of people as social beings. Similarly, social exchange theory can be classified under the socio-psychological tradition because it focuses on humans as social beings, including how people navigate relationships (Littlejohn et al., 2017). In addition, social exchange theory focuses on perception—how people perceive relationships (Kingsley Westerman et al., 2007).

### ***Branches of the Socio-Psychological Tradition***

The socio-psychological tradition has a behavioral branch, a cognitive branch, and a biological branch. The behavioral branch of the socio-psychological tradition, as one might expect, is a sub-group of theories that focus on behavior in communication contexts. The cognitive branch of the socio-psychological tradition focuses on what occurs before the behavior. Scholars in this area explore how information is obtained, stored, and processed. Finally, the biological branch of the socio-psychological tradition seeks to explain behavior through biology (Littlejohn et al., 2017). The current study falls within the behavioral branch. The researcher will explore the behavior of users on social networking sites, specifically how these users interact with brands. Further, social exchange theory belongs to the behavioral branch of the socio-psychological tradition because it has roots in behavioral psychology (Homans, 1961).

### **Conceptual/Theoretical Framework: Social Exchange Theory**

Theories are important for creating “complex and comprehensive conceptual understandings of things that cannot be pinned down” (Reeves et al., 2008, p. 631). The process of human communication, for example, cannot be easily understood (Reeves et al., 2008). As noted, Facebook communication has become increasingly difficult for brands (Feldman, 2018), and it is this complexity that makes social media an excellent candidate for theory. When facing a social problem, researchers can use theories for analysis and to approach the problem from different perspectives. Different theories can be applied to the same problem, and research findings can inform policies and industry practices (Reeves et al., 2008).

For the proposed study, the researcher will utilize social exchange theory—also known as equity theory (Littlejohn et al., 2017). Social exchange theory is a sociological concept largely credited to American sociologist George Homans (Tulane University, 2018). The theory views

elementary social behavior as a direct exchange of perceived costs and rewards, in which the goal is for individuals to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs (Homans, 1961).

Social exchange theory combines psychological and mathematical perspectives (Homans, 1958). Throughout Homans' (1958) article and (1961) book, the theorist cited the work of other scholars to ground and support his propositions—the theorist even borrows terminology from these scholars. Of the many scholars cited, Homans (1961) favored the works of B. F. Skinner (1938; 1953; 1957; 1959) and Peter Blau (1955). To different degrees, these scholars—Homans, Skinner, and Blau—can be considered the original founders of social exchange theory.

### ***Social Exchange Theory's Roots in Behavioral Psychology***

Regarding behavioral psychology, Homans' (1961) theory was specifically derived from operant conditioning, also known as “Skinnerian conditioning” or “instrumental conditioning.” Operant conditioning is when an individual learns to associate a perceived reward or punishment with a voluntary behavior (Cherry, 2023). But rather than the term “punishment,” Homans (1958) preferred the term “cost.” When a behavior (referred to as an “operant” by Skinner and an “activity” by Homans) is rewarded with material or non-material goods, it is reinforced (Homans, 1961). Thus, rewards are sometimes called “reinforcements” (Homans, 1961). Referencing Skinner's work with animals, Homans' (1958) described a pigeon that had learned to peck at a target (an activity) to receive a piece of corn (a perceived reward). In other words, the corn reinforced the activity of pecking at a target. By learning the activity, the pigeon experienced operant conditioning.

According to the second proposition of social exchange theory (the propositions of social exchange theory will be formally introduced shortly), the more often an individual's activity is perceived to be rewarded, the more likely the individual will produce that activity. If an

individual does not produce an activity very often, it is possible that the rate of reinforcement is too low, meaning that the perceived reward has not been received often enough. Another possibility is that the rate of reinforcement is too high, meaning that the perceived reward has been received too often. Both possibilities refer to deprivation and satiation—the low and high values of the individual’s state. Returning to the example, a hungry pigeon may peck at the target more often to receive more corn, but the same pigeon may peck at the target less often as it becomes full (satiated). Based on this observation, Homans (1961) argued that there must be an ideal rate of reinforcement that maximizes the emission of an activity. “The highest rates of emission are not obtained by regular, but by intermittent reinforcement, particularly reinforcement at a variable ratio” (Homans, 1961, p. 20). Of course, researchers cannot always measure reinforcement ratios accurately (Homans, 1961).

In the example, the behavioral psychologist is not concerned with how the pigeon learned to peck at a target. Rather, the psychologist wants to know what changes the frequency of the activity (Homans, 1958). “As a behaviorist, Skinner believed that it was not really necessary to look at internal thoughts and motivations in order to explain behavior [activity]. Instead, he suggested, we should look only at the external, observable causes of human behavior” (Cherry, 2023, para. 4).

Homans (1958) viewed the example of the pigeon as an exchange. The pigeon pecked at a target in exchange for corn from the psychologist. Yet, in the example of the pigeon, the bird’s activity minimally determined the psychologist’s activity and cannot be considered a real exchange. As such, Homans (1958) proposed another example—one in which the situation is mutually determined (a real exchange). In the typical example of elementary social behavior, there are two individuals. Both individuals participate in activities, and it is important to note that

neither individual is limited to a single course of activity. The first individual's activity is reinforced by the activity of the second individual and vice versa. As mentioned, a social exchange theorist is not interested in how the individuals learned their activities or how the individuals learned to interpret each other's activities (Homans, 1958).

### ***Social Exchange Theory's Roots in Elementary Economics***

Behavioral psychology suggests a proportionality between exchanged activities. The value of an individual's activity will usually be proportionate to the value of the activity he or she receives. Simply put, individuals in an exchange are pressured to match the value of each other's activity. In addition to a psychological perspective, Homans' (1958) proposed theory is concerned with the exchange of value from a mathematical perspective. The theorist asked how much of a single value results from an activity. According to the fourth proposition of social exchange theory (Homans, 1961), if an activity results in a lot of a single value, then any future unit of that single value will be perceived as less valuable. Consequently, and according to the third proposition of social exchange theory, the reinforced activity that results in that single value will be performed less often.

Notably, perceiving human interactions as exchanges of values is nothing new. Blau (1955) wrote, "A consultation can be considered an exchange of value" (p. 130). Homans (1958; 1961) did give credit to Blau (1955) and often used the sociologist's study on consultation within a federal agency as an example of social exchange theory. The example will not be meticulously described in the literature review, however, as one of the aims of the dissertation is to explore social exchange theory through an original application.

## Homans' (1961) Propositions

Homans (1961) made four statements to explain elementary social behavior of informal groups. These propositions are *usually* valid, but exceptions to the propositions are possible. Typically, the propositions were written in “*x* varies as *y*” form, as the *x* value increases with the *y* value (Homans, 1961). The propositions are only valid simultaneously and under the assumption of “other things being equal” (Homans, 1961, pp. 51-52). The assumption comes from the Latin expression “*ceteris paribus*,” which can best be explained in the following excerpt:

The term [*ceteris paribus*] is used in economic analysis when the analyst wants to focus on explaining the effect of changes in one (independent) variable on changes in another (dependent) variable without having to worry about the possible offsetting effects of still other independent variables on the dependent variable under examination. (Johnson, 2005)

Thus, for any of Homans' (1961) propositions to be valid, other variables that may affect the outcome of a study—variables that are not being measured by the researcher—must not change during a given period. Homans' (1961) outlined four general propositions regarding human behavior as exchange, from which less general statements (descriptive propositions) can be made. The more general propositions should be considered in combination with one another.

(1) The more similar a situation is to one of experience, in which an individual's activity was perceived to be rewarded, the more likely that individual is to act in the same or a similar manner. In short, stimuli affect activity.

(2) The more often an individual's activity is perceived to be rewarded, the more likely the individual is to produce that activity. Likewise, the less often an individual's activity is perceived to be rewarded, the less likely the individual is to produce that activity.

(3) The more valuable a perceived reward—a unit of activity—is to an individual, the more often the individual will produce the activity that leads to that reward, such as interacting with someone. On the other hand, the less valuable a perceived reward is to an individual, the less often the individual will produce the activity that leads to that reward.

(4) The more often an individual receives a perceived reward, the less valuable the individual perceives any future unit of that rewarding activity. Likewise, the less often an individual receives a perceived reward, the more valuable the individual perceives any future unit of that rewarding activity.

(5) When distributive justice is not achieved, the more an individual is unfairly disadvantaged, the angrier he or she will be with the exchange.

### ***Rewards***

“Festinger and his colleagues consider two kinds of reinforcing activity: the symbolic behavior we call ‘social approval’ (sentiment) and activity valuable in other ways, such as doing something interesting” (Homans, 1958, p. 599). Varying by culture, sentiments are verbal and nonverbal activities that signify an individual's emotion toward another. A sentiment can be a perceived reward or a punishment, but a sentiment can also express approval or disapproval of an overall exchange. As a sentiment, social approval (also known as “liking”) is received by individuals who perform valuable activities. The warmer an expression of social approval (the higher degree of liking) an individual receives, the more valuable the sentiment is perceived. Furthermore, ignoring other variables, an increase in voluntary interaction corresponds to an



increase in liking. With each interaction, individuals have the chance to exchange perceived rewards, and perceived rewards lead to favorable sentiment (Homans, 1961).

### *Cost*

Activities can be rewarded *and* punished. Most (if not all) activities eventually have unavoidable punishments. These unavoidable punishments may be barely noticeable at first but gradually become more burdensome. When an activity is positively reinforced and has an unavoidable punishment, the unavoidable punishment is referred to as a cost. Differently put, a perceived cost is a negative value—a value that has been sacrificed. If an activity has a perceived cost, then an individual has chosen to sacrifice an alternative and rewarding activity—knowing that at any time the chosen reward is being pursued, he or she could switch activities and pursue the alternative reward instead. If there is no rewarding alternative that must be sacrificed, then there is no cost (Homans, 1961). “The cost, then, of a unit of a given activity is the value of the reward obtainable through a unit of an alternative activity, forgone in emitting the given one” (Homans, 1961, p. 60). In short, the perceived cost of an activity is increased by the presence of alternative activities (Homans, 1961).

**Shifting Values, Varying Costs, and Influence.** Homans (1958) extended his theory to social psychologist Schachter’s work on group behavior toward conformers and deviates. Homans (1958) assumed that conformers produce valuable activity, since conformity is an activity that (at least partially) aligns with group norms, and group norms are valuable activities that are exhibited and encouraged by a group. Homans (1958) further reasoned that deviates do not produce valuable activity. According to Schachter’s work, group members will increase their communication with a deviate to change the deviate’s activity. The finding led to Homans’ (1961) proposition: The more an individual’s activity deviates from the group norm, the more

interaction the individual will receive from other individuals within the group, as these individuals attempt to influence the deviate to conform. Of course, conformers will not increase their interaction with a deviate indefinitely, and this leads to another proposition: If practical equilibrium is reached (meaning individuals cannot change the situation any further for the time being) and the deviate still refuses to change his or her activity, then the conformers will no longer attempt to influence the deviate. Instead, the more the individual's activity deviates from the group norm, the less interaction and social approval the individual will receive from the conformers. The conformers will not continue to perform an activity (attempting to influence the deviate) that is not perceived to be rewarded (Homans, 1958).

Overall, it is difficult to predict the behavioral changes of individuals within an exchange because of shifting values (high values versus low values) and varying costs. Whether a value is high or low depends on the situation. For instance, Gerard's (1954) experiment found that the favorable sentiment (a kind of reinforcement) that an individual receives for agreeing with popular opinion is more valuable among high-attraction groups. When an individual finds other group members likable, he or she assigns a higher value to that group's approval. Moreover, the perceived cost for activities can vary from person to person.

Returning to Gerard's (1954) experiment, participants can begin a group discussion in agreement or disagreement with popular opinion, in high-attraction or low-attraction groups. For instance, if Individual A (a deviate) initially disagrees with a high-attraction group, Individual A can change his or her opinion (an activity) to receive favorable sentiment. However, this choice will cost Individual A his or her personal integrity (an alternative reward). On the other hand, if Individual A does not change his or her opinion, Individual A will maintain his or her personal integrity at the cost of favorable sentiment from the group (Homans, 1958).

### ***Profit***

Cost affects profit, as profit equals reward minus cost. Since social exchange theory considers psychological value, the equation cannot produce absolute figures and often discusses perceived profit in relative terms (more than, less than). Since an individual is profit-driven, the equation can also be used to predict his or her activity. If the perceived cost of an activity becomes too great (thus decreasing perceived profit), then an individual is more likely to switch activities to increase perceived profit. Theoretically, if an individual continuously adjusted his or her activity to increase perceived profit, then that individual's perceived profit would eventually be maximized. Thus, until something changes, the individual's activity would stabilize. If every individual within an exchange stabilized his or her activity, then they would be in equilibrium (Homans, 1961). But the exchange is more complex than it first appears. An individual cannot ignore the profit of others within an exchange, since the individual's perceived profit is (at least) partly affected by the activity of the other individuals. Thus, for equilibrium to be achieved, an individual's activity would stabilize when his or her perceived profit *and others' perceived profit within an exchange* is maximized (Homans, 1958).

Yet, the individual strives to make a greater profit than anyone else. With all group members seeking to profit the most from an exchange, equilibrium may never be achieved. But Homans (1958) did not assume groups have or strive for equilibrium. Instead, he discussed *practical equilibrium*. While groups do change, for individuals within an exchange to be in practical equilibrium for any period, the values of measurable variables must not change significantly over that given period—the same activities (at the same frequencies) must be observed by a researcher (Homans, 1958). Practical equilibrium does not explain social behavior, but it can be explained by social behavior (Homans, 1961).

**Distributive Justice.** While the distribution of perceived costs and rewards are not solely influenced by notions of justice, activities are still significantly influenced by these notions, and distributive justice may make practical equilibrium more probable under certain circumstances “than would the individual pursuit of profit left to itself” (Homans, 1958, p. 603).

The concept of distributive justice emphasizes an individual’s expectations regarding perceived profit, and even third parties are expected to adhere to the conditions of distributive justice (Homans, 1961). If inequality is detected, the subgroups will attempt to restore equality (Homans, 1958). According to distributive justice, higher costs should result in higher rewards, and lower costs should result in lower rewards. Likewise, higher investments should result in higher profits, and lower investments should result in lower profits. Assuming that the perceived investments of individuals within an exchange are not significantly different, the value of an activity given should be proportional to the value of an activity received—the more the exchange rewards one individual, the more the exchange rewards the other. Further, the perceived cost of an activity given should be proportional to the perceived cost of an activity received—the more the exchange costs one individual, the more the exchange costs the other (Homans, 1961).

Distributive justice is not always achieved, and an individual within an exchange may receive a higher or lower profit than expected. If the individual receives a higher profit than expected, the unfair distribution may result in guilt, although the advantaged individual may also attempt to justify his or her perceived profit. On the other hand, if the individual receives a lower profit than expected, the unfair distribution will likely result in anger. According to the fifth proposition of social exchange theory, the more an individual is unfairly disadvantaged, the more likely he or she will be angry (Homans, 1961). Moreover, based on the first proposition of social exchange theory, the more often an activity was rewarded under particular stimulus conditions,

the angrier an individual will be “when the same activity, emitted under similar conditions, goes without its [perceived] reward” (Homans, 1961, p. 73). An individual’s expectations may also be based on the characteristics of others, and the individual may compare the perceived reward he or she received with the perceived reward similar individuals received. *Relative deprivation* occurs when the individual receives a lesser reward than similar others. An individual may compare the perceived reward he or she received with perceived rewards received from similar givers, as well (Homans, 1961).

All in all, the disadvantaged individual will show more negative emotion than the advantaged individual. Of course, it is important to remember that cost and value are inferred, and individuals within an exchange may calculate their profits differently, assigning different values to the perceived rewards, costs, and investments of the exchange. Therefore, individuals within an exchange may not agree whether distributive justice has been achieved. This does not mean, however, that the advantaged individual will not attempt to meet the other’s condition of justice. If the advantaged individual values his or her relationship with the disadvantaged individual enough (or feels guilty), the advantaged individual may alter the exchange to make the other less angry. Still, the more similar the individuals’ learned experiences are, the more likely the individuals will agree when appraising their perceived rewards, costs, and investments (Homans, 1961).

***The Three Rules of Distributive Justice.*** As mentioned, individuals within an exchange expect distributive justice to be upheld. Individuals value distributive justice, meaning they find fair exchanges rewarding. Unfair exchanges, then, are avoided. Other perceived rewards, such as money or recognition, can further increase the demand for distributive justice. Homans (1961) outlined three rules of distributive justice:

- (1) The value of an individual's perceived reward (as received from other group members) must be proportional to his or her contributions in other group activities. If this rule is being broken, group members (especially the leader) will attempt to restore justice.
- (2) The value of an individual's perceived reward (as received from other group members) must be proportional to his or her perceived investments. For clarity, perceived investments include an individual's background characteristics. Some of these characteristics can change, as the time a worker has dedicated to a job accumulates value. On the other hand, some of these characteristics cannot change. Gender, unfortunately, can be a factor in distributive justice, and this highlights how investments are weighed differently across cultures.
- (3) The value of an individual's perceived reward (as received from other group members) must be proportional to his or her perceived costs. These costs may be high or low. Individuals rank the perceived investments, contributions, rewards, and costs of activities. These rankings should match one another. For example, a high-ranking reward deserves a high-ranking cost. Higher investments should mean higher contributions, as well as higher rewards and costs. "The trouble is that they [individuals] differ in their ideas of what legitimately constitutes investment, reward, and cost, and how these things are to be ranked" (Homans, 1961, p. 246). Distributive justice requires perceived investments, contributions, rewards, and costs to be assessed on the same scale, but complete agreement within a group is difficult to achieve and maintain. Individuals with similar backgrounds and values will likely have an easier time negotiating the scale, but distributive justice is never perfectly maintained.

***A Fair Deal.*** An individual who does not emit particularly valuable activity will not receive particularly high social approval. Yet, if the individual holds low esteem and the activity he or she emits, while not particularly valuable, corresponds to his or her perceived investments, then the individual will not be punished by group members of higher status. In other words, group members will not disapprove of the individual's activity. To the group, the individual has emitted the best activity of which he or she is capable. This individual is offering a fair deal, albeit not a very good one. As a result, the individual will be liked and given a low amount of social approval (Homans, 1961).

***Satisfaction.*** Homans (1961) wrote, "distributive justice is a principal ingredient of satisfaction" (p. 265). Satisfaction is a type of verbal activity with an obvious connection to emotional activity. Although distributive justice emphasizes perceived profit, and although distributive justice is an important part of satisfaction, profit and satisfaction are not the same. Instead, satisfaction emphasizes perceived reward. The greater an individual's perceived reward, the greater his or her satisfaction with the reward. Likewise, the lower an individual's perceived reward, the lower his or her satisfaction with the reward. This statement is derived from Nancy Morse's (1953) *Satisfaction in the White-Collar Job*. Assuming an individual would be satiated with a particular (unchanging) quantity of a perceived reward, that individual will eventually stop performing the activity that leads to the reward (until the satiation subsides). If the individual is not satiated, the amount of reward still needed for satiation is known as the satisfaction quantity. The higher quantity of a perceived reward an individual receives, the less he or she has left to desire, so the closer the individual is to satiation. The closer the individual is to being satiated, the more the individual is satisfied and the less valuable any further unit of reward is perceived. The more valuable an individual perceives a reward, the higher quantity of

that reward is required for satiation, and the more likely the individual will be dissatisfied with the quantity of reward received. Based on Morse's (1953) book, Homans (1961) formed two propositions on satiation:

(1) If two individuals require the same quantity of a perceived reward to be satiated, but the individuals have not received the same quantity of that reward, the individual closer to satiation will be more satisfied.

(2) If two individuals require different quantities of a perceived reward to be satiated, but the individuals have received the same quantity of that reward, the individual closer to satiation will be more satisfied.

An individual's circumstances can affect satisfaction quantity. For example, if an individual has a large family to provide for, he or she may desire a higher income. Compared to single co-workers making the same pay, this individual has a higher satisfaction quantity. As an individual's perceived investments slowly increase, so does satisfaction quantity. As satisfaction quantity increases, so must an individual's perceived rewards. If an individual's perceived rewards do not correspond to satisfaction quantity, satisfaction will decrease (Homans, 1961).

### **Blau's (1963) Additional Contributions to Social Exchange Theory**

In 1963, Blau published a new edition of his book, *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy*, which was originally published in 1955. In this new edition, Blau added a section commenting on Homans' (1958) article. In the scholarly discussion, Blau (1963) referenced Kenneth E. Boulding's (1955) book, *Economic Analysis*. Boulding (1955) stated that for an exchange to occur, each individual must believe that he or she will benefit from the exchange. Adding to this, Blau (1963) argued that potential parties must have complementary (different) needs for an exchange to occur.



If all parties are eager to obtain more of a given commodity and none of them wants to part with any of it (or if the price that would induce them to sell is the same for all of them), there is no basis for an exchange between them. (Blau, 1963, p. 138)

### **Limitations of Social Exchange Theory**

Social exchange theory only applies to social behavior—meaning human behavior that is “rewarded or punished by the behavior [activity] of another *person*” (Homans, 1961, p. 2). These perceived punishments (costs) and rewards should not be delivered through a third party, as individuals in an exchange must have direct contact with each other. Moreover, the theory should not be applied to norms, although these norms can still be relevant to a behavioral exchange (Homans, 1961).

### **Applications of Social Exchange Theory**

Social exchange theory has been applied to romantic and non-romantic relationships across a variety of disciplines.

#### ***Romantic Relationships***

Social exchange theory has often been applied to romantic relationships. For instance, Frisby et al. (2015) applied social exchange theory to relational baggage—perceived costs that transfer from relationship to relationship. The researchers found that, while baggage was a cost in a relationship, transparency was associated with relationship satisfaction. Based on Homans’ (1961) reasoning, honesty must be a valuable reward, as greater rewards lead to greater satisfaction. In an earlier study, Osborn (2012) used social exchange theory to explore marital satisfaction—specifically how individuals assessed their romantic relationships. According to Osborn (2012), watching romantically-themed television programs and believing the portrayals within the programs was associated with higher appraisals of an individual’s romantic

alternatives, as well as higher costs of marriage. This follows Homans' (1961) reasoning, as the value of alternative activities corresponds to the perceived cost of chosen activities.

### ***Non-Romantic Relationships***

Social exchange theory has also been applied to non-romantic relationships. Kramer (2005) applied the theory to community theatre groups, identifying the perceived costs and rewards of participation. Positive sentiment (friendship) and status within community theatre groups were found to affect satisfaction and commitment. Kramer (2005) wrote that, by focusing more on affection and status, social exchange theory can possibly be expanded to address motivation and communication in different contexts.

**Online Exchanges.** Zhao et al. (2017) applied social exchange theory to interactions between individuals and groups. Studying individuals' decisions to support entrepreneur groups, Zhao et al. (2017) concluded that social exchange behavior was founded on trust. Since trust is a construct in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958), Zhao et al. (2017) ultimately supported social exchange theory's relevance within social networking sites. A year later, Kim et al. (2018) published a study on gifting through social network services and discovered, among other things, that expected benefits and costs indirectly affected the perceived value of online gifting. For example, while online gifting was perceived as convenient (a benefit), it was also perceived as impersonal (a cost). The study demonstrated social exchange theory's applicability to virtual exchanges. More recently, Chia et al. (2021) applied social exchange theory to social media influencers' decisions to create product reviews. Broadly speaking, intrinsic benefits were found to be more significant than extrinsic benefits. Thus, Chia et al. (2021) showed that social exchange theory can explain complex cognitive processes.

## **Related Literature**

### *The Purpose of Brand Communication on Facebook*

**Promotional Content.** Instead of sharing messages that include direct calls to purchase, sometimes referred to as a “hard sell strategy” with the purpose of prompting an immediate sale (Swani et al., 2013), successful brands on Facebook are more subtle (Earls, 2012). It is more important for brands to share information and encourage engagement on social networking sites, rather than directly promote a product or service on their Facebook page (Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019). In fact, promotional posts from businesses (not paid advertisements) receive reduced visibility, meaning that Facebook reduces the amount of promotional messages in users’ news feeds (Rowlson, 2015). This is accomplished through the Facebook algorithm, which determines the visibility of content based on a post’s value. In other words, the algorithm’s goal is to increase the visibility of relevant and meaningful content (Mullery, 2023).

Brands need to understand how promotional posts are defined, if they want to reach existing and potential consumers without spending money to bypass Facebook’s algorithm. Facebook identifies promotional posts as content that only encourages users to purchase a product or service, and/or encourages users to enter a contest without providing sufficient context (Williams, 2023). More specifically, Williams (2023) speculated that Facebook may identify promotional posts by scanning for promotional language and links to product pages.

Users’ aversion for promotional posts is echoed in Hanifawati et al.’s (2019) study, which found that directly promoting a product or service in a Facebook post decreases likes and comments. Reduced visibility, general disdain for promotional messages, or a combination of the two may explain why only 21.8% of Facebook posts were found to be promotional (Diaz-Campo

& Fernandez-Gomez, 2019). Regardless, “a presence on social networks should be based on dialogue and on offering something more to users” (Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019).

**Public Relations Content.** A content analysis revealed “that [Belgian] companies use Facebook more often to post public relations than marketing communications content” (Crijns et al., 2015, p. 39). This is further supported by a content analysis conducted on Mexican telecommunications companies, which identified public relations as the main purpose for Facebook communication (Urena et al., 2015).

The public relations practitioner is “a formal gatekeeper of organizational information” (Achor & Nnabuko, 2019, p. 6). A content analysis revealed that Latin American brands mainly used Facebook to spread information, rather than to foster conversation (Capriotti et al., 2019). In another content analysis, Spanish brands also used an informative approach on social media, and informative content received the most likes and shares. This has led researchers to conclude that Facebook users want to stay informed on brands (Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019). Between the sources (Capriotti et al., 2019; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019), a reader can draw three conclusions: (1) Brands often use an informative communication approach on Facebook, (2) informative content tends to receive a significant number of likes, and (3) informative content tends to receive fewer comments. Of course, these conclusions do not account for cultural and industry differences between the samples, so the studies’ findings cannot be confidently generalized.

As a communication process, the goal of public relations is to support an organization’s interests by fostering dialogic relationships with stakeholders and maintaining the organization’s reputation (Reitz, 2012). Organizations’ relationships with stakeholders are known as “organization-public relationships,” and fostering these relationships is called “relationship

marketing” (Haigh et al., 2013). An organization’s relationship with stakeholders can stem from an emotional connection, and the relationship is created and authenticated through the exchange of ideas and opinions—interactions that consider the wants, needs, and concerns of stakeholders. As for an organization’s reputation, it is necessary for public relations practitioners to communicate a strong organizational identity through repeated interactions (Reitz, 2012). “The interaction consists of a feedback mechanism where organizational audiences have the opportunity to express opinions and impressions of the organization” (Reitz, 2012, p. 48). Without a strong identity, organizations may fail to reach their goals (Reitz, 2012). Broadly speaking, public relations practitioners use two corporate communication strategies on social networking sites: Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate ability (CA; Haigh et al., 2013). These are sometimes referred to as the two dimensions of corporate associations (Kim, 2014).

**CSR.** As the name suggests, CSR bases a brand’s reputation on social responsibility (Kim et al., 2014) and concerns a brand’s perceived social obligations (Haigh et al., 2013). In other words, organizations recognize their place in society and how their actions affect society, then make an effort to prioritize others (society). This type of ethical consideration and sacrifice is expected of organizations and therefore must be communicated (Reitz, 2012).

In some cases, organizations identified stakeholders’ values through dialogue on social networking sites. These values then informed CSR management (Reitz, 2012). The dimensions of corporate associations can be presented in creative ways, too. One brand, for example, strategically presented “serious CSR topics with matters like general interests and current affairs” (Moyaert et al., 2021, p. 134).

Websites of American corporations that used a CSR strategy placed higher on the *Fortune* 100 list (Kim & Rader, 2010). Yet, it should be noted that consumers may have different expectations for brand websites and Facebook pages. This may explain the popularity of CA-based communication strategies on Facebook. Furthermore, due to their existing status, it is possible that *Fortune* 100 companies do not need to focus their communications on CA (Kim et al., 2014).

**CA.** In addition to CSR associations, relationship marketing literature notes CA associations. The latter type of memory-based association refers to consumers' perceptions of a corporation's product and service quality (a corporation's expertise). In other words, the purpose of a CA strategy is to build a corporation's reputation on ability (Haigh et al., 2013).

All in all, CA or CSR will frame a corporation's communication strategy (Haigh et al., 2013), meaning that a corporation can have a CA- or CSR-based communication strategy. A corporate communication strategy is chosen according to a corporation's desired associations (Kim et al., 2014). Sometimes, a hybrid communication strategy is used—this means that CA and CSR are equally promoted through communication (Haigh et al., 2013). “CA strategy indicators include messages about a brand's expertise in products, global success, and industry leadership, whereas CSR strategy indicators include messages about a brand's environmental stewardship, philanthropic contribution, and community involvement” (Kim et al., 2014, p. 345).

Kim and Rader (2010) created a longer, research-based list of corporate communication strategy indicators. For CA, possible strategy indicators included a brand's expertise, global success, implementation of quality control programs, industry leadership, market orientation, and/or research and development efforts. For CSR, possible strategy indicators included a

brand's environmental stewardship, philanthropic contributions, educational commitments, employee involvement, public health commitments, and/or sponsorship of cultural activities.

CSR and hybrid strategies are less common on Facebook, compared to CA strategies (Haigh et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2014). While CA messages are important, the majority of Facebook communication reflects a CSR strategy (Haigh et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2014). However, a strong CSR association often implies a strong CA association, meaning that the first type of reputation improves the second (Kim, 2011).

It is unclear how corporate communication strategies affect popularity on Facebook, as measured through levels of engagement. Scholars recommended examining CSR and CA strategies in relation to Facebook's interactive components (Kim et al., 2014). On a final note, future research should take industry differences into account, as dominant corporate communication strategies have been found to change across industries (Kim et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2019; Kim & Rader, 2010). For example, when companies' practices could be perceived as bad for the environment, messages regarding environmental stewardship increased (Kim & Rader, 2010).

### ***The Communication Style of Brands' Facebook Posts***

Defined as "the perceived predictability of the brand's behavior," brand trust is necessary for brand loyalty and successful brand interactions on social networking sites (Gretry et al., 2017, p. 78). An experimental American study concluded that an informal communication style increases brand trust, if Facebook users are already familiar with the brand. Of course, if Facebook users are not familiar with the brand, then an informal communication style would decrease brand trust (Gretry et al., 2017). Furthermore, an informal (casual) communication style affects purchase intentions and brand attitude (Sanders et al., 2019). In summary, while

marketers commonly prioritize the content of a message, it is also important to consider communication style (Gretry et al., 2017). Alternatively, “it is not merely what we [marketers] say but also how we say it that matters” (Gretry et al., 2017, p. 84). For example, there are different linguistic features that signify an informal communication style. This includes informal vocabulary, informal punctuation, contractions, emojis, first- and second-person pronouns, the use of first names, and more (Gretry et al., 2017).

**The Tone of Brands’ Facebook Posts.** Brands want to create an emotional connection with consumers (Rúa-Hidalgo et al., 2021), and a recent study suggested that communication strategies use stronger emotions on Facebook compared to Twitter. These emotions are typically positive—meaning posts communicated surprise, happiness, trust, or pride (Moyaert et al., 2021). Specifically, positive communication was found to increase Facebook engagement among food and lifestyle brands in Australia, with engagement being measured as the combined number of comments, shares, and reactions (Klassen et al., 2018). Positivity aside, research suggests that the tone of a brand’s Facebook posts should reflect the brand’s conversational qualities outside of the social networking site to foster authenticity (Alhouti & Johnson, 2022). This means that a successful Facebook page may be an extension of a brand—not its own entity (Earls, 2012). A brand’s target audience should also influence the tone of brands’ social media communication (Samuel, 2017).

***Communicating Authenticity on Facebook.*** Consumers seek brands that are authentic (Garner, 2022). Consequently, Facebook’s algorithm ranks authentic posts higher (Meta, 2024a). On social networking sites in general, candid images are a great way to communicate authenticity (Samuel, 2017), as transparency is perceived as authentic (Alhouti & Johnson, 2022). For example, brands can share product demonstrations featuring real consumers (Alhouti



& Johnson, 2022). Facebook users also appreciate behind-the-scenes looks, such as images or videos of employees working (Partner, 2015). “People are nosy, and with photos and videos you [the brand] can make a real-world connection (you’re clearly real people working in a real company)” (Partner, 2015, p. 37).

Possibly explaining why promotional posts are not well-received (Hanifawati et al., 2019), social media communication that is too focused on sales is perceived as inauthentic. Other reasons that social media communication may be perceived as inauthentic include hypocritical CSR messages, unfair pricing, misleading pricing information, and/or misleading product information. On the other hand, to be perceived as authentic, brands should consider having a strong voice and being consumer-oriented, warm, and relevant (Alhouti & Johnson, 2022).

**Communicating Brand Personification on Facebook.** According to a global study, 60.5% of brands were personified on social networking sites (Chen et al., 2015). As a communication tool, brand personification is “the act by which marketers endow brands with humanlike characteristics to present them as people” (Chen et al., 2015, p. 98). This occurs through consumers’ interpersonal interactions (conversations) with brands on Facebook, such as when brands manage their fan pages as personal accounts. By communicating a distinct personality and appearance, marketers aim to improve brand recognition, recall, and loyalty (Chen et al., 2015). Connecting brand personification to the tone of brands’ social media posts, consumers respond well to brands with warm, agreeable, and sociable characteristics (Jeong et al., 2022). Connecting brand personification to CSR, an agreeable brand communicates empathy and support toward others. Personality traits associated with agreeableness, as shown through a brand’s communication, include friendliness, pleasantness, openness, and sincerity (Men & Tsai, 2015).

Marketers use different strategies to personify brands on Facebook and prompt likes, comments, and shares. For starters, marketers can personify brands through the use of human characters (real or fictional), animal characters with human qualities, or inanimate objects with human qualities (i.e., brand personification can be accomplished through anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, or teramorphism). It should be noted, however, that anthropomorphism was the most popular personification strategy—likely because anthropomorphism is straightforward, meaning that a human character allows a brand to be directly associated with humans. In any case (anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, or teramorphism), a connection is made between the brand and the representative’s personality (Chen et al., 2015).

Moving on, marketers can personify brands through language. In fact, a recent study found that text was the primary resource for personifying brands. Different pronouns and possessive determiners have different advantages. For example, first-person pronouns can present information as personal belief, while second-person pronouns can invite engagement. Of the two, second-person pronouns were primarily used for personifying brands through language. This is possibly because second-person pronouns mimic natural conversation (Chen et al., 2015). Adding to this, Jeong et al. (2022) posited that brands can use informal (casual) communication to foster intimate relationships with stakeholders. Even verb choice is significant, as “imperative verbs (e.g., *come*, *join*, *share*, and *enjoy*) cue people to act and react to other social agents, as well as initiate interactions necessary for probable social relationships” (Chen et al., 2015, p. 99).

While imperative verbs can be beneficial to Facebook communication, engagement bait will be punished by Facebook’s algorithm (Meta, 2024b). “Engagement bait is a tactic that urges people to interact with Facebook posts through likes, shares, comments and other actions in order to artificially boost engagement and get greater reach” (Meta, 2024b). There are different types

of engagement bait including react baiting, vote baiting, comment baiting, share baiting, and tag baiting. React baiting prompts users to assign new meanings to Facebook reactions. For example, a post might instruct users to “like” or “love” the post depending on their zodiac sign. Similarly, vote baiting assigns new meanings to engagement behavior, as users are instructed to cast their votes through different reactions. For instance, users might be instructed to “like” a post to vote for Choice A, or to “love” a post to vote for Choice B. Comparatively, comment baiting limits the conversation by instructing users to post specific comments, such as to comment “YES” if the user agrees with the post. Finally, share baiting instructs users to share a post for a specific reward, and tag baiting directly prompts users to tag their friends. In short, engagement bait fosters inauthentic engagement. By reducing the visibility of these posts, Facebook aims to foster authentic engagement that comes from meaningful content (Meta, 2024b).

**The Topic of Brands’ Facebook Posts.** Also known as “newsjacking” and “topical advertising,” real-time marketing is brand communication that references current events. While scholarly research on this strategy is limited (Mazerant et al., 2022), real-time marketing can prompt brand engagement on Facebook (Malhotra et al., 2013). Analyzing brand messages on Twitter, a recent study found that real-time marketing increased engagement (calculated by adding the number of likes, comments, and retweets of each tweet, then dividing that sum by the number of followers). Yet, the success of real-time marketing is time-sensitive, with topical messages receiving more engagement in the beginning of an enduring event (Mazerant et al., 2022).

For clarity, real-time marketing can highlight enduring and ending events. As the name suggests, an enduring event does not have an expected end date. An ending event, on the contrary, does have an expected end date. COVID-19 is an enduring event, while holidays are ending

events (Mazerant et al., 2022). Events can further be categorized as predictable and unpredictable. Unpredictable events may be ideal for social media advertising, since this type of event received more retweets for Dutch brands (across 10 market segments) on Twitter (Willemsen et al., 2018).

On another note, topical messages do not need to feature a brand's products or services (Malhotra et al., 2013). After all, content can provide different types of value—functional, economic, social, and/or psychological (Chandok, 2022). “Even when they [topical messages] allude to the brand's products, these messages are perceived to be more personable, rather than scripted promotions” (Malhotra et al., 2013, p. 18). Many brands are choosing to address social, political, and/or environmental issues to establish a CSR reputation, too (Wulf et al., 2022).

Speaking of which, consumers often criticized topical messages that appeared to be motivated by financial gain. Emotional imagery can help brands' topical messages be perceived more favorably, according to a German study on unfamiliar brands' one-way communication (Wulf et al., 2022). Since Facebook allows two-way communication, further research is needed to determine the effect of emotional imagery on consumers' perceptions of real-time marketing. The effect of culture and a brand's existing reputation should be further studied, as well.

**The Length of Brands' Facebook Posts.** An international study found that posts receive approximately 20% more likes when limited to under 100 characters (Hanifawati et al., 2019). Meanwhile, a study on Spanish travel agencies found that the number of likes increased with the number of characters (Sebaste et al., 2014). In yet another study, Facebook posts with approximately 200 characters received the highest levels of generic engagement (Mariani et al., 2016). Methodological differences, including sample selection, could explain the varying results.

Overall, there is still insufficient research on the effect of a Facebook post's length on engagement (Guo & Sun, 2020). For example, while Hanifawati et al. (2019) might suggest limiting a Facebook post to under 100 characters, industry reports might suggest limiting a post to 50 characters or less. Moreover, a post's format and content will affect its ideal length (Guo & Sun, 2020). "For media professionals, the bottom line is that an ideal post length should be brief enough to be quick to read, but long enough to offer useful details..." (Guo & Sun, 2020, p. 751).

**The Timing of Brands' Facebook Posts.** The time a brand chooses to communicate with users can affect engagement. Specifically, Italian destination management organizations' content received higher levels of generic engagement when posted on Saturday and Sunday—possibly because there are fewer competing posts during this time. Another possibility for increased engagement, as speculated by the researchers, is that users have better access to the social networking site during this time (Mariani et al., 2016).

On the contrary, an international study on food and beverage brands' Facebook posts found that weekday posts were better for increasing a brand's popularity (Hanifawati et al., 2019). For this study, brand popularity was calculated based on "the average sum of the number of likes, shares, views, and fan comments" (Hanifawati et al., 2019, p. 193). Of course, the different measures of engagement (popularity) make it difficult to confidently compare the studies. Sample differences further complicate the matter. All in all, there is general disagreement on the best time for brands to communicate on Facebook (Hanifawati et al., 2019).

### ***Communication Resources in Brands' Facebook Posts***

Social media communication is aided by resources. Facebook, in particular, has three types of information resources: (1) graphic, (2) interactive, and (3) audiovisual. Graphic

information resources include images, text, animated images (animated GIFs), and emojis; interactive information resources include links, hashtags, and user tags; and audiovisual information resources include audio and video. While some resources may prove more effective than others, it was suggested that a combination of information resources be used to promote engagement (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). For example, a video can be combined with text (in the form of a caption) to significantly affect a post's likes and shares (Hanifawati et al., 2019).

### **Graphic Information Resources.**

**Images.** Approximately 70% of brands' Facebook posts (worldwide) included an image (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). In a similar study, Spanish toy manufacturers also favored the use of images. More specifically, Facebook communication that used images received the highest levels of likes, comments, and shares (Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019). Similarly, Mariani et al. (2016) found that images (along with videos) received the most comments. Further supporting the popularity of images, Guo and Sun (2020) found that nearly 80% of Facebook news posts included an image. Posts with images were positively associated with Facebook reactions, too (Guo & Sun, 2020). Further demonstrating the potential of graphic information resources, a brand's target audience can be communicated by the people in an image (Samuel, 2017).

"Including people of the demographic you [the brand] are targeting in your photos—showcasing your product or service—will benefit you significantly more" (Samuel, 2017, para. 8).

**Text.** Capriotti and Zeler (2020) found that approximately 97% of brands' Facebook posts (worldwide) included text. In addition to being a common resource, the amount of text can affect engagement (Hanifawati et al., 2019). Despite this, and as mentioned earlier, the ideal length of a post is not clear.

**Emojis.** Although Facebook was not specifically mentioned, Haymarket Media Group (2016) found that brands increasingly used emojis to enrich their communication and increase engagement across “critical marketing channels” (p. 47). Suggesting that Facebook does not align with Haymarket Media Group’s findings, Capriotti and Zeler (2020) found that only 4% of brands’ Facebook posts (worldwide) included emojis. This finding varies across cultures, as well. In Latin America, approximately 10% of brands’ Facebook posts included emojis (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). In Spain, 24% of toy manufacturers’ Facebook communication included emojis (Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019).

**Animated Images.** Graphic interchange formats (GIFs) are a resource that quickly communicates complex messages (Balkhi, 2019). A GIF is an image file, while an animated GIF is “a series of still GIF images strung together to create a soundless short looping graphic that often looks like a video” (Roy, 2023, para. 3). Notably, the soundless medium cannot be accurately classified as an audiovisual resource. Therefore, while Capriotti and Zeler (2020) classified animated images as an audiovisual resource, in this literature review, the medium is presented as a graphic information resource.

Interestingly, there seems to be insufficient research on animated images from a marketing communications perspective. It is possible that the lack of published journal articles is due to the limited use of animated images worldwide; animated images proved to be the least popular resource used by brands on Facebook (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). Despite this, the communication resource can generate emotion, which is a powerful tool for brands (Rúa-Hidalgo et al., 2021). For example, animated images often convey exaggerated reactions on social networking sites (Roy, 2023). In fact, most millennials believed that animated images (compared to text) were more effective for communicating thoughts and emotions. For marketers, the

communication resource can make a brand appear friendly and approachable (Balkhi, 2019). Even better, animated images are already integrated with Facebook (Rampton, 2016).

### **Interactive Information Resources.**

**Links.** Worldwide, more than half (53.7%) of brands' Facebook posts included a link (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). This percentage was even higher among Facebook news posts, with 83.4% containing links to the station's website. Yet, these links reduced Facebook reactions and sharing (Guo & Sun, 2020). Conversely, a different study found that links only reduced the number of comments for Spanish travel agencies on Facebook—not likes (other reactions and shares were not measured). Researchers speculated that users were not commenting on posts because the links prompted them to leave a fan page (Sebate et al., 2014). While this explanation seems plausible, another group of researchers determined that links to purchasable items actually increased engagement for food and lifestyle brands (Klassen et al., 2018). Once again, it is difficult to confidently compare these findings because of the different measurements of engagement. Furthermore, it is possible that the types of links analyzed (links to purchasable items vs. non-purchasable items) may affect engagement and account for discrepancies between studies.

**Hashtags.** Compared to Twitter users, Facebook users were found to expect higher stakeholder interactivity, and researchers speculated that this expectation may explain the increased use of interactive information resources (Moyaert et al., 2021). Indeed, Capriotti and Zeler (2020) found that approximately 46% of brands' Facebook posts (worldwide) included a hashtag. This finding differed slightly for Latin American brands (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). Meanwhile, in another study that focused on the toy industry, only 23% of Spanish brands' Facebook communication included hashtags (Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019). Even so,



contrasting Diaz-Campo and Fernandez-Gomez's (2019) findings, another Spanish study found that 81.01% of an energy company's Facebook communication included hashtags (Moyaert et al., 2021). The difference between Diaz-Campo and Fernandez-Gomez's (2019) and Moyaert et al.'s (2021) results may be explained by sample size. Moyaert et al. (2021) only analyzed the Facebook activity of a single company, while Diaz-Campo and Fernandez-Gomez (2019) analyzed six brands. The difference could also be explained by industry.

**User Tags.** "Tagging is used to mention a citizen's personal account or community organization's public page. Such conversational tagging is recognized as a tool for promoting individuals to join in a conversation and build a community around a given topic" (Guo & Sun, 2020, p. 751). Approximately 24% of brands' Facebook posts (worldwide) included a user tag (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). In another study, approximately 15% Facebook posts (in Spain) included user tags. It should be noted that this finding was based on the analysis of a single company's Facebook activity (Moyaert et al., 2021). In analyzing the posts of an Indianapolis news station, another case found that only 2.1% of Facebook posts used the tagging feature. As a result, this interactive information resource could not be significantly connected to engagement (Guo & Sun, 2020). The differences across the three studies (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Guo & Sun, 2020; Moyaert et al., 2021) could be due to sample size, culture, or industry. This calls for additional research on the topic.

#### **Audiovisual Resources.**

**Video.** Video was found to be especially effective and resulted in the highest number of likes. However, researchers could not connect the resource to an increase or decrease in the number of comments (Sebate et al., 2014). Nearly all internet users watch videos, with more than half of those users accessing their video(s) through social networking sites (including Facebook,

Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat; Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). “The advantage of video is it has the ability to display verbal and visual information that is more easily understood” (Hanifawati et al., 2019, p. 194). Nevertheless, studying the online activity of brands worldwide, research found that only 26% of Facebook posts included audio/video (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). This finding contributes to Capriotti and Zeler’s (2020) conclusion that brands worldwide did not use Facebook for engaging with stakeholders to form relationships. Further supporting Capriotti and Zeler’s (2020) claim, only 2% of Facebook messages from Spanish toy manufacturers included video (Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019). Almost matching Capriotti and Zeler’s (2020) finding, Guo and Sun (2020) discovered that 20.7% of Facebook news posts included video.

### ***Motivations for Facebook Use***

To better understand the communication strategies of brands on Facebook, it is worthwhile to note brands’ and consumers’ motivations for using the social networking site. For brands, social media can reinforce legitimacy (Samuel, 2017), allowing brands to reach stakeholders directly and more efficiently. Another benefit, social media can be used as a marketing tool for a relatively low cost. By communicating with online communities, brands can better understand consumers’ needs and foster brand loyalty through emotional attachments (Hendrikx & Castro, 2022).

For consumers, brands can offer practical benefits (informational and instrumental benefits), social benefits, entertainment benefits, confidence benefits, special treatment benefits, and economic benefits. Different online behavior results in different relationship benefits. The significance of each relationship benefit is contextual, but social and entertainment benefits were emphasized regarding consumer satisfaction. Social benefits include recognition and friendship that result from online interaction (Gummerus et al., 2012). Meanwhile, entertainment benefits

result “from relaxation and fun” (Gummerus et al., 2012, p. 861). Entertaining elements make users feel good (Gummerus et al., 2012), and several studies have noted entertainment as a key motivator for general Facebook use (Ruehl & Ingenhoff, 2015; Soukup, 2018). Indeed, entertaining content increased Facebook likes, comments, and shares for food and beverage brands (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013).

As mentioned earlier, different studies have noted information seeking as an incentive for using Facebook (Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Ruehl & Ingenhoff, 2015).

“Furthermore, digital natives use corporate pages on Facebook and Twitter for **self-reactive** reasons such as to *get inspiration, orientation* and to *form an opinion about a company and/or its products and services*” (Ruehl & Ingenhoff, 2015, p. 294). Lastly, users can be motivated by monetary and idealistic rewards to consume corporate pages on Facebook. Monetary incentives include discounts, competitions, or employment opportunities. As for idealistic motives, users may consume corporate pages on Facebook because of matching values (Ruehl & Ingenhoff, 2015).

## **Summary**

In closing, differences in social networking sites, cultures, and industries prevent existing literature from being confidently applied to the Facebook communication of American beverage brands. This should not be a surprise, considering that all studies have contextual limitations (Rahman, 2017). Still, the extant literature did identify a variety of purposes for brand communication on social networking sites (Crijns et al., 2015). As for how messages are communicated on Facebook, the literature identified popular styles, topics, lengths, publishing times, and resources.

Chapter Three will further detail the methodology introduced in Chapter One. Chapter Two's findings will inform the researcher's decisions in the next chapter, as the researcher seeks to address gaps in existing literature.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

The researcher proposes a study that will address the possible failure of American beverage brands to strategically communicate with users on Facebook, resulting in the possible inability to meet or exceed social media benchmarks for engagement. To reiterate, the purpose of the study is to explore how brands' communication on their fan pages increases engagement with Facebook users. Furthermore, in examining the relationship between brands and users, it will be beneficial and appropriate for the researcher to apply George Homans' social exchange theory. This chapter of the dissertation covers the chosen research method and design, population, procedures for recruitment and data collection, instruments, data analysis plan, assumptions, limitations, scope and delimitations, and ethical considerations.

#### **Research Method and Design**

As introduced in Chapter One, the researcher will conduct a qualitative study—specifically a conceptual content analysis. The goal of qualitative research is to understand and describe complex phenomena (McGill University, 2023), and Facebook users' behavior is an example of this. Berkwits and Inui (1998) described qualitative research as a method “used to capture expressive information not conveyed in quantitative data about beliefs, values, feelings, and motivations that underlie behaviors” (p. 195). As such, the researcher will be examining social media communication to understand engagement rates. Additionally, while the researcher's pre-defined categories for the coding process are based on existing literature, unexpected categories can also emerge. Thus, the current study aligns with the qualitative method's exploratory nature.

A content analysis is appropriate when a researcher can directly examine communication to identify trends (Columbia University, 2023). Given the public nature of Facebook, the

researcher has access to years of recorded communication. The communication trends revealed through a content analysis will support the researcher's qualitative goal of understanding brand communication. Moreover, a content analysis will allow the researcher to make inferences about communicators and their culture (Busch et al., 2005), and these contextual elements may play an important role in understanding Facebook communication. In short, the researcher will be able to explore apparent and underlying meaning through the research design (Terrell, 2016).

### **Population**

The researcher selected Facebook because the social networking site has the highest number of monthly active users worldwide. Facebook continues to be relevant, even with the emergence of TikTok—a relatively new social networking site. In fact, the majority of TikTok users are still active on Facebook (DataReportal, 2023a). The researcher selected the United States because the country has the second-largest presence on Facebook worldwide, with 186.4 million Americans using the site (DataReportal, 2023b).

### **Procedures for Recruitment and Data Collection**

As with most qualitative studies (Terrell, 2016), purposive sampling will be used. Sometimes referred to as intentional sampling, this nonrandom approach selects artifacts based on specific criteria to best answer the research question (Terrell, 2016).

The researcher aims to identify Facebook communication strategies that increase user engagement and to better understand the user-brand relationship. As such, the researcher initially wanted to analyze the brands on Facebook with the highest levels of engagement. Unfortunately, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, industry-specific brands have not been ranked according to Facebook engagement. Instead, brands are ranked according to the number of Facebook fans or followers. While the number of Facebook followers does not necessarily

increase engagement (Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019), it can vaguely predict a Facebook page's benchmark engagement rate (DataReportal, 2023b). In short, a social media benchmark is "the level of social media performance all businesses within a category should try to reach or exceed" (Newberry, 2022, para. 4).

According to a diverse sample of celebrity pages, brand pages, and more, Facebook pages' engagement rate percentages decrease with the number of fans/followers (the terms are used interchangeably by the source). Facebook pages with fewer than 10,000 fans/followers have an average engagement rate percentage of 0.31%; Facebook pages with 10,000 to 100,000 fans/followers have an average engagement rate percentage of 0.20%; and Facebook pages with more than 100,000 fans/followers have an average engagement rate percentage of 0.05% (DataReportal, 2023b).

For clarity, Facebook fans and followers are not the same, despite the terms often being used interchangeably. Facebook fans "like" a brand's Facebook page (Hootsuite Inc, 2023), and this indicates that users want to "follow" the brand. When users follow a brand, they may receive updates from the brand in their news feed. Users can "unfollow" a brand without "unliking" the page. Thus, a user can be a fan of a brand without being exposed to updates about the brand. Conversely, a user can also follow a brand without becoming an official fan (Data Reportal, 2023b).

The researcher will select Facebook brands according to their number of followers, since this is a more important marketing metric than their number of fans (Cloud Marketing Editorial Team, 2021). All brands included in the study will have more than 100,000 followers, meaning that each brand should have the same benchmark engagement rate percentage and each brand should have the same measurement of success (DataReportal, 2023b). Moreover, the researcher

will only select beverage brands, since benchmarks have been found to change across industries (Data Reportal, 2023b).

The researcher will identify Facebook posts with the highest levels of engagement, but meeting specific benchmarks will not be a criterion for the study. For example, although all brands included in the study need to have more than 100,000 followers, an engagement rate of 0.05% does not need to be met for each post. As mentioned, the average engagement rate of 0.05% for Facebook pages with more than 100,000 fans/followers was based on a diverse sample. Compared to other types of Facebook pages, brand pages often received significantly lower engagement rates (Data Reportal, 2023b). Additionally, the researcher was unable to identify a consistent benchmark engagement rate for the food and beverage industry. One source wrote that the average Facebook engagement rate percentage (per post) was 1.82% (Newberry, 2022), while another source wrote that the average Facebook engagement rate percentage (per post) was 0.04% (Feehan, 2023).

Qualifying brands for the current study were identified through *Beverage Industry Magazine* (2019), which listed the top ten beverage brands on Facebook, according to the number of fans. With the common confusion between Facebook fans and followers, it is possible that *Beverage Industry Magazine's* (2019) top ten brands were actually ranked according to the number of followers, as the terms appear to be used synonymously.

As stated later in the dissertation, the researcher assumes that *Beverage Industry Magazine's* (2019) top ten beverage brands on Facebook have not changed significantly over the last three years. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, *Beverage Industry Magazine* (2019) offers the most recent rankings on the subject. By obtaining 2023 statistics, the researcher only



aims to update *Beverage Industry Magazine's* (2019) data and clearly identify the number of followers—not fans—for each brand.

To obtain current statistics, the researcher recorded the number of followers for each of *Beverage Industry Magazine's* (2019) top brands. Facebook pages were identified through brand websites and verified by Facebook, as indicated by a blue badge next to the brand name (Meta, 2023b).

To narrow the sample, the researcher excluded any brands that were not American-owned. Thus, Red Bull (an Austrian brand) and Heineken (a Dutch brand) were removed from the sample. To ensure each brand was represented equally, brands that posted fewer than 50 times during the data collection period were removed from the study. Consequently, three more brands (Coca-Cola, Fanta, and Sprite) were removed from the sample. Relevant links and the number of followers for each of the four remaining brands (Pepsi, Starbucks, Monster Energy, and Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey) can be found in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1**

*Sample of American-Owned Beverage Brands on Facebook*

Brand	Website	Facebook Page	Number of Followers
Pepsi	<a href="https://www.pepsi.com/">https://www.pepsi.com/</a>	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/PepsiUS">https://www.facebook.com/PepsiUS</a>	36,840,435
Starbucks	<a href="https://www.starbucks.com/">https://www.starbucks.com/</a>	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Starbucks/">https://www.facebook.com/Starbucks/</a>	35,196,052
Monster	<a href="https://www.monsterenergy.com/">https://www.monsterenergy.com/</a>	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/MonsterEnergy/">https://www.facebook.com/MonsterEnergy/</a>	25,221,681
Jack Daniel's	<a href="https://www.jackdaniels.com/en-us">https://www.jackdaniels.com/en-us</a>	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/jackdaniels">https://www.facebook.com/jackdaniels</a>	18,063,134

*Updated on March 31, 2023*

For each brand in the sample, the researcher will select the 50 posts that received the highest average engagement rate percentages from January 1, 2023 to October 1, 2023. Thus, 200 posts will be collected for the study. Newberry (2022) stated that the average engagement rate percentage equals the sum of likes, comments, and shares divided by the number of

followers with the resulting number multiplied by 100. However, Newberry's (2022) calculation did not clearly address extensions of Facebook's Like button. These additional reactions include the Love button, Care button, Haha button, Wow button, Sad button, and Angry button (Meta, 2023a). Since all seven reactions represent Facebook engagement, the researcher incorporated these reactions into her calculations, as shown in Figure 3.1.

### Figure 3.1

Equation for Average Engagement Rate Percentage

$$\frac{\text{Number of Reactions} + \text{Number of Comments} + \text{Number of Shares}}{\text{Number of Followers}} \times 100$$

\*Note: The equation is based on Newberry's (2022) visualization. The original equation is altered to clearly include all Facebook reactions.

Once again, the researcher aims to analyze posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages to determine the best communication strategies. Although the brands selected for the study have successfully gained followers, the researcher cannot assume that every post created by the brands receives ideal engagement rates. As a result, only the "best of the best" will be included in the analysis. Before determining a post's average engagement rate percentage, the researcher will wait at least two weeks for reactions, comments, and shares to accumulate.

Although not all posts from January 1, 2023 to October 1, 2023 will be included in the official sample, for each of the four brands, the researcher will record the number of posts published each week. In addition to recording average engagement rate percentages, the researcher will note the time and date each post was published. This information may allow the researcher to identify trends, such as times when posts had especially high engagement rates, or

times when brands were posting more often. These findings may require a closer analysis and be relevant for future research.

### **Instruments**

No instruments will be needed for the study, as the researcher will conduct the content analysis by hand. This will allow the researcher to better identify errors (Busch et al., 2005).

### **Data Analysis Plan**

For the content analysis, the researcher will analyze brand-created content posted on Facebook fan pages. The researcher will analyze any graphic, interactive, and/or audiovisual elements of posts. As mentioned in the literature review, graphic information resources include images, animated images (animated GIFs), text, and emojis; interactive information resources include links, hashtags, and user tags; and audiovisual information resources include audio and video (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). As in most qualitative content analyses (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005), the researcher will code for individual themes. The researcher will add categories during the coding process, but pre-defined categories can be found in Table 3.2.

The researcher will code for frequency. Concepts that appear in different forms (such as different tenses and spellings) may be coded together. The researcher will also code for words that imply a category, unless otherwise stated in Table 3.2. Irrelevant information will be ignored. An example of the coding process can be found in Figure 3.2.

**Table 3.2**

#### *Pre-defined Categories*

Category	Description	Indicator(s)/Example(s)	Reference(s)
1. Promotional Content	When a brand promotes at least one specific product or service through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include specific products and/or services featured. This includes specific types of products.	(Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Earls, 2012; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Rowlson, 2015)

2. Informative Content	When a brand directly communicates any information about its services, products, practices, and/or policies through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include prices, availability, product options, product descriptions, service options, quality standards, etc.	(Capriotti et al., 2019; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019)
3. Entertaining Content	When a brand communicates a feeling of relaxation and/or fun	Possible indicators include comic strips, jokes, teasers, wordplay (rhyme, repetition, comparisons), and/or games.	(Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Gummerus et al., 2012; Ruehl & Ingenhoff, 2015; Soukup, 2018)
4. Corporate Ability (CA)	When a brand communicates CA through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include at least one reference to a brand's expertise, global success, implementation of quality control programs, industry leadership, market orientation, and/or research and development efforts.	(Haigh et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2014; Kim & Rader, 2010)
5. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	When a brand communicates CSR through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include at least one reference to a brand's environmental stewardship, philanthropic contribution, educational commitments, public health commitments, sponsorship of cultural activities, employee involvement, and/or community involvement.	(Haigh et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2014; Kim & Rader, 2010)
6. Positivity	When a brand communicates at least one positive emotion through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include images, emojis, and/or words that communicate positive emotions (such as feelings of surprise, happiness, trust, or pride).	(Klassen et al., 2018; Moyaert et al., 2021)
7. Authenticity	When a brand communicates transparency and honesty through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include candid images, behind-the-scenes looks, and/or testimony from real consumers.	(Alhouti & Johnson, 2022; Garner, 2022; Partner, 2015; Samuel, 2017)
8. Agreeableness	When a brand communicates empathy, support, and/or friendliness through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include best wishes, congratulations, thanks, and/or greetings.	(Chen et al., 2015; Jeon et al., 2022; Men & Tsai, 2015).

9. Brand Personification	When a brand personifies itself and/or invites users to treat the brand as human	Possible indicators include referring to the brand's character, referring to a product's character or story, and/or highlighting the human aspect of the brand.	(Chen et al., 2015)
10. Human Interests	When a brand directly shares or alludes to specific interests; these interests are possibly shared with users (a niche audience)	Possible indicators include references to sports and/or musicians.	(Garner, 2022)
11. Informal Communication	When a brand communicates informally through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include the use of informal vocabulary (slang and abbreviations), informal punctuation, emojis, first- and second-person pronouns, and/or first names.	(Chen et al., 2015; Gretry et al., 2017; Sanders et al., 2019)
<i>11(A). Writing Perspectives</i>			
<i>11(A-1). First-Person Perspective</i>	When a post uses the first-person perspective through any information resource	Possible indicators include "I," "we," etc.	(Chen et al., 2015; Jeon et al., 2022)
<i>11(A-2). Second-Person Perspective</i>	When a post uses the second-person perspective through any information resource	Possible indicators include "you," "your," etc.	
<i>11(A-3). Third-Person Perspective</i>	When a post uses the third-person perspective through any information resource	Possible indicators include "her," "him," "them," etc.	
12. Call to Action	When a brand directly prompts users to act through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include imperative verbs.	(Chen et al., 2015; Jeon et al., 2022)
13. Real-Time Marketing	When a brand directly references a current or upcoming event through any information resource(s)		(Malhotra et al., 2013; Mazerant et al., 2022; Willemsen et al., 2018; Wulf et al., 2022)
<i>13(A-1). Predictable Event</i>	When a brand references a predictable, current event through any information resource(s)	An example of a predictable event is a holiday or annual sporting event.	(Malhotra et al., 2013; Mazerant et al., 2022; Willemsen et al., 2018; Wulf et al., 2022)
<i>13(A-2). Unpredictable Event</i>	When a brand references an unpredictable, current event through any information resource(s)	An example of an unpredictable event is a tornado.	(Malhotra et al., 2013; Mazerant et al., 2022; Willemsen et al., 2018; Wulf et al., 2022)

<i>13(B-1). Ending Event</i>	When a brand references an ending event through any information resource(s)	An example of an ending event is a three-day festival.	(Malhotra et al., 2013; Mazerant et al., 2022; Willemssen et al., 2018; Wulf et al., 2022)
<i>13(B-2). Enduring Event</i>	When a brand references an enduring event through any information resource(s)	An example of an enduring event is COVID-19.	(Malhotra et al., 2013; Mazerant et al., 2022; Willemssen et al., 2018; Wulf et al., 2022)
14. Facebook Post Length	The number of characters in a Facebook post (not including any text featured within an image, animated image, or video); this category includes hashtags, user tags, and links		(Cuevas-Molano et al., 2022; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016; Sebate et al., 2014)
<i>14(A-1). Very Short</i>	When a post is limited to 50 characters or less		(Cuevas-Molano et al., 2022; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016; Sebate et al., 2014)
<i>14(A-2). Short</i>	When a post is between 51 to 99 characters		(Cuevas-Molano et al., 2022; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016; Sebate et al., 2014)
<i>14(A-3). Long</i>	When a post is 100 characters or more		(Cuevas-Molano et al., 2022; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016; Sebate et al., 2014)
15. Facebook Post Timing	The time that a post was published on a brand's Facebook page		(Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016)
<i>15(A-1). Weekend</i>	When a post is created on the weekend (Saturday or Sunday)		(Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016)
<i>15(A-2). Weekday</i>	When a post is created on a weekday (Monday through Friday)		(Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016)
16. Information Resources	Different resources (graphic, interactive, and/or audiovisual) that support social media communication		(Balkhi, 2019; Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Haymarket Media Group, 2016; Klassen et al., 2018; Mariani et al., 2016; Moyaert et al., 2021; Roy, 2023; Rúa-Hidalgo et al., 2021; Samuel, 2017; Sebate et al., 2014)

<i>16(A). Graphic</i>	A type of information resource that includes images, text, emojis, and/or animated images	(Balkhi, 2019; Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Haymarket Media Group, 2016; Mariani et al., 2016; Roy, 2023; Rúa-Hidalgo et al., 2021; Samuel, 2017)
<i>16(A-1). Image(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one image	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Guo & Sun, 2020; Mariani et al., 2016; Samuel, 2017)
<i>16(A-2). Text</i>	When a post includes any text (not including text found in images, animated images, or videos)	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016)
<i>16(A-3). Emoji(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one emoji	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Haymarket Media Group, 2016)
<i>16(A-4). Animated Image(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one animated image	(Balkhi, 2019; Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Rúa-Hidalgo et al., 2021)
<i>16(B). Interactive</i>	A type of information resource that includes links, hashtags, and/or user tags	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Klassen et al., 2018; Moyaert et al., 2021; Sebate et al., 2014)
<i>16(B-1). Link(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one link	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Guo & Sun, 2020; Klassen et al., 2018)
<i>16(B-2). Hashtag(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one hashtag	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Moyaert et al., 2021)
<i>16(B-3). User tag(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one user tag	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Guo & Sun, 2020; Moyaert et al., 2021)
<i>16(C). Audiovisual</i>	A type of information resource that includes audio clips and videos	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Sebate et al., 2014)

*Source:* Pre-defined categories are based on sources discussed in Chapter Two: Literature Review. Italicized categories are sub-categories. Except for Category 16, a post can only belong to a single number for each letter (meaning a post can belong to 13A-1

or 13A-2, not both). Categories are not limited to the indicators or examples listed. The last column of the data visualization refers to sources that may explain and/or be compared to the findings of the content analysis.

## Figure 3.2

### *Coding Process*

Meaning Unit	Condensed Meaning Unit	Indicator	Category	Sub-Category
<b>Fictional Example</b>				
"Hello! Summer is here! Buy our Very Berry Smoothie to stay cool!"	Hello!	Greeting	Agreeableness	N/A
	Summer is here!	An Event	Real-Time Marketing	Predictable Event; Ending Event
	Buy	An Imperative Verb	Call to Action	Purchase
	our	Possessive Determiner	Informal Communication	First-Person Perspective
	Very Berry Smoothie to stay cool!	A Featured Product	Promotional Content	N/A

\*Note: The analysis process is loosely based on Bengtsson's (2016) data visualization (p.11).

### *Drawing Conclusions*

The data analysis will be guided by social exchange theory. The researcher wants to understand how Facebook communication can be perceived as a social exchange, and how this theoretical perspective might inform brand communication strategies. Data visualizations will be used to analyze and explore the coded data, and the researcher will note important themes. When organizing and interpreting the coded data, the researcher may make inferences on how different categories interact. Moreover, the researcher will compare findings to existing literature, as introduced in Chapter Two. By doing so, the researcher's aim will be to determine the relevance (generalizability) of previous findings and direct future studies. Overall, the researcher will attempt to balance data descriptions and interpretations, as recommended by Zhang and Wildemuth (2005). Alternatively put, interpretations are based on descriptions, and descriptions



are understood through interpretation. Therefore, both elements will need to be discussed (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005).

### *Assumptions*

**Assumption One.** Unless a Facebook post states otherwise, the researcher will assume that brand communication is directed toward consumers (existing and potential customers).

**Assumption Two.** The researcher will assume that the top ten beverage brands on Facebook have not changed significantly since 2019, when *Beverage Industry Magazine* published its data. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, *Beverage Industry Magazine* (2019) offers the most recent data on the topic.

**Assumption Three.** Online communication should foster user-brand relationships of mutual benefit (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). However, since the advent of internet, all public relations can no longer be considered beneficial for a brand. While brand awareness is important, delivering the wrong message online can damage a brand's reputation (Blayer, 2023). To ensure that the selected posts are beneficial to brands, the communication must be well-received. To be well-received, communication must accumulate relatively high levels of positive, active engagement. Unfortunately, with some posts having thousands of comments, determining the precise sentiments expressed within the comment section of each post is not practical. Sentiment analysis tools are expensive, complex, and flawed. To combat this problem, the researcher will assume that the sentiment expressed through Reaction buttons reflects the sentiment expressed in the comment section of each post. Therefore, unless the majority of reactions are negative (expressing sadness and/or anger), the researcher will assume that the majority of comments are positive.

**Assumption Four.** The researcher will assume that reputable brands utilize the most successful social media strategies, as suggested by Capriotti and Zeler (2020).

### ***Limitations***

A content analysis can be a lengthy process that is not easy to automate (Columbia University, 2023), and this likely explains qualitative studies' relatively smaller sample sizes and subsequent problems with generalizability. Of course, scholars should not assume that any study is generalizable, regardless of its method. Indeed, both qualitative and quantitative studies have contextual limitations (Rahman, 2017). To not mislead readers, the researcher recognizes the contextual limitations of her study. It is possible that the researcher's findings can apply to other contexts, but additional research will be needed to test generalizability.

Another disadvantage of a content analysis design is the possibility of multiple interpretations (Aacharya, 2022). Since other interpretations of the coded data are possible, the researcher will explain her interpretations (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). This transparency will allow for further discussion, as the academic community will be able to understand the researcher's reasoning and negotiate differing interpretations.

Finally, qualitative researchers have historically been accused of being biased (Mackieson et al., 2019). To be clear, the researcher does not follow any of the selected brands on Facebook, nor does the researcher regularly purchase their products.

### ***Scope and Delimitations***

To further limit the study, and as mentioned earlier, the researcher will only include American brands. This will control for cultural influence, as findings have been shown to vary across cultures (Yuan, 2019). Additionally, the researcher will only include beverage brands. As discussed in previous chapters, the findings of the existing literature have been shown to vary

across industries (Kim et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2019; Kim & Rader, 2010). Lastly, the researcher will only include brand communication on Facebook—not other social networking sites. As stated in earlier chapters, users may respond to brand communication differently across social networking sites (Voorveld, 2019).

The researcher will only analyze posts on each brand’s official fan page, as posted by the brand. The researcher will not analyze user-created content, nor will the researcher analyze how brands interact with users in the comments section of a post. The researcher will analyze the number of reactions, comments, and shares that a post receives relative to the number of followers. This will be communicated as a percentage.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is needed for studies involving human subjects, in which a researcher interacts with a living individual and/or obtains identifiable, private information about a living individual (The University of Rhode Island, n.d.). The researcher will not be interacting with brands or their followers, as a content analysis is unobtrusive (Terrell, 2016). Nor will the researcher be obtaining identifiable, private information about a living individual, as brand communication on Facebook fan pages is public. Alternatively put, anyone can view these public posts—even internet users without Facebook accounts.

In general, public posts on Twitter, Facebook, public forums, etc. where the researcher is not interacting with the person who posted, and the disclosure of the data would not place the person at risk, would be considered *not* to be human subjects research. (University of Maine, n.d., para. 3)

Consequently, the study does not involve human subjects or need IRB approval (The University of Rhode Island, n.d.). However, the researcher did inform the board of her intentions, and the

board confirmed that the proposed dissertation does not involve human subjects. As a result, the board approved the study. Aside from this, the researcher will still be ethically obligated to analyze the Facebook activity of brands truthfully.

### **Summary**

In summary, the researcher will conduct a carefully prepared, qualitative study to strategically address gaps in existing literature through a content analysis. The transparency demonstrated will allow for the study to be replicated and scrutinized. The researcher strives to conduct honest work that contributes to knowledge, while also recognizing the limitations of her chosen methodology. Chapter Four will further detail the researcher's analysis and findings. Interpretations, according to the content analysis and social exchange theory, will be discussed in Chapter Five.

## Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of the study was to address the possible failure of American beverage brands to strategically communicate with Facebook users, resulting in the potential failure to meet or exceed engagement goals. In simple terms, the dissertation sought to uncover how communication on Facebook fan pages increases a post's average engagement rate percentage. This chapter of the dissertation restates and provides additional information and justification on the study's setting and demographics, as well as the data analysis process. Data visualizations (in the form of tables and graphs) were created to summarize the findings of the study.

### Setting and Demographics

The researcher conducted the study remotely, and there was no direct contact between the researcher and Facebook users. This unobtrusive approach to research aligns with the expectations of a content analysis (Terrell, 2016), which aligns with the research philosophy behind social exchange theory. As mentioned in previous chapters, the dissertation is based on the research philosophy of George Homans and B. F. Skinner, two founders of social exchange theory. These scholars emphasized the importance of a person's actions rather than a person's words. Actions are observable behaviors (Homans, 1961). "As a behaviorist, Skinner believed that it was not really necessary to look at internal thoughts and motivations in order to explain behavior. Instead, he suggested, we should look only at the external, observable causes of human behavior" (Cherry, 2023, para. 4). This justifies the researcher's decision to conduct a content analysis rather than a survey or series of interviews.

In the content analysis, users' engagement actions included reacting to, commenting on, and sharing a post. While different types of engagement actions have different values (Capriotti et al., 2019; Sebate et al., 2014), the researcher analyzed the observable actions according to

Figure 3.1. In the literature review, measuring a post's average engagement rate percentage was a more common approach than measuring each type of engagement individually, and the researcher wanted to be able to compare her work to existing findings. Moreover, this is how brands measure success on social networking sites (Newberry, 2022). If brands want to increase their benchmark engagement rates, then the study needs to measure engagement in the same manner.

While there are a variety of social networking sites, the researcher chose to analyze communication on Facebook because of the platform's popularity. Facebook has the highest number of monthly active users worldwide, totaling 2.989 billion in a recent report. The number of monthly active users on Facebook increased in 2023, with 68% of Facebook's monthly active users visiting the platform daily (DataReportal, 2023b). It is a common misconception that younger users are abandoning Facebook, but "young people are still some of the heaviest users of Facebook around the world" (DataReportal, 2023b, para. 2). Of course, "young" is a relative term. Specifically, 57.1% of Facebook's total advertising audience is between the ages of 13 and 34. On a side note, Facebook engagement is affected by a user's age (DataReportal, 2023b). Selecting a platform with users across demographics increases the potential generalizability of results.

Benchmark engagement rates can be affected by the industry and the number of followers a brand accumulates (DataReportal, 2023b). Communication varies across industries, as well (Kim et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2019; Kim & Rader, 2010). Therefore, to minimize extraneous variables, the researcher identified brands with the same benchmark engagement rates within the same industry. To identify communication strategies that best increase Facebook engagement, the researcher sought to analyze the posts with the highest levels of engagement by the brands with

the most followers. The reasoning for selecting brands with the most followers is twofold. First, brands that fall within the same range of popularity will have the same benchmark engagement rates. Second, the researcher assumes that brands with large followings have more successful marketing communication strategies than brands with small followings. Although benchmark engagement rates decrease as brands gain followers (DataReportal, 2023b), having more followers is still an indicator of a brand's success. A brand must be doing something right to attract so many followers (not just fans) on the social networking site. Facebook's algorithm aside, by following a brand on Facebook, a user is choosing to receive communication from that brand. This is more than simply associating one's profile with a brand, which is done by "liking" the brand's page (Meta, 2023c). Still, few industries have ranked their brands according to the number of fans or followers on Facebook. Brands selected for the study were identified through a data visualization within *Beverage Industry Magazine* (2019).

### ***The Demographics of Beverage Brands***

Since communication strategies may change across cultures, only American-owned brands were selected for the study. In addition, to be selected for the study, a brand needed to publish at least 50 posts between January 1, 2023 to October 1, 2023. If a brand did not meet this minimum requirement, then that brand would not be equally represented in the sample. After narrowing the initial sample presented by *Beverage Industry Magazine* (2019), four brands remained: Pepsi, Starbucks Coffee, Monster Energy Drink, and Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey.

### ***The Demographics of Facebook Users***

As noted, online engagement is affected by user demographics (DataReportal, 2023b). Yet, it was beyond the scope of the study to limit the engagement of Facebook users by country,

age, or gender. Instead, the researcher included the audience composition of each brand, as determined by website traffic. These demographics should be considered when considering the generalizability of the study's findings.

**Country.** Although the United States has the second-largest presence on Facebook, that only accounts for a few ( $\approx 6\%$ ) of Facebook's active users. Outside of Facebook, many of Pepsi's online audience members (53.68%) are from the United States (Similarweb, 2023c); nearly all Starbucks' online audience members (90.8%) are from the United States (Similarweb, 2023d); some of Monster's online audience members (25.55%) are from the United States (Similarweb, 2023b); and some of Jack Daniel's online audience members (38.52%) are from the United States (Similarweb.com, 2023a). Among the beverage brands, the average percentage of online audience members from the United States is approximately 52.13% (Similarweb 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d).

**Age.** Many of Pepsi's online audience members outside of Facebook (43.54%) are under 35 years old (Similarweb, 2023c). Likewise, many of Starbucks' online audience members (42.64%) are under 35 years old (Similarweb 2023d). Most of Monster's online audience members (67.2%) are under 35 years old (Similarweb, 2023b), and some of Jack Daniel's online audience members (38.36%) are under 35 years old (Similarweb, 2023a). Among the beverage brands, the average percentage of online audience members under 35 years old is approximately 47.94% (Similarweb 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d). As a reminder, 57.1% of Facebook's total ad audience is under 35 years old (DataReportal, 2023b).

**Gender.** On a global scale, more Facebook users are men at 56.8%, with (43.2%) identifying as women (DataReportal, 2023c). Comparatively, the majority of Pepsi's online audience members outside of Facebook (52.26%) are women, with the minority (47.74%) being



men (Similarweb, 2023c). Most of Starbucks' online audience members (66.84%) are women, with only 33.16% being men (Similarweb 2023d), Monster's online audience has a female minority at 28.29% and a male majority at 71.71% (Similarweb, 2023b), and the majority of Jack Daniel's online audience is (57.93%) men, with (42.07%) identifying as women (Similarweb, 2023a). Among the beverage brands, an approximate average of 47% of online audience members are women and 53% of online audience members are men (Similarweb 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d).

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher analyzed brand-created content published on official fan pages. A total of 200 posts were selected for the study, including the 50 posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages for each brand. Additionally, for a post to be considered for the study, the majority of Facebook reactions needed to be positive. As a reminder, if the majority of Facebook reactions were positive, it was assumed that the majority of comments were also positive. This assumption was quickly tested on two Facebook posts.

Graphic, interactive, and audiovisual elements of posts were analyzed. This included (but was not limited to) images, text, emojis, links, hashtags, user tags, and videos (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). Based on the literature review, pre-defined categories were created for the content analysis. More categories were created during the coding process, and these new categories can be seen in Table 4.1, which is an updated version of Table 3.2. All categories are numbered, as recommended by Busch et al. (2005).

The initial data were recorded in Microsoft Excel. If a post met the requirements for a category, the researcher wrote the letter "X." If a post did not meet the requirements for a category, the researcher wrote the letter "O." After all posts were analyzed (for both new and pre-

defined categories), the researcher counted the Xs and Os for each category to determine frequency. Unless specifically stated otherwise in the set of translation rules, the researcher coded for implied meaning and recognized concepts in different forms (different spellings, for instance). Frequencies were recorded in a Microsoft Word document, with a table for each category and sub-category.

**Table 4.1**

*Pre-defined and Emerging Categories (Updated)*

Category	Description	Indicator(s)/Example(s)	Reference(s)
1. Promotional Content	When a brand promotes at least one specific product or service through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include specific products and/or services featured. This includes specific types of products, such as iced coffee vs. hot coffee.	(Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Earls, 2012; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Rowlson, 2015)
<i>1(A). New Product</i>	When a brand introduces a product or service for the first time on Facebook	Possible indicators include any references to the fact that a product has been recently released.	
2. Informative Content	When a brand directly communicates any information about its services, products, practices, and/or policies through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include prices, availability, product options, product descriptions, service options, quality standards, etc.	(Capriotti et al., 2019; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019)
<i>2(A). How-To Content</i>	When a brand shares instructions, possibly offering a new way to use a product or service	Possible indicators include recipes, crafts, etc.	
3. Entertaining Content	When a brand communicates a feeling of relaxation and/or fun	Possible indicators include comic strips, jokes, teasers, wordplay (rhyme, repetition, comparisons), and/or games.	(Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Gummerus et al., 2012; Ruehl & Ingenhoff, 2015; Soukup, 2018)
4. Corporate Ability (CA)	When a brand communicates CA through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include at least one reference to a brand's expertise, global success, implementation of quality control programs, industry leadership, market orientation,	(Haigh et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2014; Kim & Rader, 2010)

		and/or research and development efforts.	
5. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	When a brand communicates CSR through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include at least one reference to a brand's environmental stewardship, philanthropic contribution, educational commitments, public health commitments, sponsorship of cultural activities, employee involvement, and/or community involvement.	(Haigh et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2014; Kim & Rader, 2010)
6. Positivity	When a brand communicates at least one positive emotion through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include images, emojis, and/or words that communicate positive emotions (such as feelings of surprise, happiness, trust, or pride).	(Klassen et al., 2018; Moyaert et al., 2021)
7. Authenticity	When a brand communicates transparency and honesty through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include candid images, behind-the-scenes looks, and/or testimony from real consumers.	(Alhouti & Johnson, 2022; Garner, 2022; Partner, 2015; Samuel, 2017)
8. Agreeableness	When a brand communicates empathy, support, and/or friendliness through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include best wishes, congratulations, thanks, and/or greetings.	(Chen et al., 2015; Jeon et al., 2022; Men & Tsai, 2015).
9. Brand Personification	When a brand personifies itself and/or invites users to treat the brand as human	Possible indicators include "introducing" products, referring to the brand's character, referring to a product's character or story, highlighting the human aspect of the brand, and/or showing the brand doing human things (reminiscing, planning for the weekend, etc.).	(Chen et al., 2015)
10. Human Interests	When a brand directly shares or alludes to specific interests; these interests are possibly shared with users (a niche audience)	Possible indicators include references to fashion, sports, music, astrology, etc.	(Garner, 2022)
11. Informal Communication	When a brand communicates informally through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include the use of informal vocabulary (slang and	(Chen et al., 2015; Gretry et al., 2017; Sanders et al., 2019)

		abbreviations), informal punctuation, emojis, first- and second-person pronouns, and/or first names.	
<i>11(A). Writing Perspectives</i>			
<i>11(A-1). First-Person Perspective</i>	When a post uses the first-person perspective through any information resource	Possible indicators include “I,” “we,” etc.	(Chen et al., 2015; Jeon et al., 2022)
<i>11(A-2). Second-Person Perspective</i>	When a post uses the second-person perspective through any information resource	Possible indicators include “you,” “your,” etc.	
<i>11(A-3). Third-Person Perspective</i>	When a post uses the third-person perspective through any information resource	Possible indicators include “her,” “him,” “them,” etc.	
<i>11(A-4). Missing or Unclear Perspective</i>	When a post has a missing or an unclear perspective	Possible indicators include incomplete sentences.	
12. Call to Action	When a company directly prompts users to act through any information resource(s)	Possible indicators include imperative verbs such as “click,” “watch,” etc.	(Chen et al., 2015; Jeon et al., 2022)
<i>12(A-1) Purchase</i>	When a brand directly prompts users to purchase a product or service using promotional language	Possible indicators include “buy,” “purchase,” etc.	
<i>12(A-2) Purchase, No Promotional Language</i>	When a brand prompts users to purchase a product or service without using promotional language	Possible indicators include “try,” “experience,” etc.	
<i>12(A-3) No Purchase</i>	When a brand directly prompts users to act, but that action does not lead to an immediate sale		
13. Real-Time Marketing	When a brand directly references a current or upcoming event through any information resource(s)		(Malhotra et al., 2013; Mazerant et al., 2022; Willemssen et al., 2018; Wulf et al., 2022)
<i>13(A-1). Predictable Event</i>	When a brand references a predictable, current event through any information resource(s)	An example of a predictable event is a holiday or annual sporting event.	(Malhotra et al., 2013; Mazerant et al., 2022; Willemssen et al., 2018; Wulf et al., 2022)
<i>13(A-2). Unpredictable Event</i>	When a brand references an unpredictable, current	An example of an unpredictable event is a	(Malhotra et al., 2013; Mazerant et al., 2022;

	event through any information resource(s)	tornado or a specific athlete winning an event.	Willemsen et al., 2018; Wulf et al., 2022)
<i>13(B-1). Ending Event</i>	When a brand references an ending event through any information resource(s)	An example of an ending event is a three-day festival.	(Malhotra et al., 2013; Mazerant et al., 2022; Willemsen et al., 2018; Wulf et al., 2022)
<i>13(B-2). Enduring Event</i>	When a brand references an enduring event through any information resource(s)	An example of an enduring event is COVID-19.	(Malhotra et al., 2013; Mazerant et al., 2022; Willemsen et al., 2018; Wulf et al., 2022)
14. Facebook Post Length	The number of characters in a Facebook post (not including any text featured within an image, animated image, or video); this category includes hashtags, user tags, and links		(Cuevas-Molano et al., 2022; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016; Sebate et al., 2014)
<i>14(A-1). Very Short</i>	When a post is limited to 50 characters or less		(Cuevas-Molano et al., 2022; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016; Sebate et al., 2014)
<i>14(A-2). Short</i>	When a post is between 51 to 99 characters		(Cuevas-Molano et al., 2022; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016; Sebate et al., 2014)
<i>14(A-3). Long</i>	When a post is 100 characters or more		(Cuevas-Molano et al., 2022; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016; Sebate et al., 2014)
15. Facebook Post Timing	The time that a post was published on a brand's Facebook page		(Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016)
<i>15(A-1). Weekend</i>	When a post is created on the weekend (Saturday or Sunday)		(Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016)
<i>15(A-2). Weekday</i>	When a post is created on a weekday (Monday-Friday)		(Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016)
16. Information Resources	Different resources (graphic, interactive, and/or audiovisual) that support social media communication		(Balkhi, 2019; Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Haymarket Media Group, 2016; Klassen et al., 2018; Mariani et al., 2016; Moyaert et al., 2021; Roy, 2023; Rúa-Hidalgo et al.,

		2021; Samuel, 2017; Sebate et al., 2014)
<i>16(A). Graphic</i>	A type of information resource that includes images, text, emojis, and/or animated images	(Balkhi, 2019; Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Haymarket Media Group, 2016; Mariani et al., 2016; Roy, 2023; Rúa-Hidalgo et al., 2021; Samuel, 2017)
<i>16(A-1). Image(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one image	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Guo & Sun, 2020; Mariani et al., 2016; Samuel, 2017)
<i>16(A-2). Text</i>	When a post includes any text (not including text found in images, animated images, or videos); captions of reels are included	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016)
<i>16(A-3). Emoji(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one emoji	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Haymarket Media Group, 2016)
<i>16(A-4). Animated Image(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one animated image	(Balkhi, 2019; Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Rúa-Hidalgo et al., 2021)
<i>16(B). Interactive</i>	A type of information resource that includes links, hashtags, and/or user tags	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Klassen et al., 2018; Moyaert et al., 2021; Sebate et al., 2014)
<i>16(B-1). Link(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one link	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Guo & Sun, 2020; Klassen et al., 2018)
<i>16(B-2). Hashtag(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one hashtag	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Moyaert et al., 2021)
<i>16(B-3). User tag(s)</i>	When a post includes at least one user tag	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Guo & Sun, 2020; Moyaert et al., 2021)
<i>16(C). Audiovisual</i>	A type of information resource that includes audio clips and videos	(Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Sebate et al., 2014)

17. Feeling/Experience	When a brand communicates a feeling and/or experience	For example, a brand may describe an athlete's performance at a sporting event. Another example could be a customer service experience.
18. Brand Collaboration	When a brand communicates a connection with a well-known person, an event, or another brand	Possible indicators include a brand's logo on an athlete's clothes, a brand's logo on a performance area, etc.

*Source:* Pre-defined categories are based on sources within Chapter Two: Literature Review. Italicized categories are sub-categories. Except for Category 16, a post can only belong to a single number for each letter (meaning a post can belong to 13A-1 or 13A-2, not both). Categories are not limited to the indicators or examples listed. The last column of the data visualization refers to sources that may explain and/or be compared to the findings of the content analysis. Please note that this new chart has added categories and indicators/examples, compared to Table 3.2.

Although the researcher coded for frequency, qualitative phrases were used to discuss the data. To avoid confusion, each qualitative phrase correlates to a specific percentage range. For instance, if the researcher writes that “some of the posts” included a certain communication strategy, it means that 21% to 40% of the posts included that communication strategy. The researcher chose to use these qualitative phrases because contextual differences make it unlikely that one brand's ideal social media strategy will perfectly match another's. Table 4.2 only applies to the current and subsequent chapter of the dissertation.

**Table 4.2**

*Converting Qualitative Phrases to Percentages*

Qualitative Phrase	Percentage Range
“None of the posts”	0%
“Almost none of the posts”	5% or less
“Few of the posts”	6% to 20%
“Some of the posts”	21% to 40%
“Many of the posts”	41% to 60%
“Most of the posts”	61% to 80%
“Nearly all posts”	81% to 99%
“All posts”	100%

*Note.* The researcher rounded percentages to the nearest whole number before assigning a percentage range.

## Findings

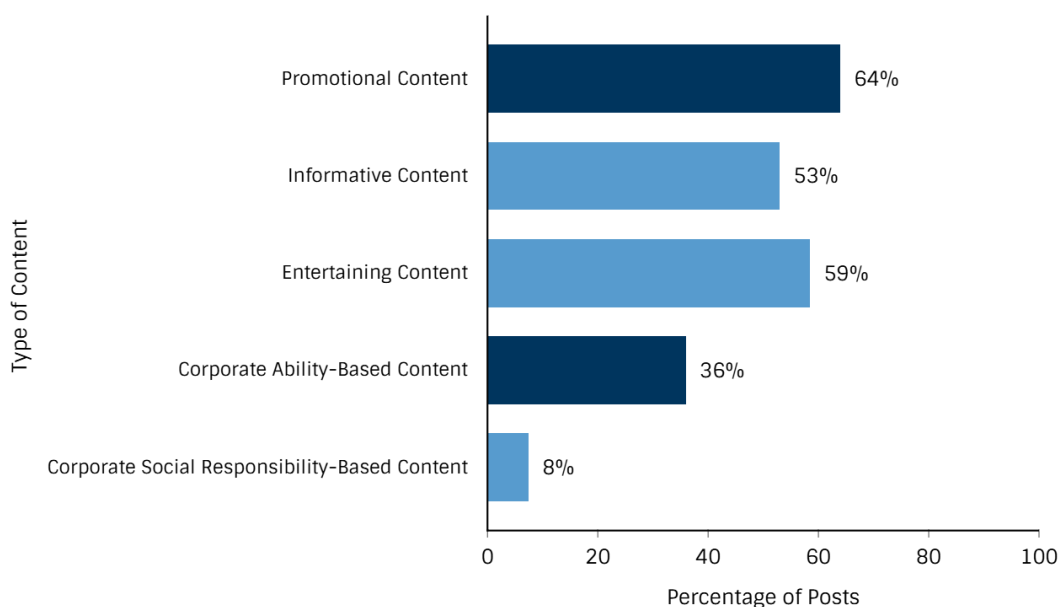
### *The Types and Combinations of Content on Facebook Fan Pages*

This section of findings was based on categories 1-5 of Table 4.1, including any subcategories within this range.

**Promotional Content.** Most well-received posts (64%) contained promotional content, as shown in Figure 4.1. Regarding the different combinations of content on Facebook fan pages, Figure 4.2 shows that many posts (43%) communicated a combination of promotional and informative content.

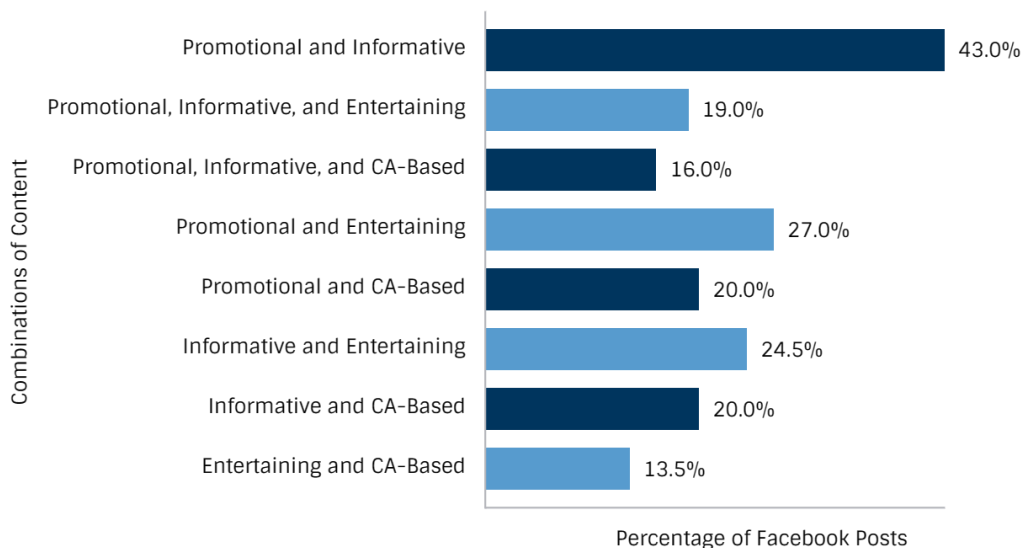
#### Figure 4.1

##### *Types of Content on Facebook Fan Pages*



*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts that include specific types of content. A single Facebook post can include multiple types of content. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.



**Figure 4.2***Combinations of Content on Facebook Fan Pages*

*Note.* Every Facebook post in the sample could be classified as promotional, informative, entertaining, corporate ability-based (CA-based), and/or corporate social responsibility-based (CSR-based). The data visualization represents the percentage of posts that use specific combinations of content. Combinations are not limited to the types of content listed. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

Thus, many of the times promotional content was communicated, it was in combination with informative content. For example, Figure 4.3 features a specific product—Jack Daniel’s American Single Malt. This post was categorized as promotional content based on the definition in Table 4.1. Additionally, that same post directly communicated information about a product—specifically a description and the availability of Jack Daniel’s American Single Malt. For instance, regarding the availability of the product, the brand wrote, “now available in travel retail locations across the globe” (Jack Daniel’s, 2023d, para. 1). Simply put, Facebook users were informed when and where the product could be purchased.

Figure 4.3

*Jack Daniel's Promotes a New Product (American Single Malt) and Informs Facebook Users*

**Jack Daniel's** September 26, 2023 · 🌐

Introducing the first Jack Daniel's Single Malt, now available in travel retail locations across the globe.

This Jack Daniel's American Single Malt finished in Oloroso Sherry Casks is a new take on timeless Single Malt traditions. Charcoal mellowed the Tennessee way. Aged in hand-crafted newly charred oak barrels, then finished in the finest Oloroso Sherry Casks. It is rich and complex, characterized as dark chocolate covered nuts and berries with a subtle sweet Oloroso Sherry finish.



👍❤️ 3.1K      293 comments 423 shares

Of course, promotional content was not always informative. In Figure 4.4, a specific product was featured in the image—Jack Daniel’s Gentleman Jack. Although it was clearly promotional, the post did not directly communicate any information about the brand’s services, products, or policies. According to the definition of informative content in Table 4.1, the post could not be categorized as informative.

**Figure 4.4**

*Jack Daniel's Promotes Its Gentleman Jack in an Agreeable Way Through Real-Time Marketing*

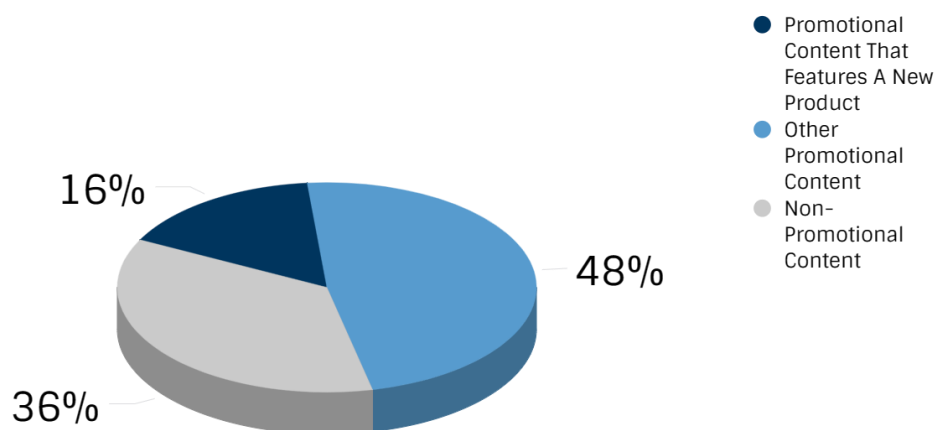


Figure 4.5 explores promotional content on Facebook fan pages in depth, highlighting an emerging theme: the promotion of new products. This is known as category “1(A)” within Table

4.1. More specifically, Figure 4.5 shows that few well-received posts (16%) promoted a new product.

**Figure 4.5**

*New Product Promotions on Facebook Fan Pages*



*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts that feature new products, in addition to other promotional content. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

Returning to Figure 4.3, the featured product (Jack Daniel’s American Single Malt) had never been featured on Facebook before that post, so it was categorized as a new product. Indicators of the category were apparent, as the text included the words “introducing,” “new,” and “newly” (Jack Daniel’s, 2023d, para. 1). Figure 4.6 shows that Pepsi Colachup was recently released using some of the same terminology as Figure 4.3—“introducing” and “new” (Pepsi, 2023a, para. 1). For both brands, the communication clearly emphasized the recent availability of each product.

**Figure 4.6**

*Pepsi Promotes and Personifies a New Product With No Calls to Action*

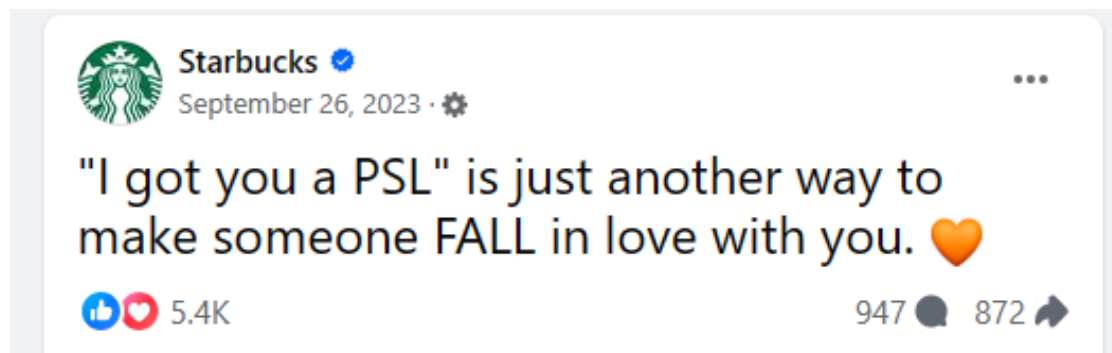


**Entertaining Content.** Some content (27%) was promotional and entertaining without being informative, and a few posts (19%) were promotional, informative, and entertaining (see Figure 4.2). Regarding the former, Figure 4.7 was coded as promotional and entertaining. The post was promotional because a specific product was featured: “PSL” (Starbucks, 2023e, para. 1), which is short for “Pumpkin Spice Latte.” The feeling of relaxation and/or fun that must be

communicated for a post to be categorized as entertaining (see Table 4.1) was apparent through wordplay. “FALL” (Starbucks, 2023e, para. 1) was written in all capital letters to emphasize the double meaning of the word, since Pumpkin Spice Lattes are famously associated with the fall season.

#### Figure 4.7

*Starbucks Promotes Its Pumpkin Spice Latte in an Entertaining Way*



Still, Figure 4.7 did not provide any information of real value—unlike Figure 4.8, which informed users of new products available. Figure 4.8 entertains users in the same way as Figure 4.7, although the wordplay was not emphasized as strongly, meaning that the keyword was not written in all capital letters. From the colorful drinks in the image to the colored heart emojis in the text, Figure 4.8 emphasized color. The wordplay in the text further emphasized the theme: “Color us content” (Starbucks, 2023c, para. 1).

**Figure 4.8**

*Starbucks Informs Facebook Users While Promoting New Products in an Entertaining Way Through Graphic Information Resources*

The image shows a Facebook post from Starbucks, dated June 27, 2023. The post features a vibrant graphic of three Starbucks Refreshers cups (orange, purple, and red) sitting on a wooden table in the foreground. In the background, several t-shirts with matching tie-dye patterns are hanging on a clothesline outdoors. The text of the post reads: "Color us content." followed by three items: "NEW Frozen Pineapple Passionfruit Lemonade" with a yellow heart icon, "NEW Frozen Mango Dragonfruit Lemonade" with a purple heart icon, and "NEW Frozen Strawberry Açai Lemonade" with a red heart icon. The post also includes the text "Starbucks Refreshers® Beverages." At the bottom of the post, there are engagement metrics: 6.5K likes, 3.7K comments, and 1.3K shares.

Starbucks June 27, 2023

Color us content.

- NEW Frozen Pineapple Passionfruit Lemonade
- NEW Frozen Mango Dragonfruit Lemonade
- NEW Frozen Strawberry Açai Lemonade

Starbucks Refreshers® Beverages.

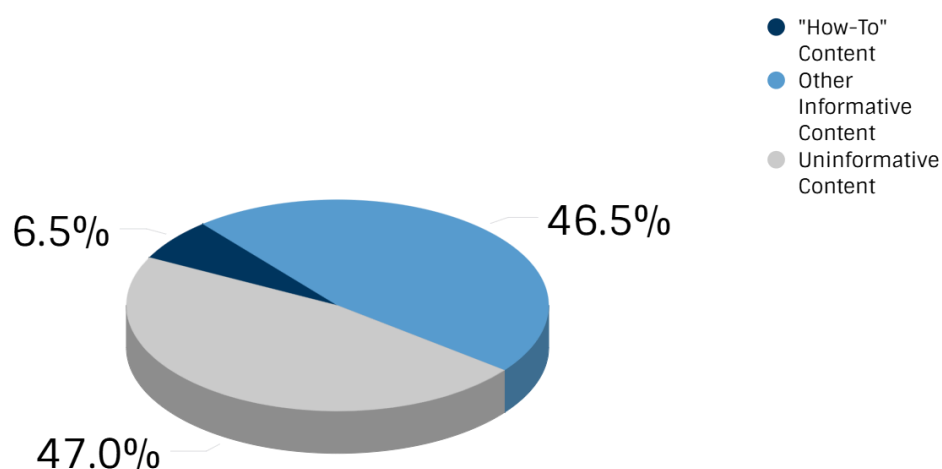
6.5K 3.7K comments 1.3K shares



**Informative Content.** Figure 4.9 further explores informative content and focuses on an emerging category. This time, the focus is on category “2(A)” from Table 4.1: “How-to” content. Although this instructional content was identified, only a few posts in the sample (6.5%) could be categorized as such.

**Figure 4.9**

*Informative Content on Facebook Fan Pages*



*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts that include informative content. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

As written in Table 4.1, the researcher identified this type of informative content when instructions were communicated. For instance, Figure 4.10 included instructions on how to enjoy Pepsi in a new way. Figure 4.11 featured a recipe, too. In particular, the post communicated how to enjoy Jack Daniel’s Tennessee Apple as a cocktail. Both recipes (as featured in Figures 4.10 and 4.11) were seemingly easy to follow with few steps and ingredients.

Figure 4.10

*Pepsi Informs Facebook Users with “How-To” Content and Collaborates with the Buffalo Bills*

**PEPSI** Pepsi ✓  
September 27, 2023 · 🌐

How do you bring #BillsMafia energy to Pepsi? Add Buffalo sauce.  
#BuffaloPepsi #Pepsi125 Buffalo Bills

### HOW TO MAKE BUFFALO PEPSI®

1. POUR 12 OZ. PEPSI® OR PEPSI® ZERO SUGAR INTO A GLASS WITH ICE
2. GENTLY ADD 1 TBSP OF BUFFALO SAUCE
3. GARNISH AND STIR WITH CELERY
4. ADD BLUE CHEESE RIM (OPTIONAL)
5. ENJOY!

OFFICIAL SOFT DRINK OF THE BUFFALO BILLS

🤩👍😱 3.9K      3.4K 💬 4.5K ➦

**Figure 4.11**

*Jack Daniel's Informs Facebook Users with "How-To" Content*



**CA- and CSR-Based Content.** More posts were dedicated to communicating corporate ability (CA) rather than corporate social responsibility (CSR), with some of the sample (36%) including CA-based content. Some possible indicators of CA-based content were references to a brand's expertise and industry leadership (see Table 4.1). For an example of CA-based content,

please refer to Figure 4.12. In this post, Jack Daniel's announced awards that its products had received. By winning these awards, the brand was demonstrating that it was not only an expert in the industry—it was a leader in the industry.

A few posts (16%) featured a combination of promotional, informative, and CA-based content (see Figure 4.2). Figure 4.12, which has already been established as CA-based content, was also categorized as promotional because specific products were featured for each award. The post was informative, too. Reading the post, a person could learn that Jack Daniel's is an award-winning brand.

Figure 4.12

Jack Daniel's Informs Facebook Users and Promotes Its Products Through CA-Based Content



Figure 4.13 was another good example of a post that communicated promotional, informative, and CA-based content. A specific product was featured in the image (Pepsi Zero Sugar), which made the post promotional. At the same time, the post communicated Pepsi's

corporate ability by noting how long the brand has succeeded in the beverage industry—an impressive 125 years. This could be seen within the text and the image. Lastly, the brand provided the start date of an event, making the post informative.

### Figure 4.13

*Pepsi Informs Facebook Users and Promotes Its Products Through CA-Based Content in a Positive Way*



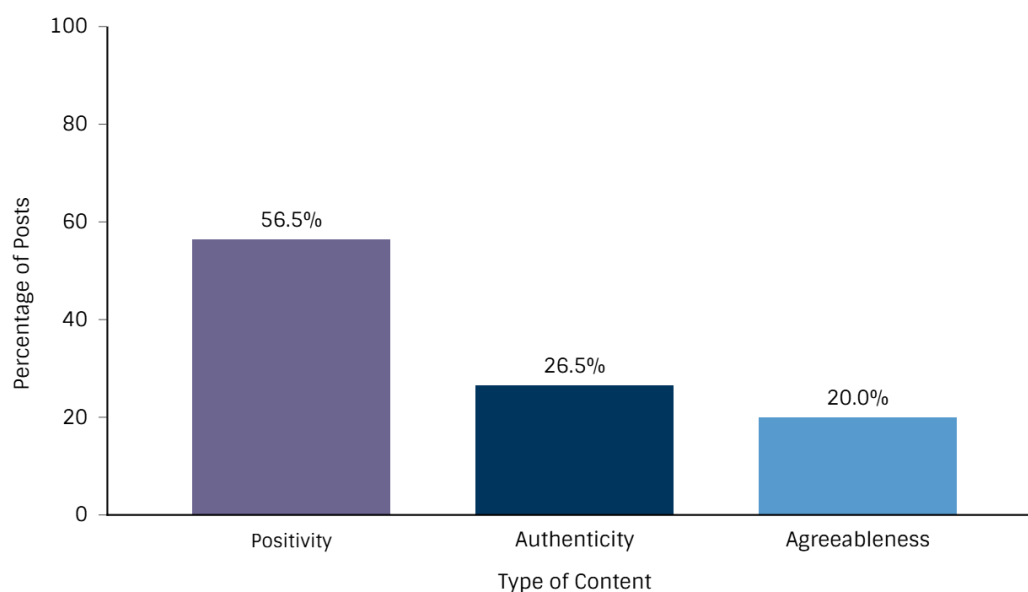
### ***Brand Communication Traits on Facebook Fan Pages***

This section of findings was based on categories 6, 7, and 8 of Table 4.1.

**Positivity.** Many well-received posts on Facebook fan pages (56.5%) communicated positivity (see Figure 4.14).

**Figure 4.14**

*Communicating Positivity, Authenticity, and Agreeableness on Facebook Fan Pages*

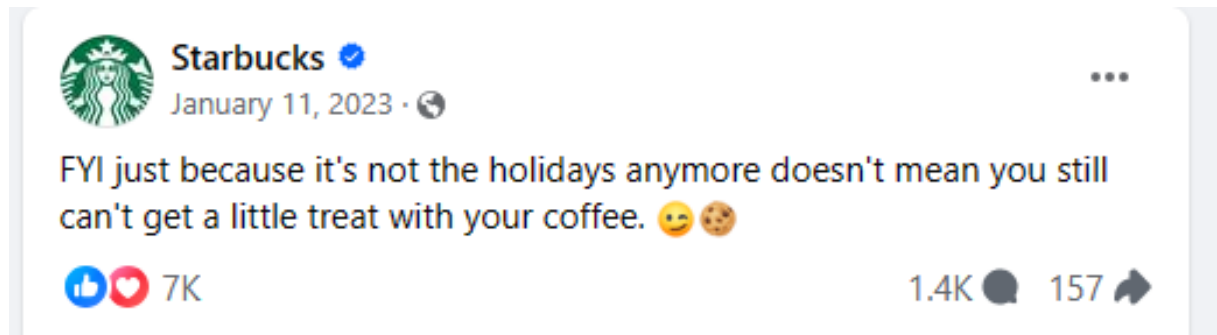


*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts that communicate positivity, authenticity, and/or agreeableness. A single Facebook post can communicate any combination of the three categories. However, this bar graph does not show different combinations. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

Posts were categorized as positive when at least one positive emotion (surprise, happiness, trust, pride, etc.) was identified through any information resource (see Table 4.1). An example of positivity was Figure 4.13. Within the post's image, there were four people smiling. In other instances, the researcher identified positivity through various smiling emojis, such as the smiling emoji used in Figure 4.15.

**Figure 4.15**

*Starbucks Uses Positive and Informal Communication*



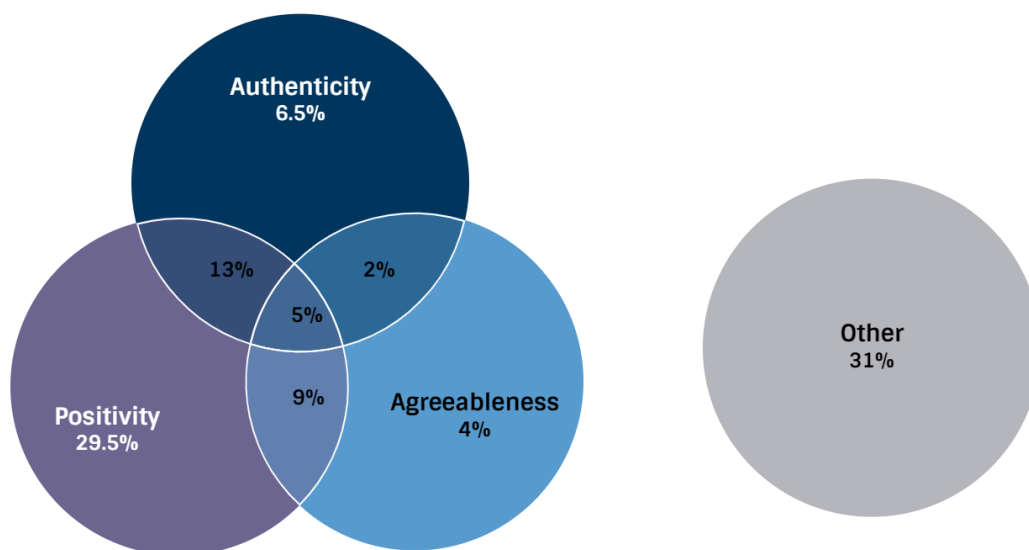
Taking a closer look at how traits were communicated, Figure 4.16 shows the frequencies of different combinations of positivity, authenticity, and agreeableness. While positivity was still communicated more often than the other traits, only some posts (29.5%) exclusively communicated positivity. As established earlier, Figure 4.15 communicated positivity. Yet, authenticity and agreeableness were not communicated.



**Figure 4.16**

*Communicating Positivity, Authenticity, and Agreeableness on Facebook Fan Pages:*

*Combinations*



*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of Facebook content communicating any combination of positivity, authenticity, and/or agreeableness. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

**Authenticity.** To be categorized as authentic, a post must have communicated transparency and honesty (see Table 4.1). As shown in Figure 4.14, some Facebook posts (26.5%) communicated authenticity. Monster Energy published raw footage of skateboarding, which can be watched here: <https://www.facebook.com/reel/802067981560122>. The footage included successful and unsuccessful skateboarding tricks, and it was the unsuccessful tricks that communicated authenticity. To be more specific, the behind-the-scenes footage communicated that everyone makes mistakes—even great athletes.

Even so, only a few posts (6.5%) exclusively communicated authenticity (see Figure 4.16). The raw footage of skateboarding could not be exclusively categorized as authentic because the footage included brief cheering—a positive emotion. Thus, the Facebook reel does

not belong to that 6.5% of the sample. Instead, the Facebook reel was categorized as authentic and positive. Only a few posts (13%) used this combination (see Figure 4.16).

Another example of authentic communication can be watched here:

<https://www.facebook.com/MonsterEnergy/videos/694887812408367>. The video provided a behind-the-scenes look at Darkfest—an annual mountain bike event. Published the day before Darkfest was to begin, the video gave a walk-through of the course and even showed some construction taking place. Like the footage of skateboarding, successful and unsuccessful tricks were included.

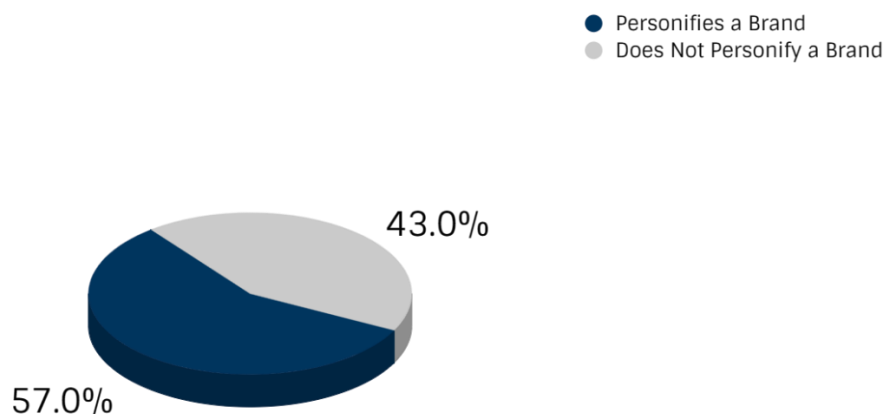
**Agreeableness.** Out of the three communication traits recorded (including positivity, authenticity, and agreeableness), agreeableness had the weakest presence, as shown in Figure 4.14. As outlined in Table 4.1, a post needed to communicate empathy, support, and/or friendliness to be coded as agreeable. For instance, Figure 4.4 made the following toast: “To those who tie the knot, and to those who pour the Jack” (Jack Daniel’s, 2023b, para. 1). The researcher interpreted the toast as friendly and supportive—an expression of best wishes.

Another example can be found here:

<https://www.facebook.com/MonsterEnergy/videos/626295949369095>. Describing a competition, Monster Energy wrote, “Congrats to our very own Bryce Tryon for taking his first ever major win in the series after six years of competition” (Monster Energy, 2023b, para. 2). By congratulating the athlete, the brand communicated support. Like authenticity, agreeableness was communicated in combination with other traits (see Figure 4.16).

### ***Brand Personification and Human Interests on Facebook Fan Pages***

This section of findings was based on categories 9 and 10 of Table 4.1. As shown in Figure 4.17, many well-received posts (57%) personified a brand.

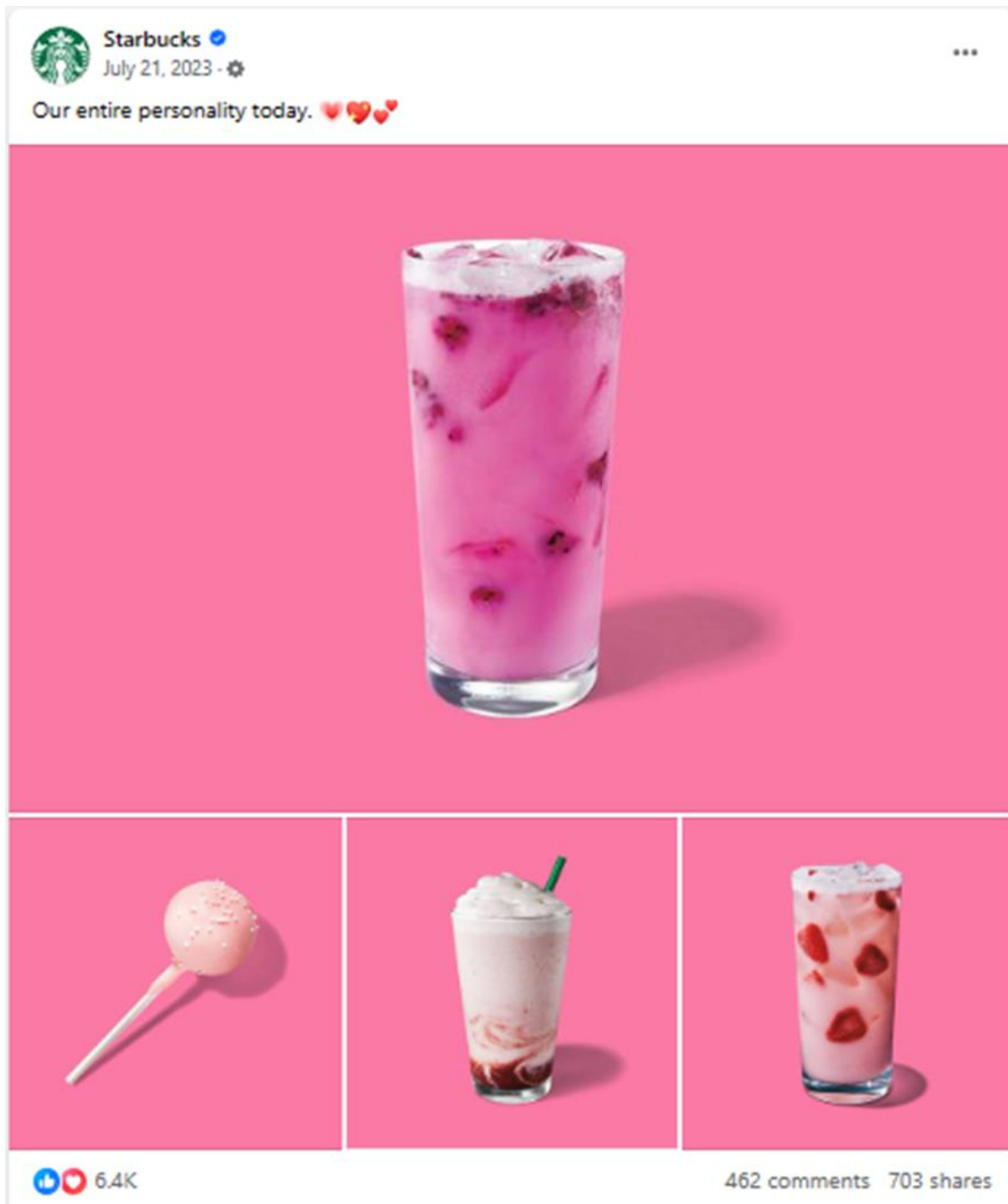
**Figure 4.17***Content Featuring Brand Personification on Facebook Fan Pages*

*Note.* The data visualization represents the number of posts that demonstrate brand personification. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

For a post to be coded for brand personification, a brand needed to present itself as human and/or invite users to treat it as human (see Table 4.1). An excellent example can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/PepsiUS/videos/679499844092612/>. In the post, Pepsi celebrated its 125<sup>th</sup> birthday. Meanwhile, in Figure 4.18, Starbucks referenced its “personality” (2023d, para. 1). Even products were personified, as shown in Figure 4.6 when Pepsi introduced its new product as “every hot dog’s new BFF” (2023a, para. 1).

Figure 4.18

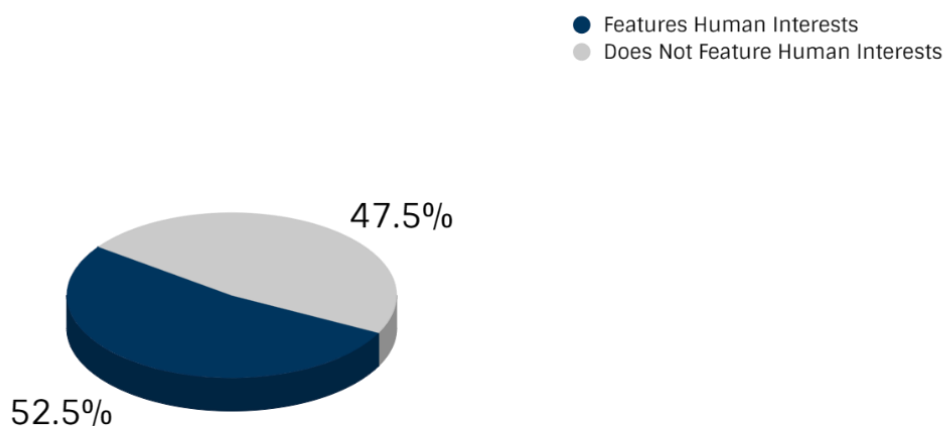
*Starbucks Personifies Itself*



Brand personification is very similar to another category: human interests. As shown in Figure 4.19, many posts (52.5%) featured human interests.

### Figure 4.19

*Content Featuring Human Interests on Facebook Fan Pages*

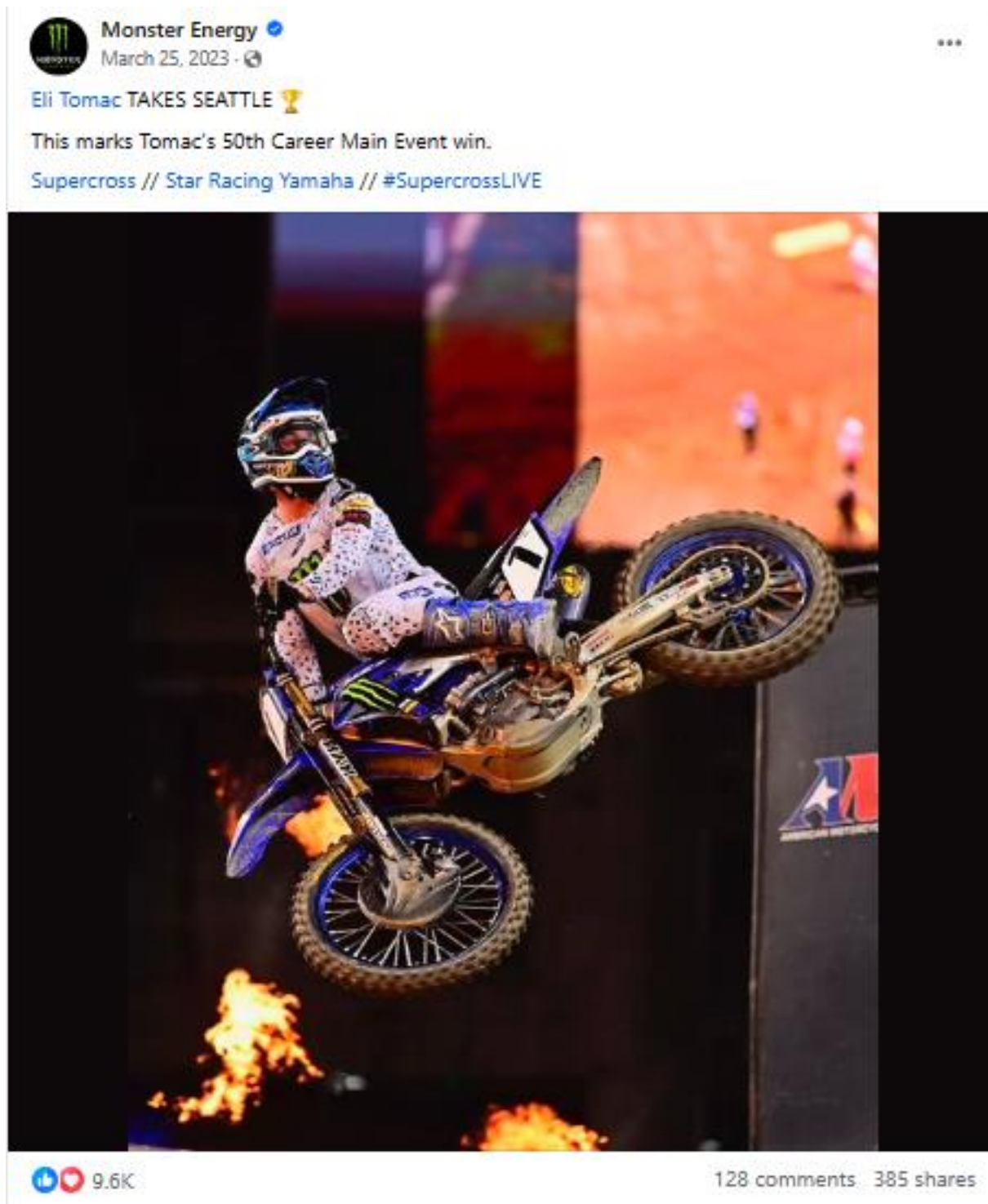


*Note.* The data visualization represents the number of posts that feature human interests. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

Obviously, to be categorized as having human interests, a brand needed to communicate those human interests (see Table 4.1). Monster Energy, for example, often posted about sports. Figure 4.20 conveyed the results of a racing event and noted the winning motorcyclist's career. Starbucks, on the other hand, showed an interest in seasonal events. For instance, the brand communicated its excitement for the leaves to change color—an event signaling the beginning of the fall season (see Figure 4.21).

**Figure 4.20**

*Using Graphic and Interactive Information Resources, Monster Energy Communicates Human Interests Through Real-Time Marketing*



The image shows a Facebook post from the official Monster Energy page, dated March 25, 2023. The post features a celebratory graphic of motocross rider Eli Tomac performing a wheelie on his blue and white Yamaha motorcycle. The rider is wearing a white and blue racing suit with Monster Energy branding. The background is dark with bright orange and yellow flames at the bottom, suggesting a night-time event. The text of the post reads: "Eli Tomac TAKES SEATTLE 🏆", "This marks Tomac's 50th Career Main Event win.", and "Supercross // Star Racing Yamaha // #SupercrossLIVE". The post has received 9.6K likes, 128 comments, and 385 shares.

Monster Energy  
March 25, 2023 · 🌐

Eli Tomac TAKES SEATTLE 🏆

This marks Tomac's 50th Career Main Event win.

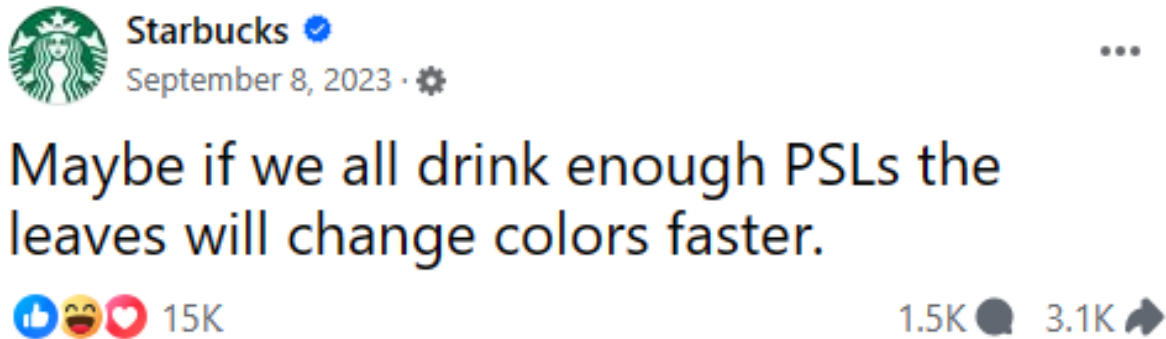
Supercross // Star Racing Yamaha // #SupercrossLIVE

👍❤️ 9.6K

128 comments · 385 shares

**Figure 4.21**

*Starbucks Communicates Human Interests Through Real-Time Marketing*

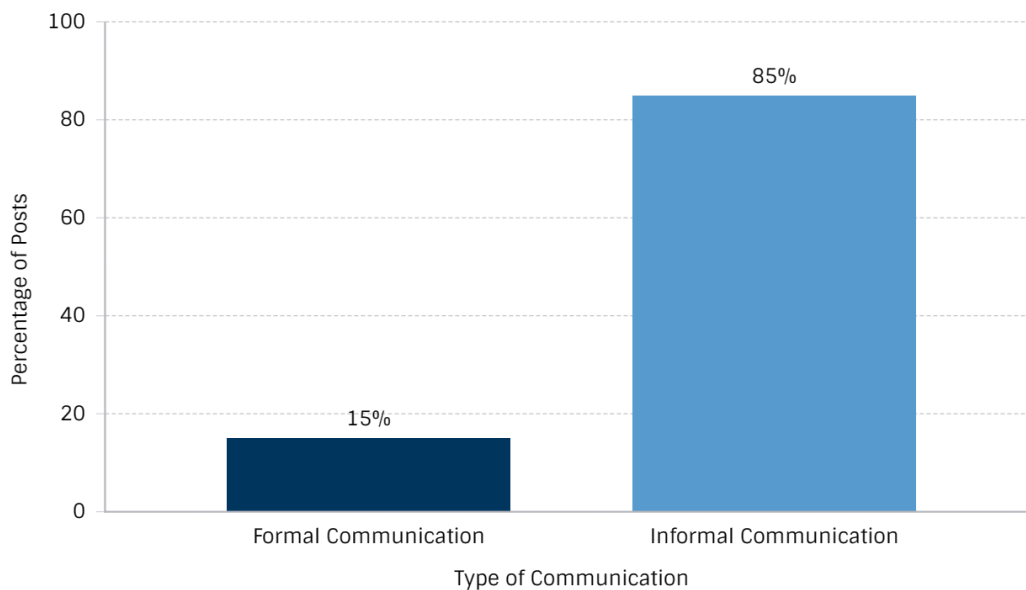


***Formal and Informal Communication on Facebook Fan Pages***

This section of findings was based on category 11 of Table 4.1, including its subcategories. As shown in Figure 4.22, nearly all well-received content (85%) used informal communication. Possible indicators of informal communication included the use of informal vocabulary, informal punctuation, emojis, first- and second-person pronouns, etc. (see Table 4.1). Multiple indicators of informal communication were often observed. In Figure 4.15, Starbucks used contractions, emojis, and an abbreviation.

**Figure 4.22**

*Formal and Informal Communication on Facebook Fan Pages*

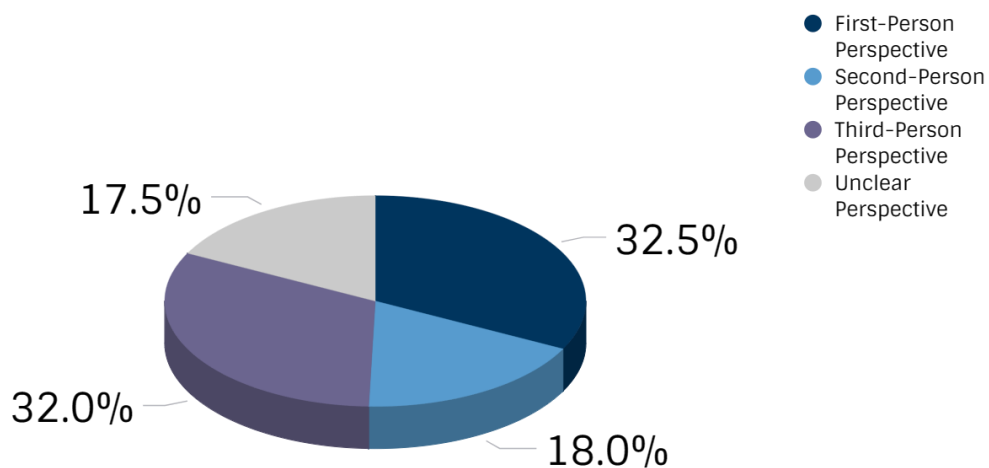


*Note.* The data visualization represents the number of posts that use formal versus informal communication. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

Only a few posts (15%) used formal communication (see Figure 4.22). Returning to Figure 4.3, Jack Daniel’s did not use any indicators of informal communication.

As shown in Figure 4.23, some posts (32.5%) used the first-person perspective, and some posts (32%) used the third-person perspective. Meanwhile, a few posts (18%) used the second-person perspective, and a few posts (17.5%) were unclear in their perspective—sometimes due to the use of incomplete sentences.

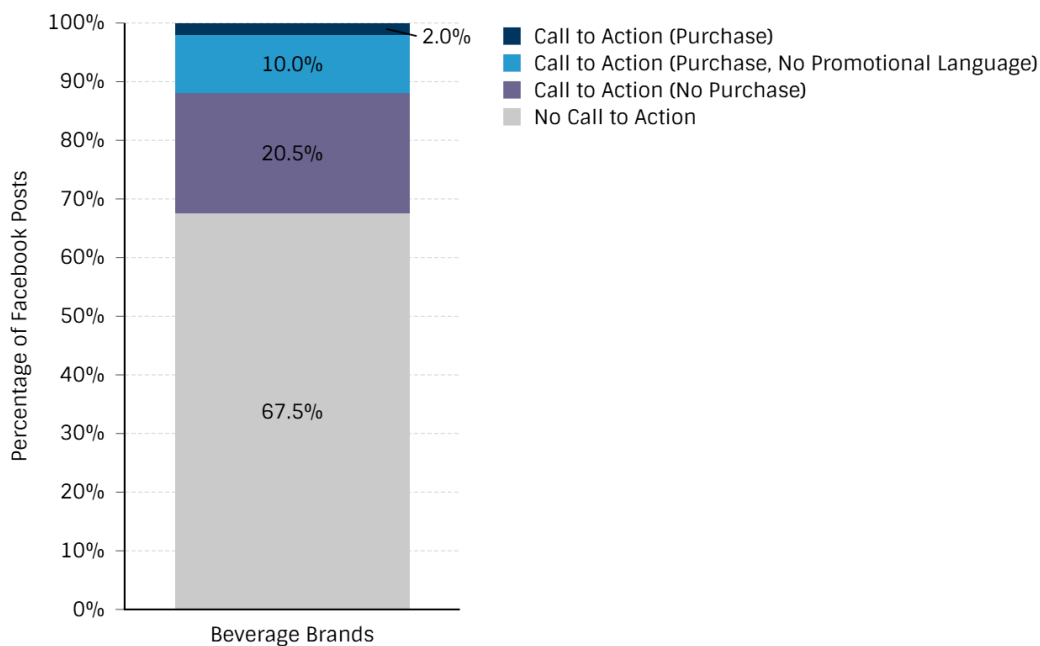


**Figure 4.23***Writing Perspectives on Facebook Fan Pages*

*Note.* The data visualization represents the writing perspectives used in Facebook posts. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

*Calls to Action on Facebook Fan Pages*

This section of findings was based on category 12 of Table 4.1, including its subcategories. As shown in Table 4.1, this category was identified when a brand directly prompted users to act. As shown in Figure 4.24, almost none of the posts (2%) included promotional language (“buy,” “purchase,” etc.). A few posts (10%) pressured users to purchase a product or service without using promotional language.

**Figure 4.24***Calls to Action on Facebook Fan Pages*

*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts that communicated "calls to action." See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

In Figure 4.25, Starbucks wrote, "Discover a cornucopia of seasonal delights" (2023f, para. 1). This was an alternative to writing, "Purchase a cornucopia of seasonal delights." After all, to truly discover the brand's products, users would have to purchase them.

**Figure 4.25**

*Starbucks Calls Facebook Users to Purchase a Product Without Using Promotional Language*




A screenshot of a Facebook post from Starbucks, dated September 14, 2023. The post features the Starbucks logo and a blue verified badge. The text of the post reads: "Pumpkin spice is in season at our Starbucks Reserve® Roasteries. Discover a cornucopia of seasonal delights." Below the text is a list of five items, each preceded by a small icon: a brown square for the bundt cake, a glass for the iced latte, a martini glass for the martini, a coffee cup for the latte, and a donut for the Maritozzo.

Starbucks 

September 14, 2023 · 

Pumpkin spice is in season at our Starbucks Reserve® Roasteries. Discover a cornucopia of seasonal delights.

-  Pumpkin Caramel Mini Bundt Cake
-  Pumpkin Spice Whiskey Barrel-Aged Iced Latte
-  Pumpkin Spice Espresso Martini
-  Pumpkin Spice Latte
-  Pumpkin Maritozzo



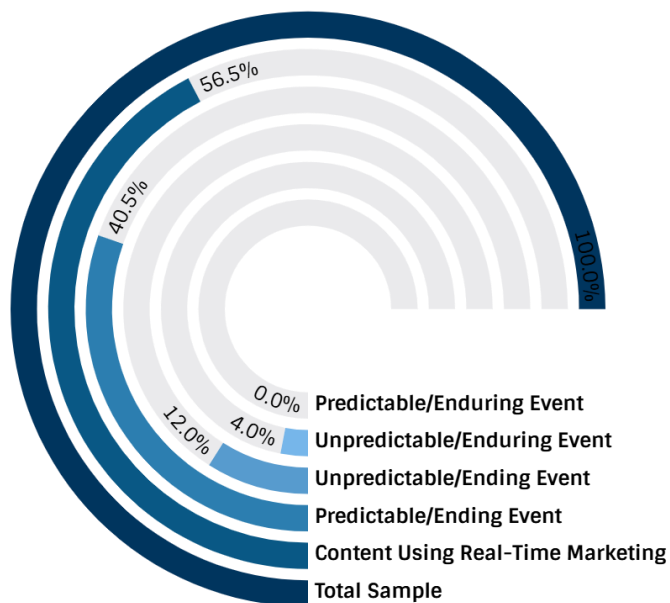
As shown in Figure 4.24, some posts (20.5%) included calls to action that were unrelated to purchasing a product or service. Still, most posts in the sample (67.5%) did not provide any calls to action. In other words, users were not told to do anything. For an example of Facebook communication without any imperative verbs, please refer to Figure 4.6.

### ***Real-Time Marketing on Facebook Fan Pages***

This section of findings was based on category 13 of Table 4.1, including its subcategories. As shown in Table 4.1, the researcher identified real-time marketing when a brand directly referenced a current or upcoming event. Figure 4.26 shows that many posts (56.5%) used real-time marketing.

**Figure 4.26**

### ***Real-Time Marketing on Facebook Fan Pages***



*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts that use real-time marketing, as well as the combinations of real-time marketing used. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

Many posts (40.5%) included predictable/ending events (see Figure 4.26). As defined in Table 4.1, these referenced events were predictable and had an expected end date. For example, Starbucks referenced the fall season—a predictable event that begins in September and ends in November (see Figure 4.21). Jack Daniel’s used the same real-time marketing strategy in Figure 4.4, but the brand referenced the wedding season instead of the fall season.

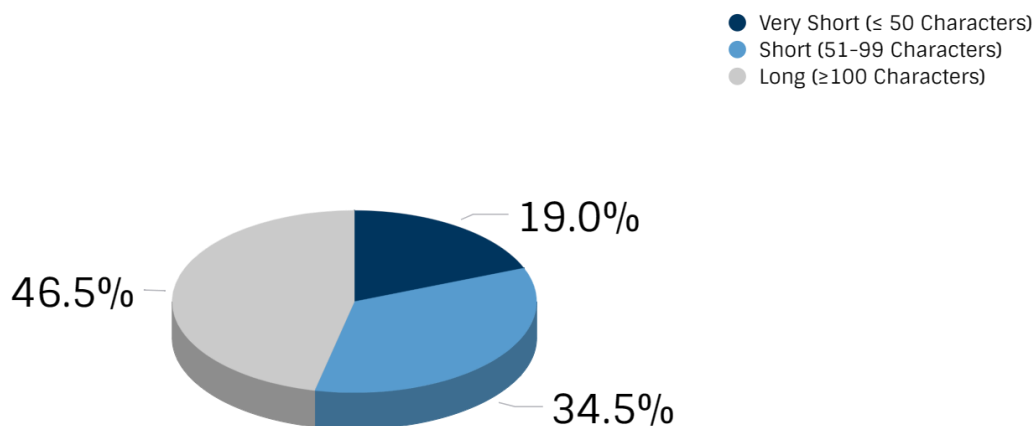
A few posts (12%) referenced unpredictable/ending events (see Figure 4.26). As defined in Table 4.1, these referenced events were unpredictable and had an expected end date. Returning to Figure 4.20, Monster Energy referenced a predictable sport event but focused on an unpredictable outcome—Eli Tomac winning. Still, Tomac’s win was connected to an event that has now ended. While the motorcyclist will always be a winner, that particular victory will become less important to users, who will be looking forward to the next competition. Enduring events were especially uncommon for real-time marketing, with almost none of the posts (4%) featuring unpredictable/enduring events and none of the posts featuring predictable/enduring events (see Figure 4.26).

### ***Character Count on Facebook Fan Pages***

This section of findings was based on category 14 of Table 4.1, including its subcategories. As shown in Figure 4.27, the character count for each Facebook post varied. Many posts (46.5%) used 100 characters or more. In comparison, some posts (34.5%) used between 51 to 99 characters, and few posts (19%) used 50 characters or less. On average, approximately 128 characters were used.

**Figure 4.27**

*Communicating on Facebook Fan Pages: Character Count*



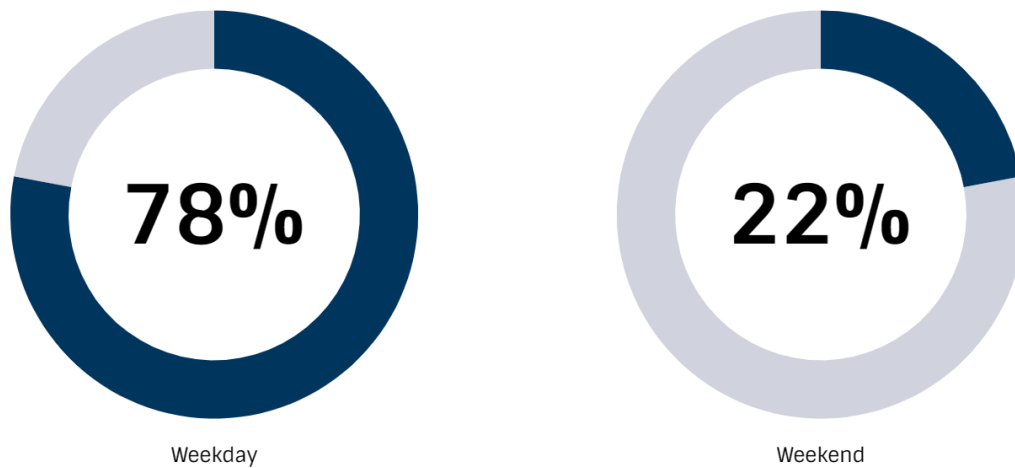
*Note.* The data visualization represents the character count for each Facebook post in the sample. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

### ***The Timing of Communication on Facebook Fan Pages***

This section of findings was based on category 15 of Table 4.1, including its subcategories. As seen in Figure 4.28, most well-received Facebook posts (78%) were published on a weekday and some well-received Facebook posts (22%) were published on weekends.

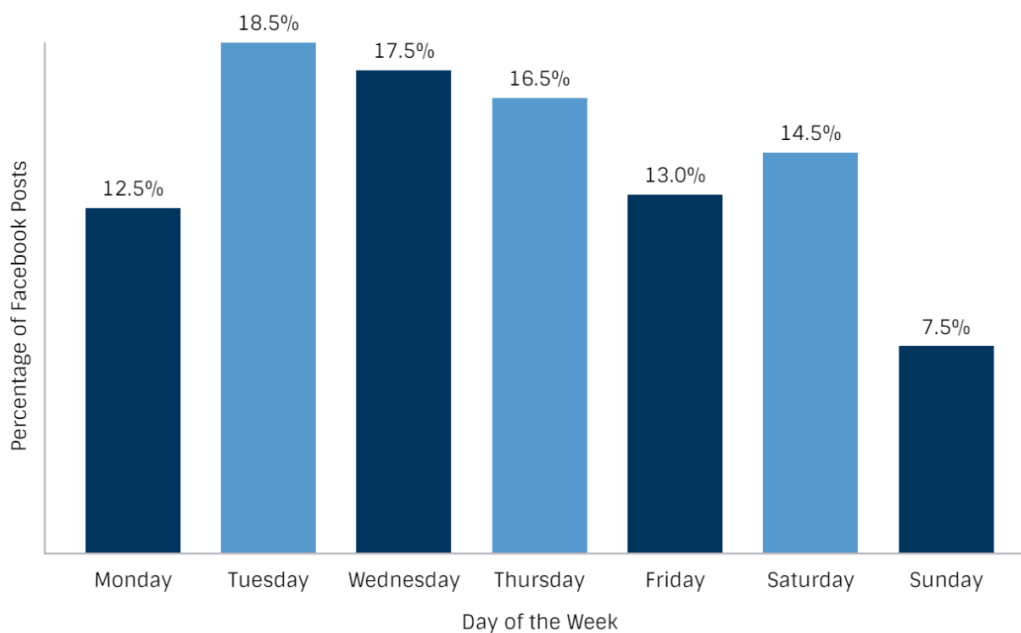
**Figure 4.28**

*Timing of Communication on Facebook Fan Pages*



*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts published throughout the week. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

More specifically, as shown in Figure 4.29, few posts were published on Monday (12.5%), Tuesday (18.5%), Wednesday (17.5%), Thursday (16.5%), Friday (13%), Saturday (14.5%), or Sunday (7.5%).

**Figure 4.29***Timing of Communication on Facebook Fan Pages: Days of the Week*

*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts published throughout the week. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

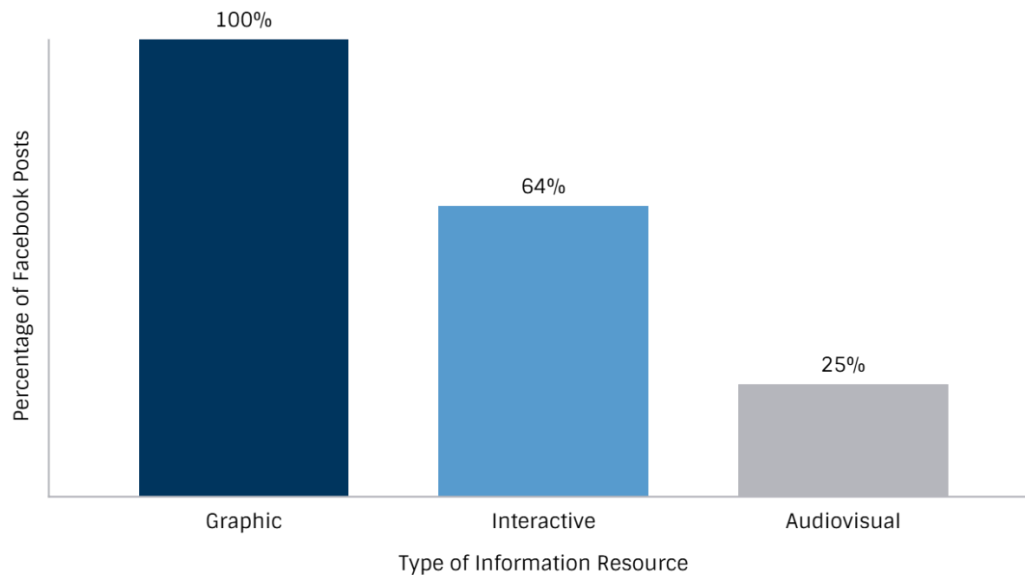
### ***Types and Combinations of Information Resources Used to Communicate on Facebook Fan Pages***

This section of findings was based on category 16 of Table 4.1, including its subcategories. As shown in Figure 4.30, all posts used one or more graphic information resources to communicate. Graphic information resources include images, text, emojis, and animated images. Most of the time (64%), one or more interactive information resources (including links, hashtags, and user tags) were used to communicate, whereas an audiovisual resource was used to communicate some of the time (25%).



**Figure 4.30**

*Types of Information Resources Used to Communicate on Facebook Fan Pages*

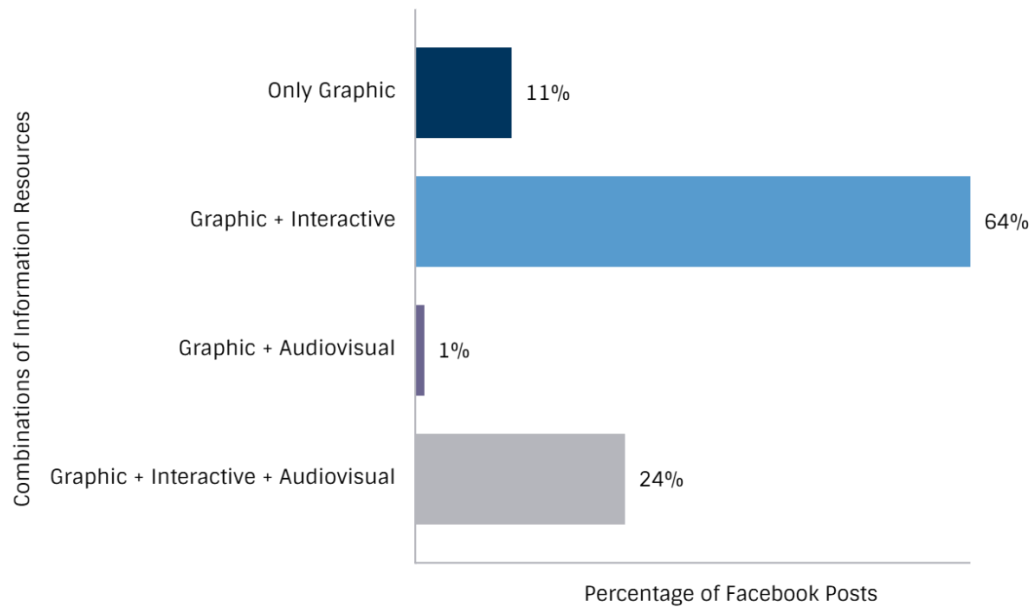


*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts using a specific type of information resource. A single Facebook post can communicate any combination of the three categories. However, this bar graph does not show different combinations. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

Graphic information resources were more common than the other types of information resources, but only a few posts (11%) exclusively used graphic information resources (see Figure 4.31). For example, Figure 4.15 did not include any interactive or audiovisual information resources. As seen in Figure 4.31, a combination of graphic and interactive information resources was found in most posts (64%), and some posts (24%) used all three types of information resources.

**Figure 4.31**

*Combinations of Information Resources Used to Communicate on Facebook Fan Pages*



*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts with specific combinations of information resources. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

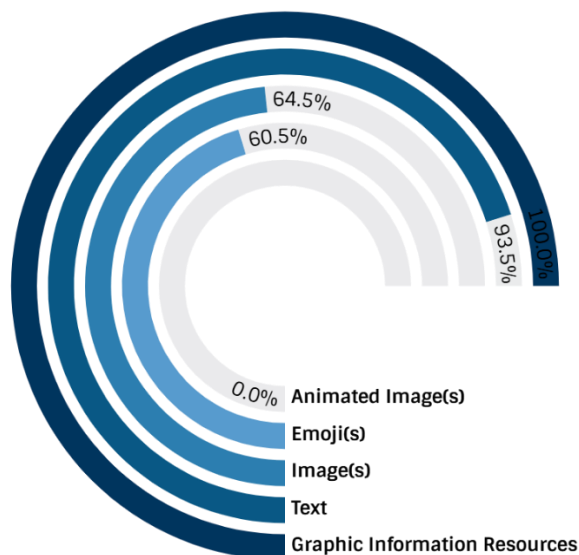
Regarding a combination of graphic and interactive information resources, Figure 4.20 included an image, text, and an emoji (three examples of graphic information resources). In addition, the post included two types of interactive information resources. An example of a combination of all three types of information resources can be found here:

<https://www.facebook.com/PepsiUS/videos/827534898772891>.

**Graphic Information Resources.** As for the most common type of information resource (graphic), Figure 4.32 shows that nearly all posts in the sample (93.5%) included text. Most posts (64.5%) included an image, and most posts (60.5%) included an emoji. No posts used an animated image.

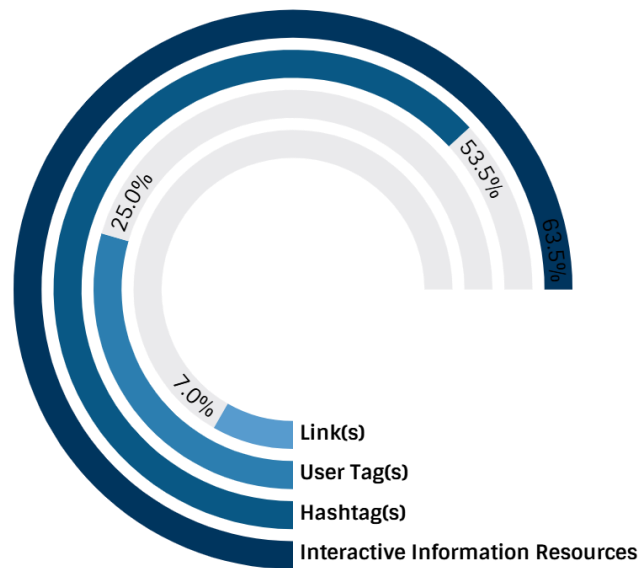
**Figure 4.32**

*Graphic Information Resources Used to Communicate on Facebook Fan Pages*



*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts that use graphic information resources. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

**Interactive Information Resources.** The three types of interactive information resources measured can be seen in Figure 4.33. Hashtags were found in many of well-received posts (53.5%). This was more than the remaining types of interactive information resources combined. Some posts (25%) included at least one user tag, and a few posts (7%) included at least one link.

**Figure 4.33***Interactive Information Resources Used to Communicate on Facebook Fan Pages*

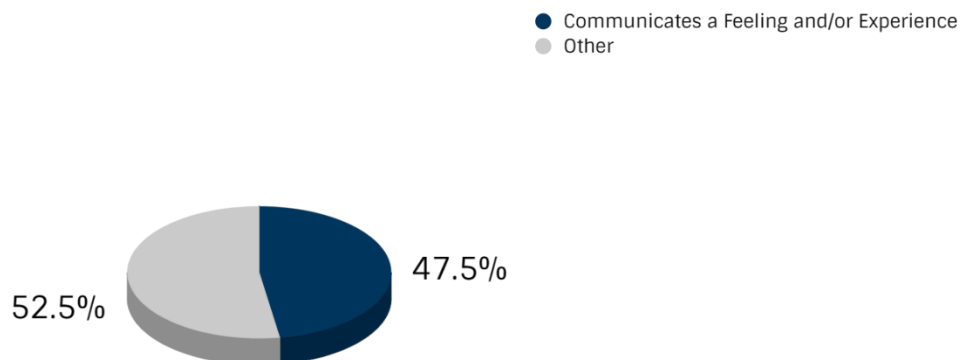
*Note.* The data visualization represents the percentage of posts that use interactive information resources. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

***Communicating Feelings and/or Experiences on Facebook Fan Pages***

This section of findings was based on category 17 of Table 4.1. As shown in Figure 4.34, many posts (47.5%) communicated feelings and/or experiences.

**Figure 4.34**

*Communicating Feelings and/or Experiences on Facebook Fan Pages*

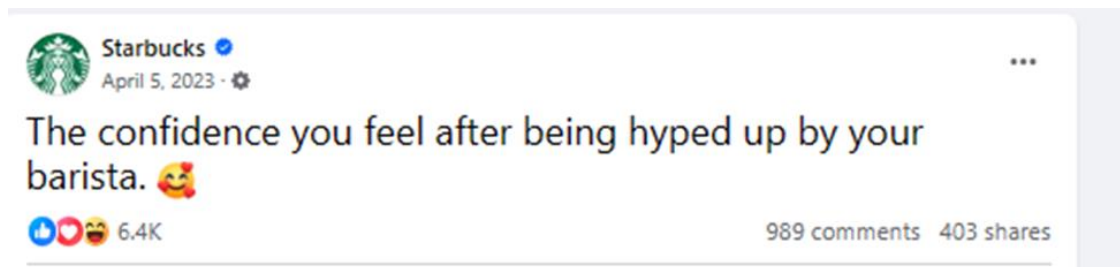


*Note.* The data visualization represents the number of posts that share or describe a feeling and/or experience. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

The researcher identified the emerging category of when a post communicated a feeling and/or experience (see Table 4.1). For instance, Figure 4.35 referenced Starbucks' customer service experience and the feelings that experience gives consumers.

**Figure 4.35**

*Starbucks Communicates the Feeling of Its Customer Service Experience Using the Second-Person Perspective*



Another experience was featured here:

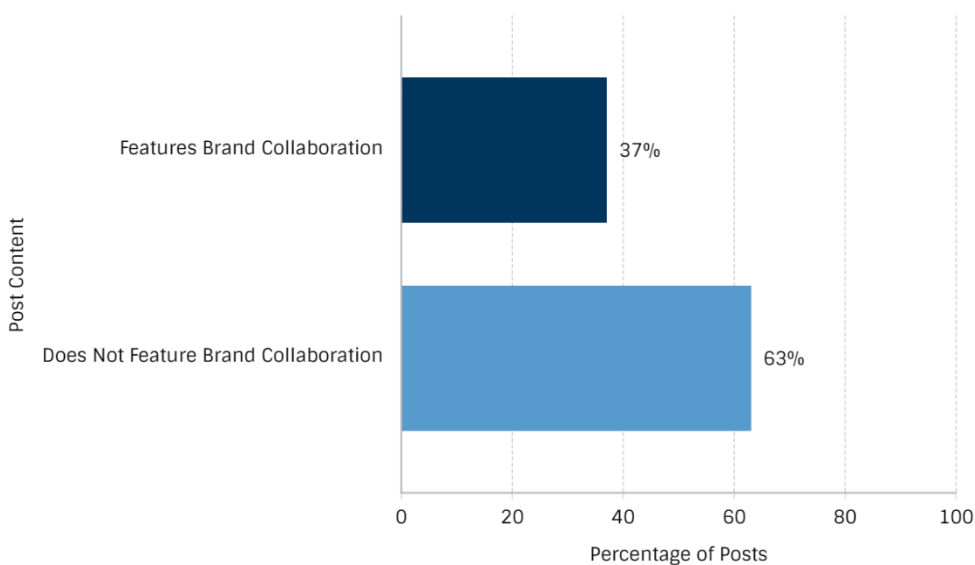
<https://www.facebook.com/MonsterEnergy/videos/637297944628426/>. In the video, Cal Crutchlow, a motorcycle racer, described an annual racing event as “an incredible and extraordinary thing to see” (Monster Energy, 2023c).

### ***Brand Collaboration on Facebook Fan Pages***

This section of findings was based on category 18 of Table 4.1. As shown in Figure 4.36, some posts (37%) communicated brand collaboration.

**Figure 4.36**

### ***Brand Collaboration on Facebook Fan Pages***

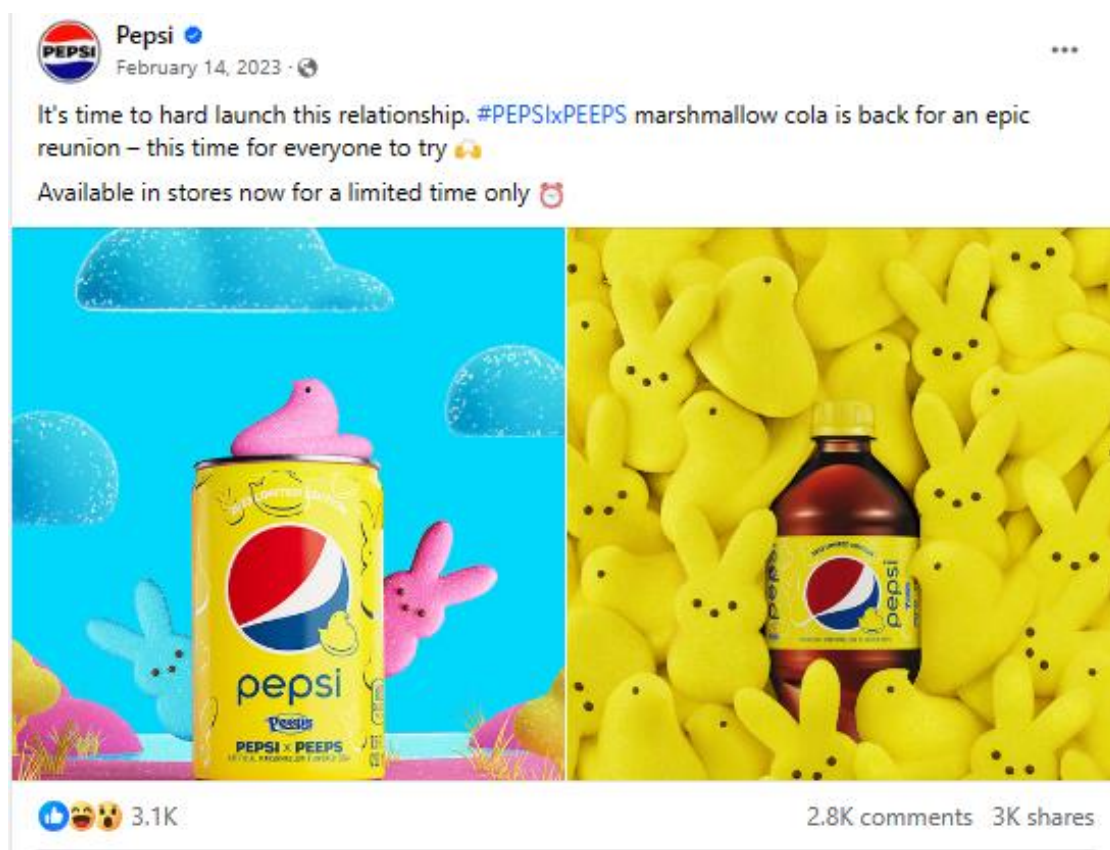


*Note.* The data visualization represents the number of posts that feature brand collaboration. See Table 4.1 for specific coding rules. The study is based on a sample of posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, as published on the official fan pages of beverage brands.

This category was not pre-defined in Chapter Three, and the researcher identified the category when a brand communicated a connection with a well-known person, an event, or another brand (see Table 4.1). For example, in Figure 4.10, Pepsi communicated a connection with a football team by becoming the official soft drink of the Buffalo Bills. In Figure 4.37, Pepsi communicated a connection with Peeps by releasing a shared product.

**Figure 4.37**

*Pepsi Personifies Itself and Collaborates with Peeps*



### Major Findings

As shown in Figure 4.1, promotional content had the strongest presence in the sample. Even so, as shown in Figure 4.2, promotional content was not always communicated alone. There was strong evidence for entertaining content (59%) and informative content (53%), too (see Figure 4.1). Regarding the traits communicated by brands, many well-received posts (56.5%) communicated positivity (see Figure 4.14) or at least some combination of traits including positivity (see Figure 4.16). Many well-received posts (57%) also personified a brand (see Figure 4.17).

As shown in Figure 4.22, nearly all posts (85%) used informal communication. Most of the sample communicated through the first- or third-person writing perspectives (see Figure

4.23). As shown in Figure 4.24, most well-received Facebook communication (67.5%) did not include any imperative verbs. Another notable finding, as represented in Figure 4.26, is the use of real-time marketing, which was recorded in many posts (56.5%).

Focusing more on how messages were communicated, many well-received posts (53.5%) used 99 characters or fewer (see Figure 4.27). Regarding the types of information resources, graphic information resources were always used to communicate (see Figure 4.30).

### **Summary**

In conclusion, multiple trends were uncovered through the content analysis. The next chapter will compare these findings to existing literature, as introduced Chapter Two. The next chapter will also interpret the findings of the study to answer the research questions. Social exchange theory will be applied to the relationship between brands and users on Facebook. Limitations and directions for future research will be discussed, as well.



## **Chapter Five: Interpretations, Recommendations, and Conclusions**

The researcher's purpose for this study was to address the possible failure of American beverage brands to strategically communicate on Facebook, which may result in a failure to engage with consumers on the social networking site. The goal of the dissertation was to learn how brands can strategically communicate on their fan pages to improve average engagement rate percentages. The current chapter restates the research questions for the study, then answers those questions based on the researcher's interpretation and compares the researcher's findings to previous literature. Limitations and recommendations are also discussed before concluding statements are provided.

### **Research Questions**

#### ***Research Question One***

What brand communication strategies promote the highest levels of engagement with Facebook users?

**Summary of Interpretations.** To answer the first research question, all communication content and delivery strategies identified in the sample were interpreted as high-value, even if a low frequency was recorded. This unique interpretation is based on the strict sample qualifications and social exchange theory. Only beverage brands with the most followers on Facebook, as determined by *Beverage Industry Magazine's* (2019) ranking, were selected for the study. Of these top-performing brands, only the posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages were analyzed. Simply being selected for the study meant that a post's communication strategies were successful. In other words, a certain communication strategy could have a low frequency, and the researcher still interpreted that strategy as highly-valued by users.

According to social exchange theory, the value of a reward (in this case the value of a communication strategy) is affected by how often that reward is given. If a reward is given too often, it will lose value. At the same time, if a reward is not given often enough, those receiving the reward will not be satisfied. To explain this concept, Homans (1958) referenced a behavioral psychology experiment involving pigeons. If a pigeon is given a piece of corn each time it pecks at a target, it will eventually stop pecking at the target when it becomes full, then resume pecking at the target when it becomes hungry again. With regard to human interaction, social exchange theory's roots in operant conditioning posit that a person's desire for a particular reward is contextual. Simply put, people's wants and needs change.

In communication, the goal is to determine what rewards a person wants and how often that person wants to receive each reward. If a certain reward (a certain communication strategy) has a high frequency in the sample, then that strategy has a high reinforcement rate, meaning it will take a high frequency of that reward to satisfy those receiving it (Homans, 1961).

Alternatively said, if the researcher recorded a stronger presence for a certain communication strategy, it suggests that Facebook users are willing to engage with that type of communication more often. Brands wanting to increase engagement should (theoretically) consider using communication strategies at the same or similar frequencies of those recorded.

### ***Research Question Two***

How can brand communication on Facebook be understood using social exchange theory?

**Summary of Interpretations.** From the perspective of a social exchange theorist, for a Facebook post to be well-received by users (have a high average engagement rate percentage), that post would need to communicate something of value. Social exchange theory is derived

from operant conditioning, which is when a reward or punishment becomes associated with a voluntary behavior (Cherry, 2023). Homans (1958) used slightly different terminology than behavioral psychology. Thus, the previous statement can be amended as follows: Derived from operant conditioning, social exchange theory is when a reward or cost becomes associated with a voluntary activity. In this case, the voluntary activity would be choosing to receive communication from a beverage brand (choosing to follow a beverage brand on Facebook). The reward associated with the voluntary activity, then, must be contained in the communication that users receive from a brand.

On a deeper level, a social exchange theorist can treat users' engagement with brands as a voluntary activity. Users learn to associate engagement (reacting to a post, commenting on a post, sharing a post) with a reward, which would be continuing to receive communication from a brand. Once again, the reason this communication from a brand is valuable is unclear. However, this communication must offer something of value. Expanding on operant conditioning, social exchange theory argues that relationships are perceived through costs and rewards. According to social exchange theory, Facebook users should strive to maximize their perceived profit in social exchanges, and this cannot happen without reward. After all, profit equals reward minus cost (Homans, 1961). As a result, the researcher sought to understand what made brand communication valuable to Facebook users—meaning the researcher sought to identify the rewards conveyed through the content and delivery of Facebook communication.

***Rewards, Distributive Justice, and Satisfaction.*** The term “rewards” is synonymous with “reinforcements” (Homans, 1961). This is because rewards reinforce activity. In a real exchange, both sides of an exchange have options and influence (Homans, 1958). On Facebook, a brand's activity reinforces users' activity and vice versa. All parties in an exchange must profit

(Boulding, 1955), so it is important to briefly recognize the rewards beverage brands seek. From the other side of the exchange, users' engagement with a post is a reward for brands, since this fosters brand awareness (Vertex Marketing Agency, 2020). Creating content on Facebook is a voluntary activity for brands, so users need to reinforce the activity if they want to keep receiving communication from those brands. According to social exchange theory, brands will not maintain an online relationship with users (continue posting on Facebook), if the reward of the exchange does not outweigh the cost. In terms of users' wants and needs, it should be noted that users do not want any and all communication from a brand. If that was the case, every post a brand created would receive the same amount of engagement.

Distributive justice argues that the cost a party pays should be proportional to the value of the reward received. The greater the cost a party pays, the greater the reward that party should receive (Homans, 1961). If engagement is a cost (discussed in the next section), then Facebook posts with the greatest engagement should have the greatest reward. Consequently, the researcher only analyzed the most well-received Facebook posts, specifically identifying what and how these posts communicated. This analysis allowed the researcher to learn what high-value rewards contained in brand communication were being reinforced by users. The researcher can also conclude that Facebook users are satisfied with the identified rewards. Homans (1961) stated that the greater a perceived reward's value, the greater the receiving party's satisfaction.

**Costs.** In social exchange theory, the term "costs" refers to punishments that are necessary for an exchange with positive reinforcement to take place. In other words, an exchange can simultaneously reward and punish a party. Indeed, one of the founders of social exchange theory speculated that all exchanges have costs, just as all exchanges have rewards. Furthermore, for a cost to exist, a party must voluntarily sacrifice an alternative and rewarding activity. Simply

put, by pursuing one reward, a party is choosing not to pursue an alternative reward. The more alternative activities a party must sacrifice, the higher the perceived cost of the activity pursued (Homans, 1961). Based on this reasoning, following a beverage brand on Facebook is costly in and of itself. There are seemingly endless brands to follow, and this abundance of alternatives raises the perceived cost of following any one brand. If profit equals reward minus cost (Homans, 1961), then for Facebook users to profit, any brand(s) followed must offer a greater reward or rewards. If the cost is greater than the reward, then users are more likely to pursue an alternative activity (follow a different brand). This explains how the number of people following a brand might fluctuate.

*Satiation.* As discussed earlier, the researcher chose to analyze Facebook posts with the highest engagement rate percentages. The purpose of this analysis was to identify the high-value rewards being reinforced by users. Before discussing these rewards any further, the rate of reinforcement needs to be addressed. Social exchange theory occurs when a reward becomes associated with a voluntary activity (Homans, 1958), but the ratio of activity for reward varies (Homans, 1961). If the researcher records a low frequency for a specific reward, it could simply mean that beverage brands do not offer that reward very often. It is possible that Facebook users may want more of a low-frequency reward, but it is also possible that beverage brands have identified the ideal rate of reinforcement for that specific reward. “The highest rates of emission are not obtained by regular, but by intermittent reinforcement, particularly reinforcement at a variable ratio” (Homans, 1961, p. 20).

If brand communication offers a specific reward too often, that reward will lose value to users, who will reinforce that reward less. A reward may receive higher levels of engagement at first but receive lower levels of engagement as it loses value. This concept refers to satiation or

the act of completely satisfying one's wants or needs (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). With that being said and interpreting all rewards as high-value because of the sample qualifications, the researcher explored the significance of each reward in relation to its reinforcement rate.

Assuming that reputable brands have the most successful social media strategies, as decided by Capriotti and Zeler (2020), the researcher further assumed that reputable brands will have the most accurate ideal rates of reinforcement. In an effort to increase social media engagement, other brands may want to consider adopting the communication strategies of these reputable brands.

## **Interpretations**

### ***The Types and Combinations of Content on Facebook Fan Pages***

Overall, it can be concluded that Facebook users are satisfied with communication that promotes specific products, entertains them, and/or keeps them informed about a brand.

**Promotional Content.** Most of the well-received posts on Facebook fan pages (64%) communicated promotional content, either in combination with (at least) one other type of content or on its own (see Figure 4.1). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jack Daniel's described its American Single Malt and provided information on where the product could be found (see Figure 4.3). Facebook users reinforced this promotional content (presented in combination with informative content) with high engagement, which indicated that they valued the content and wanted to receive more of it. For clarity, promotional content was defined as any post that featured a specific product (see Table 4.1). This means that, in simplest terms, Facebook users value content that featured (at least) one specific product. Based on social exchange theory, other brands may benefit from communicating promotional content in most posts.

The reinforcement of promotional content was a surprise, considering that the works of Diaz-Campo and Fernandez-Gomez (2019) and Hanifawati et al. (2019) seemingly contradict this finding. However, Homans (1961) would argue that no study can truly contradict the findings of another. Instead, different findings imply that there are differences between the studies. In this case, the seemingly contradictory findings may have resulted from sample differences. Diaz-Campo and Fernandez-Gomez (2019) studied the Facebook communication of Spanish toy manufacturers, whereas this dissertation analyzed the Facebook communication of American beverage brands. Meanwhile, Hanifawati et al. (2019) studied international food and beverage brands on Facebook. Differences in industry and culture could explain why the findings for the current study are different. In short, rather than say that the current study contradicts the findings of previous research, the researcher can only conclude that the findings of previous studies do not transfer to the Facebook communication of American beverage brands, specifically regarding users' reinforcement of promotional content.

**Entertaining Content.** Many well-received posts (59%) communicated entertaining content, either exclusively or in combination with (at least) one other type of content (see Figure 4.1). Discussed earlier in this dissertation, Starbucks used wordplay to promote its pumpkin spice latte (see Figure 4.7). The wordplay, in which "FALL" had a double meaning in reference to the fall season, gave the post a fun feeling encompassed by the research study's entertaining category. Entertaining content gives users a good feeling derived "from relaxation and fun" (Gummerus et al., 2012, p. 861). According to social exchange theory, the reinforcement of entertaining content suggests that Facebook users were clearly satisfied with entertaining content. Given the information here, it may indicate that brands should use Facebook posts that entertain users to increase engagement. Many entertaining posts by brands in the sample received

high engagement, so it is possible that Facebook posts can communicate this feeling of relaxation and fun without the content losing value.

Existing literature supports this finding (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Gummerus et al., 2012; Ruehl & Ingenhoff, 2015; Soukup, 2018) and showed the significance of communicating entertaining content on Facebook. The significance of entertainment as a reward is contextual (Gummerus et al., 2012), but entertainment has been identified as a reward for beverage brands and gaming brands on Facebook (Gummerus et al., 2012). It is possible that entertainment is a reward in other industries on Facebook, but this warrants further research.

**Informative Content.** The researcher defined informative content as posts that communicate about a brand's services, products, practices, and/or policies (see Table 4.1). Many posts in the sample (53%) informed users on a brand, although this was not always the only type of content communicated (see Figure 4.1). Recall Figure 4.10, in which Pepsi informed users how sauce could be added to Pepsi Zero Sugar. This communication approach, referred to by the researcher as "how-to" content, provided Facebook users with interesting ways to use a product. Thus, the post was both informative and promotional. Still, only a few posts (6.5%) were coded as "how-to" content, which suggested that the communication approach loses value quickly (see Figure 4.9). For brands that want to increase engagement with Facebook users, it may be beneficial to have many posts provide informative content, with only a few posts featuring "how-to" content. Users' satisfaction with informative content was supported by the findings of previous content analyses—specifically the work of Capriotti et al. (2019) and Diaz-Campo and Fernandez-Gomez (2019).

**CA- and CSR-Based Content.** As shown in Figure 4.1, some posts (36%) communicated corporate ability (CA) while few posts (8%) communicated corporate social



responsibility (CSR). CA-based content concerns users' perceptions of a brand's expertise, and CSR-based content concerns a brand's social obligations, as perceived by users (Haigh et al., 2013). These findings are supported by previous studies, which found that CA-based communication was more common than CSR-based communication on Facebook (Haigh et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2014). This demonstrates similarities across industries (Haigh et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2014).

Looking back at Figure 4.12, the quality of Jack Daniel's products was noted by multiple magazines. This recognition demonstrated the brand's corporate ability by indicating its expertise and industry leadership. Of course, CA can also be self-recognized. In Figure 4.13, Pepsi highlighted its own success and noted that the brand has survived 125 years. The reinforcement of CA-based content indicates that users want to know about a beverage brand's success. However, brands might benefit from moderation in communicating CA-based content in only some posts.

### ***Brand Communication Traits on Facebook Fan Pages***

Broadly speaking, three communication traits were observed: positivity, authenticity, and agreeableness.

**Positivity.** Many Facebook posts (56.5%) featured positive communication, whether exclusively or in combination with other traits (see Figures 4.14 and 4.16). The data indicate that users are satisfied with positive communication on Facebook and do not easily tire of the communication trait. This trait includes feelings of surprise, happiness, trust, pride, and more (see Table 4.1). As stated in Chapter Four, Figure 4.13 communicated happiness by including a picture of people smiling. A feeling of pride was also communicated in the text portion of the post. "When you turn 125, you can celebrate for as long as you want... so why not 125 days?"

(Pepsi, 2023b, para. 1). Clearly, Pepsi is proud of its success and unashamed to extend the celebration. Other brands should consider adopting positive communication for many posts, whether that positive emotion is happiness, pride, or something else.

The previous literature supports the results of the current study. For example, a recent study found that a Spanish energy brand tended to communicate positive emotions on Facebook (Moyaert et al., 2021). Notably, to determine the relevance of positive communication in different contexts, Moyaert et al.'s (2021) definition of positivity was used for the current study. Positivity was linked to Facebook engagement in other research, including in a study of Australian food and lifestyle brands (Klassen et al., 2018). While positive Facebook communication has been identified across different cultures and brands, the researcher cannot assume that users' satiation is universal. The findings may not apply to cultures beyond Spanish, Australian, and American.

**Authenticity.** Users were satisfied with some posts (26.5%) that communicated authenticity (see Figures 4.14 and 4.16). Table 4.1 defines authenticity as when transparency and honesty are communicated by a brand. Paraphrasing the example in the previous chapter, Monster Energy communicated authenticity through raw footage (<https://www.facebook.com/reel/802067981560122>). In the footage, the skateboarding tricks were unsuccessful at times, and showed the process behind (the attempts behind) success, thus communicating transparency and honesty. Other brands might benefit from communicating the effort behind success, as doing so in some posts demonstrates authenticity. Still, social exchange theory indicates that the value of authenticity will quickly decrease, which means that brands should be especially careful not to overuse the strategy.

In the current study, users' satisfaction with authenticity was not surprising. In studying an American brand, Garner (2022) wrote that consumers were attracted to authentic brands, and this aligns with the recommendations of other articles (Alhouti & Johnson, 2022; Partner, 2015; Samuel, 2017). Unfortunately, since authenticity is a factor in Facebook's algorithm (Meta, 2024a), there is always the possibility that posts in the current sample only received higher levels of engagement because of increased visibility. In other words, the higher ranking given to authentic posts (Meta, 2024a) may have affected the outcome of the current study. Of course, for brands hoping to increase their engagement with users, Facebook's algorithm is an important consideration. A post must ultimately be valuable to users and the algorithm for a brand to find success on Facebook.

**Agreeableness.** Users were satisfied with few posts (20%) communicating agreeableness (see Figures 4.14 and 4.16). Based on existing literature (Jeong et al., 2022; Men & Tsai, 2015), the researcher defined agreeableness as when empathy, support, and/or friendliness is communicated by a brand (see Table 4.1). As discussed in Chapter Four, the toast Jack Daniel's made in Figure 4.4 was an expression of best wishes. The brand was being friendly, supporting users by wishing them the best. Users valued this communication trait and engaged with it. Given this finding, other brands should consider using a few posts to communicate agreeableness. Users will become satisfied with agreeableness faster than the other communication traits (positivity and authenticity), which suggests that agreeable communication will become ineffective more quickly. Users' satisfaction with agreeableness in the current study is supported by another study, which found that American Facebook users respond well to brands that communicate in a warm, agreeable, and sociable manner (Jeong et al., 2022).

### ***Brand Personification and Human Interests on Facebook Fan Pages***

Many Facebook posts (57%) personified a brand, as shown in Figure 4.17. The researcher defined brand personification as when a brand acts human and/or encourages users to act as though the brand is human (see Table 4.1). In an example from Chapter Four, Starbucks directly claimed to have a personality (see Figure 4.18). In another example, Pepsi took brand personification a step further in Figure 4.6 by personifying its new product—Colachup. Pepsi wrote that the product was “every hot dog’s new BFF” (2023a, para. 1). By writing that hot dogs and Colachup are best friends forever (BFFs), it implies that it is wrong to keep the products apart. Users were encouraged to perceive and treat Colachup as human. In the current study, users valued and reinforced brand personification through engagement, which suggests that users want to interact with human-like brands. Based on this information, it may indicate that a brand can benefit from personifying itself and its products in many posts.

As shown in Figure 4.19, many posts (52.5%) communicated specific human interests. By doing so, brands may be perceived as having those human interests, thus contributing to brand personification. Additionally, it is possible that these human interests reflect each brand’s niche audience. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Monster Energy posted about a popular racing event (see Figure 4.20). The brand’s interest in motorcycle racing is undeniable, as the post includes the significance of an athlete’s performance (an athlete that the brand sponsors). The brand’s knowledge and clear support of motorcycle racing further authenticated the interest, making Monster Energy appear human—after all, it takes a human to have human interests. The data indicate that users value posts featuring human interests, and it takes many posts for users to be satisfied with the reward. Brands may also want to consider communicating human

interests they have an authentic interest in, as this authenticity will be noticeable in how the brand communicates.

The significance of brand personification was highlighted in Chen et al.'s (2015) study, which included a sample of brands from around the world. Most of these global brands (60.5%) communicated distinct personalities on Facebook, usually through the first- or second-person writing perspective. Regarding the human interests featured within Facebook posts, Garner's (2022) advice for brands to have the same personal values as their target audiences aligns with the conclusions of the current study.

### ***Formal and Informal Communication on Facebook Fan Pages***

As shown in Figure 4.22, nearly all well-received posts (85%) included informal communication. Based on the definition of informal communication in the existing literature (Gretry et al., 2017; Sanders et al., 2019), some possible indicators of informal communication included the use of informal vocabulary, punctuation, and pronouns (see Table 4.1). Paraphrasing an example from the previous chapter, multiple indicators of informal communication were observed in Figure 4.15. From contractions to abbreviations, Starbucks fully embraced informal communication. If a brand only included a single indicator of informal communication, it might be interpreted as forced or unnatural. Other brands should consider communicating informally in nearly all posts, ideally using a variety of informal indicators. Comparatively, only a few posts (15%) communicated formally with users (see Figure 4.22). This suggests that users value formal communication, but they want more informal communication.

Facebook users' satisfaction with informal communication is supported by the existing literature. For example, a global study found that most Facebook posts used informal pronouns (Chen et al., 2015). The researcher could speculate the underlying reason users value informal

communication, but this is not necessary because Homans (1961) emphasized the importance of observable behavior. For the purposes of the current study, it does not matter why users value informal communication—only that users do value informal communication.

### ***Calls to Action on Facebook Fan Pages***

Other brands may improve their social media communication by (for the most part) avoiding calls to action. Most well-received posts (67.5%) lacked a call to action (see Figure 4.24). For clarity, the researcher defined a call to action as any post that directly prompted users to act (see Table 4.1). Based on this definition, a post can lack a call to action and still be coded as promotional. For instance, Pepsi did not use any imperative verbs while promoting Colachup in Figure 4.6. Yet, a specific product (Colachup) was promoted in the post.

Posts that communicated calls to action were identified in the sample, which meant that calls to action were valued by users (unless affected by Facebook’s algorithm). Still, social exchange theory suggests that the value of these posts decreases faster than communication that avoids calls to action. For posts that did include calls to action (specifically calls to purchase a product), Facebook users tended to reinforce communication that avoided promotional language. In Figure 4.25, Starbucks encouraged users to “discover” not “buy” its products. Obviously, users must purchase a product to truly “discover” it, and this emphasizes the importance of *how* a message is delivered. Compared to Figure 4.6, Figure 4.25 featured more direct communication. Starbucks pressured users to make a purchase while still downplaying its intent to make a profit. The data imply that brands should only communicate calls to action some of the time, with nearly all posts trying to minimize the pressure brands put on users.

The low reinforcement of calls to action is supported by Earls (2012), who wrote that successful brands on Facebook (specifically British hospitality brands) took a more subtle

approach to marketing communication. However, Facebook's algorithm may have affected the results of both studies. Facebook's algorithm assigns value to posts, then gives posts with the most value the most visibility and hence a greater potential to accumulate engagement (Mullery, 2023). Deeming promotional content as low-value, the algorithm reduces the visibility of promotional posts (Rowlson, 2015).

Williams (2023) believed that Facebook may use promotional language and links to product pages to identify promotional content, and this might explain how the promotional content in the current study managed to receive higher levels of engagement—the brands in the sample typically avoided calls to action, especially calls to action that used promotional language (see Figure 4.24). As a result, the algorithm would not have identified the posts as promotional, even though they featured specific products. This would also explain Earls' (2012) findings, since brands that used a subtle approach to marketing communication would receive more visibility. Assuming Williams' (2023) theory is correct, then the current study's definition of promotional content does not match that of Facebook's, which may be the reason why "promotional content" in the current study managed to receive high levels of engagement. As listed in Table 4.1, the researcher defined promotional content as when one or more specific products and/or services were featured within a post.

In summary, because of the influence of Facebook's algorithm, the researcher cannot confidently interpret the value users' place on calls to action—whether high or low. If American beverage brands are avoiding promotional language to bypass Facebook's algorithm, then the low frequency of posts communicating calls to action may not reflect the preferred rewards of users in the current sample. Even so, the preferred rewards of Facebook's algorithm are equally

important in a successful social media strategy since brands must communicate through the algorithm.

### ***Real-Time Marketing on Facebook Fan Pages***

As defined in Table 4.1, real-time marketing occurred when a current or upcoming event was referenced by a brand. As shown in Figure 4.26, many posts in the sample (56.5%) featured real-time marketing, and this implies that other brands may benefit from communicating about current or upcoming events. Users value when brands recognize the world around them. Other brands can (theoretically) apply real-time marketing to many Facebook posts before the communication strategy loses effectiveness and no longer leads to high levels of engagement.

More specifically, many posts in the sample (40.5%) referenced events that were predictable and ending (see Figure 4.26). In the previous chapter, Figure 4.21 was used as an example. In the post, Starbucks referenced the fall season—a predictable event with start and end dates. The official start of the season was September 23, so the post technically referenced an upcoming event. Even so, Starbucks' pumpkin spice latte (the brand's famous fall beverage) had its annual release in August. The brand, like its followers, could not wait until the official start of fall and shared its excitement for the upcoming event. Other brands should consider planning social media communication around predictable and ending events to increase engagement, whether during the time of the event or in advance. Mazerant et al.'s (2022) study on top-ranking brands found that real-time marketing increased engagement on Twitter, and the same is true for American beverage brands on Facebook, per the current study.

### ***Character Count on Facebook Fan Pages***

The ideal character range for social media communication is affected by a message's content and format (Guo & Sun, 2020). Hanifawati et al.'s (2019) international study found that



posts with 99 characters or fewer received higher levels of engagement. Other industry reports limited this range further and suggested that the best length for a Facebook post is 50 characters or fewer (Guo & Sun, 2020). Meanwhile, Mariani et al.'s (2016) study on the Italian tourist industry expanded the ideal range and wrote that Facebook posts should be approximately 200 characters for optimal engagement.

Only including posts with the highest average engagement rate percentages, the current study identified communication across different ranges as high value. As shown in Figure 4.27, many posts in the sample (46.5%) had 100 characters or more and many posts in the sample (53.5%) had fewer than 100 characters.

But rather than recommend a specific character count, the variety of character ranges observed prompts the researcher to support Guo and Sun's (2020) stance: "For media professionals, the bottom line is that an ideal post length should be brief enough to be quick to read, but long enough to offer useful details..." (p. 751). For instance, Figure 4.3 has a longer character count, but this is necessary for Jack Daniel's to properly describe its new product—American Single Malt. Longer character counts allow a post to be more detailed (Cuevas-Molano et al., 2022; Sebate et al., 2014). The purpose of Figure 4.4, on the other hand, is not to describe a product. Instead, Jack Daniel's simply wants to associate its product (Gentleman Jack) with the wedding season. This required a shorter character count. Simply put, brands should consider adjusting communication length to support the purpose of each post.

### ***The Timing of Communication on Facebook Fan Pages***

Most posts in the sample (78%) were published on a weekday (see Figure 4.28). In taking a closer look at the data, every day of the week had relatively the same number of well-received posts. This indicates that content received on a weekday is not more likely to receive higher

levels of engagement. The approximately equal reinforcement of communication published throughout the week suggests roughly equal value. Of course, there are factors that can affect ideal posting times, such as current events. In Figure 4.20, Monster Energy announced the results of a sporting event on the day of the event, which happened to be a Saturday. If the brand waited to discuss the results of the sporting event, the excitement around Eli Tomac's victory may have decreased, especially if news of his victory was already received from another source.

The data are somewhat supported by Hanifawati et al.'s (2019) research on international food and beverage brands, since both studies connected weekday communication to high levels of engagement. At the same time, the data are somewhat supported by Mariani et al.'s (2016) research, which found that posts received high levels of engagement on the weekend.

### ***Types and Combinations of Information Resources Used to Communicate on Facebook Fan Pages***

As mentioned in the literature review, Facebook communication can be aided with any combination of graphic, interactive, and/or audiovisual information resources.

**Graphic Information Resources.** Examples of graphic information resources include text, images, emojis, and animated images (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). Through the content analysis, the researcher found that every post in the sample used at least one type of graphic information resource (see Figure 4.30). While this implies that graphic information resources are valued by users and can seemingly never be used too often, it is important to note that these graphic information resources were typically used in combination with other information resources. This is supported by Capriotti and Zeler's (2020) recommendation to aid communication with a combination of information resources to increase engagement.

Focusing on the types of graphic information resources, and as shown in Figure 4.32, nearly all posts (93.5%) featured text, most posts (64.5%) featured at least one image, and most posts (60.5%) featured at least one emoji. This leads the researcher to conclude that other brands may benefit from social media strategies that rely heavily on these types of graphic information resources. Revisiting Figure 4.8, Starbucks used all three types of graphic information resources to promote its new lemonades. The information resources strategically supported one another, as well. In the text portion of the post, Starbucks named its new lemonades (Frozen Pineapple Passionfruit Lemonade, Frozen Mango Dragonfruit Lemonade, and Frozen Strawberry Açai Lemonade). An image is provided to show what the drinks look like, further informing users about the products. The heart emojis (located within the text portion of the post) even matched the colors of the drinks listed, and this allowed users to match specific product names to their images.

The reinforcement of these graphic information resources is supported by existing literature. For instance, Capriotti and Zeler (2020) found that nearly all Facebook posts (97%) included text and most Facebook posts ( $\approx 70\%$ ) included at least one image. Commenting on the findings' generalizability, this demonstrates a similarity between global and American brands. Spanish toy manufacturers (Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019), American news stations (Guo & Sun, 2020), and Italian tourist organizations (Mariani et al., 2016) increased engagement with images, too.

Although the use of images on Facebook fan pages has been connected across a variety of cultures and industries, researchers and marketers should not assume that these cultures and industries have identical communication strategies. The remaining type of graphic information resource reinforced in the current study (emojis) is an excellent example. Studying a global

sample, Capriotti and Zeler (2020) found that almost none of their sample (4%) used emojis. Diaz-Campo and Fernandez-Gomez (2019) found that Spanish toy manufacturers communicated with emojis more often (24%), but this does not come close to the percentage of posts that used emojis in the current study.

Meanwhile, the most well-received Facebook posts by beverage brands never used animated images, which leads the researcher to conclude that this type of graphic information resource is not highly valued by beverage brand followers. This is supported by Capriotti and Zeler's (2020) global study, which found animated images to be the least-used resource to aid brand communication. Still, it is strange that the graphic information resource was never reinforced by brands in the current sample, considering an animated image's ability to effectively communicate thoughts and emotions (Balkhi, 2019).

**Interactive Information Resources.** As for interactive information resources, Facebook examples included hashtags, user tags, and links (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020). Many well-received posts (53.5%) included one or more hashtags (see Figure 4.33). From a theoretical standpoint, this means that many posts can include hashtags before the reward becomes ineffective. Given the information here, it may indicate that other brands may increase engagement by including hashtags in many posts. This is supported by Capriotti and Zeler's (2020) study, which also found that approximately half of reputable brands around the world used at least one hashtag.

In Figure 4.33, user tags were reinforced to a lesser extent (25%). Based on social exchange theory, other brands should consider incorporating user tags in only some posts. The low reinforcement of user tags suggests that users want less of this type of interactive information resource, but the reward is still valued by users on some occasions. Regarding the previous studies, approximately 24% of global brands (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020) and

approximately 15% of posts by a Spanish brand (Moyaert et al., 2021) incorporated at least one user tag (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020).

According to Figure 4.33, only a few posts (7%) included links, implying that the best social media strategy for brands is to focus more on the other interactive information resources. Although links have been shown to reduce other forms of engagement for American news stations (Guo & Sun, 2020) and Spanish travel agencies on Facebook (Sebate et al., 2014), Capriotti and Zeler's (2020) global study found that more than half of Facebook communication by reputable brands featured a link. This demonstrates the limited generalizability of the current study's findings.

Like graphic information resources, the different types of interactive information resources work together to support the goal(s) of a post. For example, consider Figure 5.1. In the post, Monster Energy collaborated with Call of Duty—a video game franchise. Every interactive information resource in the post emphasized the collaboration between the brands. Monster Energy and Call of Duty were both tagged in the post which signified that the brands were approaching consumers as one. Each brand also received a hashtag, and the link at the end of the post included the names of both brands. For other brands, using a strategic combination of interactive information resources may also benefit social media communication.

**Figure 5.1**

*Monster Energy Collaborates with Call of Duty Through a Variety of Interactive and Graphic Information Resources*


**Monster Energy** September 5, 2023

Monster Energy 🏆 Call of Duty

IT'S GO TIME. 🔥 Grab custom #MonsterEnergy #MW3 cans and ready up...  
 Visit [CallOfDuty.MonsterEnergy.com](https://CallOfDuty.MonsterEnergy.com) to learn more.





 5.9K

642 comments 531 shares

More broadly speaking, graphic and interactive information resources can be combined to improve online communication. As mentioned, different types of information resources are typically used in combination (see Figure 4.31). To be more specific, most well-received posts in the current study (64%) used a combination of graphic and interactive information resources. Returning to Figure 5.1, two emojis (a right-facing fist and left-facing fist) were placed between page tags. This made it look like the two brands were doing a fist bump—a friendly gesture—and further emphasized collaboration between Monster Energy and Call of Duty. Other brands may increase engagement by using a variety of graphic and interactive resources to communicate, always keeping in mind the goal of a specific post. However, only some posts (25%) used a combination of audiovisual resources, suggesting that American beverage brands (and possibly other brands) should be careful to avoid overusing this type of combination (see Figure 4.31).

### ***Communicating Feelings and/or Experiences on Facebook Fan Pages***

A category that emerged during the content analysis, the communication of feelings and/or experiences, was not predicted in Table 3.2. Later added to Table 4.1, the researcher defined this category as when a brand communicated a feeling and/or experience to users. With many posts (47.5%) meeting this criteria (see Figure 4.34), social exchange theory posits that these feelings and/or experiences can be communicated in many posts without engagement decreasing. In the previous chapter, Figure 4.35 was used as an example. In the post, Starbucks mentioned the feeling of its customer service experience. That feeling is the focus of the post—not the promotion of a specific product. In other words, the brand is promoting an experience instead of a product. The second-person perspective allows Facebook users to be the center of attention and better identify with the post. “The confidence you feel after being hyped up by your

barista” (Starbucks, 2023b, para. 1). It is reasonable to assume that users following a brand have experienced that brand’s customer service—especially when products are typically purchased in-person. Based on this information, other brands should consider communicating the intangible rewards they can offer consumers. This may include relatable experiences with a brand.

Existing literature has explored users living vicariously through Facebook (Marder et al., 2019) and connecting with other Facebook users through shared experiences (Tadros et al., 2023). Even so, the researcher was unable to locate any articles connecting the communication of feelings and/or experiences to Facebook engagement.

### ***Brand Collaboration on Facebook Fan Pages***

The theme of brand collaborations on Facebook fan pages was unexpected, as the researcher did not identify this theme while exploring the related literature for this dissertation. A brand collaboration, as the name suggests, is when two or more brands form a mutually beneficial relationship (Kenan, 2023). Table 4.1 expanded on this definition and explained that a brand collaboration is when a brand communicates a connection with at least one well-known person, event, or brand. For example, two brands can collaborate on a product, sometimes referred to as co-branding. These collaborations can increase brand awareness and revenue, making them a promising option for marketing communication (Kenan, 2023).

In the current study, some Facebook posts (37%) communicated brand collaborations (see Figure 4.36). Introduced in Chapter Four, Figure 4.37 is an excellent example of brand collaboration between Pepsi and Peeps—a candy brand. Compared to Figure 5.1, Figure 4.37 takes a more human approach. Announced on Valentine’s Day, the shared product (a marshmallow cola) is treated as a romantic relationship. The post indicates that Pepsi and Peeps have a true connection. By sometimes communicating a connection with another brand, a brand



may improve engagement on Facebook and possibly contribute to brand personification through brand relationships—whether romantic or friendly.

### **Limitations**

As a qualitative study, the current findings are limited to the researcher's interpretation. Moreover, like all research, the current study has contextual limitations (Rahman, 2017). The researcher may not have identified every factor affecting the study. The necessary assumptions for the research further limit the study. For example, the researcher assumed that reputable brands had the most successful social media strategies. This assumption is based on existing literature (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020), but it cannot be proven. Additionally, while engagement has been connected to consumer purchases (Hanifawati et al., 2019), it is always possible that brands can increase engagement without increasing consumer purchases.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As comparisons to previous research have shown, a study's findings cannot be generalized—additional research is always needed to determine if findings are relevant in other contexts. The current study may have been supported by the findings of previous literature (Alhouti & Johnson, 2022; Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Capriotti et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2015; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Earls, 2012; Garner, 2022; Guo & Sun, 2020; Haigh et al., 2013; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Jeong et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2014; Klassen et al., 2018; Mariani et al., 2016; Mazerant et al., 2022; Moyaert et al., 2021; Partner, 2015; Samuel, 2017; Sebate et al., 2014), and this is promising regarding the relevance of the findings in other contexts, but generalizability should not be assumed. For instance, the current study found that Capriotti and Zeler's (2020) findings only somewhat transferred to the communication of

American beverage brands on Facebook. Future research should examine the relevance of these findings in other contexts.

### **Recommendations for Future Practice**

To reiterate, the interpretations of the current study are grounded in theory, meaning that the researcher cannot guarantee that her recommendations will increase social media engagement. Moreover, these communication practices interact in complex ways and should be strategically applied based on each post's unique purpose.

Given this information, American beverage brands on Facebook (and possibly brands in other contexts) may encourage engagement by communicating combinations of different types of content. According to the data, the best social media strategy is mostly composed of promotional content, with many posts communicating informative and/or entertaining content. CA-based content and CSR-based content may encourage engagement, but these types of content should be more limited. Brands may also benefit from including positive communication traits in many posts, with some of these posts including authentic and/or agreeable communication traits.

Additionally, many posts in the sample communicated brand personification through human interests. For other brands wanting to try this strategy, they should consider that an authentic interest in a topic will be apparent in the knowledge and support communicated. Moreover, many well-received posts in the sample acknowledged current events through real-time marketing—a strategy other brands may want to consider. Brand collaborations may be another good option for brands wanting to increase social media engagement.

Regarding how messages are delivered, successful brands in the sample communicated informally in nearly all posts. For brands adopting this approach, it is recommended that a variety of informal indicators are applied to avoid the message being interpreted as forced. The

data indicate that nearly all posts should minimize the pressure put on Facebook users, too. This can be done by avoiding imperative verbs.

The ideal publishing time and length of a post is contextual. For brands wanting to increase engagement, it may be best to consider the purpose of each post and then make decisions from there. Finally, brands may improve their social media communication by combining graphic and interactive information resources for most posts.

### **Theoretical/Methodological Implications**

The researcher explored how social exchange theory, which Homans thoroughly introduced in 1961, might still be relevant today. The theory possibly explains how Facebook users engage with brand communication. Regarding the methodological implications of the current study, future content analyses should continue to use definitions and measurements of existing studies. Qualitative research is based on unique interpretations, but using existing definitions and measurements can help future findings be comparable to previous literature.

### **Conclusions**

The current study's findings are largely supported by existing literature, although a handful of previous findings do not match the Facebook communication of American beverage brands (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020; Diaz-Campo & Fernandez-Gomez, 2019; Guo & Sun, 2020; Hanifawati et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016; Willemsen et al., 2018). Overall, from a theoretical perspective, a variety of communication content and delivery strategies are needed to increase and maintain social media engagement. The data imply that brands should consider using some strategies more often, but all strategies identified in the study have the potential to improve a brand's average engagement rate percentages. By applying the right strategies at the right

intervals, it is possible for American beverage brands to strategically communicate and find success on Facebook.

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