

Social media activities of small and medium-sized enterprises – Study of a meme portal that became a brand

The digital space offers an outstanding possibility for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to an effective marketing communication activity, despite their general lack of resources. One such peculiar opportunity is a unique, direct communication style that might bring the organization closer to their consumers. Our study investigates a sample of 90 social media posts of a renowned Hungarian meme portal that has become, over time, an SME brand. The aim of our research is to investigate a brand communication strategy heavily focused on content generation, with special emphasis on the contradiction between a business context and the remains of social criticism of the late meme portal status. Our results show that the elements that made the brand known (meme status) are hardly sustainable when in the center of a brand communication strategy: the page's followers are confronted with a number of contradictions, which is unavoidably leading the brand to reconsider, at some point, their content strategy and even to reevaluate the unique tone at the origin of the initial success.

1. Specific characteristics of small and medium-sized enterprises' marketing communications

Small and medium-sized enterprises (hereafter: SMEs) as peculiar economic agents operate under completely different capabilities and conditions than large corporations (Gáti, 2016). According to Simpson et al. (2006) SME's course of business is largely influenced by the goals of the owner and/or the narrower management with the company. For this reason, the literature often makes a parallel between SMEs' performance and entrepreneurial behavior. Another peculiar feature of SME marketing is that the management or the owner themselves often lack the set of skills than can be defined as marketing competences (Carson – Gilmore, 2000). In their first (start-up) stage of operation SMEs tend to focus on their product or service and building business networks and awareness as these factors directly contribute to the success and future of their business. For this reason, most SMEs fall short of using the elements of marketing in an informed and purposeful way. Moreover, as in this stage of development their operating costs often exceeds revenues, SMEs are economically unable to apply price promotions on a wide scale therefore their communications often focus on putting an emphasis in other ways on the actual added value elements of their product or service.

When it comes to marketing activities (may they be labelled as such or not), SMEs are often compelled to apply a more characteristic and distinctive strategy, for instance, as a part of a niche strategy (Kohn, 1997), by appealing to consumers' social and psychological needs by creating a powerful and convincing company image (image differentiation). Digital media brought about an outstanding opportunity for SMEs to operate a marketing communications activity efficiently and share their brand story with prospective consumers with lesser effort, in spite of their limited resources. Storytelling can be characterized as a potentially effective tool of image differentiation by, instead of enumerating a product or service's specific features or benefits, places a story at the focus of a brand's position (Ringer – Thibodeau, 2008). Brands can further profit from storytelling: a brand story is directly related to brand experience thanks to which a brand's essence, its value system, or philosophy can be expressed and emphasized through a well-constructed story, language use, figures of speech, and roles. Consumers can feel part of the story if the brand establishes and maintains contact with them through and across its storytelling. All in all, this contributes to a company message being better embedded in consumers' memories (Singh – Sonnenburg, 2012). Online buzz about a brand generated by consumers is a cost-effective way of gaining brand awareness and equally to counter the effects of double jeopardy (Ehrenberg et al., 1990) to which SMEs are particularly subject to.

Consumer can also visit a company's or brand's social media pages voluntarily for various reasons (Markos-Kujbus et al., 2015) (e.g. information search, reinforcing prior positive experience, social conformity etc.) making company messages on these platforms less intrusive. Moreover, users who visit a company social media page with the express aim of self-entertainment can be perceived as more open to company messages on these platforms. Moreover, in virtual communities built around shared experiences and lifestyles – such as brand communities, and even brand pages in social media with a strong social activity – brand building is possible if a brand's message can be inserted into the related community's self-identity and the brand's marketing activity is perceived as legitimate in connection with the community's purpose (Csordás, 2013).

2. Internet memes as community integrators

As a form of “parasitic art” (Katyal, 2010) internet memes use original texts and images as tools to communicate new messages. As up-to-date pieces of information reflecting to topical events, internet memes share a lot of similarities with gossip. They often tend to essentialize, oversimplify and exaggerate the themes and topics they address. Internet memes are the imprint of a peculiar (simple, yet extremely expressive) representation of their creators' realities: they are based on seized, spontaneous, unsolicited, but thereby also authentic moments (Csordás et al., 2017). As part of a “vernacular creativity” (Russo, 2009: 125) internet memes are a cultural dialect on their own, with their own “linguistic” rules, thus spreading often through homogenous (virtual) communities in the form of texts

often understandable only to insiders (e.g. inside jokes, intertextuality). The spread of internet memes is therefore largely dependent upon a common shared knowledge (signs, images, texts bearing meaning to the target audiences) that can engender individuals' associations of ideas and thereby the processes of collective creativity and the appearance of ideas in new contexts.

In the internet folk's own perception, a meme can generally be any entertaining amateur(-like) visual or audiovisual content found on the internet that share "common characteristics of form, content, and/or stance, [and which are] created with an awareness of" other similar items (Shifman, 2014: 41). The founding impulse (e.g. an image or video) of an internet meme can circulate the web for years unchanged (or with little change) to then be made famous by popular creativity. On the other side, quickly losing its topicality, a meme generally does not live past a few weeks or months. A few successful memes can, nonetheless, be part of internet culture for years.

In the study of memes as visual cultural units on the internet, Wiggins and Bowers (2015) offer a hierarchical system of the process of memetization. According to this, successful contents are initially in a (1) maintenance mode. In this phase the basic requirement for memetization is fulfilled, namely that a content is worthy of interest, and therefore, spreadable. This means that a content is already present and shared in social media as viral content, yet in a passive way, i.e. it remains largely unchanged. In a second step, once the fame is activated, and the original content is not only rapidly disseminated but also imitated and altered in numbers by popular creative efforts, it becomes an (2) emergent meme. The status of (3) (genuine) meme is then reached with subsequent critical mass. The content the meme is based upon is universal in this stage, i.e. becomes an integral part of the culture of a wider community. At the same time, it is largely devoid of its original context and meaning, making its spread self-serving. Parallel to this classification, Csordás et al. (2015) suggest a four-stage model of the life cycle of internet memes: (1) birth, (2) transformation, (3) diffusion, (4) appeasement. The four stages represent varying contexts and participating actors in, and activities required to the development of internet memes. This model also takes into account the end of a meme, that is, when they "burst like a bubble when their limits and interest are overstrained", leaving only the most successful endure in consumers' memories. The life stages of internet memes can help understand and illustrate the role of important cultural milestones for members of a community as responses to the evolving world, which, ultimately, can also be reflected on "traditional" memes, such as fashion or culture itself – and brands.

3. Goals, methodology and sample characteristics of the study

An observational netnography (Kozinets, 2006) was selected as the empirical methodology for the present study. A sample was taken from one of Hungary's most popular social media pages. Its particularity is that after its debut, in 2012, as a socially critical Facebook page for entertaining purposes grew itself into an economically

meaningful, successful SME brand to, by 2016, sell merchandise, operate wine stands at festivals and ultimately to open a real-life bar, while at the same time remaining a content provider with one of the highest perceived credibility among Hungarian internet users. Another characteristic feature of the brand is that it can be interpreted as an evolving memplex (i.e. a meme that can be broken down to several other memes) (Shifman, 2014) and as a brand story. Indeed, since its inception, it focuses on the fictitious character of a politically incorrect, drunken rural priest, shedding a critical light upon topics such as alcoholism or greediness.

The main goal of the study is to examine the brand communication of a SME characteristically built around content creation, with special emphasis on the contradictory relationship between its main economic activity (operating a pub) and its original, socially critical tone (among others: towards alcohol consumption). Thus the following research questions were addressed:

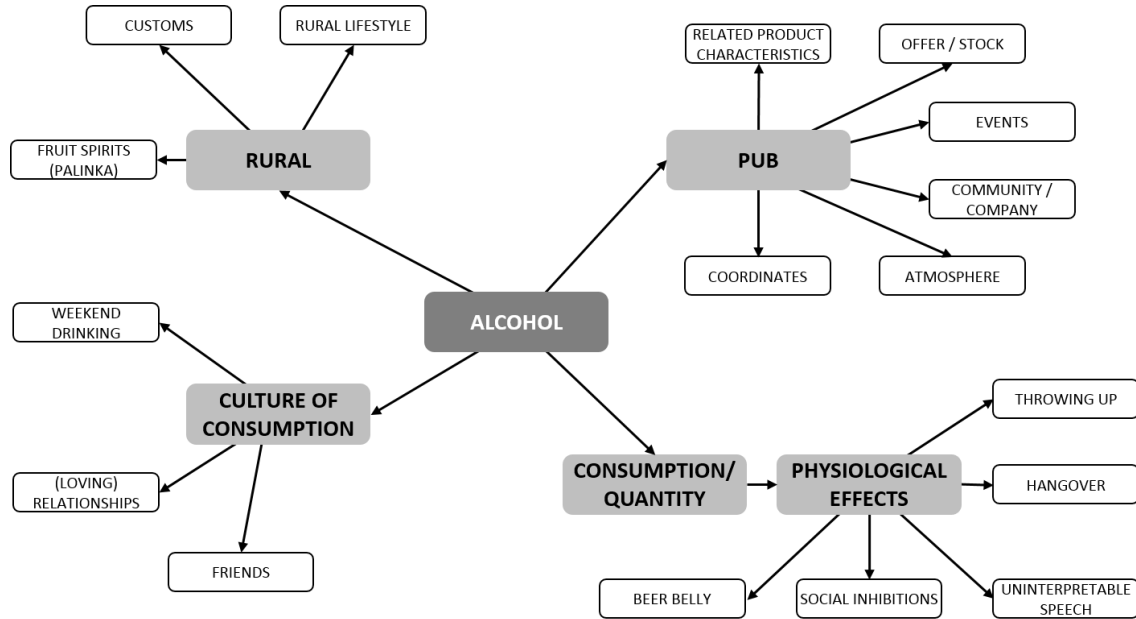
RQ1: *What is the nature of the relationship between the brand and its social message (here: alcohol consumption)?*

RQ2: *Does social media content contribute to purchase intention? (RQ2a: If no, what can be observed as the main goal of posted content, and ultimately, the brand?)*

Within the netnography, an online content analysis was applied on a sample of 184 Facebook posts. The content analysis included the text of the post, the posted image that most often accompanied it (in most cases: an internet meme generated by the brand with a watermark to visually identify the brand), and also user comments below the posts. Brand posts from April 2016 were sampled. The choice of the year and month is explained by the fact that the brand, its marketing communications, and social media activity were reinforced in 2016. Bearing in mind the focus of the present study, the sample was refined to a pool of 90 posts in order to offer a more relevant and homogenous environment of analysis. Thus were only kept in the sample posts that turned out to be independent of the brand's social role and were directly related to alcohol consumption.

4. Alcohol consumption in internet memes generated by an SME brand

The analyzed sample was quite varied in the ways that the consumption of alcohol appeared and which of its motives was emphasized. A number of characteristic uses were observed in the study: one part was related to the phenomenon itself of alcohol consumption and the subsequent social message, while in another part, unsurprisingly, the services offered by the brand (i.e. the pub) were emphasized (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The most common associations to alcohol in the sample (n = 90)

Source: own elaboration

Among the posts in the sample related to the services offered by the brand, a majority focus on the events organized by the brand, the physical coordinates and accessibility of the establishment, or its opening times. Beyond such informative posts, products related to the establishment are also mentioned in brand messages. Service offers often appear in the textual parts of posts with the related visual content in the form of an internet meme serving as emphasis to the message. Being a pub, such posts are often related to the food offer of the establishment, the possibility to consume wine or spritzers (9 posts), beer (2 posts), or fruit spirits (pálinka) (5 posts). Interestingly, posts in the sample do not provide information on the quality of the products offered, nor on their price. Instead, they only make mentions to them through the accompanying visuals using associations of ideas and piggybacking (see below).

This finding supports and contradicts at the same time the results by Markos-Kujbus et al. (2015) who find that information needs are a key pragmatic motivating factor for users in visiting service providers' social media pages. The Facebook page, a "meme-become-business", offers a surprisingly high amount of similar contents, at the expense of the distinctive, niche strategy that its special condition and history could suggest. The fact that only a selected pool of information are offered does not cover the entirety of prospective customers' information needs. Hence, a preliminary sign of the lack of marketing (communications) competences, here manifested in the inability to find a right balance between "hard selling" and storytelling. At the same time, such messages can be assumed to grab the target group's interest by offering a loose thematic connection to alcohol consumption as a social activity. This can be another reason for the texts of posts in the sample often being in relative discord with the accompanying visual cues: the

pieces of entertaining visual content in the sample most often act as instruments for the establishment to share basic information related to the business (e.g. opening times, promotions).

One part of posts related to alcohol consumption in the sample emphasize the importance of friends and relationships, or a good atmosphere. While these are expressed through humor and associations of ideas related to other brands (mostly: internet memes using still images of famous movies or series as templates), they might stir positive associations and attitudes towards the focal brand by dint of being entertaining to the audience. At the same time, many of these relationship-related messages are, once again, associated not only to the general social institution of drinking, but to the focal brand (pub) directly via the textual part of the post. These cases were identified as potentially harmful to the SME brand for several reasons.

First, a number of images in the sample address the relaxing effect of alcohol and the subsequent facility of making friends. It is worth mentioning that in these stimuli, humor is called upon to signify the veritable effects of the eventual abuse of alcohol on consumers' social skills. In the case of the focal brand, this can be interpreted as a social critique with an educational goal. Thus, on one hand, this indeed can direct the attention of the audience to suggest that moderate alcohol consumption provides a more appropriate and enjoyable experience. In case of a highly positioned establishment inviting to a "normal", "cultured" consumption, the social message is concordant with the business message thereby providing mutual assistance.

On the other hand, this strategy can also shed a bad light on the brand when consumers perceive a contrarian meaning between the respective message of the content provider as a brand and as a social critic. Hence, if the establishment operated by the brand is defined as a simple pub (as, incidentally, is suggested by the texts in the sample), its social media communications ought to encourage consumption. Humor used in the images would serve greatly the aforementioned goal to raise awareness to the establishment by entertaining the audience if there weren't an embedded social critique to the enclosed image, contradicting the information provided by the texts. The issue is aggravated by the fact that based on their superficial message, most analyzed posts can seem *permissive* towards the otherwise damaging social activity (excessive alcohol consumption), e.g. by highlighting its ritual nature (Mitev, 2006).

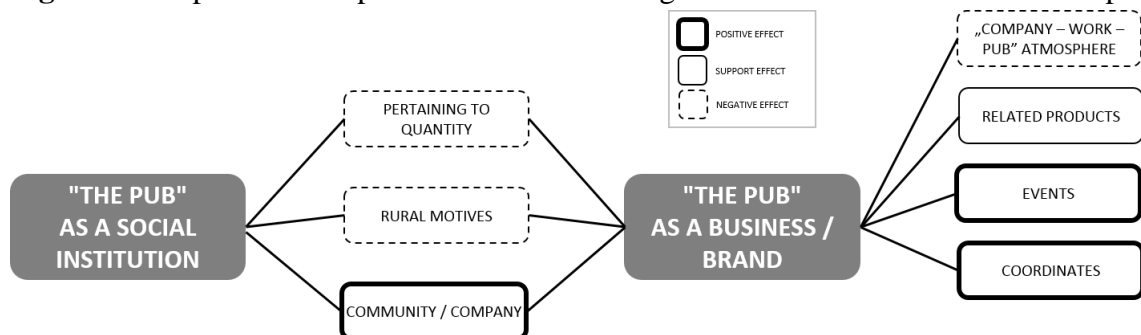
What is more, a large number of posts in question resort to the tool of *direct sales promotion* (dubbed "baseline consumer information" in Markos-Kujbus et al. (2015: 88)) (e.g. "One can not only get flooded from the outside. Escape the showers by entering [name of establishment]! [...] @[name of establishment]. Praise be!") that hijacks the sarcasm of the message to convert it to a promotional tool driving sales. Parallel to this, by combining a hard mirror on society with business goals (thereby monetizing the former), the assumed *role of social critic can hardly be maintained*.

A resulting communication problem is the ethics of leveraging a public health issue for business purposes while addressing a target audience mainly composed of a more exposed younger generation and also that of appealing to the young adult generation through image associations related to their culture (which indeed includes alcohol consumption and even binge drinking (Courtney – Polich, 2009)) while being at the same time one of the most trusted (and therefore: influential) content providers (also raising the question of a relative abuse of power).

If the brand were really aiming at solving or reducing the social issue in a business context then they would not encourage excessive alcohol consumption as it goes against its social responsibility (instead, for example, they would aim for promoting a “pub culture” in which case profit making would not only be permissible but also a positive benchmark and thus a socially acceptable goal).

Other associations in images of the sample related to social behaviors (culture of consumption), quantity, and rural culture are equally blended with the brand’s business message in accompanying texts. In this case this is an issue that can be related to the brand’s larger marketing activity and namely, positioning. The image of the pub operated by the brand (situated within the trendy party district of downtown Budapest, Hungary) ought not to be associated with images of drunken tramps wallowing in a ditch, nor even with that of drunk, unconscious guests (yet at the source of a number of sarcastic images in the sample) for fear of confusing the target audience. Therefore, such stimuli were identified as contrarian and having a negative effect on the brand as a business (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The presumed impact on the brand of image associations observed in the sample



Source: own elaboration

In spite of the potentially negative connotation of a number of related posts, texts that promote the coordinates or events of the establishment operated by the brand are altogether informative for prospective clients and can therefore be classified as having a support effect for the business by meeting those users’ needs who seek information about the given pub on social media. It is worth noting, however, that this target group might not coincide with the initial audience of the socially critical meme site, and a slow shift

in target audience can here be observed. At the same time, posts about products related to the pub's activity (i.e. those about alcoholic beverages) bear an entertainment value and can therefore serve both target audience's needs, and can, moreover, conceal the relative lack of information of supposedly informative posts.

Visual contents accompanying the posts in the sample are most often internet memes. While, as mentioned beforehand, the focal brand itself can be considered a meme(plex) itself, contents in the sample mostly resorted to using *popular meme templates* with personalized texts (and adding a watermark relating it to the brand). The entertaining contents in the case of the focal brand can be referred to as "usurped" image associations (i.e. piggybacking). Indeed, they employ images of famous actors, characters from movies, series, and cartoons (themselves to being considered as successful brands) to transmit a message. By being entertaining these internet memes are capable of diverting users' attention from the promotional goals of the accompanying texts of the posts, and therefore, in a way, support the brand, yet remain uninformative in the marketing perspective of demand generation. The opportunity they offer to the audience to identify with the characters are an advantage.

If, for instance, alcohol consumption plays an important social function for the targeted young adult generation (i.e. cultivating and contributing to friendships and/or love relationships, having fun with friends, and living the resulting experiences) (Courtney – Polich, 2009; Mitev, 2006) then they might effectively be more receptive to these entertaining messages (and, in the context of the focal site considered as a business brand: advertising messages) due to the identification with the character and the parallel made with the audience's own life situation. The site's perceived credibility also helps reinforce the impact of the message. The used characters (familiar meme templates) and a meme-based storytelling can draw their own life experiences from the consumer's minds and facilitate them – through sympathy, an understanding atmosphere, and shared, inside humor – sharing these experiences using the brand's messages as a support. Altogether this strategy is found in the sample to be effective to generate user buzz about the brand's social media page, to raise brand awareness, and to preserve its meme status.

The use of internet memes in a business context also raises some legal concerns. While a non-profit, socially critical site sharing user-generated internet memes fits into the legal category of fair use (Patel, 2013), the use of other brands for the focal brand's own purposes in marketing messages (piggyback marketing) is questionable even if they try to convey a social message to the target audiences at the same time because it may, even involuntarily, undermine the original meaning of the brand present in the internet meme. This observed practice raises another facet of SME marketing communications, namely the contradiction between being prompt, casual, and unique with messages tailored to the very patterns of media use of the target group and being subject to the rules of corporate communications, with the complexity and occasional legal aspects that the here analyzed story-driven content marketing strategy entails.

At the same time, the Facebook page in the sample is itself built upon a meme (that of a drunken rural priest sharing his wisdom on social media) which makes the strategic use of “proprietary” storytelling elements possible. Such elements observed are the *idiomatic language use* in texts accompanying the post (“Praise be!”, “my flock”, “my sanctuary” [i.e. the pub operated by the brand], etc.), additional fictional characters (e.g. the village drunkard) and locations all pertaining to the character.

Moreover, the focal character celebrates his own name day, making the character come alive – to the extent that fans of the page send their greetings throughout comments below the related post. This (inter)activity, characteristic of *brand communities* (see e.g. Gummerus et al., 2012), is not only a manifestation of the success of the fictional elements that make up the brand’s story, but also of that of the brand’s overall success and its status of love brand (Batra et al., 2012). Through their involvement, consumers themselves generate the buzz around the brand potentially leading to a viral diffusion of its message, further increasing brand awareness and the love brand status (e.g. through making the content *socially desirable*, and consumers further interacting for reasons other than the mere business goals of the brand – e.g. *group conformity* (Markos-Kujbus et al., 2015)). The brand’s youthful position is accentuated in the sample by including into the messages the target group’s (i.e. young urban adults) idiosyncratic lexicon (e.g. “mate”, “pahdy”/”partay”, “partying hard”, “all-nighter”, etc.) adding up to a *very direct communication style* with the audience inimitable by other brands.

Other associations present in the sample that can be regarded as remains of the page’s socially critical phase (e.g. rural motives, references to quantity, or binge drinking) are questionable in a brand strategic point of view. Brand associations were shown to affect brand equity by enhancing the memorability of the brand through personal experiences and thereby “locking in” specific attributes to consumer’s minds (see e.g. James, 2005). In the present case, brand association building faces a strategic issue as the aforementioned elements that still remain in the brand’s stock of associations might be classified as contrarian to and thus undermining the brand’s current position, a sign that the transformation from social criticism to a full-fledged business in terms of brand image was not seamless.

Finally, the sample showed a number of occurrences of the idea of excessive consumption of alcohol. Such posts – following the brand’s unique and provocative language and style – depict with humor the experiences resulting from the consumption of alcohol, superficially implying that *alcohol consumption is an accepted norm*. The seemingly permissive attitude of the brand is reflected in user comments and narratives accompanying such posts (Table 1). Some of these argue that a given amount of alcohol consumed has no negative consequences, while others go as far as to write odes to alcohol consumption (or at least rework known poems to the topic). The affirmation of this permissive attitude by other consumers is particularly important in an environment where consumers are able to influence each other’s attitudes and behaviors (Alhabash – McAlister, 2015) through their own activity, making these posts not only act on raising

consumer awareness of the brand through the generated buzz, but also on triggering purchase intention (and also: consumption).

Table 1: Legitimation of alcohol consumption – Example of user comments to a post on excessive consumption of alcohol

Original post:	Post text:	"I have only one question: How could this have been achieved? Praise be!"
	Posted image (meme):	meme image of a young man sleeping in a urinal
	Text on posted image (meme):	[words of a famous Hungarian lullaby]
User comment:	"Looking at the picture, the tile is quite dirty, and quite cold, too, to sleep upon. If we also add that urine is sterile at its exit, and that the individual on the picture should have drunken himself to wisdom, this could even have been a wise choice when drunk..."	
User comment:	"F***ing hell, they make drinking fountains ever lower..."	
User comment:	[a slightly rewritten version of the lullaby of the post praising drinking among friends]	
User comment:	"Not 'how', rather 'why'. Father, your lamb has wandered away from the flock. Why didn't anyone tell him that [when drinking with forebearance] the 'fore' [here: head] should be on the table, and the 'bearance' [here: unit of measurement for alcohol consumption] is a bucket. Why father?"	

Source: own sample

5. Conclusion

Small and medium-sized enterprises suffer a disadvantage because of scarce resources. Such resources can be the lack of marketing competences or that of marketing specialists at the company. This is supported by the focal brand of our study, presenting a number of brand messages that contradict the brand's positioning efforts thereby suggesting a lack of directed marketing intelligence. At the same time, the analysis of the sample equally displays a number of SME-specific marketing advantages manifested by a more casual, unique, direct, and sometimes provocative communication strategy that helps arouse the interest of the target group and generate interaction with, and even communication among consumers on the social channel thereby contributing to curating brand awareness and at the same time to preserving its initial meme status (and also brand story).

Because of the specificity of the focal brand in the study, our results are not generalizable to other SMEs, they can rather offer interesting insights about the working mechanisms of such establishments' communications and the subsequent user dynamics in social media. Given that brand chosen to be studied already had, at the moment of its inception, a very strong and unique communication style and brand image on the most popular social media channel, already employing in its messages the behavioral patterns specific to the target group, a commercial exploitation of success seems inevitable. While the focal brand benefited from a substantial awareness and credibility from the very beginning, our study draws attention to the fact that SMEs, despite their lack of resources, can, in social

media now more than ever, significantly benefit from a number of features (such as spontaneity, peculiarity in communications) that can offer them an unbeatable advantage over large brands both in terms of brand awareness and brand love. At the same time our study shows that the commercialization of controversial social topics brings about a devaluation of the social role of the page.

Moreover, the issues (e.g. legal, ethical) observed in the sample predict that the two roles are incompatible on the long run. On one hand, the change of position equally requires reviewing the brand's social content strategy (e.g. a growing and more complex need for compliance with regulations brought about by a higher profile activity) which might equally negatively affect, at least partially, the advantages gained from being a small firm. On the other hand, it is questionable whether a brand can promote social responsibility (here: alcohol-related social messages) just when they go against the message by their very activity (here: operating an establishment selling alcoholic drinks) and marketing communication messages (encouraging, sometimes subliminally, the consumption of alcohol). Indeed, a credible and popular (love) brand does have an effect on its consumers and also society as a whole (Batra et al. 2012). In this case then an alcohol-related brand promoting alcohol consumption can be considered as harmful in contributing to the legitimation and increase of alcohol consumption, a questionable position for a socially responsible enterprise.

Altogether, a potential further research direction is the study of how the community of a brand (e.g. on social media) reacts in similar situations (e.g. important repositioning), or whether they formally detect a change throughout a brand's social media postings. Indeed, in a case where users/consumers perceive a change, a brand might also be brought to alter its communication strategically to maintain consumer trust and legitimacy.

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