How User-generated content can be used to reveal the brand identity and image gap

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Abstract
In a new communicative landscape where brand-related communication is increasingly created by the users, controlling the gap between what a company say (the brand’s identity) and what the consumer perceive (the image of the brand) is increasingly difficult. When managing a brand in this social media context, it is imperative that the company gain insights on what image of the brand is distributed in order to be able to stimulate it properly.

This study provides a model for evaluating the gap of brand identity and brand image on social media, where the User-generated content and the Marketer-generated content are analyzed in terms of Brand personality, Context and Focus and then compared in order to identify a possible brand identity-image gap. Using the social media platform Instagram for collecting data, two case studies were executed to try the model’s adaptability, generalizability and subjectivity. When applying the model at the cases (Fjällräven and The North Face) we could identify a gap between the brand identities (portrayed by MGC) and the brand images (portrayed by UGC). Although the model’s subjectivity and generalizability were proven in need of improvement, due to its lack of sufficient deciphers for the factors used in analysing, the conclusion is drawn that the model is useful for identifying the gap of brand identity and image.

Key words
User-generated content, Marketer-generated content, Brand identity, Brand image, Social media, Instagram.

Relationship between brand identity and image affecting brand equity
According to Nandan (2005) a brand’s message is first “wrapped” in terms of its identity, after which it is “un-wrapped” on the receiving end by the consumer in form of its image. Brand identity is originated from the company, through which the company seeks to convey its individuality and distinctiveness, whereas the brand image instead relates to the consumers’ perception of the brand (Nandan, 2005). The feature of brand identity and brand image is a product of communication (Srivastava, 2011) and when there is a deviation in this communication, meaning that the company “code” and the consumer “decode” the brand message in different ways, a communication gap emerge (Nandan, 2005). For many brands the managerial activity of forming brand identity does not conform to the creation of brand image by the consumers’ perceptions, which thereby result in a gap of brand identity and brand image (Srivastava, 2011).
“In an over-communicated marketing environment it is very easy for brand identity (created by the company) and brand image (created by consumer perceptions) to be out of sync.” (Nandan, 2005 page 270-270)

P. Macmillan (2009) argue that measuring the gap between brand identity and brand image is of crucial importance for the company. If the two are segregated the company risk setbacks on the market due to a loss of a lasting bond with the consumers, a bond which otherwise is achieved through strong linkage between brand identity and brand image (Roy & Banerjee, 2008).

The case of Coca-Cola expose how an existing gap can cause a company’s business objectives to perish. In the 1980s, Pepsi was catching up on Coca-Cola’s market share of the US market. Blind tests conducted by Coca-Cola revealed that the participants preferred more the sweeter taste of Pepsi. As Coca-Cola perceived it, the problem was the taste of the product itself, leading to a launch in 1985 of the “New Coke” and simultaneously withdrawing the old taste. This lead to an outrage among consumers and a large boycott by the company’s loyal customers. They did not associate the brand with values of “new” and “change”, but rather the opposite of values such as “the real thing” and “truly American”. Coca-Cola had to retract the new flavor and bring back the old one. This major marketing blunder was due to the existing difference between the brand identity, designated by the company, and the brand image, designated by the consumers. (Bahasin, 2015)

The brand identity-image gap is defined as the discrepancy between the coding and decoding process of a brand’s message. In the absence of a linkage between brand identity and brand image, with a gap emerging, a company’s prosperity can stagnate or even perish (Nandan, 2005; Roy & Banerjee, 2008). Simplified, we can define the gap as the perceptive distance between what a company says and what the consumer hear.

Since the brand equity is considered one of the most important intangible assets in a company and a way to attain financial empowerment (Lo, 2012), it is intertwined with a company’s prosperity. Within brand equity the consumers’ loyalty to the brand is regarded as one of the most important building blocks (Jung & Sung, 2008). Conclusions drawn by both Nandan (2005) and Roy and Banerjee (2014) are that not being able to keep a congruence between the brand’s identity and image will lead to failure in creating brand equity and loyalty. Maintaining a linkage between brand identity and brand image is the key to create brand loyalty, and thereby brand equity (Srivastava, 2011).

Another example of the effects of a brand identity-image gap can be found in the case of McDonald’s. In 2012, McDonald’s launched a campaign on social media called “#McStories” with the intention to inspire customers to share positive stories about the brand. However, the campaign backfired miserably as consumers took the opportunity to ventilate negative stories instead. The campaign had to be withdrawn after only two hours due to the massive quantity of negative comments (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014), proving what can happen when the gap is too large. Also, as we see it, the great speed of which the negative comments accumulated reveals a
new challenge in managing the brand identity-image gap as we enter the world of social media and Web 2.0.

**The brand identity-image gap in a social media context**

Web 2.0 signify the two-way stream of communication between consumers, which is made possible through platforms on the web where users can share and take part of their own User-generated content. Through the evolution of Web 2.0 marketing messages has turned from being top-down information from experts, to users creating and sharing information amongst each other. (Dooley, Jones, & Iverson, 2012) The Web 2.0 present the possibility of social interaction between people, regardless to time or space. Furthermore it sets no limitations to the reach of User-generated content, which can spread from one to million (Lewis, Pea, & Rosen, 2010). We define a social media context the way Sashi (2012) defines Web 2.0: as making interconnection between users more frequent, faster and richer.

As the acceleration of Web 2.0 (Mills, 2007) have led to companies no longer being the only source for brand communication (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, & Schäfer, 2012) as well a rising number of brands and increased cost of expanding brands via media (Arnhold, 2010), we find that the importance of stimulating the brand image properly is continuing to increase due to the social media context. Studies have shown that it is the User-generated communication that have the greatest influence in the shaping of attitude towards different brands and products (Poch & Brett, 2014). The companies find that the ability to control how the brand is presented in an online context is now lost (Poch & Bret, 2014), with successful brand managers being called upon to implement a more participative and interactive approach to social media marketing (Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012).

“Marketers should be strongly aware of the fact that they will not be able to use firm-created social media communication to improve hedonic brand image.” (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, & Schäfer, 2012 page 782)

Adding together this context of social media, where the brand-related content to a larger extent is User-generated rather than Marketer-generated (Xiaoji, 2010), with the previously explained importance of managing the brand identity-image gap we find it even more problematic as the brand communication exposed to the consumer is increasingly originated from the other users’ image of a brand rather than the company-originated brand identity. In our theoretical research however, we have yet to find suitable tools for companies to identify their existing brand identity-image gaps in a social media context.

**Purpose**

As brand-related content today is increasingly User-generated rather than Marketer-generated, companies can use that data to gain instant insight on how their brand is perceived by consumers. The purpose of this study is to create a model for identifying the brand identity-image gap in a social media context, where the difference between User-generated content and Marketer-generated content can be used as indicators of the gap.
Theoretical framework

Brand equity

According to Lo (2012), brand equity’s major constituents are the quality associated to the brand, the awareness of the brand name, the various brand associations and the loyalty among its customers. Brand equity can accordingly be defined as the customers’ perceived added value of a brand beyond the actual product (Lee, James, & Kim, 2014) and is therefore driven by a consumer concept, the brand image (Biel, 1992). Furthermore, the brand equity is a concept connected to the financial evaluation of the brand (Biel, 1992) and there is a strong linkage between the financial performance of an organization and the brand equity (Lo, 2012; Lee, James & Kim, 2014).

A brand’s revenues are directly dependent upon consumer behaviour, which is driven by the consumers’ perceptions of the brand, equally denominated as the brand image. Hence, the cash flow and financial performance are powered by brand equity which in turn is driven by brand image. Biel (1992) and Lee, James and Kim (2014) also describes the relationship between the brand equity and cash flow as to the loyalty of the customers, where a loyal customer group are more inclined to repeat their purchasing behaviour towards the specific brand and are more willing to pay premium prices. In summary, we define brand equity as an end result of a brand’s marketing efforts and its resonance with the consumers. Put in a context of our study, we argue that building a strong brand equity is dependent on a well-managed brand identity-image gap. To understand how they work together, we need to further look at the key drivers of brand equity: brand image and brand identity.

Brand image

Brand image is commonly considered to be a key driver of brand equity (Biel, 1992; Lee, James & Kim, 2014; Roy & Banerjee, 2007) with the management of it even being considered as a prerequisite for establishing brand equity (Lee, James & Kim, 2014).

“The brand image basically describes the way of thinking by a consumer about the brand and the feelings the brand arouses when the consumer thinks about it.” (Roy & Banerjee, 2008 page 142)

As stated by Biel (1992), the brand image consists of three general components: image of the maker (corporate image), image of the product and image of the user. It has its starting point in the consumers’ perception of the brand (Biel, 1992; Srivastava, 2011), to be seen as the way consumers decode a brand message based on his or her frame of reference (Nandan, 2005). It is a perception the consumers themselves shape and reshape (Roy & Banerjee, 2007) rather than something the brand itself is in control of. The importance of properly stimulating the brand image can for example be seen in statements such as Nandan’s (2005), who claim that an agreement with the brand image will lead to a greater brand loyalty. The concept of brand image is further described by Biel (1992) as a cluster of attributes and associations connected to a brand by the consumer. Furthermore, all impressions that add up to a brand image together is considered to form a brand personality (Nandan, 2005). Also, according to Nandan (2005) we can divide the brand associations into specific and abstract attributes. In example the attributes size, colour and shape are specific meanwhile brand
personality attributes such as ‘youthful’, ‘durable’ and ‘rugged’ are abstract. As brand image can be seen basically as nothing else than the sum of consumers’ own perceptions and associations of a brand, we conclude that these receiver-focused perceptions naturally has a transmitter-focused counterpart; the brand identity.

**Brand identity**

In the way brand image can be seen as key driver of brand equity, we can describe the concept of brand identity as the tool with which companies try to build and maintain a brand image (Roy & Banerjee, 2008). It is built from within the company (Srivastava, 2011; Roy & Banerjee, 2008; Aaker, 1991; Nandan, 2005) based on a brand vision, brand culture, positioning, personality, relationship and presentation (Srivastava, 2011). While some define it as product, organization, person and symbol (Aaker D. A., 1991). Others look at it as a six-sided prism consisting of the faces physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection and self-image (Roy & Banerjee, 2008).

However, no matter what labels are used in the different definitions, our observation is that they all share the notion of brand identity as being a sum of everything the company wants the brand to be interpreted as. Furthermore, Srivastava (2011) describes it as the “unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain”. Put in a nutshell, brand identity is the associations and values of which a company encodes their communication (Nandan, 2005). In accordance with the purpose of our study, to identify a brand identity-image gap, we have in our theoretical research found a common denominator between the two concepts brand image and brand identity: the brand personality aspect.

**Brand personality**

Based on the notion that brands can be seen as having human personalities (Kim & Lehto, 2012; Aaker, 1997), brand personality is generally defined as an after-effect of brand communication and positioning (Roy, Banerjee, 2008) or as:

“*The set of human characteristics associated with a brand*” (Aaker, 1997 page 1)

To illustrate how human personality traits can be used when describing brands, we can look at how Absolut Vodka is described by Aaker (1997) as a cool, hip, contemporary 25-year old, creating a symbolic or self-expressive function.

The self-expressive function of brand personality further underpins its relevance to our study, as the act of identity-building, ego-defending and self-actualization are considered to be important key motivational factors for consumers in creating User-generated content (Wang & Li, 2014; Arnhold, 2010 page 162-163; Daugherty et al, 2008; Smith et al, 2012). Furthermore, we can also connect the brand personality to the brand image, which is considered to be the total sum of a consumer’s every received impressions and combines into a brand personality (Nandan, 2005). Lastly we find yet another connection to our study, as both Srivastava (2011) and Roy and Banerjee (2008) use brand personality to define the concept of brand identity.
The brand personality scale, or framework, was originally presented by Aaker (1997). In the development of this framework, the researcher started out with 309 different personality traits with a first stage to eliminate a majority of them. In the second stage the remaining 114 traits were then categorized into one of the five dimensions of brand personality: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication and Ruggedness. After continued research, grouping and testing the final framework consisting of five dimensions and 15 facets was completed in the manner presented in Fig. 1. Since first published, the framework has been widely used to define and measure brand personality.

However, on the opposite side of the framework’s successful applications there is a large quantity of criticism towards the framework. If we look closer, we find that it is commonly used successfully in studies concerning tourism destination branding (for example by Kim & Lehto, 2009 and Murphy et al, 2012). In other studies, such as the one conducted by Arora and Stoner (2009), the framework is only partially used as a component amongst other explorative methods. In other cases we have found, such as the luxury brand study by Sung et al (2014), the framework has been completely overhauled to fit the research context.

Bosnjak et al (2007) took a completely different approach in their study, where they duplicated the methodology used by Aaker (1997) in order to develop a completely new framework, fitting to the German cultural context. In a complete re-examination of the framework done by Austin et al (2010), the researchers firmly conclude that the model contains important limitations when researching “to understand the symbolic use
of brands within a particular product category, comparing personalities of brands across categories to identify benchmark personality brands or replacing ad hoc scales currently used by practitioners” (Austin et al, 2010 page 88) as well as significant boundaries to the generalizability of Aaker’s (1997) framework. Furthermore, their study found that the framework fails to apply to data aggregated within a single product category. Other researchers such as Malik and Naeem (2012) concur with the criticism, and adds a lack of cross-cultural generalizability to the list as the framework presented by Aaker (1997) fails to transfer from the American context in which it was developed.

As the main criticism of Aaker’s (1997) brand personality framework concerns its lack of generalizability, cross-cultural validity, Geuens et al (2009) took it upon themselves to further develop and rework the framework to fill the aggregated gaps found in criticism described above. The new framework developed called for a better generalizability of its factor structure as well as for cross-cultural replicability in their version of the scale. The authors rigidly claims their version to be proven reliable in research “across multiple brands of different product categories, for studies across different competitors within a specific product category, for studies on an individual brand level, and for cross-cultural validity” (Geuens et al, 2009).

Both frameworks use five similar dimensions, divided by Aaker (1997) in 15 facets and by Geuens et al (2009) into 12 facets. Although both frameworks (as presented in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) share a similarity in the five personality dimensions used, the testing and validation of them differ greatly as explained in criticism above. Therefore in our study we have chosen to only use the brand personality measurement framework as presented by Geuens et al (2009), as this framework better takes in concern the large quantity of criticism made out towards the original framework by Aaker (1997).

The new communication landscape of social media

We now change perspective, looking at the part of our purpose considering a social media context to the identifying of the brand identity-image gap. The landscape of communication has been fundamentally changed since technology and the internet has made platforms for interaction available, regardless of time or space (Hudson & Hudson, 2013). Through social media platforms users can share, co-create, discuss, modify and take part in communication, both in a mobile and web-based way (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). The increasing domination of social media platforms as the most used communication and information channel amongst consumers (Bruhn 2012) increases the importance for brands to communicate through these channels as well (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

However, the sole action of participation on the social media arena only makes the company yet another user among millions of others. It does not affect the fact that communication about the brand will take place among other users, out of reach of the company’s control (Kietzmann et al, 2011). Bruhn (2012) describes how the marketer’s control of brand management has diminished because of the development of
social media. Bruhn (2012) states that before this development, the companies could regard themselves as the sole source of brand communication, but in the communication landscape of today consumers have no limitations on how many other consumers they can reach with their messages and no geographical restrictions to where their messages can reach in the world. Since consumers are more likely to use social media than traditional media for information research, as well as put trust into evaluations from other consumers through these platforms regarding brands and products, the expectations among marketers is that brand communication will increasingly be made by the consumers themselves (ibid. 2012).

However, challenges aside, it is also important for companies to see the opportunities given by social media, where consumer insights can be gained faster than ever before (Hudson & Hudson, 2013). Let us look at one of the new social media platforms.

Instagram

One social media platform designed according to the trend described by Bruhn (2012), where brand messages increasingly are distributed by the consumers rather than the companies, is Instagram. The mobile app enables its users to reformat their mobile snapshots into appealing images with different visual filters and sharing these on the platform to other users. These images can be shared on other social media platforms as well, like Facebook or Twitter. (Salomon, 2013) Since the launch of Instagram in 2010 (ibid. 2013) the site has grown to be one of the most popular social media platforms in the world. Today it has a user share of 26% of all internet users (Duggan et al, 2015), which according to Instagram (2015) is over 300 million active users per month. In 2014, Instagram’s users generated 70 million photos and videos each day (Instagram Inc., 2015), highlighting the extent of User-generated content as a way for users to communicate.

User-Generated Content

Alongside the emergence of the new social media landscape, the development of User-generated content (UGC) has accelerated (Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) define UGC as:

“i) content made publicly available over the Internet, ii) which reflects a certain amount of creative effort, and iii) which is created outside of professional routines and practices.” (Arnhold, 2010 page 28)

The User-generated content can also be defined as a way to describe the diverse forms of productive Web-based activity (Shepard, 2013), where the UGC can take form as visual through text, photographs or images, acoustic through music or audio and olfactory through video (Arnhold, 2010). The production, modifying, sharing and consuming of UGC can be practiced both individually and collaboratively by users (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). When the content instead is created by the company it is referred to as Marketer-generated content (MGC).

The amount of UGC produced is increasing due to the accessibility of social media platforms through mobile devices, which makes creation and sharing possible instantly from anywhere and anytime (Wang & Li, 2014). And since the
production and consumption of UGC is growing virtuously (Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012), companies should be well aware that much of the UGC is brand-related and thereby naturally has the potential to form brand perceptions amongst consumers (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). Since brand perceptions is synonymous with and can be directly transferred to brand image (Biel, 1992; Srivastava, 2011), the importance of analyzing UGC to be able to discover a brand identity-image gap is substantial. Our conclusion is that the gap, defined as the difference between brand identity and brand image (Nandan, 2005), can be identified in social media as the difference between User-generated content (UGC) and Marketer-generated content (MGC).

Our model
As stated in the theoretical argumentation above, the ability to identify the gap of brand identity and brand image will have direct effect on a company's brand equity and therefore its financial performance. Based on that observation we conclude that it is of great importance for the company to identify the gap and thereby get the capacity to manage it. When the communication landscape demonstrates an increasing trend where consumers communicate through social media and the dominant transmitter of brand-related content is consumers themselves rather than professional marketers, we argue that companies should use UGC and MGC as indicators of the gap. The purpose of this study is to create a model for identifying the brand identity-image gap by using a comparison between UGC and MGC. To identify this gap, the model we develop will supply building blocks for the mutual qualities of the brand identity and brand image, through which a difference between them will indicate a gap. It is through these building blocks that text, images, audio and video used in the created UGC and MGC will be categorized and thereafter produce a result to whether or not a gap can be identified.

Comparing the definitions of brand image with the ones of brand identity we identify certain similarities. To simplify, we divide the mutual denominators of brand identity and image into three categories, which we define as the model’s building blocks.

The first building block is Brand personality, which we derive from the definition of brand image by Nandan (2005) where brand personality is formed by the brand image and the way Biel (1992) define brand image as three separated images, one of them being the image of the company, which we interpret as a reflection of brand personality. The brand personality as a building block of the model is further derived from the definition of brand identity, where Aaker (1991), Srivastava (2011) and Roy and Banerjee (2008) all uses the description of personality as a way to define brand identity. To be able to identify the brand identity-image gap we use Geuens’s (2009) brand personality framework, since it has incorporated the criticism towards Aaker’s (1997) framework and therefore is a developed theory more generalizable and up-to-date. The building block of Brand personality consists of the factors used in Geuens’s (1997) personality framework: Responsibility, Activity, Aggressiveness, Simplicity and Emotionality.

The second building block is Context. It is mainly built upon observations made in our pre-research (see section “Methodological
overview” for explanation of how this was done). It is also partially derived from Biel’s (1992) description of brand image as partly an image of the user, where we argue that the impression people have about a brand’s users can be viewed as a way to contextualize a brand; what kind of lifestyle does the brand’s users have, in what kind of environment are they exposed and in which social arenas do they operate. The factors of the building block Context are composed through the pre-research we conducted, and are paired together as opposites; City and Nature, Work and Leisure, Individual and Collective. These factors are compiled to cover generalizable elements of lifestyle, environment and social structure, which is how we defined cultural aspects as stated earlier.

We define the third, and final, building block as Focus, as considered on what the UGC and MGC focuses on; People, Product or Activity. To complete our model, which shall identify the brand identity-image gap using UGC and MGC, we identified this third building block and its denominators, solely through the findings we did in the pre-research as described in our methodological overview.

**Methodological overview**

To serve the purpose of our study, we have conducted a multiple case study using secondary quantitative data gathered from the social media platform Instagram. During a pre-research we selected two separate brands as our cases (the selection is motivated in section “Case study and brand selection”), each case researched from both a company perspective and a consumer perspective.

We used the two outdoor brands Fjällräven and The North Face, rendering in a total of 4 analyzed data sets (2 brands each with company-produced data and consumer-produced data). To analyze our gathered data, we created a model for identifying the brand identity-image gap in each case, after which a comparison of the index numbers between Marketer-generated and User-generated content was made. In our analysis model, we have used a combination of the theoretical brand personality framework together with empirical findings to evaluate the content.

**Instagram as source of data**

In a first step, we chose the social media platform Instagram for gathering data. As
our aims were to describe how the brand identity-image gap can be discovered on social media by looking at the difference of brand-related User-generated content and Marketer-generated content, we needed a platform where brand-related UGC could easily be found and categorized. As Instagram is currently designed, brand-related messages cannot spread beyond a brand’s reach of subscribers (followers) without being re-created, thus increasing the importance of User-generated content. There is no existing “share” function available like the one featured on Facebook and there are no sponsored ads being forcibly exposed to the end users, making re-distribution of a message in theory possibly only through the user’s own content-creation. However, Instagram offers its users a number of tools to link the published content either to a brand or a specific topic: either with a so-called hashtag (#) or a mention (@).

For this study to be relevant to companies and brand managers, the size and growth of Instagram as described in the theoretical discussion was important in our decision. Also, as stated earlier, the rise of mobile social media is important for the increase of User-generated content (Wang & Li, 2014). Our observation is that the fact that Instagram is built primarily for smartphone users, makes it perfect in this sense.

Furthermore, from a researcher’s point of view, the infrastructure provided by the platform was well suited for efficient gathering of data. We can easily access Marketer-generated content by using the account link (usually “@brandname”), as well as easily find brand-related User-generated content simply by searching for a specific brand’s topic (usually “#brandname”). In order for us to carry through our study though, we first needed to create a model for our data analysis.

**Pre-research and the development of our model**

Based on our theoretical research and our purpose to create a model for identifying the brand identity-image gap, in a first step we created a two-sided draft. We used an already proven applicable measurement method, the brand personality framework, together with a context aspect.

When a suitable social media platform was chosen, the next step in our study was to conduct a pre-research of collecting and analyzing data from UGC and MGC shared on Instagram with the aim to complete our model through empirical findings. This pre-research was conducted solely to produce material, through which we could determine if our theoretical findings of the building block Context was applicable, and what common parameters could be found to categorize it in.

The data collection was executed by looking at account links and brand topics for different brands on Instagram: for example Volvo, Starbucks, The Gap, Adidas, Nike, Helly Hansen, Salomon, SJ and Liseberg. The selection of brands was randomly made, based on our opinion on them being well-known brands among consumers. Since the aim of our pre-research was to investigate possible parameters to categorize the building block Context, we considered a larger sample size of different brands more relevant at this stage in the study than the sizes of the individual samples of data collected from the brands’ Marketer-generated and User-generated content. We argue that by studying different
industries and product categories a greater overview of common parameters among the UGC and MGC can be identified, and thereby a greater generalizability of the model’s utility can be retrieved. Additionally, due to the restraint of time we chose to delimit the sample sizes of each brand’s shared UGC and MGC.

The data was thereafter examined and compared, the content of the UGC and MGC was analyzed based on the context presented through image, text and occasionally video. We excluded content identified as produced by retailers or other professionals with a marketing interest, who were using the brand topic (eg. #Nike), not to mislead the samples of UGC. In an initial reviewing of all data, we observed and scanned for different characteristics possible to use in decoding process. Our findings resulted in six factors that we could use to subdivide the building block “Context” into, as well as an additional building block with respectively three factors. In the decoding process we determined the building block Context’s describing factors to be City, Nature, Work, Leisure, Individual, Collective. The empirical pre-research also resulted in our findings that the UGC and MGC were portrayed with different “Focus”, our third discovered building block. The content was presented with a focus either on the product of the brand, the person using the brand or the activity executed when using the brand.

Combining our empirical and theoretical findings, we completed our model. As described more extensively in the theoretical discussion, it consists of the following traits or factors:

- **Brand personality**: Responsibility, Activity, Aggressiveness, Simplicity and Emotionality.
- **Focus**: Person, Product, Activity.

The next step in our study was to test the adaptability of our model. Based on the pre-research findings, we concluded that the best way would be by testing and comparing large sample sizes of User-generated and Marketer-generated content for a few brands. In that way the results found for each brand would be more credible and representative, than if the study were conducted with smaller sample sizes of data and larger sample sizes of brands. We wanted to test our model in a more profound way, hence we chose to carry out a case study. Being suitable for the study, we concluded that the cases chosen were to have a large amount of both UGC and MGC related to the brand.

**Case study and brand selection**

According to Amerson (2011) the research strategy of a case study answers the question “how”, which is the focus in our purpose; to describe how User-generated content and Marketer-generated content can indicate a brand identity-image gap. Furthermore a case study is very useful when the phenomena being studied is occurring in a real-life context and where the researcher has minimal control of the events (Amerson, 2011). Since the object of our study is content created by both users and companies we as researchers has no influence on the content output created in
real-time, wherefore we find the case study research method profitable for our study.

By using a multiple case study as a methodological framework we can incorporate our quantitative findings to create a holistic context (Baharein & Noor, 2008), which in our case is a social media context. The case study is particularly useful as a research strategy when the phenomena and the context it takes place in are highly connected to each other (Amerson, 2011). For this study, two corporate brands (Fjällräven and The North Face) have been chosen and investigated as two separate case studies. Fjällräven is a Swedish clothing and equipment brand focusing on outdoor activities such as hiking and camping. The North Face is an American clothing and equipment brand similar to Fjällräven but, as we have identified, with a slightly more diverse product portfolio expanding over a larger span of intended product usage.

The final selection of these two brands was based on the fact that they are both globally successful brands with a strong marketing presence on social media. As part of this study’s purpose is to test our developed model, we chose to use two brands within the same industry in an ambition to ensure that eventual flaws would be exposed in both cases. Also, in our pre-research as explained earlier, our findings that these two brands also generated a large amount of User-generated content influenced our decision. Since each case study can be viewed as a single experiment (Amerson, 2011), with the usage of multiple case studies allowing for capability to generalize when the subsequent cases are replicated and therefore seen as new experiments (Baharein & Noor 2008; Amerson, 2011).

Due to the argumentation above carried out by Baharein and Noor (2008) and Amerson (2011), we therefore argue that the result of our study will be more generalizable when using two separate cases. The next step in our study was now to gather data from Fjällräven’s and The North Face’s UGC and MGC shared on Instagram.

Gathering the data
In our main data collection (n=303), we gathered four different sets of secondary data related to two separate brands. As the purpose of our study was to identify a gap between User-generated content (brand image) and Marketer-generated content (brand identity), the data sets consisted of the following: 1. Fjällräven’s own Marketer-generated content 2. Fjällräven-related User-generated content 3. The North Face’s Marketer-generated content and 4. The North Face-related User-generated content.

As we gathered the User-generated content (data sets 2 and 4) through the usage of generic topic links (#hashtags), we had to
account for and eliminate all professionally produced material. In order not to mislead the sample data, each content publisher was evaluated individually to ensure the collected data excluded all posts from third-party dealers and professional corporate accounts who also used the brand topic (i.e. #brand). After this process was done, the data sets were separately archived with each content post (gathered as screenshot images) individually named for further analysis and future reference.

Decoding the data

Once all the data was gathered and sorted, the decoding and process of analyzing the data took place. As this quantitative research method included individual evaluation of each post using our developed model, we had to ensure that the risk of individual subjectivity was kept to a minimum. Therefore, the decoding and analysis of our data collected (n=303) was divided in different steps. In a first step, we together evaluated 20 different content posts (not included in our data sets) to learn and synchronize the facets used in our model.

In the next step, we would each separately analyze 20 sample posts from each data set. The two separate results would then be compared in order to examine the model’s subjectivity; if two independent users would reach the same conclusions decoding the data using the model. In the final step we went through all data sets together, resulting in the final index numbers as present in the results. Since the purpose of this study is not to examine how the different factors and building blocks correlate, but rather to solely identify the existence of each factor and building block using our model, we have chosen to compile the data as seen in table 1, 2 and 4. The index numbers depict at what extent each factor is identified in the UGC and the MGC (number of occurrences divided by the total number of content posts in the data set).

Findings & analysis

Testing the model

In order for us to test the generalizability of our model, as it contains such abstract parameters as brand personality and context, we need to establish an understanding of how the model is affected by subjectivity. To do this, we randomly selected a smaller sample of our gathered data (n=80, 40 from each case) and did separate individual analyses (ending up with two different sets of results) and compared these two separate results, to search for discrepancies between the results. Our objective of the subjectivity and applicability test was to raise any potential warning flags about our model before our analysis of the larger sample size; simply try to verify the utility of the model. Table 1 and 2 display the full results and comparisons of these tests, in which the columns marked “analysis 1” represent the test carried out by one of us and “analysis 2” by the other. The identified discrepancy can be seen in the columns “MGC difference”, “UGC difference” and “Identified Gap difference”.

Results differ depending on which researcher decodes the data

First of all, we observed a large difference in between our model’s three building blocks; Brand personality, Context and Focus. Zooming in on the first building block within the Fjällräven case, as seen in Table 1, the discrepancy between analysis 1 and 2 of the Marketer-generated content is
as following: Responsibility (5%), Activity (20%) Aggressiveness (0%), Simplicity (20%) and Emotionality (10%) adding up to a discrepancy mean of 11%, seen in Table 3. Between the two different analyses of the User-generated content, we find the discrepancy as following: Responsibility (10%), Activity (10%) Aggressiveness (5%), Simplicity (20%) and Emotionality (10%), also adding up to a discrepancy mean of 11%. However in the end result - the identified brand identity-image gap of Fjällräven - we find that the discrepancy of the two results has shrinked to a mean of 4% (Table 3). If we look at The North Face in the same manner, we find that the discrepancy mean moves from 9% (Marketer-generated content) and 6% (User-generated content) to an identified gap result discrepancy mean of 9%.

Looking at the second building block “Context”, we still find substantial discrepancies between our two different analyses (as seen in the columns “MGC difference” and “UGC difference”).
Looking at Fjällräven’s Marketer-generated content, the result discrepancies in each factor analyzed is as following: City (5%), Nature (0%), Work (10%), Leisure (0%), Individual (5%) and Collective (0%). The observed discrepancy mean moves from 3.2% (Marketer-generated content) and 4.2% (User-generated content) to an identified gap result discrepancy mean of 5.8%.

In the last building block (“Focus”), there were no observed discrepancy between the two analyses.

Looking at only the “Brand personality” building block, our test will inevitably raise a significant amount of doubt as to the objectivity of the model. Although the results raise great concerns as to the model’s objectivity and needs to be questioned accordingly, it does not come as a surprise. Rather, it should be seen as a natural obstacle when trying to quantify something as abstract as brand personality.

**Applying the model on Fjällräven and The North Face**

As we have now examined the applicability of the model, it is used to identify the brand identity-image gap within the cases of Fjällräven and The North Face.

Initially, the cases of Fjällräven and The North Face included a sample size of 303 separate content posts. In the case of Fjällräven, 103 User-generated content posts on Instagram was gathered alongside with 41 Marketer-generated content posts. However, only 97 of Fjällräven’s UGC posts were decodable and used in the result. The second case of The North Face resulted in 96 decodable posts from UGC, based on 100 individual objects collected, and 54 Marketer-generates posts.

**Case 1: Fjällräven**

Looking at the results of the decoded User-generated and Marketer-generated contents from Fjällräven, seen in Table 4, the building block of Brand personality differs visibly on three out of the five factors. The personality types of Simplicity, Aggressiveness and Responsibility differs in a range from 13 to 30%. Users display the personalities of Activity and Simplicity most frequent in their content, while the Marketer-generated content highlights Responsibility in most of their contents.
Overall, the MGC are rather evenly allocated among the different personality types. The discrepancy between the MGC and UGC in the building block Context are even greater than the one in Brand personality, where all six factors differ more than 16% between the User-generated and Marketer-generated content.

In comparison to User-generated content, very few content posts generated by marketers are portrayed in the context of the City (29% respectively 5%). Further, the context of individuality is used more in UGC rather than collectivity. Almost half of the content produced by Fjällräven is portrayed in the context of individuality and the other half of collectiveness. When looking at the focus of the content generated by both users and the brand, the activity being executed while using the brand is the most commonly used factor in the building block Focus. The greatest discrepancy in this block between UGC and MGC is that MGC barely focuses on the product in the content, while that focus is commonly used by the users.

**Case 2: The North Face**

The second case of the brand The North Face resulted in an identified gap between MGC and UGC quite similar to the one in the case of Fjällräven, as seen in table 4. Apart from the personality factor Emotionality, the remaining 4 personalities differed in a range of 18-26%. The dominant personality types that the MGC expressed was Activity and Aggressiveness. The UGC was also dominated by the personality Activity, though not in the same extent as the MGC (43% and 69% respectively). Despite the dominance in both MGC and UGC of Activity as a personality trait, a distinct gap still exists between the MGC and UGC.

The result found with The North Face also identifies a gap in the building block Context, where the brand mostly put their content in a context of Nature, Leisure and Individuality whereas the users does not as
dominantly use those contexts. Almost one third of the contents generated by users are put in a context of City or Collective as well. The gap between MGC and UGC continues as to the Focus of the content. 67% of the MGC in our sample focuses on the Activity compared to the 52% of the UGC. The User-generated content focuses on People by 47%, whilst The North Face only have 19% of MGC with that focus.

We can thereby see that when using the model it becomes visible which parameters differ between Marketer-generated and User-generated content. The result tell us that in both cases the MGC and UGC accenture different factors within each building block, thereby creating a gap between them. Since the three building blocks (Brand personality, Context and Focus) together creates the united picture of the brand identity and brand image, it is when looking at the blocks as a unity that we can identify a potential brand identity-image gap. As the gap within each building block for both brands of Fjällräven and The North Face has been pointed out, the unified result is that a gap between brand identity and brand image is identifiable.

**Difficulties in the decoding process**
The result of our case studies showed that all content produced and shared on the social media network Instagram was not practicable to decode with our model. Due to some content posts’ devoid of substance, where pictures and texts were not interpretable, these individual posts were removed from our sample. Additionally, the language used in some User-generated content constrained us further in our decoding process. Being able to translate some texts may then have made it possible to decode some contents, as for example with picture 1 in appendix 1 where the picture is insipid but the text might reveal indications usable in the decoding process. This picture reveals a *Product focus*, but as to the other two building blocks the interpretation is vague. Picture 1 indisputably contains brand-related content, and is therefore part of the communication landscape declared by Bruhn (2012) where consumers increasingly take on the leading role of distributing and owing the brand-related messages.

As content like Picture 1 take part in the creating of brand image when being shared on social media networks and viewed and interpreted by other users (Nandan, 2005), it should not be ignored alongside of other brand-related User-generated contents. Our incapability to decode all posts might incline a lack of factors or detailed definitions of categorization in the building blocks of the model. This also raises concern, as the content needs to provide a sufficient amount of information for the model to be applicable.

Further, we found that a large amount of objects in our samples would be decoded into multiple personalities and contexts, whereas the third building block (“Focus”) only presented one possible factor per object. Our interpretation of the different building blocks, how we categorize personality types, contexts and focus is presented in appendix 1. Alongside these obstacles in the content available for analysis, we also encountered irregularities in the analyzed results.
**Possible misinterpretations when using the model**

Even though the model demonstrate a visible gap between brand identity and brand image within both Fjällräven and The North Face, when analyzing the result we did encounter possible misinterpretations when using the model making it difficult to draw solid conclusions. In both cases, the UGC are portrayed in a context of City to a much greater extent than the MGC. As our model points out, there is an existing gap in that matter. Though, the discrepancy between UGC and MGC can imply simply that the users of the brands have a bigger access to the City rather than Nature, simply because many in brands’ target groups live in the city. Shared brand-related content is then inevitably portrayed in the context of where the users spend most of their time, in the context of City. Therefore, the mere fact that UGC is put in a context of City does not necessarily imply that the users connect that context to their brand image.

A similar analysis can be made regarding the gap of Product focus in the case of Fjällräven. The User-generated content focuses by 27% on the Product, while the Marketer-generated content have a share on that focus by 5%. The gap might imply that the brand identity and brand image are not synchronized and that Fjällräven ought to look over how they interpret their brand identity, however it might also be a misinterpretation of the nature of UGC, where the users’ way to parade the brand and product does not have to signify how the users see the brand image or how they want the brand to display their brand-related messages. So, even though the model do indicate a gap here, we can not entirely conclude it to be truly interpreted as brand identity-image gap.

When creating the model, we made the assumption that what was presented through the UGC and MGC rightfully pictured the brand image and brand identity. When analyzing the result, we find that it might not always be the completely fair assumption.

**Conclusion**

Despite our test of the model’s vulnerability to subjectivity raising a significant amount of doubt as well as the discrepancies found between two separate researchers subjective evaluation, we find that the model is capable of identifying a brand identity-image gap in social media as were our purpose. Given the relationship between brand perceptions created on social media by User-generated content and the brand image, as described in our theoretical framework, we believe our developed model can provide a broad enough understanding of how the brand is presented by its consumers.

In terms of identifying the gap between the company-centered brand identity and the consumer-centered brand image, we can see that by applying the model in a context where both Marketer-generated and User-generated content is published (in our study we used Instagram) the model fulfills its purpose. However, in order to prove the model’s generalizability and objectivity, further testing and adjusting of the model would undoubtedly be needed. In terms of the model’s ability to provide an overall picture of how a brand is presented in social media, it is well capable.

One of the surprises in our test results were the discrepancies within the building block “Context”, indicating that subjectivity
affects not only “Brand personality”, the most abstract building block. Here, we conclude that this particular building block needs to be complemented with a set of distinctively defined guidance rules for objectively categorizing content into the underlying context traits. This conclusion, the need for an extended set of guidance rules, could be transferred to the other building blocks as well in order to further minimize the effect of subjectivity.

**Practical implications**
The execution of the study and the delimitation choices we have done, as are described in our methodological framework, entails certain limitations upon how the result can be interpreted and generalized. These limitations are important to keep in mind when conclusions are drawn and when the result is used for further research.

The quantity of data collected can further be seen as a parameter of reducing the reliability of our results, as well as the quantity of cases studied. Though both Baharein and Noor (2008) and Amerson (2011) argue that a multiple case study method produce generalizable results, our study would need to provide a wider range of data sets in order to strengthen the generalizability of the result. Therefore we conclude that by using a larger sample size of data and cases, the reliability and generalizability of the result would have been stronger. Despite our best efforts, the interpretation of the data collected will inevitably feature a certain amount of subjectivity, where our own perceptions affect the way the data is coded.

**Future research**
To further understand the implications of the new social media context where User-generated content to a larger extent is the main carrier of brand messages, more research should be done to evaluate what effect each factor in the model has on the brand image. The model needs to be applied to a larger sample size as well as to a wider variety of brand cases to better establish its generalizability between brand segments and product categories.

To better test the model’s objectivity, the results gathered from use of the model should be compared to primary qualitative data from both representatives of the brand as well as consumers of the brand. We would also suggest more statistical research to find correlations between the factors used both within the building blocks and between them.
References


Appendix 1

Picture 1 (UGC, Fjällräven)
Deviance of substance in picture, difficult to interpret. Translating difficulties.

Picture 2 (MGC, The North Face)
Brand personality: Activity and Aggressiveness.
Focus: Activity

Picture 3 (UGC, The North Face)
Brand personality: Activity and Aggressiveness
Context: City, Leisure and Individual
Focus: Activity

Picture 4 (MGC, Fjällräven)
Brand personality: Emotionality
Context: Nature, Leisure and Collective
Focus: People

Picture 5 (UGC, The North Face)
Brand personality: Simplicity
Context: City and Individual
Focus: People

Picture 6 (UGC, Fjällräven)
Brand personality: Simplicity
Context: City, Leisure and Individual
Focus: Product
## Appendix 2

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Index values:
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- Aggressiveness: 0.20
- Simplicity: 0.22
- Emotionality: 0.24
- City: 0.05
- Nature: 0.69
- Work: 0.20
- Leisure: 0.61
- Individual: 0.49
- Collective: 0.41
- People: 0.41
- Product: 0.05
- Activity: 0.54
## User-Generated Content

**Down-to-earth**

**Active**

**Stable**

**Dynamic**

**Aggressive**

**Ordinary**

**Romantic**

**Responsible**

**Innovative**

**Bold**

**Simple**

**Sentimental**

### Index values

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### Results

- **Responsibility**: Ordinary
- **Dynamic**: 0.89
- **Stable**: 0.06
- **Aggressive**: 0.17
- **Romantic**: 0.07
- **Innovative**: 0.89
- **Active**: 0.69
- **Sentimental**: 0.06
### The North Face

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Index values range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating a stronger association or importance. The table above shows the user-generated content for The North Face, highlighting the most relevant keywords and their respective index values.
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