

Identity Construction And Co-Creation In Digital Microcultures: The Mediation Of Consumption And The Challenge To Traditional Marketing Strategies

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Summary

This study provides an original contribution to knowledge by investigating how digital microcultures on platforms such as TikTok, Discord, and Twitch influence consumption and identity construction. The research highlights the co-creation of meaning between consumers and brands, challenging traditional marketing approaches. The implications are social, showing the importance of virtual interactions in community formation, managerial, requiring new participatory strategies, and academic, expanding the understanding of cultural practices in digital consumption.

Keywords: *digital microcultures; cultural capital; co-creation of value; culture and consumer; netnography.*

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I. Introduction

The advancement of digital technologies and the expansion of social platforms have significantly transformed the dynamics of human interactions and, consequently, consumption practices. In this context, digital microcultures—groups of individuals who share common values, beliefs, and interests in virtual environments—have emerged as relevant social phenomena (Arvidsson, 2018).

These communities, largely stemming from platforms such as TikTok, Discord, and Twitch, create new forms of cultural and behavioral engagement, shaping how individuals perceive and consume products, services, and even brands. Although there are studies that address the relationship between digital culture and marketing, a substantial gap remains in the literature regarding the direct influence of emerging digital microcultures on the consumption behavior of younger generations, an increasingly relevant aspect for businesses (Kozinets, 2019).

The central question guiding this study is: how do emerging digital microcultures on virtual platforms influence the consumption behavior of emerging generations? The objective of this paper is to investigate the influence of these digital microcultures on the consumption behavior of young people within these virtual communities, seeking to understand how interactions within these groups impact their purchasing decisions and perceptions of products and brands.

The theoretical justification for this study lies in the need to deepen the understanding of the role of digital microcultures, which, although already explored from a sociocultural perspective, still lack more specific analyses in the field of consumer behavior. The theory of cultural capital, as proposed by Bourdieu (1984), provides a robust theoretical framework for exploring how these groups construct meanings around their consumption practices. However, the application of this theory to digital microcultures remains limited, especially concerning its direct impact on consumption choices.

From a practical standpoint, this study becomes relevant by offering managerial insights for companies aiming to position themselves more strategically and effectively on digital platforms. Digital microcultures present untapped potential for creating new markets and consumption niches, which implies significant opportunities for targeted marketing campaigns. Understanding the codes, languages, and values of these communities can assist in creating more authentic and personalized strategies that effectively respond to the needs of this audience (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Socially, this research is of utmost importance because consumption, especially among emerging generations, is not limited to the acquisition of goods but represents a form of identity construction and belonging. Digital microcultures play a central role in shaping these collective identities, configuring new forms of cultural expression and social participation. The originality of this study, therefore, lies in its proposal to explore how these groups not only consume but also reinterpret and re-signify products and services based on their cultural experiences – something that has been underestimated in traditional marketing and consumption approaches (Schau, Muñoz, & Arnould, 2009).

Moreover, research highlights that microcultures on platforms like TikTok and Discord influence broader consumption patterns and shape consumer-brand relationships in profound ways (Kozinets, 2019; Arvidsson, 2006). These online communities develop their own values and symbolic practices, often driven by

collective identity formation, which alters how products and brands are perceived. The importance of these microcultures as drivers of cultural production suggests that brands must engage in more authentic and participatory strategies to remain relevant in these digitally mediated environments (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007).

Additionally, as Kozinets (2015) points out, digital platforms are transforming traditional marketing approaches by enabling consumers to co-create value and re-appropriate brand meanings within these microcultures. While brands once controlled narratives, the rise of user-generated content and social interactions allows microcultures to reshape product meanings and redefine consumer behavior. This study aims to expand on these insights by providing empirical evidence of how microcultures directly influence the consumption practices and cultural interpretations of emerging generations, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of digital consumer behavior.

II. Theoretical Background

The theoretical background for this study draws from various perspectives within the fields of cultural consumption, digital microcultures, and consumer behavior. In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital platforms, consumption practices have transformed, becoming deeply intertwined with social interactions and identity formation. This section reviews relevant theories that provide insights into how consumers engage with brands, products, and communities in digital spaces. The objective is to understand how traditional concepts such as cultural capital, co-creation of value, and symbolic consumption are reinterpreted in the context of online microcultures, where consumers actively participate in shaping and disseminating meanings through their interactions.

The growing importance of digital platforms such as TikTok, Discord, and Twitch in consumer behavior research necessitates an exploration of how these environments foster new forms of engagement and consumption. The theories reviewed here offer a foundation for analyzing how consumption is no longer a simple economic transaction but a cultural and symbolic process where individuals assert their identities, negotiate social status, and engage with brands in more complex ways. By integrating approaches from consumer culture theory and digital marketing, this framework aims to highlight the dynamic relationship between consumers and brands in online communities, particularly focusing on the role of digital platforms in mediating and amplifying these interactions.

Digital microcultures theory and forms of cultural capital in consumption

Digital microcultures, increasingly present on platforms, have been transforming not only social interactions but also the dynamics of consumption. These communities function as cultural ecosystems where norms, values, and practices are constantly renegotiated, creating new forms of engagement with products and brands. Arvidsson (2018) observes that these groups operate as digital subcultures, with a collective identity that guides the behavior of their members.

This perspective is expanded by Kozinets (2019), who argues that within these social networks, consumption is not limited to an economic transaction but involves deeper cultural and symbolic processes. Thompson and Haytko (1997) add that consumption within these communities is mediated by symbolic discourses that confer specific meanings to products. Thus, digital microcultures stand out for shaping how individuals perceive the value and meaning of their consumption choices, creating new opportunities for brands to connect with these audiences.

The concept of cultural capital, introduced by Bourdieu (1984), is essential to understand the social hierarchies that emerge within these digital communities. Cultural capital, understood as the set of knowledge, skills, and competencies valued within a particular context, is continuously negotiated on digital platforms. Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009) add that, in the online environment, these competencies are constructed and reinforced through collective consumption practices and content production, allowing members of microcultures to acquire prestige and influence.

This phenomenon is further explored by Kozinets (2019), who emphasizes the overlap between cultural capital and social capital in digital networks, where prestige arises not only from knowledge but also from the ability to influence the behavior of other members. Thus, the dynamic between these different types of capital reflects the complex relationship between knowledge, power, and consumption in digital microcultures.

Consumption practices in these communities go beyond the mere acquisition of products, functioning as an extension of both individual and collective identities. Consumer behavior, as emphasized by Arnould and Thompson (2005), is deeply shaped by the cultural contexts in which it occurs. In digital microcultures, these contexts are shaped by online social interactions. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) suggest that in the postmodern world, consumers use consumption as a tool to express multiple identities, a characteristic especially evident on digital platforms, where the boundaries between the real self and the virtual self are fluid.

Adding to this discussion, Schau et al. (2009) indicate that digital microcultures not only reflect but also create and sustain their own cultural meanings through consumption practices, transforming products and brands

into symbols of belonging and social validation. In this way, consumption in these communities becomes a cultural act that simultaneously reinforces group cohesion and provides identity to individuals.

In this sense, the study of these microcultures reveals an interdependence between cultural, social, and economic capital that redefines consumer behavior in digital environments. Bourdieu (1984) had already asserted that these forms of capital are in constant interaction, something that is clearly observed on social digital platforms. Kozinets (2019) argues that cultural capital rapidly transforms into social capital as individuals gain visibility and influence within these networks, which in turn impacts their consumption choices and their position within digital communities.

Arvidsson (2018) reinforces that this circulation of capital on digital platforms creates a new landscape for marketing, in which brands must position themselves not only as providers of products but also as facilitators of cultural meanings. These interactions between consumption, capital, and status in digital microcultures demand a new understanding of marketing strategies, which need to be adapted to this more dynamic and fluid context.

The influence of digital platforms on consumer behavior: cultural marketing perspectives

Digital platforms such as TikTok, Discord, and Twitch have played a crucial role in redefining consumer behavior by creating new forms of cultural engagement and interaction between brands and consumers. Kozinets (2019) argues that these platforms are not merely content distribution channels but also spaces where consumption practices are mediated by social interactions. By acting as cultural mediators, these environments foster the creation of new norms and meanings around products and services, transforming consumption into a highly cultural process.

This phenomenon is supported by Arvidsson (2018), who observes that these platforms create "attention economies," where the value of products is directly linked to the visibility and social interaction they generate. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) complement this perspective by suggesting that, in the postmodern context, consumption is a form of cultural expression that transcends the mere functionality of products, emphasizing the role of digital platforms as facilitators of identity and cultural narratives.

In addition to serving as spaces for content dissemination, digital platforms allow the creation of highly segmented consumer communities, which directly influences marketing strategies. Thompson and Haytko (1997) highlight that, on digital platforms, the cultural and symbolic discourses that emerge are widely appropriated by consumers as part of their everyday experiences.

Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009) reinforce this idea by pointing out that collective consumption practices within these communities not only create value for consumers but also add value to brands by transforming them into cultural symbols. Kozinets (2019) suggests that this creation of symbolic value is a dynamic phenomenon in which consumers become co-creators of brand narratives, shaping them through their interactions within digital communities. Thus, digital platforms become essential environments for the formation and dissemination of cultural meanings that directly impact consumer behavior.

Another crucial point is how digital platforms, through their algorithms and recommendation systems, influence the formation of consumer communities and shape consumer preferences. Arvidsson (2018) highlights that these platforms operate in "algorithmic markets," where consumption is directed by automated systems that categorize and segment users based on their past behaviors.

This segmentation process, according to Firat and Venkatesh (1995), reinforces the idea that modern consumers seek products and services aligned with their personal and cultural identities. Kozinets (2019) suggests that this personalization of consumption creates new challenges for brands, which must adapt to a fragmented and culturally diverse audience. By integrating consumers into personalized networks of products and services, digital platforms not only respond to cultural demands but also shape consumer behavior by creating personalized and communal experiences.

It is important to emphasize that the impact of these platforms on consumer behavior transcends individual interactions, influencing marketing strategies on a macro level. Arvidsson (2018) suggests that digital platforms reconfigure the marketing landscape by creating new cultural ecosystems in which brands must strategically position themselves. Schau et al. (2009) complement this view by stating that the success of brands on these platforms depends on their ability to participate in the cultural practices of consumer communities, contributing to the creation of collective value.

Kozinets (2019) further argues that, in this new context, marketing is no longer a simple form of unilateral communication but a continuous process of interaction between brands and consumers, where cultural narratives are constantly negotiated and co-created. In this sense, digital platforms represent both a challenge and an opportunity for companies, which need to understand the cultural and social dynamics at play to remain relevant.

III. Method

This research adopts a qualitative approach, aiming to explore in depth the cultural and social dynamics that occur within digital microcultures and their impact on consumer behavior. The choice of a qualitative

methodology is justified by the exploratory nature of the study, as this type of approach allows for a more detailed understanding of meanings and social practices in complex environments, such as digital platforms (Creswell, 2014).

Furthermore, qualitative research is particularly suitable for studies on consumer culture, as it seeks to capture symbolic and contextual nuances that would not be easily accessible through quantitative methods (Belk, 2006). The methodological strategy used was netnography, an adaptation of traditional ethnographic methods for the study of online cultures and communities (Kozinets, 2019).

Netnography allows for participant observation of interactions occurring on digital platforms, capturing consumption practices and discourses emerging from these virtual communities. According to Kozinets (2019), netnography is particularly effective in contexts where cultural interactions are mediated by technology, providing a robust means of investigating consumption dynamics in digital environments.

To ensure the depth of the analysis, three widely used digital platforms for the formation of microcultures were selected: TikTok, Discord, and Twitch. These platforms were chosen based on their popularity among younger generations and their ability to foster high-intensity interactions around products and brands.

Data collection was conducted through passive observation of interactions within digital communities, as well as content analysis of user-generated material. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), data collection and analysis in qualitative methods should occur simultaneously, allowing patterns and themes to be identified and refined throughout the process.

The qualitative nature of netnographic research also allowed for the use of rich, context-dependent data, as digital platforms present diverse socio-cultural interactions. By observing both real-time conversations and analyzing archival data from user-generated content, the study was able to capture the evolving discourses within the microcultures. As observed by Kozinets (2015), this approach enables researchers to identify nuanced shifts in consumption behavior and group identity that occur over time within digital environments.

Additionally, the iterative process of thematic analysis was employed to constantly refine codes and themes as new data were collected, ensuring that emerging patterns of identity construction and symbolic consumption were adequately captured (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By maintaining this reflexive approach, the study not only ensured methodological rigor but also adapted to the fluidity of digital interactions, where consumer narratives and brand meanings are frequently re-negotiated.

Thus, the data were coded and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which sought to identify recurring categories related to consumption and identity construction within digital microcultures (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This technique was chosen for its ability to generate insights into the discursive and cultural practices that influence consumer behavior.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the results, the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985) were followed, which suggest the use of techniques such as data triangulation and member checking. Data triangulation was implemented by comparing observed interactions across different digital platforms and verifying the consistency of consumer behavior patterns.

Additionally, interviews were conducted with selected members of the microcultures to complement observational data and ensure that the researchers' interpretations aligned with the participants' own perceptions. This procedure aimed to increase the credibility of the findings and minimize potential interpretative biases (Creswell, 2014).

The research was conducted in accordance with the guidelines and regulatory standards for research involving human subjects outlined in Resolution No. 466/12 of the National Health Council, and with the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of Centro Universitário Santo Agostinho. This committee upholds respect for human dignity, protection of research participants, and ethical development and engagement. The authorization protocol numbers are: 82747418.9.0000.5602, 82744318.7.0000.5602, 82742718.6.0000.5602, 65263417.1.0000.5602, and 65275617.3.0000.5602. Four fundamental principles of bioethics were incorporated from both the individual and collective perspectives: autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice.

IV. Identity Construction And Cultural Capital In Digital Microcultures

In digital microcultures, identity construction is intertwined with consumption, serving as an effective means of acquiring and displaying cultural capital. The concept of cultural capital, as outlined by Bourdieu (1984), involves the competencies and knowledge valued in specific social contexts. In the digital environment, this dynamic intensifies, as consumers on platforms like TikTok and Discord use their consumption practices to align themselves with community values, which in turn reinforces their belonging and status within the group.

This process highlights the participatory nature of digital consumption, where the lines between content creator and consumer blur, making cultural capital not just a measure of what one owns, but also of how one interacts and contributes to the digital space (Holt, 1998). The fluidity of digital identities means that cultural capital can be constantly negotiated and performed, thus elevating certain users as influential figures within their microcultures.

Moreover, as Hearn (2008) notes, these platforms facilitate “self-production,” where users create idealized versions of themselves that are validated through interactions with other community members. In digital environments, this self-production goes beyond the consumption of goods; it involves crafting one’s personal brand by aligning consumption with the values and aesthetics prized by the community (Marwick, 2013).

As a result, users are not only consuming products for personal utility but to craft an image that reflects communal norms and values, engaging in what Goffman (1959) called “impression management.” Cultural capital is manifested not only in the consumption of products but also in the creation of content that reflects the shared values within these microcultures. Through this, users gain recognition and status by signaling their expertise and authenticity, which are highly valued traits in these social ecosystems (Kozinets, 2019).

The netnographic analysis revealed this dynamic when a Discord user, a specialist in tech products, was widely supported after recommending productivity gadgets. One community member responded:

"The best tips. You really know your stuff."

This type of interaction not only highlights the cultural capital accumulated by the individual but also reflects what Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) call "consumer leadership," where certain individuals emerge as references due to their informed decisions and ability to influence the behavior of others. This concept of consumer leadership reinforces the idea that cultural capital in digital microcultures is both relational and performative, as status is conferred through interactions that validate a user's authority within a specific domain. It also showcases how cultural capital is dynamic, not static, constantly evolving as users engage in collective practices and exchange knowledge within the community.

Interviews also reinforced how consumption is used as a tool for self-expression within digital microcultures. A TikTok interviewee, active in the fashion community, commented:

"The brands I buy have to align perfectly with me. There’s nothing that makes me happier than when someone sees me wearing something and says: ahh, that product is so you."

This example illustrates what Elliott (1994) describes as “self-expression through consumption,” where product choices communicate individual identities and shared values. This aligns with the idea of symbolic consumption, where brands act as extensions of personal identity (Ahuvia, 2005).

For many consumers, especially in digital spaces, brand alignment is a form of social capital that signals membership within a subculture and an understanding of the values that define it (Belk, 1988). This constant negotiation of identity through consumption speaks to the importance of visibility in digital microcultures, where how one is perceived by others is tied directly to the products and brands they align themselves with.

Another important point that emerged from the research was the use of symbolic languages within digital microcultures. On Twitch, for example, streamers who master the use of specific memes and slang accumulate greater cultural capital within their communities. One interviewee remarked:

"It's like he's [the streamer] one of us, part of our friend group. Because everything he says relates to what we already talk about."

This reflects what Geertz (1973) described as “webs of significance,” where symbols and cultural practices are fundamental to belonging and social cohesion within a community. The use of memes, specific language, and references unique to a community becomes a form of gatekeeping, where fluency in symbolic language dictates one's status (Shifman, 2014).

Therefore, mastering these symbolic languages allows individuals to assert their belonging, while also reinforcing the cultural norms that define the community. This cultural fluency is essential in digital microcultures, where shared symbols serve as the foundation for group identity and collective consumption practices (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009).

The results also indicate that identity construction and the accumulation of cultural capital are dynamic processes within digital microcultures. These platforms offer consumers the opportunity to constantly negotiate their identities while displaying and sharing their consumption practices. Netnographic observation highlighted that, in many cases, individuals not only consume products but also attribute cultural meanings to them, as argued by McCracken (1986), who suggests that consumer goods have the power to transport cultural meanings between consumers and their communities.

This process of meaning transfer is amplified in digital environments, where the reach of consumer practices extends beyond personal identity to collective identity formation. Arvidsson (2018) adds to this discussion by stating that, on digital platforms, the symbolic value of a product is intrinsically tied to the social recognition and visibility it generates within the community. In this sense, the act of consumption becomes a public performance, where cultural capital is accumulated through the validation of peers within the microculture (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

The ability to navigate norms, master symbolic languages, and make consumption choices that resonate with group values allows individuals not only to belong but also to gain status and influence. These findings contribute to the understanding of the theories of Bourdieu (1984), Firat and Venkatesh (1995), and McCracken

(1986), by showing that in digital environments, consumer behavior is deeply rooted in cultural and social interactions.

The flexibility of digital platforms allows for more fluid identity construction processes, where consumption plays a central role in both individual expression and community cohesion (Turkle, 1995). This dual role of consumption in identity formation highlights the ongoing evolution of cultural capital, suggesting that in the digital age, influence is tied not only to economic power but to one's ability to navigate and shape the symbolic dimensions of digital life.

V. The Role Of Digital Platforms In Mediating Consumption And Creating Symbolic Value

Digital platforms such as TikTok, Discord, and Twitch have played a crucial role in mediating interactions between consumers and brands, transforming consumption into a social and symbolic practice. These platforms not only facilitate the dissemination of products but also create contexts where the cultural meanings associated with these products are constructed and negotiated. Kozinets (2019) argues that these platforms function as "cultural spaces," where consumers interact and collaborate in the creation of meanings around consumer goods.

This interaction shifts the locus of control away from brands, allowing consumers to play an active role in shaping the cultural significance of products. In essence, platforms like TikTok enable a democratization of meaning-making, where even lesser-known brands can gain symbolic value through viral trends and collective engagement. As a result, brand narratives become more dynamic, co-created in real-time through consumer interactions, reinforcing the notion that the meaning of products is fluid and subject to reinterpretation.

Moreover, Arvidsson (2006) suggests that in contemporary digital economies, the value of a product is intrinsically tied to its ability to generate visibility and social interaction, making platforms essential in the creation of symbolic value. This shift towards visibility as a marker of value emphasizes the role of "attention" as a new form of currency.

Consumers no longer engage with products solely for their functional purposes, but also for the social recognition they gain by being associated with visible and culturally relevant goods (Holt, 2002). As consumers curate their digital identities, the brands they engage with become status symbols, allowing them to perform identity work within their social networks. Thus, digital platforms do not simply mediate consumption; they actively shape and produce cultural capital through mechanisms that amplify certain products and trends.

The consumption practices observed in the studied digital microcultures indicate that the visibility of a product or brand on a digital platform often defines its symbolic value within the community. For example, during an interaction on TikTok, a fashion influencer highlighted the use of an emerging brand, and the video quickly amassed thousands of comments from users expressing interest in adopting this trend. One user commented: "Am I the only one who didn't know this piece is everything? I've seen so many people wearing it."

This type of response reflects what Baudrillard (1998) describes as "commodity fetishism," where the product's value is amplified by its association with social status and the desire for belonging. The desire for social belonging, as Firat and Venkatesh (1995) argue, transforms products into cultural artifacts that signal one's inclusion within a particular group or trend. This notion of symbolic consumption underscores the role of digital platforms in elevating the social significance of products, where visibility equates to social relevance, and consumers' decisions are heavily influenced by the collective endorsement of their peers. This interconnectedness between individual consumption and collective validation demonstrates how digital platforms are redefining the traditional boundaries of consumer behavior.

Additionally, digital platforms provide a space where brands can directly connect with their audiences and actively participate in the creation of symbolic value. Netnographic results indicate that, in the observed interactions, brands that engage authentically with microcultures are more successful in creating value. Authentic engagement, as described by Jenkins (2006), is crucial in digital environments where consumers are particularly sensitive to perceived manipulation or insincerity. Brands that attempt to impose their narratives without considering the values and norms of the community often face backlash or are ignored by the consumer base. As noted by one Discord interviewee:

"Brands that join the conversations [in the community] without seeming forced are the ones we respect the most."

This aligns with the concept of co-creation of value, discussed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), which suggests that companies are no longer the sole creators of value but facilitators in a collaborative process between themselves and consumers. This collaboration allows consumers to appropriate and personalize brand narratives, reinforcing their own cultural identity while simultaneously contributing to the brand's evolution.

Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009) reinforce this perspective by arguing that brand communities generate value by promoting collective practices in which the cultural meaning of products is negotiated and reinforced through interaction. In this process, the line between producer and consumer blurs, as both parties contribute to the ongoing development of the brand's cultural significance.

Digital platforms also operate through algorithms that shape consumer interactions and direct the visibility of products and brands. These algorithms play a key role in mediating consumption, as they influence

which products become visible and which remain on the margins. Algorithmic curation, as highlighted by Bucher (2012), introduces a new layer of market control, where brands are not only competing for consumer attention but also for favorable algorithmic positioning. As one Twitch participant observed:

"It feels like after I see or mention a product, it just keeps popping up everywhere for me."

This algorithmic control over product exposure reflects what Arvidsson (2018) called "attention markets," where a product's value is directly linked to its ability to capture and maintain consumers' attention. For Zwick and Dholakia (2004), this dynamic creates new forms of market control, where consumer behavior is continuously shaped by automated mechanisms, challenging traditional approaches to marketing and consumption. The influence of algorithms complicates the traditional consumer journey by introducing elements of suggestion and recommendation that guide consumers toward specific products, often amplifying those that are already trending within a community. This digital infrastructure means that the path to brand visibility is no longer linear, but shaped by algorithms that reward products based on their ability to engage and captivate audiences.

In this sense, the symbolic value of products on digital platforms is not determined solely by the initial interaction between brands and consumers but also by how meanings are disseminated and amplified through social networks and communities. Therefore, McCracken (1986) asserts that products carry cultural meanings that are attributed to them by consumers and social practices. On digital platforms, this process is accelerated, as interactions between microculture members result in the creation of new meanings, which can be quickly disseminated.

Kozinets (2019) adds that in digital environments, symbolic value is no longer tied exclusively to a brand's narrative but also to how consumers reinterpret and share this narrative among their peers. In this way, digital platforms act as cultural mediators, facilitating the creation and amplification of symbolic value that transcends traditional consumption.

VI. Co-Creation Of Meaning And The Challenge To Traditional Marketing Strategies

In digital microcultures, the co-creation of meaning between brands and consumers challenges traditional marketing approaches, which have historically centered on one-way communication. Digital platforms, by enabling continuous and participatory interactions, fundamentally alter the dynamic between brands and consumers, promoting a model in which both parties co-create the cultural meanings surrounding products and services.

Kozinets (2019) emphasizes that, within social networks and digital communities, consumers are not merely passive recipients of marketing messages but active agents in the creation and dissemination of brand narratives. This shift away from a top-down communication model toward a more fluid and decentralized interaction underscores the importance of adaptability in marketing strategies. As brands lose their tight grip on the message, they must embrace the unpredictability that arises from consumer participation, recognizing that their identity will be shaped and reshaped by those who engage with it.

This co-creation of value reflects the perspective of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), who argue that value is no longer produced exclusively by companies but emerges from interactions between consumers and brands in collaborative processes. In this sense, the power to shape brand identity becomes distributed, with consumers taking ownership of the narrative.

This is a form of empowerment for consumers, who become co-authors of the brand story, blurring the lines between producer and consumer (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). During the netnography, it was observed that brands engaging consumers in a more authentic and participatory manner are able to create deeper meanings around their products. In a Discord interaction, for instance, a group discussed a beverage brand campaign that invited consumers to share their own stories. One user commented:

"Man, I thought I was listening to my own story."

This type of engagement reflects the concept of "experiential marketing" discussed by Schmitt (1999), where the value of a product is closely tied to the experiences and emotions it generates. This approach departs from traditional marketing, which typically focuses on highlighting the functional attributes of products, and opens space for consumers to personalize marketing messages based on their own experiences and narratives.

Moreover, the co-creation of meaning on digital platforms implies that consumers can reinterpret and often subvert the messages originally intended by brands. A Twitch interviewee mentioned that, in his community, a meme about a sportswear brand ended up acquiring an alternative meaning, not anticipated by the company: "We took this brand, and now only those in the community get it (laughs)."

This underscores the fluidity of meaning within digital cultures, where consumers often take control of brand symbols and repurpose them to fit their own contexts (Hebdige, 1979). This phenomenon aligns with the concept of "cultural appropriation" discussed by Holt (2002), where consumers recontextualize products and brands to create new cultural meanings that often escape the control of companies. This form of meaning-making reflects the participatory nature of digital culture, where consumers are no longer passive subjects of marketing but active agents of cultural production (Jenkins, 2006).

Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009) complement this view by arguing that within brand communities, consumers appropriate brand practices and narratives, transforming them to fit the needs and values of the community. The appropriation of brand narratives often results in the development of in-group symbols that create a sense of belonging among community members, further cementing the social bonds that revolve around the brand.

These processes of co-creation of meaning pose a significant challenge to traditional marketing strategies, which are based on the premise that brands control their own narratives. With the rise of digital platforms, companies face the risk of losing control over what their products and campaigns represent, as consumers may reconfigure these meanings within their communities. This situation places brands in a precarious position where the meanings they attach to products may no longer be the dominant narrative, requiring them to constantly monitor and respond to evolving consumer discourses (Cova & Pace, 2006). As one participant observed:

"Here, we say whatever we want, lots of trolling (laughs)."

This exemplifies the need for brands to embrace humor, satire, and other forms of playful engagement that are inherent to digital communities, rather than attempting to suppress or ignore such activities. This underscores the need for companies to adapt to an environment where marketing becomes more horizontal and collaborative, as suggested by Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar (2007).

In this scenario, brands need to learn to navigate a space where co-creation of meaning is the norm, and where the power dynamics between companies and consumers are continuously renegotiated. By adopting a more flexible and dialogic approach, brands can become more attuned to the rhythms of digital communities, allowing them to engage meaningfully with their audience without imposing rigid control over their image.

Thus, a brand's ability to engage consumers in co-creation processes has important implications for loyalty and community building. McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) argue that brands that successfully facilitate these co-creation processes, promoting a sense of belonging and collective identity among consumers, are more likely to form long-lasting brand communities.

In the digital age, communities are often sustained by shared participation and meaning-making rather than by traditional notions of consumption alone. This form of community-building is particularly relevant in microcultures, where symbolic participation can be just as valuable as purchasing the actual product (Kozinets, 2015). The emotional investment that arises from co-creation can transform consumers into brand advocates, who not only consume but also actively promote the brand within their communities.

Netnographic observations confirmed this by highlighting how brands that encourage active consumer participation, such as those promoting creative contests or collaborative campaigns, tend to be perceived more positively. This participatory model aligns with Jenkins's (2006) theory of convergence culture, where the boundaries between production and consumption are blurred, and consumers play a pivotal role in shaping the cultural landscape.

Kozinets (2019) adds that the role of the brand in this context is to create opportunities for consumers to contribute their own stories, meanings, and cultural practices. In this sense, the co-creation of meaning not only redefines the relationship between consumers and brands but also serves as an effective means of strengthening brand engagement and loyalty in the long term. Ultimately, brands that embrace this participatory approach are better positioned to cultivate a deeper connection with their audience, fostering a community of consumers who feel invested in the brand's identity and values.

VII. Theoretical Insights Into Identity Construction, Cultural Capital, And Value Co-Creation In Digital Microcultures

The role of digital platforms in facilitating identity construction through consumption has become increasingly central in contemporary consumer culture. According to Arvidsson (2018), digital spaces act as arenas where consumers not only purchase products but also engage in identity work, using their consumption choices as a means of self-expression.

These platforms offer a unique opportunity for individuals to publicly display their consumption choices, which in turn communicate aspects of their personal identity to a broader audience (Schau & Gilly, 2003). This process is particularly significant in digital microcultures, where the visibility of one's consumption choices is amplified through constant interaction with like-minded individuals who share similar values and interests. Social platforms allow users to curate their personal brands, often with the intention of aligning themselves with certain cultural codes or trends that are prevalent within their communities.

This idea aligns with the work of Belk (2013), who argues that possessions and consumption are integral to the extended self, especially in virtual environments where identity is often performed and negotiated publicly. The extension of the self through digital possessions – such as branded products, avatars, or even social media posts – becomes a powerful form of identity construction in the digital age. In this context, consumption serves as a bridge between individual identity and collective belonging.

Moreover, virtual environments allow consumers to rapidly shift between different expressions of identity, experimenting with various modes of self-presentation and self-expression that might not be as easily accessible in offline contexts (Turkle, 1995). This constant negotiation of identity underscores the fluidity of digital spaces, where the act of consuming is closely tied to the process of becoming and evolving within a community.

Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009) add that in brand communities, identity is not only constructed through individual consumption but also reinforced by group belonging and shared symbolic practices. These symbolic practices often serve as rituals that reinforce the group's collective identity, creating a shared sense of purpose and meaning around specific brands or products. Digital microcultures, as explored in this research, provide fertile ground for the co-construction of these symbolic meanings, as consumers work together to create a shared narrative around the products they consume.

In this way, identity construction is a dynamic process that is continually shaped by the collective values and practices of the community. The findings of this research reveal that digital microcultures serve as dynamic spaces where consumers actively construct and perform their identities, supported by their consumption of products that resonate with the community's values. This phenomenon highlights the central role of consumption as a tool for social participation and identity reinforcement in virtual environments.

The concept of cultural capital plays a fundamental role in understanding the status and influence dynamics within digital microcultures. Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital explains how knowledge, skills, and competencies serve as markers of distinction within social groups. Cultural capital manifests in various forms within digital microcultures, particularly through the ability to navigate the platform's unique social and cultural codes.

As Kozinets (2015) argues, in online environments, mastering the unwritten rules of interaction—whether through language, style, or technological adeptness—becomes a key way of accumulating social capital. Participants in digital microcultures who demonstrate fluency in these codes, such as the ability to create viral content or use platform-specific jargon, are often granted status and influence. This cultural fluency allows them to position themselves as key influencers within the community, shaping collective consumption practices and setting trends that others follow.

Moreover, Lamont and Lareau (1988) emphasize that cultural capital not only grants individuals social recognition but also facilitates upward mobility within hierarchical social structures. In digital spaces, this upward mobility can be seen in the rise of social media influencers who, through their consumption choices and online personas, accumulate significant cultural capital that translates into real-world opportunities.

This is particularly evident in the way influencers negotiate their identities and consumption habits to align with the expectations of their followers, thereby reinforcing their authority and influence within digital microcultures (Abidin, 2016). The results of this study align with these perspectives, demonstrating that within digital microcultures, consumers who accumulate knowledge about products and effectively engage with symbolic languages are rewarded with status and influence. This reinforces the notion that consumption in digital spaces is not merely about acquiring goods but about accumulating social capital through culturally recognized practices.

Digital platforms also function as intermediaries that mediate and regulate the consumption practices within these communities. According to Arvidsson (2006), in the "attention economy," the value of a product is closely tied to its visibility and the social interactions it generates. In digital microcultures, the act of being seen consuming a particular product becomes just as important as the consumption itself.

Platforms such as TikTok and Twitch magnify this phenomenon, where users curate their consumption experiences for an audience, generating social capital through visibility and engagement (Senft, 2013). Products that gain traction within these platforms can see their symbolic value skyrocket as they become associated with social status, cultural trends, or group identity. Thus, digital platforms do not merely facilitate consumption—they actively shape the meaning and value attached to consumed goods.

Similarly, Zwick and Dholakia (2004) argue that algorithms on digital platforms shape consumer behavior by amplifying certain products and discourses over others, effectively guiding consumption patterns. Algorithms act as gatekeepers that determine which products or ideas gain prominence within a given community. This curated visibility plays a crucial role in reinforcing the symbolic value of certain products, as they are elevated within the collective consciousness of the community.

At the same time, this algorithmic filtering can also limit the diversity of consumption choices, as consumers are often directed toward a narrow set of products or trends (Beer, 2009). This supports Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) co-creation theory, which asserts that value is no longer produced solely by companies but emerges from the interaction between brands and consumers. By engaging with digital platforms, consumers participate in the co-creation of symbolic value, adding layers of meaning to the products they consume based on their interactions within the community.

In line with these theories, the findings of this study reveal that digital platforms, through their algorithmic mechanisms and social affordances, play an active role in shaping the symbolic value of products.

Brands that engage consumers in participatory and collaborative value creation are more likely to succeed in building strong connections with digital microcultures. This shift toward co-creation underscores the importance of interactivity and collaboration between brands and consumers, as the symbolic value of a product is increasingly co-constructed through ongoing dialogue within digital spaces. As such, the traditional boundaries between producers and consumers continue to blur, with consumers taking an active role in shaping the cultural and symbolic significance of the products they engage with.

VIII. Discussion

This research explored the role of digital platforms in identity construction and the creation of symbolic value through consumption, with an emphasis on digital microcultures. The findings revealed that interactions on platforms such as TikTok, Discord, and Twitch not only facilitate consumption but also transform the act of consuming into a cultural and social process. The co-creation of meanings between brands and consumers emerged as a central practice, highlighting that consumers play an active role in producing the symbolic values attributed to products and services.

From the netnographic analysis and interviews, it was found that cultural capital plays a fundamental role in identity construction within these microcultures. Accumulating knowledge about products and mastering the symbolic languages of digital communities confer status and influence on consumers, who are socially rewarded for their consumption practices. In this context, identity is constantly negotiated, and consumption becomes a means of expressing and reinforcing belonging to these groups.

The study also demonstrated that digital platforms serve as active mediators of consumption practices, influencing the visibility and symbolic value of products. Through algorithms and social interactions, these platforms promote a personalization of consumption that challenges traditional marketing strategies. Brands that adopt a more participatory and collaborative approach, involving consumers in value co-creation processes, were perceived more positively and strengthened their connection with communities.

The practical implications of this research suggest that companies need to reassess their marketing strategies in light of the dynamics of digital platforms. The traditional approach, centered on one-way messaging, is no longer sufficient to engage consumers who now seek more authenticity, participation, and personalization. The ability of brands to foster genuine interactions and collaborate with consumers in the creation of narratives and meanings is essential to maintaining their relevance in digital microcultures. As Kozinets (2019) and Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) pointed out, companies that adapt to this new reality can benefit by transforming marketing into an interactive, horizontal, and co-creation-oriented process.

Additionally, this research contributes to theoretical advancement by connecting discussions on cultural capital, value co-creation, and marketing strategies in digital environments. By highlighting the specificities of digital microcultures and their impact on consumption, the study fills an important gap in the cultural marketing and digital consumption literature.

However, future studies may expand this analysis by examining other platforms and digital communities, as well as exploring the influence of these dynamics in different cultural and socioeconomic contexts. In this way, the understanding of new relationships between brands and consumers in digital environments can continue to evolve, offering valuable insights for both academia and the marketplace.

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