

Digital-fictional Expectations in Virtual Brand Communities: Analyzing Consumer Loyalty for BSLady Community through Instagram Platforms

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Abstract

This research explores the phenomenon of the emergence of virtual brand communities that can drive consumer purchase desires in the digital market ecosystem. The provision of virtual community platforms can connect consumers to share experiences and interact with each other toward preferred brands. Through digital research methods, scraping data taken from the BSLady virtual community on Instagram illustrates how a brand's impact that provides space for consumer involvement can foster loyalty and consumer advocacy and create co-creation activities that can give vital feedback to each other in the digital era.

Introduction

Unlimited access for digital market actors changes various ecosystems. It causes economic capitalists to face uncertain futures. Previous studies have shown that communities are usually formed by groups that gather with similar interests, or groups of consumers or lovers of certain brands. Another form of brand community is usually led by someone sponsored by the brand. In the era of digital markets, a new phenomenon has emerged where a brand creates a community through a digital platform to provide a gathering place. Moreover, brands also

facilitate various activities that support the community, which can be defined FiVBC as firm-initiated virtual brand communities (Akrouf & Nagy, 2018). These communities provide a platform for consumers to connect, share experiences, and interact with the brands they like.

The interaction between brands and consumers has changed significantly in the digital era, especially amid the massive use of increasingly diverse social media platforms. One of the phenomena that increasingly dominates the current digital ecosystem is the emergence of virtual brand communities, which encourage consumer loyalty to products and willingness to buy due to the sense of trust that is built (Valmohammadi et al., 2023; Jeong et al., 2021). This phenomenon emphasizes consumers connecting, sharing experiences, and interacting with the brands they love (Cheng et al., 2020). In this context, consumers can express their loyalty to brands and engage in co-creation activities. These activities include providing feedback, sharing ideas, and influencing brand decision-making (Davis et al., 2014; Baldus et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2004).

In various studies, these virtual brand communities have been identified as one of the strategic instruments that can enhance the relationship between brands and consumers for the long term through a collaborative environment (Martínez-López et al., 2021; Confente & Kucharska, 2021). Not surprisingly, many companies concentrate and invest in this field to build unique relationships with consumers, especially since virtual brand communities provide an excellent opportunity to create personalized experiences (Chen et al., 2022; Huangfu et al., 2022). In addition, consumer preferences can be more easily identified, and various product offerings can be customized to consumer needs (Li et al., 2021). In an extended period, this concentration allows brands to strengthen brand equity, reduce the cost of acquiring new consumers, and increase retention through more meaningful and sustainable relationships (Kaur et al., 2020; Ho & Wang, 2020; Rubio et al., 2020).

This phenomenon not only benefits companies but also has positive implications for consumers. In this context, consumers play an active role in product development, gain more accessible access to information about desired products, and interact with fellow product enthusiasts (Kaur et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021; ShiYong et al., 2022). Consumer participation in virtual brand communities has become increasingly crucial in this digital era, especially in maintaining loyalty and expanding brand reach in an increasingly competitive market. Specifically, understanding the impact of virtual brand communities on consumer engagement is important for companies, marketing practitioners, and academic researchers to understand the evolving market dynamics (Huangfu et al., 2022; Laroche et al., 2012; Dessart et al., 2015; Davis et al., 2014; Baldus et al., 2015).

This phenomenon has also become a severe concern for many practitioners due to its increasingly relevant trend and the emergence of various socio-economic symptoms in the wave of online markets. News about damaging product scandals, for example, shows how the massive spread of negative news in online brand communities can trigger a reputation crisis and lead to consumer rejection of the product brand (Yuan et al., 2020; Dessart et al., 2020; Ozuem et al., 2021). Thus, the role of consumers is very significant in this online brand community; even research conducted by Liao et al. (2020) revealed that communities hosted by consumers have more decisive knowledge contributions than those hosted by companies, indicating a shift in power and control in brand management. This aspect further emphasizes the urgency for companies to understand how interactions within consumer communities can influence brand perception and loyalty more broadly.

While much research has been conducted on the effects of online brand communities on consumer loyalty, there is a significant gap in the literature on the topic of fictitious expectations and brand communities on digital platforms. These fictitious expectations are expectations that

consumers form based on idealized representations of products projected by brands through social media (Dunne & Raby, 2024; Chen, 2021). This expectation often does not fully match, as content on digital platforms tends to be curated to present an aesthetic and idealized image, leaving consumers in a frenzy of fictional expectations, especially in fashion communities such as BSLady Scarves on Instagram. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap through an empirical analysis of consumer loyalty within the BSLady community.

Specifically, this study will explore how fictional expectations can build and influence consumer loyalty in the BSLady Scarves virtual community on Instagram, which also supports the formation of fictional expectations in members. The leading hypothesis is that fictional expectations strongly influence the dynamics of decisions and willingness to make purchases, involvement in brand promotion, and active participation in communication built-in virtual communities. This research will then contribute to the growing socio-economic phenomenon, especially in the midst of the touch of social media which is increasingly widespread and has become a trend in society.

Conceptual Framework

Market is an exchange arena that has various views in various disciplines, one of which is often a comparison between economic and social views. In economics, the market is the realm of calculation and rationality, but in sociology economics, the market is a social exchange arena full of uncertainty (Beckert, 2016). In a market arena, there are market actors or actors who play a role in running the market, as these actors are institutions, sellers, and buyers. The actors play an important role in shaping capitalist dynamics in the market arena. In a social perspective, the values formed in the market arena are not just a matter of values that can be seen, values that can be calculated and rationalized. Some values are built as a result of the interaction of market actors.

Further extending his analysis, Beckert (2016) launched "Imaginative Value in the Economy" which dives into the role of imagination in market activities. In many economic settings, particularly in speculative ventures like financial markets, actors make decisions based on visions of future outcomes. Beckert argues that these imaginative projections are not individual fantasies but socially constructed through interactions among market participants. Investors, entrepreneurs, and other economic agents use shared narratives and collective beliefs to navigate uncertainty, turning their imagined future values into actual economic behaviors. Imagination becomes a key force driving speculative investments, as market participants anchor their decisions in what they anticipate others will believe about future conditions.

When it comes to markets dynamic, particularly speculative, characterized by radical uncertainty. Unlike risk, where probabilities can be assigned to outcomes, uncertainty means that the future is fundamentally unknowable. In these situations, market participants cannot rely solely on past data or technical analysis to make decisions. Instead, they must use their imaginations to envision possible future developments, such as the success of a new technology, the rise in stock prices, or the future demand for a product. This imaginative leap allows actors to make choices in the face of uncertainty, even when objective calculations are impossible.

Economic actors do not imagine the future in isolation but are influenced by shared cultural narratives, trends, and collective beliefs. These shared imaginaries help to stabilize expectations in uncertain markets. For example, in speculative markets like real estate or stock exchanges, investors often align their actions based on the collective mood or dominant narratives about growth, innovation, or technological revolutions. When a narrative becomes widely accepted, such as the promise of a "new economy" or the potential of artificial intelligence or actors' expectations become self-reinforcing, driving investment and market dynamics. This collective aspect of imagination also explains why

markets can experience speculative bubbles. As more participants buy into the same future vision, demand increases, often leading to asset prices being driven up beyond their "fundamental" values. This self-reinforcing dynamic can persist until a shock or change in sentiment causes the narrative to unravel, leading to market corrections or crashes. Imagination is not only about predicting future outcomes but also about constructing the very value of goods and services in the economy.

In these markets, economic value is tied to how market participants collectively imagine the meaning and significance of these goods. For instance, the value of a luxury brand may not lie solely in the material quality of its products but in the symbolic narrative of exclusivity, status, or innovation that surrounds it. The concept of imaginative value is closely linked to innovation and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs must imagine new products, services, or business models that do not yet exist, often betting on future demand for things that consumers themselves may not even know they want. This imaginative foresight allows entrepreneurs to bring innovations to market, challenging existing industries and creating entirely new ones. The success of these innovations often depends on how well entrepreneurs can convey their imagined futures to investors, customers, and other stakeholders. In this sense, entrepreneurship and innovation are deeply intertwined with the ability to project and sell a vision of a possible future. Venture capitalists, for example, invest not in what exists today but in the future potential of a company or technology, basing their decisions on the narratives constructed by entrepreneurs about what the future could hold.

In the market, the value of a product is determined by product information, material quality, and product characteristics. Still, beyond these concepts, in the aspect of the art market, one of which is fashion products, value is formed not only about materials, or the value of the product itself. However, other socially formed product values are the result of a reciprocal process of market actors' interpretations (Beckert, 2019).

This is no longer a matter of markets and institutions, socially processed value formed from successfully mediated and conventionized interactions that help attach meaning to a product, which ultimately produces collective meaning and builds willingness to pay which results in an increased transaction process.

Responding to these findings, Beckert (2016) conceptualizes fictional expectations as a value condition formed from the social process of a collection of future fictional imaginations in an effort to project future uncertainty. The word fictional is meant by Beckert (2016) to imply that a future expectation is fictional. After all, its truth cannot be verified because it has not yet happened. Another key element that supports fictional expectations is the imagination attached to a product due to actors who imagine the same value and occur collectively. The value in question is not just a matter of quality; in the composition of the imagined narrative, there is an imagined component of exclusivity, status, and luxury. Furthermore, the value continues its social process among market actors by building collective beliefs from “second-order observation” which is a judgment that comes not only from oneself but also comes from the beliefs of other actors.

Another Jens Beckert’s exploration of market dynamics offers a fresh perspective on how markets function beyond the traditional economic models. Beckert (2019) moves away from the typical focus on information asymmetry, such as in Akerlof’s (1970) model of the “market for lemons”. Beckert instead argues that in markets where the quality of goods such as; like art or fashion is not inherently visible, value and price formation are socially constructed. These constructions are based on the interplay of actors who interpret quality through discursive practices and mutual observations. Beckert (2019) introduces the “markets from meaning” model, which explains how subjective perceptions of quality, institutions, and market structures come together to form prices in uncertain markets, such as art and financial speculation.

This idea challenges traditional economic theories that explain market outcomes through the lens of information asymmetry, material qualities, or intrinsic characteristics. Instead, Beckert argues that in many markets, particularly those dealing with symbolic or speculative goods such as art, fashion, and financial products value is determined intersubjectively, through shared narratives, conventions, and mutual observation among market actors.

Fictional expectations can be a component of predicting the quality of a good's value, especially in the case of the art market, which includes fashion. Fictional expectations can shed light on understanding how the attractiveness of goods is formed among consumers. Fictional expectations can also connect the gap between economic reality and social reality, as there is a component of uncertainty in contingent interpretation that can complement the value of qualification in economic value, or in this case, it can be called intersubjective processes.

Why should fictional expectations be taken into account and believed? How is it possible that a fictional narrative that should be ignored can influence buyer decisions? This can be explained by the fact that fictional narratives, which are imagined, are often thoughts that may have been previously formed but are not based on beliefs, but build collective trust due to the formation of a collection of “second-order observers”. The fictional expectation condition can connect the fantasy and the reality that is attempted. To deal with future market uncertainty, fictional expectations can be a way to predict the future by constructing imaginative values for uncertain future decision-making.

Methods

This form of community activity is carried out with parallel methods through digital research methods by scraping data taken from the BSLady and Locallady virtual communities on Instagram. The primary data used in this research is textual data, which emerges from the digital

data of the Instagram platform in the form of posted comment fields and photo captions. By using digital data adapted to the current digital empirical situation, this research provides a form of digital data-based research practice. The digital social process described in this research uses digital analysis techniques and digital data to analyze the social world based on digital sociology in the digital era, responding to Ignatow (2020).

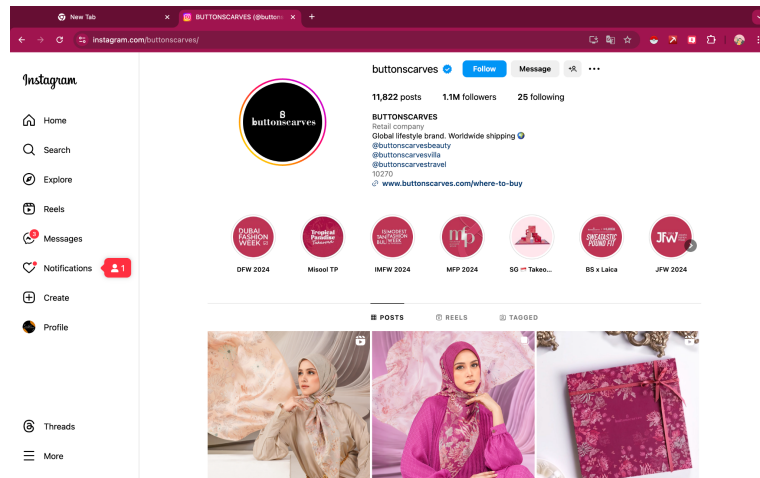


Figure 1. Brand ButtonsCarves Instagram Platform

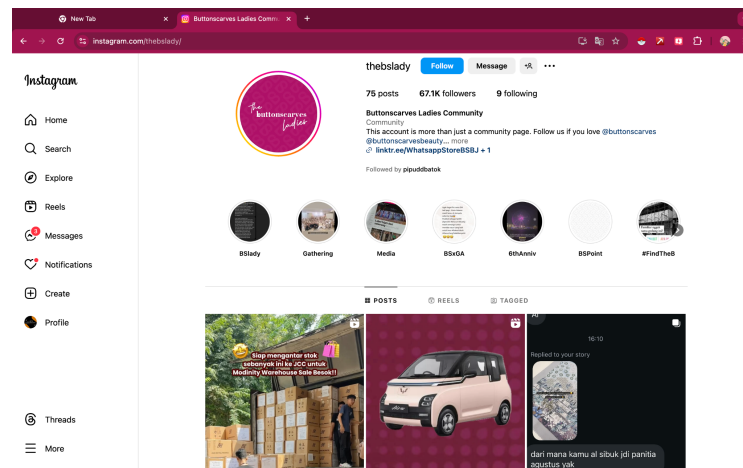


Figure 2. The FiVBC BSLady Instagram Platform

Textual data is collected using website scraping techniques with the help of IG export commenter tools to retrieve comment text data, and

Instant data scraper tools to retrieve caption text data. The text data we use is the text component of the captions used in the BSLady community Instagram platform, and the Buttonsscarves Instagram representing the brand and FiVBC. Meanwhile, the text data from the comments section of the two posts were taken to represent the consumers. This research is thus a big data analysis of the various interactions that exist on the internet by capturing the socio-economic phenomena that occur. According to Bukovina (2016) social media is a good database for knowing people's behavior, this data is then identified as big data in social media research.

Comment data is used to measure indicators of one of the market actors that play an important role in the market, namely consumers. Comment data is considered as a form of market response from the consumer side, which is socially processed through digital market interactions that create value in the market arena. The imaginative future value built by the brand through the use of captions, which the brand tries to persuade, is analyzed through textual analysis techniques to obtain the formation of fictional expectations of market uncertainty based on Beckert's (2016) concept. Going beyond the concept of fictional expectations, this research provides an overview of fictional expectations in the digital arena and illustrates a form of fictional expectations measurement that can help consumers reduce future uncertainty.

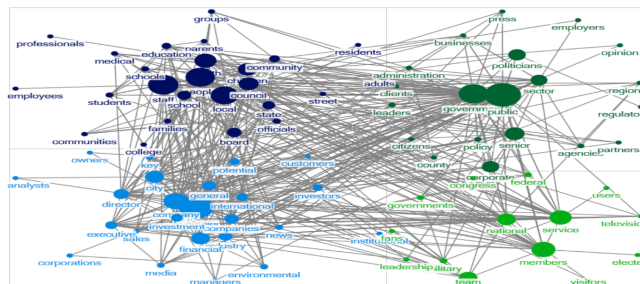


Figure 3. Semantic Network Illustration (source: WORDij, 2024)

The text big data was processed using WORDij software, which is a network model operating system (Danowski, 2013) that can analyze text big data into a text network matrix. TNA, or text network analysis, is a text network analysis technique that measures the nodes connected to each other in the matrix data to determine the influence of each network node in the network structure (reference). Each word that appears is represented as a network of interconnected nodes, and grouped based on the strongest corpus network measurement. The resulting network of text data will cluster and form a relationship of frequently occurring words, thus representing a text analysis that describes the context frequently discussed in the large data of texts. The results of the TNA analysis are visualized using Gephi software, which is able to interpret the network matrix file through the sparsification process of modularity and betweenness centrality calculations (Bastian et al., 2009). Furthermore, the visualization results are subjected to narrative abstraction, enabling the narrative explanation of the attachment and relationships within the networks, building interaction among economics actors through instagram. Thus this research can explicitly describe the form of digital-fictional expectation.

Results & Discussion

One of the market players called institutions is the Instagram platform, which is used by brands to build virtual communities. Technically, Instagram is a social media that allows individual users and communities to interact and connect with each other in the digital world. Instagram allows users to share content that can be uploaded such as photos, videos, short stories, and also direct broadcast. Another feature that facilitates interaction with each other is direct user comments, which can create a discussion space between community members and outside the community.

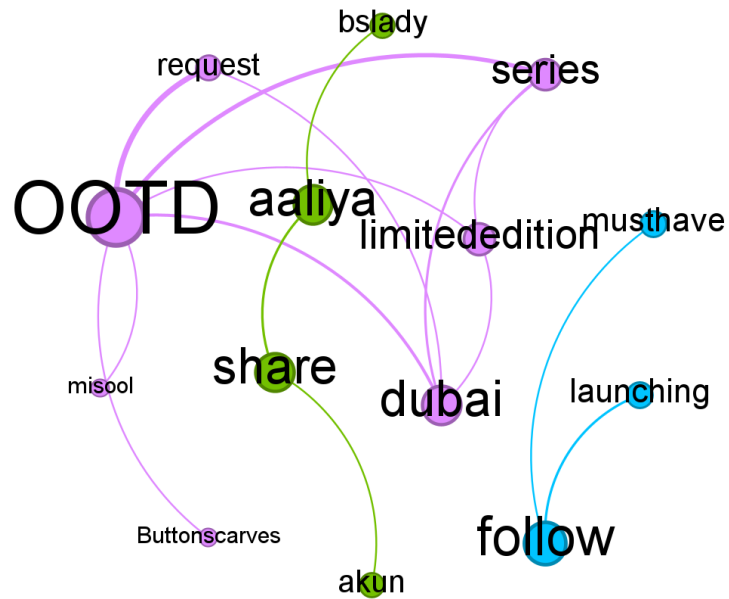


Figure 4. The TNA result of caption analysis from TheBSLady and Buttons carves Instagram account

The results show how the word networks formed in the sentences used in the Instagram captions of the BSLady and Buttons carves accounts are strongly related to the key visualized words in the analysis. This demonstrates the deliberate and strategic use of language by these brands to create compelling narratives around their products. It shows that brands are actively working to construct the imaginative value of their offerings, using carefully chosen words to build expectations and aspirations in the minds of their consumers. This linguistic strategy is central to creating a sense of desirability and exclusivity, encouraging engagement, and ultimately driving consumer behavior.

As shown in Figure 4, the purple cluster networks clearly highlight Buttons carves' efforts to highlight its most popular lines, such as Misool and Dubai, which attract attention due to their limited edition status. The

limited nature of these products taps into consumers' fear of missing out (FOMO), further increasing their perceived value bahkan cenderung memberikan kecemasan kepada konsumen dan mendorong sifat konsumtif (Alutaybi et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Rozgonjuk et al., 2020;). Additionally, the recurring use of phrases such as "share your OOTD" (Outfit of the Day) in Instagram captions reflects a direct appeal for consumer participation. By encouraging followers to share how they style these products, the brand creates a sense of community and encourages user-generated content that reinforces the products' imaginative association with lifestyle and personal expression. This approach not only increases engagement, but also reinforces the brand's narrative, making its products more aspirational and culturally relevant.

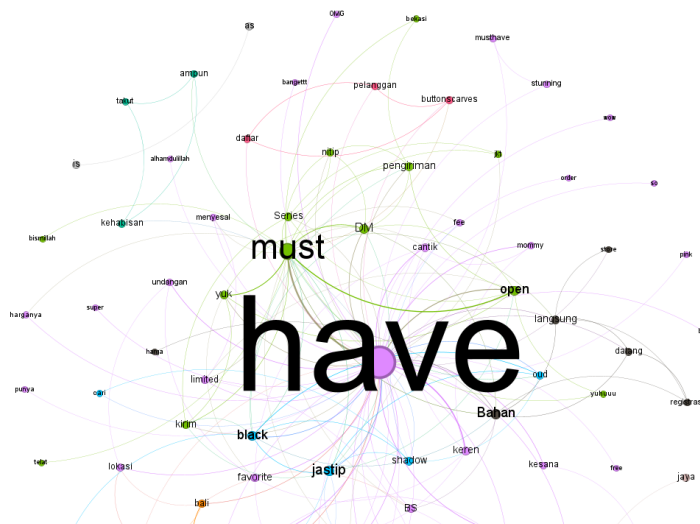


Figure 5. The TNA result of the comment section analysis from Buttocscarves Instagram account

Meanwhile, the visualization in Figure 6, The visualization shows the word network derived from Instagram captions and comments related to the BSLady account, which reveals how brands use language to shape narrative and consumer engagement. The network reveals how imagined futures and aspirational narratives drive consumer behavior and brand loyalty (Beckert, 2016). The most prominent words, such as "bag," "series," and "paper bag," indicate products that are central to the brand's narrative and marketing strategy. These items are not just functional objects, but are embedded with an imaginative value that enhances their desirability. Words such as 'yura', 'mermaid' and 'monogram' suggest product lines or themes that trigger specific emotional or aesthetic associations, reinforcing the imaginative appeal.

Compared to the TNA results observed in the brand accounts in Figure 5 and Figure 6, the Text Network Analysis (TNA) results from the BSLady FiVBC account appear significantly more diverse. The broader range of topics and sentiments reflects the fact that consumers feel more comfortable and open in expressing their expectations, preferences, and feedback on this platform. This openness highlights the dynamic interaction facilitated by the FiVBC account, which promotes a more conversational and less formal environment compared to direct brand

communication. These activities demonstrate how FiVBC effectively acts as an intermediary, bridging brands and their customers. Through the encouragement of consumer participation and dialogue, FiVBC enables brands to gain deeper insights into customer needs and desires.

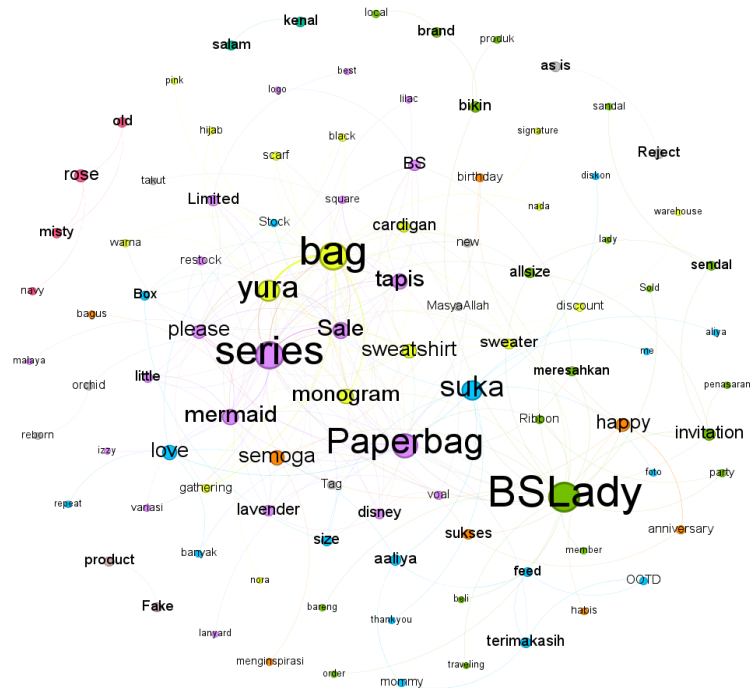


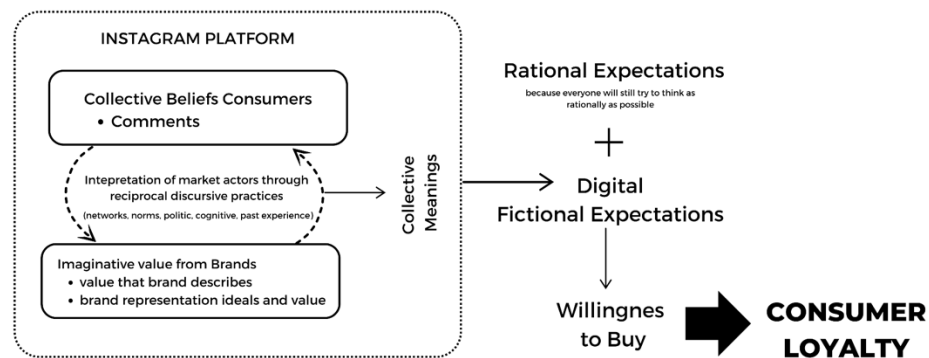
Figure 6. The TNA result in the Instagram comment sections FiVBC theBSLady Instagram account

In addition to helping brands gain a better understanding of customer preferences, behaviors, and expectations, this interaction promotes a sense of belonging and inclusion through active customer engagement (Wang, 2023). Through direct engagement with their communities, brands can create meaningful dialogues that are in line with their customers' values and aspirations. Over time, these efforts lay the foundation to build the trust and emotional connection that is essential to fostering long-term relationships between brands and their consumers. These emotional connections transform transactional interactions into

lasting brand-consumer relationships, ultimately driving stronger customer loyalty and turning satisfied customers into enthusiastic advocates who actively promote the brand.

The results also show how digital fictional expectations - the imagined futures and desires that are shaped and communicated in digital spaces such as FiVBC - play a central role in this process. Through strategic involvement in brand promotion and the encouragement of active participation within virtual communities, brands are able to amplify their narratives and engage customers on a deeper level. By embedding customers in these imaginative narratives, virtual communities become a powerful tool for fostering brand attachment. Beyond loyalty, this process cultivates a sense of shared identity and commitment among customers, solidifying their role as active participants in the brand story. As these

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virtual communities develop, a feedback loop of engagement and advocacy is created, positioning brands for sustainable success in a highly competitive digital market.

Figure 7. The Operationalitaion of digital-fictional expectations

The narrative of the words networked in the node matrix illustrates the creation of a fictional narrative of the product that can stimulate consumers' desire to consume by creating the exclusivity of the product

narrative. Although the imagined value of the product is fraught with uncertainty, the encouragement of the imagination through the fictional narrative of the product constructed by the brand can motivate consumers to imagine other values calculated from the collective beliefs of other consumers who are simultaneously connected through unlimited access to the digital world. The narrative of scarcity fosters collective hope and creates markets.

Conclusion

The digital age is characterized by unlimited access to information and the prevalence of asymmetric information, where some individuals or groups have more or better information than others. As a result of these dynamics, there is an urgent need for immediate and in-depth research in anticipation of the rapid and ongoing changes in social processes. These changes are occurring not only in the areas of technology and digital interactions, but also in various spheres of life, including social, economic, political, and cultural spheres. The accelerating pace of change in these areas requires scholars, policymakers, and industry leaders to keep pace with the changing landscape in order to better understand and manage these developments.

Much future research is needed to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and empirical observations in order to effectively navigate the digital age. How the sociology of the digital world is evolving, particularly how digital interactions are reshaping traditional social patterns, relationships, and institutions, is one of the key questions. In order to understand their wider social impact, we need to explore them in more depth.

Digital fictional expectation, a concept that refers to the creation of idealized or speculative beliefs about products, services, or experiences in

the digital marketplace, is an emerging area of research. With the rise of digital platforms, social media, and online marketing, consumers are increasingly exposed to a wide range of online content that shapes their cognition and expectations. These "fictional expectations" are constructed through digital storytelling, influencer marketing, and promoting aspirational lifestyles, which often have little to do with the actual product or service offered.

It is becoming a critical area of research to understand how these expectations are formed, how they influence consumer behavior, and how they can be managed or regulated. Digital fictional expectations can affect various sectors, from e-commerce to entertainment, and even political campaigns and social movements. Such research can provide valuable insights into the mind of the digital consumer and assist businesses, policy makers and consumers themselves in navigating the blurry line between reality and fiction.

In conclusion, as the digital era continues to evolve, it is imperative to engage in comprehensive research that addresses the complex and rapidly changing nature of the digital landscape. Digital sociology, together with emerging research on digital fiction expectations, is a critical area of study for understanding and responding to new challenges and opportunities of this.

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