RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negative brand meaning co-creation in social media brand communities: A laddering approach using NVivo

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Abstract

Social media brand communities (SMBCs) have been heralded for their co-creative, participatory potential whereby consumers actively contribute to the proliferation of meaningful brand avenues in a virtuously circular relationship with brands. Elevated loyalty and enhanced brand equity have been posited repeatedly as likely outcomes of a positively engaged community of brand aficionados. However, evidence to the contrary as negative brand co-creation or brand co-destruction has been progressively piling up in the extant literature. This paper contributes to the meaning co-creation in SMBCs literature primarily on two grounds: first, by offering a methodological framework for adapting the laddering research technique in a mixed methods vein to SMBCs data in a thread-specific context, by leveraging the analytical capabilities of NVivo CAQDAS software; second, by addressing bottlenecks in the applicability of the proposed methodology in light of negative brand co-creation.

KEYWORDS
brand communities, brand meaning co-creation, laddering technique, NVivo, social media

1 | INTRODUCTION: PROGRESSIVE EMPHASIS ON CONTENT IN CONSUMER/BRAND INTERACTIONS IN SOCIAL MEDIA BRAND COMMUNITIES

Social media brand communities (SMBCs) have been proliferating over the years at an exponential rate. Nowadays, there is not even a single brand, at least among the 100 leading brands in the FMCG sector which does not maintain an active presence across the major social media platforms, and that is not in possession of the requisite social listening skills for monitoring discussions and transforming them into actionable insights.

Muniz and O' Guinn (2001) spearheaded the community perspective in branding research (Heding, Knudtzen, & Bjerre, 2009), according to whom a brand community "is distinguished from other consumer collectives by three markers: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility" (Sorensen & Drennan, 2017). SMBCs differ from their offline counterpart primarily in terms of "transparent social context (e.g., no aliases as in web forums), flat structure,

potentially large scale, content and storytelling" (Sorensen & Drennan, 2017). Spearheaded the community perspective in branding research (Heding, Knudtzen, & Bjerre, 2009), according to whom a brand community "is distinguished from other consumer collectives by three markers: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility" (Sorensen & Drennan, 2017). SMBCs differ from their offline counterpart primarily in terms of "transparent social context (e.g., no aliases as in web forums), flat structure, potentially large scale, content and storytelling" (Sorensen & Drennan, 2017).

Consumers have been joining en masse brand communities, as the latter have been increasing their influence in shaping brand meaning (co-creation and consumer empowerment; Wiegandt, 2009). In online brand communities, consumers "communicate through postings, instant messaging, and chat discussions about special interests related to the company's products and brands" (Keller, 2009). In this context, "co-creation reinforces ties between community members. Through games and competitions, they build up intimate relationships because they share the same passion for the brand and common memories" (Cherif & Miled, 2013). The

co-creative potential of brand communities spans a broad range of marketing activities, most eminently with regard to new product development, new promotions, consumer insights, but also cultural and lifestyle aspects, either directly or indirectly related to the brand host. Rialti, Caliandro, Zollo, and Ciappei (2018) identified four principal types of co-created experiences, namely a brand's individual usage experiences, that is experiences stemming from individual consumption activities; autocelebrative experiences which derive from individual consumption activities, but are influenced by community settings; communal usage experiences with regard to the use of products for participating in communal activities; collective celebration experiences where consumers use a brand in the company of other community members. Among the various benefits that marketers may reap from consumer participation in brand communities are new ways of unlocking competitive advantage (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), enhanced engagement, equity (Cova, Pace, & Park, 2007; Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014; Rossolatos, 2018a,b) and loyalty (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Meister, 2012).

Various antecedents in terms of attitudes and motivations for participating in online brand communities have been identified in the constantly augmenting literature. Brand communities allow their members to assume multiple social identities (Zaglia, 2012). In their review of the relevant literature spanning the marketing research terrain, as well as the social sciences on a broader scale, Kamboj and Rahman (2017) singled out two main social theoretic perspectives on which researchers have been drawing for conceptualizing antecedents: the needs/benefits and the social integration theories. Additionally, Martinez-Lopez, Anaya-Sanchez, Aguilar-Illescas, and Molinillo (2016) highlight the prevalence of social identification and social comparison theories. The former is geared towards explaining the emotive participation of an "I" in a "we," whereas the latter towards explaining how people compare themselves to others while adapting to multiple environments.

Furthermore, research in brand communities has focused on types of interaction. In this context, two major types have been identified, namely between a brand and consumers (community members), and among brand community members themselves (Muniz & O' Guinn, 2001, cited in Martinez-Lopez et al., 2016, p. 109). Likewise, two major types of brand communities are currently operative in social media, namely brand initiated, moderated and controlled communities and consumer-to-consumer ones. Salient typologies with regard to the various roles performed by brand community participants and their level of involvement have been furnished, such as Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner's (2010) macro-typology consisting of devotees, insiders, newbies, and minglers, and Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder's (2011) typology of creative posters, brand warriors and moderators (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017).

Although the bulk of research into SMBCs has focused on yielding insights as to the antecedents, outcomes, and types of interaction and engagement, added focus has been laid progressively on the posted content. The recognition that a significant portion of user-generated content in SMBCs is in fact negatively valenced (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014), and moreover, potentially hazardous for brand reputation and equity, has fueled this burgeoning substream. As Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) contend, not all co-creative activities result in positive value. This form of non-collaborative behavior has been identified as a significant feature of interactions between brand owners and stakeholders. Although the community branding mantra that is suggestive of a streamlined centering around a focal brand is regularly evoked (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015), often the specific and quite dissonant, contested (Lee & Soon, 2017; Weijo, Hietanen, & Mattila, 2016; Yeritsian, 2018) and outright messy ways whereby such focalizations are attained remain under-explored.

A closer reading of consumers' comments to brand initiated threads in SMBCs more often than not points to thematic territories and semantic ramifications that not only are dissonant with the initial discussion topic (Brogi et al., 2013), but display such heterogeneity as to posit severe constraints to the sustainability of thematic control on behalf of the marketer. Subsequently, co-creation becomes a process of co-destruction of brand meaning, rather than mutual brand development (Kristal, Baumgarth, & Henseler, 2018). The bulk of research that has been produced to this end offers largely qualitative typological frameworks that outline the types of negative co-creation actions undertaken by consumers in SMBCs and brands' reactions, by discourse or content analyzing comments, as will be shown in the literature review in the following section. These studies adopt a micro-analytical approach to SMBCs content by attending to specific aspects of situated interaction.

This paper complements the extant literature on negative brand meaning co-creation by focusing on SMBCs interaction in an as yet unaddressed manner, that is by analyzing data, on the one hand, in a highly context-specific fashion that is incumbent on the thematic orientation of individual brand initiated threads. On the other hand, it dimensionalizes negative co-creation even further, by introducing a sharper distinction between relevantly negative comments, irrelevantly negative comments, and outright indifferent ones. To add interpretive depth to brand meaning co-creation in SMBCs, I apply the laddering technique in a critical vein with a view to encapsulating adverse aspects of co-creation "from below" (Yeritsian, 2018). The laddering technique is particularly attuned to the exploration of instances of negative brand evaluation (Woodside, 2010), and concomitantly of negative co-creation, while it seeks to unearth how, why and in what situations a brand is rejected either on a particular dimension with regard to attributes, benefits, values or across the board.

As will be discussed in greater detail in the ensuing section, a major difference in the formation of brand-related memory as brand associations between the offline and online enclaves consists in the conditioning of individual associations by a tapestry of synchronically accessible comments that make up a brand memory (Fujita, Harrigan, & Soutar, 2017) as living social text. This calls for a more detailed and nuanced exploration of how exactly this collective brand memory is generated and on what levels. The exploratory orientation of the laddering technique is well aligned with the exigencies of this

research task. Moreover, laddering may be used as a method for gauging the depth of consumer engagement, insofar as it offers a comprehensive outlook from latent attitudinal states to manifest evaluative judgments concerning product attributes and benefits.

In a nutshell, this paper pursues the following expository path. First, it offers a literature review with regard to the conceptual and methodological differences between sentiment analysis approaches in a big data vein and marketing research microanalytical approaches. The focus, then, shifts towards scrutinizing how negative co-creation has been framed in the marketing literature to argue for the relevance of applying the laddering technique to SMBCs data and how it may contribute in furthering our understanding of distinctive types of comments under a uniform typological rubric. Subsequently, the research questions of the exploratory study are formulated, followed by an outline of the theoretical underpinnings and empirical applications of the laddering technique. The exposition of the methodological framework that is adopted for showcasing the laddering technique follows suit. The findings from the analysis of the selected threads with the aid of NVivo 12 Plus are discussed with a focalization on contested meanings in light of negative and indifferent comments. Finally, methodological reflections on the applicability of the laddering technique on social media data are offered. The paper concludes with a discussion on the managerial implications of the proposed framework, the limitations of this study, as well as areas for further research.

2 | CO-CREATION OF BRAND MEANING IN SMBCS: OPPORTUNITY OR NUISANCE?

2.1 | Limitations of big data analytics in generating deep insights about brand meaning co-creation and consumer engagement

Disillusioned with big data and "bag-of-words" approaches that are plagued by an insufficient attentiveness to the contextual use of linguistic and multimodal components, as well as to the interactional context among participants, researchers have been calling for closer readings of social media data in a small data vein (Latzko-Toth, Bonneau, & Millette, 2017). As argued by Puschmann and Powell (2018), misclassification in big data analyses can occur for a number of reasons, most strikingly due to domain or context specificity. The authors conclude that the appropriate usage of sentiment analysis presumes detailed knowledge of the domain of application. Small data readings that seek to unearth the multilayered construal of brand meaning in co-creative predicaments may be afforded by applying semiotic and/or discourse analytic frameworks to social media data. More specifically, although consumer engagement with branded content, as well as the ubiquitous user-generated content, have been heralded as indispensable facets of brand meaning co-creation, big data analytics have been merely scratching the surface of engagement by focusing on segmenting user-generated comments into generic types, such as positive, negative, or neutral comments for gauging brand sentiment. At the same time, consumer research

has been largely concerned with identifying the psychological and behavioral antecedents and outcomes of brand-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer interactions in brand communities, rather than focusing on the interactional modes and content.

2.2 | Negative brand meaning co-creation in focus

The added focus on SMBCs content in digital marketing research has been driven by the increasing recognition of the potentially adverse impact of negative brand co-creation in terms of brand image erosion and equity dilution (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011; Kristal et al., 2018). Negative brand co-creation has been framed in various manners in the extant literature. Indicatively, Rauschnabel, Kammerlander, and Ivens (2016, pp. 381-382) coined the term collaborative brand attacks (CBAs), as "joint, event-induced, dynamic, and public offenses from a large number of internet users via social media platforms on a brand that are aimed to harm it and/or to force it to change its behavior." By adopting a multicase study analytic approach, the authors coined a typology of brand reactions to CBAs, consisting of ignoring, censoring/legal steps, counter stating, appeasing, content bumping, and changing behavior.

Hollebeek and Chen (2014) expanded the scope of brand engagement as a cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions, to accommodate both positively and negatively valenced interactions. They culminated in a three-pronged definition, featuring immersion, passion, and activation. Immersion designates the level of a consumer's positively/negatively valenced brand-related thoughts, concentration, and reflection in specific brand interactions. Passion refers to the degree of a consumer's positively/negatively valenced brand-related effect, exhibited in particular brand interactions. Activation stands for a consumer's positively/negatively valenced level of energy, effort, and time spent on a brand in particular brand interactions. Their analysis drew on consumer, rather than brand controlled SMBCs, namely on fans of Apple and fans of Samsung mobile (reflecting positively valenced engagement), and on Apple sucks and Samsung sucks (reflecting negatively valenced engagement).

Rosenthal, Pereira, and Brito (2017) put forward a brand meaning co-creation framework between brands and fans on Facebook by applying a case study methodology, with a view to identifying how brand communities may be curated by its managers. Their framework was based on the role content performs in fans' lives and their potential reactions, over and above the projected brand meaning. The offered typology drew on Kapferer's brand identity prism model (see Cherif & Miled, 2013 for a similar approach that draws on the brand identity prism), while a grounded theoretical approach was implemented during the codification process. The authors culminated in an allegedly nonrepresentative typology of brand actions and brand fans' reactions. The latter comprised doubting, liking, sharing, suggesting, praising, criticizing, self-expression. However, no further information was supplied as to the relative incidence of negative versus positive co-creation in the scrutinized dataset, thus emitting the impression that all brand/fans interactions were geared towards

positive co-creation, also relevantly so, that is in alignment with the overarching brand initiated threads. The scrutinized brand communities' posts were treated *en masse*, that is regardless of their specific meaning in the context of brand initiated thematic threads. The framework revolved around high involvement categories/brands (whiskey, running apparel), thus limiting its applicability to low involvement categories where, as the authors contend, engaging consumers may be a more demanding exercise. This study takes on board the authors' suggestion for future research that is geared towards indicating intrinsic limits to fan engagement and the ability to generate meaningful interactions in social networking sites.

Kristal et al. (2018) put forward the concept of observer-based brand engagement to account for the impact of a few participants in social media blogs who engage in negative brand meaning co-creation activities, on the larger proportion of passive participants who are exposed to the process of co-destruction. In this context, they distinguished between brand play and brand attack. Brand play accommodates negative comments as parody and pranks, whereas brand attacks encapsulate instances where a brand is hijacked for a destructively negative reimagining of its meanings.

Despite the above studies' adoption of a microanalytical approach to the classification of negative content, they neither contextualize the analysis within the strict semantic contours of individual threads nor dimensionalize them in terms of whether negatively (and positively) valenced comments are relevant or irrelevant to the overarching brand initiated themes. Yet, according to the laddering model, as will be shown in greater detail in the following section, both direct and indirect links between cognitive and affective elements are important in a means-end ladder (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988; Huber, Beckmann, & Herrmann, 2004). This entails that although the underlying theme of a comment (either with regard to attributes or benefits) may be irrelevant with reference to the overarching theme in a brand initiated thread, its impact in terms of positively engaging a brand community may be paramount. Moreover, negatively valenced comments are not addressed as to whether they are congruent or incongruent, axiologically speaking, with the projected brand image in individual brand initiated threads. These salient facets will be focalized here with the application of the laddering technique.

2.3 | The idiosyncratic nature of brand memory formation in social media

The co-creative potential embedded in brand communities runs much deeper than specific and isolated marketing activities and concerns a wholly new way whereby brand memory is formed as a collective consumer/brand memory. This diachronical molding of collective memory has been captured in digital media theorizing by the so-called memory turn, whereby official narratives are challenged with increasing frequency from countless uploads and the circulation of incidences, reflections, and illustrations (Liew, Pang, & Chan, 2015).

Brand memory or archival memory formation in a Web 2.0 environment is evinced as participatory memory (Hagedoorn, 2015),

whereby private memories make up a constantly augmenting collective memory, while collectively assembled memories feed back into private memories. Thus, brand memory formation is the outcome of a constant discursive struggle in a linguistic marketplace (Bouvier, 2015), yet whose vestiges are not necessarily apparent in a directly dialogical form. Instead, it is indirectly traceable through a secondary elaboration and dimensionalization of individual comments. The nondialogical nature of comments may be gleaned by attending to the types that regularly succeed one another in the same thread. Such types vary to such an extent and may include (Hagedoorn, 2015, p.588) personal memories from one's own experience (including mediated experiences), personal and mediated memories through engagement with *lieux de memoire* or responses of praise and criticism.

The intermingling of personal with publicly available memories in the context of SMBCs brand memory formation (Marlowe, Bartley, & Collins, 2017; Van Dijck, 2007) is further compounded by dint of the medium's interactional orientation. In such settings, communicative memory (Bartoletti, 2011) is also operative, namely the individual appropriation of readily available public information while interacting with other members' comments. In the context of Twitter, for example, this hybrid public/private memory has been identified as a meta network of communicators (Cantey & Robinson, 2015).

The participatory, yet fragmentary and not necessarily streamlined with a brand's thematic intentions co-creative brand memory in SMBCs settings calls for exploring how brand associations are shaped and what sort of brand meaning is generated in this predicament. From a consumer-based brand equity point of view (Keller, 1998; Rossolatos, 2014a), a brand memory consists of primary and secondary brand associations. The former are product-bound and concern identifiable product attributes (e.g., smell, color), whereas the latter are non-product bound, such as consumer benefits (e.g., status), user and usage imagery. Brand memory shapes up through the interaction of brand associations with latent consumer attitudes in a brand knowledge structure. Keller's brand knowledge structure, by virtue of positing brand-related associations at the very heart of a brand's structure, affords to yield a comprehensive account of the interrelations amongst attributes, benefits, and attitudes.

To explore SMBCs comments in a comprehensive manner, it is suggested to systematically interpret the selected corpus' comments by drawing on the laddering technique. The laddering technique brings under a common rubric attributes, benefits, but also consumers' personal values (axiological framework) that determine to what extent the former are valorized. The "values" component of the laddering technique corresponds to attitudes in Keller's brand knowledge structure (or self-knowledge structure, according to Bagozzi & Pratibha, 1994). Although the co-creation of values (e.g., intrinsic, altruistic, impression-seeking, peace-loving, family-oriented) between consumers and brands and among consumers in SMBCs has been addressed in the literature (Sorensen & Drennan, 2017), it has not been explored comprehensively in tandem with attributes and

benefits or with how personal values determine the valencing of attributes and benefits.

2.4 | Research questions

In light of the preceding discussion, and against the identified gaps in the negative co-creation literature in SMBCs, the main research objective consists in identifying whether and how the laddering technique may be applied to consumers' comments with a view to obtaining a comprehensive picture of consumer engagement alongside attributes, benefits, values. This application calls for a highly contextualized, microanalytical approach that takes into account (a) the bespoke thematic contours of individual brand initiated posts (b) the valencing of consumers' posts with regard to such bespoke settings. Subsequently, to identify how laddering may be applied to SMBCs data, given the ubiquity of negative co-creation, we must first clarify what negative and positive valencing mean in specific thematic contexts. To attain the stated research objectives, the following research questions (RQs) will be addressed:

(RQ1): How can we operationalize the laddering strata in the context of SMBCs comments in such a way as to effectively account for both positive, as well as negative brand meaning co-creation aspects?

(RQ2): How can the identified bottlenecks in the operationalization of the laddering technique in the context of SMBCs be circumvented with a view to yielding managerially salient insights?

The methodological framework that will be used for addressing these RQs will be displayed after the ensuing section which provides an overview of the laddering technique in light of the extant literature, aimed at identifying its salient facets and their relevance for consumer research in SMBCs.

3 | THE LADDERING TECHNIQUE AS BRAND MEANING GENERATION PROCEDURE

The laddering technique is a qualitative method for synthesizing data gathered mostly through in-depth interviews in a comprehensive manner by incorporating information on product attributes, consumer benefits, and consumer values. A key benefit that stems from the application of the method consists in its ability to bypass avoidance behavior on behalf of informants, especially in the face of sensitive or taboo research topics.

As outlined by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), the conceptual backbone of the laddering technique consists of A-C-Vs, that is associative networks or hierarchically linked conceptual ladders comprising product attributes (A), consequences of brand usage as consumer benefits (C), and personal consumer values (V) as components of a higher-order axiology. According to this model, Vs are always mediated by Cs, while Cs stem from a determinate set of A's. The laddering technique was developed by drawing on the means-ends theory. According to Gutman's (1982) means-ends chain

model, consumers are always projecting abstract values onto concrete consumption instances, albeit in an indirect fashion. All consumption choices have consequences. Means-ends theory ascribes valences to these consequences, thus accommodating product choice under a comprehensive axiological rubric.

The laddering technique generates pathways between A-C-Vs. As an example from the salty snacks category, Reynolds and Gutman (1988, p.13) cite the following ladder: (A) flavored chip →(A) strong taste → (C) eat less → (C) don't get fat → (C) better figure → (V) self-esteem. The typical procedure for effectively applying the laddering technique to data gathered through in-depth interviews comprises the following steps: Data are collected on each component of the ACV triad through constant probing that attempts to generate as much in-depth understanding of the links between the components as possible. The research may aim at producing either single brand ladders or multibrand comparative ones (Saaka, Sidon, & Blake, 2004). ACVs, then, are classified according to a typical content analytic coding or discourse analytic procedure. The resulting summary table features the ACVs (in columns) and the informants (in rows), as well as the pathways between the ACVs. The summary table is then transformed into a hierarchical value map (HVM) in the form of an orthogonal 1 × 1 matrix (also called an implication matrix; Amatulli, Pino, De Angelis, & Cascio, 2018).

The strength of the pathways is assessed by calculating the frequency whereby each pair in a ladder is mentioned by a project's informants. "A HVM is gradually built up by connecting all the chains that are formed by considering the linkages in the large matrix of relations among elements. The most typical approach is to try to map all relations above several different cutoff levels (usually from three to five relations, given a sample of 50–60 individuals). The use of multiple cutoffs permits the researcher to evaluate several solutions, choosing the one that appears to be the most informative and most stable set of relations" (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988, p. 13). The components of a ladder were further qualified by Abeele and Zaman (2010) into concrete and abstract attributes, functional and psychosocial consequences.

The laddering technique has many applications, and is particularly useful for consumer segmentation (Orsingher, Marzocchi, & Valentini, 2011), brand positioning (Gutman, 1982), adaptive selling (Wansink, 2003), and advertising development purposes (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988; Saaka et al., 2004). In the following pages I showcase how the laddering technique may be fruitfully applied in SMBC settings.

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 | Mixed-methods methodology

This study adopts an integrative mixed methods research design (Schoonenbooma, Burke, Johnson, & Froehlich, 2017), seeking to conjoin the insights that are generated across the different parts of the research. "Integration can be said to occur to the extent that different data elements and various strategies for analysis of those elements are combined throughout a study in such a way as to

become interdependent in reaching a common theoretical or research goal, thereby producing findings that are greater than the sum of the parts" (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013, p.196). In this context, the quantitative analytics are supportive of the ensuing interpretive endeavor (Herring, 2004). A case study methodology with cross-case comparative orientation is applied to the thematic discovery procedure and the analysis of findings. "One aim of studying multiple cases is to increase generalizability. At a deeper level, the aim is to see processes and outcomes across many cases, to understand how they are qualified by local conditions, and thus to develop more sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations" (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Case study methodology is also particularly well aligned with theory building, in general, as well as with the objectives and components of the laddering technique in particular (Woodside, 2010).

4.2 | Sampling frame

The sampling frame criteria for data collection consist in that the brand community (a) must have been initiated by the marketer (rather than a consumption group), as the topics in marketer initiated threads versus consumer-initiated threads, on the one hand, span all marketing functions, from new products to promotions; while, on the other hand, they correspond more strictly to the concept of co-creation given the participation of both marketers and consumers, as against consumer-initiated brand communities where the participation of the marketer is not guaranteed (and rather tends to be considered as intrusive). The offered analytic focuses strictly on brand initiated and moderated communities in Facebook (Vitak, 2017), for the sake of consistency in terms of technological platform, mode of interaction, and type of user-generated comments (b) must have a long-standing presence in Facebook of at least 5 years to ensure a sufficiently large user base, allowing for richness of brand associations against the background of multifarious topics (c) each brand initiated thread must be sufficiently sizeable (i.e., must have garnered at least $N = 30$ comments), to be amenable to quantitative analysis. Let it be recalled that, as highlighted by Miles and Huberman (1994), the relationship between analytical/interpretive depth and the sample size is inversely proportionate.

4.3 | Data collection

The preparatory stage consisted of screening the 100 biggest FMCG brands' (in terms of global sales turnover) Facebook communities with regard to the sampling frame criteria (Kozinets, 2002; Mayr & Weller, 2017; Meister, 2012). Three threads were ultimately selected from Pepsi's, Kellogg's, Domesto's (Unilever) Facebook brand communities, respectively. Positing at least three brands as the analytical corpus was deemed necessary to minimize selection bias, as well as allow for cross-case comparisons. The selected brand community threads are as follows:

Pepsi: 'Pepsi LOVE IT. LIVE IT. LOVE IT LIVE IT! Painting the world blue with Messi, Marcelo, Kroos, Lloyd and Dele'

Kellogg: For over 70 years, South African families have started their day the Kellogg's® Corn Flakes way! #NourishYourGreat

Domesto's: Domestos and Unilever are proud to support the #GlobalGoals for a #brightFuture where everyone, everywhere has access to a clean, safe toilet.

Each thread counts as an individual sampling point, while each comment as a single analytical unit. The data were scraped from Facebook by using NVivo's NCapture, saved in pdf format and uploaded on NVivo. No ethical issues emerged, as these are publicly available and accessible data.

4.4 | Data analysis

Each individual post (comments and replies) within the selected threads counts as a unit of analysis. The discovery procedure consisted of reading each comment simultaneously on three layers, namely description, contextualization, and signification, the so-called process of data "thickening" (*pace* Geertz). This process is in line with the interpretivist paradigm of qualitative inquiry which recognizes that a social phenomenon can only be understood in context through fine-grained accounts (Latzko-Toth, Bonneau, & Millette, 2017). The coding procedure took place against an *a priori* coding scheme (in terms of brand association type: attribute, benefit, personal value, and valence: negative, positive; neutral valence was excluded as maximum polarity was sought; Table 1). All comments were coded multiply based on the *a priori* coding scheme (Angus, 2017) in a qualitative content analytic vein, against the background of the three laddering strata, dimensionalized according to (a) the comments' relevance to the brand initiated theme (b) their valencing (c) in the case of values, whether they are congruent or incongruent with the specific brand value that is conveyed in the brand initiated theme of the focal threads. The CAQDAS software NVivo 12 Plus was used for coding, analyzing, and synthesizing the data in an iterative fashion (Salmons, 2017).

A bespoke code "indifferent" was used for coding comments which were neither relevant to the brand initiated theme in terms of attributes/benefits, nor irrelevant to the brand initiated theme (yet still relevant to the brand). These exploratory areas were found to be missing from the coding approaches in the extant literature, as shown earlier, although being highly relevant from a depth of engagement point of view. As above stressed, despite the speculative remarks in the marketing literature about the equity, loyalty, and involvement enhancing potential of SMBCs co-creative activities, the bleak truth is that user-generated comments not only often tend to be utterly dissonant from and negatively tinged with regard to marketers' intentions, but also blatantly indifferent. "Management failures can take a number of forms. Fans can simply express boredom and indifference" (Yeritsian, 2018, p.7). "Online customer and brand communities rarely exist in substantial or meaningful ways and there is little evidence of their practical functionality for marketing management" (Bradshaw & Zwick, 2016, p.3). Rather than constituting solid communities of an integrationist orientation, brand communities often resemble situational social collectives whose

TABLE 1 Codebook with a priori NVivo codes

Code name	Definition
ATT_POS_REL	Positive product attribute: The comment's thematic focus rests on a positively valenced attribute that is relevant to the thematic orientation of the brand initiated thread
ATT_NEG_REL	Negative product attribute: The comment's thematic focus rests on a negatively valenced attribute that is relevant to the thematic orientation of the brand initiated thread
ATT_POS_IRREL	Positive product attribute: The comment's thematic focus rests on a positively valenced attribute that is irrelevant to the thematic orientation of the brand initiated thread
ATT_NEG_IRREL	Negative product attribute: The comment's thematic focus rests on a negatively valenced attribute that is irrelevant to the thematic orientation of the brand initiated thread
BEN_POS_REL	Positive consumer benefit: The comment's thematic focus rests on a positively valenced consumer benefit that is relevant to the thematic orientation of the brand initiated thread
BEN_ NEG_REL	Negative consumer benefit: The comment's thematic focus rests on a negatively valenced consumer benefit that is relevant to the thematic orientation of the brand initiated thread
BEN_POS_IRREL	Positive consumer benefit: The comment's thematic focus rests on a positively valenced consumer benefit that is irrelevant to the thematic orientation of the brand initiated thread
BEN_ NEG_IRREL	Negative consumer benefit: The comment's thematic focus rests on a negatively valenced consumer benefit that is relevant to the thematic orientation of the brand initiated thread
VAL_CONG	Congruent personal values: The comment's thematic focus rests on a personal value that is congruent with the specific brand value that is projected in the brand initiated thread
VAL_INCONG	Incongruent personal values: The comment's thematic focus rests on a personal value that is incongruent with the specific brand value that is projected in the brand initiated thread
IND	Indifferent: The comment is utterly indifferent to the thematic orientation of the brand initiated thread, e.g., random remarks, gibberish, misplaced humor

members coexist as imaginary communities (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011). This is why it is particularly important to focus on indifferent comments, inasmuch as on negative ones, not only because of their discrepant orientation with regard to brand initiated themes, but equally importantly because they are indicative of a noninteractional attitude (in peer-to-peer communication terms), given the discrepant conversational (posting) turns.

As regards irrelevant posts with regard to the thematic orientation of a thread, the data thickening approach that is adopted here views them as indispensable signs of negative co-creation. Despite the fact that marketers occasionally seek to contain relevantly negative and/or dissonant comments by inviting consumers to send a message privately in an attempt to contain the communicative "fire" from spreading virally to peers, more often than not irrelevant comments are not tackled at all. They are left intact in the archival brand memory as vestiges of ambivalent semantic orientation, even though they appear to be compromising both the integrative character of a thread, as well as the salience of other, perhaps more seriously intended comments. Although such comments may not be strictly reflective of the driving theme of a brand initiated thread, they may be expressions of personal values that are incongruent with a brand's DNA. Given the sheer volume of this type of comments across brand communities, the application of the laddering technique in unearthing comprehensively co-created brand meaning looms like a most pertinent methodological avenue.

Finally, theming was applied to specific comments to match the focalization requirement in the data interrogation process, as it allows for contextualizing data based on underlying dimensions, and hence is amenable to more salient reporting, compared to analyses that draw

on first order lexemes. Theming also allows for disambiguating the meaning of words based on the context wherein they are embedded. To this end, memos were regularly annotated to the coded segments in an attempt to identify links between the three laddering strata.

4.5 | Data synthesis

Pursuant to the preparatory stage in the laddering analytical procedure whereby the data are screened for salient thematic patterns, the data were interrogated via frequency analyses, lexical clouds, clustering exercises, and HVMs with the aid of NVivo (Rossolatos, 2014b). The output of these exercises is discussed in the following section.

4.5.1 | The benefits from using NVivo in mixed methods research designs

The employment of CAQDAS software (including NVivo) is particularly useful in research designs of both exploratory and confirmatory orientation that feature a mixed-methods approach, i.e., a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis and synthesis, based on different coexisting objectives that may be embedded in the same research design. On the one hand, it allows for qualitatively inquiring a set of data and producing preliminary insights at an initial exploratory stage. On the other hand, it allows for content analyzing a data pool based on both a priori and emergent codes. By dint of its dynamic nature, the software allows for deleting, merging, or coining new codes as the analysis
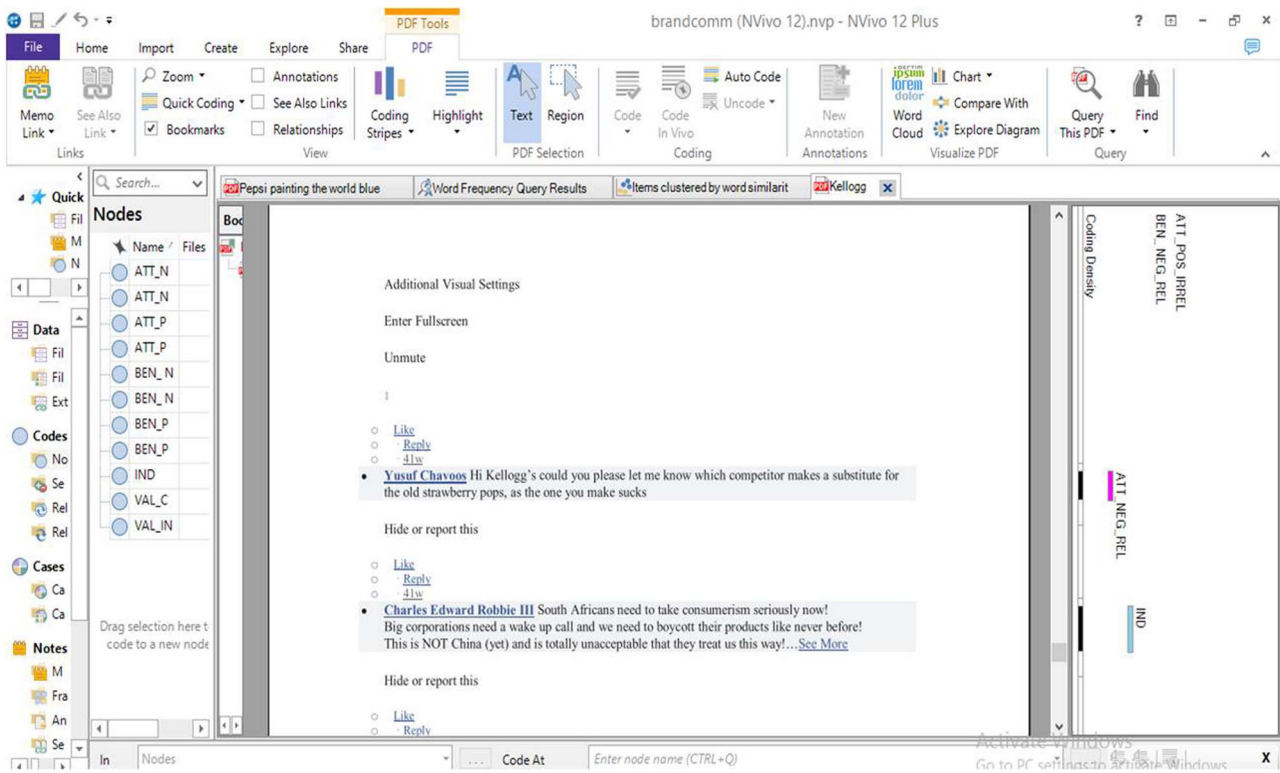
FIGURE 1 The NVivo project workbench. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

progresses, as well as for the generation of hypotheses that may be further explored through SPSS. Throughout the process, the embedded memo annotation function allows for commenting on each part of the analysis/synthesis, thus keeping track of how a reading strategy deploys while addressing the same data in multiple waves.

Moreover, NVivo Plus (cf. Figure 1 for a screenshot from this project's workbench) is uniquely equipped with social media data analytic functionalities. These range from the initial stage of data scraping where the software's Chrome extension NCapture may be used for saving and importing data from platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, up to the ability of producing social network graphs (sociograms) for gauging the relationship, for example, between influencers and followers in social media communities. The software is equipped with various reporting capabilities and templates, most importantly in the context of social media analysis of multimodal orientation, i.e., allowing for the inclusion in the same research project of both verbal and audiovisual data (videos, pictures, social memes, and infographs), and the application of a uniform coding scheme across modalities.

Last, but not least, NVivo allows for a highly nuanced elaboration of primary social media data and the expansion of sentiment analysis' interpretive layers. This is afforded by adopting a highly contextualized stance in interpreting the generated comments' valencing against the semantic background of individual threads, rather than an acontextual distinction into positive, negative, and neutral comments. As shown in Table 1, the additional

elaboration of posted comments during the coding process alongside the dimension of relevance to the overarching thread imposes more stringent constraints on the co-creative potential of consumers' comments. Subsequently, it yields a more fine-grained picture of consumer engagement in SMBCs. Furthermore, the manual, line-by-line coding that is afforded by the use of CAQDAS software allows for a nuanced extrapolation of the distinctive laddering strata, as well as for data cleaning in terms not only of

TABLE 2 The laddering table

	Total, N = 132	Pepsi, N = 38	Kellogg, N = 40	Domestos, N = 54
Codes				
ATT_NEG_IRREL	7%	5%	0%	13%
ATT_NEG_REL	28%	5%	83%	4%
ATT_POS_IRREL	2%	3%	3%	0%
ATT_POS_REL	3%	8%	0%	2%
BEN_ NEG_IRREL	3%	3%	0%	6%
BEN_ NEG_REL	3%	0%	5%	4%
BEN_POS_IRREL	0%	0%	0%	0%
BEN_POS_REL	2%	3%	0%	2%
IND	40%	63%	10%	46%
VAL_CONG	3%	5%	0%	4%
VAL_INCONG	10%	5%	0%	20%
	100%	100%	100%	100%
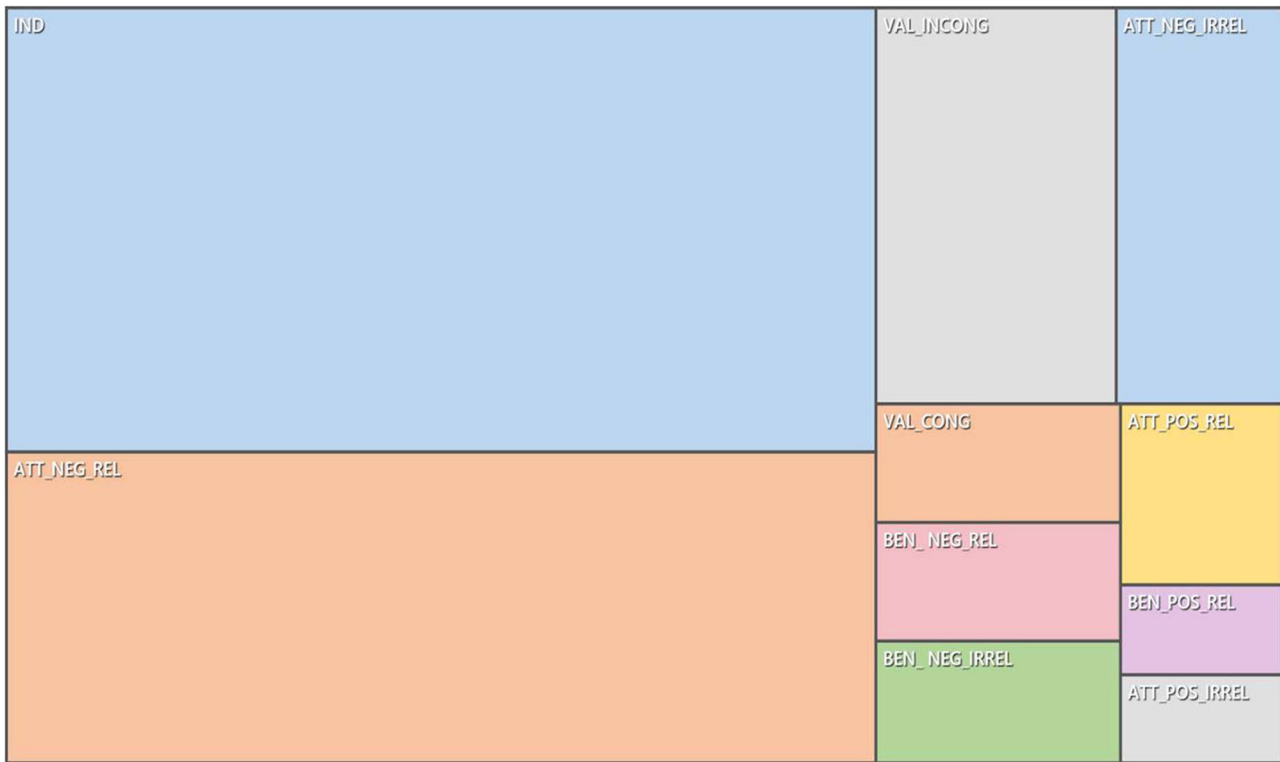
FIGURE 2 Hierarchical chart of codes' distribution across the corpus. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

irrelevant but of utterly indifferent comments which might pass unnoticed by an automated coding procedure.

5 | DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

(RQ1) How can we operationalize the laddering strata in the context of SMBCs comments in such a way as to effectively account for both positive, as well as negative brand meaning co-creation aspects?

As may be gauged from the Laddering Table (Table 2), the bulk of comments (81%) partake of either the indifferent or the negative types, with indifferent comments accounting for 40% of the entire corpus. This picture is also vividly portrayed in Figure 2 where ¾ of the hierarchical chart area (NVivo output) is covered by the indifferent/negative types. The incidence of indifferent comments is boosted by the Pepsi and Domestos threads, whereas Kellogg's comments are negatively relevant almost in their entirety. Indicative comments per type may be found in Table 3.

The operationalization of the laddering technique in this largely negative co-creation brandscape was geared towards identifying and interpreting (a) partial links or absence thereof between laddering strata in individual comments (b) links and absences thereof between laddering strata throughout each thread (c) reasons for negatively engaging with the brand initiated topic based on the coded comments' content (d) instances of comments that reflected all three laddering strata.

As soon as the coding procedure was finalized, a series of reports and graphs were produced by leveraging NVivo's analytical capabilities, aimed at inquiring the data at a preliminary thematic level. First, a frequency analysis of the most often recurring words (including their synonyms) for each brand was produced to identify potentially salient themes (Table 4). Then, word clouds (Figures 3–5) were produced from the three brand data sets, aimed at theme discovery based on the relative distribution of lexemes in their respective clouds. By referring the high ranking lexemes that were spawned from the first exercise and the central lexemes that emerged from the word clouds back to the posted comments, the following preliminary insights were yielded by brand:

As regards Pepsi, the negative themes that emerged most frequently (e.g., plastics recycling or the employment of palm oil in the product's manufacturing) are ranking quite prominently in the collective brand memory's associative inventory. Although these attributes are irrelevant to the brand initiated theme, their negative valencing is sufficiently strong, resulting in brand avoidance in terms of engaging positively with the brand's blue vision at a higher level of abstraction up the brand's ladder.

As regards Kellogg, the underlying themes beneath the most centrally distributed and most often recurring lexemes concerned a massive plea for restoring key sub-brands' (such as Rice Crispies and Coco Pops) sugar levels to earlier product formula versions. This largely negative meaning co-creation mode (83% as per Table 2) that rests on an attribute level is responsible for the reluctance on behalf of disgruntled consumers to engage positively with the brand's heritage as core brand image attribute that is highlighted in the brand initiated theme. Subsequently, any further brand claim on the value dimension failed to generate positive associations due to bottlenecks at the lower

TABLE 3 Indicative comments by code/brand

ATT_NEG_IRREL

Pepsi	You may be aware that there is another large petition going round to pressure Pepsi on your use of unsustainable palm oil in the food products owned by the Pepsi corporation
Pepsi	PepsiCo needs to update its priorities. Instead of focusing on marketing its newest product, PepsiCo needs to address its massive conflict palm oil problem. There's nothing "bubly" about the pattern of exploitation by PepsiCo's notorious
Domestos	How are you helping the world when you are using palm oil? Shameful
Domestos	If your mission is to help people live better lives then you would think you would encourage people to be environmentally friendly—not using products which are poisonous to humans, other animals, and the environment

ATT_NEG_REL

Kellogg	Hi, I have a question regarding rice krispies. I am craving rice krispies, has the original recipe been brought back? If not, when will it be brought back?
Kellogg	Used to yes! Hate the new tastes! Not buying Kelogg's anymore!!!! Bring back old tastes!
Pepsi	Can you not do a campaign with Joan Crawford. Pepsi Cola had such a better image than this
Pepsi	Still, Ronaldo is better than Messi
Domestos	How can you say that you care about the environment when you've stopped selling the refill pack?? I hate having to carry those big bottles home every time:(

ATT_POS_IRREL

Kellogg	When I was in school I wrote a letter to the Kellogg's company telling them how much I loved Coco Pops. I even wrote the lyrics to the Coco Pops song from the commercial. They kindly sent me back a free Coco monkey which I still have and love. I still know the words to the song
Pepsi	Please never cuck out and put ANY sweeteners in your original flavor Pepsi. Cola tastes horrible when not made with sugar

ATT_POS_REL

Pepsi	Its been long Pepsi actually had an array of stars that promotes and encourage young talent. Good old days: Pepsi all-star. (Beckham, Figo, Edgar Davis, Carlos, Zidane, Shevchenko, Ronaldinho, Ronaldo, etc)
Pepsi	Lionel Messi my best
Domestos	Very good. Only toilet product been using for too many years to remember

BEN_ NEG_IRREL

Pepsi	Please never cuck out and put ANY sweeteners in your original flavor Pepsi. Cola tastes horrible when not made with sugar
Domestos	have you tried using chemicals that aren't poisonous?

BEN_ NEG_REL

Kellogg	I still don't understand why the original flavor was not kept. I mean most companies keep the original product but still introduce new flavors. Keep the original for those who love it. The sugar in the new ones is a lot. Don't think it's even good for consumption on a daily.
Kellogg	You don't know what you've got till it's gone. How true those words ring. Will I ever enjoy a bowl of Coco Pops again in my life?
Domestos	How about funding organic sustainable products that sanitize and clean without harming the environment really its a long time investment to your company don't you think > safety standard says use bleach but doesn't describe there are certain procedures to use bleach every time you use it.... http://ucfoodsafety.ucdavis.edu/files/26437.pdf

BEN_POS_REL

Pepsi	Great event!

IND

Kellogg	WHY don't you answer your loyal (now ex) customers?
Kellogg	I have sent an email directly regarding a specific cereal, guess what, no response from them. I've seen many people post complaints on this fb notice, and not once have I seen Kelloggs actually respond to anyone. So this must b normal for them.
Pepsi	Please, export Mountain Dew in Italy:(
Pepsi	Do hope to see progress on the reduction of plastics this year
Domestos	All want an UN peacekeeping force in Arakan, Burma imm to protect Rohingya who are long been persecuted and are subject to state cleansing Paul Polman

VAL_CONG

Pepsi	Hate has changed all that now..#peaceindworld... Pepsi blue world
Domestos	Superb idea... Unilever Foods also help for poor families...I'm always a fan of Unilever Foods products

VAL_INCONG

Pepsi	Shame on you Pepsi https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/picturesmassive.../
Pepsi	In Pictures: Massive deforestation linked to major consumer brands	Greenpeace UK
Domestos	Stop testing your products on animals
Domestos	What has toilets to do with healthy living. Healthy starts from within the mind, not from the outside. Or do you think different?

TABLE 4 Frequency analysis of most often recurring words

Domestos		Kellogg		Pepsi	
Word	**Count**	**Word**	**Count**	**Word**	**Count**
Environment	6	Rice	18	Product	10
Sustainable	3	Back	17	Public	7
Application	1	Kellogg	14	Life	6
Conditions	1	Krispies	15	Love	6
Continuous	1	Pops	12	Need	6
Corporation	1	Coco	11	Celebrate	5
Deportation	1	Bring	9	Make	5
Discomfort	1	Original	9	Plastic	5
Environmentally	1	Still	8	Coming	4
Everywhere	1	Old	6	Feel	4
Immediately	1	Recipe	6	Greenpeace	4
Impossible	1	Andre	5	Messi	4
Investment	1	Change	5	Oil	4
Marketplace	1	New	5	Palm	4
Netherland	1	Even	4	Put	4
Peacekeeping	1	Kelloggs	4	Save	4
Persecuted	1	Know	4	Still	4
Procedures	1	Loved	4	Used	4
Remarkable	1	Now	4	Become	3
Responsive	1	Products	4	Massive	3
Terminated	1	South	4	New	3
Breizionerd	1	Strawberry	4	Nice	3
#Brightfuture	1	Sugar	4	Wont	3
#Globalgoals	1	Take	4	Blue	2
Globalgoals16	1	Buying	3	Borneo	2
State cleansing	1	Cereal	3	Bottle	2
Ucfoodsafety	1	Complaints	3	Business	2
Umweltzerstoerung	1	Consumers	3	Change	2
Unileverer	1	Flavor	3	Conflict	2
		Love	3	Deforestation	2
		Much	3	Dew	2
		Need	3	Eest	2
		People	3	Elephants	2
		Product	3	Filled	2
		Something	3	Food	2
		Taste	3	Free	2
		Tastes	3	Great	2
				Help	2
				Hope	2
				Iframe	2
				Indofood	2
				Lionel	2

FIGURE 3 Domestos word cloud [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

strata of the laddering funnel. This diametrically opposed evaluative posture between the brand's projected image and its codestruction by consumers is reflected quite forcefully in the comment

"70 years—yes and you ruined a perfectly good recipe." (Kellogg)

As regards Domestos, a widespread value incongruence with regard to the projected cause-related marketing initiative is at stake. This value incongruence is attributed to consumers' perceptions about the brand that revolves around its unsustainable draining of environmental resources. The permeating perception of the mother brand (Unilever) as not being environmentally friendly overshadows the ability of the sub-brand Domestos to generate positive associations with its cause-related marketing initiative.

On a cross-case comparative level and with regard to the distinction between brand play and brand attack that was discussed in section 2, significant differences emerged in terms of the mode whereby relevantly negative comments are voiced in each case. In the case of Kellogg, relevantly negative comments are voiced in frontal attack mode, and collaboratively so, whereas in the case of Pepsi they surface in a more playful manner:

FIGURE 5 Pepsi word cloud [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

"I gather this is an obituary notice for corn flakes if your rice krispies strategy is anything to go by...." (Kellogg)

"Why the hell did you change the coco pops????" (Kellogg)

*"Still Ronaldo is better than Messi"* (Pepsi)

As regards the utterly disruptive comments in the corpus, that is the indifferent ones, it is suggested to term them as instances of coindifference, in line with the term codestruction. Whereas codestruction refers to negatively valenced comments and brand image dilution, coindifference designates the utter dissolution of brand meaning by dint of being trajectorized in totally random ways (with regard to the thematic contours of specific brand initiated posts).

"When is Pepsi next coming to Denmark??????" (Pepsi)

"All will be Clean in God's New World" (Domestos)

"Global Trade Start Here!" (Domestos)

FIGURE 4 Kellogg word cloud [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
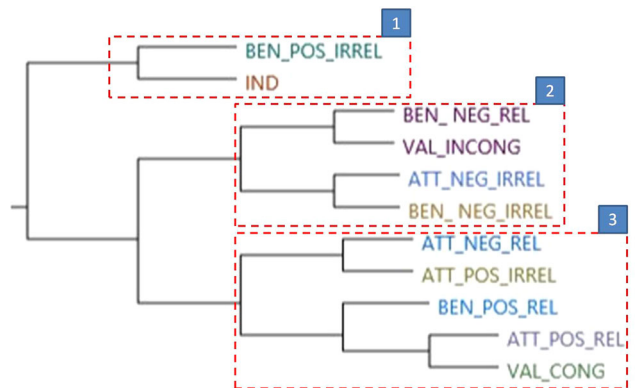
FIGURE 6 Cluster analysis of coded comments for the entire corpus (Pearson's correlation) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

As regards positively valenced comments, either as attributes or as benefits, they were marginally encountered in the entire corpus. As per Table 2, they are almost equally split between relevant and irrelevant ones. This is vividly portrayed in the cluster analysis (Pearson's correlation) dendrogram that was produced with NVivo (Figure 6), in quest for similarities among the coded data. "Clustering data based on similarities in content or coding of qualitative data is generally best used in an exploratory manner, to provoke ideas, rather than as explanatory evidence of an association" (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013, p.237; Corter, 1996; Jolibert & Baumgartner, 1997; Macia, 2015). The cluster analysis yielded a 3 cluster solution (Figure 6), with clusters 2 and 3 branching off to subordinate groupings. Cluster 1 features indifferent comments alongside positive, yet irrelevant benefits which is suggestive of the minimal semantic distance between positively irrelevant comments and utterly indifferent ones. This is further corroborated in the context of cluster 3 where positive, yet irrelevant comments concerning attributes have little difference from negative, yet relevant ones. Cluster 2 groups negative attributes and benefits with incongruent values, thus attesting to the interdependency of the three laddering strata in yielding a concise picture as regards comments' elaboration and valencing. Ultimately, only a small subcluster in cluster 3 groups positive comments that are fully relevant with congruent values.

This is a particularly important finding that lends further credence, on the one hand, to the hypothesis that positive, yet irrelevant comments differ marginally from negative ones, while, on the other hand, being affirmative of the small contribution of genuinely positive comments in a collective attitudinal state that is marked by negativity and indifference. In this context, consumers appear to be unmotivated and far from willing to participate in positive co-creation (cf. Schau-Hope, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), while clinging to issues that pertain to the brand and corporate responsibility, and unfavorable product formula changes.

Finally, as regards instances of comments that reflect all three laddering strata, only two were discovered in the entire corpus, in the Pepsi and Domestos threads respectively. The former is a case of positive, whereas the latter of negative co-creation:

> Ooh so cool... I really love the product.. Its been long pepsi actually had an array of stars that promotes and encourage young talent.. Good old days: pepsi all star. (beckam,figo,Edgar davis,carlos,zidane,shevchenko,ronaldinho,ronaldo, etc) hate has change all that now..#-peaceindworld... Pepsi blue world (Pepsi)

This comment is a remarkable instance of a full-fledged ladder. It is an attestation of this individual's peace-loving personal value that conditions him into valorizing positively the endorsers who have paraded in Pepsi's brand history, also motivated by the benefit of the brand's support for young talent. Figure 7 portrays which parts of a brand ladder contribute in shaping up the immediately superior one in a HVM. Notice that the relationship between personal values and attributes is symmetrical and not one-way.

> How about funding organic sustainable products that sanitize and clean without harming the environment really its a long time investment to your company don't you think? (Domestos)

As mentioned earlier, the main perceptual barrier in Domestos' case that mediated negatively in the recognition of its cause-related marketing initiative, concerned the brand's nonenvironmentally friendly orientation. In the Domestos HVM (Figure 8), the consumer attempts through negative co-creation to identify ways whereby this barrier may be overcome by suggesting that Domestos produces organic products that do convey the benefit of sanitization, albeit in
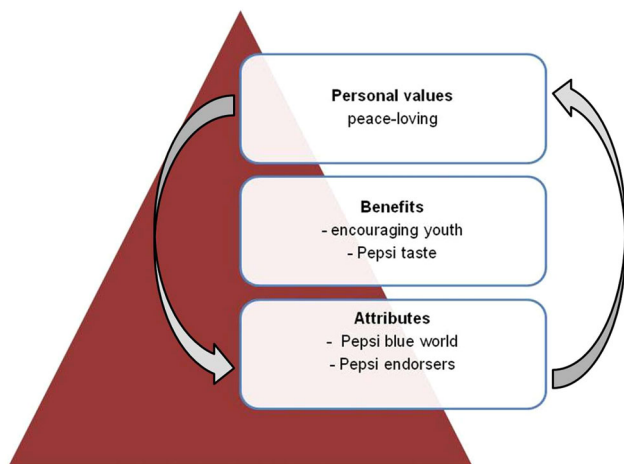
FIGURE 7 Pepsi HVM based on a single Facebook brand community comment. HVM, hierarchical value map [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
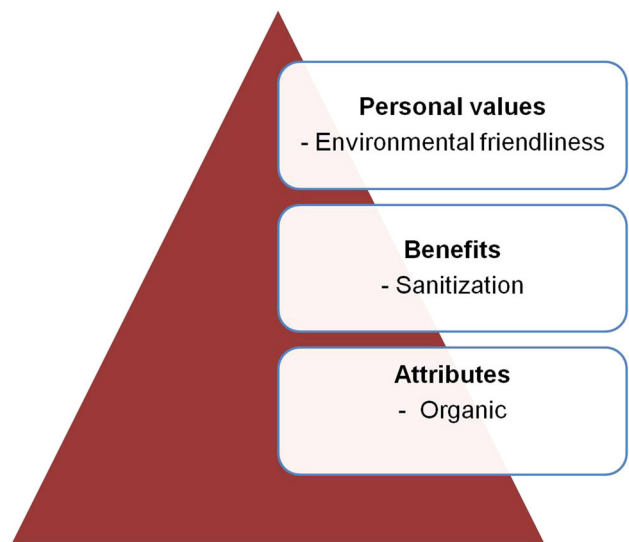
FIGURE 8 Domestos HVM based on a single Facebook brand community comment. HVM, hierarchical value map [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

an environmentally friendly manner. In this case, negative co-creation at the apex of a HVM results in positive co-creation at lower levels of abstraction.

6 | METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE ADAPTATION OF THE LADDERING TECHNIQUE IN THE ANALYSIS OF SMBCS COMMENTS

Although the application of the laddering technique in a Web 2.0 setting may sound plausible on a programmatic level, there are significant differences compared to its employment in in-depth interviews. These differences are punctuated and qualified in the ensuing subsections.

6.1 | Differences as regards the elicitation process and context

Whereas in the context of in-depth interviews the relationship between memory contents and the subject of elicitation (the elicitee) is monological, i.e., between the subject and himself, in the context of SMBCs the relationship not only is dialogical, but what might be termed polydialogical (as an adaptation of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism in a Web 2.0 environment). This designates that a subject is enmeshed by default in a social text that involves other subjects whose memories are copresent in synchrony with the memory-retrieval process of the individual elicitee. This predicament also calls for a recalibration of the role performed in typical interview settings by the researcher/interviewer who is represented in this instance by an impersonal other (the community) whose collective voices perform indirectly the probing function. This is an indirect and largely subconscious probing, albeit a probing that is not marked by latent intentionality for generating ladders between attributes, benefits, and values. It is a peculiar sort of subconscious probing as demand for participating in the brand community by contributing with one or more laddering components to a dynamically and collectively morphing ladder that crystallizes as a brand's ongoing social text. Thus, from a methodological point of view, and in the absence of a follow-up interview stage, eliciting latent axiologies by starting with concrete product attributes in the context of a social media brand community, is tantamount to a reconstruction of the individual comments (and their replies) against a laddering pattern. This process is equivalent to transforming individual brand associations into a collectively produced brand memory.

6.2 | Differences as regards the research design orientation

Whereas the laddering technique has been traditionally embedded in qualitative research designs, the sheer volume, the coding complexities, and the concomitant interpretive exigencies placed upon the researcher in the context of a social media data pool call for a mixed methods research design orientation.

6.3 | Differences in the data collection stage

Since social media data have not been generated on demand, but constitute secondary data, they do not conform strictly to the analytical exigencies of a traditional laddering exercise. The main discrepancy between primary in-depth interview data and secondary social media comments with reference to a laddering blueprint consists in that the latter have not been produced through constant probing. Therefore, from a traditional laddering point of view, they are bound to be lacking in comprehensiveness as regards the spectrum of AVC's. Nevertheless, this does not entail that they are not usable. It is just that their usefulness is not represented in full-fledged triads and triadic relationships amongst the components of ladders. Again, this is an area where the marketer's intervention is crucial with a view to promoting positive brand meaning co-creation, while minimizing destructive and/or indifferent co-creation.

7 | MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

(RQ2) How can the identified bottlenecks in the operationalization of the laddering technique in the context of SMBCs be circumvented with a view to yielding managerially salient insights?

Laddering in the context of SMBCs may be used for addressing a broad range of marketing objectives, from tactical to strategic ones. It may be used as an acid test for gauging perceptual barriers at an axiological level which may be thwarting consumers from engaging positively with the attributes and benefits that are projected by a brand in its posted threads. For example, the majority of negative comments that were posted in Kellogg's thread that is included in this study concerned attributes, with very little to no information with regard to benefits and values. This partial information is inviting towards further research with regard to less manifest (than taste or sugar levels) drivers, of axiological nature, that may be thwarting consumers from viewing positively the brand's long-standing heritage. It may also be used as a strategic consumer perception management tool over time by setting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in terms of each ladder stratum, as well as target conversion rates between a ladder's strata.

Furthermore, it may be applied comparatively across different types of brand initiated threads to gauge variable engagement patterns by type of theme, e.g., new product launch announcements, seasonal promotions, invitations to engage with brand symbols on various occasions, user-generated content, competitions, etc. Types of posts may be segmented alongside a ladder's engagement levels and actions taken to boost engagement for low performing posts or re-evaluate their effectiveness in a content marketing plan. "Managers may evaluate whether the interactions on their brand pages are embedding brand meanings in a manner that is consistent with brand objectives. Managers can fine-tune the content that is posted on their brand pages to obtain desired meanings" (Rosenthal et al., 2017).

-WILEY

As a method for gauging consumer engagement in brand communities, laddering may be used in the form of a funnel of engagement, from indifferent to irrelevant and negative to irrelevant and positive to relevant and negative to relevant and positive comments. The more consumers engage co-creatively with brands across the laddering strata, the more brand relevance is likely to be enhanced. Norms for each part of the engagement funnel may accrue overtime, thus allowing for benchmarking against competitors, as well as on an intrabrand level by comparing and contrasting different posts. Monitoring how the dynamics between the strata shift overtime against the background of set KPIs may be a viable route for devising content and moderation strategies. In this context, mini laddering sessions may be conducted through probing on the spot, while members may be recruited for more extensive in-depth interviews.

As became evident at the initial screening phase of multiple brand communities, the marketer's involvement in brand meaning co-creation is at an all-time low. In the majority of cases, the marketer vanishes after posting a new topic for discussion. Wherever marketers make their presence felt, most likely they are seeking to contain consumer satisfaction issues by urging consumers to send their messages in private. In the case of brands where co-creation with the active involvement of marketers is standard practice (e.g. Starbucks), this is evinced as flattering consumers or thanking them for their comments. Such interventions are far from the ongoing probing that is mandated in the application of the laddering technique. Since a customary response pattern to consumers' comments in a brand owned SMBCs consists of replying in private, a potential avenue for furthering positive co-creation with genuinely engaged consumers consists of probing on posted comments privately and in real time, for example through Messenger. Failure on behalf of marketers to perform their co-creative role in social media is bound to perpetuate the incidence of indifferent, but also contextually irrelevant comments, ultimately leaving brand communities in a state of semiotic frivolity, rather than constituting resourceful pools for distilling actionable insights.

However, there is also a downside as regards the level of control marketers may exert in SMBCs. Deleting comments may backfire in terms of retaliatory actions on behalf of silenced consumers, such as launching accusations about censorship. However, not omitting some comments, especially those that partake of the indifferent and irrelevantly negative types, may distort the brand's social memory and invite further negative co-creative actions by dint of silently legitimating such posts, i.e., by failing to take action against them. The optimal route, in this case, is not readily available. However, the emerging double-bind should not lead to paralysis. The bifurcated options should be weighed on an individual comment basis against the background of strategic communication objectives as they emerge.

Finally, it should be stressed that SMBCs data are neither a panacea nor a substitute for traditional consumer research. On the one hand, in traditional interview settings, specific screening questions are usually asked during the participants' recruitment stage, with regard to demographics, as well as usage and loyalty status (category and brand wise). Segmentation bases may proliferate in various directions, depending on the type of consumer feedback that is sought, and the marketing issue at hand. Not all segments' feedback is equivalent or of equal value to specific marketing problems. Unfortunately, this consumer profile information is not readily available in social media settings. Therefore, comments may not be taken at face value, as their source may be unduly skewed in favor of one segment at the expense of others, perhaps more valuable ones.

The usefulness of the laddering technique in comprehensively dimensionalizing SMBCs data may hardly be overstated in light of the highly sought after congruence between consumers' personal values and a brand's values. As seen repeatedly in SMBCs, the incidence of a fundamental incongruity at an axiological level overshadows the potentially positive valencing of either attributes or benefits at lower levels of a brand ladder. For example, when Mondelez moved some of its Oreo manufacturing operations from the US to Mexico in 2015, Facebook user-generated comments were packed with avowals to stop purchasing the brand, regardless of the thematic orientation of individual threads. These comments continued surfacing for years in a row, a phenomenon which is at least alarming as to how exactly negative meaning co-creation may be tapped by brands and perhaps favorably reversed. The application of the laddering technique in SMBCs is geared towards achieving this principal task.

8 | LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Although the quantitative results of this study with regard to the distribution pattern by code (Table 2) are by no means representative of a wider population, such as the featured brands' total SMBC posts or even on a category level, they are theoretically generalizable, as regards the applicability of the microanalytical framework to other brand cases. "In analytical generalization, it is the concepts or theories that are generalizable, not the specific context or populations" (Smith, 2018, p.141). As stressed earlier, but also as repeatedly noted in the extant literature on negative brand co-creation in SMBCs where qualitative designs have been largely applied, as well as in the laddering-related literature (e.g. Hakkio & Laaksonen, 1998), it is customary in case-study research to employ smaller samples which allows for delving deeper into the meaning of a dataset. This trade-off is both inevitable, and a source of competitive advantage of small versus big data approaches. Laddering is a well-tried and tested qualitative and mixed methods approach across various samples and research objectives. In this sense, issuing a call for confirmatory studies geared towards testing the model's conceptual robustness may as well be a pleonasm. The featured brand threads aimed at exemplifying and discussing the bottlenecks that emerge while applying the laddering technique on SMBCs data, and especially in the face of a permeating negative co-creative brandscape. Provided that the identified bottlenecks are effectively

tackled, the methodology may be strategically leveraged for generating longitudinal insights about levels of consumer engagement in SMBCs. Any well known issues of representativeness in social media studies notwithstanding (primarily stemming from a fundamental unknowability as regards the distribution of brand community participants compared to the distribution of brand users in a total population), extensive studies on both intrabrand, as well as on a category-wide level may yield useful benchmarks for identifying consumers' level of engagement with brand initiated themes alongside the laddering strata.

This study drew on brand controlled and moderated SMBCs. The scope of laddering's applications may be expanded to peer-to-peer SMBCs, while comparisons with brand controlled SMBCs may be undertaken, thus obtaining a more comprehensive picture as to differences in engagement along a ladder's strata. Additionally, Facebook was opted for as the main platform for sampling purposes. The technique may be extended to other social platforms, in an attempt to account for differences and additional bottlenecks. Last, but not least, the dataset used in this study comprised mainly verbal data. The technique may be extended multimodally to encompass visual and sonic data, especially in brand initiated posts that request of consumers to submit visual materials.

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