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Creating Brand Personality and Engaging Users in Instagram for Marketing Purposes

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a pilot study regarding the ways in which the communicative potential of Instagram can be harnessed for marketing purposes. In particular, by adopting a multi-method approach rooted in Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Iedema 2003; Jewitt 2016), the study explores how an Italian fashion start-up company, D1 Milano, expresses its brand personality (Aaker 1997; Crawford Camiciottoli 2018) and engages its followers.

The research objective is pursued by investigating a corpus of 1,137 posts published between 15 August 2015 and 30 September 2019. These are examined focusing on three areas. The most frequent linguistic patterns are analysed using Sketch Engine in order to determine how brand personality is verbalised. The metadata are explored in the light of Zappavigna's (2015) metafunctional framework, according to which hashtags can fulfil an experiential, a textual, and an interpersonal function. As regards visual representation, the study concentrates on the creation of interpersonal meaning between the image producer, the represented participant, and the viewer through choices in subjectification (Zappavigna 2016).

The results indicate that the personality of the brand combines traits belonging to the dimensions of excitement and sophistication, which *are conveyed both linguistically and visually. Moreover, since the company frequently reposts pictures taken by its customers/followers, the audience is expected to identify with the brand, especially in the case of those images where the presence of the photographer can be* inferred *by the inclusion of his/her body parts (almost 25% of the entire corpus). Finally, hashtags mainly serve an experiential and an interpersonal function: one the one hand, they evoke D1 Milano's personality by foregrounding the features of the brand, while also thematising the followers' attitude, desires, and ambitions; on the other, they promote engagement by inviting users' metacomments.*

Keywords: *Instagram, marketing discourse, multimodal discourse analysis, brand personality, engagement*

1. Introduction and aim of the study

In the last few decades, people's buying habits have been heavily influenced by the wide availability of digital technologies. In this context, marketers need to constantly adjust their communication strategies in order to reach ever increasing numbers of prospective and returning customers who gather information about their favourite brands primarily on social media and then use their smartphones weekly or even daily to shop (PwC 2020; 2019). One of the elements that social media marketing professionals need to consider is active consumers' participation fostered by Web 2.0 affordances:

> consumers actively influence brand messages and meaning, consumer opinions help dictate product and service assortments, mobile devices represent communication lifeline and online 'chatter' serves as a crystal ball that helps companies determine future product or service initiatives. (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden 2011, 267)

Social media influence "various aspects of consumer behaviour including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behaviour, and post purchase communication and evaluation" (Mangold and Faulds 2009, 358), and they represent a hybrid element of the promotion mix: companies might adopt them to address their customers unidirectionally, as they do with the traditional elements of the promotion mix (i.e. advertising, direct marketing, personal selling, public relations, and sales promotion), while customers use them to talk to each other in a way which resembles "a highly magnified form of word-of-mouth communication" (Mangold and Faulds 2009, 359).

Social media contents are contributed by both brands and their target audiences (Virtanen, Björk and Sjöström 2017; Bacile, Hoffacker and White 2014; Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden 2011; Evans and McKee 2010; Mangold and Faulds 2009), and this poses challenges to marketers, as the flow of information is no longer controlled solely by them. This is particularly problematic when it comes to consumers' negative word-of-mouth (Bacile, Hoffacker and White 2014; Lillqvist and Louhiala-Salminen 2013).

The opportunities offered by social media are, however, far greater than their possible challenges. These opportunities are seized by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and start-up businesses: not only do social media enable firms to reach large audiences and build a solid customer base, but they are extremely cost-effective and can be utilised to foster brand awareness and show expertise (Jones, Borgma and Ulusoy 2015; McCann and Barlow 2015). Nevertheless, benefits can be obtained provided that "the firms develop and possess marketing capabilities namely branding and innovation capabilities" (Tajvidi and Karami 2021, 7) as well

as digital emotional literacy, which is "the ability to perceive, understand, and manage the emotions of both senders and receivers in a digital media context" (Edelson et al. 2013, 197).

One way to strengthen a company's positive relationship with its audiences on social media is the effective presentation of its brand personality, i.e. "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker 1997, 347). This theoretical framework is inspired by the Big-Five trait taxonomy of human personality, and it includes five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Each dimension comprises a series of traits, which are listed in Table 1.

Dimension	Traits
Sincerity	Down-to-earth, family-oriented, small-town, honest, sincere, real, wholesome, original, cheerful, sentimental, friendly
Excitement	Daring, trendy, exciting, spirited, cool, young, imaginative, unique, up-to-date, independent, contemporary
Competence	Reliable, hard-working, secure, intelligent, technical, corporate, successful, leader, confident
Sophistication	Upper-class, glamorous, good-looking, charming, feminine, smooth
Ruggedness	Outdoorsy, masculine, Western, tough, rugged

Tab. 1: Dimensions of brand personality and corresponding traits according to Aaker (1997)

When the traits defining a brand match those underlying consumers' idea of self, an emotional connection can be created, which in turn increases consumer loyalty (Malär et al. 2011). Therefore, a business's effective positioning in the market depends on how clearly its defining traits are expressed (Crawford Camiciottoli 2018).

In this scenario, insights from studies on social media can have both practical and theoretical implications. On a practical plane, research can support practitioners in making choices which successfully bring consumers into the discourse (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden 2011), while at the level of theory, investigating meaning making processes on Web 2.0 platforms will help reconsider traditional notions of text; indeed, the role of multimodal semiotic resources on social media is often more significant than the one played by language (Thurlow 2017; Adami and Kress 2014; Iedema 2003).

The present work seeks to contribute to this research strand by illustrating the findings of a pilot study on one of the most popular tools for today's digital marketing, Instagram. By

applying a multi-method approach grounded in Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Jewitt 2016; Iedema 2003), the study looks at how an Italian fashion start-up company, D1 Milano, expresses its brand personality and engages its followers on its Instagram profile. Thanks to this approach, it is possible to investigate how the interplay of textual and visual contents helps promote worldwide a recently launched brand; metadata introduced by a hashtag are also considered part of the multimodal landscape of Instagram, since this symbol has "extended its semiotic reach as an information-organizing tool to a social resource for building relationships and communities" (Zappavigna 2015, 274).

The research objective is pursued by investigating a small-scale, specialised corpus which will be described in further detail below, consisting of 1,137 posts that were analysed using different lenses. The most frequent linguistic and metalinguistic patterns were examined using the wordlist, keywords, and concordance lines available in Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014; Kilgarriff et al. 2004): these helped explain the lexical choices correlated to the brand's defining traits, and explore the functions of social metadata, i.e. hashtags, using the framework developed by Zappavigna (2015). Regarding the visual mode, the study concentrated on the creation of interpersonal meaning between the image producer, the represented participant, and the viewer through choices in subjectification (Zappavigna 2016).

This article is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the communicative components of Instagram focusing on hashtagging practices and the new visual genres brought about by the platform. Section 3 introduces the case study by presenting the multimodal materials investigated and the methodology adopted. Section 4 reports on the results of the analysis in terms of linguistic markers, functions of social metadata, and creation of interpersonal meaning through the visual mode. Section 5 discusses the findings and offers some concluding remarks.

2. Instagram

Instagram is a popular social media service enabling users to publish images and short videos accompanied by captions, follow other users, and react to their posts by liking, commenting, or sharing them on their personal profile. This platform was introduced as a mobile application on iPhones in 2010, and in 2018 it recorded 706.5 million monthly users; according to forecasts, the figure of 998.1 million Instagrammers will be reached in 2023 (Enberg 2019). As regards social media marketing, Instagram is the second most important site after Facebook (Stelzner 2021): since its inception, it has always been perceived as a "mobile first" application (Firsching 2017, 85), and therefore it is a strategical tool for marketers.

Similarly to other platforms, Instagram is generally adopted by users as a pastime to fill in empty moments, as a quick source of information, for entertainment, and for social interaction (Voorveld et al. 2018), but differently from other well-liked social media such as Facebook and Twitter, textual contents cannot be posted on their own, and indeed its power is linked to the predominance of visual (and audio-visual) material (Firsching 2017). Consequently, Instagram has been categorised, among others, as a picture sharing service (Zhu and Chen 2015) and image sharing site (Ortner, Sinner and Jadin 2019).

The platform presents many of the affordances of other social networking sites (SNSs). Building on the definition offered by Ellison and boyd, an SNS is

> a *networked communication platform* in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles […]; 2) can *publicly articulate connections* that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with *streams of user-generated content* provided by their connections on the site. (2013, 158, emphasis in original)

SNSs can be viewed as a group of sites, services, or platforms within the broader domain of social media; examples are Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, and GooglePlus (Ellison and boyd 2013), and they share the following affordances (boyd 2010):

- persistence: contents are automatically saved and archived;
- replicability: contents can be copied;
- scalability: contents can be viewed by a vast audience;
- searchability: contents can be retrieved by using a search engine.

As for searchability, the use of "collaborative metadata (data about data)" (Zappavigna 2015, 274) introduced by the @ and # characters is a further distinguishing feature of Web 2.0 communication, as it makes contents easily retrievable, while connections become 'ambient,' in the sense that other users are potentially present within the social network, but not necessarily linked together through connections between users accounts, or by direct conversational exchanges" (Zappavigna 2015, 274). Hence, the presence of @ and # is crucial from a textual point of view, as they both "provide a powerful tool of cohesion in an environment where text is by definition fragmentary" (Garzone 2015, 232).

Indeed, mentions conveyed via the @ character can refer to other users, engage them in the

conversation, or acknowledge someone as the author of reposted[1] images (Garzone 2015; Zappavigna 2012; 2011;). Instead, hashtags are semiotic resources which, as stated by Zappavigna (2015; 2012; 2011), fulfil three functions corresponding to those performed by language in any communicative event according to Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), i.e. the experiential, the interpersonal, and the textual function. On SNSs, the experiential function of hashtags allows users to aggregate posts according to their topic, the interpersonal function contributes to "construing relationships, for example by facilitating metacomment that resonates across an entire post to construe an evaluative stance" (Zappavigna 2015, 279), and the textual function helps organise posts when hashtags are used as punctuation to indicate the presence of metadata.

As mentioned above, however, the considerable potential of Instagram depends on the pictures posted by its users. On this platform, new genres of visual communication have emerged (Zappavigna 2016), which differ in terms of choices in subjectification, i.e. a system of meaning standing for "the subjectivity the viewer is invited to vicariously assume or imagine in relation to the image," and which thus "explain[s] the relationship construed in social photographs between the photographer and the viewer" (Zappavigna 2016, 277).

Choices in subjectification include two different viewing positions, that is, *with photographer* and *as photographer*. The former does not provide explicit clues regarding the photographer's subjective presence, while the latter does. Accordingly, the *with photographer* visual structure, which very often functions as the traditional genre of the portrait, is not as marked as the *as photographer* one in the way it inscribes the user's presence; nonetheless, in social photography, the photographer's discourse of self can be activated linguistically in the caption when s/he writes something about his/her personal experience (Zappavigna 2016).

Instead, in the *as photographer* positioning, the user's subjectivity can be mediated in three ways. Firstly, it can be represented explicitly as in selfies, which differ from traditional portraits because they are marked by "the position of [the photographer's] shoulder or arm, or distortion due to the close focal range" (Zappavigna 2016, 278). Another type of *as photographer* structure is obtained when the photographer is inferred by the representation of parts of his/her body in the picture. Finally, the photographer's presence might be implied "through compositional choices, for instance […] as a co-participant in a conversation across a table in a café, signalled by the positioning of a coffee cup in the foreground of the image" (Zappavigna 2016, 279).

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[1] Similarly to "retweet," which is employed for Twitter, the term "regram" is commonly used to refer to an Instagram photo which a user takes from another account and posts to his/her feed (Tran 2020).

Thus, Instagram stands out as it "connects people based on their creative output and provides a meaningful outlet for their creativity while at the same time providing entertainment and aesthetic content to followers" (Zhu and Chen 2015, 338). Thanks to its functionalities, advertising on Instagram is perceived more favourably compared to other digital platforms, and appealing images showcasing products are easily leveraged by marketers as means to engage audiences (Voorveld et al. 2018).

3. Case study: the Instagram account of the Italian watch brand D1 Milano

The present case study focuses on the Instagram profile of an Italian fashion start-up manufacturing luxury watches, D1 Milano, which was founded in 2013 (D1 Milano, 2022). D1 Milano's watches are marketed as fashion accessories rather than status symbols (Eytan 2016, 2015), and this is reflected in their competitive price. The typical D1 Milano client, in the words of the founder Dario Spallone, is "someone who is keen on having fun, while at the same time also knowing his responsibilities" (Eytan 2015). The brand's main target group is between the ages of 25 and 35, but the watches have received positive feedback from older customers as well (Eytan 2015).

D1 Milano was selected for this research firstly because the company maintains an Instagram profile in English where posts are published daily, and the account has a verified badge, which means that Instagram has confirmed its authenticity as a global brand (Instagram 2022b). Secondly, watches are fashion accessories which aptly embody the "visual-oriented culture" (Lee et al. 2015) dominating Instagram. Thirdly, D1 Milano's products are designed with "talking points in mind, to stimulate word-of-mouth and social-media-based conversations" (Mangold and Faulds 2009, 363): the brand has been acclaimed for being one of Italy's start-ups which redefines fashion by means of technology (Eytan 2016); the fact that the watches have a good price-quality ratio and are more affordable than average luxury brands also provides talking points. Based on all these premises, D1 Milano's Instagram feed can exemplify how the potential of this SNS can be harnessed by a start-up to establish itself and market its products.

3.1 Corpus and methods

This case study was conducted using a self-compiled small-scale corpus consisting of 1,137 posts which D1 Milano had published on its Instagram feed[2] during its first four years of social media presence on the platform between 15 August 2015 and 30 September 2019. The dataset was

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[2] https://www.instagram.com/d1milano/. Last visited 19/05/2022.

limited to images captioned in English; posts comprising videos were discarded to limit the number of semiotic modes to be investigated. Metadata regarding the day on which each post was loaded, the location (when available), the number of likes, and the number of comments were systematically recorded on a separate spreadsheet in order to be able to identify and organise all the material gathered.

Since Instagram's terms of use prohibit users from obtaining information in automated ways (Instagram 2022a), the captions, including hashtags, @ mentions, and emojis,[3] were collected manually over a period of four months,[4] they were saved as a .txt file and uploaded to the online software for text analysis Sketch Engine, where a specialised corpus called DM1 was built.

The actual images in the dataset themselves were not downloaded, since scraping is not allowed, but their salient communicative features were manually annotated on the spreadsheet created for storing the metadata: the images were coded one by one following Zappavigna's (2016) emerging visual typologies expressing choices in subjectification, and when this scheme could not be applied, e.g. in the case of non-animate participants, the images were classified following the traditional genre of the still life (Zappavigna 2016).

The multimodal analysis of the posts concentrated on three components, namely linguistic markers, hashtags, and visuals, which were analysed by means of a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. At the level of language, Sketch Engine was employed to obtain general quantitative information about the corpus (number of tokens, words, and most frequent items); the frequency wordlist and the concordance lines were examined closely to pin down those adjectives which encapsulate the brand's defining traits in the light of Aaker's five-dimension framework illustrated in Section 1. These two tools were also used when exploring the hashtags in the sample, following Zappavigna's (2015) metafunctional framework. In order to locate terms in the metadata which are unique to the brand's communication on social media, a keyword list was generated as well, using English Web 2015 (enTenTen15) as a reference corpus.[5]

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[3] Emojis, which are "stylized, almost comic-book-like, pictures that can (and do) replace words and phrases" (Danesi 2017, 15) were collected too, as "they reinforce, expand, and annotate the meaning of a written communication, usually by enhancing the friendliness of the tone, or else by adding humours tinges to it" (Danesi 2017, 15). In the context of digital marketing, their presence "leads to increased positive affect among consumers, which in turn leads to more favorable purchase intentions" (Das, Wiener and Kareklas 2019, 148), especially as regards the promotion of hedonic products.

[4] For convenience, the material was gathered using the desktop version of Instagram, and the company gave written permission to use it for research purposes.

[5] The English Web 2015 (enTenTen15) was selected because it is made up of web-based texts only. In order to retrieve expressions in the focus corpus that are rare in the reference corpus,

The co-text of the adjectives and hashtags was analysed from a qualitative point of view, also considering the presence of traditional advertising techniques such as hard selling, soft selling, reason and tickle (Cook 2001; Simpson 2001; Bernstein 1974). Hard selling advertising addresses consumers using straightforward language, and it relies on arguments such as "low cost, limited availability and guaranteed reliability" (Cook 2001, 15); in contrast, soft selling is based "more on mood than exhortation, and on the implication that life will be better with the product" (Cook 2001, 15). Reason adverts provide rational motives for buying a product, while ticklers appeal to consumers' desires, emotions, and imagination (Cook 2001; Bernstein 1974).[6] These well-established advertising strategies were accounted for in the present analysis assuming that they can offer valuable insights into how products are marketed and audiences are engaged in today's social media discourse.

As regards visual representation, the images were filtered using the coded information stored on the spreadsheet to disclose how subjectification is exploited by D1 Milano to create interpersonal meaning between the company itself, the represented participant(s), and the viewers. All the information that could be obtained from different viewpoints was integrated to enable more in-depth investigation of few significant posts in terms of emerging genres of visual representation on social media.

4. Results

The results are subdivided into two sections. The first one focuses on the captions in the corpus by examining their linguistic and metalinguistic components. More precisely, the analysis of language highlights the traits underlying the brand's personality, whereas the investigation of hashtags concentrates on the functions of social metadata in the corpus. When needed, reference is made to the images accompanying the captions being considered: indeed, sometimes posts can only be understood and properly analysed by accounting for those intermodal relationships which are central to meaning making on social media.

The second part concentrates on the visual mode and reports on the frequency of subjectification choices, but it also considers the results surveyed in the first part to uncover how linguistic markers, hashtags, and visual elements complement each other in two posts that seem

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the default settings of the keyword tool in Sketch Engine were maintained, which correspond to value "1" in the advanced section of the tool (Lexical Computing Ltd. 2015).

[6] It should be underlined that "the reason/tickle distinction is not just the hard/soft distinction with a new name" (Cook 2001, 15): for example, soft sell adverts might offer logical, rational reasons for purchasing something while addressing the audience indirectly (Cook 2001).

particularly indicative of how the brand seeks to transmit its distinctive personality while including its ambient connections into the discourse.

4.1 Captions in DM1: linguistic markers and social metadata

A word count run in Sketch Engine revealed that the corpus totals 25,256 tokens, including punctuation marks, the # and @ characters, and emojis. The # character ranks first with 4,445 occurrences, the start-up name follows with 1,041 occurrences, and the @ sign is the third most frequently occurring token with 851 occurrences: the high frequency of the # and @ symbols surely represents an expected result confirming the fundamental role they play on social media in indicating "aboutness," forming communities, and encouraging participation (Garzone 2015; Zappavigna 2015; 2012; 2011).

When excluding non-words, 14,885 items can be retrieved; a list of the 15 most frequent words is given in Table 2.

Word	Frequency
d1milano	1,041
italiandesign	695
the	459
ultrathin	285
watch	239
to	217
d1milanogirls	195
d1waytoexplore	193
for	187
black	176
and	176
premium	166
of	160
our	152
you	148

Tab. 2: The 15 top ranking words in the corpus

The company name ranks first in the list, and this is not surprising considering the nature of the texts being analysed. Then, the list presents unusual combinations of two or more words such as *italiandesign*, *ultrathin*, and *d1milanogirls*; these might be elements around which the brand has organised its multimodal communication strategies: this hypothesis is supported by the fact these items are frequently preceded by a hashtag, as illustrated in Sub-section 4.1.2. The last element worth pointing out is the high frequency of *our* and *you*: this, again, is something that should be expected when analysing promotional discourse in general, due to its inherent dialogic quality; in this context, their use relates to the interpersonal metafunction of language (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), as it establishes a relationship between the brand and its ambient audience. This is demonstrated in (1) and (2) below.

(1)   Our Best Seller watch is back ■
        Discover the new Shadow at www.d1milano.com

(2)   Did you know we have a blue dial on the Ultra Thin 40 mm? ◆ Tap to shop!

Both captions seek to awake the audience's interest in D1 Milano's products and urge them to take action. In other cases, the captions do not seem to have an explicit promotional aim, but rather they try to consolidate the company's relationship with its ambient audience by creating a sense of solidarity, as in (3), or by showing interest in their free time activities, as in (4).

(3)   We are at work but **our** minds are still thinking about holidays, right? ✦
        [...]

(4)   Where are **you** heading to this Sunday? 🏞 #D1WAYTOExplore
        [...]

The linguistic strategies deployed in (3) and (4) are as relevant to the company's communicative agenda as the ones in (1) and (2), even if they lack overt promotional purposes. In fact, effective social media marketing is about "creat[ing] a bridge to dialogue with the customers" (Evans and McKee 2010, 8), and in order to reap the benefits of their feedback, it is fundamental to create a symmetrical relationship, also by showing skills in digital emotional literacy.

The personality of a brand is also instrumental to establishing this type of connection, and thus the next step in the analysis is to delve deeper into those linguistic markers which carry D1 Milano's main traits.

4.1.1 Brand personality

In order to define how D1 Milano's personality is verbalised in the captions, the Sketch Engine wordlist tool was used to retrieve all the adjectives in the corpus which, following Keller et al. (2008) are either product-related or "less tangible in nature and reflect imagery, experiences, and feelings that consumers have in relation to [the] product" (Crawford Camiciottoli 2018, 142). Given the small size of the dataset, all the items in the list were examined individually; 48 adjectives were thus singled out, and concordancing lines were generated and reviewed in order to interpret their meaning through the lenses of Aaker's (1997) five-dimension framework. During this process, each item was assigned to one of the dimensions, except for few adjectives which did not seem to fit the model and therefore were labelled as "other." Table 3 offers an overview of all the attributes that were uncovered.

Personality dimension	Product and non-product related adjectives in DM1
Sincerity	Natural (6), real (4), simple (3), humble (1)
Excitement	New (63), special (22), amazing (10), unique (5), cool (4), magic (3), iconic (3), sporty (3), bold (2), different (2), fresh (2), magical (2), positive (2), ambitious (1), brave (1), daring (1), limitless (1), exciting (1), fearless (1), trendy (1)
Competence	Strong (6), resistant (3), waterproof (2)
Sophistication	Premium (166), essential (49), perfect (20), beautiful (14), light (9), exclusive (5), classic (3), minimal (3), soft (2), authentic (1), fine (1), rare (1), superb (1)
Ruggedness	Wild (3), free (4)
Other	Bright (3), shiny (3), typical (2), colorful (2), comfy (1), cozy (1)

Tab. 3: Product and non-product related adjectives in D1M and corresponding personality dimension

It can be argued that the brand is primarily defined by the excitement and the sophistication dimensions: 20 different adjectives are associated with the former and 13 with the latter; the sophistication category is therefore less varied, but its attributes are more frequent (274 items) in the corpus than those belonging to the excitement one (130 items).

The adjectives belonging to excitement are either product-related, as in (5) and (7) below, or non-product related, as in (6).

(5)   **Bold** and **unique**, our Skeleton Gun Metal is available online. Tap to shop!
       #D1Milano #Skeleton #WearYourAttitude
       […]

(6)   Find your magic and be **brave**!
       Find out more about the CONCRETE collection on: www.d1milano.com
       #d1milano #concrete #watch #texture #tattoo #italian #design
       […]

(7)   Are you ready for another **amazing** collection?
       Subscribe to our Newsletter at d1milano.com and discover more

In these examples, the message is primarily constructed around emotions and mood rather than on rational motives for purchasing the products; accordingly, the captions can be regarded as ticklers (Cook 2001; Bernstein 1974). The audience is directly addressed using imperative verbs, and this straightforward tone pertains to hard-selling techniques. However, while in (5) and (7) the adjectives are attributes of the watch, in (6) *brave* is non-product related: thus, the "possessor reflects the possessed" (Cook 2001, 15), an assumption underpinning soft-selling ads (Cook 2001).

From the point of view of the general organisation of the captions, similarities with Facebook and Twitter posts (Garzone 2015) can be observed: the captions are short, fragmented texts, and more precisely

- (5) consists of an assertion and an interpersonal element in the form of an exhortation;
- (6) is divided into two sentences containing exhortations;
- (7) is a question followed by a sentence including exhortations.

As for sophistication, this dimension is notable not only in terms of frequency, but also because its attributes *premium* and *essential* are the first and second most frequently occurring adjectives in the wordlist. Close reading of the concordance lines shows that they are mainly product-related, and in most cases they are used as social metadata to help classify the posts and make them searchable: *premium* occurs 80 times as a hashtag, while *essential* 52. Another element which emerges is that both adjectives have been chosen by the company to designate two of its product lines: with this marketing strategy D1 Milano is sending a precise message

as regards the kind of brand personality its audience should perceive, and possibly identify with, when purchasing and wearing these watches. In (8) and (9) below, the nodes *premium* and *essential* are adopted both linguistically and metalinguistically.

(8)   Be authentic, be Premium.
        #d1milano #watch #black #gold #premium #italiandesign #wearyourattitude

(9)   Essential details for this Sunday.
        Shop the Essential Collection: https://eu.d1milano.com/collections/essential
        […]
        #d1milano #essential #watch #italiandesign

Similarly to (5), (6), and (7), the captions (8) and (9) are short textual items featuring interactive components: (8) combines two imperative clauses, while in (9) an imperative clause is preceded by a verbless sentence.[7]

In these examples, promotion relies on tickle advertising strategies: in (8) the imperative *be* is used twice to reach out to the audience, so again the interpersonal metafunction of language is fulfilled; the adjective *Premium* is capitalised to refer to a specific product line, but it can be attributed to the person wearing the watch as well, so the invitation to purchasing it is implicit. Instead, hard selling is tapped into in the second part of caption (9), where the imperative *shop* is used. As regards social metadata, the adjectives are reiterated as hashtags to mark the topic of the posts and make them searchable. Both captions embed other hashtags, including the frequently occurring *#italiandesign* (see Table 2) and the combination *#wearyourattitude*. The linguistic functions of these and other hashtags in DM1 will be expanded on in the next sub-section in the light of Zappavigna's (2015) framework.

4.1.2 Hashtags

The hashtags ranking high in the frequency wordlist in Table 2 above prove how essential social metadata are to DM1. Additionally, the presence in the keyword list of these and other hashtags indicates how specific they are to the brand's social media marketing strategies. Table 4 lists the 15 top ranking keywords, together with the number of times they co-occur with the # sign. The majority of keywords extracted are not to be found in the reference corpus because they are terms created by the company.

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[7] Verbless sentences are frequently used in Twitter posts (Garzone 2015).

Keyword	Frequency as hashtags	Presence in the reference corpus – English Web 2015 (enTenTen15)
d1milano	1,024	No
italiandesign	695	No
ultrathin	284	Yes
d1milanogirls	195	No
d1waytoexplore	193	No
polycarbon	114	Yes
wearyourattitude	138	No
D1waytotaste	76	No
superslim	76	Yes
D1waytofashion	74	No
monochrome	66	Yes
youared1	56	No
ultrathin19	38	No
p701	35	No
stasyatkach	0	No

Tab. 4: Keywords in DM1 and their frequency as hashtags

All the items in Table 4 are employed as hashtags with the exception of *stasyatkach*, which in fact belongs to a different type of metadata: this keyword is always preceded by the @ symbol (34 occurrences) to acknowledge an Instagram user who contributed some of the visual material posted, that is, a woman in her mid-twenties usually represented in the *with photographer* viewing position (Figure 1): this layout, which is seen in traditional portraits too, does not include any visual indication of the person taking the picture.

However, there are two cases in the corpus where this user is the photographer herself, and her presence can be inferred by inclusion of her body parts in the visual composition (Figure 2).

More information about the distribution and significance of traditional and new visual genres in the sample will be provided in Section 4.2; for now it is worth noting that the @ mention is accompanied by the camera emoji in both images: this is a strategy applied consistently in the

dataset to give photo credits to D1 Milano's followers and to make them feel included in the brand's social media discourse.[8]

Fig. 1: Example of an image that does not include the photographer in the composition, with photo credits in the caption

Fig. 2: Example of an image incorporating the photographer's body parts, with photo credits in the caption

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[8] Overall, 744 photos in the corpus can be attributed to other Instagrammers, and the camera emoji integrates the @ mention 712 times.

As regards hashtags, a preview of their role in conveying brand personality is given in Sub-section 4.1.1 above, but a closer look at the concordance lines demonstrates how Zappavigna's (2016) metafunctional framework can be broadly applied in the context of social media marketing. The experiential function, which caters for the classification of the posts according to their topic, seems to be the most frequently enacted one. This is fulfilled, for example, by all those hashtags that are directly related to the company, its products, and their properties, such as *#d1milano*, *italiandesign*, *#ultrathin*, *#superslim*, *#monochrome*, *#ultrathin19*, and *#p701*.[9] In this sense, the social metadata act as carriers of brand personality in the way they are cohesively integrated inside the post.
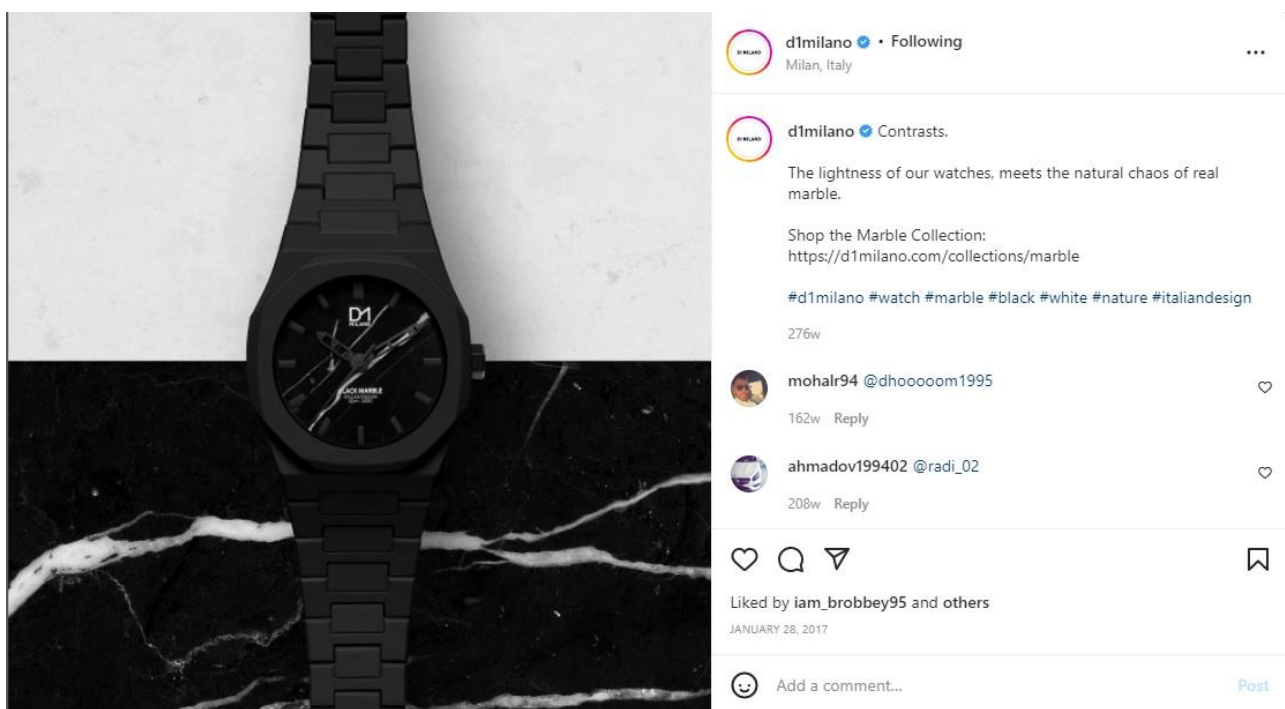

Fig. 3: Intermodal relationships across visual elements, text, and hashtags

(10)   Contrasts.
       The lightness of our watches, meets the natural chaos of real marble.
       Shop the Marble Collection: https://d1milano.com/collections/marble
       #d1milano #watch #marble #black #white #nature **#italiandesign**

In (10), the hashtag *#d1milano* complements the caption and the picture by firstly topicalising the name of the brand; the hashtag *#italiandesign* adds value to the message by relying on the Country of Origin (COO) effect to appeal to an international audience. Most importantly,

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[9] This hashtag corresponds to the name of a collection of men's watches launched in 2017.

intermodal relationships are established across the semiotic resources of the post, since the main features of the watch are conveyed in linguistic, metalinguistic, and visual form (Figure 3). Linguistically, the properties of the watch, which is visually represented as a still life, are conveyed by the noun phrases *lightness*, *natural chaos*, and *real marble* in the caption; these are reinforced at the level of metalanguage by the hashtags *watch*, *marble*, *black*, *white*, and *nature*, fulfilling an experiential function. Overall, the dimension of personality that emerges from this cohesive blend of multimodal contents is that of sophistication.
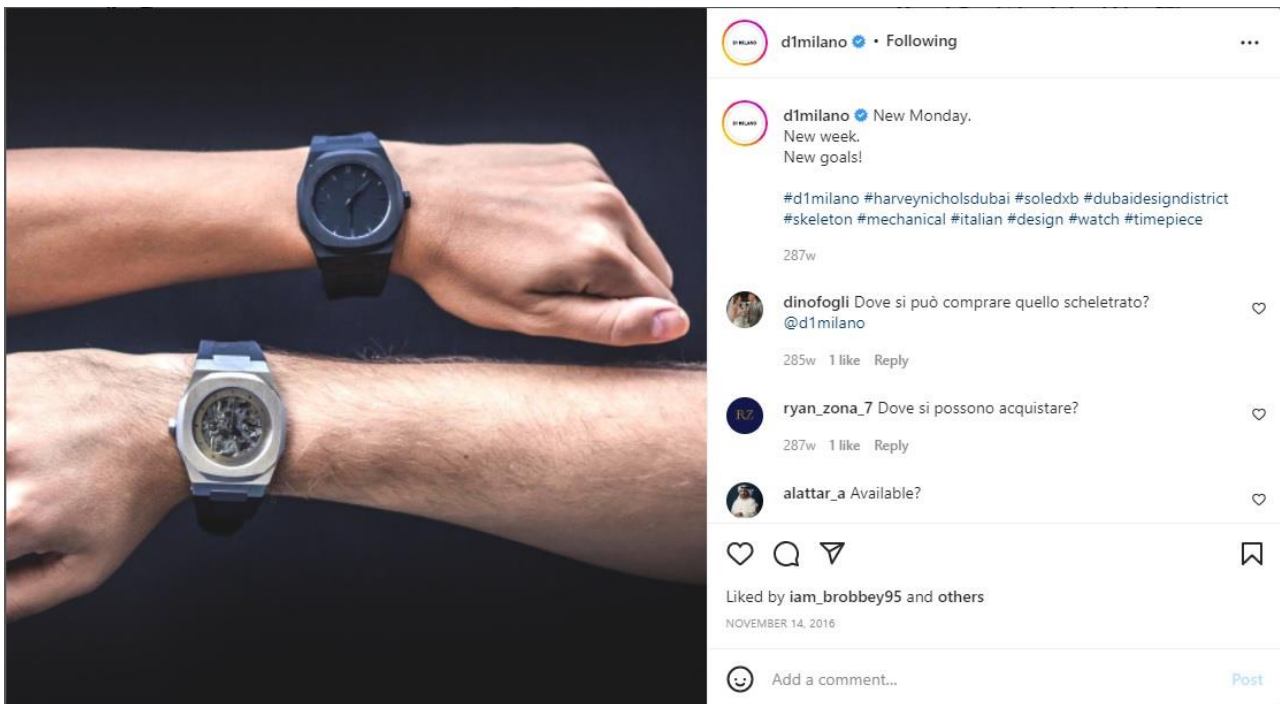

Fig. 4: Intermodal relationships across visual elements, text, and hashtags

The intermodal relationships supported using hashtags are crucial in (11) as well.

(11)   New Monday.
       New week.
       New goals!
       #d1milano #harveynicholsdubai #soledxb #dubaidesigndistrict #skeleton #mechanical #italian #design #watch #timepiece

Taken out of context, the caption transmits an idea of excitement for new beginnings, but it lacks cohesion if the hashtags and the image are not accounted for while processing the message. The visual element grabs the ambient audience's attention by placing the two watches at the centre of the composition (Figure 4), while the social metadata help make sense of the post by

providing additional information. In this sense, the hashtags serve an experiential function by indicating

- the message-sender (*#d1milano*)
- the location where it is based (*#dubaidesigndistrict*)
- the specific collections advertised and their qualities *(#skeleton #mechanical #italian #design #watch #timepiece)*
- where the watches can be purchased (*#harveynicholsdubai*)
- one of the company's business partners (*#soledxb*).

By mentioning relevant locations and one of its stakeholders as social metadata, the company is not only extending the participation framework of its post, but it is also establishing its credentials, and this is fundamental in the marketing of a brand, especially if it has been introduced recently.

The interpersonal function of hashtags, which is that of developing relationships with the message-sender's ambient connections, is also vital to the start-up in its attempt at engaging its followers online and eventually expanding its customer base in the physical reality.[10] For example, the frequent hashtags *#wearyourattitude*, *#d1waytofashion*, and *#youared1* intend to create a community of lovers of the brand by emphasising their attitudes, desires, and ambitions, as shown in (12), (13), and (14) respectively.

(12) How do you like to style it? ✦˚
     #UltraThin #D1Milano **#WearYourAttitude**

(13) Wear your attitude with our Automatic movement **#D1WAYTOFashion** #ItalianDesign #Automatic #P701

(14) Choose what's essential ⌚ #d1milano #watch #black #essential #italiandesign **# YOUARED1**

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[10] Although the exploration of the three functions of language, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), is beyond the scope of this paper, in 4.1 and 4.1.1 we noticed that the interpersonal metafunction plays a relevant role also in the main block of the captions, and this is something to be expected in the context of promotional discourse.

Other hashtags performing an interpersonal function are targeted to market niches that can be identified in terms of age and gender, as in *#d1milanogirls*, or depending on their interests, as in *#d1waytoexplore* and *d1waytotaste*.

(15) Are you a fan of the seaside or of the mountains? @elisavir **#D1MilanoGirls** #SuperSlim #ItalianDesign **#D1WAYTOExplore**

(16) When you want to take a food picture but you just can't resist eating the cake! 🍰🍰🍰 **#D1WAYTOTaste** #D1Milano #ItalianDesign **#D1MilanoGirls** #UltraThin

In contrast to (12), (13), and (14), the promotional aim of the captions (15) and (16) is hidden: in all five cases, the followers are addressed directly using, for instance, the pronoun *you*, the possessive *your*, direct interrogatives, and imperative forms; however, soft selling and tickle advertising techniques have been applied in (15) and (16) in order to construct the message around situations to which the brand's female followers are supposed to relate. Interestingly, on a visual plane, the watch is a peripheral element inside both compositions (Figure 5).[11]
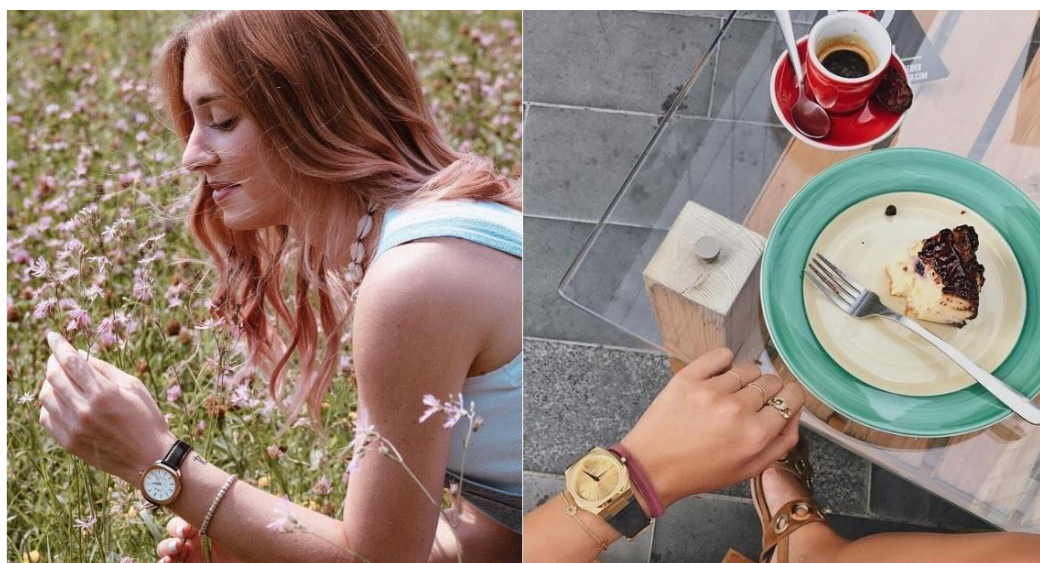

Fig. 5: D1 Milano watches as peripheral elements in the visual composition of two posts

The textual function of hashtags is also attested in the corpus. As the following examples show, the hashtags can be integrated in any location inside a post.

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[11] As mentioned in 4.1.1, and further explained in 4.2, the picture accompanying caption (15) is an instance of the with photographer subjectification option, while in the picture accompanying caption (16), the photographer is inferred via the inclusion of her limbs in the composition.

(17)   All new **#P701** collection soon online and in stores #D1Milano #ItalianDesign #Skeleton

(18)   Which one is your favourite **#SuperSlim?** #D1Milano #D1MilanoGirls #ItalianDesign

(19)   If you buy a watch from this collection and you post about it with **#UltraThin19**, you can be chosen to win a 500$ voucher to spend on flight tickets

However, we can notice that the hashtags highlighted above enact multiple functions. The experiential function is always implied, as the hashtags mark the contents of the post and coordinate all the semiotic resources adopted; moreover, the interpersonal function is fulfilled in (18) where users' metacomments are explicitly invited through a direct interrogative and the possessive *your*. Caption (19) is worth considering too, as the interpersonal function supports sales promotion: the followers are given incentives to buy D1 Milano's watches and to spread electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) by sharing contents related to the brand. In contrast, the invitation to buy a new watch is implicit in (17): the caption only includes a verbless sentence thematising the new collection and creating expectation for it through the adverb *soon*, without addressing the brand's followers directly.

4.2 Visuals in DM1: subjectification and interpersonal meaning

The first stage in the analysis of the images was to count the instances of traditional and new genres of visual representation as they emerge from the spreadsheet where the posts are manually coded following Zappavigna's (2016) scheme.

Visual genres	Number of posts
Traditional genres (non-animate participants, e.g. still life)	355
Subjectification	
With photographer viewing position	526
As photographer viewing position	
Inferred photographer	250
Implied photographer	6
Represented photographer (i.e. selfies)	0

Tab. 5: Frequency of traditional and new visual genres in D1 Milano's dataset

The data reported in Table 5 indicate that the majority of posts in D1 Milano's feed are represented by the emerging visual genres that characterise Instagram discourse. In this group, the *with photographer* subjectification choice is the prevalent one. According to Zappavigna (2016), this is the least marked type of composition, as it is comparable to a portrait. Although the photographer's presence is not incorporated in the picture, his/her subjectivity is realised through the intermodal connections across the post, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Fig. 6: *With photographer* subjectification

In the caption (20) we can notice some of the metalinguistic elements previously analysed, such as the @ mention to acknowledge the participant portrayed in the post, and the hashtags performing both experiential (*#ItalianDesign* and *#Superslim*) and interpersonal (*#D1WAYTOFashion* and *#D1MilanoGirls*) functions; on a linguistic and visual plane, the message is built around ideas of sophistication and elegance, thus reinforcing the personality traits of the brand; the overall aim is that of appealing to a niche market consisting of young female customers who might identify themselves with the Instagrammer in the picture.

(20)   Dress to impress 🎇
         📷 @stasyatkach
         #D1WAYTOFashion #ItalianDesign #SuperSlim #D1MilanoGirls

The *as photographer* viewing position is adopted fewer times than the traditional visual genre of the still life,[12] but it is worth discussing, especially because in almost 25% of the pictures in the sample the photographer's presence is inferred. This visual choice seems to be the most appropriate one in fostering identification between the viewer and the represented participants, as the ambient audience is invited to adopt the perspective of the person taking the picture, as in Figure 7.

Fig. 7: *As photographer* subjectification: inferred

On the linguistic plane, the caption in (21) plays with the portmanteau *Friyay*, and it thematises a situation of excitement which is familiar to the message-receivers; the general tone is extremely straightforward and friendly, and it promotes a symmetrical relationship between the brand and its followers.

(21)   Let's have a toast, it's Friyay
       📷 @thefashionfraction
       #D1Milano #D1MilanoGirls #ItalianDesign

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[12] An example of this genre is given in Figure 3, and in terms of advertising discourse, it resembles the packshot of traditional print media and television commercials.

The promotional aim of the post is implicit and can be decoded by looking at the hashtags: they purse the company's objective by embedding its name (experiential function), and by appealing to a given market niche (interpersonal function).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Communication in the context of social media marketing relies on diverse yet interconnected semiotic modes: the multimodal analysis conducted in this paper is an attempt at unpacking the many ways in which text, images, and social metadata are coordinated to fulfil the communicative agenda of a recently founded business targeting an audience that consumes and produces social media contents on a daily basis. In the case of Instagram, the inherent properties of the service contribute to its significance for research into communication practices in the Web 2.0 environment, as the preponderance of the visual over the textual mode affects language use in ways which are highly context-specific.

The findings presented indicate that the start-up object of this study has developed a straightforward communication style which consistently tries to include its audience in its social media discourse. The fragmented language expressing personality traits primarily linked to the sophistication and excitement dimensions often relies on typical techniques of advertising genres, but in several cases meaning becomes clear only by considering the metalinguistic and visual components of the Instagram posts. In particular, hashtags are vital metafunctional devices that help contextualise the posts and encourage interaction with the followers: they do so by creating intermodal links with the features of the brand, in line with the followers' attitude, desires, and ambitions. As for the visual mode, the pictorial contents convey the brand's personality, and the adoption of subjectification choices invite the ambient audience to feel part of the community that the brand is building around itself.

Since this work focuses on one start-up business, and the corpus is limited, generalisations about the marketing application of Instagram cannot be made. A larger dataset should be investigated in the future, also including posts by companies in other industry sectors, in order to carry out contrastive analysis. Additionally, the insights offered by marketing experts should be integrated into the research design, in order to lend further validity to the study and gain a better understanding of companies' social media communication practices.

Despite its limitations, this case study has proposed a model for investigating social media discourse, on the assumption that language online cannot be studied in isolation, but it is just one of many resources which marketers (and other professionals dealing with communication in other domains) can resort to.

The challenge in conducting this study was to examine language, hashtags, and visuals as distinct semiotic resources, while accounting, from a more comprehensive point of view, for the manner in which they co-construct meaning. Therefore, the investigation was carried out bearing in mind that multimodal communication on social media is extremely stratified. In fact, analysis may seem only possible if each mode is considered independently from the others, but the risk is to isolate each communicative resource from the others while *de facto* losing sight of the intermodal relationships which hold together the elements of social media posts. Hence, it is crucial to remember that all the layers of this type of communication only make sense in the audience's mind when processed as a whole, since they are organically combined to spread the brand's message.

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