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# Run Over the Blog

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## INTRODUCTION

*Which is the link between running shoes market and blogging?*

*Why User Generated Content is a crucial theme if we talk about digital marketing?*

*How can we understand if users like what they comment and which is their real opinion about a product?*

These questions and many others can be the starting point to our analysis.

First we have to talk about User Generated Content, the relationship between users and web. Users online participation is nowadays essential to digital marketing analysis. Digital marketing is nowadays essential to market analysis. This kind of funnel is the core argument of this thesis. The idea that a form of online participation from normal users (not paid for do that) can influence and can change entire marketing strategies, is very interesting.

In this perspective sportswear market, more specifically, running shoes market is a narrower area where this kind of online and offline relationship is observed closer than ever thanks to internet. Actually, we know that exists a huge online world of blog and communities dedicated to runners. We have selected a short list of blogs for only athletes and runners where the core arguments are running shoes and running gear.

There, they can comment and write about every kind of running shoes brand, model and type without any sort of payment or reward to talk about that. Running blogs are a great example of User Generated Content where participation is amazingly active and constant. At last we can understand how this involvement can influence running shoes firms. Sportswear brands product several shoe models and can evaluate and make different marketing research about those shoes. But at last, users decide if shoes work and are comfort or not. In this perspective we have selected a short list of reviews with relative comments that an Artificial Intelligence Tool can analyse and can find important information about blog texts. Cogito is a platform based on Artificial Intelligence algorithms that mimics the human ability to understand language and complex textual information at scale and with accuracy. The language and textual understanding permit us to find new interesting insights about the sentiment of the User Generated Content and can make emotion taxonomy of the several texts we find. Cogito platform becomes a marketing tool to understand what users want and what runners pretend from their running shoes brands. In that way we can find interesting insights that can answer all of our first questions.

The introduction to User Generated Content, the running shoes market explanation and the communication and marketing strategies description are fundamental parts to understand the final analysis. Finally, Cogito analysis gives a short description of what happens in running blogs and how important and influencing is users participation.

In this perspective we have tried to answer many questions trying to find new interesting insights about digital marketing world and the use of Artificial Intelligence tools.

## Chapter 1

### About UGC and FGC

#### 1.1 Introduction to UGC

Business environment, firm organizational asset and marketers' work are evolving day by day. Digitalization and advanced technology are the reason of this changing. Companies are selecting always more frequently digital marketing strategies with the aim at raising brand awareness and create trust among customers in order to lead to strengthen the purchase intention. Actually, who creates trust creates a vital component in order to determine the success of companies' marketing efforts (Tang & Liu, 2015; Cheng & Khan, 2017). In fact, the relationships between trust and purchase intention is strictly dependent: the user that trust in the brand, buys that brand and talks about that brand. With that aim we can concentrate our evolving analysis on the relationship between customers and firms on online communities. In recent years, social media platforms e.g. Instagram (photo-sharing application) have been in commercial interest for companies worldwide since it is fundamentally changing the view of communication and the relationship between companies and consumers (Hoyer et. Al., 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Cheng & Khan, 2017). So we are talking about a "business blending" between social networks

and firms, where online communities are the real platform for an equal exchange where customers are users, and users are generators of the contents that they-self use and share. It could be seen as a circular or mutual relationship and exchange, but we can consider this phenomenon as the encore performance of what happened in the squares, or in the places where people meet each other and talked suggesting places, staffs and people who already know. In that way social media has empowered and enabled customer-to-customer interaction and companies are therefore not the only source of brand communication (Li & Bernoff, 2011, Cheng & Khan, 2017).

In fact the market is evolving to consumer-to-consumer approach. In this range we can find an important element. Consumers create and share what they want, and that is User Generated Content. Actually, we are talking about any form of content that the user wants to communicate on online platforms such as social medias. The posted content can be any kind of expression, from images to videos and originally created by the user or re-posted from other users. The user's aim is to communicate a special idea, an opinion or just a funny thing that can entertain the readers. Generally users are motivated by the desire to express themselves, or just to connect peers, another way users decide to post something sometimes is because of the aim at achieving notoriety or prestige in a social community. In any case, User Generated Content is generally posted without any institutional or commercial market contextualization. Users are not paid people, outsiders that do not come from any label or professional routine and practices. Since we are illustrating how the market is overturning the roles and the buyers are becoming the promoters, and at the same time the mind behind the idea of products is the same buyer of the product, we want to know what labels do. Of course as we talk about User Generated Content, there is also the Firm Generated Content, a way that the firm choose to communicate on the web with its consumers. In this case we are mentioning the interaction of labels on social networks, posting contents created by the firms to

communicate their values, their characteristics and any kind of useful proposition to engage user audience on Internet. In line with this, Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016) explain that consumers are increasingly using social media to obtain product and brand related information as part of their purchasing process. This is aligned with the fact that brand advertising is increasingly communicated through social media (Dennerhardt, 2014, Cheng & Khan, 2017). Therefore, brand advertising on social media are no longer perceived as the result of solely marketers' actions but are instead viewed as dynamic outcomes (Merz et al., 2009, Cheng & Khan, 2017). Hence, consumers can influence the advertising of the brand and other consumers' consumption process through UGC (Halliday, 2016; Kim & Johnson, 2016, Cheng & Khan, 2017).

## 1.2 The Customer Journey

Consumer habits are changing with technological innovations, and as we said before, markets have new necessities. UGC and FGC are the key factors that are changing the evolution of consumer journey, the *funnel* as we know, is changing and the main change starts from the dimensions of *volume* and *valence* and the single marketing funnel stages of awareness, consideration, purchase intent and satisfaction. The traditional metaphorical funnel passes through five important phases: **awareness**, where the customer can consider every brand specialized in that kind of product the customer needs, then the customer find a sort of **familiarity** with that brands, then he or she takes in consideration few brands that can confront and analyse better, then, when the customer have decided with a *reasoned decision process*, there is the **purchase** act. Finally, when the customer has chosen his product starts the

**loyalty** phase, when the customer becomes a loyal buyer of that brand. That kind of typical phases process has changed with the last transformation of the markets. As we can find on McKinsey Quarterly “the proliferation of media and products requires marketers to find new ways to get their brands included in the initial-consideration set that consumers develop as they begin their decision journey”(Bommel, Edelman, & Ungerman, 2014). The conversation has changed, as we said before, we are talking about a two-way conversation where marketers talk to consumers and consumers talk to marketers. But, actually, *how consumers make purchasing decision?*

The typical consumer meets many touch-points with different brands, advertisement, pop-ups advertising, e-mail, a conversation with a friend and whatever way labels use to communicate with the consumer. The traditional marketing point of view deals with the marketing funnel in which the four stages of awareness, consideration, purchase intent and satisfaction refer to a very simple path that the consumer follows every time gets in touch with a new product. Of course the differentiation between FGC and UGC makes the funnel description more structured, dealing with the informative effect and the persuasive effect. That effects make the consumer aware of a brand’s products (Herr et al., 1991), but what makes the consumer in order to decide what to try and what to not do it is the **source credibility**. Source credibility refers to the extent to which a source is perceived as possessing expertise relevant to the communication topic and can be trusted to give an objective opinion on the subject (Goldsmith, Lafferty, and Newell 2000). Source credibility is composed by two main dimensions, source trustworthiness and source expertise, that are postulated to determine the strength of the persuasive effect of marketing communications (Harmon and Kenneth 1982). Finally, we have persuasive effects that are key for consideration and purchase intent, and we postulate that source expertise and source trustworthiness determine the relative effectiveness of both FGC and UGC in the stages (Colicev, 2018). But we can

focus on the first phase of the funnel and we can go ahead with the description of a new version, update to a new generation of consumers. Edelman et al. work specifically on the initial-consideration set that is described from that set of brands that the consumer can consider, to the potential purchasing option brands. Actually, we are finding new solutions about the decision-making process, where the consumer passes through **initial consideration** and so the touch-point meeting with the considered brands, then there is the **active reasoned evaluation**, with comparisons and evaluation about the different brands, then closure, when there is the **purchasing act** and the **post-purchasing phase**, the real trial of the product. In every phase of this new version of the funnel, consumer has assumed a more interactive role. From the consideration phase where as a user the consumer can compare on-line every single brand to make a reasoned decision. The outreach of consumers to marketers is the real revolution of that new *funnel* version. "In today's decision journey, consumer-driven marketing is increasingly important as customers seize control of the process and actively *pull* information helpful to them" (Edelman, Singer, Court, & Mulder, 2015). So, when the consumer has decided what product to buy, here marketer's real work starts: the post-purchase phase starts the cycle journey of the consumer, here the marketer shapes the real opinion of the consumer. In that range, marketers have to move on new marketing efforts: new ways of measuring consumer attitudes, brand performance, and every kind of useful analytic. If the first is the Analysis, then the result is a tailored message and a specific on-line use of it. "Strong performance at this point in the decision-journey requires a mind-set shift from buying media to developing properties that attract consumers: digital assets, programs to foster word-of-mouth and systems that customize advertising by viewing the context and the consumer" (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, and Vetvik, 2009). In that way we have to consider these final stage of the funnel called **advocacy stage**, where the consumer is totally absorbed by the social community, the participation to the

brand activities, a positive word of mouth, sort of recommendations, good ratings and UGC reviews. Here we can find the best engagement required by a user, what every marketer want to find about his or her target, the best engagement rate, expressed by full positive participation to brand presence. But what if the differentiation between FGC and UGC is going to influence the funnel path for the consumer? Specifically, we build on consumer information processing theory to argue that FGC and UGC have distinct *informative* and *persuasive effects* on consumers in each stage. The *informative effect* is prevalent in the awareness stage, in which higher exposure to brand identifies generates brand recall (Colicev, 2018). Both UGC *volume*, that captures UGC frequency and FGC *valence* that captures the sentiment contained in FGC posts, have a positive relationship with awareness, which is stronger than that of FGC dimensions. We can start this focus drawing from source credibility, theory that postulates that the interplay between source expertise and source trustworthiness determines the strength of persuasive effects of FGC and UGC. In this case we can assure that FGC vividness has the strongest relationship with consideration and purchase intent, which prevails not only over other dimensions of FGC but also over dimensions of UGC (Colicev, 2018).

### 1.3 User Generated Content and Word of Mouth

We consider User Generated Content as every kind of content created and shared by the users, potential buyers of any product sold on the web. The main characteristic is that the *creator* of the content is not paid by any worker part of the label that is promoted. The topic of Word of Mouth (WOM) pertains to goods, services, brands, and companies. These goods and services have

different levels of functional and financial risk (Von Wangenheim and Bayon, 2004). Here the uncertainty becomes a key factor: the consumer needs to reduce this perceived risk by the purchasing act, consumers consult with other (Roselius, 1971). In earlier stages of development, platforms attract fewer visitors, and they experience smaller network effects than more mature platforms. Therefore, WOM displayed on platforms introduced more recently may have a lesser impact on sales than WOM appearing on more mature platforms. Fifth, we differentiate platforms according to posting policies. Specifically, WOM senders may incur posting hurdles. For example, they may need to have purchased the product or registered as a member to create or disseminate a review, upload a video, and so on (Mayzlin, Dover, and Chevalier 2014). Previous research has shown that such costs decrease the prevalence of fake reviews and thus increase the value of WOM (Ott, Cardie, and Hancock 2012). Therefore, the effect of WOM on sales may be greater for platforms imposing WOM posting costs. Product characteristics. In this case we can observe that WOM becomes a replace factor for information obtained through sampling or purchase, consumers may rely more on WOM in services specially but also for products (Babić Rosario, Sotgiu, De Valck, & Bijmolt, 2015). Word of Mouth could be very useful for hedonic products, specifically, because this kind of product needs a sort of suggestion to be sold. Another way to use at all WOM is to launch a new product: because anticipating their performance is difficult. For these products, WOM plays a particularly important role in building product awareness and providing information to consumers (Mahajan, Muller, and Kerin 1984). What makes interesting that fact is that in any way, users that approach to that content find a great level of trust on that element. We find that trust is a constant element that we can find in every social network service (SNS's). At the same time we have to consider how widely social networks as Twitter or Facebook can produce a certain level of customer's cognitive trust by User Generated Content. This basic mechanism born from the most effective

marketing mechanism of Word of Mouth, now transferred on Internet with its pros and cons. As information flows by person-to-person or account-to-account, we know that WOM is very powerful. Every day, reading an online social media wall or a notice board we are always involved in some product related information panel. In every online and offline conversation and when we send some post to another friend, we are always involved in a WOM process with a product related content as protagonist of our conversations. Just a suggestion, a comment or every kind of participation it could be seen as a WOM product. According to the report *Hearing the Voice of the Consumer: UGC and the Commerce Experience*<sup>1</sup> online word of mouth communication is the most preferred source for 90% of shoppers making a purchase. The most interesting fact from that analysis is that when information is shared via social media tends to be more influential “when those exposed to the message believe they are similar to the person sharing information” (Tuten & Solomon 2017). Of course, as offline, WOM can be positive or negative and we know, by the Forrester Research that if the information is negative has much more possibilities to be shared on the socials. “The research suggests that the effect is due to high interpersonal closeness activating the goal to protect other, and low interpersonal closeness activating the goal to enhance the self”<sup>2</sup>. So as the research said, the influence impressions that are generated by users on social media are open discussions about brands. As Oscar Wilde said “*There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about*” we can say that WOM on social media it must be considered in both alternatives, or positive or negative, it is always a way to talk about a brand. What labels want on the web is to raise impressions, the view or the

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<sup>1</sup> Developed by TurnTo and executed by Ipsos, the report represents responses from more than 1,000 U.S. shoppers who made an online purchase in the past 12 months. The study examines what motivates shoppers, how they prefer to shop and the impact and influence user-generated content (UGC) plays in shaping the consumer experience and building long-term engagement once a purchase has been made. (<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-study-shows-user-generated-content-tops-marketing-tactics-by-influencing-90-percent-of-shoppers-purchasing-decisions-300475348.html>)

<sup>2</sup> Tracy L., Tuten, & Michael R. Solomon, *Social Media Marketing*, SAGE 9, 2017

exposure to an advertising message. "In social media, brands may benefit from influence impressions as well as ad impressions as well as ad impressions". We have to know clearly what is an influence impression: any impression that is generated by social sharing. "Further, the brand activity in the social media space, whether in the form of tweeting, blogging, social networking, or virtual commerce, encourages people to incorporate this information into their own communication exchanges" (Tuten & Solomon 2017). Following Forrester description we know that the influencers, who deliver this kind of influences, are called *mass connectors*. As Malcolm Gladwell said in *The tipping point*<sup>3</sup>, three types of individuals help to spread viral messages:

- Mavens: who knows much information.
- Connectors: who know many people and communicate with them.
- Salespeople: who influence others and with natural persuasive power convince to buy.

In that way, people communicate in between nodes, information and content becomes viral involving people in a process structured by information sharing, re-posting of content, post and images commenting and every kind of personal and not paid activity. Interactions with peers are fundamental human acts, arising from psycho-physiological and sociological need gratification (Ward, 1974). So we are talking about peers, that are the primary socialization agents, the key factor of WOM and interaction in social media. Group peers can influence consumer behaviour, as sociology says, shopping orientations and consumer decision-making. In line with socialization theory, we argue that peers act as socialization agents through social media and that newcomers are influenced by peers through communication, as a result of a social learning process (Wang & Yu, 2012). In

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<sup>3</sup> Gladwell M. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* M A L C O L M G L A D W E L L LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY, 2001

fact during this ongoing peer communication process performed by written messages, comments, feedback, reviews, suggestions and discussions, a consumer becomes socialized to adopt some product new for him or her. Peer communication is associated with learning about consumption, such as brand preferences, involvement, or purchase intentions. Consumer behaviours or attitudes tend to result from learning acquired through interactions between the consumer and socialization agents (Wang & Yu, 2012). Involvement, a psychological construct that occurs during a buyer's decision-making process, refers to the perceived relevance of an object, based on the consumer's needs, values, or interests (Zaichkowsky 1985). And there we have to insert marketing and its tools. Literature demonstrates that consumer product preferences always depend on need for uniqueness. The social influence of other members of a community affects an individual's decisions because of that individual's concern about the impressions his or her behaviour gives other people (Amaldoss and Jain, 2005). This need of uniqueness expressed by consumers can affect willingness to generate WOM or comply with others' preferences (Wang & Yu, 2012). So we can say that "need for uniqueness moderates the association between peer communication and product attitude: high (versus low) uniqueness consumers are less likely to conform to peers' influence" (Wang & Yu, 2012). Who interacts in social communities with a huge amount of contents is creating a consistent social capital. People have valuable resources as actual or virtual and it is comprehensive of online reputation, bonding and bridging and maintained. In that way network relationships become very important, because are power bearers on the web. Influencers have got this power, just using and promoting any kind of brand, enjoying a different way to communicate personally.

### 1.3.1 WOM Analytics

Academic literature wants to explain and illustrate how WOM could be measured in practice and operationalized. We work on *volume*, *valence*, *composite valence-volume*, *variance* and other. Firstly, if we talk about *volume* we are mentioning the total amount of WOM interaction (Liu, 2006), that is the total number of WOM units sent about a particular object (Babić Rosario et al., 2015). Volume is an index of the number of people have experienced or used the product and how the product has become popular in the market. It can indicate consumers' awareness increasing and the reduction of uncertainty about the same product, in order to explicit if the product is going to increase in sales. An interesting pragmatic example for volume could be the *bandwagon effect* (e.g. Van den Bulte and Lilien, 2001), in which the mere availability of other consumers' opinions has an influence on other consumers, regardless of whether these opinions are positive or negative (Godes and Mayzlin 2009, Babić Rosario et al., 2015). The main idea behind the reliance on the amount of peer-generated information in consumers' decision-making process is rooted in herding behaviour and social impact theory, according to which people tend to follow the previous behaviour of others to reduce risk in the environment (Banerjee 1992; Latané 1981, Babić Rosario et al., 2015). In addition, the more consumers discuss about a product, the greater is the chance that other consumers will become aware of it, because message repetition attracts people's attention to the topic of the message (Cacioppo and Petty 1989; Tellis 1988, Babić

Rosario et al., 2015). *Valence* is the other indicator; it is also called the “favourability”, “sentiment”, or “polarity” of WOM and refers to the affect expressed in a comment or suggestion or review and to the objective information found in the same context. Of course, we can observe that consumers are formed, reinforced or altered from this exposure. In this case we can derive what is the product’s reputation and which is the expected product quality. This is called *persuasion effect or informational influence* of WOM (Godes and Mayzlin 2009; Rui, Liu, and Whinston 2013, Babić Rosario et al., 2015). Another metric, new-labelled *composite valence-volume* represents the combined influence of persuasion and bandwagon effects. For example, seeing that a product received 500 Facebook “likes” informs a consumer about the sentiment toward the product, while also providing an indication about the actual number of people who formed an opinion about it. This represents both valence and volume. In contrast, the metric “the percentage of 1 star ratings” indicates that some consumers share negative sentiment, but it does not communicate how many consumers share an opinion. This is a measure of valence (Babić Rosario et al., 2015). Variance represents “a natural measure to capture the heterogeneity in consumer opinions upon seeing a high variance, consumers infer that the product is a niche one that some people love and others hate” (Sun 2012, p. 697, Babić Rosario et al., 2015). Finally, we know that there are numerous metrics specifically for each kind of product is proposed on-line, If we are working on a specific area we can find different kind of metrics, changing method consequently to the social media used and the information needed. An interesting observation to take stock of the analysis made by Babić Rosario, Sotgiu and De Valck et al. (2015) is that platform managers can influence WOM effectiveness by accounting for the following two platform characteristics:

- To increase the effectiveness of WOM spread on social media platforms,

managers should encourage consumers to provide more information about them so that WOM receivers can gauge homophile. This result is in line with a long line of research on tie strength and WOM persuasiveness in personal networks (e.g., Brown and Reingen 1987).

- For WOM spread on e-commerce platforms, platform managers' efforts might focus on bringing WOM information to the forefront without over-structuring it. Given an abundance of other product details available on this type of platform, it is crucial for WOM to be prominent in order to have a strong impact on sales.

#### 1.4 UGC and FGC

As we have seen, marketers are constantly searching for new channels to communicate with users. Users, at the same time communicate with each other creating any sort of content in order to reach any participant to the web. But what we want to understand after a specific analysis is what happens on the communities. The difficulty is to reach much more users on the social media. But are social communities the right way to reach the maximum number of users of the web? Following a report from SYSOMOS<sup>4</sup> "over a third of all brand communities on Facebook (35%) had only fewer than 100 fans, and over three-quarters (77%) had fewer than 1,000 fans. This is echoed by a study by Deloitte, which indicates that attracting community members is a major obstacle to creating successful communities, and 35% of the corporates surveyed have less

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<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://www.sysomos.com/insidefacebook/>

than 100 fans and are struggling to survive (Conference, 2014). Communities need to be reached by anybody on the web and need to trigger user's interest. In that way Marketer Generated Content and User Generated Content must be constantly present on that community pages. Following the Hawaii conference about *The Role of Marketer and User generated Content in Sustaining the Growth of a Social Media Brand Community*, we can find that a salient element of the creation of signals on social media is of course Word Of Mouth, "where users co-produce signals in the forms of WOM, a salient signal cost is the time and effort users spend on writing and communicating the WOM"(Conference, 2014). For this reason users have the necessity to choose firms evaluated worthy for them to share their contents and commenting every post created. In that way Dichter<sup>5</sup> has found an interesting structured four inter-related motivators of involvement in WOM communication:

- 1) Product involvement: how WOM acts triggering consumer interest and what makes the user to share contents and information about that product.
- 2) Message involvement: the product can stimulate a discussion through a sending message created by the firm. The interesting fact is that this kind of WOM stays on the web, readable by anybody, everywhere and at every time, after years too.
- 3) Self-involvement: consumers are participating to this content generation to enhance their image. Other users, because of their utility in purchasing process, request participation, opinions and comments.
- 4) Other involvement: this is the genuine desire to help another buyer to make a decision, probably is the summa of the other points.

Dichter confirms the idea that UGC by highly involved users are likely to be influential in attracting people to join a brand community (Dichter, 1966). And

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<sup>5</sup> E. Dichter, "How word-of-mouth advertising works", Harvard Business Review, 1966, pp. 147-160.

what about FGC? Companies today have high expectations in engaging consumers on a more personal level on social media platforms to influence them to purchase their products or services (Brodie et al. 2013; Li & Bernoff, 2011, Cheng & Khan, 2017). FGC on social media is described as a type of advertising which the company is in charge of and governed by the marketing strategy (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016, Cheng & Khan, 2017). FGC on social media has the intention to affect consumers' perceptions about the company's products and spread company-related information (Brodie et al., 2013; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Cheng & Khan, 2017). Choi & Lee (2016) explains that consumers usually search for brand-generated content because they perceive that companies' have full access to company and product information while customers have limited product knowledge. Therefore, consumers put greater trust in firm-generated content (Kivetz & Simonson, 2000; Cheng & Khan, 2017). Firms, when create product related FGC display prices, images and specifications about the products. This kind of content is essential for any label that wants to be clear and achievable by people. Branding community is the flawless channel to reach any user. We are talking about the *information asymmetry resolution*, users need information for the decision making process, the firm gives those information. We are talking about the context of high involvement products, or to be more explicative, the highly regulated product categories like healthcare (Chatterjee, P. 2011). On the other hand content as greetings and welcome messages on the community brand may be used as a way for the hosting firm to socialize and build relationships with its customers (A.M. Muniz Jr. and T.C. O'Guinn, 2001). These are social-related FGC that are interesting to analyse how much important is the consumer care. Both the FGC are very useful and effective to communicate with consumers, but effectively, the personalized content and formulas created to communicate in social related FGC are the best choice to interact. As we know, with that kind of activity, firms achieve a closer relationship with the consumer, involving that target in a

purchase experience. As Laverie et al. said, "Emotional bond with customers does a better job in attracting and keeping consumers than product quality". Another relevant fact is the bond between product related FGC and the product related UGC, where, following this hypothesis by the study, we can observe a good effect of FGC on the creation of more social related UGC. This is because the presence of such relationship-building messages may remind users of their intention to connect with the brand and with other passionate customers of the brand, which are among the major motivations of users joining a brand community (Hawaii International Conference on System Science). When somebody shares something online, consumers tend to heed that because they tend to absorb sentiments disseminated by fellow consumers (W. Hanson and K. Kalyanam, 2007). Finally we can say that UGC as FGC collaborate on the supporting and growing of brand communities, involving people to enjoy them and be part of interaction of the online community. Especially UGC affects very positively brand community growth permitting the diffusion of the brand and the cooperation on the sharing of pictures and comments about that brand. Finally we can observe from the research that users are very sensitive and pleased with the provision of socializing messages from the hosting firm in the brand community. This fact enhances the idea that FGC can intensify the relationship between users and brands raising the growth of the community within a short time. Another result from the research is Trusov et al. analysis from where we deduce that "UGC (in terms of WOM referrals by consumers) and FGC (in terms of traditional advertising and promotion) on customer acquisition in a different context (user signing up for social networking websites). They conclude that UGC has substantially longer carryover effects than FGC in that particular context" (Trusov et al. 2009).

## 1.5 UGC Weight

We have seen how much consistent is UGC and how much can be useful a FGC approach to consumer on brand communities. But how much is heavy the impact of User Generate Content on the consumers? From Chatterjee study we have seen that the impact of network, message source and recipient covariates on both outcomes clearly demonstrates that impacts differ for recommending and referral visit outcomes (Chatterjee, 2011). Then, we have to consider the importance of WOM, from prior studies where it is demonstrated that the recommendation event represents a conscious decision by the influencer to disseminate positive word of mouth to recipients and is a more active endorsement of a brand sponsor's product than self-reported intentions (Lee & Youn 2009). So the communication process receive many inputs, as studies says, the referral event as behavioural measure of the effectiveness of the influencer's recommendation complete the communication loop with feedbacks too. Managerially, it can help brand sponsors identify and reach potential consumers in the SNS with latent need for the product, as well as those in the general population who are not members of the SNS (Chatterjee, 2011). But to identify a correct and efficient analysis we need a *plan*. What is necessary is to identify how effective WOM and User Generate Content can approach users on brand communities in order to convince and seduce them. An interesting approach is the S-O-R model, Stimulus-Ordering-Response (Kim & Johnson, 2016). It is an effective model to identify how people react to that kind of inputs as WOM and UGC. This model illustrates the influence of a Stimulus on an Organism and its

consequently response by that. Mehrabian & Russel model can be use useful if applied as a structure to demonstrate the effect of external influences on consumers (S), the internal processes responding to that influence (O), and the resulting behaviours (R). The external influences (e.g., informational inputs) can include managerially controllable factors such as advertising, price, product design, or non-controlled environmental factors such as competition, social pressure, and economic conditions (Bagozzi, 1983). Can be analysed the different reactions, from fear to arousal and liking reactions as well as cognitive responses as perceived risk, dissonance and expectations (Bagozzi, 1983). S-O-R model is very useful to try to capture the complex decision making process of consumer response. In this case we apply the S-O-R model to demonstrate how brand-related UGC (S) evoked emotional and cognitive responses (O) within consumers, and these internal states influenced consumer's behavioural responses (R). That is, when a consumer encounters brand-related UGC on Facebook, UGC (S) activates internal information processing by the consumer (O) and consequently behavioural actions (R) related to the brand as the consumer processes the information (Kim & Johnson, 2016). From different researches we have found that this model has found purchase intentions and intentions to engage in WOM activities to be linked to User Generated Content. In that way, we can observe that an exposure to UGC can produce brand-related outcomes of consumer activities in social media context and be considered as behavioural outcomes. Then, in addition we can observe a relationship-building variable (i.e. brand engagement) as a component of behavioural responses because important goals for companies engaged in social media activities are to increase brand awareness and to build and enhance relationships with existing and new customers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kim & Ko, 2012). When a consumer is exposed to stimuli such as WOM that provides information (e.g., facts about a product, usage instruction), cognitive processes must occur to understand the factual content presented.

After understanding the stimuli, the consumer might develop an affective or emotional response toward the information (Kim & Johnson, 2016). We can assume that website design elements (i.e., colours, images, interactive features) had a positive influence on consumers' emotions (e.g., pleasure) and cognitions. In addition, informational stimuli such as advertising content was also found to influence pleasure as well as arousal (Olney et al., 1991). Because brand-related UGC (S) often contains information about brands, consumers who encounter it are expected to process the information (O) and determine its quality (Kim & Johnson, 2016). Finally we can find a tie between WOM and purchase intention in which future intention of purchasing is exactly influenced by information passed by word of mouth in order to be considered enrichment information about a brand. Properly, consumers assume information by other users as knowledge included in the consideration set about a specific brand. The consideration set of the consumer it might be considered an element that participates on the purchasing act. The comprehension process and storing WOM messages represents consumer's cognitive mental activity in response to WOM. These findings led to the prediction that emotional and cognitive responses (O) stemming from brand-related UGC (S) is positively related to future-purchase intention (R), (Kim & Johnson, 2016). As a result of this study we can say that of course, UGC and WOM influences customer relationships with brands. Brand related content on social media influences of course, relationship equity, but also customer disposition to stay in relationship with a brand (Kim and Ko, 2012). Here we can individuate brand engagement, as when the customer shows willingness to be involved with a brand and gather information about the brand, talk about it, and exhibit its use to others (Keller, 2001).

Another interesting study by Erkan and Evans address the issue of the relationship between WOM in social media and consumers' purchase intentions. We know that there is an ample theoretic background focusing on consumer

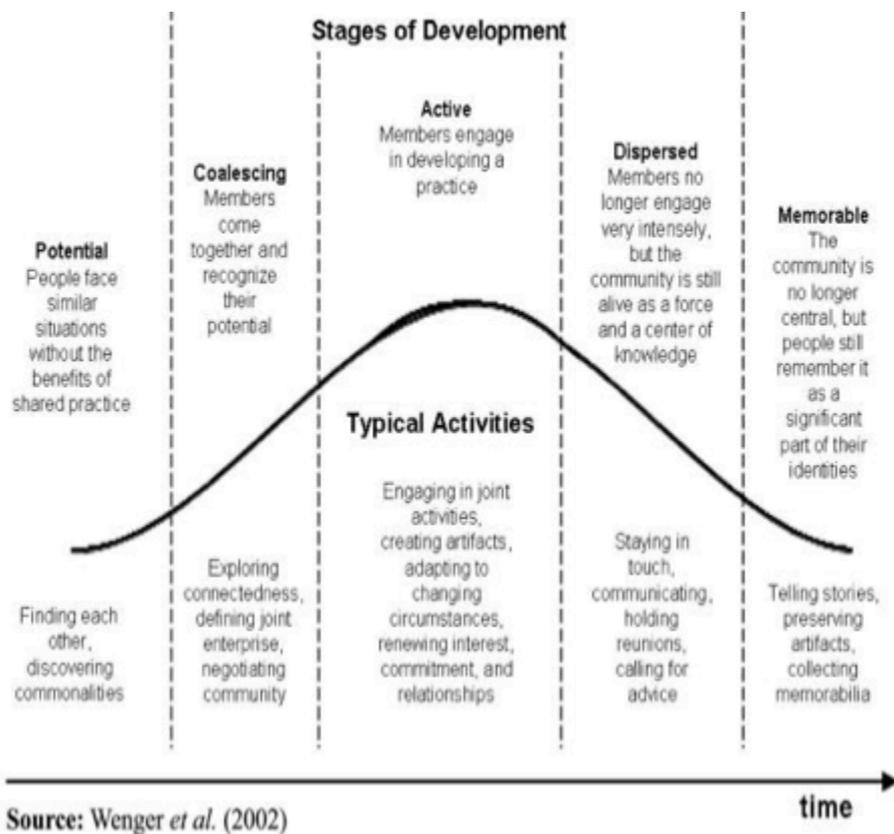
behaviour but we might adopt a new point of view. Internet and social media have given the possibility to apply many of these behavioural theories on these new generation methods to purchase something. Consumers' behaviour can be read, analysed and developed as a new argument and, at the same time, the old theories can be useful and applicable in this new world. Erkan and Evans in *The influence of WOM in social media on consumers' purchase intentions: An extended approach to information adoption* try to use mainly two important theories that we have found interesting to enrich the full description of UGC and WOM use on social media. The study analyses firstly the application of the information acceptance model (IACM) where the influence of WOM on social media "not only depends on the characteristics of WOM information, such as quality and credibility of information, but it also depends on the consumers' behaviour towards WOM information". This theory derives from Information Adoption Model (IAM) and Technology acceptance model (TAM) where technology is perceived as usefulness or perceived ease of use for predicting an individual attitude towards accepting certain technology. The IAM is based on the Information Adoption Process (Nonaka, 1994), in order to understand how people internalise the information they receive by WOM conversations and their exchange and different reactions by different persons (Erkan & Evans, 2016). The IAM four components are in fact very useful to express how WOM can be analysed in different contexts. Argument quality, source credibility, information usefulness and information adoption are applicable considering behaviours of consumers towards information. The components relating to consumer' behaviour towards WOM information are derived by TRA (Erkan & Evans, 2016). In this way we can find that using the explanations of the Elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and its application with the IAM theory, we can understand the explanation and developing of IACM and its hypothesis. Erkan & Evan study claims that the characteristics of WOM information are not sufficient to examine the influence of WOM on consumers' purchase intentions;

the behaviour of consumers towards the WOM information should be included in the evaluation. Therefore, it creates a new model, which is named IACM. Both characteristics of WOM information and consumers' behaviour towards WOM information are considered together whilst developing the IACM (Erkan & Evans, 2016). Eventually, the IACM examines the relationships between following variables: information quality, information credibility, needs of information, attitude towards information, information usefulness, information adoption and purchase intention. Starting with the hypothesis that who adopts WOM information is certainly positively related to consumers' purchase intention, we can assume also that information usefulness refers to people's perception that using new information will enhance his/her performance. In this way, people tend to engage with the information when they think it is useful (Erkan & Evans, 2016). Therefore, based on IAM, we predict that the credibility of WOM information is positively related to its usefulness in addition to information adoption and purchase intention (Erkan & Evans, 2016). Through this research we know that characteristics of WOM information, and behaviours of consumers towards WOM information have a positive impact on consumers' purchase intentions (Erkan & Evans, 2016).

## 1.6 Social Communities: How does it work?

A question rises after this short brief about UGC and is where UGC is established, is used and where is developed by users. Well, we know that we can find contents in blogs, social media networks and every kind of news site.

Contents could be created both by professional figures and by users that want to share their opinion and their experiences with other users. But all these “digital squares” have an interesting characteristic in common: a special identity that involves a group of users, in that way an on-line community is founded. Participants of the community interact between them, because of a common interest, a common background or just a common friend that has created the friendships network. But the principal communities’ aim is to concentrate and make the interaction between people that have the same interest, hobby or just an activity in common. Communities create the occasion to make participants interacting about topics they are interested in (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). As a funnel that involves users, Pitta and Fowler (2005) have conceived a community development model (tab.1) where are described users’ behaviours on on-line communities. On-line forums tend to come into being at stage two, the *Coalescing*, where a sufficiently motivated and technically knowledgeable person or group decides to create the forum. From there the forum may grow, if sufficient numbers of its target community find and adopt the forum. It is sustained if the number of new members is equal or greater to the number of who lose interest over time. Over time, forces that foster community formation may operate. Those forces include interests and relationships (Pitta & Fowler, 2005).



tab.1 : source Wenger et al. (2002)

What identify a specific community is a characterizing interest, very often a niche hobby or activity that involves people and make them to talk about it, ask for questions of interest and create real conversations and suggestions about that thing (phase 2 and 3 on tab.1). The community could, of course, involve a large population by a broadly argument, but there is the advantage to find a specific topic for a more narrow community where the target is consequently much more reduced and the audience could tend toward homogeneity. If we see a community, as source of market this factor could be priceless for a marketing research. So, communities are created and shared to discuss about a single or several arguments, and this discussion can involve many users starting a discussion forum as a unique blend of public and private online communication. It is for this reason that many communities are not open. There is the choice to make a place secure and protected by others, for this reason is

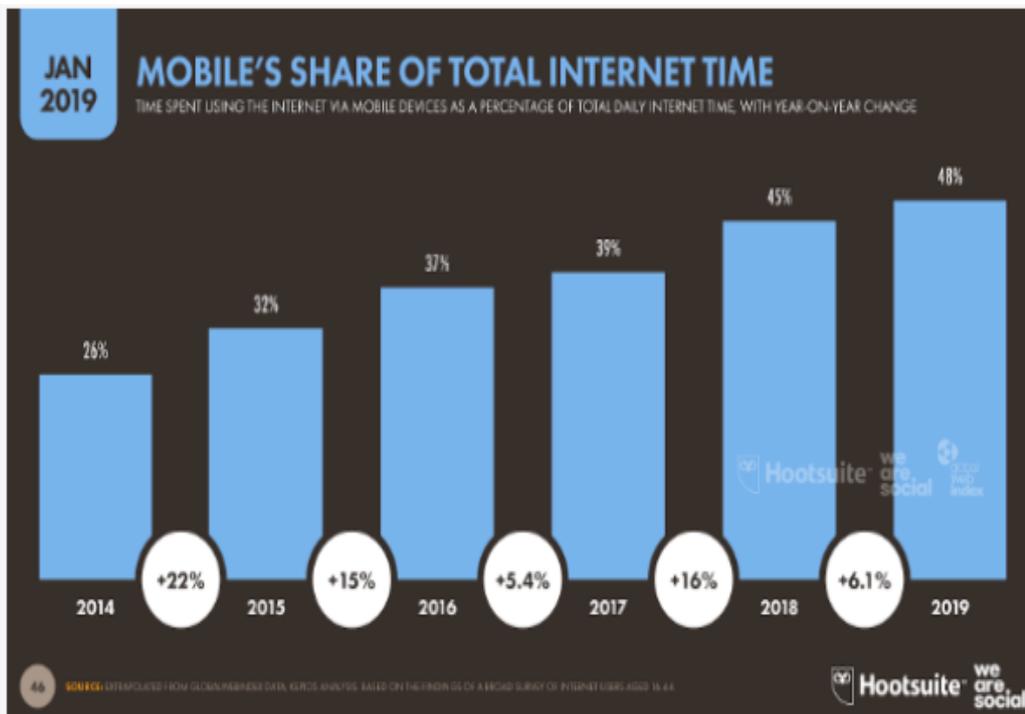
very used a regulative activity, where every user is invited to follow specific organizational rules. Regulative information deals with the structure, procedures, or processes that currently exist or are being instituted within the group. This establishes a set of rules for the group and a framework for how activities are accomplished (Ahuja, 2015). This structured organizational way to make relationships and conversation on the web could be seen as normative community work, where everyone has an interest and wants to communicate with everybody following specific rules, useful and "civil" just to guarantee safe exchange of information, private too. Users, in addition are asked to register to the blog and sometimes the request could be denied by the supervisors aligning with the idea that the person that is asking for participating could be do this just for personal interest or maybe for having some informational or economical gain. In that way we can distinguish people who stay in the community just to read, as *lurkers*, that don't want to be exposed to all the community but prefer to stay in "the edge" of the community. Then there are users that want to be part of a community for a personal gain. In that order of ideas, we find that *trust* is a premised idea that must be found in every community on-line: it arises because even if the parties to a social exchange seek profit, they realize that the achievement of profit depends on a mutual belief that the parties are reciprocating appropriately (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001). These factors are underlined by the fact that *de facto* obligations in social exchange are poorly specified. And finally, it is for these reasons that before login a community blog is often present normative part, full of simple rules to be known in order to be part of the community. Values and expects are very important in the definition of an on-line consumer or user community. This type of information deals with being a group member and doing the right things. It is the means for finding out what behaviours are "normal" and what are not. Prior research for co-located individuals has shown that this type of information is most likely acquired through observation and

face-to-face interaction (Morrison, 1993b) that means that members of virtual groups have to use different means to acquire this type of information. Virtual group members may have to rely on electronic exchange and find ways of articulating social information through electronic channels (Ahuja, 2015). More specifically we can align with Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) saying that socialization is a process of sharing experiences and thereby creating tacit knowledge such as shared mental models and technical skills (Ahuja, 2015). With this premise, we can agree with Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) saying that association with most virtual communities is voluntary, and the strength and kind of participation are freely chosen. The economic leverage of the virtual community provides an interesting opportunity to achieve an interplay between aspects of the *I* and the *me* in the context of consumer choice (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001). And is for that reason that many firms are concentrating their force, data acquisition systems and technologies to approach to online communities. Users are at the same time potential consumers and they now have the power of choice and to convince a product or a service. The management of a community's virtual information capital would involve influencing, moderating, capturing, coding and providing distributed access to the contributions of its constituents (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001).

## 1.7 Communities, Internet and what happens in the world

We have talked about the economic leverage of the virtual community, we have

seen that the evolution of economics, sales and marketing passes through Internet. Specifically, we know that consumers can now be part of a huge decision system, where firms ask to consumers what to do and both are influencing each other. Internet basically, is changing society and society is changing Internet. For this reason we have to know some important data about the uprising of internet, social media communities and how much they are influencing people. Analysing what *We Are Social* platform says about Internet growing use we know that recently, Internet user growth accelerated with more than 366 million new users coming online, only from 2018 to January 2019 (Digital 2018 Report). Internet users are growing day by day: there are 11 new users per second, which results in that impressive total of one million new users each day (Digital 2019 Report). Of course we have to talk about the use of Internet by different device from computer. Mobiles are the new boundaries of online activities. It is worth noting that mobile phones now account for almost half the time that people spend on the Internet. In this picture we can see the positive growth from 2014.



tab.2: source from wearesocial.com

On average, the world's Internet users spend 6 hours and 42 minutes online each day. This drop, following the platform theory, may be in part due to the large number of new users who are still learning how to use Internet, and who use the Internet less than those more seasoned users who turn to their connected devices hundreds of times each day (Digital 2019 Report). Certainly, both novice of the web and seasoned users have all a common interest, be part of a community, a social media login or just a diversion during the day. What we know is that people past a lot of time on Facebook. Alexa<sup>6</sup> research data system says that Facebook is third on the ranking of the most used web sites from 2018 to January 2019. At the top of the ranking Google with 7 minutes of time visiting, just for an information research, some question or need of users. At the second place of Alexa's ranking we can see YouTube, as the biggest search engine for more than 1,8 billion people registered on the site seeing every day 5 billion videos. Is that User Generated Content? Of course, by video creation and posting we can see that YouTube has all the characteristics to be considered the *Internet bucket* of user generated content.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.alexa.com>



tab.3: source from wearesocial.com

But what makes interesting Alexa’s research is what happens in e-commerce web sites have been steadily raising through the ranks of these lists over the course of 2018. Interesting are the Chinese platforms that are particularly well represented, and it’s worth highlighting that both Taobao and Tmall now rank higher than Amazon in terms of global traffic (Digital 2019 Reports). That’s curious because China must be considered one of the biggest Internet users of the world; actually there is a 60% rate of Internet penetration comparing the number of Internet users to total population<sup>7</sup>. We know that Chinese people spend a lot of time on-line, buying, posting and searching for western products. But let’s concentrate on the use of social media worldwide. We can say that in more than 230 countries and territories people use social media platforms. These in depth numbers tell a mixed story though, with some platform showing

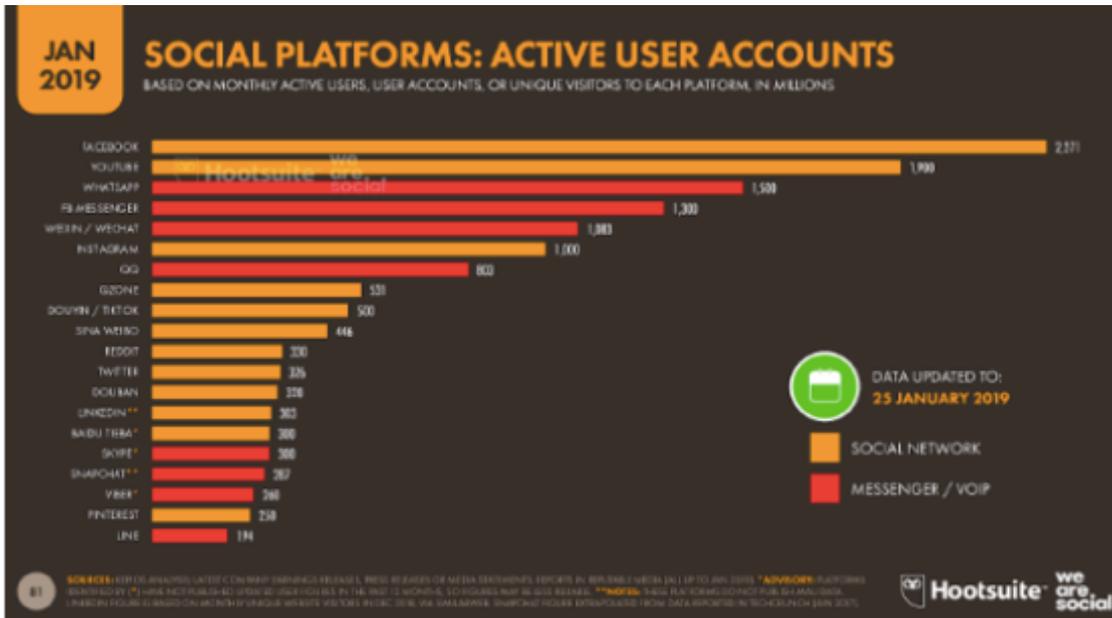
<sup>7</sup> Sources from Internet World stats; ITU; world bank; CIA Factbook; Euro stat; Local Government bodies and regulatory authorities; Mid East media org; Reports in reputable media; social media platform user numbers. We Are Social Platform.

impressive growth over the past 12 months, and others starting to lose ground (Digital 2019 Reports). Worldwide social media user numbers have grown to almost 3.5 billion at the start of 2019, with 288 million new users in the past 12 months pushing the global penetration figure to 45%. Social media use is still far from evenly distributed across the globe though, and penetration rates in parts of Africa are still in the single digits. In 2018 people has past an increased amount of time on socials. Global Web Index<sup>8</sup> reports that the average social media user now spends 2 hours and 16 minutes each day on social platforms which equates to roughly one-third of their total internet time, and one-seventh of their waking lives. *But what are the social media platforms more used around the world?* Facebook remain on the top of the ranking in early 2019, in spite of the fact that in 2018 Facebook has seen reduction of the participation of people on the platform. In this following table is described the whole ranking. In fact Facebook's monthly active users (MAU) numbers grew steadily across the past 12 months, and the platform's latest earnings announcement reports year-on-year user growth of almost 10%. Despite some leadership hurdles in 2018, Instagram posted some strong numbers over the past 12 months. Back in June 2018, the company announced that it had passed the 1 billion "active accounts" mark, and although the company later clarified that this figure did not represent unique users, the milestone was no less impressive. The platform's latest advertising audience figures show that this strong performance has continued into 2019, with active users growing by more than 4% in the past 3 months to reach an advertising audience of 895 million active users around the world at the time of writing. Finally, Twitter who has not reported declines in global active users in their two past earnings announcements. This downward trend is clearly visible in the platform's advertising audience numbers too, which indicate that Twitter's total addressable audience has fallen by 1.5% since October. Twitter's advertising audience also skews significantly towards men,

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.globalwebindex.com>

with the platform reporting that almost two-thirds of its addressable audience is male (Digital 2019 Report).



tab.4: source from wearesocial.com

*Last but not least*, we have to talk about mobile situation in 2019. The number of people around the world who use a mobile phone increased by 100 million in 2018, with the global total reaching more than 5.1 billion users by January 2019. This figure brings worldwide mobile penetration to 67%, more than two-thirds of the total global population. Smartphones now account for two-thirds of global mobile connections. With roughly 5.5 billion smartphones in use across the world today, it's little surprise that the mobile app market is booming. More than 2.5 billion "feature phone" handsets are still in use around the world though, while cellular "internet of things" (IoT) connections have reached almost 300 million (Digital 2019 report).

We'll finish this year's analysis on another high point. The latest data from

Statista<sup>9</sup>'s Digital Market Outlook studies show that e-commerce spend has grown by 14% year-on-year, with the company estimating that full-year 2018 spend on consumer goods alone topped US\$1.78 trillion. At 17%, Fashion & Beauty posted the strongest growth over the past year, with annual global spend in the category now topping half a trillion US dollars. However, online travel and accommodation bookings accounted for the largest share of consumer e-commerce spending in 2018, with users around the world spending a combined US\$750 billion on online travel over the course of the full year (Digital 2019 Report).

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<sup>9</sup> [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com)

## Chapter 2

The sportswear market: *Shoedogs* and other stories.

### 2.1 Introduction to Running Shoes Industry

After Philip Knight decided to found a real company that could work exclusively on running shoes, he passed a lot of time observing which kind of shoes people use to wear. Everywhere he could see if people preferred to wear work shoes instead of dress shoe. Every different circumstance creates an occasion to wear a different kind of footwear. And that is the moment in which the founder of Nike decided that he had to see a Nike's shoe worn by every person around him. This is the starting point of what now is one of the most important and most profitable markets in the world. Of course we won't talk only about Nike's success but this should be defined the first moment in the history of sportswear market in which somebody has had a complete vision, or better forecast, of what now is the uniformity and trend normality.

Offices, schools, restaurants and every kind of workplace it can be seen as the perfect place where to wear sneakers. With a sneaker you can run, walk, or just stand-up all day long, being comfortable, fashion and adapted to the general trend.

The wide diffusion of sportswear must be defined and distinguished by the different aim of the audience. Firstly we have to define the first direct use of sportswear (from footwear to every item of clothing) as the main article to use in a sporty circumstance.

The runner needs hard running shoes as a tennis player; the professional swimmer needs a specific kind of swimwear or the football player a special customized pair of soccer shoe. Every sportsman has different necessities, due to different kind of performance, fields, and structures. This world product involves a huge amount of different semantic characteristics that involve a wide number of users, and consequently consumers. There is not a real fashion diktat but instead of that there is mainly a technical approach to the product. The new definition of a modern buyer journey where the user is involved in a loyalty funnel for a brand, in this case is mainly influenced by the technical characteristics of the item. Specifically the shoe assumes a real importance for its role in the athletic performance.

The other indicative point of view of this contemporary market is the fashion one, where trends are determined by big brands of sportswear but also by the giants of fashion world. In this way, sportswear, in few years has become a lifestyle, free from traditional etiquette and revolutionary for the fashion system. Sportswear perception changed in few years evolving in something people loves for comfort, convenience and mainly for appearance. The great special sneaker limited edition has become the status symbol for youngers, principally the z-generation and millennial. As we know appearance has become the first indicative factor of social statement and not casually big fashion firms has dedicated entire product line to sportswear.

We will see both the aspects of this markets, the sportswear as sports gear, chosen after several speculations, an attention to details for the best athletic performance and the lifestyle version, when the sportswear becomes a way to dress and to live as "sporty".

## 2.2 The protagonist: The Product

In the contest of the active-wear market, we take the focus on the specific sector of shoes. The production of shoes classified as *training shoes* has got an expeditious rising, but let's see what we are talking about. The original shoe from which derives the sneaker, as we know, comes from the shoe made of canvas used during Victorian age to walk on the sand of the several Britannic colonies. Any use of that kind of shoes was dedicated to explorers and militaries. An interesting fact stand up to the evolution made by the English company Liverpool Rubber in 1830s that has transformed the sand-shoe in something more similar to the current *sneaker*. Around the 1860s, a croquet shoe was created that had a rubber outsole with a canvas upper fastened with cotton laces. Sand shoes were different than the croquet shoe as they had a T-strap upper construction fastened with a metal buckle. So as easier but comfortable shoes, "sandies" became the traditional English school sandals (Wagner 1999, [www.fashion-history.lovetoknow.com](http://www.fashion-history.lovetoknow.com)). The bridge moment for the evolution of the shoe is the *Plimsoll*. The term *Plimsoll* was adopted by the shoe industry because the point where the canvas upper and vulcanized rubber outsole bonded together looked similar to a ship's *Plimsoll* line. This line aesthetically made the shoe look more expensive than previous models and became adopted by all social classes for a variety of athletic activities<sup>10</sup>. Actually we know that one of the most famous *Plimsolls* was the one produced by Dunlop Green Flash and worn by Fred Perry when won three Wimbledon titles (Heard 2003, pp.290-291). The evolution that started in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, allowed people to enhance their athletic skills and provided an aesthetic opportunity for casual shoe design. With the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the shoe assumed new modifies and was added of a toe box protect the big toenail from bumps. Another adjustment was that provided abrasion resistance in sports as tennis where the forefoot was dragged to provide balance. Finally functional outsole patterns were created to add traction. Sneakers were becoming

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.encyclopedia.com/fashion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sneakers>

military shoes and even were recommended by school for students during gym classes not only in Britain but also in U.S. The big “jump” for the sneakers were 1900 Paris Olympics and the Antarctic expedition were all this “customized” shoes were worn for their efficiency and comfort (Kippen 2004)<sup>11</sup>. The brand and the model that maybe could describe better the old “sandies” could be the old Chuck Taylor’s shoes, called All Stars too or Converse. The original canvas shoes consisting in minimally reinforced canvas upper lasted to a rubber sole were markets leaders since 1908, when Converse was born. The brand was one of the most important in U.S. when started mass production of machine stitched athletic shoes. The traditional design maintained by *Chuckies*, as the shoes were called, made those shoes the premier athletic shoes. The tactical choice to position them as basketball shoes allowed the predominance of the brand on the market. Converse became the Olympic basketball team brand in 1936 and was chosen as the official athletic shoes of twenty different U.S. Olympic teams in 1972 (Barff & Austen, 1993). But there weren’t only *Chuckies*; during 20th century there were several brands, many technical innovations and diversification about type and design of the product. Actually we know for sure is that after that canvas upper and vulcanized rubber outsole there was, and there still is a long evolution of the shoe. Research and development of the product has allowed people to enhance their athletic skills and provided an esthetical transformation until the shoe as we know as casual or fashion one, as we have seen. Technically, the sneaker evolved in functional outsole patterns created to add traction, facilitate player movements and cushion the jump kinetic. Anyway, the word sneaker in fact was coined in U.S.A. as a marketing term; actually, many sources reference the advertising agent Henry Nelson McKinley that used sneaker term because the rubber outsole allowed the shoes to be quiet or “sneaky”(Bellis 2004). Moreover, during this evolution era we can find several particular names created to indicate *sneaker*. Some are based on function, while others are based on material, people and even street slang. A few of the names include: Bobos, Bumper Boots, Chuck's (from Converse’s Chuck Taylor), Creepers, Daps, Felonies, Fish Heads, Go Fasters, Grips, Gym Shoes, Gymmers,

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<sup>11</sup> <https://fashion-history.lovetoknow.com/fashion-accessories/sneakers>

Joggers, Jumps, Kicks, Outing Shoes, Pumps, Runners, Sabogs, Skiffs, Sneaks, Tackies, Tennies, Trainers, and Treads (Perrin 2004).<sup>12</sup>

### 2.2.1 Shoe Developments

The creation of the perfect athletic shoe with its vulcanized rubber outsole is the product of process that is still evolving. The development and production goes from U.S. to U.K. with a contamination know-how approach that has permitted to innovate in a very fast period of time. From Goodyear modern rubber waterproof and essential usefulness by 1839 passing through McKay that can be defined the first shoes product by assembly line. The real revolution in the machinery development for shoe production happens in 1883 by Jan Matzeliger who developed a shoe lasting machine that could attach an outsole to an upper in one minute (Tenner 2000, p. 37). The lasting machine revolutionized the shoe making process as it could make hundreds of pairs of shoes a day and enabled the mass production of affordable shoes<sup>13</sup>. As we will see, the introduction of athletic shoes on western markets it has depended by the acquisition and totally adoption of *know-how* in the production of sneakers by rubber companies, as they were the major producers of vulcanized rubber. Of course, through the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was an evolution on the use of rubber and the textile used for upper. Different brands founded R&D departments just following the evolution of the market and the different necessities of the users. Actually athletic shoes technical development started with the fitness boom, every part of the shoes were transformed and evolved following the necessities of an athletic market. As Barff and Austen said in 1993, the take-off passed through the health and fitness revolution, when millions of American started

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.encyclopedia.com/fashion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sneakers>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.encyclopedia.com/fashion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sneakers>

participating in sports such as jogging and aerobics. As a result, athletic footwear producers designed and marketed new sneakers for the purpose of enhancing performance while reducing the risk of injury: the athletic footwear industry reinvented itself as one catering to a new leisure society. So Americans, as the rest of the world, increasingly found the comfort of athletic shoes appealing and their look fashionable (Donaghu and Barff, 1990; Rikert and Christensen, 1984, Barff & Austen, 1993).

### 2.3 Industry Outlook

The athletic footwear industry can be analysed as one of the most dynamic. After sportswear market and consequently athletic shoes achievement and uprising after 1950, U.S. tripled production and sales of athletic footwear (Willigan, 1992). Brands, with the market, needs more space and new places where to produce more and more. American brands spatial needs moved the production from West to East. One of the first to move in Asia was Nike Inc. that in 1989 had about 2% of their shoes made by Chinese-based subcontractors; in 1993, almost a quarter of their shoes will come from Chinese factories. But there was not only China as production destination, South and East-Asia including Taiwan and Vietnam became one of the most interesting sites of production for the footwear market (Barff & Austen, 1993). But in the meanwhile, most of the most important American brands still maintain the national plants where continues to produce and furthermore, tries to expand with other national plants. Another way firms behave is the global assembly line where firms use foreign sources to manufacture components for final assembly in the U.S. Nevertheless, both companies presently pride themselves on being U.S. companies and the bulk of their shoes are mass produced in the United States (Barff & Austen, 1993). The interesting fact is the re-organization of the lead line of production; many footwear producers changed their agreements with their

subcontractors and the internal organization of the factory. The sector is the protagonist of a constant evolution, result of factory improvements, market fluctuation and technological progress (Donaghu and Barff, 1990). The interesting fact about this industry is the theorization of processes operating at various geographic scales, from the firm to the region, nation and eventually to supranational entities. The globalization and the research about cost cuttings in the production has concentrated the footwear market in North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, South America, and the Middle-East and Africa. In terms of revenue, North America led the market in 2016 holding 35.6% of the overall market. However, Asia-Pacific led in terms of volume accounting for 40.5% of the market in the same year<sup>14</sup>. With globalization, the dichotomy between U.S. and U.K. got out of date and sportswear production spread around the world. The current footwear market is divided into North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, South America, and the Middle-East and Africa. In terms of revenue, North America led the market in 2016 holding 35.6% of the overall market. However, Asia-Pacific led in terms of volume accounting for 40.5% of the market in the same year<sup>15</sup>. In fact we know that making global comparison revenue for the leading economies in the last years we find that U.S., China, Brazil, Japan and Russia are in the top-5 with market volume for revenues. U.S. defeats China with US\$91,178 million of generated revenues, remaining the best market for footwear<sup>16</sup>.

New pressures forced corporations to restructure and seek cheaper sites of production in the periphery. Improvements in transportation and communication, the evolution of a large supply of disposable labour in developing nations, and the increasing subdivision of modern labour processes facilitated this dispersal, and was partially caused by heightened competition between producers in traditional core countries and those in newly industrializing countries in the periphery (Barff & Austen, 1993).

Following Grand View Research the global athletic footwear market size was valued at USD 64.30 billion in 2017, and, for Transparency Market Research is expected to be worth US\$278.86 billions by 2025. The market is expected to expand at a CAGR of

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.transparencymarketresearch.com/footwear-market.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.transparencymarketresearch.com/footwear-market.html>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.statista.com/>

slightly over 5.0% from 2018 to 2025<sup>17</sup>. In the area of this research we use a market classification on the basis of material of production, rubber, plastic and others. Focusing on rubber, we know by Transparency that in the last 5 years rubber held the dominant 24.2% revenue share and 25.6% volume share in the footwear market.

This aspect is on account of that rubber is the most material used in every type of shoe ranging from athletic to non-athletic. As we have seen in the short explanation about the birth of the sneaker, innovation always has been part of footwear industry. An interesting characteristic of this production is the capacity to innovate shoe technologies. The sole, the upper and every single part of the shoe can be modified and customized in order to accomplish the audience. Every different brand is characterized by a specific technology involving the type, the used material, the form and the size. Some examples are adidas AW that has innovated a Forged Mesh, a single layer shoes upper with a ribbed pattern created using ARAMIS motion capture technology for determining the strain exerted on the foot. The technology helps provide maximum flexibility and adequate support along the ankle to ensure free foot movement. Other technologies patented by adidas AW include Adaptive Traxion, Boost, Bounce, Climachill, Promeknit, and Stableframe

In the following chapters of this work we will have more excuses to talk about that.

We need to go ahead with the different classification in the market analysis, in order to complete the whole vision of the market. Focusing on the category segmentation, we can see that the training footwear market is divided in shoes specifically thought for aerobic, running, walking, trekking & hiking and generic sports. From Grand View Research analysis we consider that the sports shoes segment has been further reviewed on the basis of prominent sports in each of the regions. For instance, the sports shoe market in the U.S. encompasses baseball, basketball, American football, ice hockey, tennis, and golf. In the U.S., the baseball shoe sub-segment contributed to more than 35% of the overall volume in 2017 on account of high popularity of baseball in the country<sup>18</sup>. The running shoes sector can be divided in training shoes, advanced running,

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/athletic-footwear-market>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/athletic-footwear-market>

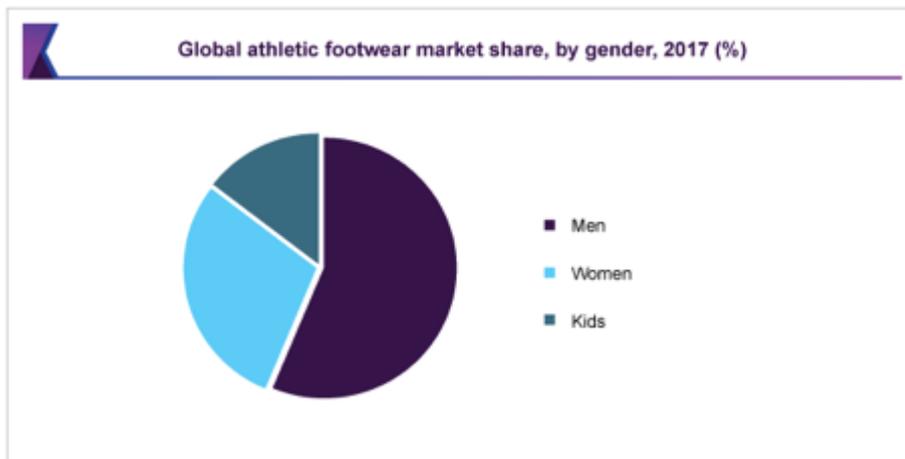
road running, trail running, track running, and racing. This specific sector can be considered a giant of the sportswear market. That fact should be attributed to the user aptitude to practice running training, choosing where, when and how to run as his or her availability. Another interesting fact to be attached is the accessibility of the market to offer shoes with a wide range of prices from affordable athletic shoes that anyone could buy to highly luxurious pieces that user can buy as limited editions.

Talking about trekking and hiking shoe segment, we analyse an innovative area of the market: technological advancements ensures more comfort and flexibility for hikers' feet. The research and development department are working relentlessly just to innovate what once a time was just one more discipline where to use any type of athletic shoes. Studying and technical choice of the perfect shoes for the discipline practiced is becoming rule. Who practices a specific athletic discipline, from climbing to hiking and any other sport, needs a different pair of shoes. This is a technical choice but of course a commercial strategy too. Marketing, in this way makes a difference with specific separated approaches for every kind of discipline and this makes increasing sales and brand positioning.

## 2.4 The Audience

If we have a look to the graphic below (tab. 2), men's footwear occupies more than half of the market in terms of revenue in 2017. Thanks to a marketing action to keep the women's attention, women's footwear is expected to growth until 2025, catching up day-by-day more popularity in every sport, aka in every type of shoes. As Grand Review Research says, the proportion of women athletes representing their respective nations at major sporting events is significant as compared to developing and underdeveloped

countries. In addition, overall level of awareness about fitness among women is considerably high in advanced countries as compared to developing countries. In this case, governments are pushing to engage much more women to participate and practice actively different sports. This is likely to boost the sales of women's athletic footwear considerably in emerging markets.



Tab 2: sources from Grand View Research

If we have a look to the growing demand of athletic shoes we have to consider not only the new fashion trends about sportswear but also the specific increasing of the practice of sporting activities whereas we can see that, following a research made by Young People and Sport in England 2002, "there is a strong increase in competitive sport with a quartes of all school children taking part in competitions with other local clubs, from a 19% in 1994 to 25% in 2002. Another interesting data is that there was a significant increase of 30% of new rounders and 21% of new tennis players in 2002. Always focusing on children from primary and secondary school there is a wider variety of sports performed out of school hours, an average of 11.2 in 2002<sup>19</sup>. So we can assert that the increasing demand of training shoes depend also from the increasing participation in sporting activities and changing lifestyle, as well as among non-sport-persons buying choice. For this examination we can observe a remarkable expansion of product portfolio

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/increase-sports-participation>

of manufacturers in order to gain any competitive advantage on this market<sup>20</sup>.

On the other hand, focusing on the consumption by countries we have to dwell on China, first country in the world for athletic footwear consumption. In 2017 China was the world's leading consumer of footwear, with around 2.3 billion pairs of shoes bought. Footwear is a life necessity on par with housing, food, water, and other clothing; as such it is of little surprise that China tops the list of footwear consumers as it had the highest number of inhabitants on the planet as of 2018. In fact, the leading five countries in terms of footwear consumption mirrored the most populated countries worldwide (statista.com). Following World Footwear Yearbook, the second largest consumer of athletic footwear is India, a milestone in Asia's ascent to prominence in the world market, as main index of this predominance position of the market, the strong demographic and economic trends. In the top 5 countries largest consumers we have to consider also Pakistan, Japan and Indonesia, these Asian countries represent almost 40% of world consumption (worldfootwear.com). As the demand grows the offer need to increase. As the population was around 7 billions in 2010, today we are around 7,69 billions. And with the population, also the demand for shoes increases and we are now at 23 billions of pair of shoes produced, with an expected evaluation of the market in 2025 of 278 billions of dollars. And who is the main actor of this pick? China as the largest consumer must be considered as the main producer and the first exporter globally. In 2016 China cash 36% of the total global export value. Following, there is Vietnam with 17% as a great producer for several important brands, and its importance as producer is growing with Indonesia and Bangladesh where manufacturer is cheaper than any other country. Other interesting growing producers are Brazil and Turkey that are chosen by several brands to produce part of the selected shoes to be exported in North America and Europe. China, otherwise, is one of the richest country in the world, here are sold at all 4 billiards of shoes. But, as we have seen, the population that spend more for shoes is North America that spent 35,6% of the total market in 2016<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.transparencymarketresearch.com/footwear-market.html>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.transparencymarketresearch.com/footwear-market.html>

## 2.5 The Main Actors

As we have top 5 countries manufacturing athletic footwear, we have to mention who are the main actors of this industry evolution. There are several important brands and companies that have huge amount of volume of production and revenues. These brands have an increasing rate of innovation about the final product. Of course in big structure there are huge amounts of found for research and developments but the key element for those big firms is the globalization and the constant presence in the market (Technavio.com). According to World Footwear yearbook with a market with positive dynamics as footwear, with 23.5 billions of pairs produced, a 2% more than previous year, we have to mention who are the leaders of this market. The following brands are the most important sellers of athletic and apparel footwear in the world. Some of those that started this huge business, some of those that are famous for their logos or their technical characteristic, some of those that are evolving with the market making it different year by year.

### Nike Inc.

Nike is the largest seller of athletic footwear and apparel in the world, as the *Annual Report on form 10-k* released by Nike Inc. in 2017 says. Nike's products are sold by retail accounts; Nike owned retail stores, Internet websites and mobile applications and finally through a mix of independent distributors and licenses.

Nike Brand products are divided in nine key categories: Running, NIKE Basketball, the Jordan Brand, Football (Soccer), Men's Training, Women's Training, Action Sports,

Sportswear (lifestyle sport-inspired products) and Golf. Nike produces for men, women and kids including other athletic and recreational uses. In fact, a large percentage of the shoes are worn for casual or leisure purposes. One of the Nike's aims is to place some emphasis on innovation and high quality standards on the construction of the final product. Sportswear, Running and the Jordan Brand are the top-selling footwear categories that lead that kind of focus. Nike owns several important brands known independently from it by the consumers. As Jordan Brand, which sales and operating is reported in the Nike brand geographic operating segment, there are Hurley and Converse. In addition to the products sold by Nike Inc. to their wholesale customers and directly to consumers through their DTC operations, they also entered into license agreements that permit unaffiliated parties to manufacture and sell.

Marketing and sales are of course influenced by the relative popularity of various sports and fitness activities that could be seasonally and changeable by the popular trends. What Nike wants to achieve is to respond to trends and shifts in consumer preference by adjusting the mix of existing product offerings, developing new products, styles and categories and influencing itself sports and fitness preferences through extensive marketing. Each NIKE Brand geography operates predominantly in one industry: the design, development, marketing and selling of athletic footwear, apparel, equipment, accessories and services. For fiscal 2017, the reportable operating segments for the NIKE Brand are: North America, Western Europe, Central & Eastern Europe, Greater China, Japan and Emerging Markets. In June 2017 was approved a new company alignment designed to allow NIKE to better serve the consumer personally, at scale. As a result of this organizational realignment, beginning in fiscal 2018, the Company's reportable operating segments for the NIKE Brand were: North America; Europe, Middle East and Africa; Greater China; and Asia Pacific and Latin America. NIKE Brand Direct to Consumer operations is managed within each geographic operating segment (NIKE INC. *Annual Report on form 10-k*).

**About sales.** Focusing on Nike's number of stores we know by the 2017 report that Nike Brand and Converse are 384 in United States, while in the rest of the world we stay

about 758 stores. The total orders in 2017 were \$14.7 billion including orders from external wholesale customers and internal orders from DTC online stores and digital commerce operations. The total revenues were \$34,350 million and a gross profit of \$15,312 considering that the cash flows were growing faster than net income.

**About production.** Nike Inc. is supplied by approximately 127 footwear factories located in 15 countries. Virtually, independent contract manufacturers who often operate multiple factories manufacture all of Nike's footwear outside of U.S. For fiscal 2017, contract factories in Vietnam, China and Indonesia manufactured approximately 46%, 27% and 21% of total NIKE Brand footwear respectively. In addition there are manufacturing agreements in Argentina, Brazil, India, Mexico and Italy too. About the raw materials used in the footwear products, Nike Inc. declares that are natural and synthetic rubber, plastic compounds, foam cushioning materials, natural and synthetic leather, nylon, polyester and canvas as well as polyurethane films used to make NIKE Air-Sole cushioning components. During fiscal 2017, Air Manufacturing Innovation, with facilities near Beaverton, Oregon and in St. Charles, Missouri, as well as independent contractors in China and Vietnam, were our suppliers of the Air-Sole cushioning components used in footwear (NIKE, INC. *Annual Report on form 10-k*).

#### adidas AW

Following its direct competitor, Adidas has a different corporate history from Nike Inc. but its aims and goals don't differ so much from the firm from Portland.

Adidas, born in Germany in 1949 is a brand corporate that works in the whole world with the aim at becoming "the best sports brand in the world, by designing, building and selling the best products in the world, with the best service and experience and in a sustainable way" (Adidas AW Annual Report 2018). Adidas portfolio is structured and structured following the necessities of the market. After the completion of the sale of the TaylorMade, Adams Golf and Ashworth brands as well as CCM Hockey business in 2017,

the firm is now operating with a narrowed focus on the core strength areas of athletic footwear and apparel. This will allow Adidas to reduce complexity and pursue the target consumer more aggressively with both the Adidas and the Reebok brand. In fact Adidas owns different brands, including Salomon, Reebok and Five Ten. Its work tries to implement the brand positioning independently from the big brand owner. The product portfolio includes athletic shoes, any kind of athletic garment and leisure apparel. The athletic line production is dedicated to several sport as taekwondo, athletic, football, running, tennis, basketball, golf, hockey, cricket, lacrosse, rugby, skateboarding, karate, judo, fencing and driving. The consumer grid comprises six key quadrants: Male Athlete, Female Athlete, Young Creator, Streetwear Hound, Amplifier, and Value Consumer.

Following *Adidas AW Annual Report 2018* we achieve that one of the most important markets for the firms United States, representing approximately 40% of total share. From a geographical perspective U.S. represents the biggest opportunity for the brand, given its relatively small market share compared to other regions. As a consequence of heavy investment strategy on U.S., the territory saw a strong-double-digit top-line growth despite a challenging and promotional environment. The performance goal for 2020 is to reach \$5 billion in revenues for that market. Company's strategic choices consist on Speed, Cities and Open Source values that are expressed in the footwear franchises. That business model represents at least 30% of the brand's footwear business by 2020. In 2018, key Adidas brand footwear franchises included UltraBOOST, PureBOOST, Alpha- bounce, Predator, and NMD.

With those very ambitious goals, marketing effectiveness and operating efficiency evolve and are aimed at significantly increase and improve for positive results. Digital, advertising, point-of-sale and grassroots activations will decrease the ratio of marketing investments spent on promotion partnerships.

**About sales.** During 2018 the sales amount to €21.915 billion, with a gross margin increasing of 1.4 points to 51.8% (*Adidas AW Annual Report 2018*). Including orders coming from the app and the online service. The segmentation by net sales highlight the radical European identity of the brand, as in Europe the brand has had a great

performance with 5.885 euro of net sales, while in Asia it had 7.141 euro and in U.S 4.689 euro. An interesting aim of Adidas is the strength conviction about too be never out of stock and be so fast in the delivering of the articles to be recognized as speed-enables product brand. With more than 2.300 own retail stores, more than 14.000 mono-branded franchise and more than 150.000 wholesale doors, Adidas AW have a network of consumer touch-points including moreover the e-commerce channel, the biggest store available to consumers in over 40 countries.

**About production.** Global Operation working on innovation of materials and manufacturing capabilities, including innovative distribution capabilities, could maintain the speed quality and a good worldwide reputation. To keep the production costs competitive, Adidas outsource almost 100% of production to independent manufacturing partners Adidas only operates two own production sites – one in the USA and one in Germany). In 2018, Adidas changed the definition of independent manufacturing partners from individual manufacturing facilities to supplier group level. Based on this new definition, the firm worked with 130 independent manufacturing partners in 2018 that were producing in 289 manufacturing facilities (Adidas AW Annual Report). Of their independent manufacturing partners, 71% are located in Asia, 18% in the Americas, 6% in Africa and 5% in Europe. Otherwise we can say that Vietnam is the largest sourcing country with 42% of the total volume of production, followed by Indonesia and China (Adidas AW Annual Report 2018).

Discussing which is the most important brand for footwear in the last ten years we are about to confirm the straightness of Nike Inc. over the other 4 important firms for footwear and athletic garments (see tab. 3). With annual footwear sales of \$22.3 billion, Nike is still number 1 in the global sneakers market, as we have already said in Nike Inc. paragraph and quoting what data journalist Felix Richte said. An interesting fact about that brand is that having started as an enterprise licensing Japanese running shoes for the American market, Nike quickly developed a name of its own in the 1970s when some of the company's most iconic sneakers were introduced.

Interestingly some of the models released in the 1970s are still among Nike’s most popular shoes today. The sneaker market is probably unique in the way it's constantly moving between innovation and *nostalgia*, with shoes designed in the 1970s and 1980s still selling equally well or in many cases better than shoes featuring state of the art technology. This characteristic is maintained in every brand of footwear market, as we will see with the next brands we will talk about (statista.com).



tab. 3: source from statista.com

### Asics

As we are completing a global vision of the contemporary situation of the markets, we have to mention Asics. The history of Asics is part of the history of the running shoes and partially, part of the history of other important brand as Nike Inc. Actually we know that all the Nike business started with Philip Knight’s agreement in order to export Tigers in U.S. Tigers shoes we are talking about are famous Onitsuka Tiger, nowadays branch of Asics business, same firm, same culture, different positioning in the market. In fact, after the worldwide success of Onitsuka, in 1977 the company chose Asics as main brand umbrella, owning Onitsuka shoes. The strategy had the aim at giving a more technical

and renewed aspect to the shoe. As first Japanese athletic shoes, Asics was born as basketball professional shoes. Nowadays, Asics Group owning three similar brands that are Asics, AsicsTiger and Onitsuka Tiger, produce running shoes and it specializes in several sports. From athletics to volleyball, from wrestling shoes to tennis, Asics it can be seen as the perfect brand for professionals and technicians of the sportswear. Of course, with Onitsuka Tiger there is a wide production of apparel shoes, so there is too differentiation of the offer.

**About sales.** Asics is around of 386,662 yen of net sales and the gross profit is around 180,666 yen, considering the two western giants that have the partial duopoly of the market. In fact, together the priorities of the Japanese company are to focus on the performance running market in the U.S. where the enter costs are so high because of the other important local firms. The other important objective is to accelerate growth in the Chinese market, following the increasing running involvement of Chinese population. Other important changes coming from Asics Annual Report 2018, are the incentives to convert the apparel business into profitability growing business and digitalize much more process by utilizing all consumer touch-points such as own retail, websites, e-commerce, apps and other channels. But we will have more opportunities to talk about that in chapter 3.

**About production.** Asics manufacturer are placed in great part of Asia, as in Taiwan, China, Korea, Japan and Singapore with its 8,823 employees. Interesting considerations about the firms is that any kind of test on the sole and on the shoe more generally are done in South America and North Africa. Asics, otherwise works on subsidiaries business model permitting the brand to be present almost in all the countries. With a net income of 10.2 billion of yen Asics is confirmed as the third producer and seller of athletic shoes in the world.

## Puma

When Rudolf Dassler founded Puma back in 1948, his vision was to create shoes that give athletes the speed, agility and spirit of a puma, inspiring them in competition and empowering them to win. With the mission statement FOREVER FASTER, the real values of the company maintained their valence in all these years, of course following the picks and downs of the worldwide economy. The mission statement stands also for the development and implementation of new technologies and design: fast evolution and decision-making processes; agile production pipelines allow the brand to quickly react to consumer trends and deliver relevant products to the market, as 2018 company reports says. For it, Puma aims at becoming the fastest sports brand in the world, in this way there five priorities: brand heat, competitive product range, a leading offer for women, an improved distribution quality and organizational speed. Puma products need to be “cool stuff that works” and the best sellers comprehend the running shoes HYBRID, the football boots PUMA FUTURE and PUMAONE together with Thunder, RS-0 and RS-X. In fact, always following this principle, Puma re-entry into the basketball category. As Puma started its business producing basketball professional shoes, now with Clyde Court Disrupt re-entered in the market. The report says that the strongest growths were in the Sport-style, Running and Training categories. Sales increase in the reporting currency-adjusted sales growth of 16.6% was achieved. The proportion of this segment in total sales fell slightly from 47.7% in the previous year to 47% in 2018 (Puma Annual Report 2018).

**About sales.** Puma’s net sales amount to €4,648.3 million. The most relevant sales increasing appeared in Asia/Pacific region, specifically in China where there was a double-digit growth in sales, due in part to the digitalization of the retail system. The footwear recorded a growth trend persistent for 18 quarters at the end of 2018.

**About production.** As the report says, “PUMA International Trading GmbH (PIT) with head office in PUMA’s corporate head quarters Herzogenaurach (Germany), is the Group company mainly responsible for PUMA Group Sourcing. PIT coordinates product

sourcing from independent manufacturers by sourcing products itself from the manufacturers and selling them to PUMA distribution subsidiaries or supporting PUMA distribution subsidiaries directly in the local sourcing of products via local manufacturers. Additionally, PIT manages the cooperation with PUMA's suppliers worldwide and oversees the production processes at the different sourcing sites in Hong Kong, China, Vietnam, Bangladesh, India, Portugal, South Africa, Brazil and Mexico". Puma Group Sourcing collaborates with a network of independent manufacturers worldwide maintaining six core principles of partnership: transparency, flexibility, speed, simplicity and effectiveness (Puma Annual Report 2018).

### Under Armour

The American firm was born in 1996 and is the youngest brand in footwear market top five. In the 2018 annual report, Under Armour Company says that their main core business are the development, marketing and distribution of branded performance apparel, footwear and accessories for men, women and youth (Under Armour 2018 Annual Report). The first most important product that made UA known everywhere was the technological t-shirt made to be better than any other cotton shirt; its name was prototype 0037, "the shorty". The most interesting fact about Under Armour business insights is the slowly changing of kind of products during these last years. Actually the American brand is evolving its business in the footwear market. The innovative and technological change is influencing the whole business, modifying what the market wants. The Under Armour user is asking for breathable shoes with high level of performance and good amortization. The key fact about Under Armour is user perception: a superior alternative to traditional athletic products. The footwear offering includes running, basketball, cleated, slides and performance training, sport-style and outdoor footwear (Under Armour 2018 Annual Report). The innovative technologies include UA HOVR, Anafoam, UA Clutch Fit and Charged Cushioning.

**About sales.** Under Armour major sales happen in wholesale channels including national and regional sporting good chains, independent and specialty retailers, departments store chains, institutional athletic departments and leagues and teams. In the countries where there are not direct sales stores there are independent distributors and licensees to sell the products. Under Armour has four geographic segments: North America, Europe, Middle East and Africa EMEA, Asia Pacific and Latin America. Of course North America accounted in 2018 72% of the net revenues (Under Armour 2018 Annual Report). Net revenues generated from the sales in the U.S. were in average \$3.6 billion from 2016 to 2018. The total net revenues in 2018 were \$ 5,193,185 while the gross profit was \$2,34,471.

**About production.** The American firm produces and develop any part of its products by third parties and is available from limited number of sources. The fabric and other raw materials used to manufacture apparel products are sourced by contracted manufacturers from a limited number of suppliers pre-approved by the firm. In 2018, approximately 49% of the fabric used in apparel products came from 5 suppliers, from Taiwan, Malaysia, Mexico, Vietnam and Turkey.

With this short overview we have seen how is composed a huge and evolving market. Sportswear, specifically footwear market is increasing in number and in brands. Of course we could talk about New Balance, Hoka One One, Brooks, Mizuno, Altra Running, Topo Athletic and many more athletic shoes brands. Here we had an industrial overview about the most important brands for income and sales. In the next chapter we will have an overview about marketing and digital communication of most famous brands and the other, as we will have a complete vision of the market and its evolution.

For this reason we are going to go ahead with the argument of selling channels as the introduction to what is now the innovative and different way to communicate and finally to buy. The Buyer Journey is going to be modified by users and consumers and we are going to see how it is happening.

## 2.6 The Purchase Channels

We have to consider the importance of selling channels, from the independent seller to the multi brand retailer considered the best choice for a multivariate demand, and then there are big brands with their own sellers as single brand shops. But lurking over the corner there is the main reason of that outstanding market, online retailers. This channel, relatively new, is triggering the impulse buying behaviour of consumers, striking every single leverage gift from the web on the research channels of the consumer. Based on distribution channel the market has been classified into online channels, supermarkets and hypermarkets, independent retail stores, shoe stores, independent retail stores, textile retailers, and departmental stores. In 2016, online channels, independent retail stores, and supermarkets and hypermarkets collectively held more than 70% of the market in terms of revenue. The high consumer preference to make purchases through these channels accounts for their high revenue share to the overall market is remarkable<sup>22</sup>. An example of the increasing success of e-commerce channel is Zalando.com that is increasing with a 2017 revenue of 4.4 billions in euro. The growing rate between 2016 and 2017 is about 23,4 %. The worldwide revenue growing is about +45%, leading the on-line market, as Transparency says.

The footwear branch comprises every gender shoes, including all kinds of outdoor and indoors shoes made of any kind of material, from leather to plastic pasting through natural textile too. Following this classification, inclusive and involving different materials, we can observe an interesting increasing on women's footwear brands, that have increasing points of sale.

In that perspective we analyse a market in incessant transformation, what happens with web arrival and which should be the expected transformation. The analysis starts from

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.transparencymarketresearch.com/footwear-market.html>.

the pillars of sportswear, the brands that have influenced the entire sportswear and specifically the footwear. From the market analysis we need to understand the mechanisms that involve the user and the consumer, actually the same person, in the buying process. The buyer journey must be seen in a different optical, where the buyer persona is an athlete that have specific needs, and the evolution from the athlete to the fashion trend-setter that buys a pair of Nikes just to share a new post on social networks. Web beginning and relative evolution have influenced this interesting transformation.

## Chapter 3

### The Communication Strategy Transformation

#### 3.1 Introduction

As we have seen in past chapters, marketing is evolving with Internet. Consequently brands and big firms are totally changing their approach with consumers. Marketing has been for years an important core element for brands. In footwear market we have seen that marketing has been the key vehicle to success. Through marketing the athletic shoes has become a fashion item and the street-style is now a catwalk affair. But in the last decade marketing too is transforming itself and is evolving in different ways. Experiential marketing, *neuro-marketing* and consumer behaviour studies are changing the core effects of marketing and communication on brands. Brand positioning and brand awareness can be reached in different ways and in these cases. To any firm Internet is the best choice in order to reach the best result. Indeed, we are going to discover how Internet, User Generated Content and Firm Generated Content can be applicable to marketing strategies. How the web involves the consumer in a new consumer journey funnel (as we have seen in the first chapter) and how much online communities influence that perspective. Blogs and social media communities are spreading on-line involving always more

frequently much more people than ever. We know, on-line communities are an interesting aspect of the evolution use of User Generated Content, but what we don't really analyse at all is how much these communities are influencing brands.

*Can specialized blogs influence other users? Can brands directly influence users that read and are involved in blogs? How much direct is the communication between brands and users in the blog and community context?*

In this chapter we will discuss about that new online relationship and its application to the offline world. But first we need to have a complete and clear idea about what does it mean doing some marketing and communication in the footwear market. Starting with brand positioning and explaining how firms communicate with users and consumers we need to have a clear description of the marketing plan for a footwear firm.

### 3.2 Brand Positioning

The differentiation of a brand should be seen as the first step to the brand positioning in the market. As Kotler *et al.* says the branding process consists on the differentiation of the products, conferring them the power of a brand. This phenomenon happens directly in consumer's head, of course there is an objective perspective, but it always starts in the mind of the consumer. A brand and the idea of it, from a theoretical point of view is explained by the value expressed as the difference between what the consumer would pay for that brand and what he would pay for the same products without the brand (Cappellari, 2017). We can take the practical example of the consumer that choose a pair of Nike shoes instead of a pair of no brand discount shoes with

any kind of advertising just because he likes the *swoosh* and he thinks that a pair of Nikes is more reliable and more fashion than any other brand. About that, we have to focus on the effective use of the product. In footwear market, the importance of the quality and the performance of the shoe should be the core characteristic that the buyer looks at, but as we will see they are not the only. In fact, brand and its value for the user become a real added value, or better explained, the core characteristic of the product as a pair of shoes. In that way we quote Enzo Rullani that says that the lifestyle and fashion products are immaterial industrial output, that produces symbols and knowledge in association with the product, putting together specific competences [...] creative imagination and communication skills.

In fact a brand, in that case a footwear brand, need to be communicated to every individual in the target, everyone buys that product knows what is buying and why, because of the technical characteristics, because of the colours or the comfort, or finally because he or she is a loyal buyer of that footwear brand, because he or she knows very well the system of size, the technical characteristics of that model and why is the best for his or her feet.

If we talk about brand strategy we have to mention the three moments (Keller, Busacca, Ostilio, 2005). The first is the positioning definition with brand values; then, planning and making off of the marketing strategies for consumer brand awareness; finally, the development of activities to sustain brand equity.

Brand positioning strategies need a specific study about the target. Talking about footwear and lifestyle products more specifically we know that there have always been a sort of emotional grouping as sport academies, athletic groups, school sport groups divisions or more easier, street-style sport crews and group of friends or just a trend style that influence a certain group of young people. Today that grouping has new structures. First, there is a huge growing about quantity, big selling channels worldwide have a specific solution on sales; then postmodern societies, characterized by small groups of people that acquire the

value of consumption as social aggregation factor, that way, brand communities are growing quickly. At last, web and specifically social networks create new opportunities for communities to aggregate and interact, instead of geographical and cultural difficulties (Chiarvesio, Di Maia, 2008). That new idea of community is expressed online between people that find the perfect match of friendly discussion square and information gathering. In fact that online communities could be a good opportunity to exchange information, details and different perspectives just to enrich their knowledge or finally, to make a buying decision. In fact, we can consider this kind of online self-targeting, when a community grows all around a brand or a product, as an expression of brand engagement. That is triggered when the customer shows willingness to be involved with a brand and gather information about the brand, he or she talks about that an exhibit its use to others (Keller, 2001). In that way, the main input for this behaviour is the involvement. This psychological construct occurs during a buyer's decision-making process, referring to the perceived relevance of an object, based on the consumer's needs, values and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985).

### 3.3 Communication Processes

Considering the marketing mix we need to focus on promotion part. A firm can spend large sums on advertising, sales promotion, or other forms of marketing communication, but it stands little chance of success if it is a poor quality product [...] or it does not have adequate distribution to consumers. In this case, if the product is a shoe that instead to improve the running performance, makes more difficulties to the athletic action, the product should be banned

from the market directly by the unsatisfied users, in this case the marketing strategy can change the destination of the product or modify its worst characteristics for the market. The marketing strategy must be cohesive with the promotional part and for that reason many companies also recognize the need to integrate their various marketing communication efforts, such as media advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, Internet marketing, social media, events sponsorships and public relations to achieve more effective marketing communications (Belch and Belch, 2014). So, the buyer is involved in a real funnel where the communication is essential to convey to the values and the advantages deriving from buy that brand and developing a real relationship expressed by the connection with the firms and based on trust, transparency, engagement and authenticity (Belch and Belch, 2014). In this optic the evolution in communication channels has completely modified the relationship between user and firm, changing balances and budget equilibrium that marketers have to consider. Online world is today the most pervasive tool to communicate with users and consumers. Considering this changes we have to mention and explain how the communication channels are divided in the three main pillars for marketing. Paid, Earned and Owned are the three different touch-points of communication control by the firm. Owned is the media channel that the firm totally controls and have all the functions. Owned media is the guarantee of the brand and consists mainly in mono-brand shops, the web page, some special events organized by the marketing and communication team and the packaging. Owned media channel have to be part and parcel of the firm that have to control every part of the process involved in. Paid media is what we know as the blank sheet bought by the firm in a newspaper to do some advertising. This example helps to explain how a firm can use the paid media channels to do some advertising and communication just paying. An example of these touch-points is advertising, product placement, sponsorships and independent billboards. But now the real most interesting touch-point for

us is the evolution of Earned media. When the firm has done some events for the fidelity clients and those events has been promoted by advertising on a newspaper (owned plus earned media), here Earned media has a relevant role in the communication process. When people read about this event and decide to participate there is a social and communicative action that involve user and firm. Earned media are every kind of interaction by the user about the brand in every accessible channel as social media, blogs, forums and the word of mouth. In fact, what we can focus on is the pervasiveness of social media that has transformed traditional word of mouth into viral *word of mouse*: messages that fly around Facebook, Twitter, YouTube at the speed of send (Belch and Belch, 2014). For those reasons, before any action on the communication plan, we have to consider who is the receiver of the message. As we have seen, to respond to the media fragmentation of these last 20 years, there was an increasing spending of communication budgets on Internet as digital ad spending and is expected to grow up to 45% by 2020 (Belch and Belch, 2014). Meanwhile printed advertising is expected to decline by 2% annually. The transformation starts from mass media marketing to micromarketing, ultra segmented and targeted. Most marketers understand the value to send a specific message to a very narrow group of users in a very focused channel. Moreover many new generation users, *millenials* and *z-generation* are very sceptical about traditional advertising and prefer to acquire and receive information about a brand or about a product from their personal researches. For this reason, many firms are evaluating their positioning in the market and considering the changes on trends for *millenials* and the other categories. About positioning and what users perceive about the brand we have to mention the brand identity value as the combination of many factors as name, logo design, performance, packaging and symbols of the product as well as the image or type of associations that come to mind when consumers think about a brand. Thinking about Puma, we can focus on the logo, the Puma jumping in

the air, the symbolic name as Puma and the old school design of the products. The packaging is one of the most characterizing aspects of the footwear market. Any kind of athletic shoes need a box; any different brand is characterized by different coloured boxes: Puma one is green and silver, Nike one is orange from the first pair of shoes, while Adidas is bright blue with white stripes as the logo and many others brands with the relative characteristic box. Brand identity express values, awareness, knowledge and image perceived by the consumer about the brand. These touch-points are very strongly used in integrated marketing communications activities including advertising, entertainment events, websites, social media, direct email, brochures, catalogues and any other tool to communicate. Finally brand identity must be perceived in the communities too. Following a recent research made by Spotify, we know that 62% of generation z and *millenials* believe brands have the power to create communities based on common interests and passions<sup>23</sup>. In that way, we can understand why online and offline communities love to talk about the products. Their aim is to discuss about some products, to list its characteristics, its pros and cons and find additional information about that. Otherwise consumers today demand more than just product or service quality or performance as many view brands as a form of self-expression. So, to sum up, we recognize in a marketing plan a more specific promotional plan where marketers decide to focus on advertising, direct marketing, digital, sales promotion, publicity or personal selling or to choose all of them or to concentrate more forces in one instead to other. In this perspective the marketer make every decision about the mix considering always the target and the segmentation planned for. About targeting we know that many companies have developed extensive databases containing customer names; mail and e-mail addresses; geographic, demographic and psychographic profiles; purchase patterns, media preferences, credit and other financial information; and other

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<sup>23</sup> Spotify trend survey among 500 U.S. respondents 15-37, February 2019

relevant customer characteristics. This information is acquired from direct marketing methods such as newsletters, telemarketing and the access to the web sites. These databases are an integral part of companies' customer relationship management programs, which involve the systematic tracking of customer preferences and behaviours and modifying a product or service to meet individual needs and wants.

### 3.4 The Digital Marketing

#### 3.4.1 Use of Internet and mobile applications

As we have seen before, Internet can be considered the *magical box* of marketers. If a brand needs to assert itself in the market, first need to be mentioned in the web. It is not a gold rule but it is turning into a habit. As the numbers of the worldwide internet users are growing day by day and mobile access is getting much more diffuse than the pc's access we can consider Internet access as the most comfortable and easy way to communicate with almost any kind of target. It is not an age question, 4.0 users could be elders too; digitalization is a cultural and demographic fact. As We Are Social data says, number of Internet users grows: there are 11 new users every second, which results in that impressive total of one million new users each day (Digital 2018 Report). The time spent using internet mobile devices as a percentage of total daily internet time is about 16% only between 2017 and 2018 with an amount of 6 hours and 42 minutes online spent on internet each day (Digital 2018 Report). As well, with that kind of evolutions, all marketers are making

Internet part of overall business strategy. About sportswear brands, we know that any brand, worldwide, has its own websites (this could be predictable) and, as we have seen there are several mobile initiatives that involve users into the brand world: almost any footwear brand has one of these. The digital tool is made for customers and curious who are used to practice sports, trainings and competitions. It is not a professional way to get informed, but is a way to reach the customers directly to their interests and to create a real customer experience. If a consumer loves to run and need a "trainer" can download an app released by Nike, (of course there are more applications not branded) and start to run with a suggestions and tips tool. Actually we know that the most important sportswear and athletic footwear brands have this kind of digital marketing tool. Nike was one of the first that in 2006 released Nike+ application with Apple with the aim at monitoring running performance by the use of a digital device to add to the shoe. Then, adidas, ASICS, Puma, Under Armour and more have developed several tools to engage runners and athletes. Of course branded applications were developed also just for shopping, but the innovation for the performance applications is a newness in order to achieve the loyalty and recognition of the consumer, moreover his or her richness of data by the use of it.

But mobile application and devices spreading need to be explained firstly by the use of Internet. Actually any brand permits training app to observe consumer behaviour since the app is downloaded. Another study done by Brooks, a minor running shoe brand, reported that 24% of runners use a fitness tracker<sup>24</sup>. We are talking about more than 10 billion interactions a year and the occasion to improve a brand experience for the consumer. And these interactions permit brands to have a look to the several workouts and users information about training and sport behaviours. The occasion for the marketer

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<sup>24</sup> Wasserman T., Why Sports Apparel Brands Are Becoming Tech Companies, January 3, 2017, Forbes, [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com)

is explicit: it's all about making the experience personal, enjoying the application and sharing the results, but *where*? Of course the sharing happens on social media.

### 3.4.2 The Social Media Rising

Internet can be seen as a multi-faced communication tool. First it is an advertising medium: we know that paying to run displays ads on websites of other companies is a good way to promote a product on the web and to have access to different segmentations of the market. Moreover there are different Internet search engines as Google principally, that can place your ads and search results in the first place only by pay. This kind of paid search is one of the favourites by anyone wants to make some advertising with a short investment and a huge visibility. Key words and special payoffs are the best in order to be seen firstly by the user. In addition advertising on the web is so scattered that marketers prefer to use it also for sale offer promotions such contests, coupons and any other sales incentive to promote products. Internet is the spreading complete element for promotional mix. Important brands, as less important, need visibility on the web and use several ways to communicate with the consumers. In this case, Internet is the perfect channel to improve the brand awareness with different targets. Following Belch and Belch, (2010), we are into the second phase of the Internet revolution where, in fact, the focus is on collaboration and sharing among Internet users. The most massive phenomenon of this revolution is social media, which is the best interaction model in the web. Social media are used, as we have seen in the first chapter, to create, to share, and to exchange content such as information, insights,

experiences, perspectives, and even media themselves (Belch and Belch 2014). Actually, usage of social media among teens and young adults (18 to 29) is particularly high with 90% of this age group using social networks sites<sup>25</sup>. For Americans Facebook remains the first social network with 68% of adults using it on a daily basis. Together with Facebook there are Twitter, Instagram and YouTube that is a social video sharing platform but that has got all the social media characteristics of participation between users and the platform. Of course the access to social network by mobile is spreading very quickly and is spreading the mobile marketing concept. This is a promotional activity designed for delivery to cell phones, smartphones, tablets and other handled devices including applications, messaging, commerce and customer relationship management (Belch and Belch, 2014). Actually in 2018 there is an average spending of \$61 billion and to increase from 10% only for U.S. media. The specialty of mobile marketing is the direct delivering of the message to a specific segmented target. Timing and positioning are essential indexes for communication process. In this area, one of the most interesting sectors for its evolutions and developments is the mobile shopping. The spreading of mobile shopping apps that simplify in any way the purchase process is changing the shopping experience. Marketers develop new methods, tools and applications that involve the consumer to the shopping experience via mobile, an example are coupons, QR codes for landing pages, barcode applications and any kind of tool to inform, compare, find and directly buy the product. In this case we have to mention a very interesting way to take advantage of mobile applications. Nike+ run application is a tool for runners that want to monitor their performance, of course using Nike shoes. The Nike app allows the performer to be part of training, with personal digital coach, some challenges and the opportunity to share the performance results on the social media channels. In

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<sup>25</sup> Smith A., Anderson M., Social Media Use in 2018, Power Research Center, <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>

this way, the user lives a running experience with comfort and the feeling to be trained by someone in the correct way. Of course there is a diversification of the offer and the communication based on the typology of the good, but talking about normal and superior goods (about footwear we can consider both the classification about the product) we can say that the offer needs high levels of communication because of the impressive market competition and the high level of typology of the good. So the creativity must grow. Marketers are finding a number of different creative ways to connect with consumers through their mobile devices by developing their own brand-specific applications as well as games, videos and ads (Belch and Belch 2014). An example could be adidas Yeezy Boost 350 V2 triple White that has been the biggest digital release for the German brand. In fact after collaboration with the singer and influencer Kanye West, adidas has seen its largest digital drop for an adidas Originals model of shoes. With the aspiration to democratize the Yeezy brand while preserving the Yeezy hype, the brand has released this new model. The launch has worked because of the influence and the large contribute of the singer and have significantly contributed to driving e-commerce traffic by creating millions of visits on adidas.com (adidas Annual Report 2018).

The capability to gather the interaction of the user by social media enables the marketer to collect personal information about the customer and prospects and to adjust consequently their offers, some times in real time. Under Armour has developed, for example the largest digital fitness community in the world. Under Armour Connected Fitness has got 200 million registered users worldwide. This marketing and product strategy has allowed the brand to gain direct relationship with hundreds of millions of people on all seven continents and amassed a lot of insightful data<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> David Trites, Under Armour Transforms into World's Largest Digital Fitness Brand, 2017, [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com)

Of course with geo-localization and web browsing history brands can measure how consumers appreciate a certain campaign and if not they can try to understand why. There is a number of metrics that can generate that kind of useful information and can facilitate that adaptation process. Of course, brands understand the importance of web for communication and many are increasing the role of various forms of digital and social media play in their IMC programs. The brand campaigns can integrate websites, social media and mobile marketing with other aspects of the IMC program such as media advertising (Belch and Belch, 2014). An example of a success case of digital communication strategy is adidas that since 2014 has started an expansion plan that has changed the overall footwear market. With the aim at expanding its audience, enable the customer to express any preference, reclamation and suggestion in a website always more available to interactions. In that website it is possible to customize adidas products, make different configurations and interactions in the digital newsrooms. The activation plan works also because of the several social initiatives with hashtags as for example *#allin*, released for the 2018 World Cup and that was mentioned 917.000 times on line (Zouzhi M., 2015). Together with social media campaign for German World Cup, adidas released different online campaigns, one of the most important for the sustainability in order to save more plastic as possible with the joint-venture with Parley and another important campaign against cyber bullying and haters where the hashtag *#therewillbehaters* has become a trend motive also in YouTube because of the release of several online video campaigns.

As we have seen, big brands have changed their minds about communication and budgets. Now, we know that adidas spent around 2 billions euros in 2017 for digital communication strategy and the result was a huge escalation in the footwear market that has permitted to achieve international goals that years ago were impossible to imagine for a European competitor of U.S. huge firms.

## 3.5 Target Audience

### 3.5.1. The Who

As we have seen also in chapter 2, footwear and sportswear market is an expansion business area, with a target audience that could reserve some interesting surprises. Big and medium brands can have several different targets and goals but we can consider generally the target audience of the market as a unique entire one. Footwear brands target customers who follow an active lifestyle, if they are active and trained people that need some sportive garment to improve their performance, they are the most loyal customers. They are the kind of persons that usually look for good products that have the performance required to support them. So we can focus generally on athletes that practice different sports, from soccer to running or gym and fitness, and more specific sports. More specifically, these are kind of consumers that train between 5 and 10 hours per week, some could be professional athletes that perceive a salary for their athletic performance, but the majority are serious amateurs that compete in their sports. Then we have people who use athletic shoes to work or in any way for full day. These are convenience and quality choice that need a very comfort shoes to work all day. Then, at last, there are the *fashionistas* that buy trainers and some specific line of athletic shoes just for fashion and want to appear day by day up to date with fashion system (as trainers and athletic footwear is a real trend for every occasion in this fashion trends period). But if we talk generally about Nike or New Balance customer, we know that every brand has got a segment of specific loyal customer that prefer a brand instead

another. As Hudson et al. (2012) say, "The brand loyalty is a kind of consumer behaviour that involves psychology, rational behaviour and just feeling about a brand, a logo or a personal history involved with the brand." This aspect resumes a real relationship growing between consumer and brand. In that way authors continue "people are involved in a connection with brands so as to benefit from the meanings they add into their lives. Some of those meanings are functional and utilitarian; others are more psychological and emotional. In this way we can say that all of those are purposive and ego-centred, and therefore of great significance to the persons engaging them". This kind of real engagement includes affective and socio-emotive attachments, behavioural ties and supportive cognitive beliefs. All of these combine to yield strength and durability over time (Hudson, Roth, Madden, 2012).

The target analysis, in this case, is referring to the influence of trainers and athletic footwear targets to the digital dimension. The question is if both the off-line and on-line dimensions have the same target audience or if the footwear buyer, the one that purchase the product in a shop, is the same reader and interlocutor of online brand website and community blogs. Actually if we go more in deep with digital marketing campaigns and the online activity of the brands we have to narrow this targeting and specify that probably, for example, an adidas' digital communication campaign, would reach male customers between 25 and 34 years old. Indeed 19% of the website visitors would be in the segment, followed by 17% between 35 and 44 years old. The male audience some years ago would be 50% while the female audience would be 39%, otherwise in these days this equilibrium has slowly changed in order to see an increasing on the female visiting audience (Zouzhi M. ,2015). Finally we can say that the targeted customers use their smartphones more than their computers or tablets. Indeed, 59% of customers use their mobile, 27% the desktop and only 14% the tablet (Zouzhi M. ,2015).

What does it mean? Brand users prefer to have the easiest access and maybe to have a frontline with the mobile application of the brands. So if the access devices are an *open source* for users we know that the usual visitor of the Puma or New Balance website is a passionate, or maybe an interested consumer that needs some additional information about a specific pair of shoes.

### 3.5.2 Buyer and User Persona

In order to explain better an online targeting with any difficulty of the case of something untouchable and so huge as the web access we can distinguish two separate buyer personas. Firstly we have to broach that we are talking about an online targeting for branded web sites and blogs, community user blogs and official online sellers blogs, our main customer base in our analysis. In one hand we have the athlete, a man or a women, as we have seen before probably more a man, who approaches to online websites to gather more information and a technical schedule about a specific pair of shoes. In this case the possibility is that the user is already a brand user, he needs to buy the next pair of performance shoes and wants a technical improvement on the product. Or in a second case, he prefers to enlarge his knowledge about a certain brand to decide between a new brand and the old he uses to buy. We know for sure that athletes and much more specifically runners are loyal buyer and once they choose a brand is very difficult to change their mind. This is probably one of the reasons of the huge growing of the eldest brands instead of the smaller and younger ones. We want to specify that in running shoes market we have different users but, in this research, we want to focus on runners and their total dedication to the research of the perfect shoes. Sometime this buyer persona

could appear obsessed by the athletic performance and this could happen for professional runners as for amateurs. The runner is a passionate buyer that, with certain social conditions, has a notable willingness to pay for a pair of good running shoes. So our first buyer persona could be into his 40s, he could be a worker who dedicates his leisure time for his hobbies, as run. He loves run and be off-line in that short time. But at the same time he loves to find interesting new tricks about running performance, trips, and gear. So our runner pass between 40 minutes to 1 hour online, consulting different footwear sellers and blogs, analysing schedules and reviews about a specific kind of shoes. On the other side we have the other buyer persona. Probably the opposite kind of the one we have talked about. Looking at stats, we are always talking about a male, who is between 20 and 36 years old and wants to be up-to-date with fashion trends. We can consider him a *fashionist* that sees athletic shoes and trainers as the perfect footwear to go outside, pass the weekend with friends and, if the job doesn't require formal outfit, also to go to job. The *fashionist* guy is probably a millennial (we can consider fashionist who perceive the social media influence, consequently we recognize a normal social media user as a millennial), hence, is very used to consult any kind of online source, starting from social media, to make a purchase decision. With him the buyer journey starts specifically on line. Social media as Instagram gives the inspiration, then the guy can consult any forum to compare different pair of shoes for esthetical characteristics and prices. In fact this buyer persona is always looking for new releases by big and niche brands too. Finally when he makes a decision, he can consider to buy directly on the brand website or on a re-seller web site, in order to find the best price and maybe some limited edition probably not available off-line.

Of course, as we have seen, both the buyer personas are active online users and consider brand websites as a reference point to make a purchase decision, but with different aims. The first buyer and user persona prefers the web, because

he needs a technical reference and the guarantee of a good product. The second one prefers online channels because of the time availability: he can buy the pair of shoes he wants by everywhere and anytime, because maybe that specific model is sold only in the other side of the world. So, undeniably online purchasing action is involving a specific population area that have temporal and geographical necessities and with this also a much more knowledge necessities. As we have said before we have chosen specifically a male audience because of the data. Just analysing Nike revenues on 2017 we know that in the Nike brand Wholesale Equivalent Revenues there is an evident difference between male and female revenues: men's are around 16.041 billions, while women are around 6.600 billions , and this proportion appears in any athletic footwear brand (Nike 2017 form 10k). Now, even if only slightly, Nike reports an increasing of 8% in 2017 women wholesale and its annual goals consider the eventuality to increase and improve women's wholesale until 2020 (Nike 2017 form 10k). So the number of female runners is increasing but yet if we have to consider the ideal buyer persona we have to mention a male runner.

### 3.6 From Brand To Community

#### 3.6.1 The Involved Consumer

We are analysing the evolution of marketing and communication. *What happens to the consumer once he is involved in the funnel and how he reacts to brands inputs?*

In that way our focus is on athletic footwear and trainers and the real community that grows with the market. The community consists on professional and amateurs runners that practice and train from 5 to 10 hours per week (of course professional ones would run much more than 10 hours per week). The loyalty of the runner, as we have seen is a main factor of the funnel and involves the consumer, the user and the runner in a system of feedbacks, pictures and video sharing, podcasts, reviews and comments that has changed the communication process in these last years.

Brand communities are part of these changes, because by managing that with a light and sustaining them with corporate level commitment companies can build customer loyalty, increase marketing efficiency, and enhance their brand equity (Moore, Hudson, Roth, & Madden, 2012). Moreover there is also enrichment for the firm because of the ambivalence relationship with the online user: he can be a valuable source of innovation with new ideas, comments and reviews. And this opportunity happens only when brand and users are linked by a strong tie of trust as well as the higher the brand trust, the more likely a consumer is willing to contributing to open innovation projects initiated by a brand (Moore et al., 2012). In that way is very important to find where, how and what is expressed in blog communities on-line, who is the writer and who puts the comments. Moreover, but probably the most important fact, how the lexicon used in blogs influence firms and users about footwear? This question will be answered in 4<sup>th</sup> chapter with the help of special tools. But let's continue with blog and communities introduction.

Marketers find themselves to have to manage brand communities and understand the types of community affiliation. The roles that community members play are very important in order to find the real functionality of blogs and on-line communities. Strategy Consultants Jump Associates have identified three basic forms of community affiliation: *pools*, *webs* and *hubs* (Moore et al., 2012). Members of *pools* are persons that have strong associations with a

shared activity or goal, or shared values, and loose associations with one another. This community affiliation is founded on shared activities, same goals and values that are the key "projects" for blogs. *Webs* affiliation consists on people that have strong one-to-one relationships with other who have similar or complementary needs. Their key are of course, personal affiliation and for these reasons webs are the strongest and most stable form of communities because the people in them are bound by a wide range of relationships (Moore et al., 2012). Finally *hubs*, those are composed by who have strong connections to a central figure and weaker associations with one another. This community affiliation needs a charismatic figure that enrolls the entire community as a reference point.

Following a research from Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science by Adjei et al. (2010), we know that effectively brand communities and blogs can become tools for influencing sales and for that reason day by day are more adopted by marketers. The study says that the quality of communication exchanged between customers in fact, reduces the level of uncertainty about the firm and its products, which relates to increased profits for the firm in terms of immediate purchase intentions, and the number of products purchased (Moore et al., 2012). In this way we follow exactly what happens in athletic footwear market and trainers where users need a constant relationship with the brand. Runners need shoes to run but the relationship that rises with that pair of shoes often becomes a sort of fundamental tool to have a good performance, a safe run and even a better day sometimes!

So, the blog dedicated to runners, the community of runners and every on-line initiative to talk about performance and gear appear as a real necessity to find more information, see different opinions and make a decision about the next pair of shoes the runner will buy.

Touching this more behavioural argument we have to mention that organizations as Nike, adidas and smaller ones have quickly moved on to

building emotional bonds with customers through some of their social and personal motivation needs. Finally, these brands offer something additional, such as learning opportunity or a chance to help others. An example could be SecondtoNAKED platform that has worked for adidas and Stella McCartney Fall/Winter 2018, has released to promote brands and designers that manufacture locally and reduce the environmental footprint of the fashion industry. They are the first company to provide an online shopping experience for women that want active-wear<sup>27</sup>. Another interesting initiative from the leader Nike is the developing an open source app to help designers assess their environmental impact. It has been running a reuse-a-shoe scheme since 1990s, grinding old trainers into pellets that are used to surface running tracks<sup>28</sup>. Sustainability and support become year by year more frequent on firms' policy and are of course harnessed by marketing and effective communication to build a strong and fair relationship with the user. These are short themes taken on by big firms and often used on community blogs to depict better the brand. But which are the main themes talked about in community blogs and which kind of subjects become parts of the discussion?

### 3.6.2 Community Themes

Choi and Lee (2016) explain "consumers usually search for brand-generated content because they perceive that companies' have full access to company and product information while customers have limited product knowledge". This research confirms

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<sup>27</sup> <https://sustainablebrands.com/read/product-service-design-innovation/secondtonaked-adidas-by-stella-mccartney-boost-ethical-activewear-market>

<sup>28</sup> Alice Grahame, *The footwear industry is taking steps towards sustainability*, 9<sup>th</sup> October 2014, [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com)

that community blogs can be considered an engagement tool to find and catch customers' interests. In fact, consumer engagement could be considered as a vehicle for creating, building and enhancing consumer relationships as Brodie et al. say. The same study from University of Auckland Business School, "consumer engagement is seen both as a strategic imperative for establishing and sustaining a competitive advantage, and as a valuable predictor of future business performance (Sedley, 2008). Of course any kind of engagement strategy developed in a community blog could facilitate sales growth and profitability as many authors confirm.<sup>29</sup> Another important factor of this blogging evolution is the natural use of Word Of Mouth in the online community. As the real significance of what we consider a community it can be expressed on line, the same is for word of mouth. As we can imagine a real place, a real network formed by people that talk each other with the aim at giving a suggestion, a tip, gossip news to alert or just to have a joke, then, it happens in the same way in online communities. As recommendations can occur at virtually no cost and spread rapidly, both within and beyond the virtual brand community, as De Valck et al. said in 2009 (Brodie et al.2013; 2010). But why Word of Mouth can be considered one of online community blogging pillars ?

For instance, consumers are more likely to search for, and accept, especially negative e-WOM when they lack of information and experience (Richins and Bloch, 1991, Brodie et al. 2013). In this case on-line communities make people to share their interest, creating affinity and bonds between users. Members of the same on-line communities share the same interests and for this reason they can find a powerful and interactive engagement platform in order to respect consumer-to-consumer recommendations and tips. For this reasons we can recognize our buyer personas, the same we talked about before, to express how and why they meet together in an online community. They are users with all

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<sup>29</sup> Neff J. OMD proves the power of engagement. Advertising age 2007; 78. Available at <http://www.fipp.com/News.aspx?PageIndex=2002&ItemId=13735>. [Accessed 17 May 2010].  
And Voyles B. Beyond loyalty: meeting the challenge of customer engagement, Economist Intelligence Unit 2007. Available at <http://www.adobe.com/engagement/pdfs/part1.pdf>. [Accessed 31 January 2010].

the same interest: running. They find that blogs the richest way to reach and share information about their hobby. Running blogs can be used to describe the multivariate and rich world of thematic blogs, together with food blogs and travel blogs. About blogging we can add that we are enterprising a marketing branch, considered part of inbound marketing where sometimes big (and smaller) brands can write about themselves in the case of brand communities. In other cases users talk about brands and make several reviews, about the product, the performance or the competition. In that case we can recognize what we can define User Generated Content in the best expression. Those contents, often one or two written pages, are the main object of the blog, sometimes with pictures and videos. The entire User Generated Content comprehends the comments area. Blogging is so spread also because of the possibility to add a specific and personal comment in any "chapter" of the blog. It happens that after the tale of a competition (In our case will be for sure a half marathon or a marathon) we will see beyond a long list of comments left by other readers. If the reader wants to agree with that content, if he wants to share a similar experience or just a feedback about that, he can leave a comment. Sometimes, and this 4.0 matter of this kind of participation, comments could be expressed as negative; haters and bullying are the other side of the coin. In a dimension of collaboration and social enrichment as could be Internet, people leave themselves to be so discordant to contest the contents. Criticism is of course allowed, but we know that first must be respect. In any case, comments and reply answers make contents and blogs a dense place where to find an intense User Generated Content activity. When we talk about branded contents we can find user comments too and in this case the activity is intense in the same way. In fact blogging must be considered an easy and agile way for brand to catch user attention and hopefully to answer to his necessities and problems. A user that sees that his or her insights about a product are read and answered by a brand can feel listened. His or her attention is kept by the brand and the grade of loyalty can increase with two comments and an interaction with the brand. Of course, also in this case we don't have only the good part of the coin, but if we analyse that with a marketing point of view we can

consider blogging a good tool for brand engagement. On one side branded content is a good activity for firms. The brand presence online must be a good showcase for the market and a good showcase should be a good content, with useful insights for the consumers. A good content must be prepared and written directly with the idea of the buyer persona. If New Balance blog content is well written and planned for a specific kind of consumer, a brand loyal runner that has always been running with his or her pair of New Balance Fresh Foam Beacon, the runner will be much more motivated and he or she will feel supported by brand contents. A good blog can be a real backing with the every-day life of a runner. People like to feel themselves in a community and belong to something familiar although we are talking about a virtual community. The most appreciate community is users one. So brand communities can create brand engagement and grow up a sort of consumer loyalty but the favourite form of on line conversation, commenting, and participation in general starts from on line communities founded and promoted by the same users. User Generate Content allows everyone is part of the online community to participate, create contents and comments and leave a message to everyone who read the blog. We have talked about both the different forms of online communities: online brand community and user generated content community blog, as we can define for our research.

An example to illustrate better the first one could be the community blog of Under Armour, MapMyRun. Journalists expert in running write contents here and sports that can write about motivation, nutrition and any kind of suggestion a runner would need. The blog provide users with the ability to map, record and share their exercise routes and workouts with each other. As Under Armour web site says, MapMyRun is part of the world's largest digital health and fitness community, Under Armour Connected Fitness.<sup>30</sup>

The second example, the user generated content community blog we can talk about is runblogger.com. The blog is written by a guy who run and who likes to update his readers about shoes, competitions and his personal everyday life as a runner. Any content comes from not a professional journalist but from the administrator and any kind

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<sup>30</sup> <https://blog.mapmyrun.com/author/emily-abbate/>

of comment is welcome to start a discussion or to have a feedback about certain arguments. In this case we can say that User Generated Content is made to make community people to participate and to have more information not easily findable. Another interesting insight about blogging is the evolution happened in these last years where bloggers started to continue posting and publishing contents on social media. Runblogger.com actually, is very active on Twitter and permits more and more users to enjoy his profile and enrich any kind of argument confronted in the blog. This is participation and community of information and insights, a new form of sharing community.

## Chapter 4

### Blog Analysis

#### 4.1 Introduction

Our analysis proceeds with a focus on online blogging and the community that grows up together. In a communicative perspective, blogging is one of the most complete and efficient ways to create touch-points with users. The phenomenon of blogging has been analysed in different topics areas and, if we quote an interesting research from Johnson, Kaye, Bichard and Wong (2007), we can find that blogs are perceived as being moderately credible by themselves, but more credible than other forms of media. The research rating stays in the fact that blogs are highly credible in terms of depth of information provided, and not as highly in areas relating to fairness (Clavio, Eagleman, 2011). We have to consider that our blog analysis and research involves principally only running blogs where are present several shoes reviews and relative comments. After a global vision of the sportswear market, after a specific explanation of the communication strategies and some interesting examples of what big sportswear brands have done in the last ten years, we want to make a specific and direct analysis of what happens in the web with a contemporary communicative solution and direct relationship with users as footwear consumers. The choice of blogging analysis derives from the awareness that User Generated Contents and Digital Marketing are changing the communication past

models and that the same brands have evolved their communication strategies, optioning a more personal, not very controlled method, a user-to-user channel, that very often is transformed in a stakeholder-to-stakeholder channel. Another reason to explain the contents of this 4<sup>th</sup> chapter could be another interesting study by Kelleher and Miller (2006) that, focusing on user-perceived credibility of blogs, has examined user reactions to organizational blogs as compared with traditional web sites. Following the same extract used by Clavio and Eagleman (2011), we know that the study has diversified the user approach to a more conversational and humanized voice coming from blogs and the much more traditional tone of organizational web pages. Kelleher and Miller (2006), posited that blogs are a good place to speak candidly and that such communication was important in developing and maintaining relationships with users in a computer-mediated environment (Clavio, Eagleman, 2011). Eventually, we can say that there are several researches about social interaction and online relationships between, sport organizations, events and athletes, users and consumers. Specifically, with this chapter we want to catch the connection and exchange of perceptions on line between normal users, in our case the runner, the author of the shoe review or blog article and the brand writer are writing about. There are several interesting points about that relationships: the potential influencing power of brands on blogs; the reaction of users readable by comments; how much interesting and useful are the blog contents for runners. In that way our analysis is induced by an artificial intelligent engine that helps us to understand with a small sample what happens on blogs and eventually on a short portion of authors on Twitter, just to have a more complete idea of the evolutions. With this resolution we use a social media short analysis just to confirm and validate the answers to our questions. In that way we manage to find a corresponding answer about influencing, new developments of digital marketing and especially how big sportswear brands develop new digital marketing strategies.

## 4.2 Why concentrating on blogging?

Brand communities and their community blogs (including not branded blogs) can be seen as useful reference point for brands having the function to facilitate the communication and create a chain with the customer. We are considering blogging as a form of brand engagement, due to facilitate communication exchange and brand awareness. In this case we are referring explicitly to brand communities. We can see how Under Armour's Connected Fitness with 200 million registered users worldwide, is a platform dedicated to training and athletic performance that is a reference point for consumers and users and how the brand has changed its position on the market also thanks to the digital strategy. The example of the brand community is functional to explain how a large firm with a solid brand equity can enrich its position on the market, change its image or just remain in the mind of its consumers as persistent image, logo or name. Blogging with social media activity can change or enforce the status of a brand. In sporting goods companies this fact is happening yet with a consistent impact on the market. As Kruger Stieglits and Potthoff say, "enterprises aim at improving their stakeholder management, stakeholder integration, open-innovation or crowdsourcing activities. In contrast to and internal usage of social media (supporting knowledge management among employees), these mentioned approaches focus on stakeholders as the main target group"<sup>31</sup>. In fact we have always talked about the approach with the consumer, or user but in reality we are going to explain in deep who are the actors of this communication relationship: brands as sender of the messages and stakeholders as recipient. In this way we have to mention the distinction of three distinct communication directions. The most relevant social media communication activity for corporates is business to stakeholders (B2S), stakeholders to business (S2B) and stakeholder to

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<sup>31</sup> Nina Kruger, Stefan Stieglits, Tobias Potthoff, Brand Communication In Twitter- A Case Study On Adidas, Pacific Asia Conference o Information Systems (PACIS)

stakeholder (S2S). But who really is the *stakeholder*? The group of stakeholders includes customers but also other interested people (e.g. private persons previously to their buying decisions, competitors, suppliers) (Kruger et al. 2012). With these actors we need to understand how important is the grade of awareness for brand and relative companies. The digital and social media communication strategy aims at creating much more brand awareness in stakeholders mind presenting new products or campaigns, creating the possibility to accept suggestions and complaints about new products and innovations. Stakeholders as customers need a direct communication exchange in order to promote the culture, the personality, the dimension and image of the brand. Stakeholders expect to be involved in a process act to create awareness about the firm and the brand. As Neff (2007) says, consumer engagement is a primary driver of sales growth and Voyles (2007) join the argument saying that consumer engagement enhances profitability. For this reason big companies prefer to concentrate the strategy on brand engagement and creation of brand awareness through digital communication strategy. Otherwise, as Holebeek says, "consumer engagement plays a central role in the process of relational exchange, where other relational concepts (e.g. participation, involvement) act as engagement antecedents and consequences in dynamic engagement processes occurring within the brand community. The iterative nature of the consumer engagement process implies that specific relational consequences of engagement may act as antecedents in subsequent engagement (sub-) processes and cycles" (Brodie et al. 2011). Blogging is part of this relationship because users tend to trust in what they search. In fact we have to consider the participation of the user in the mechanism of information: he or she is not exactly the receiver of the message, as in the theoretical part of the communication strategy. Actually, the receiver of the message is contemporary a self-directed searcher of information about a product and at the same time he is the creator of the same information (User Generated Content). The typical relationship between brand and stakeholder must be considered a vertical direct communication. The brand creates information in order to satisfy directly the stakeholder considering the noise in communications. On the other hand blogging and, more specifically running blogs, have

a horizontal direct communication. In fact, as the firm, user explains, tells and evaluates products that he can find in the market. The successful part of this relationship could be found in the participation with comments and answers to comments. The actors are almost users, so runners that try and test running shoes performance giving an objective review. The comment are written by runners or passionate that use to read those blogs to inform themselves about last shoes releases and to find some suggestions for their sportswear shopping. Another way to consider blogging and social media strategy is studying the evolution it could take in these years. Digital communication can make connections and change the way consumers buy. As we have already seen, 4.0 buyer is not looking for a single product that could fulfil his or her needs. After all, the entire contemporary consumer wants to be involved in a real *journey*. The runner who reads a running blog almost every week wants to have a constant and persistent update about training and gear, curiosities and competitions. The Running blog becomes a web magazine and one of the most visited areas is, of course, the gear review blog area. Suggestions and insights about a new watch or a new pair of shoes are searched in blogs to improve knowledge and updating of runners. The review, with the several insights about the running modalities and the description of the uses and performances of the shoes become a description of a kind of training and, at last, a way to live with a hobby and passion as running is for few people. About that, Bernoff and Li (2008) state that, as Kruger at al. confirm that, "marketing is not limited to the promotion of products and services them but it also includes the promotion of brands and feelings about products and services". Finally, we can say with Liu and Ji (2009) that web communities must be considered as open spaces customer centric oriented (Schneider et al. 2008) where it becomes easier to find explicit and tacit demands of customers (Bernoff and Li 2008).

## 4.3 The blog research

### 4.3.1 Introduction to blog selection

Running blogs, our first focus, are a condensate of information, data and insight that can be very useful to a firm to understand consumer behaviour mechanism in nowadays market. The relationship is horizontal, as we have said; if the firm needs information about the reception of a pair of running shoes referring to blogs could be a possibility. Of course when we talk about digital marketing we know that before the online launch of a new product, there are several audience metrics and measurements, the achievement of the right target, and of course, there are different test matches with selected sample of users to understand consumer preferences about a certain products. But talking specifically about running gear we touch a market that involves lovers, technicians, professionals and, of course, the mass market. Blogging and social media communication could be seen as a powerful method to reach all these several target audiences a part the mass market that is not very interested to technicalities. Large companies appreciate those online channels and we can find the evolution of this good relationship with the creation of the brand communities intern to brand website. In our analysis we want to focus on the exchange between users and other users, a stakeholder-to-stakeholder relationship, where are evaluated several reviews, how are written, their construction and how readers perceive them.

First we have to mention that the most of the independent running blogs have a disclaimers' list. If the blog is not part of brand communication strategy intern to a firm, as a brand community blog, authors and users tend to assert their autonomy from companies. That fact explains a sort of blog's ethic, part of a common habit of bloggers: *the disclaimers list*. This declaration of intents and what blog approves and disapproves

is commonly part of blogs and in this specific sector explains how blogs reviews are independent from any brand subsidy. Normally the decision to not receiving any free sample from companies is another indicator of the autonomy. If we take a disclaimer page from a blog, in this case we will choose [runningshoesguru.com](http://runningshoesguru.com), we will see that first, there is a short presentation of the owner and administrator of the blog. Then we can see (image 1) a short explanation of blog reasons and origins. Finally there are five point of disclaimers list where is specified that the blog is independent from any company; the blog doesn't receive free sample from any company; the explanation of how works advertising system on the blog. Another point explains (this less common but it happens in few blogs) that there is a little commission for every click on the links purposed by bloggers to buy shoes with no additional cost for the user/reader; the last point is about an affiliation with [amazon.com](http://amazon.com). These disclaimers are very useful to understand how blogs are managed. Users appreciate that ethical clearness. Under this short explanation is included the Legal Disclaimer document and the Privacy Policy (image 1).

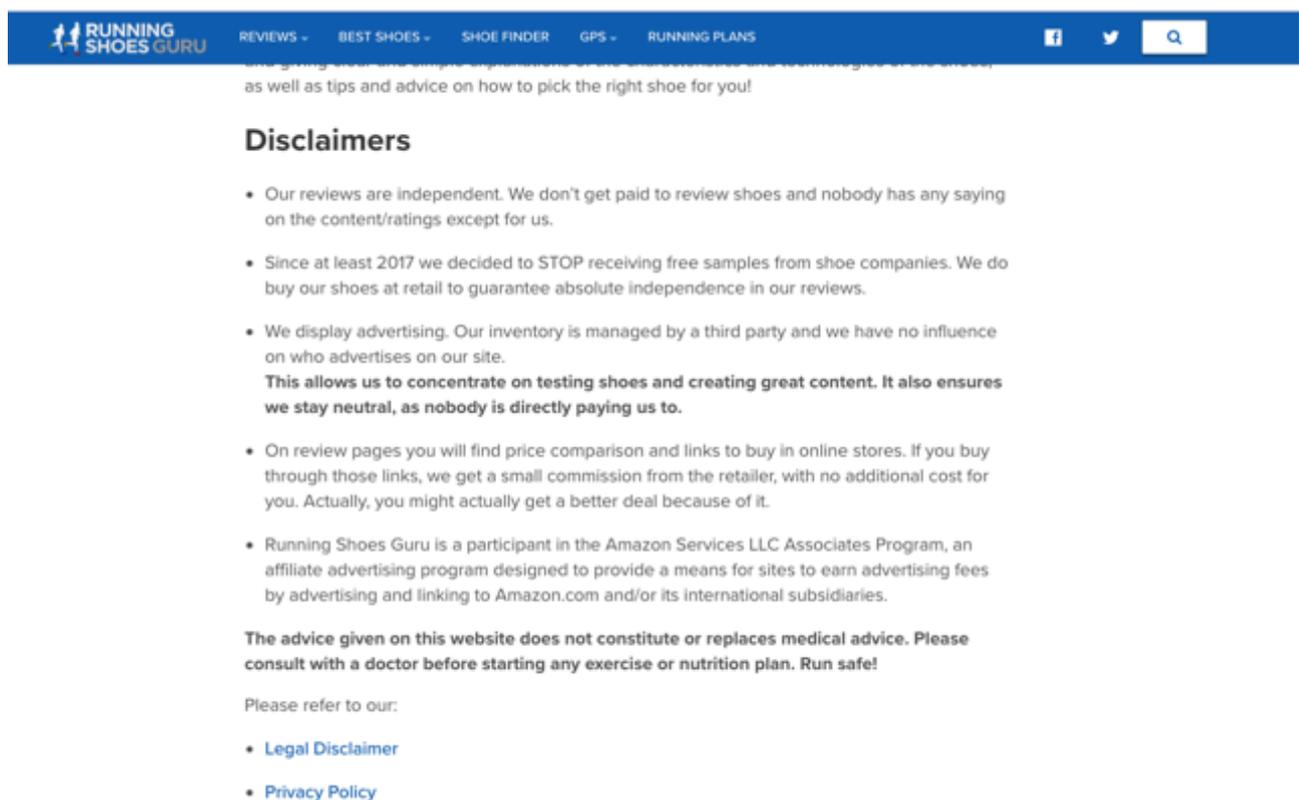


image 1; source: [runningshoesguru.com](http://runningshoesguru.com)

This is an example from one of the most popular blogs and review website about running shoes, we know that this kind of action is very appreciated, specially by readers. So above all, independent blogs talk mainly about running shoes. Every independent blog treats personally the testing and reviewing of selected pieces. The choice of the model and brand is arbitrary to the author of the reviews. If we evaluate a sample of almost 50 selected blogs, in English language, we have seen that the structure is nearly standardized: a single blogger or a small group of authors in the blog use to test for more than 40 km per week for 2-3 months a pair of running shoes. After the test period the author formulate a review with a precise structure. First, as choice introduction and explanation, there is the first impression about the pair of shoes. The author express why and how he or she has got in touch with that model. Then, the description of the product starts from the sole characteristics, and then there is a linkage with the ride due to the material and the responsiveness of it to the run. After that, there is the description of the upper unit of the product and its aesthetic characteristics. At last there is the conclusion of the review with a short verdict about the product and its pros and cons. Prices are written down with a referral to a selected website where to make the purchase, sometimes with discounts or promotional gifts. Few reviews have several added elements as the technical comparison with other similar shoes or as pros and cons specific of that model. Then sometimes we can find a technical chart with weight, dimension and thickness of the sole or of the upper. Users commonly appreciate this kind of detailed description because a precise description from a technical point of view of someone who runs and need specific information about athletic gear and its performance is implicitly most reliable. In fact, when an author introduces himself or herself, is very common to find a very precise description on any athletic characteristic about his or her performance. Probably, when a reader chooses which blog to attend, it is for a similarity or some athletic characteristic in common. The blog reading and writing is something much more personal and involving that any kind of market communication. Consulting an interesting research that has published in 2015 by Mahan et al. we can

understand how people as users prefer blogs and social media to have a feedback about running performances and to discover new tips about running gear. There is a significant relationship between the use of online communication and the practice of an endurance sport that involves an athlete almost *in toto*. That analysis is explained by the fact that media can vary based on the amount of information or knowledge they are able to carry. Following this view, blogs and social networks can be categorized as a richer communication format relative to traditional media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, Mahan, Jae, Jordan, & Funk, 2015) in that a variety of visual and other contextual information is integrated over-and-above text-based communication (Burgoon et al. ,2002; Mahan, Jae, Jordan & Funk, 2015). In this research is mentioned also runnersworld.com as an example of how a social blogging activity as the one present in this website (part of our analysis) could be a valid example to demonstrate the following concept. Runnersworld.com, as the others web blogs communities, is a virtual place where athletes and running lovers share their experiences related to the specific activity of running. Users make the website a desirable medium to meet driven information from activity involvement (Mahan et al., 2015). In this sense social media websites and blogs communities are viewed as significant rich media to satisfy information needs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, Mahan et al., 2015). Hence, as the authors say, "in the current context individual using running-related SNS are likely to satisfy informational needs by spending more time on these sites, especially as they become more involved in running activity" (Mahan et al., 2015). Pfeil et al. (2009) give another complementary point of view saying "SNS are influential online platform in formulating social capital since it allows participants to engage in social activities and build and maintain networks". This sequence of definitions aims to complete the vision about SNS and their social capital because of the importance of the benefits given by interactions and social support, enhancing self esteem and social cohesion (Acar, 2008; McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Valkenburg et al., 2006; Mahan et al., 2015). And the same social capital can enrich our connections and evaluation about the perception and the reactions of users about running shoes brands.

## 4.4 The analysis

### 4.4.1 Blog data selection and export

In our research we have selected a useful and significant number of blogs in English language, available for a semantic analysis. It has done a readable selection following the homogeneity of contents and a precise selection of characteristics needed for the analysis. First, we have selected a list of almost 100 online blogs, issued in English language, so consequently we consider a global vision and character of the contents. Specifically, we have chosen an original English language content to develop a standardized analysis, available almost at international level and considering the globalization of the sportswear market. Considered this first important issue we have to explain which criteria we have selected to choose the blogs and how we have, in second instance, filtered those blogs to a list of 60 analysed online blogs.

A useful tool to select several blogs for the analysis was [blog.feedspot.com](http://blog.feedspot.com) and [alexa.com](http://alexa.com) with the support of several online newspapers as [forbes.com](http://forbes.com) and [digitalconsumer.com](http://digitalconsumer.com), [1010data.com](http://1010data.com), [whidegroup.com](http://whidegroup.com) and [technofashion.com](http://technofashion.com). Moreover we have been supported by statistics references coming from [statista.com](http://statista.com), [sneakers.com](http://sneakers.com) and [footwearinsight.com](http://footwearinsight.com). Those websites, principally [alexa.com](http://alexa.com), have been useful to find a classification list of sources and blogs where to find a reliable reference about website traffic; keywords opportunities (keyword gaps, buyer keywords, optimization opportunities, easy-to-rank keywords); keywords by traffic; comparison metrics in search traffic, in bounce rate and sites linking in; comparison with other similar websites and blogs; and site general web ranking in global internet engagement; finally but not less important, the time spent on site. With this kind of tools the selection

automatically has followed a short number of online blogs, considering the web traffic score the list of blogs has been filtered in order to analyse a short list of very specific online blogs. The website we have selected is essentially considering the quantity and quality of reviews presence, the number of correlated comments and answers. Finally, our analysed website list comprehend these blogs and the number of pageviews per day.

BLOG LIST	PAGEVIEWS/DAY
Runblogger	961
iRunFar.com	6,7K
Run Infinity	474
Takbo.ph	1,22K
Science of Running	1,69k
Running Shoes Guru	11
Jill Will Run	117
Rich Roll	4,63k
Run Bulldog Run	124
Running for Passion	50M
The Trail Running Blog	154
RunBlogRun	960
Midwest Multisport Life	106
Runner Dudes Blog	50M
"Can't Stop" Endurance	Not Available
tonireavis.com	306
Brandons Marathon	not available
Elbowglitter	not available
JogBlog running blog	108
Team Cross Runs	54M
daveelger.net	3,2k
An Ultra Runners Blog	689
H.U.R.T Hawaii	24
The Emerging Runner	67M
Recover Your Stride	not available
Running Inspired	789
Fast Cory	not available
UNDEFEATED RUNNING	90
Runner Susan	2K
RunWestchester	89
Quadrathon!	3,5K
The Active Joe	57
Georgia Running	865
Breakheart Trail Running	12M

Running Is Funny	786
Carilyn Johnson	134
These days, I call myself a runner	40M
RunGainesville	5,6K
Nathan Veldhoen Art, Design, Travel, Photography, and Building.	34
www.runtothefinish.com	126
www.dirtyoldsneakers.com	90M
www.hungryrunnegirl.com	78M
www.drnicksrunningblog.com	4,2K
pavement runner	6K
a trail runner's blog	not available
trail sisters	89k
roadtrailrun	45M
science of running	321
diary of a rubbish marathoner	123
tom's next step	9,8K
fine fit day	435
podiumrunner.com	167

Tab. 1, list analysis with pageviews information extracted from alexa.com and websiteoutlook.com

This list maintains a number of characteristics important for the selection of the reviews and comments in order to apply the analysis we are going to explain. Principally we consider the presence of reviews and comments. With this important prerogative we have structured the following list with the index 1 as positive answer to the presence of the characteristic and 0 as negative response to the element required.

<b><u>SELECTED BLOG LIST</u></b>	<b>review</b>	<b>comments</b>	<b>twitter</b>
Runblogger.com	1	1	1
iRunFar.com	1	1	1
Run Infinity	1	1	1
Takbo.ph	1	0	1
Science of Running	0	0	0
Running Shoes Guru	1	1	1
Jill Will Run	1	0	1

Rich Roll	0	0	0
Run Bulldog Run	1	1	1
Running for Passion	1	0	0
The Trail Running Blog	1	0	0
RunBlogRun	0	0	1
Midwest Multisport Life	0	0	0
Tom Ropers Running Training	0	0	0
Runner Dudes Blog	0	0	0
"Can't Stop" Endurance	1	1	0
tonireavis.com	0	0	0
Brandons Marathon	0	0	0
Elbowglitter	0	0	0
JogBlog running blog	0	0	0
Team Cross Runs	0	0	0
daveelger.net	0	0	0
An Ultra Runners Blog	1	0	0
H.U.R.T Hawaii	0	0	0
The Emerging Runner	1	0	1
Recover Your Stride	1	0	0
Running Inspired	0	0	0
Fast Cory	0	0	0
UNDEFEATED RUNNING	1	0	0
Runner Susan	0	0	0
RunWestchester	0	0	0
Quadrathon!	1	0	0

The Active Joe	0	0	0
Georgia Running	0	0	0
Breakheart Trail Running	1	0	0
Running Is Funny	0	0	0
Carilyn Johnson	0	0	0
These days, I call myself a runner	0	0	0
RunGainesville	0	0	0
Nathan Veldhoen Art, Design, Travel, Photography, and Building.	0	0	0
runtothefinish.com	1	1	1
dirtyoldsneakers.com	1	0	1
hungryrunnegirl.com	0	0	0
drnicksrunningblog.com	1	1	0
pavementrunner.com	1	1	1
atrailrunnerblog.com	0	0	0
trailsisters.com	1	1	1
roadtrailrun.com	1	1	1
scienceofrunning.com	0	0	0
diaryofarubbishmarathoner.com	0	0	0
tomsnextstep.com	0	0	0
finefitday.com	0	0	0
podiumrunner.com	1	0	1
bonkproof.com	1	1	1

Tab. 2, list analysis done with alexa.com

At last, once we have obtained the checklist concerning the presence or absence of these specific characteristics of the blogs, we are ready to export blog review texts in txt. format on our tool analysis platform.

#### 4.4.2 Cogito and the chosen method of analysis

We want to make readable and understandable the analysis about the relationship between blog reviews, comments and the presence of firms in online communities. To do that we need to understand how our tools and specific artificial intelligence systems works. In fact, one of our prerogatives is to understand how digital marketing is a changing market. In this way community blogs easily succeed in a marketing perspective. Brand awareness, brand engagement and users behaviour towards firms is changing thanks to digital marketing and social networks. To understand these important passages and relationships we have selected an Artificial Intelligence tool, Cogito. This entity extraction software and semantic reasoning works on semantic. Cogito is an Expert System product, an Italian software house specialized on analysis and management of information through a semantic approach<sup>32</sup>. Cogito can understand the meaning of language in context, reading content much the way people do. But first, how does it work Cogito technology machine?

An artificial intelligence as this, works on logic as a *Rational Agent*, this system operates in an ambient where it perceives information through detectors, and then it works on it. The AI knows *logic agents*, KB (Knowledge base) through formulas that express and translate the world status with a precise language and rules in a system called *syntax*.

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<sup>32</sup> Expert System is a software house founded in Modena in 1989. The firm was specialized in linguistic technologies and semantic launching the software *Errata Corrige*, that in 1994 was sold to Microsoft for Microsoft Office. In 1999 Expert System launches Cogito for b2b activities. In 2014 the firm is listed at AIM Italia, the alternative market of capital in the Italian market with FTSE AIM Italia index.

Finally this logic must define *the semantic, the indicator of formulas significance* contextualizing the logic to the surrounding world. In this way, if we say that a formula is true, so this formula satisfy the *relative model. Syntax and Semantic* of formulas can determine some importance sentence of conclusions through logic inferences. In this way we use a logic world to translate a real effective world. This kind of technologies is going to grow up and change the world because of their capacities to solve a problem through a logic sequence. In this way AI has got specific learning capabilities, in order to be always more similar to a human, so, rational and intelligent. An apprentice algorithm is good enough if it produces hypothesis that could predict future events<sup>33</sup>. Cogito, as an Artificial Intelligence platform, uses these inner workings to understand textual information and automatically processes natural language<sup>34</sup>. Some of the most important and innovative tools of Cogito are these: the Knowledge Graph; the Active Machine Learning Workflow; the Robotic Process Automation (RPA) Connector.

The first is customizable by users with 350,000 concepts connected by 2.8 Million relationships and lets users import targeted knowledge from any sources in few clicks, enabling Cogito platform to resolve references to real-world entities and to link them to knowledge repositories by using standardized identifiers<sup>35</sup>.

The second one, the Active Machine Learning Workflow is a tool that extends the Natural Language Processing (NLP) extraction pipeline accelerating machine-learning-based analytics projects.

Finally, the last one, the Robotic Process Automation (RPA) Connector is a tool that extends the use of RPA bots into process automation leveraging knowledge (and not only structured data) as well as requiring human-like judgement. The RPA Connector operates leveraging deep contextual understanding for the extraction of precise data

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<sup>33</sup> Russel and Norvig *Intelligenza Artificiale: un approccio moderno, Vol 1*, Chap. 2 page 43, 8

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.expertsystem.com/expert-system-announces-new-release-flagship-ai-platform-cogito/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.expertsystem.com/expert-system-announces-new-release-flagship-ai-platform-cogito/>

from unstructured business documents. The bots, in that way are enabled to intelligently classify and route mainstream cases for straights-through processing<sup>36</sup>.

#### 4.4.3 Cogito for Marketing

Cogito semantic intelligence elaborates the natural language with the following applications in order to activate a new intelligent approach to marketing.

Knowledge Management and Business Intelligence are the first appliance to handle information from texts, in that way primary data can be elaborated and used.

Natural language researches and text mining are another important faceting of Cogito in order to be useful for market analysis and communication plans in any firm. Consequently, marketing and competitive intelligence become essential to a good developing of a strategic plan for a firm that wants to understand consumer behaviour and how to catch their attention in a vast panorama as today market. Moreover, Cogito can categorize any information and document from users following the contents on it, Customer Relationship Management and customer service are other service that can be guaranteed by cogito application and can be improved just using semantic approach to users generated contents analysis. The semantic web is the final approach to what Cogito can achieve just using its AI tools. Comprehension and machine learning make Cogito in the condition to understand and improve firms' relationships with customers and their language. Language is the most important aspect to analyse in a marketing and communication structure. Quoting Christian Grönroos in his research about the relationship marketing process, we find that in the interaction processes a value base is transferred to and also partly created together with customers [...]. Thus, if the supplier or service provider manages to successfully align its resources (physical product

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<sup>36</sup> All of this information is extracted from Expert System web site where Cogito 14.4 new version is been released on April 2019.

elements, service elements, information and other resources of various kinds) and competencies with its customers' internal processes, in these processes this value base is turned into customer perceived value. In this perspective we can individuate users' needs and firms' insights in order to find a way to analyse the relationship between them. The machine learning and the semantic approach give good results as an improve of firm knowledge about customer requests; clustering and linking information about firms' CRM in order to create a real-time customer profile and find the clients needing much more information and care online. As we can understand from the use of this kind of tools, listening is becoming day by day always more important for enterprise development. Consumers are now Citizen Marketers, the user does marketing for the firm, for the brand. Feedbacks and questioning survey are important inputs for firms, together with Word of Mouth, as we have seen in the past chapters, and innovation process inducted by customers observation and reviews. Reviews, that now are the tool that we use to understand some dynamics that at first sight don't appear, are the best way to understand how the audience react to new products and how this products are perceived at the final stage of the business to client marketing and communication strategy.

#### 4.5 Analysis Launch

We start our analysis considering first the entire group of selected reviews and relative comments for a wide overview of blogs participation, brands perception and running shoes review. In a *marketer* approach we need to consider three main parameters in the analysis with Cogito. If we want to understand how specific lemmas influence and participate in the User Generate Content of the blogs, we need to identify first, *main lemmas*, their presence online, how many times those specific and selected lemmas are

mentioned and with which kind of relation to the readers and the users. Accordingly, we need to use similar parameters that allow us to understand the important relationship between main lemmas and blog users. We have used Sentiment analysis and Emotions Taxonomy analysis as two important indicators of the relation between the two parts. In this optician we have to specify the characteristics for both the parameters.

Sentiment analysis consist on a contextual mining of text, made by Cogito, where the AI Knowledge Machine identifies and extracts subjective information understanding the real sentiment about a brand or just the argument of the text. Our Sentiment analysis by Cogito is very specific and can incorporate several different sentiments, not basic. In that way we can recognize different shades of the perception of a word in a User Generated Content context. In this way, if we talk about footwear brands, we can understand and find immediately the key aspects of brand's product that users prefer and users' underlying intentions and reactions, through review and especially comments concerning those aspects<sup>37</sup>. With Sentiment Analysis we use an Emotion Taxonomy index that distinguish an emotion to another in a text mining analysis. The classification made by Cogito is always sourced by Knowledge Machine and can focus on what kind of emotions a text can induce on. Cogito technologies can consider a notable quantity of different emotions in the analysis, as we will see, we have selected a moderate number of 10 possible emotive reactions that involve a wide range of emotions. Emotion Taxonomy in our research involves Hope, Desire, Happiness, Love, Like, Excitement, Health Fanaticism, Success, Trust and Hatred. Considering that those are the first 10 emotions selected from all blogs reviews, chosen by a frequency analysis drawn by Cogito in blog reviews analysis. In that way we have mixed up three main parameters and we have found several interesting insights. Before the single parameters and analysis we have to remind that our research is done on a short basis of 70 blogs in English language, every blog has from 1 to 10 reviews with relative comments. Those numbers change from blog to blog in order to use a total number of 496 results from reviews and comments upload. The single analysis can involve fewer results in order to follow the type of analysis we

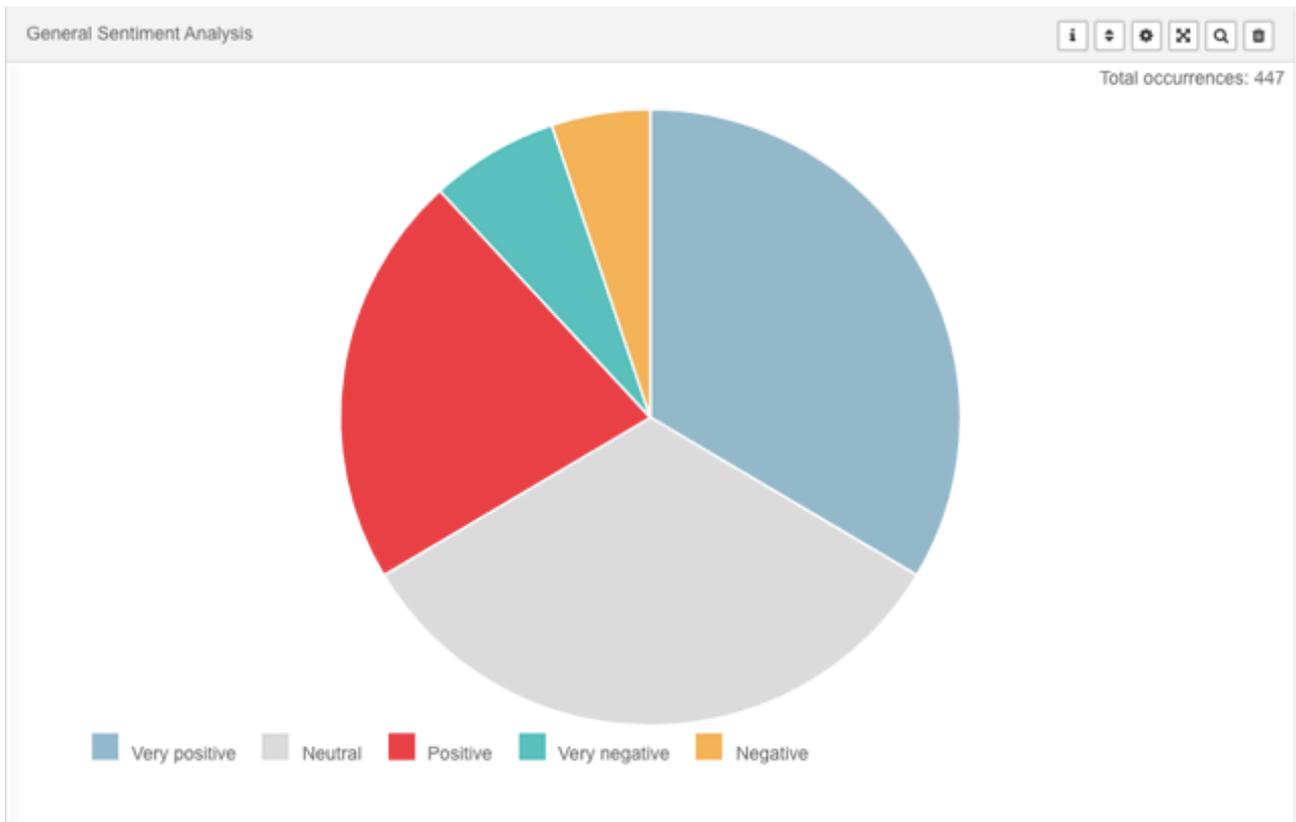
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<sup>37</sup> S. Gupta, *Sentiment Analysis: Concept, Analysis and Applications*, January 7, 2018, [towardsdatascience.com](http://towardsdatascience.com)

have chosen. The totality of main lemmas is a significant parameter to understand the wide of the research. We have worked on 300 main lemmas where we can find that *shoes* has been mentioned in a total number of 249 times in 70 reviews, also called data-flows.

#### 4.5.1 General Sentiment Analysis

From this section we can find the general feeling about a certain review, the author and the content. The sentiment analysis could involve both a perception about the content of the review or just a feeling about the form of the review. Very often, readers use to appreciate some indications or sort of parameters used by authors for the reviews. In that way, we can find a general "very positive" sensation. The pie graph we can see below is the solution analysis where the Knowledge Machine makes a text mining considering 70 data-flows, including reviews and relative comments, and obtains a total amount of occurrences of 447. In this extract we can see an important incident of "very positive" sentiment (150 times), then "neutral" following with 147 times. The "positive" feeling occurred 90 times while "very negative" and "negative", 30 times and 23 times.

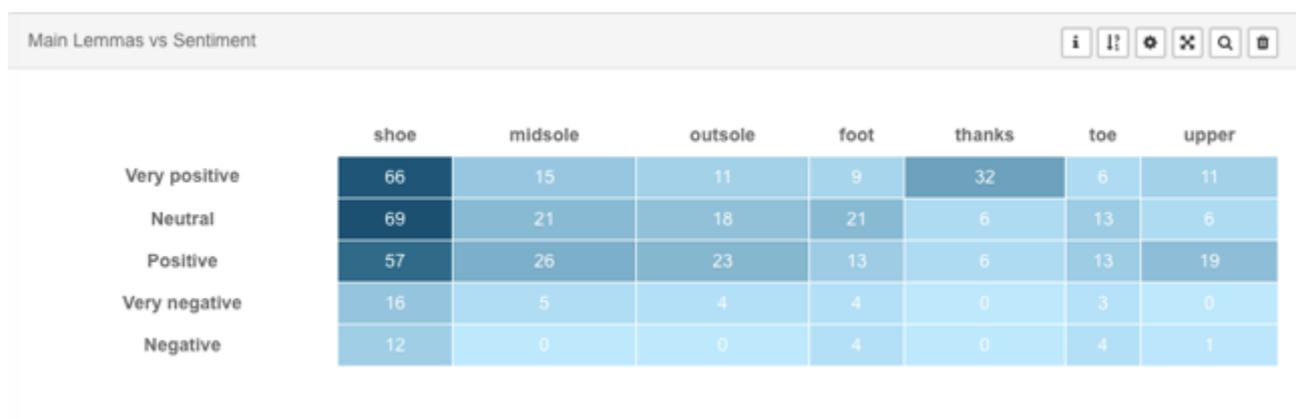


tab. 3: General Sentiment Analysis, developed by Cogito support

From our pie graph we can see how a positive perception of reviews can be influenced by the presence of certain brands, several authors that are appreciated by the readers and sometimes could be counted for many thanks and positive feedback only about general information about running performance. Notwithstanding, we have to restate that every text mining made by cogito here evaluates the real semantic character of our reviews and can explain more focused what happens between users and brands, but we will see that later.

## 4.5.2 Main lemmas and Sentiment analysis

If we consider an imaginary funnel of our research about lemmas, sentiment and emotions in a text mining analysis, here we are at the second phase, where we have selected with Cogito the main lemmas most used in all data-flows and the relative sentiment we can find. The analysis between main lemmas (X axis) and sentiment (Y axis) has as aim to identify how many times the following main lemmas convey a “very positive”, “positive”, “neutral”, “negative” and “very negative” sentiment.



	shoe	midsole	outsole	foot	thanks	toe	upper
Very positive	66	15	11	9	32	6	11
Neutral	69	21	18	21	6	13	6
Positive	57	26	23	13	6	13	19
Very negative	16	5	4	4	0	3	0
Negative	12	0	0	4	0	4	1

tab. 4: Main lemmas related with sentiment, developed by Cogito support

From the table above we can see that the word “shoe”, protagonist in a running shoes reviews area is mentioned with a “very positive” thought 66 times, while “neutral” 69. The word shoe, as one of the most used lemmas, has a positive trait wherever is mentioned 57 times. Generally, for “shoe” we can observe that has not got a real negative connotation associated, and with that lemma, the others. If we have a look to “midsole” and “outsole” we can recognize the similarity between the two words and we can understand how this characteristic of the description of the shoe can have mostly positive reactions. Finally we want to underline the word “thanks” that is present in the analysis as one of the most mentioned and wants to attribute a “very positive” connotation to the texts. In fact is very common to find grateful reactions in comments to running shoes reviews. Another interesting fact about this analysis is that a real

“negative” reaction is not present at all with the following words: “midsole”, “outsole”, “thanks” and “upper”, while is moderately present with “foot”. The lemma “shoe” has got moderately mention with every sentiment, “very positive” to “very negative”.

#### 4.5.3 Analysis between brands and sentiment

Finally, to follow our research funnel, we have the third table where is expressed the same sentiment analysis of main lemmas but filtered considering only main lemmas involving shoe brands. We have selected a rose of four main brands, the most common in the text review and comments. The brand selection has done with Cogito counting that the brand Hoka (the running shoes complete name is Hoka One One) is been mentioned 51 times. Adidas is been mentioned 44 times and Nike 16 and finally Altra that has been mentioned 18 times.

Correlation analysis between the most nominated brands and sentiment

	Adidas	Hoka	Nike	Altra
Neutral	4	13	2	10
Very positive	6	4	2	3
Positive	8	4	3	1
Negative	0	1	1	1
Very negative	1	2	0	0

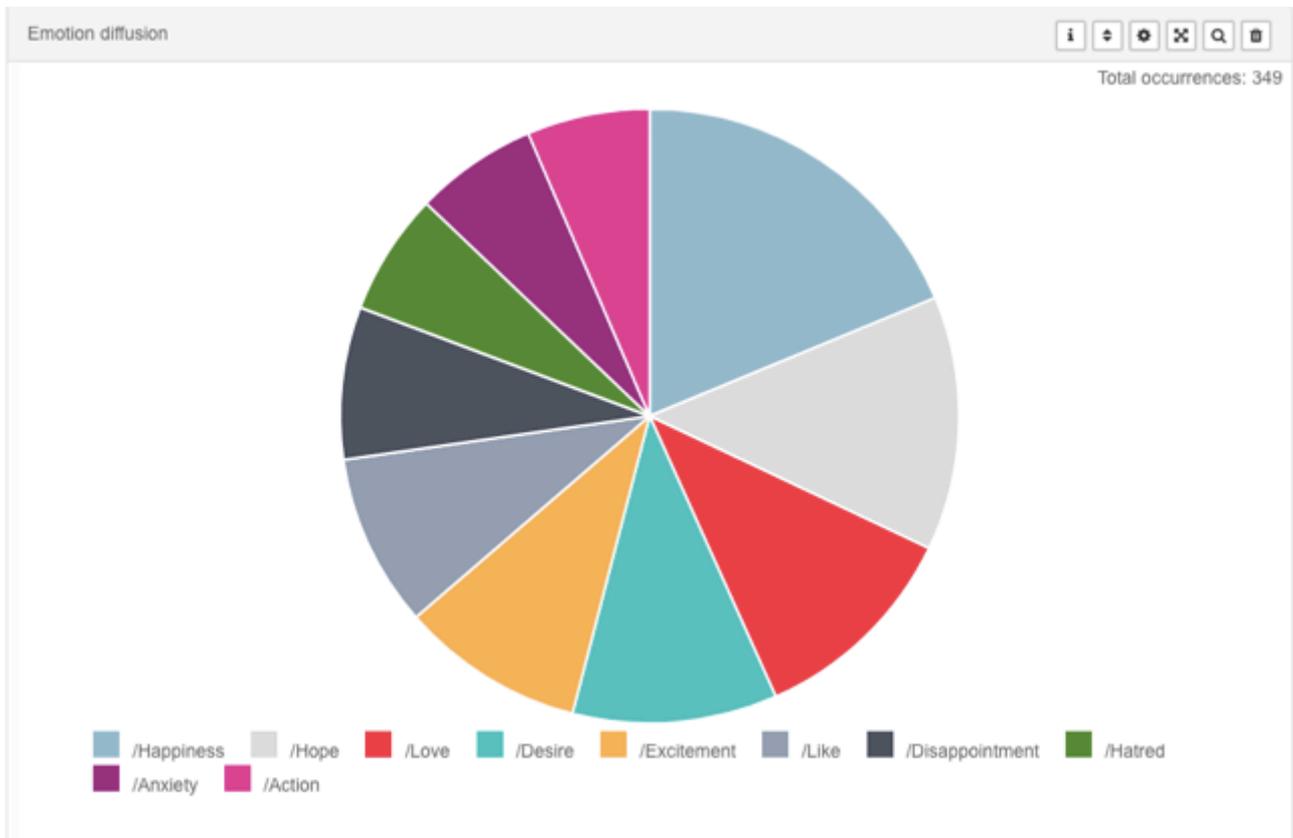
tab. 5: Main Lemmas as most mentioned brands correlated with sentiment, developed by Cogito support

Reading the table above, we can find and interesting peak for “neutral” sentiment about Hoka One One and Altra. Adidas and Nike have a short incident on these texts but specifically Adidas has an interesting peak in correspondence of “positive” that can be

an interesting indicator of how Adidas as brand is recognized in a positive key-position. A good index about the high or low perception that people have about a specific brand could be this table because of the general vision of what happens in review blogs between users in comments and authors of reviews. For sure there are not huge disparities and the "neutral" sentiment must be seen as an index of a sense of regard proved by users and authors discussing brands and shoes performance.

#### 4.5.4 General Emotion diffusion analysis

In order to find a *fil rouge* for our central analysis, we have to mention the diffusion of Emotions for all the 70 data-flows of the analysis. Cogito has developed with Knowledge Machine the way to calculate, as what we have done with sentiment, the total occurrences of emotions taxonomy. In that way we have analysed a total number of occurrences of 349 for our sample. We have found that in the running shoes review contest the dominant emotion expressed by users with user generated content is generally "happiness" with 35 occurrences and "hope" with 25. In order of appearance the following emotions are: "love", "desire", "excitement", "like", "disappointment", "hatred", "anxiety" and "action".



tab. 6: Emotion Taxonomy diffusion analysis, developed by Cogito support

It is very interesting to focus on the fact that action and desire, that could be considered as more significative for a running shoes review blog because of the call to action to see and try some shoes instead of others and the desire to buy one new brand. With this optician we can use a cloud text box to understand how a chosen emotion present or less present in the analysis is linked to other main lemmas and how we can read this presence and link.

## Cloud of lemmas and emotion taxonomy



tab. 7: Lemmas Cloud, developed by Cogito support

The tag-cloud above (tab. 7) explains the presence of “happiness” as the emotion most relevant in the review contest. “Happiness” as emotion is linkable, mainly to “shoe”, “outsole” and “midsole” and participating with some interesting lemmas as some running shoe models as “Evo Mafate” or “Clifton” that are both Hoka One One models or just the links with “Facebook” as one of the most important social networks. We can say that “happiness” is a very versatile emotion adaptable to several running shoes editions and shoes characteristics. As we have analysed the tag-cloud of the emotion most scattered, we have to mention the emotion less proved in all the review analysis. “Action”, “hatred” and “anxiety” are the less present emotion in the taxonomy, we can consider this absence having a look to the cloud tag, where we can focus on several different terms where these three terms get lost.



#### 4.5.5 Analysis between main lemmas and emotion taxonomy

Correlation analysis between main lemmas and emotions

	shoe	midsole	outsole	foot	thanks	toe	upper
/Happiness	25	16	15	4	2	3	4
/Hope	22	9	7	6	1	4	1
/Love	18	7	6	3	2	3	3
/Desire	16	10	9	5	0	4	3
/Disappointment	13	8	6	2	1	0	1
/Excitement	11	4	5	2	3	0	2
/Like	8	4	5	1	3	1	0

tab. 9: Main Lemmas correlated with emotion taxonomy, developed by Cogito support

In the second phase of our funnel of the research we have found that there is a good interaction between main lemmas and emotion. The lemma most used and with a high level of relation with emotions is “shoe” that has a level of 25 associations with “happiness”. The same main lemma has a high presence with “hope”, “love” and “desire”, in that way we can consider the word “shoe” as perceived in very positive circumstances. At the same level we can see that the word “shoe” can have several “disappointment” emotions that, at the same time are mitigated by “excitement” and “like”. The other two interesting main lemmas with a high level of positive emotions and expression of interest from users are “midsole” and “outsole” that are the best demonstration that the real important aspect of blog reviews is the technical characteristic of the shoe, from the midsole to the outsole. Finally we can say that the entire analysis is very balanced and there are not bad emotions or negative feelings about the products at all.

#### 4.5.6 Analysis between main brands and emotions

Here we have the last part of the funnel where the main actors, running shoes brands, are analysed in the table with the emotion taxonomy.

Correlation analysis between brands most nominated and emotions taxonomy

	Adidas	Altra	Hoka	Nike
/Hope	3	1	3	1
/Desire	3	1	2	1
/Happiness	3	0	1	1
/Love	1	2	2	0
/Like	2	1	0	1
/Excitement	1	1	1	0
/Health Fanaticism	0	2	0	1
/Success	0	0	1	1
/Trust	2	0	0	0
/Hatred	0	1	0	1

tab. 10: Main Lemmas as most mentioned brands correlated with emotions taxonomy, developed by Cogito support

As we can see by the table above (tab. 10), Adidas and Hoka have an interesting developing with "hope" and "desire", Adidas, moreover is correlated with a relative high score to "happiness" but not the same for "love". In Altra and Nike we can observe a conspicuous *absence* of emotions while, on the other hand Adidas can grow its level of emotions with "trust". This observation could be a very good index for customer satisfaction analysis and data mining. Another little surprise is the level of "health fanaticism" expressed by Altra, in this way we can consider Altra audience a wellness addicted and a kind of buyer persona that loves running and Altra shoes to respect that lifestyle. Another notable aspect of this table is the very low score of emotion taxonomy. These results could be attributed to a short participation of Nike users to blog

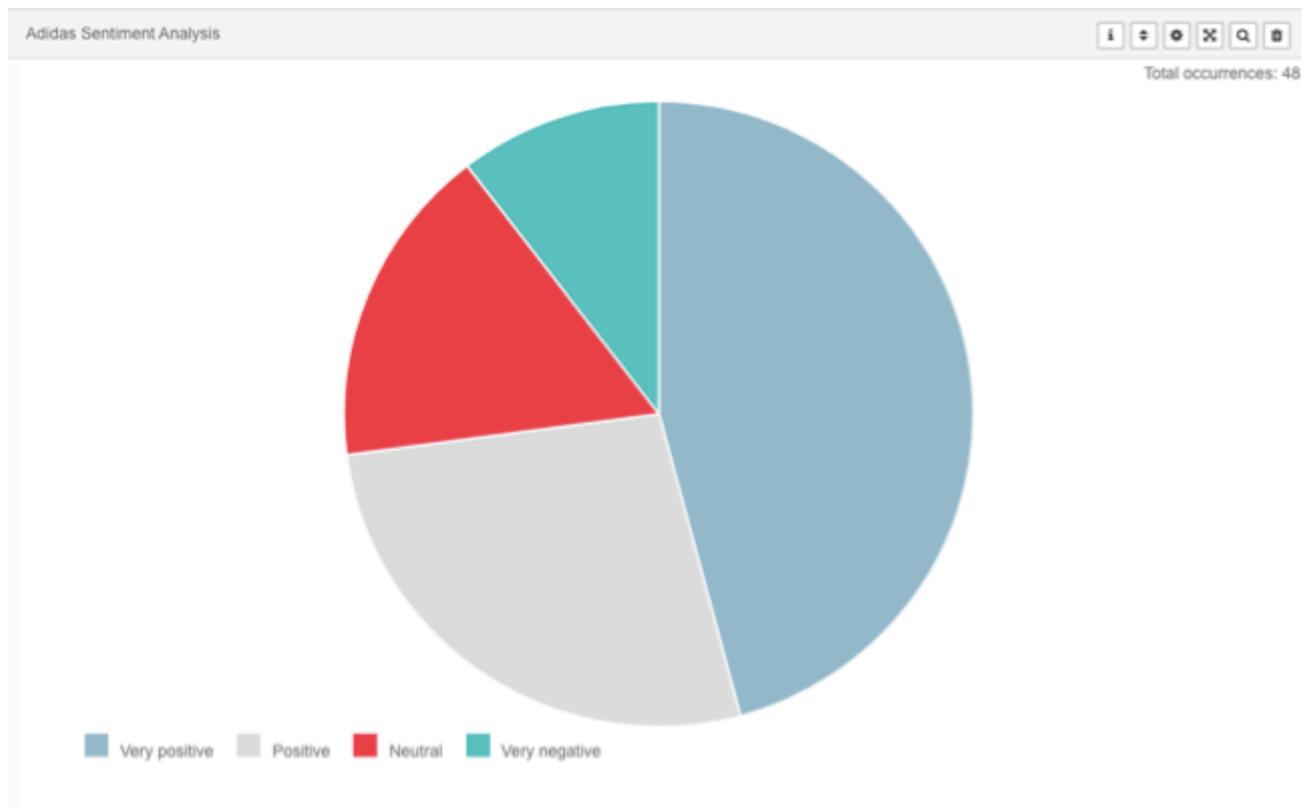
conversations or, on the other hand, there is less response from users about Nike and Nike shoes performance. We know that this analysis is based on a semantic analysis through a Knowledge Machine that of course has a textual and literal interpretation of the written text but we have to recognize that the relative intuition about the causes of these phenomena detected by our analysis have too determinants variables. This kind of information, obtained from analysis and pie graphs, is very useful as a marketing quantification tool, it makes the possibility to have a quality response of selected campaigns and products and can help in the customer relationship management. To make a more reliable analysis we need to have a look to single brands semantic analysis, considering only the most mentioned. We have selected the four most discussed running and trail brand shoes that appear in community blog reviews. Of course if we extend our analysis to a wider sample we could consider much more brands in order to enrich the analysis research.

#### 4.6 Single brands analysis

##### Adidas

As we have said before, we need to understand some dynamics that we cannot find in a general semantic research. To do that we have to extract a selected group of reviews plus comments filtered by brand. We start from Adidas as one of the most important and one of the most mentioned in the reviews. This brand is protagonist of 11 reviews with relative comments in our analysis.

## Sentiment Analysis



tab. 11: Adidas' Review Sentiment analysis, developed by Cogito support

As we can perceive by the pie-graph (tab.11), Adidas' reviews scrape a very positive appeal. Considering the total occurrences of 48, we have found that there are 45% that are "very positive" occurrences, 27% "positive", 16% "neutral" and 10% "very negative". As a proportion, we will see, is almost balanced Adidas can be considered one of the most reliable brands for blog communities. If we have a look to table 5 we can see how Adidas is considered with a "very a positive" sentiment very high rate, following Hoka One One, Nike and Altra. In this area, we can say that the sentiment analysis helps us to make a real ranking about what online users consider the best brand.

If we consider a deeper analysis where selected sentiment indexes are "Very positive", "positive", "negative", "neutral", "very negative", and the main lemmas for all Adidas reviews are "shoe", "Adidas", "Jeff", "midsole", "thanks", "anonymous" we find some interesting insights.

Adidas Correlation analysis with sentiment (most used lemmas)					
	shoe	Adidas	Jeff	midsole	thanks
Very positive	7	3	6	0	7
Positive	6	8	2	4	0
Neutral	4	4	0	3	0
Very negative	2	1	0	0	0

tab. 12: Adidas relation analysis between main lemmas and sentiment, supported by Cogito

We have to say that these lemmas have been selected because of their frequency in reviews. The name of the author, Jeff is a common lemma because of its widespread use but is not a real index for the review. Otherwise, the lemma “thanks” must be considered in our analysis as an indicator of satisfaction rate of the readers and blogs users. In fact we can observe a high rate of very positive sentiment paired with “thanks” lemma. This is an indicator, not only that we have a very polite user audience, but also that we can consider the lemma as positive indicator by reading reviews and comments. In fact we can consider those lemmas as a real signal of gratefulness for the information the author has made available to the readers. On the left of the table we can see that “shoe” has a “very positive” reaction as we will see in most cases, while “Adidas” has a “positive” reaction, the most high rate in the totality of the reviews and comments. We are considering only Adidas as footwear brand but this case it must be not taken for granted. Not all brands are mentioned such as positive way in their reviews and comments, probably this is the reason why Adidas has one of the highest rates of positive sentiment in the analysis.

Until now we have used only the most mentioned lemmas, but *if we want to focus on the most functional lemmas what can we find?*

In our analysis we have selected a functional group of lemmas. We have observed that the following short list of lemmas is always present in the majority of reviews and comments. These are the most used and most useful words to describe and discuss

about the running shoes. It is not an arbitrary choice. "Midsole", "outsole", "upper", "heel", "cushion" and "foam" are the most interesting lemmas in the Adidas review context. Considering a huge dimension of new and old technologies used and tested by Adidas and applied to the following the shoe shape. Actually, our selection of reviews, depending on the last releases by the firm, is focusing only on Boost technology, the one present in any Ultra Boost model (from the first one to the number 19 released at last in 2019). A previous very important innovation is the EVA, very common in those reviews. Boost, as EVA, are cushioning technologies that permit to combine comfort and energy at take-off. The first one is the direct evolution of EVA improving the quality of a softer cushioning and a harder cushioning level for energy and reaction. So, to elevate the analysis specificity, we have selected this group of associated lemmas that are directly connected with these two main Adidas technologies.

Adidas Correlation analysis (selected lemmas) (+sentiment)

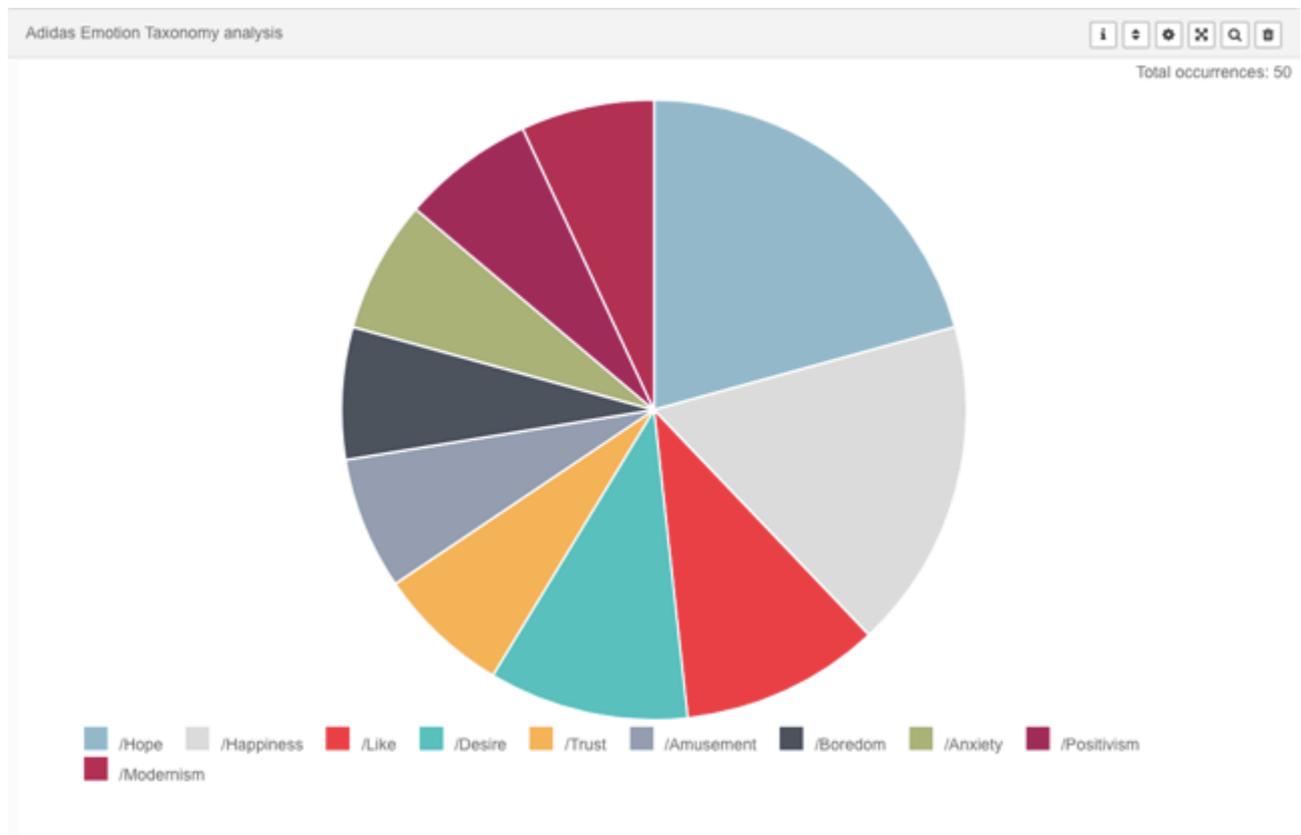
	midsole	outsole	upper	heel	cushion	foam
Very positive	0	0	1	1	0	0
Positive	4	2	1	1	0	0
Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0
Neutral	3	2	1	0	1	0
Very negative	0	0	0	0	0	0

tab. 13: Adidas relation analysis between selected lemmas and sentiment, supported by Cogito

Considering that these lemmas are commonly used to describe some technical characteristics of Adidas shoes, is notable to see that in the reality "foam", "cushion" and "heel" are not very considered in the sentiment analysis. We can observe that probably the machine can not recognize a real subjective expression or keyword to match with these words. A different observation is ascribable to "midsole" and "outsole" that are very common in reviews and comments, always with a good rate of positivity and neutrality. In this case we need to observe that if we talk about the shoe is more common to be objective in reviews. Objectivity is a great feature for reviews, of course we do not

pretend to find objectivity in the comments but we know that, on the other hand, users appreciate objectivity.

### Emotion Taxonomy Analysis



tab. 14: Adidas Emotion Taxonomy, supported by Cogito

The Emotion Taxonomy analysis (tab. 14) underlines a dense panorama of emotions originated by reviews and comments. At first we can see how “hope” is one of the most diffused emotions with a 12% incidence on the totality of occurrences. “trust”, “amusement”, “boredom”, “anxiety”, “positivism” and “modernism” are at the same level (4%) giving a heterogeneous result to the analysis. Actually, we can observe a strange co-presence of emotions that at the first look could appear opposed. “Positivism” and “anxiety” could be an index of some reaction to shoe characteristics. We can read and understand if users like reviews or, if some review has transmitted anxiety maybe because of

prices or bad performances of the shoes. Finally we have to mention the partial absence of “trust” that with a short incidence of 4% in the totality of occurrences it must be seen as a bad signal for Adidas intern marketing team. “Trust” must be higher in the general rate, if we find such a tiny proportion we have to consider that the brand is doing bad choices about customer relationships and brand management. Brand equity is influenced also by these kinds of indexes and to find a shortage of trust in online users is not a good signal. It could depend from reviewed shoe models but probably it depends from several shoe aspects.

Going ahead with the analysis we have to mention the analysis between emotion taxonomy and the most used lemmas (tab. 15), the same process we have done with sentiment analysis.

Adidas correlation analysis between main lemmas (most used) and emotions taxonomy

	shoe	Adidas	Jeff	midsole	thanks
/Hope	5	2	1	0	1
/Happiness	3	3	1	2	0
/Like	2	2	0	1	1
/Desire	3	3	0	1	0
/Trust	2	1	1	1	0
/Boredom	2	1	0	0	0
/Anxiety	1	0	0	1	1
/Positivism	2	0	0	2	0
/Modernism	2	1	0	1	0
/Action	2	0	0	2	0

tab. 15: Adidas relation analysis between main lemmas and emotion taxonomy, supported by Cogito

We can observe that “hope” as to confirm what we have said before, has got a high rate comparing it with the other emotions. The lemma “shoe” has got a great rate with almost every emotion we can find. It is very interesting observe how “anxiety” has got a low rate in relation with every most used lemma. We can consider that generally, Adidas reviews and comment don’t include almost at all “anxiety” elements. That is a good notice for Adidas that can be assured about a positive impact of its running shoes

reviews on line. The lemma "Adidas", instead, is very active for emotions as hope, happiness, like and desire. The brand has a very high rate and value of positive emotions, it is a notice confirmed by the sentiment analysis that has underlined a positive sentiment every time Adidas is mentioned. "Jeff" and "thanks" as we have said before, are not as very indicative as "Adidas" or "shoe" because of their committed presence in every review and comment.

Then we introduce the selected lemmas analysis made by Cogito (tab. 16). Here we have maintained the same specific lemmas we have used in sentiment analysis.

Adidas Correlation analysis with emotion taxonomy

	outsole	midsole	upper	heel	cushion	foam
/Happiness	2	2	0	0	0	0
/Desire	2	1	0	1	1	0
/Like	2	1	0	1	0	0
/Positivism	0	2	1	0	0	0
/Action	1	2	1	0	0	0
/Love	0	1	1	0	0	0
/Satisfaction	1	1	0	0	0	0
/Hope	1	0	0	0	0	0
/Trust	0	1	1	0	0	0
/Amusement	0	0	1	0	0	0

tab. 16: Adidas relation analysis between selected main lemmas and emotion taxonomy, supported by Cogito

Here we can see that, as in Sentiment Analysis, the main emotions proved by users and readers are associated to "outsole" and "midsole". Both this lemmas represent the main part of reviews and probably the most discussed. If we have a look to a typical running shoe review we can see that the most of the description is about these two parts of the shoe. Cushioning, that is the protagonist of shoe innovations, is physically part of both the lemmas so is considered in those descriptions. Definitely we can say that authors and users give a high rate to both the parts of the shoe, feeling positive emotions and good doses of desire. In this case the firm must consider this evolution an interesting insight. At last we have to have a look to "foam" that is a fundamental part of running

shoes review but here cannot be combined with any emotion. We can say that Sentiment Analysis and Emotion Taxonomy Analysis follow the same evolution.

From Adidas reviews analysis emerged a positive idea of brand and products. Every Adidas model analysed has been receiving a positive feedback and positive emotions. There is not a real emotion linked to technicalities but is expectable from this kind of reviews. The big absence of this analysis is the value of "trust" that is not been found and probably it could be an insight very important for online communication.

We have selected a text (image 2) where we try to find a part with a feeling of "trust" just to have an idea of what a review or comment need to perceive a trusty emotion.

The screenshot shows the Cogito Intelligence Platform interface. The main content is a text analysis of a document titled "Running Shoe Review- Adidas Parley-runblogger.txt". The document is identified as "Positive" with an acquisition date of 11/09/2019 10:01 and a creation date of 20/09/2019 10:45. The source name is "20190911\_test" and the dataflow name is "Adidas Adizero Prime Parley".

The main text of the review is displayed in the center, with a search bar above it. The text includes the following paragraphs:

- Running Shoe Review: adidas Adizero Prime Parley
- There was time when shipments of shoes would arrive at my house from various brands on a weekly basis.
- Some I had requested, some were shoes that brands were pushing because they were the latest and greatest thing and they wanted to spread the word.
- That's how the blogging/review/influencer business works.
- It's also part of the reason why I couldn't make it as a full-time blogger.
- I always felt vaguely like I was a still hawking products for big companies.
- Yes, I did my best to be honest, and not every review was positive, but there was always an underlying fear of being too critical for fear of upsetting someone, whether it be an advertiser or source of material/products to write about.
- Being an influencer kinda sucks, and it's really hard to be authentic.
- I really just want to be helpful, and to write about things I like.
- I don't really want to write long posts full of shoe specs D those are easy enough to find on product pages.
- So I thought I might try a different approach while writing my first review in a long, long time.
- Here goes.

On the right side of the interface, there is a summary table showing the results of the analysis:

Expand all   Collapse all	
Highlight all   Remove all highlights	
	Occ.
Query constraints	< 1 >
Entities	= 36
Main lemmas	+ < 33 >
Organizations	+ < 3 >
Topics	= 5
Emotions Taxonomy	= < 5 >
Action	< 1 >
Fear	< 1 >
Love	< 1 >
Positivism	< 1 >
Trust	< 1 >
Locations	= 1
Cities	+ < 1 >

Image 2: text deck with a short analysis, supported by Cogito

The greened text is the part we can read with a "trust" emotion. We can observe a positive review that try to be subjective and doesn't want to be catchy but honest.

Finally, we have selected a sample of comment (image 3) with a special focus on Boost as main argument of the text, a "positive" general sentiment and "desire" as main emotion.

On the right there is the summa of the analysis with the number of mentions, emotions and sentiments proved in the comment.

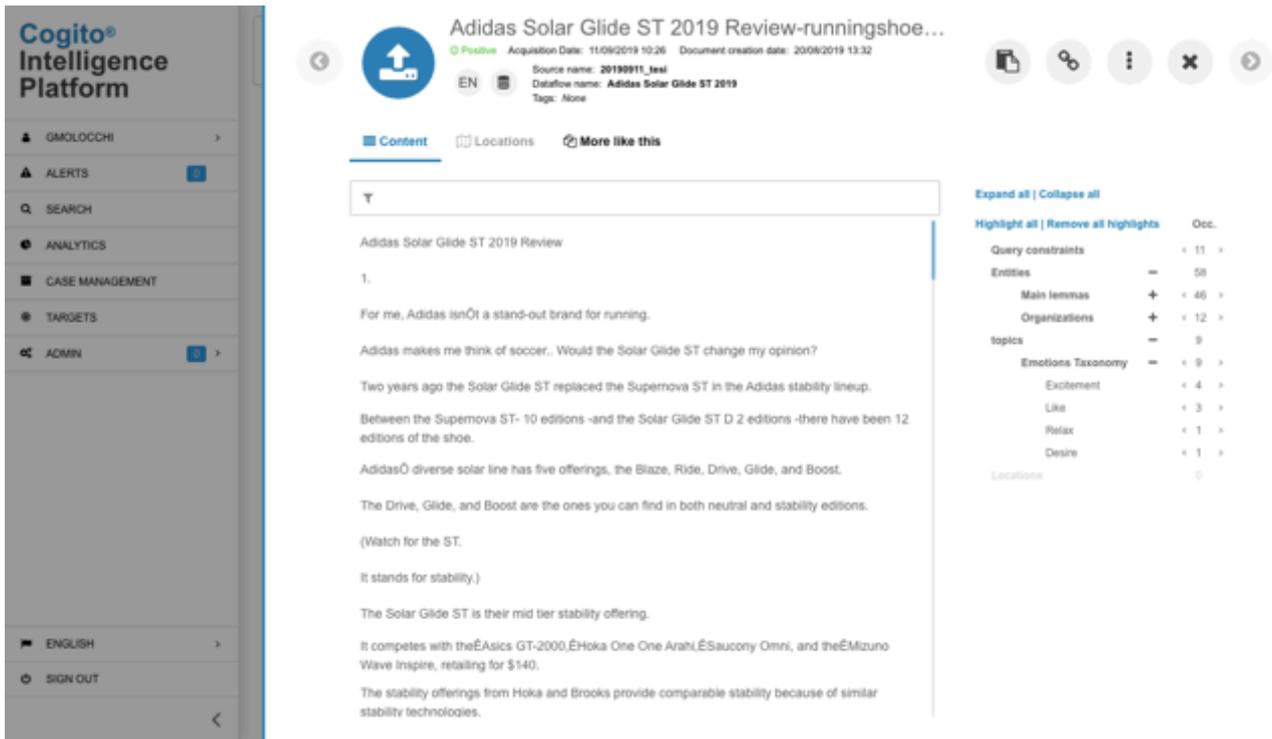


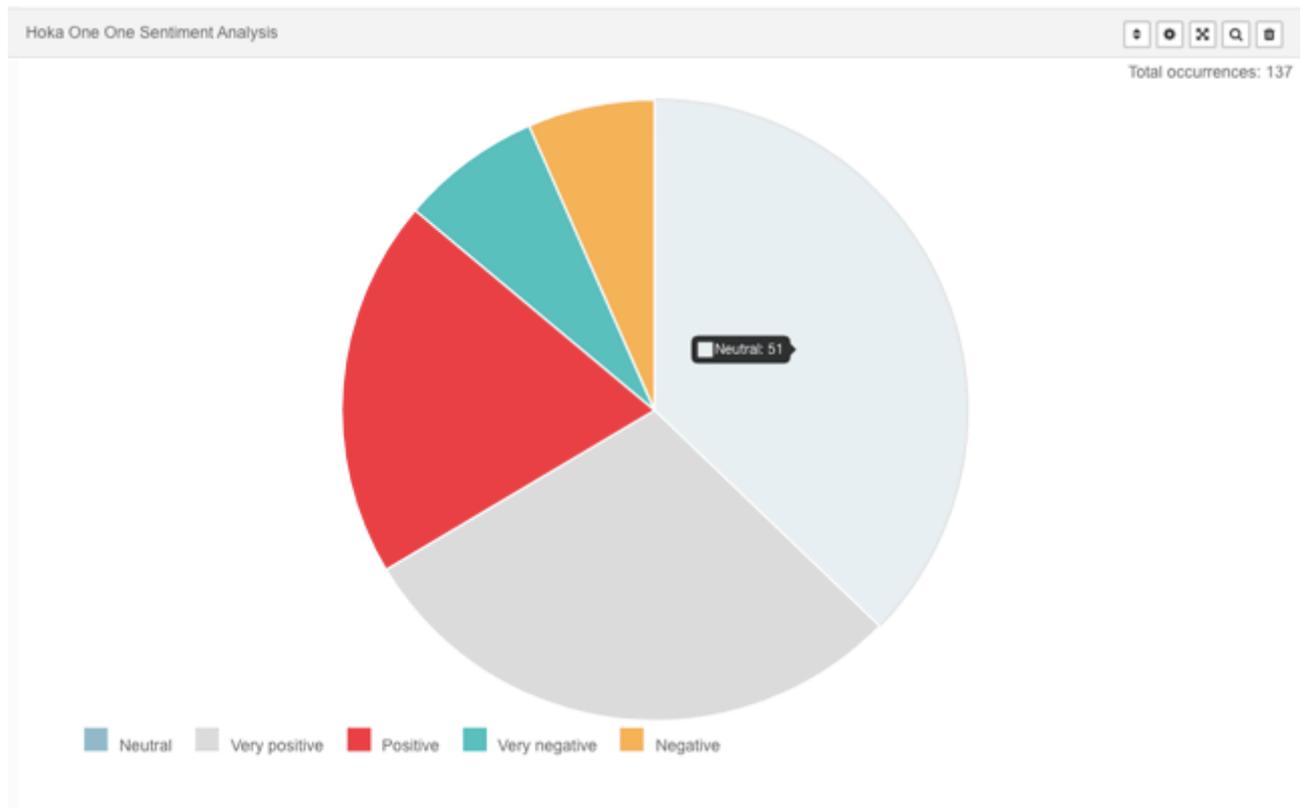
Image 3: text deck with a short analysis, supported by Cogito

We can observe a good representation of a positive and powerful review. The protagonist emotions are "excitement" and "like" following a favourable review headline.

### Hoka One One

We are following the short list of the most mentioned brands and we find Hoka One One with ten complete reviews with relative comments. We know that Hoka is one of the most used brands of the entire selection of reviews to be compared, for this reason is one of the most mentioned in the general analysis.

## Sentiment Analysis



tab. 17: Hoka One One Sentiment Analysis, supported by Cogito

As we can see from the Sentiment pie-graph (tab. 17), there is a trade off between “neutral” sentiments and “very positive”. “Neutral” has majority of 37% of occurrences and “very positive” is 29% of occurrences. Then “positive” sentiment has got a 19% of total occurrences and “negative” and “very negative” are between 7% and 6% of total occurrences.

Hoka One One correlation analysis between sentiment and main lemmas

	shoe	Hoka	foot	toe	midsole	trail
Neutral	22	12	12	9	8	6
Positive	17	4	6	7	4	2
Very positive	20	3	0	1	3	5
Very negative	6	2	0	2	1	2
Negative	3	1	3	3	0	1

tab. 18: Hoka One One analysis between main lemmas and sentiment, supported by Cogito

Observing the Sentiment analysis correlated with main lemmas (tab. 18), we can say that, as we have already seen before, "shoe" is mentioned a lot of times and together "Hoka". Positive reactions to reviews are a good advice for the brand. Otherwise, we can see that there is a short incidence of negative and very negative sentiment in Hoka One One reviews. More specifically we can see that "shoe" has got an interesting rate of 6 for "very negative" sentiment. We have to add to the discussion that the selection of most used lemmas comprehend different words from Adidas and general analysis. Hoka reviews appear more specific and technical by the common use of "trail", "toe" and "foot". The brand name, "shoe" and "midsole" are more present in the other reviews too. If we select a more specific list of main lemmas linking our work to the main characteristic of the Hoka brand, we can see this kind of analysis.

Hoka One One correlation analysis between main lemmas (selected) and sentiment

	midsole	outsole	upper	heel	forefoot	cushion
Neutral	8	5	1	3	3	2
Positive	4	3	8	0	0	2
Very positive	3	3	3	0	3	1
Negative	0	0	0	2	0	0
Very negative	1	2	0	0	0	0

tab. 19: Hoka One One analysis between selected main lemmas and sentiment, supported by Cogito

Lemmas selection comprehends "outsole" and "midsole" as a constant presence of the analysis. Then, "upper", "heel", "forefoot", and "cushion" as main parts of the shoe to talk about. If we concentrate on "positive" sentiment, we can see that there is a very high rate for "upper" in order to explain that users appreciate a lot the upper side of Hoka One One shoes. In this optician we consider Hoka a good appeal product for users and can be not only a technical product. There is not a real "very negative" high rate for any lemma but if we want to consider "negative" and "very negative" line, we can say that "midsole" and "outsole" can have some episodes of negative sentiment. At last we

have to concentrate our attention on “cushion” that is a fundamental lemma for Hoka brand. In fact the cushioned midsole made by ProFly technology, a cushioning system that combines soft foam in the heel with firmer foam in the forefoot<sup>38</sup>. More cushioning is the main characteristic of Hoka models, with lighter materials, wider rocker midsole in order to create a smoother ride. The evolution of EVA support for Hoka means the new innovative EVA-rubber blend that is a more elastic and more durable material. For all these innovative and technical characteristic of the shoe, we have selected those lemmas, to find an interesting reaction on users texts. In general we can say that Hoka shoes arouse an intense blogging activity, as we will see with Emotion Taxonomy Analysis.

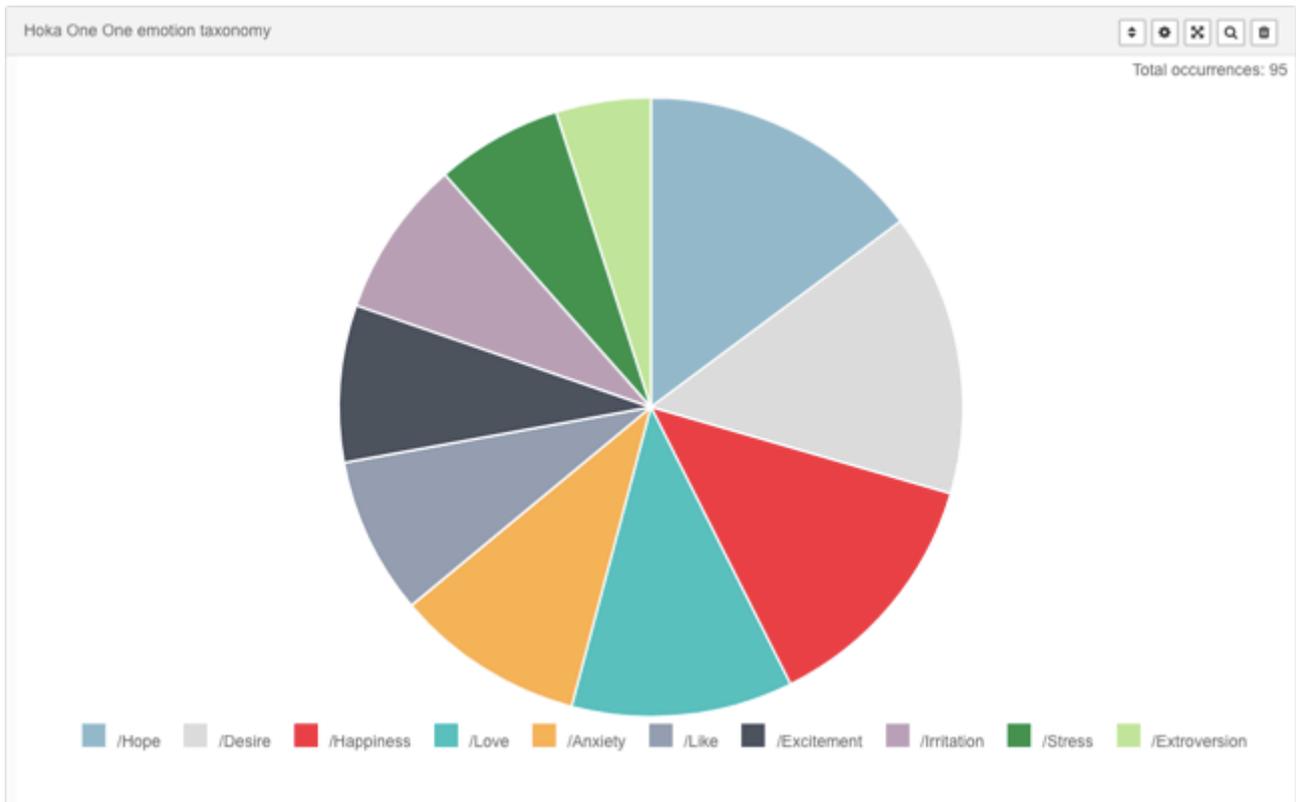
### Emotion Taxonomy

We follow up the structure of our analysis and we go ahead with Emotion Taxonomy. As we can see from the pie-graph (tab. 20) we know that the most felt emotion is “hope” and “desire” for an incidence of 9% of total occurrences of 95. Both the lemmas go together indicating a strong sense of belonging to the shoe and the brand. Brand awareness could be at a very high level for users. Following those strong emotions we can find “happiness” and “love” with 8% and 7% of total occurrences, those too are positive emotions that help to understand the good users feedback. Then, in the middle of the emotions ranking we can find “anxiety” with a relatively high rate of 6%. This lemma could be an index of uncertainty about some models or a sort of doubt from users choice. We can have a check later from a more focused analysis.

Then, there is a back and forth emotion expression, from “like” to “excitement”, until “irritation” (5%) and “stress” (4%), finally “extroversion” (3%).

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Charboneau, *The 11 Best Hoka One One Running Shoes You Can Buy*, August 7, 2019 <https://www.runnersworld.com/gear/a22515179/the-10-best-hoka-one-one-running-shoes/>



tab. 20 : Hoka One One Emotion taxonomy, supported by Cogito

Going ahead with the analysis we take the analysis as an example of the enthusiasm proved by users. "Hope" and "desire" are special lemmas that going to indicate a positive correspondence to "shoe" as main lemma. "Love" and "happiness" have got an interesting high rate not only with "shoe" but with "midsole" too. From "hope" to "love" we find a very positive user feedback with a high rate. In the middle of the table we can see an interesting rating for "anxiety", "irritation" and "stress" deriving from uncertainty for the shoe testing. In fact we can observe that "shoe" has got a high rate for negative emotions as "irritation" and "anxiety". This fact could depend on a sort of uncertainty deriving from the novelty of the shoes. Hokas are different shoes, they have original cushioning characteristics and very often people don't get used to it immediately.

	shoe	Hoka	foot	toe	midsole	trail
/Hope	7	2	2	1	3	1
/Desire	7	2	3	1	4	0
/Happiness	6	1	1	1	5	0
/Love	6	2	1	2	1	1
/Anxiety	4	1	2	3	1	2
/Irritation	5	1	1	1	1	0
/Stress	3	0	0	0	2	0
/Like	2	0	1	1	2	0
/Excitement	3	1	1	0	0	0
/Extroversion	3	0	1	1	0	0

tab. 21: Hok One One analysis between main lemmas and emotion taxonomy, supported by Cogito

In fact, when we isolate the emotions “anxiety” we can observe a concentration of very negative sentiment that it is focused on “toe”, “shoe” and “trail”. Anxiety could be linked to the uncertainty deriving from the shoe performance. If we isolate “irritation” we find a negative sentiment on “shoe”, “harshness” and “lacing”. These aspects annoy users and make them to talk about that. Other lemmas that are involved with “irritation” emotion are “stretcher” and “terrain”. In this way we can understand what make the users annoyed in the running moment.

If we work on a selected lemmas table (tab. 22), we can see that the highest concentration of emotions is on “midsole”, “outsole” and “upper” components part of the shoes and, for Hoka, important characterized areas. Otherwise, we cannot see any kind of high rate of emotion in the analysis with “cushion”. Probably, readers and users are yet more focused on the part of the shoes as “midsole” and “outsole”. Generally, there is a positive concentration on both the lemmas, giving to Hoka a positive standard.

Hoka One One correlation analysis between main lemmas (selected) and emotion taxonomy

	outsole	midsole	upper	forefoot	cushion	foam
/Happiness	3	5	2	0	0	1
/Hope	3	3	1	0	0	0
/Desire	3	4	1	0	0	0
/Love	0	1	0	0	1	0
/Forgiveness	1	1	0	1	0	0
/Like	1	2	0	0	0	0
/Irritation	1	1	1	0	0	1
/Stress	2	2	0	0	0	0
/Dynamic	2	2	0	0	0	0
/Extroversion	0	0	1	0	0	1

tab. 22: Hoka One One analys between selected main lemmas and emotion taxonomy, supported by Cogito

Finally, to catch the positivity of Hoka One One reviews we have selected a lemmas cloud where "happiness" is grouped with correlated lemmas as "Hoka", "Mafate", "shoe" and "midsole". The last lemma permits us to understand the positive idea that users have about this brand and the fact that every positive sentiment concerns the shoe structure.

**Cloud describing the relationship between emotions and main lemmas**



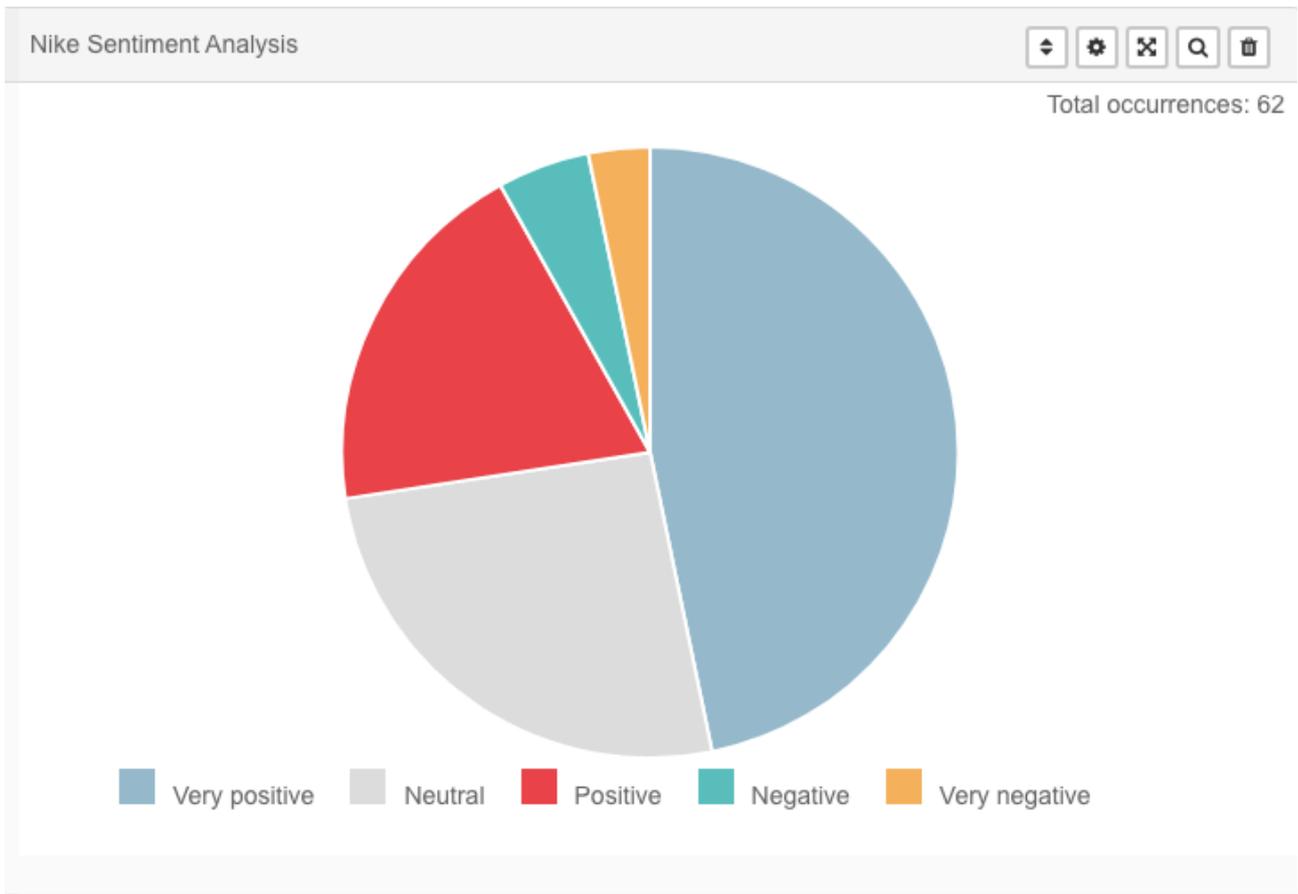
tab. 23: Lemmas Cloud, supported by Cogito

## Nike

### Sentiment Analysis

Nike is one of the most popular brands, with adidas, to have many dedicated reviews. At the same time we have to say that Nike is not the most mentioned (at this point we have Hoka One One as the most discussed and reviewed running shoes brand). In fact, when we talk about Nike at blogging we tend to do not consider as much as the most popular sportswear brand but to consider only the shoe, the technical characteristics of the shoe. Going ahead with the analysis we can see that the sentiment analysis is very clear. There is an evident positive sentiment in a large part of reviews and comments.

“Very positive” sentiment is 46% of the total occurrences, while “neutral” (one of the first time that is not the majority) is at 25%. “Positive” as 20% while “negative” and “very negative” 6% and 3%.



tab. 24: Nike Sentiment Analysis, supported by Cogito

Apparently, Nike products have a positive online feedback. The sentiment analysis underlines the fact that Nike remains one of the favourites and that technically, can be a valid challenger brand for more specific and technical brands.

Nike Correlation Analysis between main lemmas and sentiment

	shoe	midsole	outsole	foot	thanks	toe
Very positive	13	3	3	2	5	0
Positive	8	2	3	1	2	0
Neutral	5	2	2	1	1	0
Negative	3	0	0	1	0	0
Very negative	1	1	1	0	0	0

tab. 25: Nike analysis between main lemmas and sentiment, supported by Cogito

In the table above (tab. 25) Nike has a very positive result in this table, with "shoe" as Hoka and Adidas, as well; it has got a medium "positive" sentiment for the other

lemmas. "Thanks" is present as a very used lemma as we have already explained in the other brand cases. On average, "negative" and "very negative" sentiment is common for "shoe" that has a medium rating, because, of course, reviews need to be critical and objective about several aspects of the shoe.

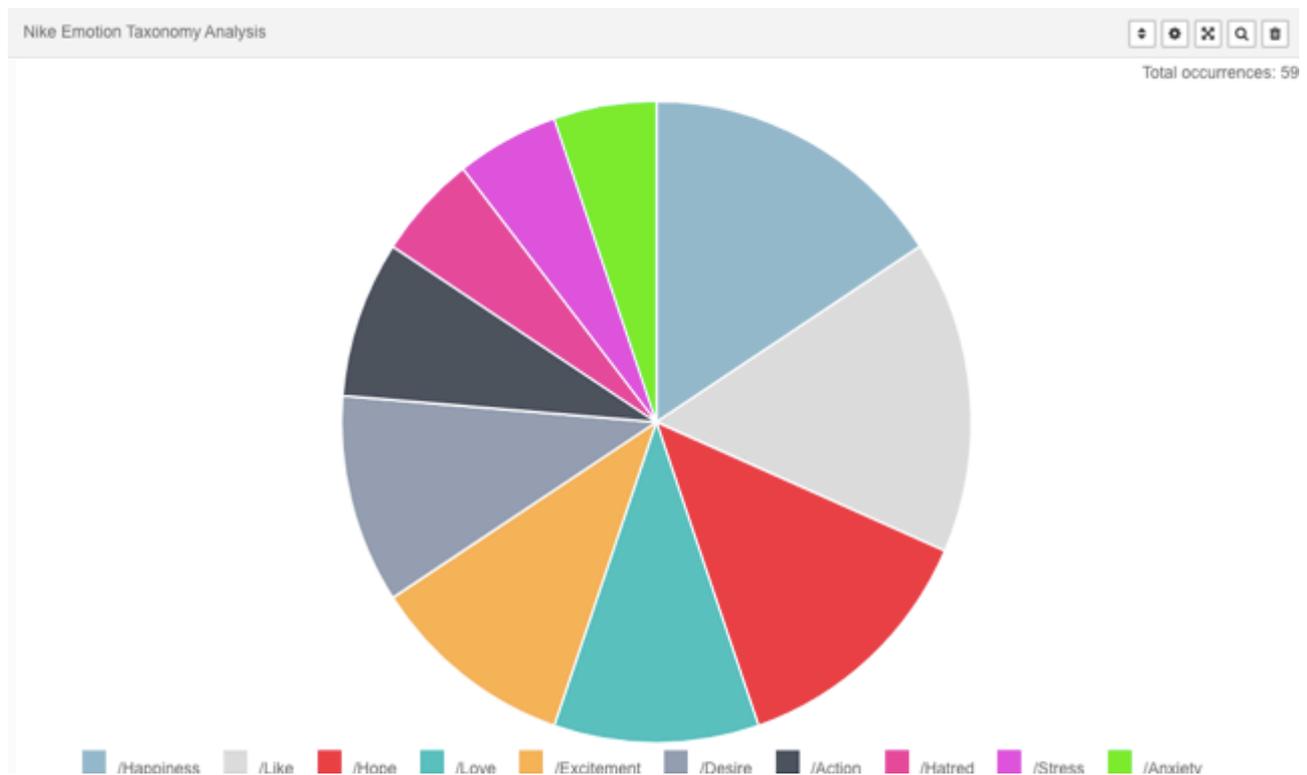
Going ahead with the analysis and choosing a selected group of lemmas for the sentiment analysis we can observe a smoothly change. In fact, in tab. 26 we can immediately observe that "upper" has a "positive" sentiment, probably because the aesthetic of the shoe is commonly welcomed in running shoes reviews. Differently is observed a high rate of "negative" sentiment for the "heel". In this case the firm could have a great occasion to understand the different users trends. Otherwise, if we concentrate on "midsole" and "outsole" columns we can see a very positive feedback from users with "forefoot" and "heel" too. At last, "cushion" is discussed too, but has got lower rates and can be considered in a "neutral" sentiment status.

Nike Correlation Analysis between main lemmas (selected) and sentiment

	midsole	outsole	upper	forefoot	heel	cushion
Positive	2	3	4	2	2	0
Very positive	3	3	1	2	2	1
Neutral	2	2	0	2	2	1
Negative	0	0	0	1	3	1
Very negative	1	1	0	0	0	0

tab. 26: Nike analysis between selected main lemmas and sentiment, supported by Cogito

## Emotion Taxonomy Analysis



tab. 27: Nike Emotion Taxonomy Analysis, supported by Cogito

In the pie-graph above (tab. 27) we can see interesting evolutions of the analysis. Nike reviews have a majority of “like” and “happiness” emotions as we could have supposed from sentiment analysis. “Hope”, “love”, “desire” and “excitement” have generally good rating: 8% and 6% together for the total of occurrences of 59. Then, if we want to focus on emotions not so positive we can see that “hatred”, “stress” and “anxiety” are at 3% of the total occurrences, summed up this, it is an interesting data for running shoes performance. At last, “action” is felt about 5% of total occurrences, in that way users are probably invited to test shoes or specific Nike models.

The second step of emotion taxonomy analysis is the analysis between not selected main lemmas and emotion taxonomy (tab. 28). “Shoe” almost always has a high rate of positive feedbacks: there is a high rate of “desire”, “love”, “hope” and “happiness” have high rates. On the other hand, “midsole” and “outsole” have a discrete rating but not at

the best. "Foot" and "toe" have no results. The other emotions are badly expressed with "shoe" and "midsole" and "outsole".

Nike Correlation analysis between main lemmas and emotion taxonomy

	shoe	midsole	outsole	foot	thanks	toe
/Happiness	5	3	2	0	0	0
/Hope	5	2	2	0	0	0
/Like	2	2	3	0	2	0
/Love	4	1	1	0	1	0
/Excitement	2	0	1	0	2	0
/Desire	4	2	1	0	0	0
/Hatred	2	1	1	0	0	0
/Stress	1	1	1	0	0	0
/Anxiety	2	0	0	1	0	0
/Dynamic	2	2	2	0	0	0

tab. 28: Nike analysis between main lemmas and emotion taxonomy, supported by Cogito

If we select the main lemmas for a more in deep analysis we can observe that "happiness" is felt almost in every selected lemma. Specifically, "forefoot" has a great concentration, users could be very satisfied about the forefoot of a Nike pair of shoes. "hope" and "like" are contemporary expressed for the other lemmas a part for "upper" , "forefoot" and "cushion". In this collation there is not a real negative emotion apart from "hatred" that is proved intensively for "heel". Finally, we can consider "action" an interesting emotion proved by "heel" and "forefoot". Another interesting rate could be the number of "like" for "outsole". Generally we can consider Nike reviews very positive, not so common as properly review but where they are, very positive elements.

Nike correlation analysis between main lemmas (selected) and emotion taxonomy

	midsole	outsole	upper	heel	forefoot	cushion
/Happiness	3	2	1	2	3	1
/Hope	2	2	0	2	0	0
/Like	2	3	0	1	0	0
/Desire	2	1	1	2	0	0
/Love	1	1	0	1	1	0
/Hatred	1	1	0	2	0	0
/Dynamic	2	2	0	1	0	0
/Commitment	1	1	0	1	1	1
/Action	0	1	0	2	2	0
/Success	1	1	0	1	0	0

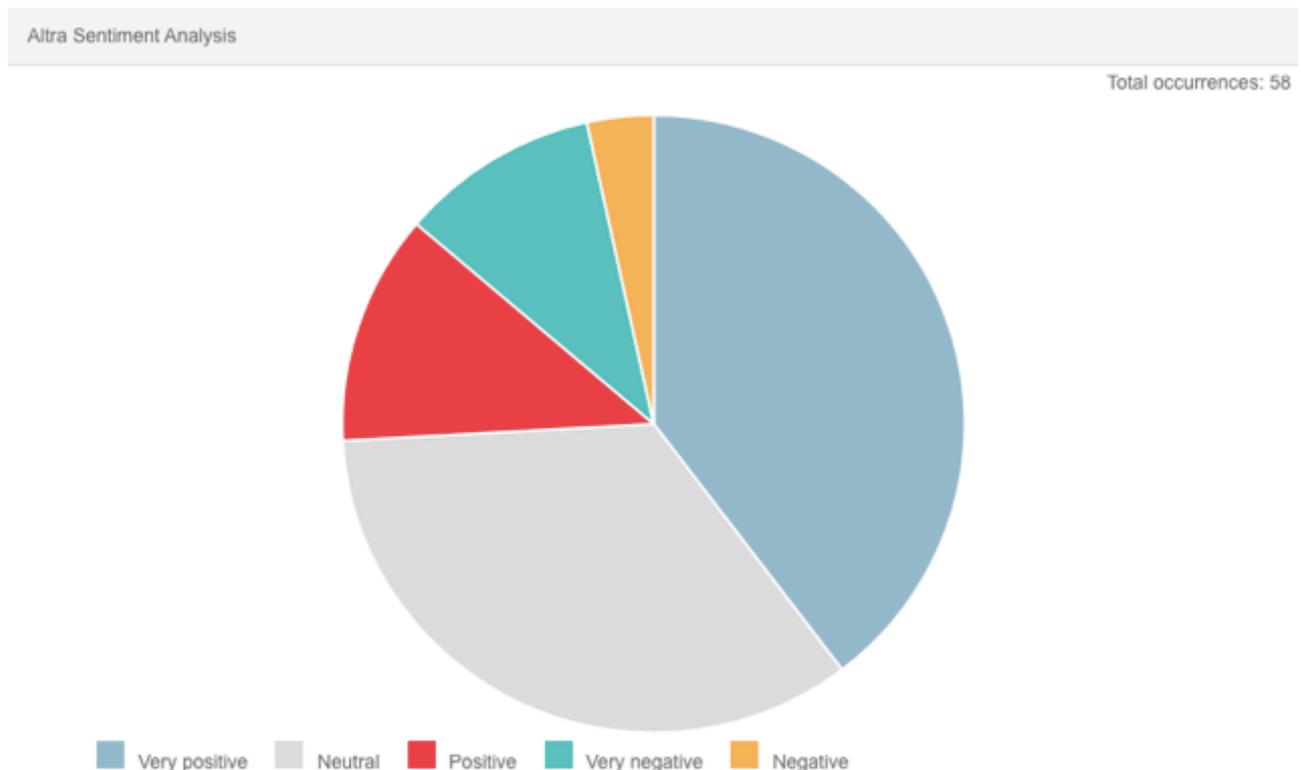
tab. 29: Nike analysis between selected main lemmas and emotion taxonomy, supported by Cogito

Altra Running

Sentiment Analysis

Altra is a smaller brand; it has got few reviews but is rich of innovations enough to give a high rating of sentiment and emotions for this analysis. Principally, Altra stands out in the market because of three important technologies and characteristics of the shoe. First, Altra Running introduces a different structure of the forefoot, the Footshape Toe Box in order to permit to the toes to relax and spread out naturally in the forefoot. The other distinguish element is the characterized shoe structure for female foot. Fit4Her is a

narrower heel and mid-foot, a higher instep, a longer arch and a metatarsal spacing. These shoe form innovations permit to make the shoe appreciable shoes. The third technology involves, of course, the cushioning. In this case we'll see a balanced cushioning platform that positions the heel and forefoot an equal distance from the ground <sup>39</sup>. Following these innovations, we confirm the same procedure done before confirming the importance of lemmas selection for the analysis.



tab. 30: Altra Sentiment Analysis, supported by Cogito

The Sentiment Analysis (tab.30) expresses a very positive approach to reviews. "Very positive" has got a 39% of total occurrences while "neutral" 34%. "Positive" sentiment is around 12% for the total occurrences, while "negative" and "very negative" are at 3% and 10%. If we have a look to the general analysis sentiment standard we are at similar levels.

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.altrarunning.eu/uk/why-altra>

Using the analysis below (tab. 31) we can see the most used lemmas in relationship with main sentiments.

Altra correlation analysis between main lemmas and sentiment

	shoe	midsole	outsole	foot	thanks	toe
Very positive	15	3	3	1	3	0
Neutral	12	5	4	3	1	0
Positive	5	3	0	0	1	0
Very negative	4	4	3	1	0	0
Negative	1	0	0	0	0	0

tab. 31: Altra analysis between main lemmas and sentiment, supported by Cogito

“Shoe”, as very often, has got a high “very positive” and “neutral” rating, in the others lemmas we can see a very equilibrate panorama where “midsole” and “outsole” have positive sentiments at all. “Negative” and “very negative” sentiments have a modest concentration in “midsole” and “outsole” permitting us to read a sort of scepticism in users sentiment. The analysis focuses, as in the other brands, the most of the sentiment, from negative to positive, in the first three lemmas. “Foot”, “thanks” and “toe” remain indicators not so specific and not so useful in this instance.

If we choose our selected lemmas (tab. 32) we find that sentiment highest concentration happens in “midsole” and “outsole” considering “neutral” as the principal sentiment proved. “Upper” has got “very positive” and “positive” rating higher enough to say that users could like this part of Altra shoes. Otherwise, “midsole” and “outsole” remain with a relative higher rating in “negative” and “very negative” sentiment.

Altra correlation analysis between main lemmas (selected) and sentiment

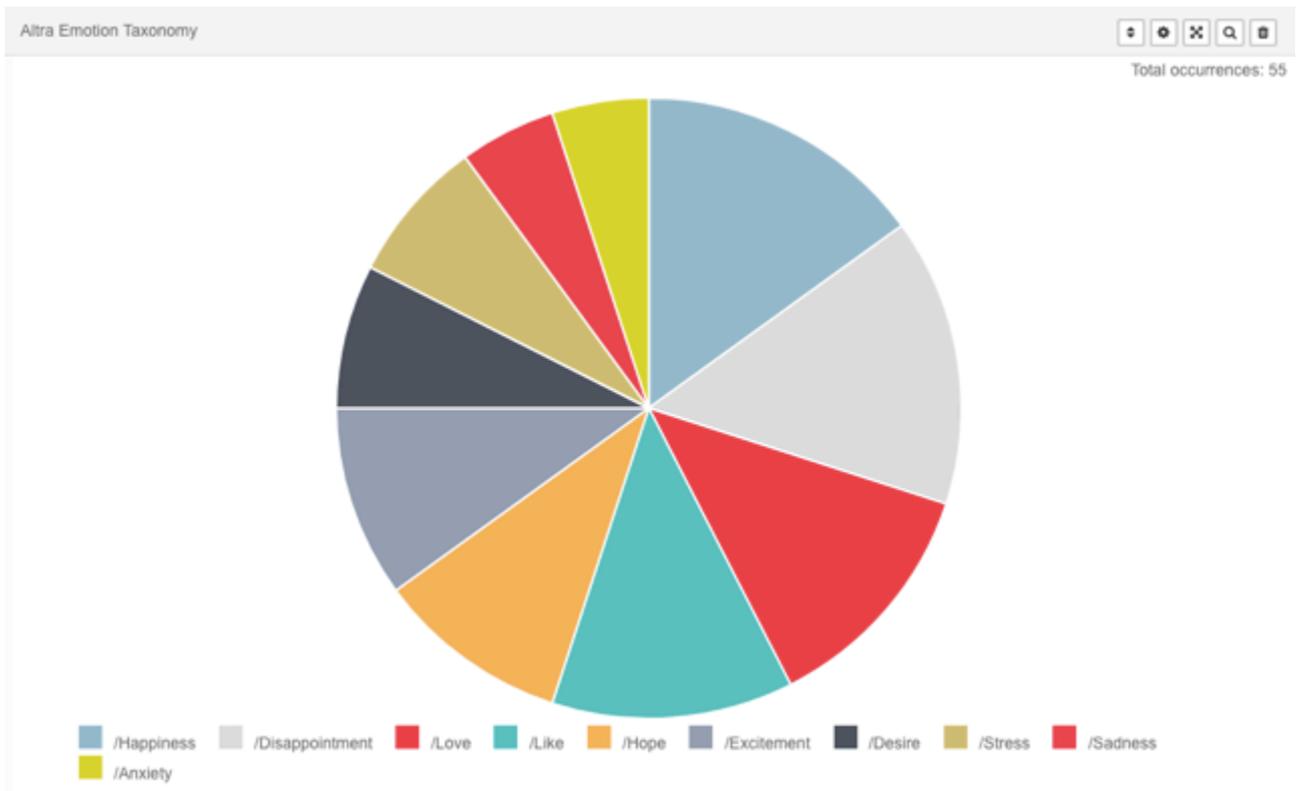
	outsole	midsole	upper	forefoot	heel	cushion
Very positive	3	3	3	0	1	0
Neutral	4	5	0	0	0	0
Positive	0	3	3	0	0	0
Very negative	3	4	0	0	0	0
Negative	0	0	0	0	1	0

tab. 32: Altra analysis between selected main lemmas and sentiment, supported by Cogito

The word “cushion” together with “forefoot” remain lemmas without expression of sentiment, while “heel” doesn’t raise notable sentiments a part from “very positive” at low rate and “negative” at the same low rate.

Emotion Taxonomy Analysis

The emotion taxonomy analysis underlines that Altra Running shoes have got a very equilibrate selection of emotions. An interesting insight could be the same level of 10% for “happiness” and “disappointment”, leaving us the idea that probably Altra communicates its values and propositions in a way that is not always efficient. After all “love” is a strong indicator with “like” at 9%. Emotion taxonomy can describe exactly what is users’ idea of Altra Running shoes and permit us to understand the likeness level. Following the pie-graph, “hope”, “excitement” and “desire” are interesting emotions for users and buyers. Altra is a very appreciated brand.



tab. 33: Altra Emotion Taxonomy Analysis, supported by Cogito

Finally we have “stress”, “sadness” and “anxiety” that express the negative part of Altra reviews. Users that talk about Altra Running shoes feel stress and sadness in 5% and 3% as the anxiety feeling. If we want to understand this phenomenon we can isolate a review or a comment where for example anxiety is proved. Having a look at image 4 we can see how in a very positive comment (read below the title) we have an anxiety sentence because of user test. We have selected in green lines the *anxious* part and we have found a questioning about a certain model of Altra Running that probably creates some doubts about the shoe and the performances.

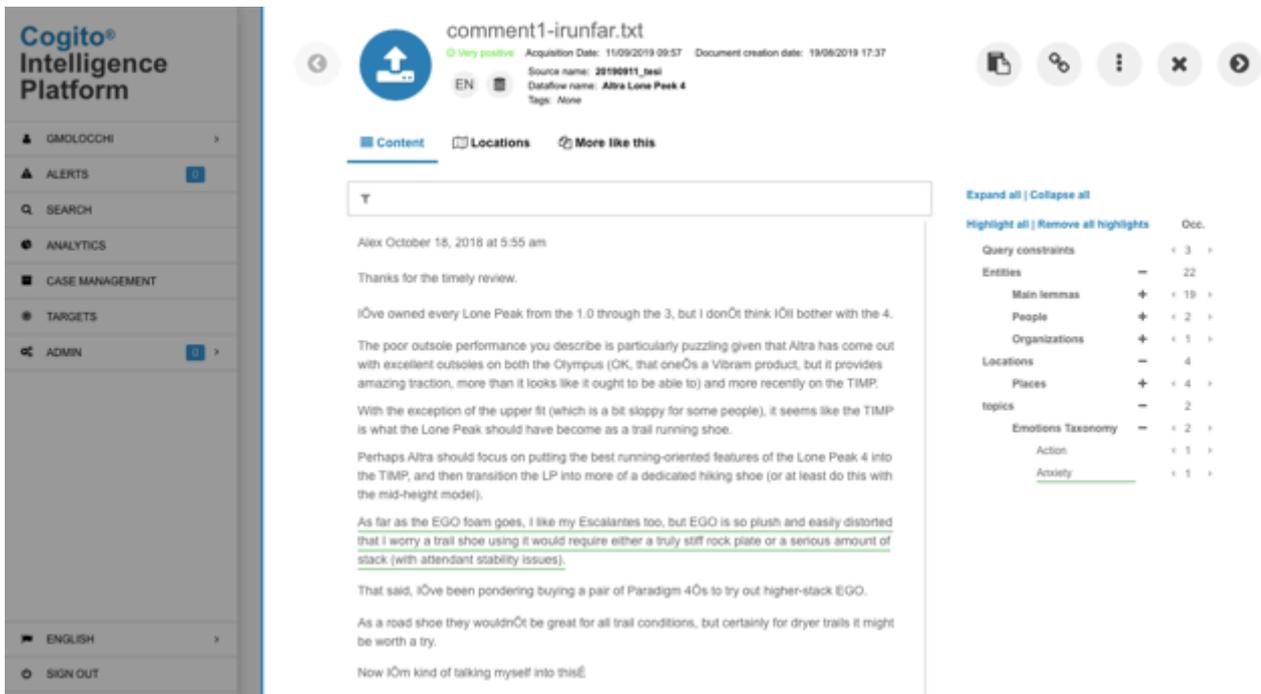


Image 4: Text deck from Cogito.com

In this optician we can considerate this emotions a real expression of what users think in reviews and comments. This is a participation process where users share their insights about a shoe testing and the results of it.

Altra corelation analysis between main lemmas and emotion taxonomy

	shoe	midsole	outsole	foot	toe	thanks
/Disappointment	6	3	2	0	0	0
/Happiness	5	3	1	2	0	0
/Love	4	2	1	0	0	1
/Hope	4	2	1	0	0	0
/Like	1	1	1	0	0	2
/Excitement	2	0	0	1	0	2
/Desire	3	1	0	1	0	0
/Sadness	2	2	2	0	0	0
/Stress	1	1	1	0	0	0
/Anxiety	2	0	1	0	0	0

tab. 34: Altra analysis between main lemmas and emotion taxonomy, supported by Cogito

Going ahead with the analysis and considering the relationship between main lemmas and emotion taxonomy (tab. 34) we can observe that "disappointment" is positioned at

first in the table. "Shoe", "midsole" and "outsole" at "disappointment" have high rating probably due to the testing phase with Altra shoes. We can see from a short sample, representative for the analysis of the other 5 comments and 1 review that "disappointment" emotion is linked directly with the shoe and the fact that there are some particularities or characteristics that don't fit as users preferences. In image 5 we can see an example about what we are talking about. The green line underlines the part of the text we focus on. Cogito selects the text through the AI, finding the lemma or the expression that could respect the idea of "disappointment" in the text. Finally we have to say that Cogito select as emotion "disappointment" and it correlate with shoe because, as we can see, the problem for the user is directly with the shoe.

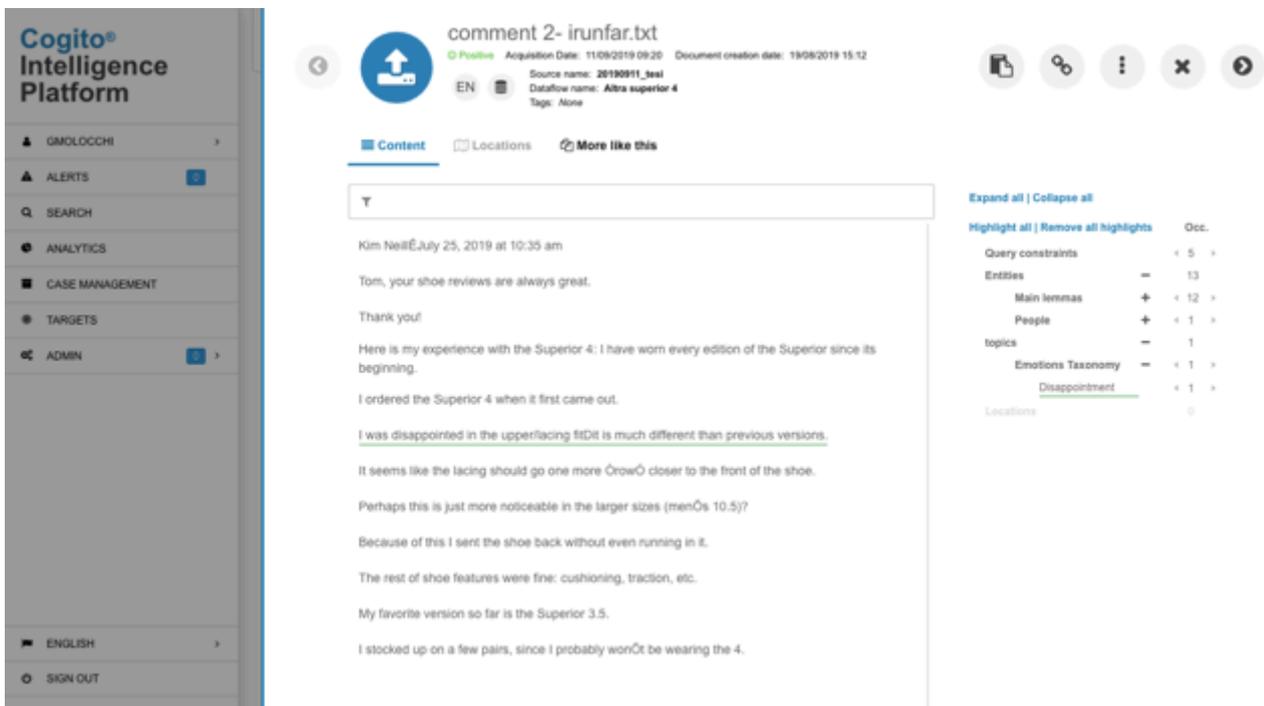


Image 5: Text deck from Cogito.com

About the other lemmas we have to specify that: "happiness" is spread until lemma "foot" in order to considerate the group of reviews and comments moderately positive for the users. Then, we have to concentrate on the slightly change of opinion for "shoe". Users consider Altra Running both in positive and in negative way perceiving the products also with "anxiety" and "sadness" (tab. 34).

To be more specific with our brand analysis we focus on the relationship between selected main lemmas and emotion taxonomy.

Altra correlation analysis between main lemmas (selected) and emotion taxonomy

	outsole	midsole	upper	forefoot	heel	cushion
/Happiness	1	3	2	0	1	0
/Disappointment	2	3	1	0	0	0
/Love	1	2	0	0	0	0
/Hope	1	2	0	0	0	0
/Desire	0	1	2	0	0	0
/Sadness	2	2	0	0	0	0
/Forgiveness	1	1	0	0	0	0
/Like	1	1	0	0	0	0
/Amusement	1	1	0	0	0	0
/Excitement	0	0	1	0	0	0

tab. 35: Altra analysis between selected main lemmas and emotion taxonomy, supported by Cogito

Here (tab. 35) the most considered lemma, with the highest level of emotions (we talk about “happiness” and “disappointment”) is “midsole” that has got rate 3 for both the emotions. “Outsole” is moderately considered with level 2 of “disappointment” and “sadness” and this couldn’t be good news for Altra brand. Users see more positively “midsole”, compared with “outsole”, having higher rates in positive emotions, and lower rates in negative ones. “Upper” has got good rating for “happiness”, users like the upper of the shoe and at the same time they prove “desire” and “excitement” for that part. The other lemmas are not really correlated with any emotion but they are in every review and comment.

## 4.7 Concluding Remarks

This chapter is an exhaustive description of what happens in blogs. Cogito Artificial Intelligence with its Knowledge Machine could have described the different dynamics that involve blog reviews and comments. Sentiment analysis and emotion taxonomy are the two important pillars of the study. We have chosen these two cogito.com widgets because of their importance in the direct reading of blog reviews and comments. If we understand which is users intent reviewing a pair of running shoes, a part from the sponsored one, we can understand the level of participation, involvement and finally users agreement, bloggers and consumers. Actually we know that running performance contents and garments and shoes reviews are a great explanation of what is happening between users and brands. We are not treating stats or specific measurement, but we want to find a link between User Generated Content and product awareness, since we are working on product reviews and comments. The link we want to find has its "spark" from the semantic analysis in order to understand how and in which way users consider technical lemmas to evaluate the products.

First we have to explain that all lemmas we can find in blogging analysis are all sourced from all considered reviews. Cogito has extracted Sentiment and Emotion directly from the selected review and comments. There have not been filters or exclusion. This could be considered a primary data work, with an artificial intelligence elaboration that has been read and analysed. After the practical analysis, with the help of Sentiment and Emotion Taxonomy pie-graph and the relationship between main lemmas and both separated indexes, we can pronounce some observations.

## General Brand Analysis

The first analysis we have done has the advantage to anticipate and explain, as generalizing as it is possible, the online users behaviour. Generally, reviews are written in a spread positive sentiment. The fact that someone, the author, has written something for the users, athletes and buyers, is an essential argument that justifies the positivism atmosphere. Neutrality, in this area, is expectable because of the sense of responsibility on the future purchase of users. The blog author knows the importance of his or her judge on those specific pair of shoes. Besides, we have to say that every review and comment in the analysis and generally in this kind of blogs is explicitly subjective and product of a personal experience with those specific pair of shoes.

For these reasons we have find a perfect mix of positive and neutral sentiments and a huge range of emotions. The neutrality is expected and makes the value of the analysis reliable.

If we have a look to main lemmas selection and development in the analysis (chapter 4, tab. 4) we discover some interesting insights. As we are talking about running shoes reviews, it is predictable to find the lemma "shoe" almost in every comment and review article. But we have to focus our attention on the positivity of the lemma. As Sentiment Analysis as Emotion Taxonomy can be an useful insight to understand if that review has got positive engagement on users or neutral or negative. In the general analysis we have found that "very positive" and "positive" sentiment summed can reach more than 53% of occurrence, and if we focus this relationship with the use of "shoe" we can understand that this lemma has got a related ranking. "Shoe" has a "positive" and "very positive" incidence of 55% of total sentiment impressions. The other lemmas have different relationship with sentiment. In the emotion taxonomy happens similarly that "shoe" concentrates a very positive group of emotions as "happiness", "love" and "desire" confirming what we have understood from the sentiment analysis.

The other lemmas, mainly "midsole" and "outsole" are representative of what happens in reviews. Users concentrate the most important information about shoes in the use of these two lemmas. Firstly, the sentiment analysis has underlined the moderately condition of positive sentiment, while neutrality wins on "very positive". This factor depends on the more technical description of the shoe in the part of the review where both lemmas are used. On the other hand "midsole" and "outsole" have a very low rate of negative impressions, good signal for brands and for producers. The last three selected lemmas are "foot", indispensable "element" of the descriptions, "toe" and "upper". As we have said in Chapter 4, we can consider "thanks" a part, as a general use of reviews and not so useful for our analysis. "Foot" generally maintains a neutral sentiment together with the other two lemmas. "Upper", in the last column of tab. 4, has a "positive" sentiment reaction; in this case we can consider this a good sign. The reviews we have read include many running shoes that apparently are appreciated by users for their upper aspects. By the Emotion Taxonomy we can recognize that the relationship is apparently equilibrated and the term raises some intense emotions as "happiness" and "desire".

Then, the general analysis has selected four main brands to go ahead with the more specific part. Using the sentiment analysis we have decided the ranking and the level of importance of the single brand analysis. It was a surprise when we have realized that there were not only "famous" brands. In our analysis there are not only the most mentioned brands but also the most reliable and interesting for the users and consumers, first for athletes. These data alone just could be essential information.

Adidas, Hoka One One, Nike and Altra are the most mentioned, appreciated and discussed brands of running shoes we have in our analysis. Considering that the whole analysis not involves any branded blog, we can accept the idea that the consumer decides. Of course marketing and communication strategies guide the on-line and off-line consumer, but here we can see only a part of the consumer journey funnel, and in blogs, opinions are independent. The four brand Emotion Taxonomy is consistent with the Sentiment Analysis, but it describes an interesting panorama: Adidas is the most

“happy” brand, while Nike has not relevant numbers neither for “happiness” neither for “hatred”, as negative emotion. This last is an index that there is something wrong in the digital communication of Nike Inc.. Essentially, if we have a look on Nike reviews we find a general dissatisfaction about technical characteristics and performance of the shoe while the aesthetic aspect is commonly appreciated.

The other two brands are the surprise. Hoka One One and Altra represent the niche market, not as niche as it appears. In fact both the brands are known and appreciated for their performances and technical characteristics. Runners and blog users are used to these two brands that, as we can see from the analysis are even loved and aim of health fanaticism. In this way we can confirm this diffused idea.

### Single Brand Analysis

As we have seen before, these four brands reviews and comments represent what people as users say in online blogs. Every brand in a structured analysis developed by Sentiment Analysis and Emotion Taxonomy Analysis has consistent characteristics and touch-points that align with our idea of online users involvement.

Every sportswear brand has singular and specific technology for running shoes. Every shoe reviewed uses a specific language to describe the product and its performance by running. Finally, every review, as we have seen, has an invariable use of some lemmas. “Shoe”, “midsole”, “outsole” are the most used. Every one of these words is correlated with a positive, neutral or negative sentiment, as we could have read in paragraph before.

*But do the different technologies and shoe innovations change the idea that users have about a brand?*

This is an important focus concerning the idea of what happens inside the review text and this is what Cogito could have done with the entire reviews selection.

First, we have found that for the four brands, the review approach is always almost positive and very positive. Adidas has got the highest rating for positive and very positive sentiment, Hoka One One, the second one, while Nike and Altra follow the others. Hoka, on the other hand, has got the highest (relatively) negative rating. Moreover, we can observe from the Emotion Taxonomy that Adidas and Hoka have an interesting level of “hope” and “desire”. Both the brands have very good reviews and feedbacks, inviting users to test the shoes. Adidas, as a complete brand, can be product to have a relative high rating on “happiness” too. In this way we can say that the product brand is almost what runners want and approve. Adidas has got a very high concentration of emotions in relationship with “outsole” and “midsole” overlooking the other terms.

Hoka One One, instead, is more complete, both in Sentiment Analysis either in Emotion Taxonomy. In fact the brand has got high ratings for “heel”, “forefoot” and “cushion” as main selected lemmas. This is an interesting insight in order to explain the huge participation of users in Hoka blogging. Hoka users love to talk about every aspect of the shoe, including the “upper” of the shoe, not always considered. Moreover, if we have a look to Sentiment analysis, (Chapter 4, tab.18) we can see that Hoka users appreciate to talk about “foot” and “toe” differently from the other brands.

Nike has not same reactions. In fact if we have a look to main lemmas analysis with sentiments and emotions, is not so “active” as the previous one. If we have a look to tab. 25 in chapter 4 we can see that the only lemma with some interesting rating is “shoe”. The Sentiment Analysis reveals that there is less users activity and is generally less enthusiastic. Nike does many communication campaigns and is famous for its brand engagement in every kind of sport and lifestyle, but if we talk about shoe testing and performance there is a gap. Smaller firms can be more dedicated and focused on runners and their performance. Blog users are less inclined to talk about noted running shoes; we can see that by the lacking emotional participation on blogs.

Finally we talk about a niche brand, well known by runners and specialists. Altra Running, as Hoka One One is famous because of its efficient and excellent products. Running and trail shoes are very positively reviewed, as we can see from tab. 30 in chapter 4. Most

used main lemmas, as in other brands, are "outsole", "midsole" and "upper" with a good level of enthusiasm and, of course very shortage of negative sentiments. The niche market is very appreciated by runners and it stimulates the testing on blogs. Reviews and comments are directly focused on Altra shoes' performance. As we can see from texts we can recognize the active interest and participation of users in shoe reviews. The real interest is found by Cogito and recognized by several emotions. Differently we can recognize that "disappointment" is a new interesting emotion proved by users. At the end we find that the emotion comes from a diversity of the some shoe models. In this way, we see that Altra shoe reviews are barely positive but as a niche brand need to be discovered.

Cogito analysis is strictly semantic and has several possible interpretations. Our research, from User Generated Content application to market evolutions, wants to explain shortly how today brands are perceived by users and how much users can appreciate running shoes brands as long as to make their purchasing decisions. The positive perception derived from blog reviews is a good signal for those brands. Finally, we can observe that the specificity of the descriptions helps users to take purchasing decisions. This buyer journey becomes the journey that an athlete chooses to practice his or her favourite sport, running as best as he or she can.

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