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Real-time marketing to break through the clutter: a cross-cultural comparison of factors and motivators influencing social media consumer engagement and brand eWOM intention in China and Italy

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"Don't push people to where you want to be. Meet them where they are."

- Meghan Keaney Anderson,
VP Marketing, HubSpot

ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this thesis is to empirically investigate the influence that the use of real-time marketing message creativity (CREA) and humor (HUMO) has on consumer brand engagement on social media (CBEN) and electronic word-of-mouth intention (EWOM). Moreover, this study tests the relationship between CBEN and EWOM, by trying to investigate whether the former has a positive effect on the latter, and, by trying to understand if both self-enhancement (SENH) and social bonding (SBON) exert a moderating effect between the two variables. The analysis was carried out in Italy and China, in order to investigate cross-cultural differences between these two different and dissimilar countries.

Design/methodology/approach – Two questionnaires, made of the exact same number of blocks and questions, translated in Italian and Chinese, were administered to social media users between August 3rd and August 10th. Two filter questions and two attention checks in the questionnaires revealed a final sample of 100 respondents for both countries. The hypothesized relationships were tested through partial least squares structural equation modeling technique, developed using the SmartPLS software.

Findings – The results report that CREA and HUMO have a positive effect on both CBEN and EWOM in China, and that CREA has a positive effect on CBEN and EWOM in Italy. Moreover, CBEN was found to have a positive influence on EWOM intention in both countries, and neither SENH nor SBON were found to have a moderating effect on the relationship in neither country.

Implications – Findings from this study reinforce the idea that brands and companies should try to "join the conversation" with their customers online, by encouraging the application of RTM strategies, so as to increase consumers' social media engagement and their willingness to engage in eWOM activities.

Originality/value - This study is only the fourth of its kind, with pioneering outcomes that contribute to the latest marketing literature on the effectiveness of social media real-time marketing strategies, in terms of engagement and eWOM intention. Findings provide unique and fundamental contributions to the field of cross-cultural studies as well.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, with the appearance of online social networking platforms and social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram – in Western countries – or Renren, Sina Weibo, WeChat – in the East – a great number of brands and businesses worldwide had to reinvent and readapt their marketing efforts, in a new and revolutionary attempt to find some fresh and innovative ways to communicate with their customers online. The world has officially entered a new era in which the marketing landscape keeps on changing and evolving, and companies now are required to keep up with consumers' dynamic behavior, in order to create mutual benefits from the use of these new platforms.

Nowadays, social media are used by billions of people around the world and the number of users is expected to grow to 3.29 billion users in 2022, which will represent almost 42.3% of the world's population (Appel et al., 2020). These social networking sites (SNS) have become culturally significant, considering that they now serve as the primary domain in which vast amounts of information and content is distributed, and through which people can easily share aspects of their lives with others and quickly receive information about the world around them. Studies show that most users engage in social media activities for three main reasons: 1) information processes, 2) entertainment activities and 3) social connection (Heinonen, 2011). According to Ma & Chan (2014), knowledge sharing – in the context of SNS – also plays an important role in the distribution of information online to other people in one's social network. In fact, knowledge sharing on these channels can serve as an effective tool for people to use, through which interaction and bonding, community development, self-actualization and self-expression can be enhanced.

In the past, marketing consisted in carefully constructed campaigns that followed specific schedules and deadlines, and usually launched weeks after the completion of the campaign. With these new changings and developments in technology and consumer behavior, advertisers are now required to find creative ways to engage with their customers, by trying to capture their attention and anticipating their needs in real time. These transformations have led to the creation and growth of the recent phenomenon of

real-time marketing (RTM). RTM encompasses the use of more than one channel to engage with the customer at a time and place that is convenient for the consumer, and in a way that is innovative and non-intrusive. According to Bathelot (2013), RTM can take one of three forms: 1) automated RTM, 2) personalized marketing executed in real time and 3) marketing campaigns developed in real time (see Kallier, 2017).

The first form refers to delivering the right, pre-written message to the right consumer at the right time. These messages are automated, and they can be triggered by various events or actions executed by the customer, immediately after which the message is sent. For example, if one customer or user online is interested in buying a new trending pair of shoes, they will most likely use a search engine like Google to search for the new shoes. Through automated RTM, a pop-up banner advertisement will certainly appear on the consumer's web page, right after the Google search, for a shoe store closest to the customer in that moment. The second form of RTM involves marketing messages that are created for the customer and executed in real time. For example, retailers can provide their customers with loyalty cards that can be used to collect points after every purchase. Whenever consumers pay using their loyalty cards, these points will be used and deducted from the card to receive an immediate discount for their purchase. The third and final form of real-time marketing refers to marketing messages that are developed and sent in real time via different channels, such as social media platforms and SNS, as a result of a special trending event or occasion. As a matter of fact, events such as the World Cup, the Oscars, the birth of a royal baby or the Superbowl generate tremendous interest and user conversation. Companies can use these events to join and be part of the conversation, and this can allow them to gain awareness and recognition.

For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to underline that the analysis presented in this dissertation will *only* focus on the third type or form of real-time marketing mentioned above. This is because the present study is aimed at examining consumers' behavior toward RTM messages in the mere context of social media, through the investigation of the use of these timely strategies and techniques on these platforms. Besides, being the third and most recently developed form of timely technique in the field of RTM strategies, very few studies in literature have evaluated its effectiveness (if

compared to the first two forms, whose efficiency has been largely demonstrated).

The following research has several objectives: first, it aims at empirically investigate the effects and the influence that the application of real-time marketing strategies within brand messages and brand ads on social media has on consumer brand engagement and electronic word-of-mouth intention. In doing so, two major aspects of these messages will be taken into consideration, that is, message creativity and message humor. The purpose here is to scientifically confirm that whenever social media users run into timely real-time marketing ads on these their platforms, they will have the intention to show their appreciation toward these marketing messages, by contributing to the brand advertisement through likes, comments and shares and by spreading a positive word about that brand to other people in their social network. Second, this study tests and verifies the relationship between consumer brand engagement on social media (CBEN) and brand electronic WOM intention (EWOM), by trying to understand whether the former positively affects the latter. This is done to demonstrate that the action of contributing to the social media message is actually correlated to some subsequent willingness to engage in electronic WOM communications on SNS. Third, this research tries to probe whether the use of two different moderating factors – specifically, self-enhancement and social bonding – alter the relationship between the two variables previously mentioned. In fact, previous studies by marketing experts, such as Milkman & Berger (2014), have reported that these two components seem to be two major motivators for users' engagement on these social networking platforms. Finally, this study aims at providing an in-depth analysis of cross-cultural differences between Italy and China, by carrying out this exact same examination in both countries; this will surely provide some remarkable incremental contributions to the field of cross-cultural studies, by being the *first* research in the marketing history make such comparison in the field of real-time social media messages. More specifically, the following study strives to address the following research questions:

RQ1.   *What impacts do RTM message creativity and RTM message humor - i.e., two major aspects in the application of real-time strategies – have on consumers' engagement on social media and their willingness to engage in eWOM activities?*

RQ2. *To what extent do self-enhancement and social bonding affect and moderate the relationship between social media consumer engagement and brand eWOM intention in both countries?*

Consistent with these purposes, this research is structured in three main parts: the first one (chapter 2) provides a comprehensive review of the marketing literature on the subject and tries to summarize the most important contributions from previous works, for all the elements of the research analysis. The second part (chapters 3, 4 and 5) presents a complete overview of the hypothesis development and research model, and explores the methodology, data analysis and results of the scientific process behind the investigation that was successfully carried out. The third and final part of this thesis (chapters 6 and 7) shows the general discussion on the results obtained, as well as practical and managerial implications, limitations and future research directions. For academic purposes, a summary of the entire research in the Chinese language, together with figures, tables, references and acknowledgements, was also included at the end of the dissertation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Real-time marketing

     With the increased changes and developments in technology and economy, and with the advent of Web 2.0 together with a new specificity of online consumer behavior, a great number of retailers and businesses in general had to readapt their products and services, as well as their marketing strategies, to find a new, original and creative way to communicate with their customers online. The internet has entered a new era characterized by an emphasis on interactivity and information sharing, in which the keys to the marketing success are represented by images, sounds and videos, as well as joining the conversation with consumers online (Torres et al., 2015). These rapid changes have also led to numerous businesses thinking and developing new, different ways of capturing consumers' attention by trying to anticipate their needs in real time and by trying to understand what they might like and share (Kallier, 2017). In times like this, it has become fundamental as well as incredibly difficult for advertisements to break through the clutter and build memory for the advertised brand online. Just as important, marketing professionals must recognize and acknowledge how technology is changing customers' behavior and need to think how to meet their needs tomorrow (McKenna, 1995). Copywriters, art directors and advertising mavens consider original, creative, and humoristic advertising to be to key to pierce through competition; they believe that originality is at the center of the advertising effectiveness because it captures consumers' attentions and makes the advertising more memorable. (Pieters et al., 2002). In this sense, the media context and Web 2.0 largely affect ad recall, ad recognition and purchase intention and that is why a creative ad online has several potential advantages compared to traditional ads. (Dahlén, 2005).

     Bearing this in mind, it's easy to realize that marketing managers need to shift the focus of their efforts by opening themselves to consumer access and by trying to initiate a dialogue with them. To achieve this, they need to involve consumers and make them part of the development and production processes and the brand's products and services. The single person as a consumer has evolved from showing a passive behavior, in which

they were the mere recipient of marketing information in a one-way and unidirectional communication, to be the main actor and protagonist of the marketing process (Torres et al., 2015). In a certain way, this already happens if we think of B2B relations, as the very nature of this marketing transaction allows for and encourages a dialogue between the customer and the company, which eventually fosters mutual trust and loyalty (McKenna, 1995). However, although various contents and audiences have been examined to understand and gain insight into the effectiveness of brand messages on social media, very little is known about moment-related advertising (Willemsen et al., 2019).

The term Real-Time Marketing (RTM) was coined for the first time by the PR specialist David Meerman, who said that "Real-time means news breaks over minutes, not days. It means ideas percolate, then suddenly and unpredictably go viral to a global audience. It's when companies develop (or refine) products or services instantly, based on feedback from customers or events in the marketplace. And it's when businesses see an opportunity and are the first to act on it" (see Smart Insights). Today, social networking sites paired with real-time analytics and tactics have the potential to transform and innovate the way brands and companies participate in global cultural events. New means for connectivity and interactivity can provide these companies with wholly new strategies to attach their brands to major popular events (Kotlyar, 2021).

According to Golin and Harris (see Kallier, 2017), RTM can be defined as the "systematic, multi-channel engagement, using more than one channel to communicate with the customer, based upon real-time insights". RTM was originally inspired by "the need to respond to social media interactions and implementations" but it has grown to include more channels and techniques (Evergage, 2014). Already in 1997, Sutherland noted that such RTM messages create "opportunities to hitch a ride and harness the brand to something that will help move it more effortlessly and drive its budget further" (see Willemsen, 2019). Although nowadays RTM is widely used because of its outstanding effects on consumer responses, the question about whether it is an effective new, original social media strategy or not is still subject of study (Mazerant et al., 2021). RTM is a brand-new way for companies and businesses online to go extra mile and engage with their customers on social media in a way that is non-intrusive, while sharing information

and allowing for brand recognition that ultimately increases brand equity. It encompasses the use of more than one channel, more than one way to engage with clients and consumers online at the time that is convenient for the users, by listening, understanding, and anticipating their interests (Kallier, 2017).

To gain momentum, advertisers nowadays are constantly trying to link their ads and content on their pages with moments or events that are interactively discussed on social media at that very specific time. Trends are created every day on social networks and the possibilities for brands and companies to join, participate and be part of the conversation are infinite and innumerable (Torres, et al., 2015; Willemsen et al., 2019). According to one survey carried out by Evergage (2014) called "Real-time to the rest of us", 76% of marketers recognize personalized content in response to users and consumers' interactions online as real-time marketing. 81% of the respondents believe that RTM can increase customer engagement and 73% of them think that it improves customer experiences online, conversation rates and brand perception.

The huge success of RTM or "instant marketing" was achieved officially in 2013 during one of the most watched television broadcast sports events: the Superbowl. During the final match, un unexpected power outage occurred in the superdome stadium, leaving both the players and the audience in the dark for 35 minutes. The viewers of the match throughout the world promptly started to post and talk about the blackout on

Figure 1. 2013 RTM message published By Tide on Twitter

social media and many global companies instantly joined the conversation and started advertising their brands, responding rightly to the trend using the hashtag #Blackout. In that moment, the company that led the way and gained the greatest success out of the application of an instant RTM message was Tide, a detergent brand (Figure 1). Gaining momentum from the unexpected blackout, the company posted this image on Twitter, advertising the brand, using the caption "We can't get your blackout, but we can get your stains out". By playing with words and creating an original and playful ad, they managed to accurately interact with users and consumers online, scoring their highest in number of likes, comments, and retweets on the social network (Torres et al., 2015).

However, Tide was obviously not the only one who benefited from this event, and quickly other global brands and companies took advantage from this episode and posted their own RTM messages on social media. Another outstanding example of "instant advertising" at the final match of the Superbowl in 2013 was provided by Oreo's "exquisitely timed and provocative tweet, which set the benchmark for breakthrough marketing on one of the world's most visible stages" (Lavecchia, 2013; Figure 2).

That smart activation and nimble application of creative and innovative ways to advertise Oreo's biscuits not only generated immediate social recognition and appreciation from customers online but it urgently called for brands to evolve and innovate, so as to shift from the standard and simple publication of content to "a new sophisticated construct that helps marketers reach and connect audiences at scale" (Lavecchia, 2013).
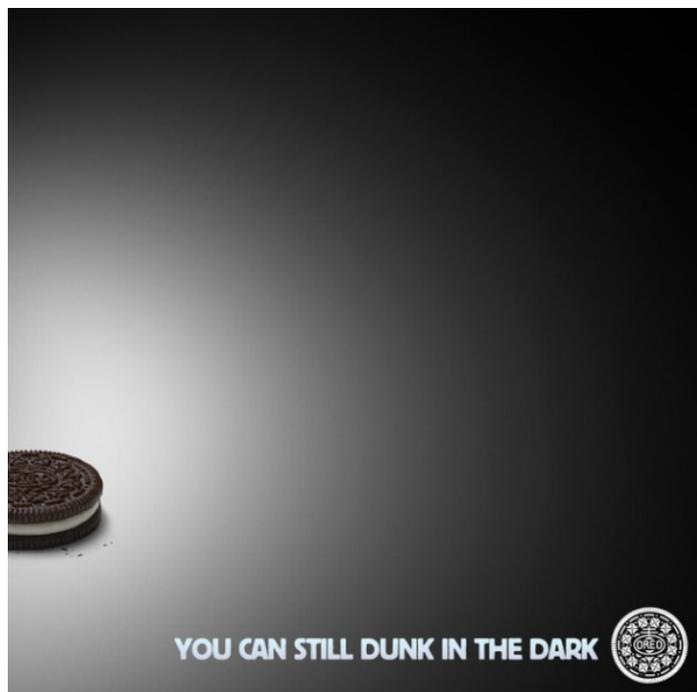
Figure 2. 2013 RTM message published by Oreo on Twitter

These two examples clearly demonstrate how RTM can promptly capture online user information and data, including current trends, to provide an instant, individual advertisement to a specific audience. As a matter of fact, these data allow companies to offer immediate response to what individuals are doing and what they're talking about (Marketing Schools). According to Evergage (2014), marketers are really starting to see the benefits of real-time marketing and it has become a high priority for many brands, as they're seeing results and ROI as well. By using a combination of software and creative platforms, you can identify the content and narratives from events that are trending at that moment, and this will give you material for trend attachment. Once the trend is identified, you must rapidly create the content, publish it, and promote it. In this sense, you won't need a huge team or a dispendious amount of money: all you need is for the content to be original and humorous, and consumers' engagement and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) will do the rest for you (Kotlyar, 2021).

Another famous event that triggered companies' quick response on social media in the form of marketing in real-time was the 2015 social phenomenon known as the Dressgate or #thedress, and #whiteandgold or #blackandblue. This trend was born from a viral photo and meme of a dress, published on social media on February 26th, which started a social quarrel over whether this dress was blue and black or white and gold. The impact of this picture and discussion that followed was so big that almost 10 million tweets around the globe were posted in few minutes (Kallier, 2017). The most interesting aspect of this unusual event was that it triggered a response not only from people around the world, but from neuroscientists as

Figure 3. 2015 RTM message published by Heineken NL on Twitter

well, who argued and commented on the optical illusion and color perceptions created by

the dress in that photograph. Rapidly, brands and non-profit organizations around the world managed to take advantage from this situation and started posting tweets and RTM messages on social media. Figures 3 and 4 provide two of the most famous and viral examples. Heineken in the Netherlands posted a picture of their golden beer

Figure 4. 2015 RTM message published by The Salvation Army on Twitter

with the caption "definitely white and gold" and, following the same trend, The Salvation Army posted this hard-hitting picture on Twitter to try to raise awareness on women's abuse, using the caption "why is it so hard to see black and blue?" (Torres et al., 2015, Willemsen et al., 2019).

Whilst benefits in terms of social media engagement and eWOM are desirable, companies that make use of RTM strategies can take home tangible results in terms or ROI and economic profit. According to Howell (2014), one in four brands and market mavens believe that RTM messages improve conversation and ROI, however 45% of the brands cannot find people with the right skills that can create content "on the fly". All in all, a company with an engaged customer base can expect to see an average increase in share of wallet of 55% and 50% higher productivity. This, however, shouldn't come as a surprise: the more you're able to participate and "insert yourself into the everyday lives of your customers", the more you seem familiar, and the more they like your brand. Eventually, all of this not only allows for "an increase in conversation, but it brings more money for your business" as well (Rosner, 2016, 2018). Finally, a 2015 report by social intelligence software provider Wayin (see Bedgood, 2016) found that 59% of businesses are planning to increase their RTM budget each year and that 66% of them plan to increase social media spend specifically. Data show that companies around the globe can actually make money using RTM strategies, but it is important to remember that the key to any successful marketing strategy is knowing your audience, by connecting with the right person at the right time, with the right message in the right place (Bedgood, 2016).

However, although - at least in theory - RTM seems to be straightforward (discover new trends, join the conversation, and then post on social media), in practice RTM success is not quite so easy to achieve (Howell, 2014). Being friend with your audience, with your customers online is not an easy task. There are companies that, sometimes, try so hard to ride the train of RTM success that they end up being involved in a rather controversial online conversation. If this happens, low rates of digital brand awareness and reputation, and discomfort with the community may occur. In this sense, marketers and advertisers should be aware that, most of the times, it is not a matter of *when* to create the message, but rather a matter of *how* to create it (Torres et al., 2015). A precise example of this occurred on March 10th, 2015, when Colombia felt a tremor of 6.3 degrees on the Richter scale, for what the car brand Jaguar Colombia posted a RTM message saying: "We are sorry for the tremor, we just started the Jaguar F-type, but we didn't expect that much power". This, of course, generated a sense of rejection by the community because, although fortunately no casualties were left, hundreds of people lost their homes and their belongings (Torres et al., 2015).

It is now clear that publishing content that makes use of real-time insights, while being creative, original, innovative, and stimulating at the same time is not an easy job. It is important to ensure that companies can remain an active and ongoing part of the cultural dialogue and it is *fundamental* that they do that in the right way. For these reasons, Lavecchia (2013) listed several different tips that companies can use for them to effectively create RTM messages. Here is a recap:

1. **Tap into the moment**: in this "always-on" type of marketing deviation, brands are now "tasked with tapping into everyday moments as they emerge with genuine wit, creativity and timeliness to help drive cultural relevance with their audiences".

2. **Rigor and magic:** when we think of the critical aspects of RTM, it's important that companies learn to ignore unessential "noise" and focus on key signals (engagement, momentum, rapidness) and data that really matter.

3. **Don't overdo it – be relevant**: sometimes it can be difficult to place your ad in a timely context, while relating to a trending topic and staying relevant. It's important to use wit and creativity intelligently and avoid controversial situations.

2.1.1 Real-time marketing in China and Italy

As China's economic and technologic developments continue to occur, companies and brands in China have started to engage in an increasingly intense battle for the consumer. Recent reports suggest that people now use social media more frequently that a company's official website when searching for information on brands, services, and products (Men & Tsai, 2013). Thus, communicating with users in different countries, while trying to dive in into social media trends has become a serious and difficult challenge, particularly in countries such as China, where Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are absent and inaccessible. For this reason, Chinese most famous social media and social networking platforms such as Sina Weibo (Chinese Twitter), WeChat and Renren (Chinese Facebook) have now become critical to the marketing mix and to the marketing success in general (Magni & Atsmon, 2012). Sina Weibo was launched by the Sina corporation in August 2009, following the government decision to block the access to Twitter and Fanfou (an old Chinese Twitter clone) to all Chinese users. At that time, two emerging companies, Sina and Tencent (owner of WeChat), started offering microblog services to their users in mainland China (Yu et al., 2011, Gong et al., 2017), and cleverly paved their way to become two of China's and the world's most famous and leading companies. However, social media and social networking sites are going to be discussed in further detail in one of the next paragraphs.

Just like on Twitter, there are two types of user accounts on Sina Weibo, regular user accounts and verified user accounts. The former is used by common individuals, whereas the latter typically represents a well-known public figure or organization in China (Yu et al., 2011). This platform is used daily by millions of users, all (or most) of whom are situated in mainland China and "tweet" in the Chinese language. The equivalent of a "retweet" on Weibo is shown as two amalgamated entries: the original entry and the other user's entry which is a commentary of the original one (Yu et al., 2011). The main difference between the two apps is that that number of "retweets" that the users get on Weibo is several orders of magnitude greater than the "retweets" received on Twitter. This suggests that the retweeting action is far more used in China for trending topics than in Twitter-using countries.

For these reasons, The Weibo platform in China has become one of the most prominent means for the application of RTM strategies by notorious companies and brands. According to Zhang (2020), there are several different benefits that brands can expect by using real-time messages in China:

1. It offers a solution to one of the biggest challenges today: "how do I engage with online customers?".

2. It helps them stay on top of things and the content they publish is fresh, relevant, and it is exactly what online consumers are looking for in that specific moment.

3. It lets them interact and build a connection with their targeted audience.

4. It makes them raise brand awareness or sales, as it increases ROI and overall profit.

Here is a famous example of the use of RTM strategies in China, with one specific brand that got into the spotlight last year: Corona.

In fact, when the government in Shanghai decided to introduce a new waste management rule, which triggered online discussions across all social media, people started to joke about the fact that, from that moment, beer bottles and limes (Corona's beers contain a slice of lime inside) should have been placed in different trash cans, according to the new law. A few hours later, when the topic started trending across all China, this comment went viral (Figure 5), saying "Starting today, you can't drink Corona with lime here in Shanghai. Otherwise, how will you ever get it out? With those two fat fingers?". With that comment, Corona's marketing team were smart and quickly came up with their own solution: "1/16 lime slice" that could fit into the bottle and could be easily
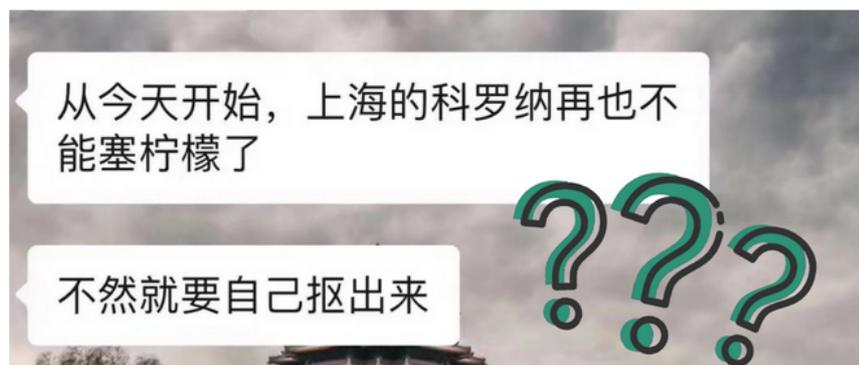

Figure 5. 2020 comment that went viral after Shanghai's government new waste management rule

removed (Figure 6). The following night, their message had more that 420,000 views

across the web and everyone in China was talking about their cleverness, creativity, and acute sense of humor. After that, Corona made an extra effort to collect all memes that appeared online and sent them to various platforms and made them go viral. They also made it clear that they would have not given up on the lime and

Figure 6. 2020 RTM message published by Corona on Weibo

came up with other several practical solutions. Ultimantely, Corona's marketing team in China were also able to find the person that made the original joke (see Figure 5) and granted him with a year's worth of free beer, causing another frenzy online (Zhang, 2020). This example provides a clear idea of how to reach and engage with Chinese customers online via real-time strategies. For brands and companies to succeed in China, they need to prove themselves to be innovative, creative and, above all, incredibly smart. They need to be able to align their brand messages to trending topics and they need to take "a step further" to participate in the conversation and befriend users on social media. If done correctly, results can be outstanding, and brands can really get to the next level and stay ahead of the pack.

In Italy, when we think of real-time marketing and timely messages, most market mavens and advertisers agree that Taffo Funeral Services or Durex Italia (see next sub-paragraph) are the most prominent examples. These companies' winning strategies when speaking of trending topics and brand ad make them two of the most interesting cases of instant marketing since, if not anything else, they know how to create brand awareness and make people talk about them. In this sense, we need to remember that this type of communication strategy is as effective as it is risky, especially if it makes use of provocative tones. In fact, we must never forget that the key to good communication is first and foremost to convey the vision, attributes, and identity of the brand. This means

that having an insolent or audacious tone and following the latest communication trends can sometimes be inappropriate if this style is not consistent with the values of the brand (Castenetti, 2020).

As we have already seen, Sina Weibo and WeChat, in China, are the most commonly used social networking sites for strategies in real time, but when we think of Italy, Instagram and Twitter are at the forefront (with few examples coming from Facebook). Taffo's challenging and aggravating tones in their Twitter and Facebook ads when legitimizing the combination of wit and dark themes, such as death, gives customers and users online the idea of boldness and audacity, but it also gives them something to talk about with their friends and family both online and offline. According to LeadSift reports, this type of strategy benefits the company and leads to an 18% lift in interest. Moreover, consumers are "22% more likely to consider a brand as a result of RTM" and their sentiment and purchase interest increases by an average of 15% (see Galetto, 2016). Figure 7 shows one of the most famous viral RTM messages posted by Taffo Funeral Services on their Facebook page. This picture, with the caption saying: "We also have

Figure 7. 2019 RTM message published by Taffo Funeral Services on Facebook

your data, but we'll be as silent as the grave", was posted in March 2019, after the infamous Facebook data breach, when private and personal data of millions of people were leaked and stolen worldwide.

All these illustrations analyzed so far show that personalization and attention to User-generated content (UGC) online become indispensable for the brand's credibility

and influence. If, 40 years ago, consumers were listed as "anonymous" because their views and opinions contributed little to the marketing formula and overall competitiveness of the brand both locally and internationally, it is now crucial to comprehend how the role of the consumer *is* and *has always been* prevalent (Torres, 2015).

2.1.2 Mastering RTM: the case of Durex

With companies and marketing experts having to realize how difficult it is to adopt a strategy that involves the creation or advertising messages in real-time, many brands seem to be struggling with user engagement online and they don't always manage to position themselves in the consumers' mind. However, this is not the case when it comes to Durex. Born in London in 1929, Durex is a brand that produces and sells condoms, personal lubricants, and sex toys to individuals worldwide and it is commonly known for their winning marketing techniques that, most of the time, include creative and witty messages that easily catch the eye of the standard consumer, making their advertising playful and extremely enjoyable. According to The Economist (2015), Durex in China has a dominant market share of 45% and, following Chinese new waves of technological and industrial developments, their marketing strategies are almost exclusively carried out through social media. The company's target demographic is the 90s generation, who are more "digitally native" and eager to express themselves and their own identity (Hung, 2017). Given the nature of the products sold and services provided, the most important aspect for Durex is to always stay ahead of time, while being open-minded and extremely inclusive with their target audience. For these reasons, Durex customers and the brand itself often focus on the present and live in the moment, and that is exactly why Durex keeps on the forefront of the latest trends and never misses the chance to make witty articles and posts whenever there are social events, hotspots, or popular trends.

In this sense, Durex is the leading company when it comes to viral and instant marketing and manages, most of the times, to tiptoe around trending topics to create engagement and timely communications that resonate with consumers, while being part of the conversation. (Hung, 2017). According to a study conducted by Yu et al. (2011)

called "what trends in Chinese social media", which ranked 50 different keywords that appeared most frequently in users' tweets, Durex ranked 8th as the most frequently tweeted topic on Sina Weibo. This, however, shouldn't come as a surprise, considering how skillfully the company is able to master the art of RTM marketing. Figures 8 and 9 provide two famous examples of Durex's RTM messages that went viral in China. The 2017 RTM message published by 杜蕾斯官方微博 was posted on the app after the release of the new iPhone X, when people worldwide were gossiping about the unpleasant notch the Apple added on the freshly announced mobile phone. A few days later, Durex China came up with this advertising idea where they "replaced" the notch with their logo, riding the moment while raising brand and product awareness. The post received 4659 shares, 5409 comments and 14972 in few hours (see Hung, 2017).

Another great example of RTM message published by Durex China on their Weibo account was released after a famous Chinese celebrity, named Fan Bingbing, announced her relationship with a fellow actor named Li Chen, by posting two simple Chinese characters "我们" – *wǒmen*, meaning "us" (notice how the pronunciation also recalls the English noun "women") - on the same app. Being one of China's most famous single ladies, the news exploded on social media

Figure 8. 2017 RTM message published by Durex China on Weibo

Figure 9. 2015 RTM message published by Durex China on Weibo

and within minutes people were posting tweets on Weibo using the hashtag and the same two characters. Rapidly, brands of all types joined the conversation and managed to create instant messages connecting their brands to the theme of "We and together". Durex (and other brands like McDonald's, Xiaomi, and Alibaba) quickly engaged with its consumers online and posted this image (figure 9) with two matching packages of condoms for couples, using the same caption "我们" (Zhang, 2015).

Also in Italy, there is no doubt that Durex is the first brand that comes to mind when people talk about the wit and creativity of instant marketing. A broader understanding and a great contribution in this sense was provided by Valentina Pagliarini (2020), when she decided to interview the marketing manager of Durex Italia, Nicolò Scala, by asking him questions about the humor and creativity behind this strategy. According to Scala, when it comes to advertising messages, Durex adopts a method called "playful provocation", which differs, however, from country to country, considering that sex is still considered a taboo in many parts of the world. The most important thing, he says, is to be able to switch from the provocative and playful to the serious and relevant whenever the context requires it. With real-time marketing messages, Scala explains that this type of approach is fundamental for the company because, whenever they make use of real-time message techniques, their engagement online grows considerably, and so does the number of new followers and interaction, and overall word-of-mouth. However, he affirms, it is also important to understand what trends can be made fun of, what conversations can be exploited for marketing purposes and *when* or *how* brands can do it.

Durex's team in Italy are very limited and this allows them to be flexible and quick when responding to current trends. Finally, Scala explains that the team have a WhatsApp group as well, where they can share timely news and hot topics, so as to decide whether to create something or not. It's essential for brands to individuate their brand identity and adopt an appropriate "tone of voice". They need to find an equilibrium and maintain a certain type of communication (see Pagliarini, 2020). Figures 10 and 11 provide two distinct examples of RTM messages published by Durex Italia on their Instagram page. This picture from 2019, saying "The banana needs to be protected. Always." was

published by the brand when the famous $120,000 worth banana, a provocative art piece by Maurizio Cattelan at the Art Basil in Miami, was eaten by one fellow artist named David Datuna, quicky making the news go viral worldwide (see Pagliarini, 2020).

Figure 10. 2019 RTM message published by Durex Italia on Instagram

Nonetheless, the most acclaimed and brilliant example of instant message published by the brand in Italy was this picture from March 15, 2020, a few days after the announcement of the first lockdown, due to Covid-19, and in which the use of the mask outside was ordered mandatory ("protect yourself and others when you go outside/when you go inside"). The post received +65,000 likes and brought 4372 new followers in one single day. From that moment on, the engagement on their Instagram page continued to grow and Durex Italia was officially acknowledged by most people as one of the most remarkable and influential brands on Instagram, thanks to their distinguished sense of wit and creativity. RTM really represents the latest evolution of the brand and the marketing system that move at the speed of consumer conversations. It can't be considered a "new concept", but it's simply an "evolution of how marketers recognize an opportunity to do marketing and respond effectively at it" (Torres, 2015).

Figure 11. 2020 RTM message published by Durex Italia on Instagram

2.2 Message creativity

As already mentioned, it has become increasingly difficult for marketers and their advertisements to break through the clutter in this strongly competitive international environment. Companies are constantly trying to find new ways to gain consumers' attention and build memory for their advertised brands, and both experts and researchers worldwide agree that creativity is one of the essential elements, at the very core, for advertising success in a combative marketplace. (Ang & Low, 2000; Pieters et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2007; Ang et al., 2007). Most of the times, creativity in marketing is seen as a way to solve problems that benefit the company and market mavens worldwide have long struggled to understand whether creativity lies in the context and single situation or in the individual (Kilgour & Koslow, 2009; Koslow et al., 2006). Whilst ad creativity is seen as an essential component of the advertising process and still attracts interest as a subject of research, most literature branches into two different perspectives on the key components of creativity. One perspective sees creativity as divergence, which means that it contains elements of novelty, aesthetic, difference and newness. The second branch in literature sees creativity as a combination of both divergence and meaningfulness (or appropriateness) to the consumer (Lehnert et al., 2014). In this sense, Kilgour (2009) believes that "splitting creativity into its components is vital because most creativity techniques encourage divergent, or original, thinking", whereas other techniques prefer more of a convergent or appropriate creativity.

But *what is creativity*? The literature throughout the years has provided several definitions, some of them more complex and some of them more simplified. According to Newell (et al., 1962), one of the first theorists on the matter, "problem solving is called creative to the extent that one or more of the following conditions are satisfied: 1) the product of thinking has novelty and value (either for the thinker or for his/her culture); 2) the thinking is unconventional, in the sense that it requires modification or rejection of previously accepted ideas; 3) the thinking requires high motivation and persistence, taking place either over a considerable span of time (continuously or intermittently) or at high intensity; 4) the problem as initially posed was vague and ill-defined so that part of the task was to formulate the problem itself" (see McFadzean, 2000). In 2004, Smith and

Yang also provided an over-simplified definition of ad creativity, describing it as "the extent to which an advertisement diverges from expectations while remaining useful to the task at hand", but a few years later, El-Murad and West integrated Smith and Yang's definition by pointing out that "ad creativity is the art of establishing new and meaningful relationships between previously unrelated things in a manner that is relevant, believable, and in good taste, but which somehow presents the product in a fresh new light" (see Smith et al., 2007; Sheinin, 2011, Baack et al., 2015).

When referring to general marketing products, Amabile (1982) claims that a product is creative to the "extent that appropriate observers independently agree it is creative", with 'appropriate' observers and advertising 'creatives' being copywriters and art directors who, in fact, ideate and produce advertisements (see White & Smith, 2001). Traditionally, ad experts have investigated the key factors and stages of consumer response in relation to creativity in advertising, finding that attention to the ad, accepting and liking the ad message and purchase intention usually provide the most insightful evidence, albeit many different variations (Yang & Smith, 2009). From an ideational point of view, although there are several variables that influence creative achievement and the creation of original, innovative ads, creativity is commonly held to begin with a new understanding of something under certain circumstances. As a result, scholars have long tried to study and analyze mental operations that contribute to the generation of new, creative ideas (Baughman & Mumford, 1995; Mumford et al., 1997).

As previously said, the body of literature on advertising creativity has studied and developed two distinct perspectives when looking upon the concept of creativity. One stream of researchers believe that ad creativity means ad novelty and that the term itself is a synonym for originality and innovativeness (White & Smith, 2001; Smith & Yang, 2004; Sheinin et al., 2011; Lehnert et al., 2014). According to Feng & Xie (2019), ad novelty is an essential component of ad creativity and it's the most widely discussed creativity dimension. As such, the word *novelty* is usually associated with fresh, distinctive, and divergent. Ang et al., (2014) explain that novel ads are unusual and out of the ordinary, and sometimes also "unexpected", but they also suggest that, while essential, it may not be the only determinant of the effectiveness of creative ads.

Sometimes consumers view creativity as being a function of novelty and imaginativeness, and creative ads as being "divergent from the norm". In other words, a creative stimulus is something that is not expected from previous situations or information and it's something that delivers a strong sense of uniqueness and originality (Ang & Low, 2000). In accordance with Mandler (1995), novelty carries emotional consequences as well, as people react emotionally to an innovative and unexpected stimulus. This also suggests that emotional responses play an important role in concluding whether the ad will be accepted or resisted by customers (see Ang & Low, 2000). Sheinin et al., (2011) also found that novelty has important implications for ad effectiveness and that it influences brand attitude and trust toward the brand. Being unexpected, ad novelty not only increases the chances of attentive processes, but it also enhances the development of associative memory network (Ang et al., 2007).

Both studies by West et al. (2019) and Mazerant et al. (2021) showed that some type of novelty works to attract consumer cognition and that creativity in layout is generally the most important aspect in winning awards. The impact of novelty was also shown to be greater when accompanied with meaningful ad stimuli, allowing for higher ad recall, more favorable attitudes toward claim and non-claim ad elements, and enhancing more upbeat feelings than non-novel ads (Ang et al., 2007). Berger & Schwartz (2011) argue that innovative creative ads also impact word-of-mouth, since one of the most important rules of WOM marketing is to "be interesting" and provide something that is unexpected. While trying to figure out how to increase the effectiveness of the marketing message, managers can easily boost immediate WOM by emphasizing ad novelty.

Researchers worldwide have also been debating on whether or not the term *originality* stands as another synonym for creativity. According to most experts (see Mazerant et al., 2021), originality is defined as the extent to which an ad message is innovative and unique. In fact, when a message is original, it can be classified as divergent and distinctive, hence, it can be used as an equivalent to creativity and novelty (White & Smith, 2001; White et al., 2002). Pieters et al., (2002) argue that originality in advertising involves "thinking up (dreaming up) new ways to present selling propositions", which

stimulates the audience to think "about a familiar issue from an unexpected perspective" such as metaphors, wordplay, or humor. In this sense, they found that ad originality enhanced information storage about the advertised brand, by increasing the amount of attention, and that it promoted "significant indirect and direct improvements in memory for the advertised brands". Other researchers, on the contrary, believe that the concept of originality is more to be associated with terms such as rarity, uncommonness, and craftsmanship (Lehnert et al., 2014).

The second stream of researchers, on the other hand, believes that creativity in advertising should be seen as a combination of divergence and appropriateness (or meaningfulness), in the view that focusing on the mere aspect of novelty an originality, in a creative process, may distract the viewer of the ad, by jeopardizing and compromising its informational aspects. According to Lehnert et al. (2014), meaningfulness relates to what is appropriate and what it usually goal oriented. In this sense, it "concerns whether the elements in an ad are relevant to the message conveyed and the intent of the ad, while providing an added value" (Ang & Low, 2000). He also explains that meaningfulness, within creativity research, has also been referred to with other different names, such as involvement, relevance, and connectedness. Focusing on appropriateness means operating through a convergent thinking, and here not only is originality reduced, but it also means exposing the ad to the opening of less appropriate memory categories than those otherwise opened by novelty and inventiveness (Kilgour & Koslow, 2009).

Altsech's (1996) quasi-experimental study in which creative ads were rated on 65 items related to originality, appropriateness or relevance and excitement or boredom, proved that if, on the one hand, creativity and originality can be seen as synonymous, on the other hand appropriateness or relevance are to be considered as "qualifiers" for creativity, with the two words standing on different levels (see White & Smith, 2001; White et al., 2002). Meaningfulness relates to how an ad conveys some meaning about the product or service and the way ad elements, such as body and headline, are coordinated and implemented in a manner that is coherent for consistent interpretation (Ang et al., 2014). Interestingly, Mazerant et al. (2021) argue that, especially on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram, the creativity of brand messages is not only

determined by meaningfulness, defined as the extent to which the brand message makes sense and is logical, and originality, but it is also determined by craftsmanship, which is described as the extent to which a brand message is well-made and skillfully crafted (White et al., 2002). Meaningfulness, together with novelty and connectedness has been found to enhance perceptions of creativity and increase recall and liking (West et al., 2008, 2019) and when speaking of ad creativeness, it represents one of the "big two" – together with originality – because novelty does not pertain to creativity unless the elements in the ad convey useful product information (Feng & Xie, 2019). Ang et al. (2007) suggest that, from a managerial perspective, advertisers should not emphasize novelty at the expense of meaningfulness, because while novel ads may be useful to break through the clutter, ads should also have a meaning, connect to the audience and be effective.

Ultimately, the goal of meaningfulness is to build some sort of connection with the target, so as to create a relationship with the brand. In fact, when testing the relationship between divergence and appropriateness, Ang et al. (2007, 2014) found that a highly meaningful ad had a strong tie between the message and the execution and they also found that higher meaningfulness and connectedness, along with novelty, elicits higher recall and more positive attitudes toward the advertisement. These studies do show that meaningfulness (or appropriateness or connectedness) has a positive impact on advertising effectiveness and overall involvement, and this alone stands for the importance of using relevance to "properly" engage the final consumers. However, while meaningfulness is essential, it is a less important contributor than divergence in relation to ad creativity (see Lehnert et al., 2014).

Most of the times, meaningfulness and appropriateness are also connected and related to the informativeness of the ad. Most literature reveal that informativeness and entertainment in ad creativity are recognized as key sources of advertising effectiveness and importantly affect the user's behavior in the social media environment. As a matter of fact, ad creativity and informativeness are two significant predictors of attitude toward empathy expression (Hong, 2016). However, a study carried out by Moldovan et al. (2019) refutes the theory, by showing that the interaction between novelty and informativeness in ad creativity are associated with worse outcomes than ads that are just informative,

meaning that consumers prefer creative ads that are non-informative over ads that are both creative and informative.

In their study, Mazerant et al. (2021) make an interesting correlation and association between the concept of creativity and RTM messages, analyzing the relationship that exists between these two aspects. In fact, RTM messages allow brands to make a meaningful and rather successful connection with a timely moment that can easily attract the attention of social media users. If successfully applied, this enhances the creativity of the message, considering that meaningfulness is one of the two most important aspect of creativity. Indeed, the authors apply a convergent thinking when studying ad creativity, since they adopt a conceptualization of ad creativity that is based on originality as well as meaningfulness. However, in their study, Mazerant and colleagues found that only craftsmanship is positively related to consumer responses in RTM messages, therefore this suggests that assessing originality, meaningfulness, and craftsmanship as one single construct might conceal the complexity of ad creativity effectiveness.

Several authors have also suggested that the time allocated to a project can enhance its creativity and so having enough time to create the ad is vital to creativity because it stimulates idea incubation. This basically means that having long time is expected to be associated with more creativeness (Koslow et al., 2006). If that is the case, marketers and advertisers operating with real-time marketing strategies, which are mostly improvised and in which time is definitely short, may have issues and difficulties when trying to create and distribute a creative message or ad. Initial support for this assumption is provided by Moreau and Dahl (2005) who argue that time constraints are negatively related to ad creativity, although they did not test these hypothesis (see Mazerant et al., 2021).

In conclusion, when trying to ask a professional marketer what the key to success in advertising is, they'll most likely provide an answer that echoes the mantra of Stephan Vogel, Ogilvy & Mather Germany's chief creative officer: "Nothing is more efficient than creative advertising. Creative advertising is more memorable, longer lasting, works with less media spending, and builds a fan community…faster" (see Reinartz, 2013).

2.3 Message humor

Humor undoubtedly affect people's lives and social interactions and it is one of the most effective tools that people have in their social arsenal to establish connections and relations with others (Mcgraw & Warren, 2010; Treger et al., 2013). As a fundamental ingredient in our daily conversations, humor is present every day and it's used to elicit laughter for other people to enjoy and be amused with. The stimulus event that brings laughter can be either intentional or unintentional and the interlocutor's response to the stimulus largely depends on the person's subjective cognitive reaction to the stimulus configuration, or, in other words, on the person's perception of this reaction (e.g., cheerfulness, amusement; Wyer & Collins, 1992). In this sense, Ruch (1997) proposed that the term exhilaration, coming from its Latin root (hilaris = cheerful) denotes the process of cheerfulness or the temporary rise and fall of a cheerful state, and it's often used to describe a behavioral and psychological situation in which an experiential response in terms of tickling or laughing is present. The author also argues that the state and concept of cheerfulness is to be expressed also in terms of a necessary enduring disposition, since individuals differ enormously in the frequency, intensity, and duration of the cheerful state, as well as in their readiness to react to the humoristic stimulus with a smile or laughter and increased feeling of exhilaration (Ruch, 1997).

Studies on the use of humor and laughter have also assessed that this state of cheerfulness has positive and tremendous health benefits both among health care providers and the general public (Yovetich et al., 1990; Martin 2001). Experts on the subject claimed that laughter is beneficial to the autonomic system which stimulates and promotes responses of the immune system and it benefits health through a variety of mechanisms, including providing physical exercise to the muscles, lungs, and inner organs of the body, enriching the blood, increasing respiration and blood circulation, improving digestion, and providing emotional catharsis (Martin, 2001). In this sense, humor has always been regarded in literature as a positive defense and coping mechanism, which, in the last few years, has been extended to include physiological correlates (see Yovetich et al., 1990). According to Freud (1928), who also makes a distinction between "innocent" and "tendentious" jokes, these correlates also include sexual drive, as laughter

is often perceived to be an effective way to restore balance after conflict or tension. Many contemporary theories also relate laughter to increased arousal, but studies that satisfactorily distinguish between humorous and serious experiences that exhibit this physiological arousal pattern have yet to be carried out (see Sternthal & Craig, 1973; Long & Graesser, 1988). Articles on the health-enhancing effects of humor appear frequently in the media and many practitioners were found to promote therapeutic humor through seminars, workshops, and internet websites (Martin, 2001). As a matter of fact, while an ill-humored may not want to be involved in humoristic and joyful situations, the person in a sad mood may not be able to do so even if they would want to (Ruch, 1997). Henman (2001) also carried out an interesting study on the effects of humor on prisoners of war (POW) in which humor is important for rebounding from many different types of adversity. In Vietnam, prisoners experienced so little governance over their lives that they had to find control in whatever ways they could. Humor was one of those ways. In this context, humor served as a formidable weapon for coping with loss of control in other aspects of life, which helped them "grasp what little power they had to avoid the feelings of capitulation". The beneficial characteristics of humor, seen as a potent agent for psychological removal from stressful situations, were also reported among Nazi prisoners, in a study carried out by Dimsdale (see Henman, 2001).

While *humor* is defined by the *The Oxford English Dictionary* as "that quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement, oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun" and the term itself can be used to refer to a stimulus (e.g., a comedy film), a mental process (e.g., perception or creation of amusing incongruities), or a response (e.g., laughter, exhilaration; Martin, 2001), the term *sense of humor* refers to "habitual individual differences in all sorts of behaviors, experiences, affects, attitudes, and abilities relating to amusement, laughter, jocularity, and so on" (Martin, 2001; Warren et al., 2018). One study undertaken by Yovetich et al. (1990) showed that subjects with high sense of humor had lower anxiety ratings than subjects with low sense of humor and higher correlations were also noted between negative life events and mood disturbance of subjects with low sense of humor. Martin (2007) explains that "humor is a broad term that refers to anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make

others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing situation, and also the affective responses involved in the enjoyment of it" (see Warren & Mcgraw, 2013). Finally, according to Warren et al. (2018) humor can refer to 1) a stimulus that elicits laughter and amusement (e.g., a joke); 2) a psychological state associated with laughter and amusement (e.g., a response to a joke); 3) the act of creating something funny (e.g., telling a joke); and 4) an individual difference in the tendency to laugh or to amuse others (i.e., laugh at jokes). The easiest and most common cognitive view is that surprise or inconsistency offer reasonable motives to achieve humor, in the sense that the need to process and resolve discrepant information, in an incongruity-resolution setting, results in humor (Long & Graesser, 1988; Spotts et al., 1997; Veatch, 1998; Warren et al., 2018). However, not all humor involves surprise, since good jokes, for example, can bear repetition. In this case, surprise is not an essential feature but the simultaneous juxtaposition of two interpretations is fundamental (Veatch, 1998). In some other cases, listeners often laugh before the punch line is delivered. It appears that listeners correctly predict the punch line from the text or find the text itself amusing even though they have not yet experienced surprise at an incongruity between prediction and punch line (Long & Graesser, 1988). Mcgraw & Warren (2010) argue that "humor is aroused by benign violations. The benign-violation hypothesis suggests that three conditions are jointly necessary and sufficient for eliciting humor: a situation must be appraised as a violation, a situation must be appraised as benign, and these two appraisals must occur simultaneously.

Most theorists subdivide humor and comedy into two different branches, one that refers to physical comedy such as "farce", defined as dramas that rely "on visual humor centering on physical activities and usually involv[ing] complicated misunderstandings" and one that involves verbal comedy, such as "wit", and that includes playing with words to create repetitions ("obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase form"), inversions (the root transformation – words that appear to mean one thing but in reality mean something else – stems from reversed meanings and the misunderstandings that ensue) and equivocations (a pattern that uses transposition by shifting "the natural expression of an idea into another key"; see Stern, 1996). Long & Graesser (1988), when

referring to verbal comedy, split humor into two different categories or taxonomies: jokes and wit. On the one hand, the joke category includes items and comedy types such as nonsense, social satire, philosophical, sexual, hostile, demeaning to men, demeaning to women, ethnic, sick, and scatological. On the other hand, the wit category includes comedy types like irony, satire, sarcasm and hostility, overstatement and understatement, self-deprecation, teasing, replies to rhetorical questions, clever replies to serious statements, double entendres, transformations of frozen expressions and puns (see also Wyer & Collins, 1992). Another taxonomy of different types of humor was provided by Veatch (1998) as well, who made a distinction between elephant jokes, offensive jokes, peekaboo, the giggle-fest, linguistic humor, puns and satire, and who discerned different types of laughter (a physiologically spasmodic, rhythmic, vocalized, expiratory, and sometimes-involuntary action).

Given the social nature of humor, it's no surprise that the use of humor and comedy influences consumers' ability to persuade others, whereas both humor appreciation and comedy production can easily affect consumers' ability to form, build, and maintain relationships. According to Warren et al. (2018), people produce comedy to attract attention, to increase message acceptance and perceived importance, to evoke positive emotions, to make consumers more attractive relationship partners and to manage conflict (see also Cline & Kellaris, 2007). On average, not only does humor promote liking, but liking also promotes humor as both associations occur in the same mechanism and interaction. In this sense, Westfield (1993) also proposed that "laughter conveys appreciation and gratitude—an intention to reciprocate for having received a stimulating idea" and that successful use of humor may signal an attempt to convey a specific idea, with the interlocutor's laughter being the gratification (see Treger et al., 2013). Fuller et al. (1974) also argued that, among seven different kinds of laughter, one they called "social laughter" is characterized by the individual laughing as a direct consequence of other members of his group laughing. This happens because the sound of others laughing has a facilitative effect on the individual's tendency to express amusement and joy.

In the firm and marketing environment, the use of humor is an executional tactic that has gained particular interest, since marketing performance depends on a successful

and effective advertising (Eisend, 2009). Humor is, in fact, widely used in advertising around the world, with almost one out of every five television ads containing humorous appeals (Elpers et al., 2004), and Weinberger & Gulas (1992) suggest that as much as 24.4% of prime-time television advertising in the U.S. is intended to be humorous. Quite an effort has been made to investigate the impact of humoristic claims in advertising and this has led to several literature review, in which several different types of humor have been analyzed and catalogued. Humor appears to be a very complex topic that has been experimentally studied by advertisers over the past fifty years and according to 55% of the advertising research, executives believe humor and comedy to be superior to non-humor in gaining consumers' attention in advertising (Duncan, 1979; Weinberger & Gulas, 1992, Spotts et al., 1997).

As reported by Chung & Zhao (2003), if humor is indeed more effective at grabbing attention, supporting high recall, and aiding message comprehension, advertising practitioners may be wise to add a few laughs to their advertising messages. This, in fact, could increase advertising liking which, in turn, could increase advertisement's effectiveness in terms of recall, brand preference or persuasion. Josephine et al. (2004) argue that while some ads are spectacularly successful at raising a laugh, others may fail to do so. Such variation in perceived humor is likely to have important consequences for downstream variables of interest to marketers such as message credibility, recall, and attitude toward the ad and brand (see also Warren & Mcgraw, 2013). Results from a study by Eisend (2009), that used meta-analytic correlations, demonstrated that humor in advertising significantly enhances attitude toward the ad, attention, and positive affect. His findings support the notion that humor is more effective in generating lower order than higher order communication effects and that the effect size of the impact of humor on attitude toward the ad is even twice as large as the effect size for attitude toward the brand. Finally, Cline & Kellaris' findings (2007) provided additional support to this theory, as they found that humor's attention gaining mechanisms (i.e., humor strength) may translate into positive effects for memory. Specifically, data show that humor strength and humor-message relatedness jointly influence participants' recall of advertising claims.

Sternthal & Craig (1973) found that humorous messages in advertising attracts attention, affects comprehension, and may also distract the audience, yielding a reduction in counter argumentation and an increase in persuasion. Moreover, their study proved that the persuasive effect in humorous appeals is at best no greater that serious appeals and that humor tends to enhance source credibility and increase liking for the source while creating a positive mood in the viewer. These findings were also supported by Weinberger and Gulas in their study from 1992. Ultimately, Herring et al. (2011) also discerned the terms amusement and joy, as their study found that participants displayed more positive facial affect and more laughter during the amusement clip than during the joy clip. In this sense, the authors argue that amusement and joy differed on two indicators of physiological responding: heart rate and respiratory amplitude. Heart rate decelerations were smaller during amusement than during joy, and major positive effects were noticed with respiratory amplitude in an amusing setting than in a joyful setting.

Another new and innovative field in which the application of ad humor is being explored is real-time marketing and the so-called improvised marketing interventions (IMIs). In this sense, the execution of a RTM message in an overall strategy that is unexpected and surprising, proves to be probably the most efficient channel of application for humoristic appeals. Previous studies have successfully analyzed how RTM brings benefits to the firm on various digital platforms, including consumers' willingness to make positive comments about the firm online through electronic word-of mouth (eWOM, see following paragraphs). Here, humor provides an added value to the unanticipated and timely message, in which surprise and curiosity are successfully enhanced by the fun and witty nuances that consumers online wouldn't normally expect from brands accounts on social media. In an interesting study by Borah et al., (2019) humor is paired with timeliness and unanticipation to prove that the association enables firms to drive both virality and firm value. In fact, authors' findings show that the interaction between IMI humor and timeliness, and IMI humor and unanticipation, positively affect firm value, which also allows for greater exposure and visibility through eWOM. It is important that firms empower marketing teams to keep a close eye on trends and spontaneous chatter, as humor and wit serve as incredible weapons to increase equity and value to the firm.

2.4 Social media marketing and message content values

Social media allow people to freely interact with each other and can offer different ways for marketers to reach and engage with online consumers (e.g.: Chang, Zhu, 2011; Wirtz et al., 2013; Schamari, Schaefers 2015; Appel et al., 2019). The marketing landscape is changing quickly and following the enormous interest in social media and social networking sites (SNS), consumers have started to strongly contribute to marketing activities and marketing content. Nowadays, companies are constantly challenged by the urgency to find new, different, and engaging ways to interact with their customers, for both parties to create mutual benefits from the use of these new online media (Ducoffe, 1996; Bruning et al., 2008; Heinonen, 2011; Sabate et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2018).

When dealing with social media and SNS, individuals, companies and marketing experts must keep in mind that historical developments and cultural differences allowed for a different evolution of these media channels when comparing Western and Eastern countries. With more that 2.6 billion monthly active users, Facebook is the world's most used SNS, reaching the top in North and South America, Canada, Western and Eastern Europe, Africa and Australia (January, 2021: see https://vincos.it/world-map-of-social-networks/). According to Winter & Neubaum (2016) and Coursaris et al. (2016), Facebook gives users the opportunity to "like", "comment" and "share" content on the app and offers various opportunities to express opinions on politics or public affairs, raise awareness of specific topics, and send links to media contents to the whole friend list, with the strongest association between bridging social capital and its use. Findings from a study carried out by Chu & Choi (2010) suggest that the functions and features of Facebook facilitate the formation and maintenance of both strong ties (e.g., family and close friends) and weak ties (e.g., acquaintances and classmates) and thus have positive effects on students' attitudes and behaviors that indicate enhanced social capital. According to Lee et al. (2018) thousands of posts from brands on Facebook contain humor, emotional appeal, casual banter, or discussion of the brand's philanthropic outreach. In this sense, Facebook easily allows brands to create profile and interact with users online, by "providing unique and interesting conditions for investigating the interaction of multiple selves and the incorporation of brands in consumer self-expression" (Sabate et

al., 2014; Jin et al., 2015). On Facebook, people also have the possibility to join discussion groups and like brand pages and when Park et al. (2009) investigated Facebook Groups users' gratifications, they found that socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information are the four main reasons for using Facebook Groups. In China, nonetheless, since the use of Facebook is not permitted, the Chinese government allowed for the creation of a "Chinese" version of the app. Established in 2005, Renren, which literally means "everyone" in Chinese, is widely considered the "Facebook of China" and is the "most popular, most open and best-financed social network site" (Men & Tsai, 2013). However, Renren is not as famous as Facebook and, in fact, when it comes to Chinese SNS, Weixin (WeChat) is at the top.

Developed by Tencent Holdings Ltd. in China on January 21, 2011, WeChat is a closed-source SNS for multimedia instant messaging that has features of blogspace (Facebook's main function), micro-applications, and mobile payment (WeChat payment). Among the active monthly users, 94% utilized the application daily while 61% used it more than 10 times per day and 36% more than 30 times per day. On average, 700,000 articles are posted on WeChat daily (Chen, 2017). WeChat, as WhatsApp and Twitter in Western countries, serves as a convenient text and voice communication service in China, and has been prevailing all over the country ever since its emergence. WeChat users can interact with friends in various forms (one-to-many messaging, video chat, voice message, etc.), through diverse mobile operating systems such as iPhone, android and windows, and it enables users to look for suggestions and advice (opinion seeking), express prior or post-purchase opinions about products or services (opinion giving) and share friends' opinions (Song et al., 2017). While WeChat is fundamentally a social mobile-messaging service, it offers functions from online shopping, bill payment and taxi booking to hospital appointments as well (Chu et al., 2018). Because social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are blocked in China, WeChat is one that marketers can use to directly communicate with their Chinese audience. An example, that can easily explain the success and potential of the app, is that users on Weixin can actively interact with their friends during China's New Year festivities, by sending them a "red envelope", a tradition that was started in January 2014. Traditionally, Chinese people gift one another,

during the lunar New Year, by filling red envelopes with money for good luck. WeChat launched an official "new year red envelope" account and allowed its users to send and receive a virtual envelope. The amount of money put in each red envelope is credited to the receiver's bank account and to make it more entertaining, users can select one friend to send a red envelope to, or let the app randomly divide money between a group of friends, with only the first 20 people to open their envelope receiving the money (Lien & Cao, 2014). In the same way as Facebook and Instagram stories, WeChat Moments also allows users to share the most important occasions of their lives with a close family and friends list (Shofner). Conclusively, in terms of messaging apps, since WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger or Telegram are blocked in China, QQ serves as their substitute with the largest number of active users, reaching 224 million (albeit not as popular as WeChat). Accounting for 50% of the Chinese SNS population indeed, QQ now holds the largest user group in the world and is reported to generate more web traffic than Facebook or MySpace (Chu & Choi, 2010).

Apart from Facebook and WeChat, the two most popular social networking sites, social media, and microblogging platforms such as Twitter in the U.S. and Weibo in China, have gained remarkable popularity. The central feature of microblogging is called "tweet", which is a short post disseminated from registered users to their followers and users can easily show appreciation for other people's tweets by "liking" them. In 2013, the year of its initial public offering, Twitter's users posted approximately 500 million tweets a day, and Weibo users posted more than 100 million. A second function is called "retweet", which allows users to forward and optionally comment ("quote") on other users' tweets. Another key function is "follow", which allows users to subscribe to other users' tweets and the subscribers are called "followers" (Gong et al., 2017). In social media like Twitter, those users who are motivated by the brand, the so called "brand followers", serve as role models, who tweet or retweet brands' links. In fact, the information on these websites has higher impact on intention and trust than the information included on a firms' official website. Recently, Asur and others have also examined the growth and persistence of trending topics on Twitter, and they discovered that traditional media sources are important in causing trends on twitter (Yu et al., 2011).

In China, Weibo is a popular mesh between Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Although the 140-character structure from Twitter was initially used, the platform eventually increased the post limit to 2,000 characters (Shofner). As already mentioned in one of the previous chapters, Sina Weibo is a popular microblogging network in China which contains millions of users who live in mainland China and post in the Chinese language. Compared to Twitter, Weibo has very similar features, with the possibility of tweeting, retweeting, liking other people's tweets and following other accounts or brand pages. Thanks to the role of opinion leaders and influencers in China, who shape public opinion by selectively conveying mass media messages to their social networks (Bobkowski, 2015), the magnitude of retweets on the Chinese app is far bigger than on Twitter and this makes it the perfect social media for customer brand engagement on business accounts.

Ultimately, other two video-sharing SNS that is worth mentioning are YouTube and its Chinese version called Youku Tudou. In fact, by using these apps and websites, millions of users can regularly watch TV shows, movies, and user-created content, through which advertisers can enormously benefit from the publication of videos and short ads (also considering how video-making has become an important part of social media culture in China and most Western countries: e.g., TikTok).

Social media have become culturally significant, since they now represent the primary domain in which both people and brands receive vast amounts of information and share aspects of their lives with others, while, at the same time, receiving feedbacks and insights from the world around them. The rise of social media has strongly impacted consumer behavior and marketing practices, and since the "early days" of SNS, that included media such as MySpace and Friendster (precursors of Facebook and more recent social media), these channels have served as means for searching information, entertainment, social interaction, community development, self-actualization, and self-expression (Heinonen, 2011; Ma & Chan, 2014; Zhang et al., 2016, Appel et al., 2020). In this sense, social media marketing has become a fundamental part of social commerce, meant to engage, and attract a large number of internet users and potential consumers. Marketing studies today increasingly pay more and more attention to the marketing message and many of them seem to largely ignore the channel or carrier of that message

(Wang et al., 2018). Furthermore, the environmental stimuli offered by the use of social media and marketing features may influence the cognitive and behavioral states of the individual, including their perceived utilitarian and hedonic values, which eventually leads to the individual positive response, in terms of engaging with the social media message (Babin et al., 1994; Wang et al., 2018). In this case, Chang & Zhu (2011) found that an individual's attitude and subjective norms are positively related to the adoption intention towards social media and SNS, together with perceived behavioral control, information and entertainment motivation, and connecting with an old friend motivation. Although many researchers studied that consumer have generally negative attitude toward traditional ads and marketing messages, the internet and social media advertising seem to generate positive consumers' attitude, thanks to the informative and entertaining nature of the internet and online channels (Ducoffe, 1996; Tsang et al., 2004).

When discussing the marketing message and its content, a very large number of experts agree on the added value provided by the message's informativeness and sense of hedonism or entertainment (Babin et al., 1994; Tsang et al., 2004; Cyr et al., 2009; Heinonen, 2011; Chen Y.R., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). On the one hand, the level of informativeness of the marketing message refers to the informational element which can influence the cognitive state of the individual. In fact, during the information processing activity, the acquisition of knowledge about the product or service helps retrieving the information for future utilitarian needs (Tsang et al., 2004; Heinonen, 2011). As a matter of fact, the informational and instructive appeals of the marketing message work as marketing stimuli in a stimulus-organism-response framework, which subsequently affect participants' cognitive and affective experience (such as, perceived utilitarian value) and their response (intention to repost, engage with or forward the message; Wang et al., 2018). On the other hand, because of the interactive nature of the internet, entertainment and the hedonic value of the marketing message can easily forecast the effectiveness of the ad. In this sense, the perceived hedonic value of the message content is defined as the extent of playfulness and pleasure perceived when the internet user receives a marketing message through social media (Ducoffe, 1996; Tsang et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2018). Increased arousal, higher involvement and sense of escapism provided by an entertaining

ad on social media may indicate a hedonically valuable experience that further enhances the user's sense of engagement and may eventually lead to affective commitment toward the company (Babin et al., 1994; Zhou et al., 2012, Chen Y.R., 2017). Affective commitment is reflective of the emotional "attachment, identification and involvement" and has been viewed as one of the most important determinants of consumers' trust and dedication. This also creates a psychological affiliation that makes disconnection less probable (e.g.: Kang, 2014). For these reasons, the importance of perceived utilitarian values, as a result of informativeness, and perceived hedonic value, as a result of entertainment, significantly affect and increase the individual's performance and response to the ad in terms of overall engagement and intention to repost.

From this analysis, it becomes quite clear how social networks have made a tremendous impact on online computing, by providing users opportunities to connect with others and generate enormous content on a daily basis. The enormous user participation in these social networks is reflected in the infinite number of discussions, images, videos, news, and conversations that are constantly posted on social sites (Yu et al., 2011). Under the influence of collectivism, Chinese consumers are more dependent on social media in general, demonstrate a higher level of (behavioral) social media engagement with brands, perceive a closer parasocial interaction with the corporate SNS representatives, and form a stronger identification with the corporate SNS communities than their American and European counterparts (Chen, 2018). International marketers need to understand how the process of globalization affects cross-cultural and cross-national consumer behavior, and the design of effective comparative marketing strategies (when marketing both products and services) needs to take into account both the similarities and differences in cross-cultural and cross-national consumer behavior as well as changes in the marketing environment caused by globalization (Manrai & Manrai, 2011).

By putting together social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube or China's WeChat, Weibo, Renren, QQ and Youku Tudou) and the brands' message informativeness and entertainment, managers and marketers can effortlessly catch the attention of consumers online and they can efficiently, effortlessly, engage with them while tenuously advertising their products or services.

2.4.1 Consumer brand engagement on social media

Consumer engagement has become a buzz phrase, a concept and construct that has attracted much academic attention and practical research in the digital communication environment, in which ICTs (information communication technologies) enable organizations to communicate with consumers and users online through messages in various forms in an interactive and dynamic process (Chen, 2018). The concept of engagement, however, is nothing new. In business and organizational contexts, engagement has become a popular subject that brings positive organizational or marketing outcomes, such as increased employee and customer voluntary behaviors, consumer advocacy, financial support, and loyalty (Kang, 2014). Nowadays, it is safe to say that the success of brands and companies lies in this new public and media environment, which is largely dependent on these firms' ability to find new, interactive ways to engage with their stakeholders effectively and successfully, so as to build lasting and meaningful relationships. The advent of social media has meant that brand and company managers have basically lost their control over their customers and marketing strategies, since consumers are now more empowered to voice their opinions and ideas, and to find a broad audience. As consumer engagement can be both positive (e.g., recommendations) and negative (e.g., complaints or negative word of mouth), monitoring and managing consumer interactions has become a pivotal part of brand management (Schamari & Schaefers, 2015). According to Tsai & Men (2014), with its collaborative and user-centered characteristics, social media are now changing marketing communications by enabling consumers to become influential gatekeepers and producers of brand-related content, which means that they actively and collaboratively shape corporate image and reputation through the "likes," "posts," "tweets," and "shares" of their personal networks (see also Schivinski et al., 2016). Moreover, marketers now heavily rely on social media in order "to contextualize their messages in consumers' own social communities, to personalize the brands, and build consumer relationships in an organic and personal manner".

In accordance with Abdul-Ghani et al. (2011) engagement refers to a consumer's ongoing attention to an object of consumption such as a website or brand, whereas

Patterson et al. (2006) explain that "customer engagement" represents "the level of a customer's physical, cognitive and emotional presence in their relationship with a service organization". By contrast, Vivek et al. believe that consumer engagement refers to "the intensity of an individual's participation and connection with the organization's offerings and activities initiated by either the customer or the organization" (see Brodie et al., 2011), however, as Hollebeek (2011) and Dessart et al. (2015) explained, the scrutiny of engagement research in marketing indicates that there are several engagement sub-forms, which include "customer engagement", "customer engagement behaviors", "customer brand engagement" and "consumer engagement". In one of her studies from 2014, Hollebeek also conceptualized consumer brand engagement (CBE) and she described it as "a consumer's positively valanced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions" (see also Kuvykaite & Piligrimienė, 2014). Engagement as a psychological state should consider related concepts in the form of absorption (which means paying high attention to the organization's activities and businesses), attachment (e.g., feeling of belonging to the organization), and enthusiasm both in its conceptual and operational level (Kang, 2014). Furthermore, following this same logic, Bowden (2009) views "customer engagement" as a "psychological process", comprising cognitive and emotional aspects, which can ignite consumers' desire to share useful information with others (or at least reduce the perceived risk associated with such actions) and buy recommended products or service, lubricating social commerce engagement (see Brodie et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2017).

Consumer engagement has its roots in relationship marketing and offers a further enhancement of the current theoretizations around consumer and brand relationships with its major added value that lies in supporting the increasingly interactive and experiential nature of consumer relationships (Dessart et al., 2015). According to Stafford and Canary (1991), a satisfying relationship is the one in which "the distribution of rewards is equitable, and the relational rewards outweigh the cost", with Hung (2006) also pointing out that satisfaction is a favorable feeling about the other party that can be nurtured from a positive expectation of relationships (see Men & Tsai, 2013). However, Taylor & Kent (2014) believe that most engagement articles find engagement via social media to be a

one-way communication process from an organization to followers or friends, rather than constituting any sort of participatory or interactive engagement. Marketing communications represent how firms attempt to inform, persuade, and remind consumers – directly or indirectly – about the products and brands they sell. In a sense, marketing communications represent the 'voice' of the company, and this allows the brand to establish a dialogue and build relationships with and among consumers, as they engage with the content that is published (Keller, 2009).

Previous studies have also tried to identify consumer engagement antecedents, and most authors agree that relationship (i.e., brand identification, parasocial interaction with brand representatives, and identification of brand community), participation, involvement, trust, satisfaction, gratifications, and flow and rapport serve as the most significant and relevant motivators for online engagement (Chen, 2018). Brodie (2011) also reiterates Chen's words and points out that relational concepts such as participation and involvement act as engagement antecedents and/or consequences in dynamic engagement processes occurring within the brand community. Men & Tsai (2013) proved that Chinese respondents who were more deeply engaged with corporate SNS pages tended to be more trusting of, more satisfied with, and more committed to the organization. When respondents were engaged, they paid more attention to the messages distributed on the company's SNS pages and were better receivers and consumers of the information.

When conceptualizing online "brand engagement," Mollen & Wilson (2010) scrutinize how the concept differs from "involvement", and they explain that a consumer's brand engagement "extends beyond mere involvement, as it encompasses an interactive relationship with the engagement object and requires the emergence of the individual's perceived experiential value, in addition to instrumental value obtained from specific brand interactions" (see Brodie et al., 2011). However, according to Wang (2006) engagement initiated by contextual relevance may be a fundamental driver of involvement (defined as the motivation to process information and an important factor of advertising effectiveness, which may occur when a person's perception or attention is directed toward an advertisement), since engagement may be a precondition to the level of involvement that influences the consequences of message effects on attitude formation.

Here, engagement serves as measure of the contextual relevance in which the brands' messages are framed and which eventually leads to users and consumers involvement online. (COBRA) rates user interaction and involvement with corporate pages on social networks based on three continuous engagement levels: the first is the lowest level of content consumption (for example, viewing videos and pictures and reading product reviews); the second is a moderate level of contributions to page content (e.g., rating products or companies and commenting on posted videos or pictures); the third is the highest level of creation, which refers to creating and sharing user-generated content, UGC (see Men & Tsai, 2013).

In one of his research studies, Chen (2019) explained how Tsai & Men conceptualized consumer engagement, applied to the social media environment, as "a behavioral construct with hierarchical activity levels, from passive message consumption (e.g., viewing videos and pictures, reading product reviews) to active content contributing which includes two-way conversation, participation, and online recommendation (e.g., responding to comments and other SNS posts, posting one's own product reviews, uploading user-created videos and pictures)". This means that according to the authors, customer engagement on social media is defined as the consumer's online behavior with a brand. When applied to Chinese social media, such as WeChat, consumer-corporate engagement on SNS is identified by *five* influential factors that shape the community-oriented features and parasocial interactions and relationships: account identification (the extent to which the brand account resonates with the consumer's self-identity), utilitarian value (which refers to the user motivation to seek social media content or function delivering resourceful and helpful information or technological affordance that enhances his or her performance), innovation differentiation (the extent to which a brand account is unique and provides unique content), entertainment value (which refers to the relaxation, enjoyment, and emotional relief generated by temporarily escaping from mundane routines) and social value (how much the brand account facilitates socialization among consumers; Abdul-Ghani et al., 2011; Chen, 2017, 2019).

The concept of consumer brand engagement (CBE) addresses specific interactions between a focal consumer and a particular brand and themes such as "immersion",

"passion" or "activation" represent the degree to which a customer is prepared to exert relevant cognitive, emotional and behavioral resources in specific interactions with a focal brand, which are displayed by applying particular levels of brand-related concentration, positive affect and energy (time/effort) in specific brand interactions (Hollebeek, 2014; Meirani & Abor, 2019). Chen (2017) extends Hollebeek's definition and explains that CBE is often defined as "deep involvement," "interaction" or "both an orientation that influences interactions and the approach that guides the process of interactions among groups". One of the main ingredients of CBE is stickiness, which, according to the same author, is defined as "the extent to which consumers repeatedly return to the same application for performing various tasks". Since mobile SNS applications are a newly established means of corporate communication, stickiness should be included as a major driver of consumer engagement on brand social media because "the continued application use facilitates possible consequences of consumer engagement with the corporation in the mobile SNS context for the consumer and the corporation". Evidence from literature research also shows that engagement with the community and engagement with the brand are closely related, and even intertwined, each one of them sustaining the other, and together representing two facets of the same phenomenon (Dessart et al., 2015), and this leads to consumer loyalty and satisfaction, consumer empowerment, connection and emotional bonding, trust, and commitment (Brodie et al., 2011; Hong & Yang, 2011).

Regarding Chinese publics' motivations for using and engaging with corporate SNS pages, two studies from Men & Tsai (2013, 2014) showed that the respondents "liked" or visited a company's Renren or Weibo page mainly for information purposes, followed by entertainment and social integration purposes. Findings also suggested that Internet users in China "have embraced corporate SNS as a primary source of product, promotional, and corporate information, a medium likely to be particularly befitting their collectivist cultural orientation, which is characterized by reliance on social networks for information". In this sense, by joining in the conversations embedded in a brand SNS page (for example, commenting on the brand, raising questions, expressing support, making suggestions, and sharing the brand posts with one's online friends and family

members), Chinese consumers can directly engage with the brand and each other on a more personal and social level (Tsai & Men, 2014).

One last important aspect that is strictly related to consumer engagement on social media is behavioral engagement. According to Chen (2017), behavioral engagement refers to the consumer's behavioral interactions with a corporation, and while relationship marketing scholars often consider consumer engagement at all three levels (familiarity and satisfaction; affective commitment and intimacy; WOM and UGC), public relations scholars tend to focus on one dimension (i.e., behavioral engagement) in consumer social media engagement research. Brodie (2011) explains that the interplay between the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of engagement generates different levels of engagement intensity. For example, emotional engagement may generate increased levels of cognitive and/or behavioral engagement, which consequently leads to brand love, trust and commitment and helps brands and companies increase brand equity (a customer's subjective and intangible assessment of the brand over and above its value) and brand image retention. As matter of fact, when consumer gets familiar with a brand, this evokes some particular emotions that could be positive or negative, and that eventually stimulate the consumer to act in a certain way (here the consumer is an active participant, who gives some input into brand value creation; Kuvykaite & Piligrimienė, 2014).

Abdullah & Siraj (2016) believe that these factors lead to brand's overall perceived quality, defined as "the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service regarding its intended purpose in comparison to that of other alternatives", and that customer engagement in social media can either generate positive word-of-mouth (PWOM), by the satisfied and delighted customers, or negative word-of-mouth (NWOM), out of disengament on social media, and which in turn affects brand loyalty (defined as a sense of attachment to a particular brand or company), brand awareness (that signifies the presence of a brand in a consumer's memory and therefore indicates how well a consumer will recall or recognize that brand) and brand image (that encompasses the characteristics and advantages linked to a brand that build brand uniqueness, thus differentiating its services from competition). However, the next paragraph will provide an in-depth analysis on WOM and its use online.

2.5 Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)

In the last couple of decades, the increasingly widespread use of social networking sites (SNS or social media) has gradually, but quite quickly, shifted the advertisement and marketing platform used by firms and brands from traditional media to social media channels (Cao et al., 2009; Hong, 2016). This, in turn, has strongly impacted the way marketers and businesses foster virality or "buzz" and enhance the so-called word-of-mouth (WOM) activities. WOM communication has attracted increasing attention in the research and academic field of marketing and advertising since the early 1950s, and researchers have demonstrated that personal conversations and informal exchange of information among acquaintances can not only influence consumers' opinions, but also their choice and purchase decisions (see Tsugawa & Ohsaki, 2015). Dichter (1966) and Singh (1988) have defined WOM as an "informal mode of communication between private parties concerning the evaluation of goods and services", which has been found to facilitate the sale of a wide range of products, including professional services or automobiles (see Chung & Darke, 2006). In the marketing literature, word-of-mouth communication is usually referred to as the "oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator, whom the receiver perceives as noncommercial, regarding a brand, a product, a service or a provider" (Park et al., 2011). According to De Bruyn & Lilien (2008) the research on this topic revolves around three main axes: 1) why a consumer disseminates, in a proactive fashion, their consumption experience of a series of products or brands; 2) situations in which consumers trust WOM more than other sources of information before they purchase something; 3) why the information supplied by some people can have more influence on recipients (see also Dafonte-Gómez, 2014). From their research report, the authors found that factors such as extreme satisfaction or dissatisfaction commitment to the firm, length of the relationship with the firm and novelty of the product can drive such WOM behaviors. At a time when consumers seem to display ever-diminishing confidence and trust towards firms and their advertising messages, word-of-mouth communication are proving increasingly popular and important, since the source of the message (the one person who conveys the message) is known by the recipient, thus influencing the recipient's beliefs and attitudes toward the

original brand ad (Chung & Darke, 2006; Camarero & San Jose, 2011). In a two-step flow theory, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1964) stressed that WOM by opinion leaders can accelerate the diffusion of innovations and information, and Reichheld and Sasser (1990) reported that positive WOM not only reduces the need for marketing expenditures but might also increase revenue if new customers are attracted (see Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003).

Through WOM, consumers can talk about new trending clothes, complain about bad hotel stays, or share information about the best way to get out tough stains, and since social talk generates more than 3.3 billion brand impressions each day, it is safe to say that marketing strategies aimed at fostering WOM communications are crucial and essential for brands to achieve success. An important distinction that needs to be made is between immediate WOM (which happens as soon as people first learn about a product or service) and ongoing WOM (when the product or service mentions occur in the following weeks or months), since most research papers often investigate not only *whether* certain types of products (i.e., more interesting ones) are talked about more but also *when* different product characteristics are more important in driving discussion (Berger & Schwartz, 2011). In this sense, marketers and practitioners argue that the most important rule in WOM marketing is "to be interesting", since nobody wants to talk about boring companies and boring ads. Quite often, WOM marketing is considered to be a successful marketing strategy because it creates the "familiarity, personal connection, care, and trust" between the consumer and the translator of the information (see Agam, 2017) and being interactive, WOM can directly affect sales and firms' ROI. When sharing WOM, consumers not only communicate information, but also something about themselves, because most people want others to think highly of them and talking about interesting (vs. boring) things should facilitate this goal. Berger & Schwartz (2011) suggest that ongoing WOM is driven more by accessibility, or whether products are top of mind; this means that, for example, a product that can be eaten for breakfast and lunch should tend to be more accessible than one that can only be eaten on one's birthday, and so, logically, these products will drive more WOM communication.

Recently, however, online consumers seem to have gained more power than other "offline" consumers and the rapid expansion of social media has changed how content is

accessed. In fact, most web based SNS provide several means for users to interact online and allow the sharing of ideas, activities and events with their relatives, friends, and colleagues, thus serving as instruments for the rapid diffusion of information through eWOM (electronic WOM) activities (Gunawan & Huarng, 2015). eWOM is basically the extension of traditional WOM on the internet, in which the communication is written and *not* face to face or oral, and it plays an important role in electronic marketing (e-marketing) nowadays because comments can evoke emotion or needs (to be part of a group, to stand out, to be altruistic etc.) and affect behavior (Aramendia-Muneta, 2017). The main difference between eWOM and traditional WOM is that the message circulates through a purely digital channel and that such channels provide peculiar aspects regarding the scope, speed, and ease of spreading the message (Camarero & San Jose, 2011; Park et al., 2011; Amiri et al., 2012). Balaji et al. (2016) provide a further distinction between eWOM and sWOM (social media word-of-mouth) and they explain that, although WOM communication on social media (sWOM) is similar to face-to-face WOM and eWOM, it differs significantly in terms of anonymity, social risk, confidentiality, and geographical and spatial freedom, since sWOM usually involves non-simultaneous conversations with a network of people.

Online consumer reviews have also become an important means of marketing communication because many consumers search for online reviews as the first step in shopping. For this reason, the assessment of credibility with electronic word-of-mouth, defined as the extent to which one perceives the recommendation as believable, true, or factual, has become increasingly important in marketing literature. Source credibility refers to the extent to which consumers perceive that an information source is believable, competent, and trustworthy, and it has been shown that high credibility sources have a greater role on opinion change than low credibility sources do (Gunawan & Huarng, 2015). Park et al. (2011), when studying credibility online in the context of Chinese social media, explained that Chinese young consumers prefer to believe the words written by others on the internet than traditional oral word-of-mouth; in this sense, they found that perceived eWOM credibility influences the eWOM effect sufficiently. These findings comply with Yang et al. (2015), who reported that the higher the credibility and the

stronger the relationship is, the stronger the influence is on consumers' purchase decision. Prior studies have also reported that personal messages sent by friends gain more credibility than those coming directly from the self-interested advertiser (Palka et al., 2009), and according to Barreto (2015), when the receiver perceives that the sender is to benefit by a third actor from the WOM process, the sender's credibility may be jeopardized and the way that specific content is perceived may be affected.

Overall, eWOM is widely acknowledged as a crucial factor in influencing purchase intention and ultimately purchase behavior, and social media has been widely recognized as a facilitator in eWOM dissemination (Song et al., 2017), even though Buttle & Groeger (2017) explain that whilst it is established that eWOM can directly affect product sales, two-thirds of overall WOM's impact on business is estimated to be from offline WOM – either directly influencing consumer decision-making or amplifying paid media. In China, Chu et al. (2018) found that Chinese users on WeChat rely heavily on eWOM for travel decision-making and that dedication towards WeChat significantly affects their intention to engage in eWOM. According to Delafrooz et al. (2019), brand pages on social media are successful tools of eWOM, since firms can provide brand information, answer the questions about the product, and fight negative eWOM, in order for them to build awareness, raise interest, enhance brand image, and raise profit for brand owners. In this sense, it becomes vital to identify the likely individuals (influencers or opinion leaders) who are effective in eWOM, to motivate them to extend their brand related positive eWOM. Results from Bobkowski's study (2015) showed that opinion leaders are more likely than nonleaders to share news that both leaders and nonleaders perceive to contain informational utility. Findings reported that opinion leadership affected perceived informational utility and, subsequently, news sharing, and that they may create more opportunities for themselves than an average consumer to share news they perceive to have informational utility. Nevertheless, Watts & Dodds (2007) believe that opinion leaders are not "leaders" in the usual sense - they do not head formal organizations nor are they public figures such as newspaper columnists, critics, or media personalities – but rather they have a direct influence, which derives from their informal status as individuals who are highly informed, respected, or simply "connected".

One fundamental distinction in eWOM is between positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) and negative word-of-mouth (NWOM). According to Hong & Yang (2011) customers' positive word-of-mouth communication is considered as a strong supportive behavior toward organizations because of its influence on organizations' growth and revenue. In this sense, the more customers identify with a company, the more likely they will be to act as ambassadors for the company, because customers who identify with a company focus on tasks that are beneficial to the whole organization and engaging in such tasks allow customers to express their identification. On the contrary, a negative WOM communication is defined as a customer's effort to share negative or unfavorable feedback or opinions with friends, family, and others (Balaji et al., 2016). When certain products or services fall short of the expectations, customers experience disconfirmation and dissonance. In such situations, they may engage in NWOM communications to reduce their cognitive dissonance and diminish their perceived sense of betrayal, while making negative comments online to vent their dissatisfaction, frustration, or to seek revenge (Balaji et al., 2016). Statistically speaking, PWOM occurs three times more often (3 to 1) than NWOM, and Cheung et al. (2007) found that cultural differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures change the way customers "make use" of NWOM: in fact, Chinese NWOM is based on venting anger and punishing the business organization, while U.S. NWOM will seek compensation and the correction of a bad situation (see Nguyen, 2014; Aramendia-Muneta, 2017). However, Schamari & Schaefers (2015) reported that webcare was found to be effective in the context of negative consumer engagement, by mitigating the deleterious effects of negative word-of-mouth and complaints on observing consumers. Ultimately, Eltaj & Eltaj (2017) concluded that "if a message gets a positive effect through a viral marketing campaign this can be spread very fast and maybe lead to a purchase in the consumers buying act. On the other hand, a negative word-of-mouth can be spread just as fast but instead maybe push the consumer further away from a purchase in the consumers buying act".

In marketing and word-of-mouth literature, many experts have also been debating on whether the term eWOM can be used to describe the phenomenon of "viral marketing" (VM), with one being the synonym for the other or rather two very different concepts

(Camarero & San Jose, 2011; Miquel-Romero & Adame-Sánchez, 2013). For example, Porter & Golan (2006) hold that the term eWOM can be replaced by "viral marketing", "viral communication", "buzz marketing", "stealth marketing", "word-of-mouth marketing" and "viral advertising" to describe the same single concept. In 1997, Steve Jurvetson used the term "viral marketing" as "network-enhanced word-of-mouth" and as an effective way in reaching a large number of people rapidly, in the same way as a natural virus or a computer virus, to describe the marketing strategy of the free email service of Hotmail which is believed to be one of the most successful samples of viral marketing (Camarero & San Jose, 2011; Amiri et al., 2012). However, another (smaller) stream of research agree that the term "viral marketing" was first introduced by Knight (1999), who analogized the spreading of messages or content through social media to a virus, calling viral marketing a "digitalized sneeze" that could be characterized by the release of "millions of tiny particles that can infect others who come into contact with them" (Botha & Reyneke, 2013; Beverland et al., 2015).

Kiss & Bichler (2008) define viral marketing as "marketing techniques that use social networks to produce increases in brand awareness through self-replicating viral diffusion of messages, analogous to the spread of pathological and computer viruses". The authors also explained that VM can be considered the equivalent of "online/electronic word-of-mouth" which refers to "all informal communications related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and service, or their sellers directed at consumers through Internet-based technology" (see Amiri et al., 2012). Viral marketing is specifically related to its use of existing digital networks and considering that it is quite easy to target a viral message, because they naturally circulate among people with common behaviors or interests, viral marketing successfully exploits existing social networks by encouraging customers to share product information with their friends (Beverland et al., 2015; Ketelaar et al., 2016; Eltaj & Eltaj, 2017). When executed effectively, viral marketing campaigns can create an instantaneous buzz in the promotion and distribution of companies' brands and products, while driving sales, reduce marketing costs reach media-jaded consumer segments such as Generation X and Generation Y. Although it has been proved to be a successful means of marketing communication,

however, there is still only a limited understanding of how it really works (Dobele et al., 2007).

Viral advertising relies on provocative content to motivate unpaid peer-to-peer communication of persuasive messages from identified sponsors, and the dynamics behind it refer to the process of receiving, sending and/or forwarding messages from one person to another in their network of contacts (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Skiera et al., 2011; Cohen, 2014). The VM concept suggest that marketers can leverage the power of interpersonal networks to promote a product or service, by understanding its pass-along process and underlying mechanisms of influence (Tang et al., 2017). It is currently regarded as the "holy grail" of digital marketing since this marketing strategy allows for the exponential distribution of content in network-based channels in the shortest time with comparatively little effort (Akpinar & Berger, 2016; Reichstein & Brusch, 2019). Given that people share content online to entertain others (among other reasons), Berger & Milkman (2012), in their study called "What Makes Online Content Viral?", found that surprising and interesting content is highly viral. The authors suggest that marketers should focus on content that evokes high-arousal emotions, since this type of content is more likely to be shared (see also Dobele et al., 2007). This was also confirmed by another research by Agam (2017), who discovered that 90% of the respondents agree that viral marketing gives customers freedom to talk about a specific company, with 46% of them agreeing that companies gain more popularity through the use of a viral marketing platform.

Table 1: **Scientific articles linked to RTM, engagement and virality**

Title and author	Main Topic	Type of analysis	Content and purpose	Results and conclusions
Borah et al. (2019), "Improvised Marketing Interventions in Social Media"	This article explores the use of wit paired with timeliness in	Five multimethod studies, including quasiexperiments, experiments, and archival data	The aim of the study is to show how the effect of RTM and IMIs (improvised	Overall, across the five studies that span different methods utilizing archival and experimental data, there's evidence that an IMI generates

	real-time marketing communications.	analysis of 10 RTM messages posted after the 2013 Superbowl's unexpected blackout.	marketing interventions) is furthered by humor, wit and timeliness or unanticipation.	virality and leads to a significant boost in virality compared with a non-IMI, and that IMIs characterized by humor and timeliness or unanticipation can enhance virality and firm value.
Willemsen et al. (2019), "Let's Get Real (Time)! The potential of real-time marketing to catalyze the sharing of brand messages"	This article explores RTM as an effective strategy to boost sharing behavior.	To test the hypotheses and the research questions, a content analysis of brand messages, as posted on Twitter by the top-100 Dutch advertisers, compiled by Nielsen in 2016, was performed. Twitter was chosen as a research context for this study, given its focus on real-time content production and content sharing.	Aim is to examine whether brands can boost sharing behavior, by proposing and testing two different types of moments to connect brand content with timely events: (1) predictable moments (e.g., Super Bowl) and (2) unpredictable moments (e.g., #thedress)	First, it was found that brand messages that make use of RTM elicit more shares than messages that do not make use of RTM (H1). The results show that RTM is an even more effective strategy when brand messages are linked with unpredictable events (vs. predictable events). Shares increase as a function of meaningfulness and originality. These dimensions of creativity, however, are differently affected by predictable and unpredictable moments, thereby leading to opposing indirect effects.
Mazerant et al. (2021), "Spot-On Creativity: Creativity Biases and Their Differential Effects on Consumer Responses in (Non-)Real-Time Marketing"	This study explores the creative crafting of RTM on Instagram and its consequences.	Study 1: a content analysis was conducted of brand messages on Instagram, as posted by the Top-100 Forbes social media brands of 2017. Study 2: RTM messages were experimentally manipulated to vary in originality, meaningfulness, and craftsmanship.	The aim is to examine the creative crafting of RTM messages on Instagram and its consequences for RTM success. By doing so, the study sheds light on the question of how brands can create effective RTM messages and the mechanisms underlying engagement effects.	The results showed a meaningfulness bias for RTM in which more emphasis was placed on creating meaningful rather than original and well-crafted content, and a craftsmanship bias for non-RTM messages in which marketers focused on craftsmanship instead of originality. The results revealed that only craftsmanship is positively related to consumer responses. Results also showed that RTM messages on Instagram yield less positive consumer responses compared to non-RTM messages due to a meaningfulness bias.

Berger (2014), "Word of Mouth and Interpersonal Communication"	This article argues that word of mouth is goal driven and serves five key functions (i.e., impression management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding, and persuasion).	Literature review of the five proposed functions and contextual factors that moderate the impact of eWOM on consumer behavior.	This paper focuses more on micro-level (i.e., individual) processes of transmission in eWOM and focuses on how they impact what people talk about and share rather than their selection.	The communication channel (written vs. oral, identifiability and audience salience) and the audience (tie strengths, audience size and tie status) play an important role in moderating the functions of word of mouth and what consumes talk about.
Delafrooz et al. (2019), "The Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth on Instagram Users: An Emphasis on Consumer Socialization Framework"	This article explores the extent to which users model their behavior – as well as their brand attitudes, their perception of relationship quality, their use of Instagram, and the number of brands they follow – on other users.	A standard questionnaire that was derived from Chu and Sung (2015). The data were analyzed by the logistic regression test in the SPSS software package. The statistical population was composed of the Instagram users. Finally, 384 individuals were sampled by convenience non-probable technique.	The aim is to identify the most important consumer socialization variables with an emphasis on peer communications, brand-related factors, and the use of social networks for eWOM among the users of Instagram.	First, no significant relationship was found between peer communications and the following activity, but this variable was significantly related to the tagging activity. Second, it can be observed that positive or negative attitude of individuals has a significant positive relationship between following activities. On the other hand, there is no relationship between positive attitude and tagging activity whereas a significant positive relationship was observed between negative attitude and tagging activity. Third, brand relationship quality is related to both following activity and tagging activity significantly and positively. Fourth, there was a significant positive relationship between Instagram usage and following activity, while this variable has no relationship with tagging activity.

Chu et al. (2018), "Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on WeChat: examining the influence of sense of belonging, need for self-enhancement, and consumer engagement on Chinese travellers' eWOM"	This study examines the influence of two personality traits, sense of belonging and need for self-enhancement, on consumer engagement and in turn leads to eWOM intention.	A questionnaire, consisting of five section was distributed to 500 people, of which 421 valid samples were returned. The questionnaire was administered using a professional online survey company called Sojump.	The aim is to examine the relationships among sense of belonging, need for self-enhancement, consumer engagement, and eWOM intention. This study also explores the mediating effects of consumer engagement on eWOM intention.	First, this study offers new insights into the social identity theory by considering the individual characteristic factor of need for self-enhancement and consumer engagement. Second, among the three dimensions of consumer engagement with WeChat, dedication towards WeChat is the key driver affecting eWOM intention and mediates the influence of need for self-enhancement on eWOM intention. Third, Chinese consumers' sense of belonging in WeChat friends' circle did not influence their engagement with WeChat through physical (vigour), cognitive (absorption), and emotional (dedication) con-nections with the site.
Tsai & Men (2014), "Consumer engagement with brands on social network sites: A cross-cultural comparison of China and the USA"	This cross-cultural study evaluates how culture influences consumers' engagement levels and activities on brand pages of social network sites.	An online survey with adult samples was conducted to answer the research questions and to test our hypotheses. A questionnaire was developed first in English and then translated into Chinese. Research participants were SNS users in the USA and in China. Participants were recruited via online consumer panels that were sustained by a major international sampling firm. The final sample contained 245 Chinese	The aim is to examine the motivations and antecedents that contribute to American and Chinese users' engagement with brand SNS pages. Specifically, consumer engagement with brand pages in leading SNSs from the USA (i.e., Facebook) and China (i.e., Renren, Sina Weibo) is examined.	Findings provide empirical support that the overarching influence of culture indeed plays a critical role in driving consumers' engagement activities on brand SNS pages. Results revealed both contrasts and commonalities between American and Chinese users' motivations for using brand SNS pages. However, while Chinese respondents used brand SNS page as an indispensable platform to interact with like-minded peers for social purposes, American respondents ranked social integration as the least important reason to use the brand SNS pages. Instead, American respondents considered obtaining economic benefits, such as coupons,

		respondents and 280 Americans.		awards, and free samples, as the chief rationale.
Nguyen (2014), Customer engagement planning emerging from the "individualist-collectivist"-framework "	This study investigates customers in China and UK, aiming to compare their perceptual differences on the impact of multiple customer engagement tactics.	Using a quantitative approach with 286 usable responses from China and the UK obtained through a combination of person-administered survey and computer-based survey screening process, the authors test a series of hypotheses to distinguish across-cultural differences.	The aim is to draw from past studies to identify the factors which engage customers and their perceptions, by positing that posit the customer engagement framework to thus include price, service, communication, customization, and reputation.	Findings show that the collectivists (Chinese customers) perceive customer engagement tactics differently than the individualists (UK customers). The Chinese customers are more sensitive to price and reputation, whereas the UK customers respond more strongly to service, communication, and customization. Chinese customers' concerns with extensive price and reputation comparisons may be explained by their awareness towards face (status), increased self-expression and equality.
Triandis et al. (1988), "Individualism and Collectivism: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Self-Ingroup Relationship"	This study examines cross-cultural perspectives on self-ingroup relationships, in relation to individualism (United States) and collectivism (China).	Study 1: four different questionnaires administered to three hundred subjects from the psychology subject pool. Study 2: one questionnaire administered to ninety-one Illinois, 97 Puerto Rican, and 150 Japanese students. In addition, 106 older Japanese were studied, so that the total Japanese sample is 256.	The aim is to study and compare allocentrism versus idiocentrism, which is a within-culture variable that corresponds to collectivism versus individualism at the cultural level.	Results show that collectivism and individualism constructs reflect patterns of information processing and evaluating events in the social environment that distinguish most traditional, complex cultures from either simple or industrial, complex cultures. In individualistic cultures it is individuals who achieve; in collectivist cultures, groups achieve. People feel proud of their achievements and their success in personal competition in the individualist cultures, and people feel proud of their group's achievement and the success of their groups in the collectivist cultures.
Wang et al. (2018), "Which is the King in Social Commerce? An Empirical Study of	This study explores perceived utilitarian and	Collection of cross-sectional survey data from the participants of	The aim is 1) to point out that both marketing and media features are	The research results indicate that perceived utilitarian value and perceived hedonic value collectively explained 50% of

Participants' Intention to Repost Marketing Messages on social media, Computers in Human Behaviour"	hedonic value as the two key mediating mechanisms to transmit the effects of marketing stimuli and social media stimuli on participants' intention to repost a marketing message on social media.	WeChat platform, with a total of 402 valid responses that were used for statistical analysis. Structural equation modeling (SEM), specifically AMOS 17.0, was used for the data analysis.	important in facilitating the prosperity of social commerce, 2) highlight the underestimated role of marketing features, as it argues that the success of social commerce requires a more nuanced understanding of the impact of non-technical factors, 3) demonstrate the role of utilitarian value and hedonic value in the process of forming participant's reposting intention and behavior.	the variance in participants' intention to repost. Perceived utilitarian value, in turn, was predicted by perceived hedonic value. The importance of perceived utilitarian and hedonic value suggests that a participant's perceived value of a marketing message on social media would significantly influence his/her intention to repost and share it with friends. Results strongly support the view that the immediacy and intimacy created by social media can facilitate participants' enjoyment and emulate the communication processes that occur in a physical context.
Yu et al. (2011), "What Trends in Chinese Social Media"	This study examines the key topics that trend on Sina Weibo and contrasts them with observations on Twitter.	Identification and collection of topics that are popular on Sina Weibo over time. For each of these trending topics, characteristics of the users and the corresponding tweets that are responsible for creating trends were analyzed. To perform a comparison, similar trending topic data from Twitter were also used.	The aim is to examine the information that is propagated and the key trend-setters for this medium. There has been a lot of prior research done on the adaptation of influence and evolution of trends in Western online social networks. The goal is to discover important factors that determine popularity and influence in the context of Chinese social media and contrast them with corresponding ones	Key findings are as follows. It was observed that there are vast differences between the content that is shared on Sina Weibo when compared to Twitter. In China, people tend to use Sina Weibo to share jokes, images and videos and a significantly large percentage of posts are retweets. The trends that are formed are almost entirely due to the repeated retweets of such media content. This is contrary to what it was observed on Twitter, where the trending topics have more to do with current events and the effect of retweets is not as large. Results also show that there are more un- verified accounts among the top 100 trend-setters on Sina Weibo than on Twitter and most of the unverified accounts

			from Western social media (Twitter).	feature discussion forums for user-contributed jokes, images and videos.
Chen Y.R. (2017), "Perceived values of branded mobile media, consumer engagement, business-consumer relationship quality and purchase intention: A study of WeChat in China"	This study examined the relationships between perceived values of branded WeChat accounts, consumer engagement on the account, quality of business-consumer relationships, and purchase intention.	An online survey was conducted to answer the proposed research questions and test the hypotheses for this study. A total of 272 Chinese millennial WeChat users who had followed at least one branded public account on the platform were surveyed using a non- probability snowball sampling. A unified email invitation was sent to mainland Chinese students and alumni of a communication program at a university.	This study had three objectives. One was to test if perceived values of branded WeChat accounts drive the engagement of Chinese millennial WeChat users with the given brand on the platform. A second objective was to examine the effect of perceived values and consumer engagement on quality of business-consumer relationships. Thirdly, the study sought to determine if consumer engagement mediates the effect of perceived values on business-consumer relationship quality and purchase intention of Chinese millennial WeChat users.	The results suggested that consumer engagement with corporations on WeChat had a direct impact on business-consumer relationship quality (trust, commitment, control mutuality, and satisfaction) and purchase intention in general but not on intention to purchase via WeChat. The study found all the proposed perceived values except usefulness and interactivity to be the antecedents of consumer engagement on WeChat. The results of this study also suggest that branded WeChat accounts have a great potential for OPR cultivation not only because WeChat is where publics are but also because branded WeChat accounts can increase the level of public trust, commitment, control mutuality, and satisfaction toward the corporations if they can gratify the publics and engage them.
Men & Tsai (2013), "Beyond liking or following: Understanding public engagement on social networking sites in China"	Focusing on one of the most important world economies, China, this study explored the types of	To test the hypotheses, a web-based survey using random sample drawn from online consumer panels in China in early 2012 was conducted. The population of the	The aim of this study is to investigate the types of engagement and the associated motivations underlying Chinese users' engagement with corporate	The results show that Chinese SNS users demonstrated only a medium level of engagement with corporate SNS pages. Message-consuming activities, such as viewing pictures and reading wall posts, were more common than contributing activities, such as commenting,

	public engagement with corporate pages on leading Chinese SNSs as well as the motivations and antecedents that drive such engagement.	study comprised the adult users of two leading SNSs in China – Renren and Sina Weibo. The online panels consisted of 245 Internet users from diverse demographic backgrounds who voluntarily participated in online studies for various rewards offered by an international research firm.	pages on SNSs. This study also empirically tests a model that explores social media dependency and relationship factors, including parasocial interaction, perceived credibility, and community identification, as the key precursors of public engagement on SNSs.	asking and responding to questions, or creating and uploading user-generated content. Regarding Chinese publics' motivations for using corporate SNS pages, the study showed that the respondents "liked" or visited a company's Renren or Weibo page mainly for information purposes, followed by entertainment and social integration purposes. The results reveal that Chinese users who viewed social media as an indispensable part of life also tended to exhibit a deeper engagement with the companies' Renren or Weibo pages.
Wang (2006), "Advertising Engagement: A Driver of Message Involvement on Message Effects"	This study examines whether higher engagement initiated by contextual relevance increases advertising recall, message involvement, message believability, attitude toward the message (Am), and attitude toward the ad (Aad).	One-way experimental design manipulating two levels of engagement (lower versus higher engagement) was employed. The participants were involved in a primary task of playing an online game featured in a website. Next to the online game was an online advertisement. There were 119 participants in the lower engagement condition and 120 participants in the higher engagement condition, with an average age of 20 years old.	The aim of this study is to examine whether an online advertisement that invites consumers to play a game while they are playing an online game (engagement initiated by contextual relevance) generates better advertising recall, message involvement, message believability, AM, and AAD than an online advertisement that does not invite consumers to play a game.	The results revealed that there was a perfect mediation between message involvement and the engagement effect on message believability because three conditions of mediation held. First, the engagement effect affected message involvement in the first equation. Second, the engagement effect also affected message believability in the second equation. Finally, message involvement affected message believability, and the engagement effect did not affect message believability in the third equation. While message involvement mediated the engagement effect on message believability, AM mediated the effect of message believability on AAD.

Haikel-Elsabeh et al. (2018), "When is brand content shared on Facebook? A field study on online Word-of-Mouth"	This study examines individual and collective factors that lead to brand content sharing behaviors. The research conducts a field study of a real brand on its Facebook fan page to gather actual behavioral data.	Participants were recruited through an online survey sent from the Facebook brand pages of the media brand ZoomOn. The data collection was done from March to October 2016. The data of users (likes, comments, posts, number of friends) that were extracted and aggregated spanned from the moment they answered the survey back to the creation of their account. n total, 250 out of 450 participants completed the survey and agreed to give an access to their personal data.	The purpose of this study is to understand why people share brand contents on Facebook by identifying the antecedents that determine electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWoM) about brands. This study measures how individual factors (Facebook activity and brand engagement) and collective factors (brand community involvement) affect users' brand content sharing behaviors	The findings of the study show that for the posters group, the Facebook activity on one's own timeline has a positive influence on eWoM about brands on Facebook brand pages, which means that the more active the posters are in general on different social media, the more actively they share brand contents on brand Facebook pages. However, this is not the case for lurkers. It was also shown that the second individual factor, brand engagement, positively influences eWoM, for both the lurkers and posters group. This indicates that irrespective of the intensity of the activity, when users contribute on Facebook pages, the more strongly they identify with a brand, the more they share information about brands.
Sanchez Torres & Restrepo (2015), "Strategic Real-time Marketing"	This study shows the evolution of social media and its influence and deals with one of the most powerful marketing trends: real-time marketing.	Literature review and theoretical framework of RTM. Review of real-time marketing in the real world (customized content, tracking trends, engagement with the audience).	The aim of this review is to show the evolution of social media and the impact of corporate communication on audiences. It shows that marketers can really strengthen their strategies through practices in real time leading to fortify the link between the audience and brands.	The real-time content goes beyond a creative advertisement message, it provides its own brand style and real- time engagement to obtain an increase in online and offline reputation and ultimately sales. Above all, the most important real-time marketing benefit, whatever the brand is (profit or nonprofit), whatever its size, country of origin, is to give brand value and brand equity. The tone of the message should be appropriate according to the situation, so it is vital that brands monitor the conversation

				and have an exhaustive prior knowledge of the community.
Lee & Hong (2016), "Predicting positive user responses to social media advertising: The roles of emotional appeal, informativeness, and creativity"	This study conceptualizes SNS ad effectiveness as a concept encompassing emotional appeal, informativeness and creativity that all have a potential to contribute to a positive online behavior.	An online survey was conducted using the Google Forms tool to collect data for empirical analysis. A total of 420 undergraduate students at a major university in Korea, took part in this survey for course credit. The survey lasted for the period of one week, and an additional week was given to induce the non-respondents to participate.	The main purpose of this paper is to identify the antecedents of the behavioral intention to engage in positive user behavior for an SNS advertisement and propose a conceptual model of how positive user responses to an advertisement are formed on a SNS. The conceptual model is built around the theory of reasoned action, the social influence theory, and a persuasion theory.	The results of this study reveal two significant predictors of attitude toward empathy expression: informativeness and advertising creativity. The role of informativeness can be understood from the instrumental, or utilitarian, perspective. It was found that information about the utilitarian aspects of a product or service can strongly support consumers' functional needs and that the more informative and creative users perceive an SNS advertising message to be, the more positive their attitude to empathy expression is. Emotional appeal failed to influence user attitudes toward empathy expression, while perceived herd behavior had an indirect impact on intention to express empathy.
Moldovan et al. (2019), "Propagators, Creativity, and Informativeness: What Helps Ads Go Viral"	This study explores characteristics that make consumers more likely to circulate ads, by focusing on (a) the main transmitters of the viral content which the authors refer to as propagators, consumers who are more	Study 1: a sample of 57 commercials that were uploaded to YouTube during a four-hour period was created. One year later, the number of views, the number of comments written about the ad, and the star-rating (1–5) for each ad were collected. Of the 57	The first study aimed to provide initial support for the tendency of propagators to forward ads that are both creative and informative, based on actual views of online ads. Study 2, which relied on real print and viral Internet ads, examined whether propagators are more likely to circulate ads that are	Field data (Study 1) using actual online views provided initial support for predictions by showing that ads that are creative, informative, and have greater online social activity were associated with more views. Lab studies on real ads for various products (Study 2) and ads designed for a specific product that manipulated creativity and informativeness (Study 3) found that propagators are associated with higher intentions to spread ads that are both creative and informative (H1), and that this

	socially connected and active, and (b) two key ad characteristics : creativity and informativeness.	original ads, only 37 were still online.	characterized by high levels of both creativity and informativeness than ads that are high on creativity or on informativeness alone.	effect is mediated by perceptions of social status elevation (H2). Advertisers should seek to create ads that will lead consumers to forward them, especially in an era where consumers can easily avoid advertising.
Spotts et al. (1997), "Assessing the Use and Impact of Humor on Advertising Effectiveness: A Contingency Approach"	This study examines humor effectiveness by using a conceptual framework adapted from Speck, through the examination of (1) the humor mechanisms employed, (2) the intentional relatedness of humor to the ad or product, and (3) the type of product advertised.	Starch/INRA/Hooper was the source of the advertising performance data used in this study. Starch uses an aided-recall technique to establish the amount of attention readers remember giving to a particular ad. Magazine ads were collected by three co-researchers who sequentially searched the targeted product category files of Starch/INRA/Hooper containing five years of measured magazine ads.	1. Does the use of humor in advertising vary across product groups? 2. Does the effectiveness of humor in advertising vary across product groups? 3. Does the type of humor mechanism influence ad effectiveness, and does the effect vary across product groups? 4. Does the intentional relatedness of humor influence ad effectiveness differentially across product groups?	Humor appears to be very effective in enhancing initial attention, aided brand recall and held attention for yellow goods, and somewhat effective for white goods. Hence, the low usage of humor with red goods and the high usage with yellow goods are appropriate according to the Starch effectiveness measures. Advertisers do not use humor very often with white goods (7.9%), but some positive gains are associated with such ads. The use of humor may be detrimental in ads for red and blue goods. Perhaps because red goods are high involvement products and are assumed to have a relationship to a consumer's personality, making fun of such products may be considered threatening.
Camarero & San Jose (2011), "Social and attitudinal determinants of viral marketing dynamics"	This study proposes a causal model in which viral dynamics is determined by the individual's social capital and prior attitudes.	To conduct the empirical study, information through a questionnaire given to email users was gathered. The authors selected a homogeneous group to control demographic, social and psychological characteristics which might	This study explicitly incorporates the receipt and forwarding of viral messages simultaneously in the same model, a process the authors refer to as viral dynamics. A further contribution is that this article	The findings confirm that the viral dynamics process is driven by both individuals' social capital in the email network and their attitudes. Forming part of a wider network of email contacts seems to impact the frequency with which messages are received. In addition, the wider the email network, the less frequently the individual forwards viral messages.

		influence viral dynamics. A final sample of 230 individuals was obtained.	integrates two theoretical frameworks to explain viral dynamics, which refers to the process of receiving, sending and/or forwarding messages from one person to another in their network of contacts.	Secondly, results support the idea that individuals' social capital, in its relational dimension, influences both the opening and for- warding of viral messages. The strength ties between individuals and the members of their email group are essential to foster the dynamics of viral marketing Thirdly when individuals feel curiosity towards the message and associate it with a relaxing or pleasant moment, they are more likely to open it and forward it.
Ketelaar et al. (2016), "The success of viral ads: Social and attitudinal predictors of consumer pass-on behavior on social network sites"	This study investigates which factors predict whether consumers will pass on viral advertising communicatio ns to their friends on a social network site.	Members of the Dutch SNS Hyves. were exposed to advertising campaigns for three large international brands: Lay's, Telfort, and Sony Ericsson. A total number of 166,755 Hyves members visited at least one of the three campaign websites within the four weeks that the viral advertisements were active, of which 17,850 members (10.7%) agreed to participate in this study.	This study aims to integrate previous research findings on the predictors of passing along online content into a new conceptual framework and tries to understand social and attitudinal predictors of consumer pass-on behavior on social network sites, through the success of viral ads.	In contrast to what was expected, in the present study pass-on behavior appeared to be more strongly predicted by attitudinal factors, instead of social factors. With respect to the three attitudinal predictors that were investigated, attitudes toward the brand, ad, and viral advertising in general all significantly influenced pass-on behavior of the three different campaign ads, with effect sizes approaching the medium range. Although the attitude toward the brand was not previously studied in relation to viral advertising, this research shows that consumers are also significantly more likely to pass on an ad when they have a positive attitude toward the advertised brand.
Derbaix & Vanhamme (2003), "Inducing Word-of-Mouth by Eliciting Surprise – A Pilot Investigation"	This research – using the critical incident technique – brings to the fore the	The method chosen for this pilot study is the critical incident technique (CIT). This method is well-suited to this research since its	The aim of this article is to prove that positive surprise is a privileged means to initiate positive WOM and that the	Although results clearly bring the impact of subsequent emotions on WOM to light, they also show that these (positive or negative) emotions do not fully mediate the influence of surprise on WOM.

emotion of surprise and its influence on word-of-mouth (WOM).	purpose is to thoroughly describe and understand real-world phenomena about which little is known. One hundred respondents participated in the study. They were drawn from within 30–50-year-old consumers from middle- or upper-middle-class.	polarity of surprise should be carefully controlled since negative surprise is likely to trigger off important negative WOM. This study also describes the emotion of surprise and tries to outline its causes and consequences. Finally, this article examines the WOM phenomenon and delineates its hypothetical link with surprise.	As a result, the basic/primary emotion of surprise deserves a thorough analysis per se. WOM activity elicited by surprising experiences might also have at least one other reason than just sharing one's emotions. Speakers could indeed engage in WOM activity on the basis of the perceived utility for their audience. Most people assume that what is surprising for themselves will also be new and therefore useful information for others.

2.6 Cross-cultural differences in marketing

When discussing the twenty-first century and the advent of the new millennium, globalization is one of the most prominent topics that sciences and studies about culture have to deal with. Globalization has been largely debated in the last couple of decades and related subjects, such as immigration, overseas activities and countries' socio-cultural changes, have practically emerged in international studies (Manrai & Manrai, 2001, 2011). Until the very beginning of the new century, a very small number of studies had examined China and Asian markets in international marketing but with the relatively recent opening policies of the Chinese government, the development of cross-cultural studies and the understanding of cultural differences between China and most Western European and North American countries have proven to be fundamentally important (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997; Manrai & Manrai, 2001; Zhou & Hui, 2003). Most countries today are multiethnic and international experts as well as international marketers need to create and build up multidimensional and culture-sensitive measures of evaluation of consumer behavior and consumer attitude toward brands and marketing practices (Malhotra &McCort, 2001; Manrai & Manrai, 2011).

In trying to explore international markets and cross-cultural marketing, one of the main issues and questions that marketers often ask themselves is whether they need to standardize their products and services in light of globalization and cultural integration or try to adapt their offerings in order to better attract foreign consumers, to satisfy and retain them. The advocates of standardization argue that this technique leads to cost reductions and economies of scale, but when it comes to service and relationship marketing, when it comes to satisfaction and retention, adaptation seems to be the optimal and most obvious choice (Furrer et al., 2000; Tsikriktsis, 2002). Cui & Liu (2001) believe that in transitional economies like China, MNCs need to be able to adapt to the local context in order to run successful and profitable operations, and that standardization and standardized global products may not fully penetrate these new markets. However, the discussion about standardization and adaptation goes beyond marketing purposes and the roots of the issue are to be found in a broader cultural and dimensional context. In this sense, the behavioral and cognitive factors that characterize a given culture are dynamic and differ enormously from those of other societies, given that norms and beliefs are attainable to members of a given society because they have been exposed to them in the course of their lives (Wyer, Hong, 2010; Hong & Yang, 2011). Since culture has the greatest importance on human behavior and cultural influence is transmitted through norms, behavioral-intention models need to be evaluated in a cross-cultural setting (Malhotra & McCort, 2001; Soares et al., 2007) and cultural conditioning becomes of primary importance in trying to shape consumers' reaction and behavior based on cultural values (Lim & Ang, 2008).

According to Hofstede (1991), most Western Europeans and North Americans lack resemblance with Eastern societies on 5 main cultural dimensions: namely individualism vs. collectivism, high vs. low uncertainty avoidance (UA), long-term vs. short-term orientation, small vs. large power distance and masculinity vs. femininity (later integrated with indulgency vs. restrain). For the purpose of this literature review and this thesis, not all of these dimensions will be taken into consideration, but only those that are useful to the analysis and development of this work. Individualism means that people in a given country are generally considered to be more individualistic (they look after

themselves or their immediate family) than their Eastern counterparts, whose cultural values, norms and beliefs have always developed in a more collectivistic background, by which people are integrated into robust in-groups where protection is provided in exchange with unconditional loyalty (Hofstede, 1991). In cultures with a high degree of individualism, people and consumers are more independent and self-centered and are more demanding than people in collectivist cultures (Furrer et al., 2000; Li & Su, 2007). The result is that individualist (or idiocentric) consumers will perceive the impact of communication, price and personalization more strongly than their collectivist (or allocentric) counterparts and they feel positive about their tasks, disregarding the needs of communities and work groups. (Triadis et al., 1988; Nguyen, 2014). Extreme individualism in some countries has also been found to be associated with several forms of social pathology, such as high crime, suicide or emotional stress and mental illnesses, whereas collectivism is often associated with emphasis on harmony, less insecurity and better social support, although in many collectivist countries governmental corruption and low level of economic development are more common (see Triadis et al., 1988). Chinese people think of themselves as part of a group and they are likely to be guided by persuasive engagingness that accentuate their social relationships, whereas North Americans and most European people score higher in terms of individuality and competitiveness (Wyer, Hong, 2010).

Power distance can be defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 1991). Countries with large power distance, like China, are characterized by wider differences between more powerful and less powerful people and these differences also apply to powerful customers and weak customers. Powerful customers expect good treatment and attach greater importance to responsiveness and reliability from companies and service providers, whereas weak customers are more likely to tolerate failure (Furrer et al., 2000). This means that in countries like China, it is crucial for companies to preserve their good name in order to be successful, otherwise they may lose their grip on customers more easily than their Western counterparts. Power distance has a strong influence on advertising appeals and information exchange, and

cultures with high power distance highlight the importance of "face" and reputation when having business with other people (Soares et al., 2007; Sharma, 2011; Qiu, 2011).

Hofstede (1991) defines uncertainty avoidance as "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations" and according to Sharma (2011) consumers in high (low) uncertainty avoidance cultures have less (more) favorable evaluations and behavioral intention toward foreign products. In high UA countries, individuals prefer to stick to what they know and to try what they've already experimented, and they are hardly willing to try new things, new products and new brands: individuals, in this case, have a stronger positive influence of country-of-origin (COO) image (Lee et al., 2007; Sharma, 2011). UA is often associated with product uncertainty and Lee (2007) also found out that in countries with high UA, people have lower (higher) purchase intention for offerings with high (low) product uncertainty. As mentioned earlier, in international and cross-cultural marketing, the COO effect can positively or negatively affect the perception and purchase intention of consumers in a given country. Most experts define country-of-origin as the country (home country) with which a manufacturer's product or brand is often associated and COO image is the stereotypic perception on that product or brand. Wang & Yang (2008) proved that COO image exerts a significantly positive impact on purchase intention and moderates the relationship between the brand personality and the consumer's positive behavior. COO is often perceived as an indicator of product quality, but most buyers simply use the COO image as a sort of "halo effect" on their behavior and intention to buy (Rezvani et al., 2012).

In this background, these cultural values and norms become very easily a primary explanation of behavioral similarities among individuals living in the same community and behavioral differences among people across different societies (Ackerman, Tellis, 2001; Pavlou, Chai, 2002). Following the theory of planned behavior (TPB), individuals act differently according to their normative and control beliefs, which consequently influence their consumer behavior and intention to transact (Pavlou, Chai, 2002). In this sense, marketing depends on the environment and fits into the ever-changing cultural values of each country. With the introduction of the marketing concept, manufacturers and producers started to think that they could benefit from understanding consumer's

needs and preferences (Hoekstra et al., 1999). The traditional marketing concept and marketing mix paradigm dominated marketing for almost forty years, and with the changing marketing environment and with the advent of consumer-focused marketing strategies, traditional marketing paradigms changed and so did the long-established four Ps (price, product, place and promotion) and the marketing mix concept (Grönroos, 1994).

The growing interest in consumer relationship and consumer retention led to the creation and development of the Western concept of the so-called relationship marketing, in which the company moves from emphasizing transactions and sales to building long-term interactions with online consumers, together with a new, enhanced emphasis on the concept of customer value (Hoekstra et al., 1999; Yang et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2016; Song et al, 2018). Parallel to this shift in the marketing paradigm, many Chinese students and researchers experienced a growing interest in the concept of *guanxi*, which has been defined as the Chinese corresponding translation of relationship marketing or business networking (Wang, 2007). *Guanxi*, which is the literal translation of "relationship", or "personal connection" represents the Chinese expression of social networks and social relationships, in terms of an asymmetric exchange of favors (Ou et al., 2014; Lin et al, 2017; Au, 2020). The concept of guanxi is usually related to other Chinese constructs, namely *renqing*, which refers to the emotional response and the emotive schemas within social exchanges in daily activities (Wang, 2007; Au, 2020) and *ganqing*, which is an indicator of *guanxi* and refers to the emotional connection and sense of attachment among members of a given network (Wang, 2007).

In western countries, relationship marketing has a more universalistic and a more impersonal nature, because the network is open to any member for any kind of exchange. However, since China is a low-trust country, entering a network based on *guanxi*, ensures trust-building and a competitive advantage in decision-making (Wang, 2007). For this reason, trust or *xinyong* needs to be strengthened and it provides an added value, as a person's promise to fulfill their duty and obligations within *guanxi* (Grönroos, 1994; Wang, 2007; Au, 2020). In Chinese culture, trust is one the 5 traditional Chinese virtues inherited from Confucianism and Confucian values. When Chinese people are able to comply with these five virtues, their reputation or *mianzi*, their social status and prestige

can be elevated and receive gratification from other members within *guanxi*. The concept of *mianzi* perfectly relates to the aforementioned concept of "face" and reputation when engaging in business activities, by which Chinese people are constantly reminded of the *renqing* owed, that must be repaid, and there feel the pressure to reciprocate and return their "debt", their duty to exchange, in the ongoing labor to maintain their *mianzi* (Au, 2020). The concept of exchange encompasses today's exchange of "likes" within social media and social networking sites (SNS) as well (Winter, Neubaum 2016).

Many researchers and experts have also been studying how interactivity between the buyer and the seller, between the company and online consumers, can establish trust and what Chinese people call *swift guanxi*. According to Ou et al. (2014), the concept of *swift guanxi* "stresses the buyer-seller relationship […] and the ultimate goal is to lubricate online transactions in online marketplaces". Ou argues that interactivity and *swift guanxi* with the company online contributes to the consumer's building of trust toward the seller and to his/her intention to (re)purchase. Interaction is fundamental on social media and many marketers even treat interaction, in the form of "likes" and "shares", as success measurement (Wirtz et al., 2013).

Following this logic, since SNS communication typically include larger audiences compared to traditional direct communication, in order for marketers to get a grip on the large Chinese market they could expertly use the help of opinion leaders. Opinion leadership is defined as a two-step flow of communication by which the company provides information to the so-called opinion leader and who, in turn, passes that information to their acquaintances, and tries to forge and mold their behavior by directing their attention to specific and various topics and matters (e.g: Winter, Neubaum 2016). In China, the role of opinion leaders is more sensitive compared to Western countries, because they are more historically and culturally influenced by authority figures and personal status (Hofstede, 1991; Wyer, Hong, 2010; Zhang et al., 2014). When using opinion leaders to spread awareness about a company's services or products, marketers need to properly understand what kind of products they want to sell (utilitarian or hedonic) and a rational and logical choice of the right person or "influencer" will have to be made.

Since most Chinese people are allocentric and live within collectivistic boundaries, they will highlight the importance of practical things and functional utility goods (utilitarian goods, such as detergents, house appliances etc.). According to Malhotra & McCort (2001), Chinese focus more on the concrete and their thought process is directed toward utilitarian motivations much more than Western thought. The reason behind this is that many Chinese people in the countryside traditionally lived in poverty, therefore a "utilitarian familism" developed, in which the most important things were those that benefited the whole family (Malhotra & McCort, 2001; Sharma, 2011). On the contrary, being idiocentric, most Western people rely on tangible cues coming from the physical environment, and by doing so they focus on the hedonic dimension of the consumption experience (hedonic goods, such as design clothes, music, sports car etc. are primarily consumed for sensory gratification and fun, enjoyment purposes; Tsikriktsis, 2002; Lim & Ang, 2008; Sharma, 2011). However, due to growing globalization and westernization, recent studies have shown that younger Chinese people may have become more individualistic, and they may have started to consume utilitarian, upscale luxury products while engaging in hedonic and entertaining activities (Cui & Liu, 2001).

Bearing this in mind, the choice of advertising and marketing messages becomes a critical element in a firm's international marketing plan, and the precipitous changes in the endorsement and application of advertising in China show that Chinese people are positively and favorably disposed to advertising (Pollay et al., 1990). Many suggest that individuals' behavior and social relations towards marketing ads depend, at least in part, on the dominant cultural orientation of the society to which the individuals belong and in which he/she was born and raised. Moreover, most studies in cross-cultural marketing also suggest that users' cultural backgrounds play an imperative role in determining attitudes and preferences toward culturally customized ads. In this sense, Zhang & Neelankavil (1997) demonstrated that advertising, as a form of social communication, is extremely effective and indicative of a country's culture and norms. They determined that different product types need different advertising appeals in order to convey the message and describe the product features effectively, and they proved that appeals that emphasize individualistic (collectivistic) values are more effective in the USA (China) than in China

(USA). Lim & Ang (2008) further demonstrated that ads promoting utilitarian products should use both informational and hedonic appeals in order to enhance their aesthetic aspects, so as to set their brands apart and gain competitive advantage, whereas ads promoting hedonic products should only focus on hedonic appeals.

In conclusion, since the implementation of the 1978 Chinese open-door policy, together with a brand new wave of economic and technological developments, the People's Republic of China (PRC) emerged as one of the largest viable consumer markets (Zhou & Hui, 2003) and the emergence of the middle class in a large population market, such as China, grants a never-seen opportunity for foreign international companies to engage with Chinese consumers and to employ their products' symbolic value in the Chinese market. Hence, it becomes very easy to comprehend why it is crucial for companies and foreign businesspeople to learn and to understand how to interact successfully with their Chinese customers (Wang, 2007; Chu & Choi, 2010).

2.6.1 Self-enhancement

In an individualistic culture (such as European or American), "self" refers to the individual and in this type of context independence and individuality are valued (Tsai & Men, 2014). Themes such as self-reliance (which implies freedom to do one's own thing and competition with others), achievement, hedonism and competition are at the base of the individualistic construct and the individual feels proud of their achievement and success in personal competition with other people. People in individualistic cultures often have greater skills in entering and leaving new social groups. They make "friends" easily, but by "friends" they mean nonintimate acquaintances (Triandis et al., 1988). Given the ideocentric orientation of individualistic cultures, the ingredients for the "self" recipe include more concern for one's own goals than the ingroup's goals, less attention to the views and opinions of in-groups, self-reliance and detachment from in-groups, deciding on one's own rather than asking for the views of others, and less general concern for the community. Individualism implies looking after themselves and their immediate family, it means that children learn to think in terms of "I" and that friendships are voluntary and should be fostered. Hiring and promotion decisions are supposed to be based on skills and

rules only (which prevail over friendships as well) and the employee-employer relationship is a contract between parties in a labor market (Hofstede, 1991).

In the context of individualism, self-enhancement is one important aspect that shapes people's relationships every day and that usually serves a motive or reason to engage in social communication with other people both on general and brand-related contents. According to definitions.net, self-enhancement is defined as "a type of motivation that works to make people feel good about themselves and to maintain self-esteem. This motive becomes especially prominent in situations of threat, failure or blows to one's self-esteem. Self-enhancement involves a preference for positive over negative self-views". Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) report that among the eight specific factors which motivate consumers to make contributions to (and engage with) online communities, we find 1) venting negative feelings, 2) concern for other consumers, 3) *self-enhancement*, 4) advice-seeking, 5) *social benefits*, 6) economic benefits (e.g., cost savings), 7) platform assistance, and 8) helping the company (see Brodie et al., 2011).

In accordance with Milkman & Berger (2014), "one reason people share news and information is to self-enhance or generate desired impressions. Just like the music people listen to, or the brands they buy, what they talk about, and share affects how others see them". This implies that people are more and more likely to like and share (both online and offline) things that make them look good or enable them to signal desired identities. The same authors explain that, because of self-enhancing motives, people are more likely to share surprising, interesting, or otherwise entertaining content; besides, positive content is more likely to be shared than negative content, because people prefer to make others feel good rather than bad. In a study by Chu et al. (2018), self-enhancement was found to be one of the factors that motivate travelers to post online travel reviews, together with sense of belonging and social approval. In the context of Chinese WeChat, sense of belonging and need for self-enhancement are conceptualized as the two main drivers for social media engagement in the Chinese market, which in turn determine an outcome and WOM intention. This also *strongly* indicates how globalization has been reducing differences between individualism and collectivism in the last couple of decades.

In this sense, Aramendia-Muneta (2017) believes that written communication online is more effective because it leads senders to describe products and brands more accurately through self-enhancing effects, and this guides consumers to create positive word-of-mouth as a basic human motive. Berger (2014) demonstrated that, through self-enhancement, WOM facilitates impression management, and this was also confirmed by Angelis et al, (2012) who found that self-enhancement is a unique motive that explains when positive versus negative WOM is more likely to occur (see Delafrooz et al., 2019).

Lastly, Tellis et al. (2019) define self-enhancement as the basic human need to feel good about oneself in the eyes of others. The authors assume that sharing valuable or impactful content can enhance one's status by making one seem knowledgeable or expert about the marketplace. In this sense, people also share information to express or signal uniqueness. However, Chu & Choi (2010) contest what most experts agree on and in one of their studies, they explain that "self-presentation differs when interacting with close friends versus strangers […] and people habitually focus on self-enhancement when communicating with strangers but show modesty when expressing themselves to friends.

2.6.2 Social Bonding

In a collectivistic culture (such as Chinese or Middle Eastern) 'self' is largely defined by in-group memberships; therefore, interdependence and group harmony are valued. Collectivism implies that people are born into extended families or other in-groups that continue protecting them in exchange for loyalty. Self-reliance for the collectivist cultures implies not being a burden on the ingroup, and competition is unrelated to it. Competition, in collectivist cultures, is among ingroups, not among individuals, and people feel proud of their group's achievements and successes (Triandis et al., 1988). In this sense, children in collectivistic cultures learn to think in terms of "we" and harmony is and should always be maintained, thus avoiding direct confrontations. In a collectivist country, friendships are predetermined, and resources are shared with relatives. Communication is high-context and most of the times socialization happens in public spaces. In a collectivistic context, employees are members of in-groups who will pursue the group and the community's interest and the employer-employee relationship

is basically moral and like a family link. Given the allocentric orientation, people in collectivist cultures have fewer skills in making new "friends," but "friend" in their case implies a life-long intimate relationship, with many obligations, and so the quality of their friendships is different than among individualistic people (Triandis et al., 1988).

China is traditionally considered to be a country with a collectivistic culture. As such, the Chinese society has historically focused on social interests and collective actions and has de-emphasized personal goals and accomplishments (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997). Marketers in china have always been highlighting the community-oriented features and have encouraged parasocial interactions to capitalize on the relationship-oriented advantages of SNS communications (Tsai & Men, 2014). Being a collectivistic country, people in China do not necessarily conform more or feel the urge to look like others: such responses are much more selective and largely depend on each single individual. As collectivism implies the importance of social linking and socialization within each ingroup, here social bonding is one fundamental element that forges daily communications and relationships. According to sociologyindex.com, social bond is the "binding ties or social bonding to the family, that describes the degree to which an individual is integrated into the society. Social bond also includes social bonding to the school, to the workplace and to the community and the theory was develop for the first time by Travis Warner Hirschi in 1969".

Milkman & Berger (2014) found that "another reason people share news and information is to deepen connections with others. Many authors have suggested that language evolved to allow humans to reinforce bonds and keep track of a large set of people in their social circle. Sharing emotional content is one way to enhance social bonds as it produces a shared experience for the transmitter and recipient and increases cohesiveness". In one of his studies, Berger (2014) explains that one of the reasons why people engage in WOM activities is to connect with others. In fact, Dunbar's social bonding hypothesis explains that language allows humans to quickly and easily reinforce bonds and keep tabs on a large set of social others. This is because people have a fundamental desire for social relationships and interpersonal communication helps fill that need, since sharing also deepens social bonds through reducing feelings of

loneliness or social exclusion (see Berger, 2014).

Given their highly collectivist orientation, Chinese consumers tend to emphasize social bonding in their relationships, and they trust a brand more than they value utilitarian product information. Utilizing the SNS platform, a brand can not only position itself as part of consumers' personal networks but can also provide opportunities for consumers to socialize with the company and link with other fans. SNS communications that can humanize brands through close and personal dialogs may further induce Chinese consumers to perceive the brands as traceable and recognizable human beings, with whom they can build strong and lasting relationships (see Tsai & Men, 2014).

Table 2: **Scientific articles closely linked to RTM and its influencing aspects**

	RTM messages		Online consumer behaviour		Cross-cultural differences	
Author and year of publication	RTM message creativity	RTM message humour	CBE on social media	Electronic WOM	Self-enhancement	Social bonding
Borah et al. (2019)		X	X	X		
Willemsen et al. (2019)	X		X	X		
Mazerant et al. (2021)	X		X			
Berger (2014)				X	X	X
Delafrooz et al. (2019)			X	X	X	
Chu et al. (2018)			X	X	X	
Tsai & Men (2014)			X		X	X

3. HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH MODEL

3.1 RTM message creativity, CBE on social media and brand eWOM intention

To the best of our knowledge, only few studies have analyzed and compared the use of RTM message to regular brand messages on social media so far. Previous findings reported that the application of real-time marketing strategies on SNS positively affects sharing behavior, especially in the context of Twitter (Mazerant et al., 2021). As a matter of fact, RTM messages allow brands to create and establish a meaningful connection with a timely moment that easily gains attention from social media users and online consumers. The very recent advertising literature shows that these types of messages are more effective in generating higher and favorable consumer responses, in terms of brand engagement on social media and in terms of WOM intention, when they score highly on creativity (Willemsen et al., 2019). However, Mazerant et al. (2021) argue that creativity, in this case, is to be applied and enhanced in terms of its meaningfulness and connectedness. In line with previous research on message creativity, the same authors argue that, especially on visually oriented and creative platforms such as Instagram (in Italy and most Western countries) and Weibo (in China), the creativity or RTM messages, which indeed influences users' engagement on SNS, is not only determined by meaningfulness and originality, but also determined by craftsmanship.

When making creative RTM messages, advertisers must make sure that there is a logical and relevant connection between the brand and the moment that is targeted, and the same holds for originality, since unpredictability and timeliness of real-time moments enable marketers to demonstrate their creative abilities (Willemsen et al., 2019). In fact, unlike predictable moments (such as imminent festivities, an already-confirmed release of a new product, a famous sport event, etc.), these unforeseeable events often revolve around topics and matters that suddenly become of public interest. This deliberate associations, which were previously unconnected to the brand, triggers original and novel ideas, which in turn influence users' behavior on social media. According to Baack et al. (2015), message creativity has multiple roles and, for example, allows for message persuasion and message processing. In this sense, creativity can act as a mechanism to

encourage deeper transformation that can generate an emotional response, in terms of trust, peace of mind and security. This enhances and allows for customer engagement on social media (by "liking" the ad, commenting, or sharing it) and helps build customer relationships and lead to competitive differentiation. Yang & Smith (2009) reiterated this concept as they found that ads deemed "highly creative" trigger increased open-mindedness, curiosity, and positive affect, producing higher levels of viewing and engagement intentions. Furthermore, findings from a study by Ang et al. (2007) also noted that, most of the times, a creative ad is perceived as different and innovative, whose message can connect with the audience and enhance effective engagement and WOM.

As for eWOM intention, the hypothesis tested by Willemsen et al. (2019) reported that brand messages that make use of real-time creativity elicit more sharing behavior through eWOM than brand messages that do not make use of RTM strategies. They found that RTM messages associated with unpredictable events drove more sharing behavior than predictable events, as they explained that RTM is an effective and powerful strategy to boost word-of-mouth. However, findings from Mazerant et al. (2021) revealed that creativity dimensions associated with RTM messages do not yield unequivocally positive consumer responses, unlike previously suggested, and that the direction and strength of these effects are largely context dependent. Moreover, it was also found that the hypothesis suggesting that RTM messages containing moment-driven visuals yielded more shares and WOM than RTM messages containing no moment-driven visuals was *not* supported, and that is why this type of analysis was not taken into consideration here.

Following these lines of logic regarding the use of RTM message creativity, consumer brand engagement on social media and electronic word-of-mouth intention, and following suggestions for future research directions provided by Willemsen et al. (2019), the following hypothesis, in the context of Italian and Chinese social media, are drawn:

H1: the use of RTM message creativity has a positive effect on consumer brand engagement on social media both in China and Italy
H2: the use of RTM message creativity has a positive effect on brand eWOM intention both in China and Italy

3.2 RTM message humor, CBE on social media and brand eWOM intention

When discussing and analyzing the use of humor and wit in RTM messages and its effect on consumers' response online in terms of engagement and word-of-mouth behavior, the marketing literature lacks enormously on research papers and empirical analysis. So far, there's been only one single study that has investigated the potential of RTM through improvised marketing interventions, as a means to improve the effectiveness of digital communications, by using quick wit and humor. Although there has been a lot of research made on the use of humoristic appeals in traditional advertising, with dozens of findings reporting that humor in advertising is related to positive attitude toward the ad, positive attitude toward the brand and higher purchase intention (Sternthal & Craig, 1973; Cline & Kellaris, 2007; Eisend, 2009), Borah's (and colleagues) study (2019) is the only one that provided positive empirical support on the use of message humor in RTM ads in relation to virality, online engagement and firm value.

According to Gulas & Weinberger (2006), humor in ads has been demonstrated to increase liking and persuasion, compared to non-humorous ads, and in the context of SNS, humorous advertising was found to bring on benefits such as increased attention and more favorable consumer attitudes toward the advertisement, in terms of engagement and word-of-mouth intention on social media (see Warren & McGraw, 2013). Porter & Golan (2006) supported these findings by showing that humor is employed at near unanimous levels for all viral advertisements, identifying wit and comedy as the universal appeal for making content go viral. One study from Warren et al. (2018) revealed that some of the reasons why people share humorous ads, for example by forwarding the ad (engaging with it) or by talking about it with friends and colleagues online (eWOM), include eliciting appreciation and signaling the intention to persuade others, form alliances and affiliations, gain status and esteem, and attract new lovers. This aspect was also reiterated in other two studies by Hsieh et al. (2012) and Reichstein & Brusch (2019) who found that positive emotions, such as humor, triggered a clear increase in the intention to share, with an increasingly positive attitude toward the ad content and toward the brand. In this sense, Lee et al. (2018) reported that a variety of emotional and

humorous ads are associated with consumer engagement, and this type of personality-related content have positive effects on liking the post, commenting on it, and sharing it.

Consumer's appreciation for humorous ads also varies depending on their cultural orientation, and the way that humor and wit themselves are created and perceived changes tremendously from country to country (Lim & Ang, 2008). This means that, logically, humor in Western countries (such as Italy) and humor in Eastern countries (such as China) is witnessed and understood differently, and one of the purposes of this thesis' cross-cultural comparison is to study and analyze this very aspect.

In the context of real-time marketing and improvised marketing interventions (IMIs), Borah's and colleagues (2019) found that the interaction between IMI's message humor and timeliness, typical of RTM, positively affect firm value and virality. These findings suggest that people feel more engaged by the RTM ad when it includes humoristic appeals, and consequently this allows for positive eWOM, by recommending the ad to other people. Therefore, following this same logic and in line with previous statements, it is hypothesized that:

H3: the use of RTM message humor has a positive effect on consumer brand engagement on social media both in China and Italy
H4: the use of RTM message humor has a positive effect on brand eWOM intention both in China and Italy

3.3 CBE on social media and brand eWOM intention

To manage customer relationships in a multichannel communication context, companies try and attempt to create the right type and the right number of touchpoints to make sure that consumers and users online enjoy a positive customer experience. Nowadays, brand pages allow users to share the content they see not only with their friends and family but also with other people who have the same focus and are fans of the same brand. In fact, information here circulates not only towards consumer's interpersonal network but also towards the network around the brand on the SNS (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2018).

According to Wang (2006), advertisers have identified that engagement on social media is a crucial component that underlies consumer brand choice in response to a good communication. It is a measurement of when customers are strongly engaged in brands and their messages and share information on them to their network of friends, colleagues, and relatives. When communication is not effective (and this can happen many times with RTM messages), a defective customer can also decide to cause harm to the firm's brand through negative WOM, especially if the defection is due to unmet needs. If there's more than one single defective customer, for example because a certain message or advertisement offended a specific category of people, the negative WOM can quickly snowball into a serious issue, thereby damaging both the brand and its value (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). However, Abdullah & Siraj (2016) found that consumer engagement on social media that makes use of effective website interactivity generates and is associated with positive WOM by the satisfied and delighted customers, which in turn creates brand knowledge and enhances brand equity.

When users online "like", comment or share brand-related content, they're contributing to the firm's messages, through a two-way dimension that includes both peer-to-peer and peer-to-content interactions about brands. In fact, because of its interactive nature, this contributing dimension has gained popularity among practitioners and researchers, since they found out that when consumers engage with a brand message through contribution, this usually leads to sharing the brand-related content consumed to other people in their social media network (Schivinski et al., 2016). Research has also demonstrated that personality traits have an influence on social media behavior, and that extraversion, opener, neuroticism, conscientious and agreeableness moderate on the propensity to share content and information on SNS. The brand itself acts as its own moderator, in the sense that if the consumer is not interested in the brand or its product, he or she will simply not share information about it.

Haikel-Elsabeh et al. (2018) revealed that, since WOM is a form of brand commitment, being a liker, commenter or a poster on a brand page is a social factor that allows the individual to identify with the brand. The authors argue that since consumers' brand engagement is rendered visible through their contribution in the form of posting,

liking, sharing, or commenting, this content can be seen by friends and followers in the social network who are, in turn, influenced by it and can engage in electronic word-of-mouth. As a matter of fact, findings from their study report that brand engagement on social media positively influences eWOM about brands on Facebook brand pages, which means that the more active they are, the more actively they share brand contents on brand Facebook pages and to their network online. Finally, they also confirm that the more companies initiate eWOM by raising brand engagement, the more it will impact brand content sharing.

Therefore, based on all these considerations, the following hypothesis is drawn:

H5: Consumer brand engagement on social media is positively related to brand eWOM intention both in China and Italy

3.4 Moderator variable: self-enhancement

In the last few years, globalization has largely influenced countries and societies and has widely modified cultural contrasts, by shrinking differences and allowing for a commonality of values and behaviors. However, most experts in the field of cross-cultural studies (see Hofstede, Triandis and, more recently, Tsai & men) agree that self-enhancement is one fundamental drive that shapes people's relationships every day and that usually serves a personal tool to engage in social communication with other people in individualistic contexts and cultures. Italy is traditionally considered to be an individualistic country, therefore, themes related to the *self*, such as self-reliance, self-esteem and self-improvement seem to be more predominant than in China. Milkman & Berger (2014) believe that people share news and information on social media to self-enhance and to generate desired impressions; therefore, they share content that is surprising, interesting, and otherwise entertaining and that make them look good in front of other people's opinions and perceptions. What people say and what they share online is, in fact, a reflection of who they are, and this means that, by self-enhancing themselves through positive WOM recommendations, they can ensure that other people hold them in great esteem and consideration.

One study from Chu et al. (2018) found that the need for self-enhancement, drawn from the social identity theory, is one of the factors that motivate people's engagement on WeChat, thus determining eWOM intention. China is traditionally viewed as a collectivist culture that emphasized group membership and sense of belonging, yet the recent popularity of WeChat may be fostering young Chinese's need for self-enhancement, mostly because of the effects brought on by worldwide integration. Aramendia-Muneta (2017) stated that when dealing with electronic word-of-mouth as a written channel of communication, self-enhancement can be of the reasons that leads senders to describe products and brands online in more accurate way, whereas Angelis et al. (2012) found that self-enhancement is a unique motive that explains why positive WOM is more likely to occur than negative WOM (see Delafrooz et al., 2019). Chu & Choi (2010) found that because Chinese young generations enthusiastically form relationships with strangers via SNSs, they are more likely to rely on strategies for self-enhancement, with positive and favorable claims about themselves, when sharing or forwarding content online. Finally, when reporting what specific factors motivate consumers to make contributions online and engage with their social media communities, Henning-Thurau et al. (2004) found that self-enhancement is a major drive for written communication on the internet and for overall WOM intention (see Brodie et al., 2011).

Therefore, following the logic of all these considerations described above, it is hypothesized that:

H5a: In Italy more than in China, self-enhancement positively moderates the relationship between consumer brand engagement on social media and brand eWOM intention

3.5 Moderator variable: social bonding

Milkman & Berger (2014) studied that one of the many reasons people share news and information on the web and engage in activities such as sharing and forwarding certain brand messages to their social network online, is social bonding. In fact, language has evolved during millennia to allow humans to create and reinforce bonds and to keep track of a large set of people in their social circle. This means that when people share

emotional content to their friends, colleagues, and family members online, they are enhancing their social bonds, and this allows both the transmitter and the recipient of the message to increase their cohesiveness.

Given their highly collectivistic orientation, users on social media and SNS in China tend to emphasize social bonding and relationships more than users in Italy and most Western countries (Hofstede, 1991), therefore, when Chinese people follow brand pages on these channels, they can take the opportunity to socialize with the company and to network with other fans and followers (Tsai & Men, 2014).

As a matter of fact, Berger (2014) found that people contribute to brand messages on SNS to connect with others and, in this sense, they engage in eWOM activities because they want to socially bond with other users in their online social circle. This means that people have a fundamental desire for social relationships, and this is what basically motivates their behavior online. Thus, based on previous research on the subject and following the same logic, this last hypothesis is drawn:

H5b: In China more than in Italy, social bonding positively moderates the relationship between consumer brand engagement on social media and brand eWOM intention

3.6 Research model
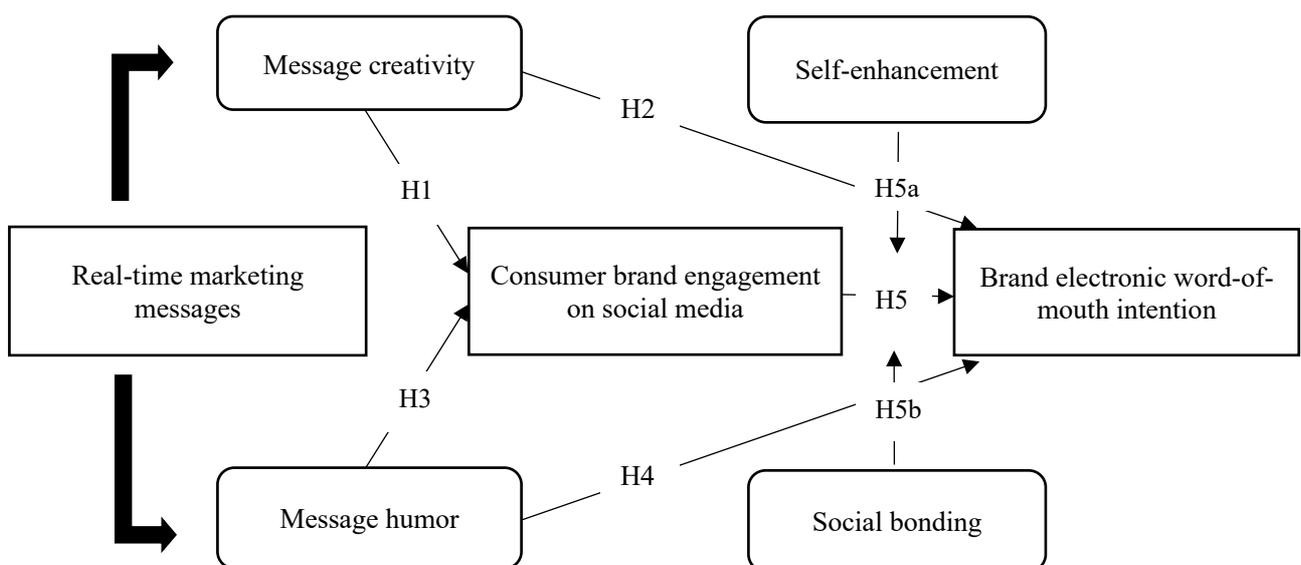
4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Population, sample, and data collection

The analysis of the research data was carried out using the SmartPLS software and descriptive statistics were used to determine the sample profile. The descriptive statistics on demographics, questions on personal habits and questions relating to the knowledge of innovative techniques and brand real-time marketing, were analyzed using Google Docs, a software used for the creation and administration of questionnaires.

For the collection of data, two questionnaires in Italian and Chinese composed of 7 different blocks (the blocks and the questions in the questionnaires were the same) were administered, with a total of 39 questions aimed at analyzing the dimensions indicated above. The questionnaires were disseminated over a week (from August 3rd, 2021, to August 10th, 2021) and they were distributed through a special link created with the Google Docs software. In the case of the Italian questionnaire, administered to Italian people, the link was shared via WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter to acquaintances, family members, relatives, and friends of friends; therefore, through a chain online diffusion. In the case of the Chinese version of the questionnaire, administered to Chinese people, the link was shared via Amazon Mturk, a crowdsourcing marketplace that makes it easier for individuals and businesses to outsource their processes and jobs (a survey in this case) to a distributed workforce who can perform these tasks virtually. Each of the so-called workers (respondents of the questionnaire) were paid 15 Yuan Renminbi (2 euros approximately), and the time allotted for each worker was 20 minutes. The software allows you to specify two additional qualifications that workers must meet and, in this case, "Primary internet device – Smartphone or Tablet" and "Language fluency – Chinese Mandarin" were chosen.

The analysis mainly focused only on consumers belonging to generations Y and Z who use social media every day or every other day at most: the objective of this quantitative research, in fact, is to analyze and comprehend the behavior of both Chinese and Italian users on social media when they encounter brands' real-time marketing messages that employ humor and creativity as the most important aspects. As a matter of

fact, people who were born between the 1980s and the early 2000s are more likely to spend a larger amount of time on SNS than people born before the 1980s or, e.g., after 2005. The analysis on the intention of generations Y and Z to engage with RTM messages online derives from the need to understand what motivations drive these people's behavior on SNS in China and Italy; the aim is, in fact, to confirm the idea that these categories of people are more inclined than others to, first of all, understand these types of messages, since they are more exposed to trending topics online and most pop culture events, and, secondly, to engage with these timely ads through like buttons or through word-of-mouth communication. In this regard, the questionnaires present two filter questions, aimed at screening all respondents and, in doing so, only answers provided by people aged between 19 and 40 years and who make use of social media daily or every other day at most were considered valid and useful for this research.

The questionnaires are made up of 7 blocks of questions: the first relating to the demographic data of the participants and their knowledge on the topic of real-time marketing; the second relating to their perception of creativity in RTM messages; the third relating to their perception of humor in RTM messages; the fourth relating to their willingness to engage with these messages; the fifth relating to their willingness to engage in eWOM; the sixth relating to self-enhancement as a moderator for their behavior and, finally, the seventh relating to social bonding as a moderator for their behavior.

The first questions of the survey, shown in tables 3, 4 and 5, are aimed at investigating demographic aspects, such as gender, civil status, employment and current level of education as well as, as previously mentioned, to skim the participants of the study and consider useful for research only data coming from people aged between 19 and 40 years and with a higher frequency of social media use, thus excluding participants who were less than 19 years old or more than 40, and with a minor frequency of social media use. The validity of the answers provided by the candidates was tested by repeating, within the survey, the question relating to gender, so as to verify that the participants answered coherently and not randomly. For this reason, candidates who gave a different answer to the same redundant question in the survey were excluded from the analysis and research interaction, and therefore not taken into consideration.

Initially, the questionnaire totaled 129 answers in Italy and 120 answers in China, reaching a total number of 249 valid interactions. On these numbers, a first screening was carried out using the first filter question relating to age, on the basis of which only the answers between 19 and 40 were considered valid. This provided a first sample of 117 valid answers in Italy, and 109 valid answers in China.

Table 3: **first filter question – age**

Age	Italy (129 total)		China (120 total)	
	%	N.	%	N.
< 14	0%	0	1.7%	2
14 - 18	5.43%	7	5%	6
19 - 24	53.49%	69	45.8%	55
25 - 32	27.91%	36	26.7%	32
33 - 40	9.31%	12	18.3%	22
> 40	3.86%	5	2.5%	3

Subsequently, a second screening was carried out using the second filter question relating to the frequency of social media use, according to which only the answers "everyday"

and "every other day" were considered valid. This provided a second sample of 116 valid answers in Italy, and 107 valid answers in China.

Table 4: **second filter question – frequency of social media use**

Frequency of social media use	Italy (117 total)		China (109 total)	
	%	N.	%	N.
Everyday	96.6%	113	96.4%	105
Every other day	2.6%	3	1.8%	2
3 times a week	0.8%	1	1.8%	2
Less than 3 times a week	0%	0	0%	0

As we can see from table 4, participants to the survey, belonging to generations Y and Z, tend to use social media "everyday" - 96.6% of the respondents in Italy and 96.4% of the respondents in China - and "every other day" - 2.6% of the respondents in Italy and 1.8% of the respondents in China -, a lot more than "3 times a week" - 0.8% in Italy and 1.8% in China - and "less than 3 times a week" - 0% in both countries.

However, of this second sample, 16 people in Italy and 7 people in China either failed the attention check questions (in which poles were inverted) or gave the same answers to all questions and were therefore removed from the study. This led to a final sample of respondents, useful for this research, of 100 respondents for each country. Table 5 provides the demographic profiles of this final sample (100 interviewees).

Table 5: **demographic profile of respondents (200 interviewees)**

	Italy (100 total)		China (100 total)	
	%	N.	%	N.
Age				
19-24	59%	59	52%	52
25-32	31%	31	28%	28
33-40	10%	10	20%	20
I identify as				
Man	53%	53	50%	50
Woman	42%	42	48%	48
Non-binary	5%	5	2%	2
Prefer not to say	0%	0	0%	0
Civil status				
Single or in a relationship	94%	94	95%	95
Married or house partner	6%	6	4%	4
Divorced	0%	0	1%	1
Other	0%	0	0%	0

Employment status				
Student	59%	59	65%	65
Part-time worker	7%	7	4%	4
Full-time worker	27%	27	30%	30
Unemployed	6%	6	1%	1
Other	1%	1	0%	0
Level of education				
Middle school graduate	1%	1	0%	0
High school graduate	32%	32	20%	20
University graduate (Bachelor's)	33%	33	53%	53
University graduate (Master's)	33%	33	18%	18
Other	1%	1	9%	9
How often do you use social media?				
Everyday	97%	97	99%	99
Every other day	3%	3	1%	1
Have you ever heard of real-time marketing?				
Yes	38%	38	45%	45

No	62%	62	55%	55
Do you follow brand pages on social media?				
Yes	66%	66	74%	74
No	34%	34	26%	26

In the first block of question, which included questions on demographics and overall knowledge of real-time marketing, the results indicate that most of the respondents are aged between 19 and 24 years (59% of the total in Italy and 53% in China). This data is in line with expectations since people born at the end of Gen-Y and at the beginning of Gen-Z are the most likely to use social media and follow trending topics at the same time. Data show that the majority of the respondents identifies as a man (53% of the total in Italy and 50% of the total in China) and when it comes to their civil status, most of the interviewees is "single or in a relationship" (94% of the total in Italy and 95% of the total in China). When looking at the respondents' employment status from the data, 59% of them is a student, in Italy, with a stronger 65% of the total in China; however, data also show that many interviewees are full-time workers – 27% of the total in Italy and 30% of the total in China. Results in this first part also show that 1/3 of the respondents in Italy are either graduated with a bachelor's or a master's degree, whereas 32% of them is a high school graduate. In china, however, data are more inconsistent, with a stronger 53% of the total respondents graduated with a bachelor's, 18% of them with a master's and with 20% of them being a high school graduate. Finally, data reveal that 97% of the respondents in Italy use social media every day, with a striking 99% of the total in China. According to these data, most of the interviewees both in China and Italy are students of bachelor's or master's degree courses who make use of social media almost every day, meaning that, across all categories, they may be the ones with the greatest amount of time spent on their smartphones scrolling through social media and following social trends.

The last two demographic questions of the survey were aimed at studying and understanding the respondent's overall knowledge of real-time marketing with a specific question on whether they follow brand pages on social media (since brand accounts are the ones adopting these real-time marketing strategies in their ads). Results from the first question reveal that most of the respondents don't know or do not realize that many companies nowadays make use of these strategies, since 62% of them have never heard of real-time marketing (55% among Chinese respondents). Regarding the second question, results reveal that most of the interviewees follow brand pages on social media and are, indeed, exposed to real-time marketing messages, with a 66% of the total in Italy and 74% of the total in China. These demographic data display that instant marketing in the context of social media is still a fresh topic, however most people who make frequent use of social media are constantly exposed to RTM messages, especially since most of them follow brand accounts on SNS and keep an eye on trending topics and major pop cultural events that become viral.

Next sub-paragraph provides an in-depth analysis of the measurement scales employed in the other blocks of the survey and which were used to research and analyze the different variables subject of this study.

4.2 Items and measurement scales

In the present research, all 30 measurements items used to survey and analyze the different variables of this study were borrowed from existing research. However, little modifications were made in the wording of the items to align them with the context of this research. Table 6 provides a complete overview of the measurement scales, with columns indicating the measures, the items and their source. The two questionnaires, in Italian and Chinese, employed a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7 for all variables (meaning "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree" in the case of self-enhancement, SENH, and social bonding, SBON), except for electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) that employed a five-point Likert scale from 1 to 5. For comparison and comprehension purposes, table 7 was also included to reflect the same measurement items and their respective translation in Italian and Chinese, used in the two questionnaires.

Table 6: **Variables and measurement scales**

Measures	Items	Sources
CREA: RTM message creativity	Originality: 1. overused/fresh 2. predictable/novel 3. usual/unusual 4. ordinary/unique 5. conventional/original Logic: 6. illogical/logical 7. irrelevant/relevant 8. inappropriate/appropriate Technique: 9. botched/well-made 10. careless/careful	**10 items, Likert-type scale from 1 to 7** Heiser et al. (2008); O'Quin & Besemer (1989); White (2003); White & Smith (2001)
HUMO: RTM message humour	Humour scale: 1. not humorous/humorous 2. not funny/funny 3. not playful/playful 4. not boring/boring	**4 items, Likert-type scale from 1 to 7** Chattopadhyay & Kunal (1990); Cline et al. (2003); Elpers et al. (2004); Zhang (1996)
CBEN: consumer brand engagement on social media	CBEN contribution: 1. to join brand-related profiles on SNS 2. to "like" brand-related pictures 3. to "like" brand-related posts 4. to comment on brand-related pictures	**7 items, Likert-type scale from 1 to 7** Schivinski et al. (2016)

	5. to comment on brand-related posts 6. to share brand-related pictures 7. to share brand-related posts	
EWOM: electronic word-of-mouth intention	eWOM intention scale: 1. I am likely to say positive things about this _____ to other people 2. I am likely to recommend this _____ to a friend or colleague 3. I am likely to encourage friends and relatives to _____	**3 items, Likert-type scale from 1 to 5** Bruggen et al (2011); McGregor (2006); Reichheld (2003); Zeithaml et al (1996)
SENH: self-enhancement	If I share my opinion about this brand in a conversation: 1. It will create the impression that I am a "good" person 2. I will receive positive feedback from others about my gesture 3. I will create a positive impression on others	**3 items, Likert-type scale from 1 to 7** Aliosha et al. (2013)
SBON: social bonding	If I share my opinion about this brand in a conversation: 1. it will provide a topic for further discussion with this person 2. it will benefit the relationship with this person	**3 items, Likert-type scale from 1 to 7** Aliosha et al. (2013)

	3. it will help me learn more about the person I'm talking with	

Table 7: **Italian and Chinese translation of the measurement items used in the questionnaires and for the research analysis**

Original items	**Italian translation**	**Chinese translation**

CREA:
 	
    Originality.
1. overused/fresh
2. predictable/novel
3. usual/unusual
4. ordinary/unique
5. conventional/original
 	
    Logic.
6. illogical/logical
7. irrelevant/relevant
8. inappropriate/appropriate
 	
    Technique.
9. botched/well-made
10. careless/careful
	CREA:
	
	    Originalità.
	1. scontata/innovativa
	2. prevedibile/ non prevedibile
	3. usuale/inusuale
	4. commune/unica
	5. convenzionale/originale
	
	    Logica.
	6. non logica/logica
	7. irrilevante/rilevante
	8. Inappropriata/appropriate
	
	    Tecnica.
	9. mediocre/ben fatta
	10. Poco attenta/attenta
		创造力:
		    独创性.
		1. 平庸的/不平庸的
		2. 可预测的/不可预测的
		3. 通常的/不通常的
		4. 一般的/不一般的
		5. 不创新的/创新的
		
		    逻辑.
		6. 没有逻辑/有逻辑
		7. 无关/有关
		8. 不恰当的/恰当的
		
		    技巧.
		9. 做得不好/做得好
		10. 做得不细致/做得细致

HUMO: 1. not humorous/humorous 2. not funny/funny 3. not playful/playful 4. not boring/boring	UMOR: 1. non umoristica/umoristica 2. non divertente/divertente 3. non scherzosa/scherzosa 4. noiosa/non noiosa	幽默： 1. 不幽默的/幽默的 2. 不好笑的/好笑的 3. 不好玩的/好玩的 4. 没劲的/有劲的
CBEN contribution: 1. to join brand-related profiles on SNS 2. to "like" brand-related pictures 3. to "like" brand-related posts 4. to comment on brand-related pictures 5. to comment on brand-related posts 6. to share brand-related pictures 7. to share brand-related posts	PART: 1. mi interessano gli account relativi a questi brand sui social media 2. metto "mi piace" ai post relativi a questi brand sui social media 3. metto "mi piace" alle immagini relative a questi brand sui social media 4. inserisco un "commento" ai post relativi a questi brand sui social media 5. inserisco un "commento" alle immagini relative a questi brand sui social media 6. condivido/Inoltro i post relativi a questi brand sui social media 7. condivido/Inoltro le immagini relative a questi brand sui social media	参与度： 1. 您对社交媒体上的这些品牌帐号感兴趣 2. 您"点赞"社交媒体上与这些品牌相关的帖子 3. 您"点赞"社交媒体上与这些品牌相关的图像 4. 您"评论"社交媒体上与这些品牌相关的帖子 5. 您"评论"社交媒体上与这些品牌相关的图像 6. 您"分享"社交媒体上与这些品牌相关的帖子 7. 您"分享"社交媒体上与这些品牌相关的图像

EWOM:	PASS:	网上口传：
1. I am likely to say positive things about this _____ to other people 2. I am likely to recommend this _____ to a friend or colleague 3. I am likely to encourage friends and relatives to _____	1. sono propenso/a a fare commenti positivi su questi brand ad altre persone 2. sono propenso/a a raccomandare questi brand ad amici e colleghi 3. sono propenso/a ad incoraggiare amici e parenti a seguire questi brand sui social media	1. 您倾向于向其他人发表对这些品牌的正面评价，是不是？ 2. 您倾向于向朋友和同事推荐这些品牌，是不是？ 3. 您倾向于鼓励朋友和家人在社交媒体上关注这些品牌，是不是？
SENH - if I share my opinion about this brand in a conversation: 1. It will create the impression that I am a "good" person 2. I will receive positive feedback from others about my gesture 3. I will create a positive impression on others	AELO – se decido di parlare di questi brand con un'altra persona: 1. do l'impressione di essere "in gamba" 2. ne ricevo sicuramente un riscontro positivo 3. creo una buona impressione sull'altra persona	自夸 – 如果您决定与其他人谈论这一些品牌： 1. 您给人的印象是"聪明"，是不是？ 2. 您一定会收到积极的反馈，是不是？ 3. 您给别人留下好印象，是不是？
SBON - if I share my opinion about this brand in a conversation: 1. it will provide a topic for further discussion with this person 2. it will benefit the relationship with this person	LSOC – se decido di parlare di questi brand con un'altra persona: 1. avrò un argomento di cui discutere con questa persona 2. andrà a beneficio del rapporto con questa persona	社会纽带 – 如果您决定与其他人谈论这一些品牌： 1. 您会有一个话题和这些人讨论，是不是？ 2. 这将有利于您与这些人的关系，是不是？

3. it will help me learn more about the person I'm talking with	3. mi aiuterà a saperne di più sulla persona con cui sto parlando	3. 这将帮助您更好地了解您正在与之交谈的人

4.3 Data analysis procedure

After having analyzed the data collected through the questionnaires, it is necessary to process and test the validity of the hypothesized model, in a way that is more detailed and specific. To do this, SmartPLS, a variance-based structural equation modeling tool, was used. The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) method allows researchers to simultaneously model, estimate and test complex theories with empirical data. The structural equation model is divided into two different types of models: the measurement model and the structural model. The first helps evaluate the reliability and validity of the construct and is represented by the set of items of each variable. The structural model, on the other hand, helps evaluate and verify the relationships between the different variables, and it is represented by the construct and the related relationships represented by the single arrows.

The structural model represents the underlying theory or concept with its constructs (i.e., variables that are not measured directly), represented in the structural equation model as circles or ovals and hypothesized cause-and-effect relationships. On the one hand, when latent variables are used only as independent variables (i.e., one-headed arrows pointed outside), they are called exogenous latent variables; on the other hand, when latent variables are used only as dependent variables (i.e., one-headed arrows pointed inside) or as both independent and dependent variables (i.e., one-headed arrows pointed both inside and outside), they are called endogenous latent variables. In SEM, latent variables must be measured by observed variables (often called indicators, items, or manifest variables). A relationship approach (one-headed arrows) from construct to

items is referred to as reflective measurement, whereas a relationship approach from items to construct is called formative measurement. The reflective indicators are caused by the construct (their covariance, more precisely), whereas in the case of a formative measurement the indicators cause the construct. The structural model can also include one or more moderation variables (in this case represented by self-enhancement and social bonding), which directly influence the relationship between the latent exogenous and endogenous variables. In this research it is assumed that the variables represented by self-enhancement and social bonding generate a moderating effect, thus modifying the strength and degree of influence of the relationship between two constructs in the model: specifically, consumer brand engagement on social media and electronic word-of-mouth intention.

Figure 12: **Structural model with items and variables in Italian**
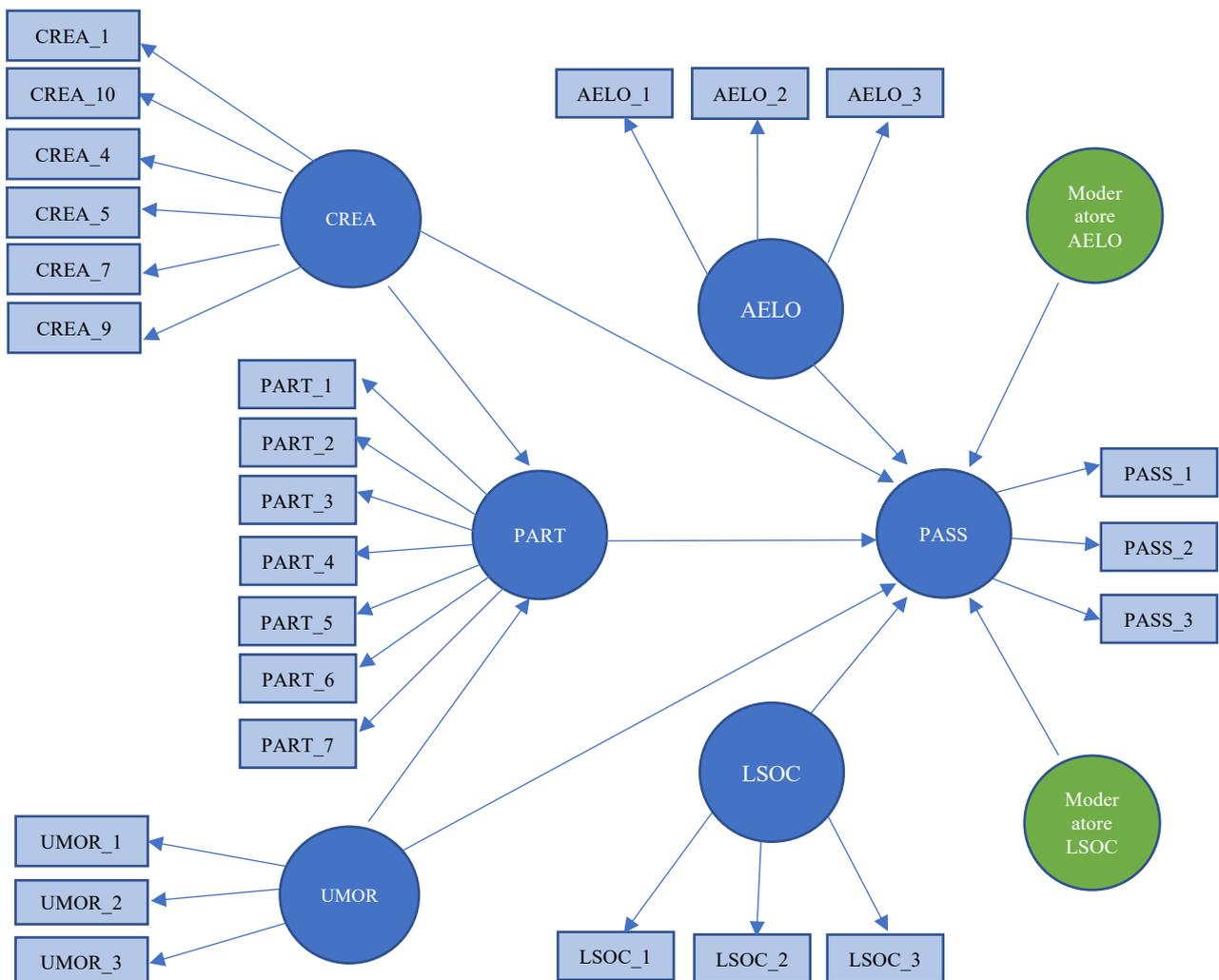
These types of moderation effects can be of two different types; one type is continuous moderation, and the second type is categorical moderation. The difference between the two is that the former exists when the moderator variable is measured metrically (as in this case), while the latter occurs when the moderator is represented by a category, such as gender. In the analysis, the first step is to check the reliability and validity of the measurement model (this means checking the reliability of the different items); and the second step is to check the validity of the structural model (this means analyzing the relationships between the different variables). Figures 12 and 13 show the two versions of the research model (in Italian and Chinese) created with SmartPLS, and the different relationships between the independent and dependent variables, here

Figure 13: **Structural model with items and variables in Chinese**
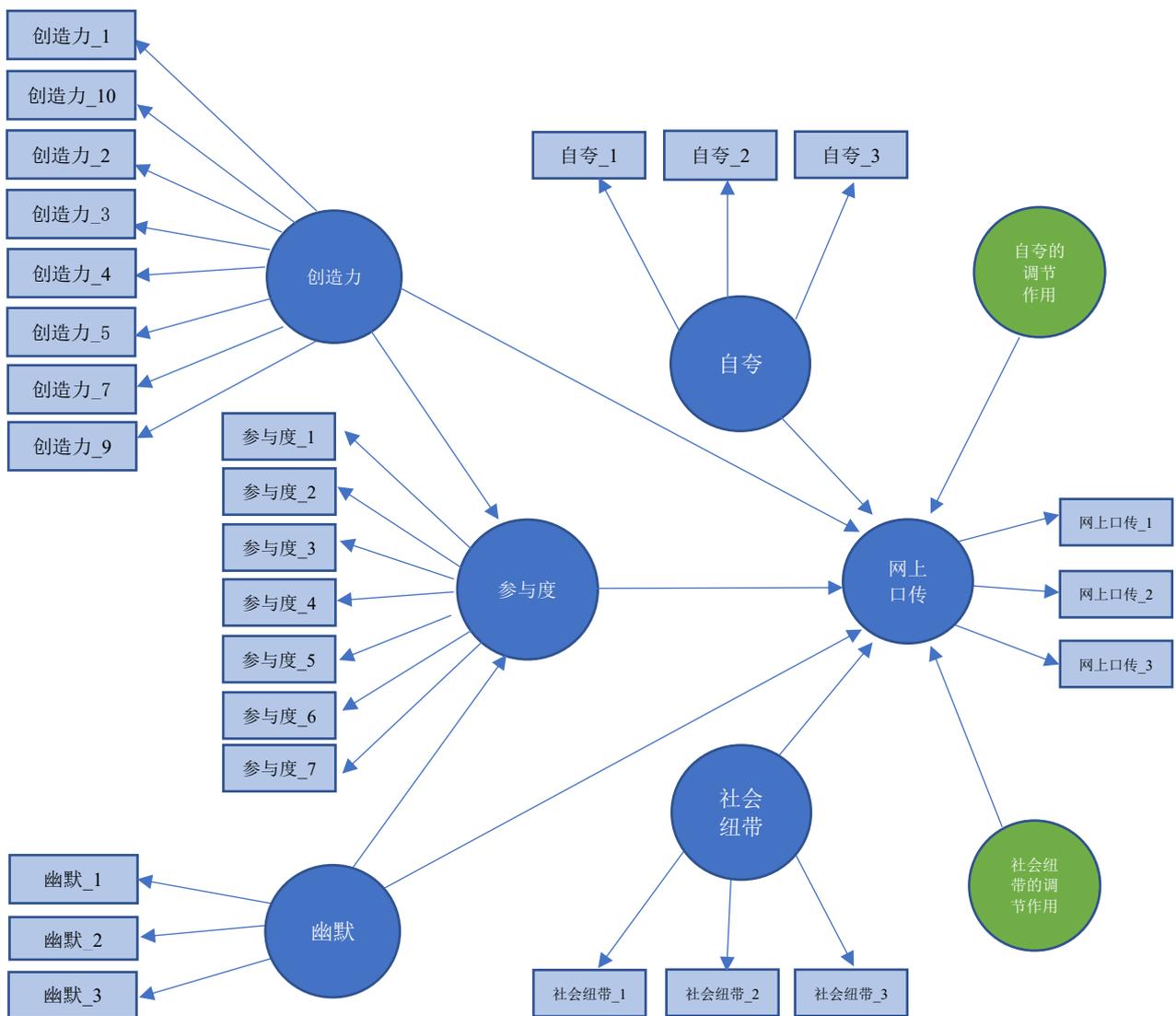
represented by consumer brand engagement on social media (PART/参与度) and electronic word-of-mouth intention (PASS/网上口传). It is important so specify that the items CREA/创造力_6 and UMOR/幽默_4 were excluded from the analysis, as they represented the two attention check questions in the survey with inverted poles and which could potentially compromise the results obtained with the PLS algorithm.

In assessing reliability, values between 0.60 and 0.70 are considered "acceptable in exploratory research", while values between 0.70 and 0.95 are considered "satisfactory" (Hinton, et al., 2014). Values above 0.95 are considered problematic, as they indicate that elements are redundant, leading to problems such as undesirable response patterns (e.g., direct alignment) and inflated correlations between the error terms of the indicators (Hinton, et al., 2014). Convergent validity detects the extent to which a construct converges in its indicators by explaining the variance of the elements, and it is evaluated from the average variance extracted (AVE) for all elements associated with each construct. The AVE value is calculated as the average of the square loads for all indicators associated with a construct. An acceptable AVE is 0.50 or greater, as it indicates that on average the construct explains more than 50% of the variance of its items.

Once the reliability and convergent validity of the reflective constructs have been successfully established, the following step is to evaluate the discriminant validity of the constructs. Discriminant validity determines the extent to which a construct is empirically distinct from other constructs in the path model, both in terms of how much it correlates with other constructs and in terms of how distinctly the items represent that single construct only. The most conservative criterion recommended for evaluating discriminant validity compares the AVE value of each construct with the inter-constructive quadratic correlation (a measure of shared variance) of that construct with all other constructs in the structural model. Recommended results reveal that a construct should not exhibit a shared variance with any other construct greater than its AVE value. Therefore, the first step in proceeding with the analysis of the data using SmartPLS and the related SEM method is to evaluate the reliability of the constructs and, after that, the validity of the model.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

5.1 Measurement model assessment

In PLS, two different tests can be run to determine the reliability of the measured constructs: the first is **Cronbach's Alpha** and the second is **Composite Reliability (CR)**. Cronbach's alpha represents the reliability coefficient (or consistency) and indicates how well a set of items (or indicators) fit a single one-dimensional latent construct (consider that when the data have a multidimensional structure, the Cronbach's Alfa is usually low). The composite reliability, on the other hand, tends to be higher than the Cronbach's Alpha measure of internal consistency since it makes use of the loads of the elements obtained inside the theoretical model. Even though, Cronbach's Alpha weighs all items equally without considering their load factors, the interpretation of the composite reliability score and Cronbach's Alpha is exactly the same.

A Cronbach's Alpha value greater than 0.7 is considered acceptable and sufficient to determine the convergent validity of the constructs; and with regard to composite reliability (CR), a value that is greater than or equal to 0.5 is considered acceptable (excellent if it is higher than or equal to 0.7). If both values (Cronbach's Alpha and CR) are found to be higher than the values considered to be acceptable, then the construct does not present problems related to reliability.

As shown in Tables 8 and 9 below, the constructs, both in Italy and China, have a value greater than 0.70, which is acceptable for both reliability tests. Although Cronbach's Alpha is commonly used as an estimator for reliability tests, it has been criticized for its lower limit value which underestimates true reliability. For this reason, the CR is also taken into consideration for the reliability of the constructs since it is characterized by a composite value slightly higher than Cronbach's Alpha. The results of Tables 8 and 9 demonstrate the existence of good reliability for the measured constructs and a good internal consistency in the measurement model, which therefore implies a good measurement of each latent variable provided by their related items, justified by values greater than 0.70 for both Cronbach's Alpha and CR. Hair, Hult et al., in the book PLS-SEM, argue that uploads of items with values between 0.40 and 0.70 should be excluded

from the convergent validity analysis, because such exclusion can increase the composite reliability value (Hair, et al., 2017). For these reasons, the items CREA_2, CREA_3 and CREA_8 (in Italy) and 创造力_8 (in China) were removed due to their insufficient external load values. The tables below also include the rho_a value, a further reliability index, and the extracted mean variance (AVE), useful for the analysis of the discriminant validity explained later.

Table 8: **Descriptive coefficients (Italy) of the model variables**

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
AELO	0.935	0.935	0.958	0.885
CREA	0.800	0.816	0.856	0.501
LSOC	0.860	0.889	0.914	0.780
PART	0.858	0.895	0.894	0.555
PASS	0.875	0.875	0.923	0.800
UMOR	0.783	1.633	0.822	0.616

Table 9: **Descriptive coefficients (China) of the model variables**

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
创造力	0.887	0.908	0.909	0.558
参与度	0.896	0.934	0.916	0.617
幽默	0.828	0.980	0.890	0.732
社会纽带	0.834	0.843	0.900	0.750
网上口传	0.901	0.906	0.939	0.836
自夸	0.904	1.905	0.940	0.840

The validity of the construct (measurement model) can be defined as the degree to which it is possible to define the components responsible for the observed effect, therefore the

degree to which the scale measures what is expected to be measured. The construct's validity evaluates whether a scale or set of measured items reflects and justifies the latent construct being measured, which is explained by its convergent and discriminant validity; the first refers to the degree of correlation between two measures of the same concept, and can be analyzed by means of the AVE value, the average variance extracted; the second refers to the diversity that exists between the constructs of the different variables, and tries to determine to what extent the individual latent variables have their own individual identity which differentiates them from all the other constructs of the model.

Convergent validity is a measure for the overall internal coherence of the model and the accuracy with which the variables are effectively able to evaluate the concepts they are called to represent; therefore, it constitutes a measure of how much the multiple items that describe the individual latent variables converge with each other and

Figure 14: **Loadings of each variable's specific items (Italy)**
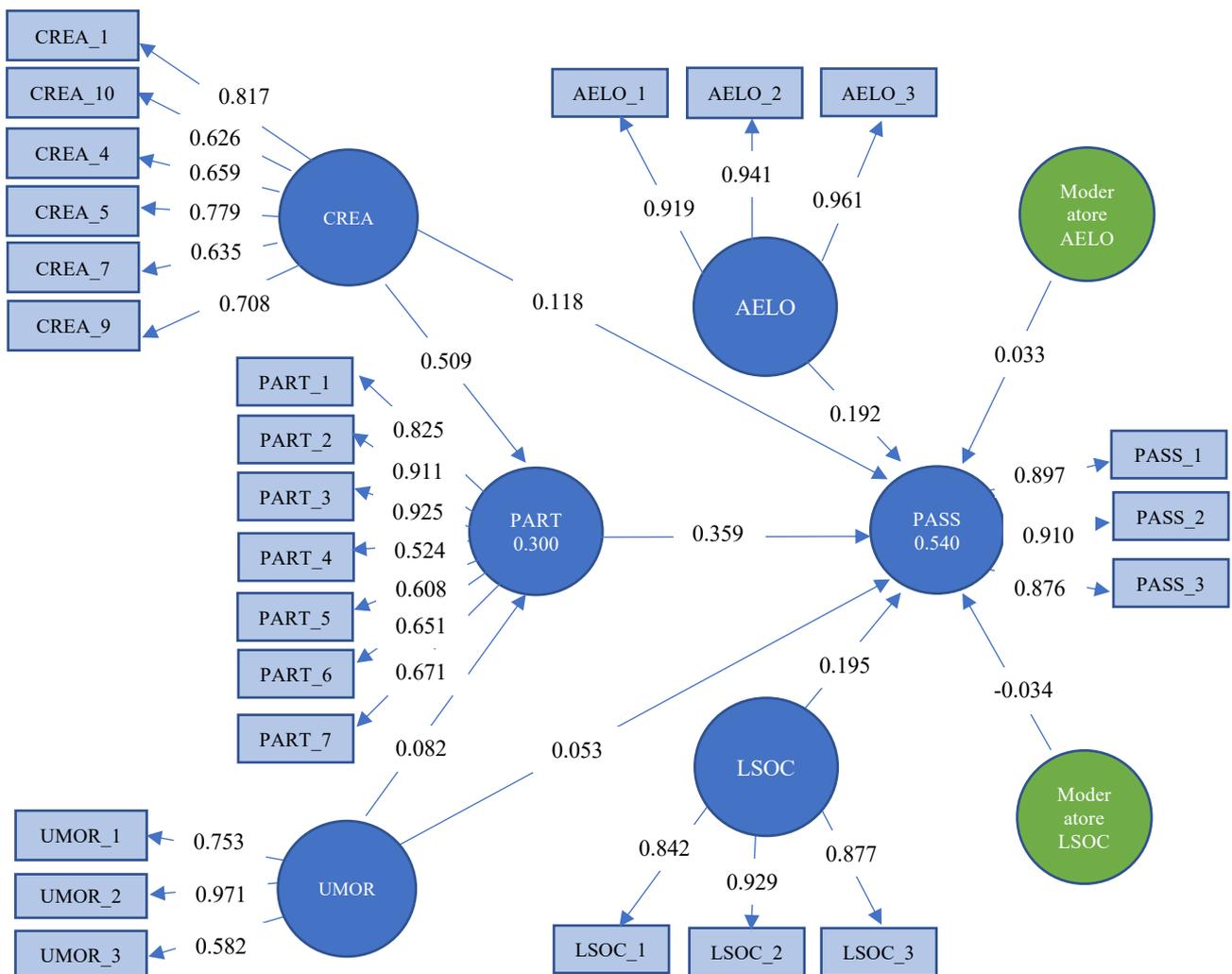
collectively contribute to defining them. In other words, it consists of a quantitative measurement, for each latent variable, of how much the individual items converge to represent it. To verify the convergent validity of the model, one must consider the AVE (Average Variance Extracted) index. An AVE value equal to or greater than 0.50 is generally accepted. This means that at least 50% of the variance of the measurement is captured by the latent variables. In the previous figure, it can be noticed that the AVE values of all the variables are higher than the minimum acceptable value of 0.50, so the existence of a convergent validity of the measurement can be confirmed. To determine the convergent validity, it is therefore necessary to consider the value associated with each item (loading) that characterize the different variables, and which indicates the weight and importance of the item in describing the variable to which it refers. In figures


Figure 15: **Loadings of each variable's specific items (China)**
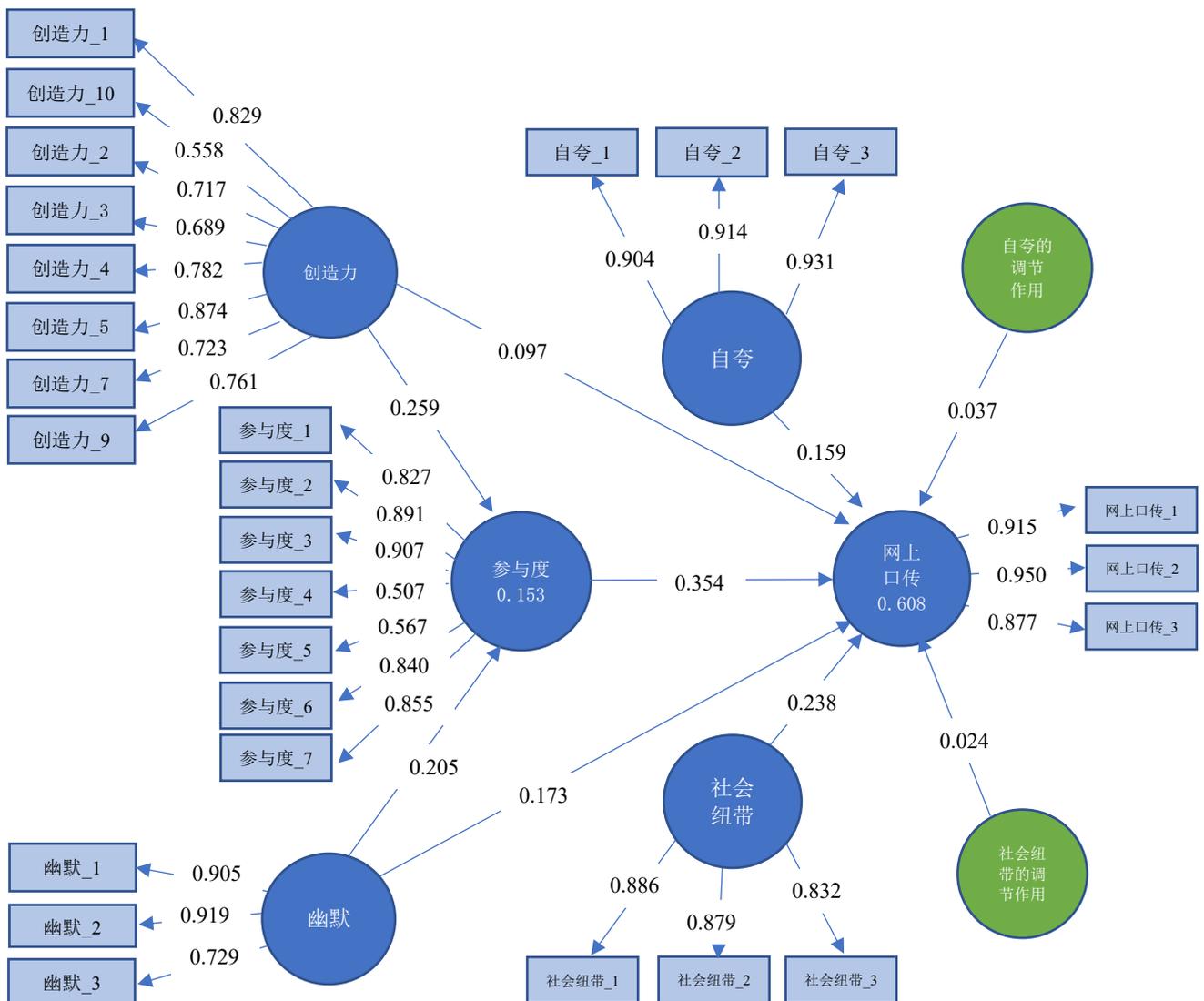
14 and 15, you can see the weights of the different items that characterize the variables subject of this research. As it can be noticed both in Italy and China (figures 14 and 15), all the items characterizing this research model's variables are extremely useful in describing them, therefore they all converge in the measurement of each latent variable and represent them perfectly, as their weight is greater than 0.50.

After analyzing the reliability of each single element and the convergent validity of the measurement model, the following step is to analyze the discriminant validity of the measurement. The discriminant validity indicates the extent to which a given latent variable is different from another latent variable in the model, therefore it indicates the statistical diversity that exists between the constructs of the different variables. Through the indices relating to the discriminant validity, we therefore try to measure how much the individual variables have their own individual identity that differentiates them from the other constructs of the proposed model. There are three different ways used to verify the discriminant validity of the model: the first is the **Fornell-Larcker criterion**, the second is the **HTMT ratio (heterotrait-monotrait ratio)** and the third is **cross-loadings.**

Table 10: **Fornell-Larcker coefficients (Italy)**

	AELO	CREA	LSOC	PART	PASS	UMOR
AELO	0.941					
CREA	0.420	0.708				
LSOC	0.686	0.337	0.883			
PART	0.615	0.543	0.505	0.745		
PASS	0.605	0.482	0.569	0.659	0.894	
UMOR	0.174	0.416	0.316	0.293	0.302	0.785

Table 11: **Fornell-Larcker coefficients (China)**

	创造力	参与度	幽默	社会纽带	网上口传	自夸
创造力	0.747					
参与度	0.344	0.785				
幽默	0.415	0.313	0.855			
社会纽带	0.268	0.587	0.158	0.866		
网上口传	0.401	0.696	0.382	0.620	0.914	
自夸	0.235	0.588	0.099	0.715	0.584	0.916

With regards to the first criterion, tables 10 and 11 show the Fornell-Larcker coefficients for all variables of the proposed model in both countries. In both tables, the data are reported in the form of a symmetric matrix, in which the diagonal values correspond, for each of the variables of the proposed model, to the square root of the extracted mean variance (AVE) described above. When looking at the analysis of the discriminant validity of the proposed model, the values underlying the diagonal, for each variable shown in the column, are of particular importance. These values represent the correlation between each latent variable and the others and must have a value lower than the value of the square root for the AVE of the variable in question. For example, the correlation between the latent variables "RTM message creativity" (CREA/创造力) and "consumer brand engagement on social media" (PART/参与度) is 0.543 in Italy and 0.344 in China, with values lower than what the variable "RTM message creativity" assumes with itself on the diagonal (0.708 in Italy and 0.747 in China), and equal to the square root of the AVE for this latent variable. Based on this first criterion, since all the values lying under the diagonal (the values representing the correlation between the different latent variables) turn out to be lower than the values arranged on the diagonal (representing the square roots of the AVE for each latent variable), it can be stated that the discriminant validity of the proposed model is confirmed from a first analysis.

The second method that can be used to evaluate the discriminant validity of the model is represented by the HTMT index or heterotrait-monotrait ratio. The data relating to this indicator are shown in the following tables in the form of a matrix.

Table 12: **Heterotrait-monotrait ratio coefficients (Italy)**

	AELO	CREA	LSOC	PART	PASS	UMOR
AELO						
CREA	0.467					
LSOC	0.763	0.376				
PART	0.675	0.623	0.564			
PASS	0.668	0.550	0.646	0.752		
UMOR	0.121	0.417	0.293	0.229	0.268	

Table 13: **Heterotrait-monotrait ratio coefficients (China)**

	创造力	参与度	幽默	社会纽带	网上口传	自夸
创造力						
参与度	0.325					
幽默	0.430	0.315				
社会纽带	0.291	0.647	0.212			
网上口传	0.426	0.730	0.402	0.710		
自夸	0.247	0.650	0.138	0.823	0.645	

Based on this criterion, the existence of an adequate discriminating validity of the proposed model can be confirmed only if all the HTMT values among the different variables are less than 0.85. In this case, the discriminating validity of the model is confirmed since all the values shown in both tables (table 12 for Italy and table 13 for China) are lower than the limit value of 0.85.

The third and final criterion for the evaluation of the discriminant validity of the proposed model, often used in the case of problems related to the previous criteria, is Cross Loadings. The reference tables developed by the SmartPLS software are shown below (table 14 for Italy and table 15 for China). This criterion compares the weight that each different item has with respect to each of the latent variables of the proposed model. Based on the Cross Loadings criterion, the existence of an acceptable discriminant validity of the proposed model is confirmed, since each item has a higher value or weight in correspondence with the variable it is intended to represent, and a lower value or weight in correspondence with all the other variables.

*Table 14***: Cross Loading of all items for the model's variables (Italy)**

	RTM message creativity (CREA)	RTM message humor (UMOR)	CBE on social media (PART)	eWOM intention (PASS)	Self-enhance ment (AELO)	Social bonding (LSOC)
CREA_1	0.817	0.290	0.448	0.375	0.341	0.287

CREA_4	0.659	0.172	0.290	0.184	0.199	0.164
CREA_5	0.779	0.266	0.431	0.333	0.188	0.154
CREA_7	0.635	0.228	0.301	0.235	0.236	0.153
CREA_9	0.708	0.403	0.452	0.461	0.432	0.383
CREA_10	0.626	0.336	0.337	0.360	0.317	0.211
UMOR_1	0.337	0.753	0.107	0.114	0.027	0.167
UMOR_2	0.406	0.971	0.335	0.339	0.211	0.334
UMOR_3	0.092	0.582	-0.024	0.069	-0.021	0.116
PART_1	0.496	0.294	0.825	0.627	0.524	0.553
PART_2	0.491	0.301	0.911	0.590	0.561	0.416
PART_3	0.522	0.305	0.925	0.568	0.594	0.462
PART_4	0.334	0.106	0.524	0.356	0.269	0.277
PART_5	0.314	0.029	0.608	0.402	0.373	0.259
PART_6	0.227	0.160	0.651	0.415	0.359	0.255
PART_7	0.348	0.228	0.671	0.395	0.436	0.303
PASS_1	0.440	0.354	0.480	0.897	0.521	0.494
PASS_2	0.378	0.305	0.472	0.901	0.577	0.581

PASS_3	0.477	0.152	0.417	0.876	0.524	0.450
AELO_1	0.345	0.140	0.519	0.561	0.919	0.650
AELO_2	0.467	0.190	0.426	0.571	0.941	0.649
AELO_3	0.373	0.160	0.489	0.574	0.961	0.638
LSOC_1	0.334	0.281	0.428	0.435	0.582	0.842
LSOC_2	0.387	0.317	0.425	0.592	0.655	0.929
LSOC_3	0.152	0.231	0.369	0.460	0.575	0.877

Table 15: **Cross Loading of all items for the model's variables (China)**

	RTM message creativity (创造力)	RTM message humor (幽默)	CBE on social media (参与度)	eWOM intention (网上口传)	Self-enhancement (自夸)	Social bonding (社会纽带)
创造力_1	0.829	0.419	0.324	0.389	0.159	0.250
创造力_2	0.717	0.365	0.059	0.267	0.224	0.237
创造力_3	0.689	0.151	0.246	0.142	0.066	0.068
创造力_4	0.782	0.312	0.213	0.253	0.209	0.266
创造力_5	0.874	0.308	0.309	0.349	0.204	0.173
创造力_7	0.723	0.244	0.289	0.311	0.201	0.163

创造力_9	0.761	0.304	0.339	0.311	0.214	0.262
创造力_10	0.558	0.303	0.027	0.258	0.006	0.061
幽默_1	0.334	0.905	0.215	0.290	0.055	0.119
幽默_2	0.454	0.919	0.364	0.428	0.144	0.206
幽默_3	0.194	0.729	0.148	0.182	-0.003	0.005
参与度_1	0.306	0.320	0.827	0.701	0.459	0.499
参与度_2	0.375	0.258	0.891	0.649	0.511	0.507
参与度_3	0.302	0.289	0.907	0.613	0.517	0.536
参与度_4	0.019	0.116	0.507	0.230	0.323	0.200
参与度_5	0.058	0.180	0.567	0.298	0.369	0.280
参与度_6	0.258	0.234	0.840	0.551	0.498	0.497
参与度_7	0.354	0.254	0.855	0.553	0.537	0.555
网上口传_1	0.442	0.379	0.409	0.915	0.525	0.571
网上口传_2	0.356	0.356	0.463	0.950	0.590	0.610
网上口传_3	0.300	0.312	0.437	0.877	0.482	0.516
自夸_1	0.208	0.201	0.319	0.545	0.904	0.639
自夸_2	0.279	0.090	0.383	0.538	0.914	0.649

自夸_3	0.156	-0.025	0.499	0.520	0.931	0.677
社会纽带_1	0.243	0.235	0.459	0.566	0.611	0.886
社会纽带_2	0.189	0.129	0.482	0.568	0.647	0.879
社会纽带_3	0.271	0.028	0.481	0.469	0.599	0.832

For an example, the item PASS_1, which represents the propensity of people online to make positive comments on brands that make use of RTM strategies, has a weight equal to 0.897 in correspondence with the electronic word-of mouth intention (PASS) it intends to represent, while having lower cross loading's values in correspondence with all the other latent variables that it does not describe. Therefore, the item PASS_1 is used effectively to describe the PASS variable, but it is not useful for describing and defining the other variables of the proposed model, as it has a lower weight/cross loading's value in correspondence with them. Therefore, based on the Cross Loadings criterion, if the items relating to a variable have lower values in correspondence with another variable that is different from the reference one, it means that the two variables in question are statistically different from each other. As shown in tables 8 and 9, the model presents a good discriminant validity, both in Italy and China, since each item reported follow the aforementioned criterion.

5.2 Structural model assessment (bootstrapping)

After having analyzed and confirmed the reliability and the lack of problems in the convergent and discriminant validity of the model, and after having assessed and verified the measurement model of this study, the analysis of the structural model can be now carried out to understand the relationships that exist between the different variables of the proposed model and their intensity.

In the SmartPLS software, the method used to analyze the influence that the variables of the proposed model exert on each other is represented by the Bootstrapping,

a non-parametric procedure that allows you to test the statistical significance of various PLS-SEM results such as path coefficients, alpha values, Cronbach's HTMT and R^2 values. Precisely, the software allows you to generate random sub-samples from the original data in the system and to verify the validity of the model set for the research for each single one of them. Therefore, starting from the overall dataset developed by the software, SmartPLS lets you verify the validity of the relationships existing among the different variables, which are divided into sub-samples. For this procedure, 500 bootstrap samples or sub-samples were generated from the initial database provided by this research, which included responses from 100 participants to the questionnaire both in Italy and China. The path coefficients related to the Bootstrapping procedure are shown in the following tables.

Table 16: **Path coefficients through Bootstrapping procedure (Italy)**

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	St. Devia. (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV)	P Values
CREA → PART	0.509	0.510	0.090	5.679	0.000
CREA → PASS	0.304	0.316	0.090	3.364	0.001
UMOR → PART	0.082	0.097	0.127	0.645	0.519
UMOR → PASS	0.080	0.079	0.100	0.804	0.422
PART → PASS	0.366	0.371	0.118	3.098	0.002

Table 17: **Path coefficients through Bootstrapping procedure (China)**

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	St. Devia. (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV)	P Values
创造力 → 参与度	0.259	0.286	0.079	3.264	0.001
创造力 → 网上口传	0.200	0.206	0.083	2.411	0.016
幽默 → 参与度	0.205	0.200	0.083	2.475	0.014
幽默 → 网上口传	0.247	0.243	0.077	3.219	0.001
参与度 → 网上口传	0.381	0.380	0.086	4.455	0.000

To verify whether the different relationships hypothesized between the constructs of the proposed model are statistically significant or not, it is necessary to analyze the path coefficient values shown in the previous tables, that is:

- The Original Sample (O) or Beta Value, a coefficient that indicates the weight of the influence that a certain independent variable has on the dependent variable (in this case consumer brand engagement on social media and brand electronic word-of-mouth intention). If this value is greater than 0.20, in a first analysis, the impact or the relationship between the variables considered is statistically significant.

- T Statistics (|O/STDEV|) and P-Value. These two coefficients are more effective in understanding how significant the relationship between two variables is. For the former, a T-value greater than 1.96 indicates that there is a significant impact between the variables considered; while for the latter, a significant impact between two variables can be asserted if the value is less than 0.05. Thus, the relationship hypothesis between the variables of the proposed model whose T-Value exceeds 1.95 and whose P-Value does not exceed 0.05 are considered valid and confirmed.

In the previous analysis, however, it was not verified whether the independent variables represented by "self-enhancement" (AELO/自夸) and "social bonding" (LSOC/社会纽带) had an actual moderating effect on the relationship between the independent variable "consumer brand engagement on social media" (PART/参与度) and the dependent variable "brand electronic word-of-mouth intention" (PASS/网上口传). In fact, a moderator, or moderating variable, is said to be altering the relationship between two variables, by changing their intensity and direction; therefore, as the values assumed by the moderator increase or decrease, it is possible that the impact produced by one variable on another is amplified or reduced.

To analyze the strength of the moderator variables just mentioned, through the same Bootstrapping procedure, it is necessary to analyze the patch coefficients, related to these moderators, and carry out the Simple Slope analysis. With regard to the first step, the tables below provide all path coefficients of all variables, including the moderating

effect of self-enhancement and social bonding in the relationship between CBEN and EWOM, in both countries.

Table 18: **Path coefficients with moderation effects (Italy)**

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	St. Devia. (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV)	P Values
CREA → PART	0.509	0.510	0.090	5.679	0.000
CREA → PASS	0.304	0.316	0.090	3.364	0.001
UMOR → PART	0.082	0.097	0.127	0.645	0.519
UMOR → PASS	0.080	0.079	0.100	0.804	0.422
PART → PASS	0.366	0.371	0.118	3.098	0.002
Moderaz. AELO	0.033	0.028	0.105	0.312	0.755
Moderaz. LSOC	-0.034	-0.028	0.119	0.287	0.775

Table 19: **Path coefficients with moderation effects (China)**

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	St. Devia. (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV)	P Values
创造力 → 参与度	0.259	0.286	0.079	3.264	0.001
创造力 → 网上口传	0.200	0.206	0.083	2.411	0.016
幽默 → 参与度	0.205	0.200	0.083	2.475	0.014
幽默 → 网上口传	0.247	0.243	0.077	3.219	0.001
参与度 → 网上口传	0.381	0.380	0.086	4.455	0.000
自夸的调节作用	0.037	0.021	0.108	0.342	0.733
社会纽带的调节作用	0.024	0.032	0.093	0.259	0.796

According to the data highlighted in the tables, it can be stated that, for both countries there is no statistical significance of the moderating effect exerted by both self-enhancement and social bonding in the relationship between consumer brand engagement on social media (CBEN) and brand electronic WOM (EWOM), since the Beta Value is lower than 0.20 (respectively, 0.033 and -0.034 in Italy; 0.037 and 0.024 in China), the T-Value is lower than 1.96 (respectively, 0.312 and 0.287 in Italy; 0.342 and 0.259 in China) and the P-Value is higher than 0.05 (respectively, 0.755 and 0.775 in Italy; 0.733

and 0.796 in China). Therefore, in this first analysis we can confirm that the independent variables SENH and SBON do not alter the link between CBEN and EWOM. The second step in the analysis of the moderator effect between two variables is the Simple Slope Analysis, shown in the following figures.
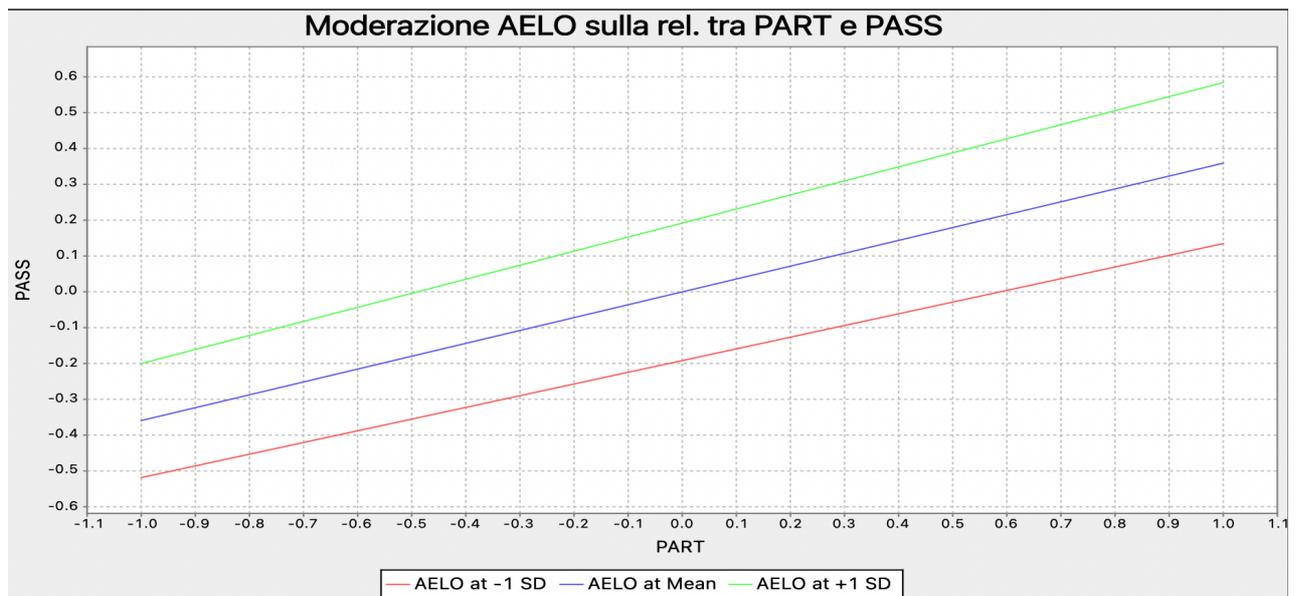
Figure 16. Simple Slope Analysis for SENH (Italy), developed with SmartPLS
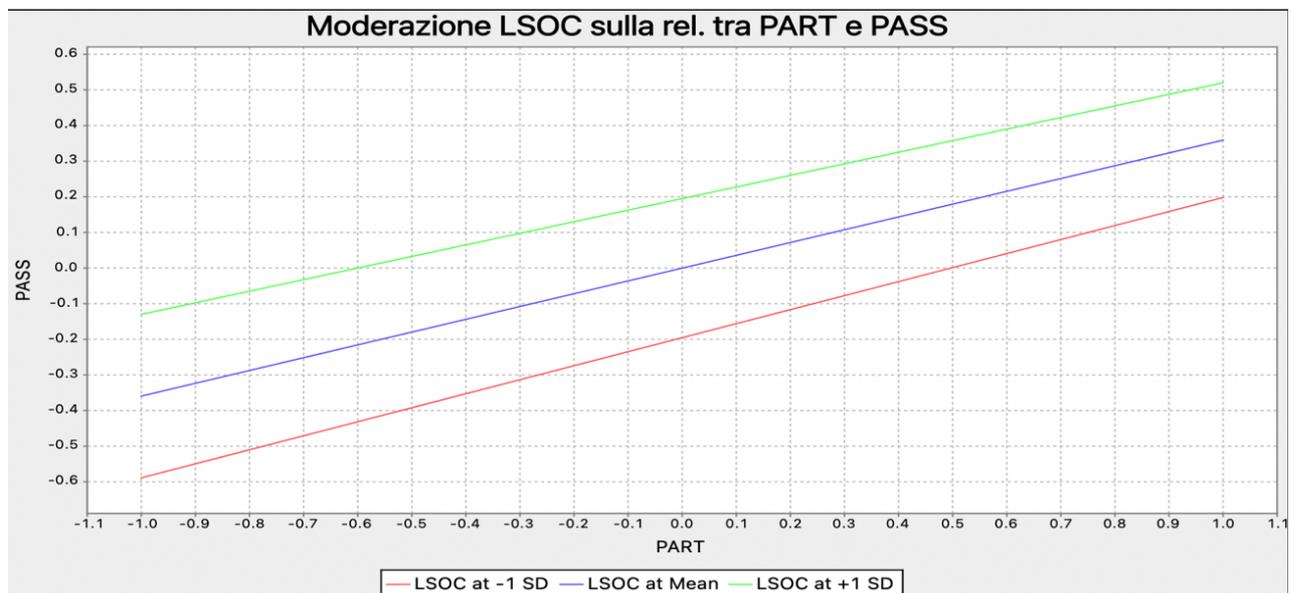
**Figure 17.** Simple Slope Analysis for SBON (Italy), developed with SmartPLS
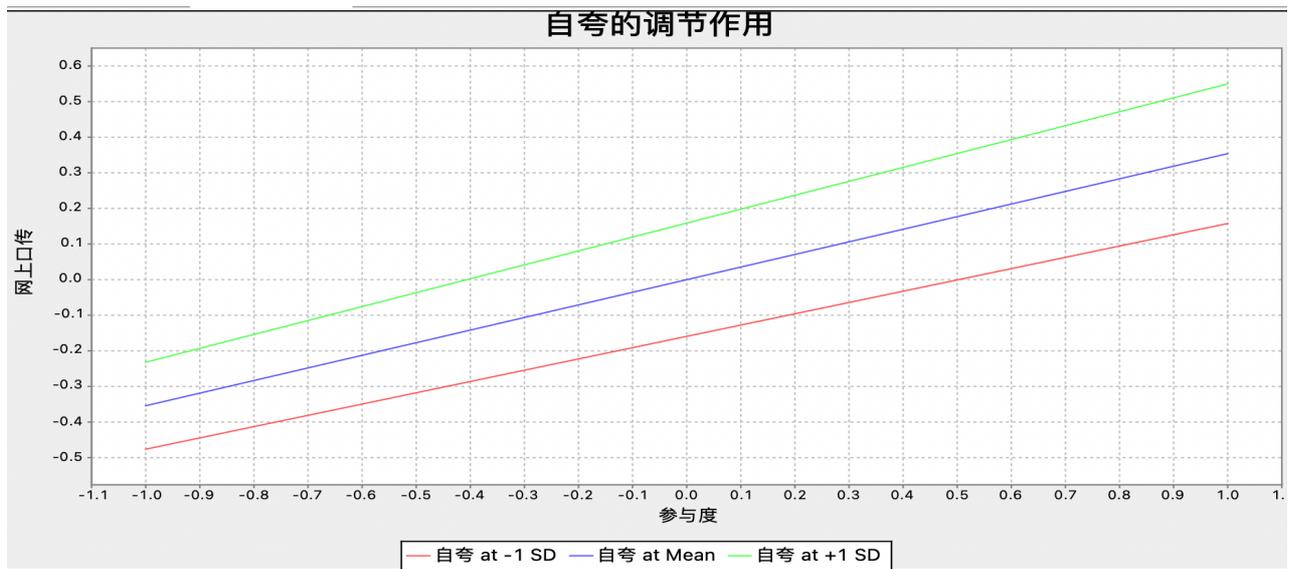
Figure 18. Simple Slope Analysis for SENH (China), developed with SmartPLS
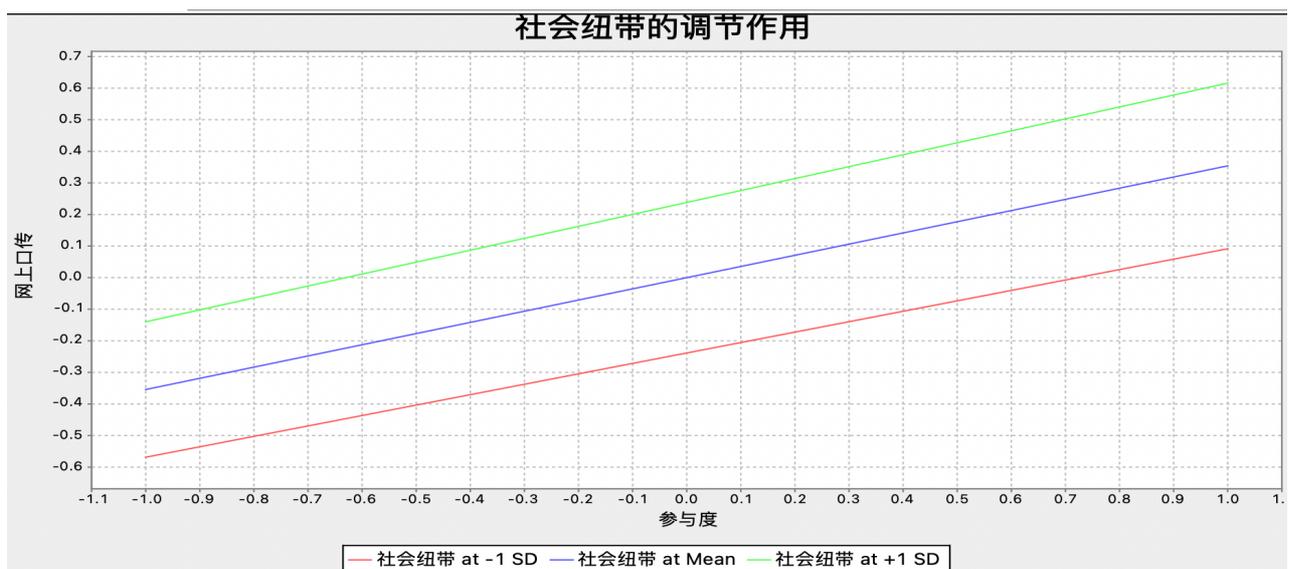
Figure 19. Simple Slope Analysis for SBON (China), developed with SmartPLS

The Simple Slope Analysis allows you to graphically analyze the alteration of the relationship between two different variables, CBEN and EWOM, in three different scenarios. The red line indicates the relationship between CBEN and EWOM in the case that SENH and SBON assume values lower than the average value. The blue line describes the link between CBEN and EWOM if the two moderators assume values close

to the average value, while the green line describes the relationship between the same variables if the moderators assume values above the average one. From the graphics, we can understand that when SENH and SBON are high, they strengthen the relationship between CBEN and EWOM (since the green line is at a higher level than the other two lines) and when they are low, they weaken that same relationship (since the red line is at a lower level than the other two lines). This, however, confirms the results obtained from the first step, according to which self-enhancement and social bonding do not influence (neither positively nor negatively) the relationship between the independent variable CBEN and dependent variable EWOM, both in Italy and China.

5.3 Final results

This paragraph summarizes all final results collected from the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS, regarding the relationships between the different variables of the research model as well as the different hypotheses proposed in this study. Based on the interpretation of the path coefficients previously described and shown in Tables 18 and 19, results are as follows:

- The first hypothesis (H1) assumes that "the use of RTM message creativity has a positive effect on consumer brand engagement on social media both in China and Italy". In Italy, this hypothesis is confirmed by the analysis of the results since all three values - Beta Value = 0.509, T-value = 5.679 and P-value = 0.000 – were found acceptable. In China, the hypothesis is also confirmed by the bootstrapping procedure, since all three values - Beta Value = 0.259, T-value = 3.264 and P-value = 0.001 – were found acceptable. This means that the hypothesized relationship, which positively relates RTM message creativity (CREA/创造力) and consumer brand engagement on social media (PART/参与度), is statistically relevant. In fact, RTM message creativity appears to be a significant predictor of CBEN on social media; thus, H1 IS CONFIRMED FOR BOTH COUNTRIES.

- The second hypothesis (H2) states that "the use of RTM message creativity has a positive effect on brand electronic WOM intention both in China and Italy". In

Italy, this hypothesis is confirmed by the analysis of the results since all three values - Beta Value = 0.304, T-value = 3.364 and P-value = 0.001 – were found acceptable. In China, the hypothesis was also confirmed by the bootstrapping procedure, since all three values – Beta Value = 0.200, T-value = 2.411 and P-value = 0.016 – were found acceptable. This means that the hypothesized relationship, which positively relates RTM message creativity (CREA/创造力) and brand eWOM intention (PASS/网上口传), is statistically relevant. As a matter of fact, RTM message creativity appears to be a significant predictor of brand eWOM intention; thus, H2 IS CONFIRMED FOR BOTH COUNTRIES.

- The third hypothesis (H3) states that "the use of RTM message humor has a positive effect on consumer brand engagement on social media both in China and Italy". In Italy, this hypothesis is not confirmed by the analysis of the results since all three values - Beta Value = 0.082, T-value = 0.645 and P-value = 0.519 – were found not acceptable. However, in China, the hypothesis is confirmed by the bootstrapping procedure, since all three values - Beta Value = 0.205, T-value = 2.475 and P-value = 0.014 – were found acceptable. This means that the hypothesized relationship, which positively relates RTM message humor (UMOR/幽默) and consumer brand engagement on social media (PART/参与度), is statistically relevant in China, but not in Italy; thus, H3 IS CONFIRMED FOR ONLY ONE COUNTRY (CHINA).

- The fourth hypothesis (H4) assumes that "the use of RTM message humor has a positive effect on brand electronic WOM intention both in China and Italy". In Italy, this hypothesis is not confirmed by the analysis of the results since all three values - Beta Value = 0.080, T-value = 0.804 and P-value = 0.422 – were found not acceptable. However, in China, the hypothesis is confirmed by the bootstrapping procedure, since all three values - Beta Value = 0.247, T-value = 3.219 and P-value = 0.001 – were found acceptable. This means that the hypothesized relationship, which positively relates RTM message humor (UMOR/幽默) and brand electronic word-of-mouth intention (PASS/网上口传),

is statistically relevant in China, but not in Italy; thus, H4 IS CONFIRMED FOR ONLY ONE COUNTRY (CHINA).

- The fifth hypothesis (H5) presumes that "consumer brand engagement on social media is positively related to brand eWOM intention both in China and Italy". In Italy, this hypothesis is confirmed by the analysis of the results since all three values - Beta Value = 0.366, T-value = 3.098 and P-value = 0.002 – were found acceptable. In China, the hypothesis is also confirmed by the bootstrapping procedure, since all three values - Beta Value = 0.381, T-value = 4.455 and P-value = 0.000 – were found acceptable. This means that the hypothesized relationship, which positively relates consumer brand engagement on social media (PART/参与度) and brand electronic word-of-mouth intention (PASS/网上口传), is statistically relevant. In fact, CBEN on social media appears to be a significant predictor of brand eWOM; thus, H5 IS CONFIRMED FOR BOTH COUNTRIES.

- Hypothesis 5a states that "In Italy more than in China, self-enhancement positively moderates the relationship between consumer brand engagement on social media and brand eWOM intention". In Italy, this hypothesis is not confirmed by the analysis of the results since all three values - Beta Value = 0.033, T-value = 0.312 and P-value = 0.755 – were found not acceptable. In China, the hypothesis is also not confirmed by the bootstrapping procedure, since all three values - Beta Value = 0.037, T-value = 0.342 and P-value = 0.733 – were found not acceptable. This means that the hypothesized moderator effect of self-enhancement, which alters the relationship between consumer brand engagement on social media (PART/参与度) and brand electronic word-of-mouth intention (PASS/网上口传), is not statistically relevant; thus, H5a IS NOT CONFIRMED FOR NEITHER COUNTRY.

- Hypothesis 5b assumes that "In China more than in Italy, social bonding positively moderates the relationship between consumer brand engagement on social media and brand eWOM intention". In Italy, the hypothesis is not confirmed by the bootstrapping procedure, since all three values - Beta Value = -

0.034, T-value = 0.287 and P-value = 0.775 – were found not acceptable. In China, this hypothesis is also not confirmed by the analysis of the results, since all three values - Beta Value = 0.024, T-value = 0.259 and P-value = 0.796 – were found not acceptable. This means that the hypothesized moderator effect of social bonding, which alters the relationship between consumer brand engagement on social media (PART/参与度) and brand electronic word-of-mouth intention (PASS/网上口传), is not statistically relevant; thus, H5b IS NOT CONFIRMED FOR NEITHER COUNTRY.

Table 20: **Results of hypothesis testing**

No.	Path	Direction	β		T-values		P-values		Support	
			China	Italy	China	Italy	China	Italy	China	Italy
H1	CREA → CBEN	+	0.259	0.509	3.264	5.679	0.001	0.000	Yes	Yes
H2	CREA → EWOM	+	0.200	0.304	2.411	3.364	0.016	0.001	Yes	Yes
H3	HUMO → CBEN	+	0.205	0.082	2.475	0.645	0.014	0.519	Yes	No
H4	HUMO → EWOM	+	0.247	0.080	3.219	0.804	0.001	0.422	Yes	No
H5	CBEN → EWOM	+	0.381	0.366	4.455	3.098	0.000	0.002	Yes	Yes
H5a	MODER. SENH	+	0.037	0.033	0.342	0.312	0.733	0.755	No	No
H5b	MODER. SBON	+	0.024	-0.034	0.259	0.287	0.796	0.775	No	No

6. GENERAL DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Final discussion

After having introduced the final results of this research, it is important to interpret and analyze these outcomes in relation to the proposed model, carried out using the SmartPLS software. This study was conducted to analyze and explain how consumers and social media users online react to brand's real-time marketing messages and ads, in terms of engagement (contributing to the marketing message through likes, comments and shares) and in terms of electronic word-of-mouth intention (to what extent users are willing to talk positively about the brand and their RTM messages to other people). In particular, given the specificity of these types of messages and given their timeliness and rapidity of execution, this research tried to study and understand how consumers react to the brand's use of humor and creativity, since these two aspects characterize almost all marketing messages in the field of IMIs.

The results of the analysis provide a further contribution in the field of cross-cultural studies since a comparative evaluation was carried out in Italy (traditionally seen as an individualistic country) and China (traditionally seen as a collectivistic country) to understand if certain factors can positively moderate the effect and the relationship between consumer brand engagement on social media (CBEN) and electronic word-of-mouth intention (EWOM). In this sense, self-enhancement and social bonding were considered as factors having a moderator effect in the research analysis, since the former has largely characterized social relationships in more individualistic cultures, whereas the latter seems to have defined these relationships in more collectivistic cultures. This contribution is important because it can also expand the knowledge on globalization and worldwide integration and how they have been changing and shaking traditional cultural values in the last couple of decades.

According to the results obtained from the SmartPLS software, the use of creativity in instant marketing messages influences user's willingness to engage with real-time marketing advertisements on social media, and this means the more brands make use of creative appeals and techniques for these types of messages, the more people online

are willing to contribute to these messages through likes, comments and shares. As a matter of fact, RTM message creativity was found to have a positive effect on consumer brand engagement on social media, in both China and Italy, in accordance with the first hypothesis (H1). The results also show that the use of creativity in RTM messages influences customers and brand followers online to engage in electronic word-of-mouth activities, meaning that the more brands and companies promote and enhance creative techniques in their instant messages on social media, the more users will be willing to talk to other people (e.g., relatives, friends, colleagues etc.) about these brands and their messages online. In fact, in accordance with the second hypothesis (H2), RTM message creativity was found to have a positive effect on consumer's intention to engage in eWOM communications, both in China and Italy.

These results are in line with what was found by Mazerant et al. (2021), who reported that the application of real-time marketing strategies on SNS and, in particular, strategies that make use of creative appeals, positively affect the sharing behavior in the context of Twitter. The authors also revealed that creativity techniques associated with instant messages do not yield unequivocally positive responses by consumers online, instead, the direction and the strength of these responses are largely context dependent. These results also confirmed what was previously found by Yang & Smith (2009) – although not in the context of RTM strategies – that is, ads considered to be "highly creative" trigger positive effects that translate in higher level of viewing and engagement intentions. Baack et al. (2015) also confirmed these findings, explaining that creativity in ads can act as a mechanism to encourage an emotional response which, in turn, enhances customer engagement on social media. As for eWOM intention, this study's second hypothesis confirmed what was previously found by Willemsen et al. (2019), according to whom brand messages that make use of instant marketing strategies elicit more sharing behavior through electronic word-of-mouth than brand messages that do not make use of these strategies. In fact, they explained how RTM is a smart and effective strategy that can be used to boost word-of-mouth, and results from this research endorsed this idea by demonstrating that RTM messages, combined with creativeness, can increase consumers

online WOM intention in both collectivistic countries, such as China, and individualistic ones, such as Italy.

In relation to the third and fourth hypothesis, results from the bootstrapping procedure on SmartPLS reported that - only in China - the use of humor in RTM messages influences brand engagement of social media users, meaning that the more firms make use of humoristic appeals in their instant marketing ads on these platforms, the more people are willing to participate to these ads by clicking like buttons or sharing the ad. In point of fact, RTM message humor was found to have a positive effect on the intention to engage with these messages on social media in China (H3). Results from this study also prove that humor in instant messages influences Chinese users' intention to engage in eWOM activities, explaining that the more brands make use of humoristic techniques in their real-time marketing messages, the more people are willing to "spread the word" about these brands (H4). However, when it comes to Italy, both H3 and H4 were not confirmed by the SmartPLS analysis: this means that – in Italy - the use of humor in RTM messages does not seem to be influencing neither consumers' brand engagement on social media, nor their intention to engage in eWOM communication about these brands.

These results are partly in line with what was found by Borah and colleagues (2019), according to whom the interaction between RTM messages and humoristic appeals positively affect firm value and virality. However, as explained by Lim & Ang (2008), customer's appreciation of humoristic ads can vary enormously depending on the cultural orientation and social values of the country they live in, and, in fact, this research proves precisely how humoristic techniques may influence Chinese users' appreciation of brand messages on social media and how these same techniques may not be as affective in influencing Italian users' appreciation of these messages. Although Gulas & Weinberger (2006) and Lee et al. (2018) have demonstrated that humoristic ads increase liking and persuasion, compared to non-humorous ads, and that humor is associated with consumer engagement in the context of SNS, this study explains that there is more to that, and that these findings are not generally applicable to every consumer in every country. Porter & Golan (2006) also reported that humor is employed at near unanimous levels for all viral ads, and so the question is not *whether* to use humor or not, rather the question is

how to use it. If globalization has indeed reduced cultural differences and social barriers, people may be sharing or engaging with humoristic ads for different purposes and not to simply talk about these ads with friends and colleagues online, as revealed by Warren et al. (2018), through means of electronic WOM communications.

In concordance with what presumed by the fifth hypothesis, this study found that consumer brand engagement on social media influences brand electronic word-of-mouth intention both in China and Italy, meaning that the more people engage with brand messages on social media through likes, comments and shares, the more they are willing to perform electronic WOM activities, by talking to other people about the brands they have engaged with. As a matter of fact, CBEN on social media was found to have a positive impact or effect on brand eWOM intention in both countries (H5).

Findings from this research analysis conform to what was found in previous studies by Wang (2006), Schivinski et al. (2016) and Haikel-Elsabeh et al. (2018). In fact, these authors and their colleagues revealed that engagement on social media is a core component that underlies and highlights consumer brand choice in response to a good communication started by firms and companies. When consumers engage with certain brands and their messages, they often share information on them to their online network of relatives and friends. In this sense, as suggested by Schivinski et al. (2016), practitioners and researchers have found that when consumers engage with a brand message through likes and comments, this often leads to the sharing of the brand-related content to other people in their SNS network. This study provides a further contribution to these outcomes, by giving proof that consumers' engagement on SNS is positively related to the distribution of constructive communication about these brands through eWOM. By being a liker, a commenter or a sharer of the RTM brand message on social media, the single individual can identify with the brand and, in turn, can influence other people in their social network to like, share or spread positive words about the same brands and the same messages. Results of this research, however, are more generally applied to both Chinese and Italian social media, whereas other studies chose to confine the examination of customers' engagement in the context of specific social media, such as Facebook (see Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2018).

In relation to the last couple hypothesis, results of this study show that both self-enhancement and social bonding do not have a moderator effect on the relationship between consumer brand engagement on social media (CBEN) and brand electronic word-of-mouth intention (EWOM) in both countries, meaning that these two factors do not seem to influence the extent to which people engage in WOM activities online after having contributed to the brand message or ad on social media. As a matter of fact, self-enhancement and social bonding do *not* positively moderate the relationship between CBEN and EWOM in neither country (H5a and H5b).

These results provide some important insights for cross-cultural studies and marketing literature in general. For self-enhancement, in fact, these results do not seem to comply with previous studies that emphasized how people share news on social media and engage in WOM recommendations to self-enhance and to generate desired impressions. Particularly, findings from this study are not in line with what was found by Chu & Choi (2010) and Chu et al. (2018), according to whom the need for self-enhancement is one of the factors that motivate people's engagement on WeChat and their intention to forward content online. Henning-Thurau et al. (2004), Angelis et al. (2012) and Aramendia-Muneta (2017) also found that self-enhancement is a major drive for written communication on the web and for overall WOM intention, and they also state that this can explain why PWOM is more likely to occur than NWOM. This study's findings, however, do not comply with their results, in the sense that self-enhancement specifically is not reported to be one of the major drives for "word-of-mouse" communication. For social bonding, results are *not* in line with previous studies either, since Milkman & Berger (2014) and Berger (2014), for example, found that people engage in activities online, such as eWOM or sharing and forwarding brand messages, to socially bond with other people. This was also confirmed by another study by Tsai & Men (2014) in the context of Chinese SNS, where it was reported that people socialize with the company, fans and followers when they follow brand pages on these platforms. In this study, however, social bonding is not revealed to be one specific major drive for eWOM activities when engaging with brand messages on social media, and these outcomes are also in contrast with major traditional cross-cultural assumptions by Hofstede or Triandis.

6.2 Practical and managerial implications

This current research provides several fundamental insights as well as practical and managerial implications regarding the creation and use of brand real-time marketing messages to enhance consumers' engagement online and increase *buzz* communications.

First, it was demonstrated that the today's widespread diffusion of viral ads and messages in the field of improvised marketing interventions (IMIs) can bring on more benefits and advantages than ever imagined, especially in terms of online social media engagement and buzz marketing. This means that firms and companies in both Western countries (more individualistic) and Eastern countries (more collectivistic) should encourage the production and development of RTM strategies, since brand messages and viral advertisements that can join the conversation and respond timely to major trending topics and pop cultural events, such as sports games, music events, famous tv shows and talent shows, can bring on more engagement from users online and allow them to like, comment and share these messages to their social network of friends, families and colleagues. Therefore, by communicating and initiating a dialogue with their customers online, brands can make sure that users talk about them to other people in their social network, by means of WOM activities and communications.

Second, this research has proved once again that creativity in RTM messages is another way through which brands and companies can gain consumers' attention, especially in this competitive marketing environment in which it has become increasingly difficult for marketers and advertisers to break through the clutter. As a matter of fact, when the companies' marketing team decide to make use of creativity as one of the main aspects of their timely brand advertisements, this allows them to properly engage users online and to really make them like, comment and share these social media messages, increasing overall attention towards the ad, as well as allowing for higher ad recall, more favorable attitudes toward claim and non-claims ad elements and enhancing more upbeat feelings, just as it was previously suggested by Ang et al. (2007). Originality, novelty, meaningfulness and appropriateness, in the context of a creative message, are largely recognized as some of the key sources for advertising effectiveness or entertainment, which also affect consumer's behavior in this extended social media environment,

through positive eWOM communications to other people. Although Mazerant and colleagues (2021) found that only craftsmanship is positively related to consumer's response in RTM messages, this research reports that a more convergent application of ad creativity, which effectively puts together craftsmanship, meaningfulness, novelty and originality, is indeed another way to make fans and followers of a certain brand page engage with that brand's commercials on SNS. Thus, managers and marketing experts really need to encourage creativity in their messages, considering how clear it is that it can bring consumers' commitment and participation on social media, also based on dozens of research/academic papers on the subject; besides, this is so true for individualistic countries, such as Italy or the US, as it is for collectivistic ones, like China or South Korea.

Third, this research's results imply that, as already explained by other authors in previous works, humor is a core aspect of our lives that undoubtedly affect our social interactions and our willingness to engage with brand messages online. Thanks to humoristic ads, people can easily "spread the word" about certain brands or companies to someone they know in their social network. By eliciting laughter for other people to enjoy and be amused with, witty RTM messages can easily stimulate people's desire to think highly of the company and appreciate their marketing efforts. This study shows that this is important especially in countries like China, in which the use of humor associated with timely RTM messages can really make your brand go viral, while increasing brand and ad recall as well as the company's positioning in the consumer's mind through activities such as PWOM or simple likes and shares. As a matter of fact, given the social nature of humor, it is no surprise that it can easily influence consumer's ability to persuade other and be persuaded by others. Findings report that the use of humor is an executional tactic of great interest that strengthens the marketing performance considerably. However, companies and manager need to be careful when they use wit and comedy in their timely and non-timely ads: many humoristic ads tend to be very provocative and, in some cases, it is not really a matter of whether brands can use humor or not, but rather a matter of how they can use it. Findings reveal that, in Italy, RTM message humor does not necessarily yield to social media engagement or WOM intention, and this seems to be in line with

Scala's warning about understanding what trends can be made fun of and what trends cannot (see Pagliarini, 2020). It is, indeed, important to find an equilibrium and maintain a certain type of communication that is appropriate and unoffensive, especially because the risk of backlash for instant marketing messages, which could quickly lead to NWOM behaviors, is right behind the corner. Firms should really empower marketing teams to keep a close eye on trends and play along with them while joining the conversation and advertising their brand, however, they *must* be aware of the risks and consequences in case they fail in their good communication.

Fourth, results from this study demonstrate that when people engage with timely ads and messages on social media, they will be influenced to speak highly of brands and companies that make use of these strategies to other people on these platforms. This means that marketers should create and think of original and humoristic timely ads because, whenever users contribute to them, this will also inspire them to engage in "word-of-mouse" activities, by bringing PWOM ramifications as well. The advent of social media has meant that brand managers have fundamentally lost their control over their customers and marketing strategies, since nowadays consumers seem to be more empowered to voice their opinions and ideas, while finding a broader audience to talk to. As also explained in the literature review, consumer engagement has its roots in relationship marketing, meaning that whenever firms manage to support the increasingly interactive and experiential nature of consumer relationships, this will grant them some major added value that, in turn, influences their customers' behavior online.

This "Western" concept of relationship marketing was developed from the growing interest in the idea of customer relationship and retention, in which the emphasis shifted from transactions and sales to building long-term interactions with consumers online. However, this aspect is so important for Western countries as it is for Eastern countries, as China, for example, coined the term *swift guanxi* to describe this very concept. In this sense, Ou and colleagues (2014) argued that interactivity and *swift guanxi* between the company and the users online contributes to the consumer's building of trust toward the seller. This, in turn, influences their intention to engage with the brand online

and to consume that company's products and/or services as well, and this research's cross-cultural comparison between Italy and China was found to be encouraging this idea.

Lastly, this study proved that companies and managers should and must be aware of how worldwide integration has been shaking traditional cultural values throughout the years. As a matter of fact, both social bonding and self-enhancement, which have always been academically considered as motivators for the overall engagement of consumers on social media, but also for eWOM activities, were not found to be major drives for consumers' behavior in this sense. This proves that, in this ever-changing marketing environment, these two components may not be the only major factors that influence the sharing and forwarding of brand messages on SNS. In fact, advertisers and marketing mavens must be mindful that there may be other aspects that come into play in the cognitive, emotional and behavioral response of users online, and these may go from simple concern for other consumers online to advice-seeking, cost savings and many others (see Brodie et al., 2011). Moreover, this demonstrates that cultural barriers and limitations that have traditionally separated individualistic countries from collectivistic ones may be shrinking even further, making younger generations throughout the world share more similar values and experiences.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

7.1 Research limitations

In spite of the different fundamental results reported in this study, this research has several limitations that need to be outlined, so as not to jeopardize its outcomes.

The first limitation is intrinsic to the very nature of this study on the effects of RTM messages on consumer's engagement on social media and their intention to engage in eWOM activities. In fact, as previously mentioned, being real-time marketing a quite-recently developed marketing concept in literature, not many studies have investigated the effects of instant messages or ads on consumer's behavior on these social media platforms. To the best of the author's knowledge, this study is only the fourth to have *scientifically* examined the effects and outcomes of brands' use of RTM strategies in their ads and messages on social networking sites, following previous studies by Borah et al. (2019), Willemsen et al. (2019) and Mazerant et al. (2021). In this sense, this study is pioneering if one considers how short-listed the marketing literature is on the subject.

Second, another intrinsic limitation of this research is represented by the clear screening of the respondents that only takes into consideration men, women and non-binary people from generations Y and Z, aged between 19 and 40 years. In fact, this study does not consider data coming from people who were born before the early 80s and after 2002; however, these missing data may also be useful to this type of analysis, considering how social media are now part of people's everyday life, independently from their age. Moreover, this study provides an analysis of data coming from Italy and China only, generalizing on the affiliation of the former to individualistic cultures and the latter to collectivistic ones. However, data coming other individualistic or collectivistic countries, such as Germany or USA and Japan or South Korea may report different results from the ones obtained from this research.

Third, this study funnels through creativity and humor as the two main factors or aspects of the RTM messages that may influence consumers' behavior on social media in terms of engagement and "word-of-mouse" intention. This was determined by looking at the existing marketing literature on the subject that has previously analyzed these two

components in reference to brands' use of instant or real-time marketing strategies. However, these two may not be the only factors influencing customers' choices on SNS, but other components, such as the elaboration, the flexibility, the synthesis, the artistic value etc., can come into play and affect or alter consumers' participation and contribution. Furthermore, this study's approach on creativity is based on that stream of literature that operates a more convergent thinking, by adopting a conceptualization of ad creativity that includes originality as well as meaningfulness. Nonetheless, by focusing on a more divergent thinking and considering originality, meaningfulness, craftsmanship etc. as single individual components in the analysis of ad creativity, results may report different or altered outcomes compared to this study's findings. This also stands for humor, in the sense that, perhaps, the analysis of different aspects of ad humor, such as wit, jokes or linguistic humor may reveal different results and may provide further insights on the reason why RTM message humor was found to be an effective marketing strategy for social media engagement and eWOM intention in China but not in Italy.

A fourth limitation of this study is represented by social media engagement *per se* which is traditionally represented as the totality of social media factors such as likes, comments and shares of the marketing message online. Results from this study show a positive influence of RTM messages on the overall engagement, however, it does not investigate and examine how these brand messages on SNS influence each of these factors.

Finally, one last limitation of this research is that it does not make a differentiation between positive word-of-mouth intention and negative word-of-mouth intention - which largely depends on whether communication strategies adopted by the company were effective or not - but rather considers the extent to which people online are willing to talk to other individuals in their social networks about what they see and like on these social networking platforms.

7.2 Future research directions

The recognition of this study's most important limitations may also prove to be a starting point for future studies and provide suggestions and "food for thought" for future research directions.

First of all, future academic and scientific studies should keep on surveying and investigating the effects of the use of instant marketing strategies for brand messages and ads on social media, considering how this new marketing phenomenon is being widely operated among national and international firms for their social media strategy. This means that future research should be aimed provide more scientific insights on the use of buzz strategies in order to understand more deeply how real-time marketing affects users' overall engagement on social networking sites and their intention to speak highly of those companies that make use of these strategies. As previously mentioned, this study is only the fourth of its kind, thus, it becomes fundamental that future studies aim to expand current observations, by deepening what is scientifically known on the subject.

Second, in doing so, future studies should aim to understand what other factors may come into play in the creation of timely messages and how different aspects – other than creativity and humor – influence consumers' engagement with the brand ad and their intention to "spread the word" about it. For example, one future study can try to adopt a divergent approach on creativity and examine originality, novelty, meaningfulness, craftsmanship etc. as individual components that separately affect SNS engagement and electronic word-of-mouth. Another future study can also try to understand how the synthesis of these ads, or their artistic and visual values, influence consumers' response to these messages, also in terms of attention toward the brand message, ad retention, ad recall and brand memorability.

Third, other future analysis may also extend the knowledge on the subject for cross-cultural marketing, by testing this study's hypothesis for different countries and cultures, perhaps by making a comparison between two individualistic or collectivistic countries and analyzing how consumers' online behavior may vary in these countries. This study's outcomes were obtained from data coming from people belonging to generations Y and Z, which shed a light on how recent streams of globalization and worldwide integration that have been shrinking differentiations and cultural boundaries towards a more profound commonality of cultural and political values. However, future studies can also try to target previous generations of people (Gen X), whose data analysis may present results that, perhaps, are more conforming to traditional cross-cultural beliefs.

Furthermore, future research directions may also focus on the differentiation between positive and negative WOM intention online and what factors in buzz marketing may enhance or reduce both of them. By carrying out a pros and cons analysis for each of the timely trending events for which they intend to join the conversation, marketers and advertisers can figure out how to improve their real-time marketing strategies and how to get a stronger grip on their customers online.

Lastly, future scientific research can also investigate the effects of RTM strategies on brand messages online not only in terms of engagement and willingness to "spread the word", but also in terms of economic benefits and profit for the companies. This would allow them to understand whether these new marketing efforts, as reported by surveys from Evergage (2014) and Howell (2014), can take home more practical and tangible results such as revenues and ROI.

8. CONCLUSION

The analysis carried out in this research proved once again how the development of world wide web (WWW) technologies has been presenting fresh and new opportunities, as well as challenges, for marketers to benefit from the understanding of how consumers perceive the internet as a source of advertising; besides, years and years of studies in the field of advertising effectiveness have proved that image appeals and visual designs on the internet elicit emotional responses in the customers which, in turn, influence their attitude and behavior toward the brand and the ad message.

With the booming popularity of social networking sites, companies have now discovered different and more effective ways to advertise their brands and their products, therefore, they have started to use social media channels to promote new necessary marketing efforts. Consumers have begun to organize themselves as networks of fans and followers around specific brand profiles on social media, and without allocating excessive advertising budgets, messages and advertisements from these brands can be easily pushed through these communities, because of the networked nature of these platforms and the ability to pass on these messages in real time. In China, for example, WeChat Business, which can be seen as a mix between traditional e-commerce platforms and social networking communications, provides an innovative way for firms to develop customer relationships and deepen firms' knowledge of users' behavior on social media (Yang, 2016). Moreover, it can offer a never-before-seen opportunity for brand accounts on WeChat to develop and create real-time marketing strategies and enhance users' liking and overall engagement toward their ads.

The examination in this study had the purpose to empirically investigate consumers and users' behavior toward the application of instant marketing strategies in the context of social media. Through the administration of a survey on users' perception and contribution toward brands' use of RTM strategies in their timely messages on these platforms, data from a final sample of 100 respondents in China and Italy (200 total) showed that RTM is an effective marketing tool that can be used to reinforce and enhance customer engagement and eWOM intention in both countries.

More specifically, the analysis performed in this thesis provided some important incremental contributions that fill in the gaps in the marketing literature and broaden the knowledge on the real-time marketing subject. First of all, it experimentally demonstrated the effects and the influence that the employment of instant marketing strategies within brand ads on social networking sites has on consumer brand engagement and brand electronic word-of-mouth intention. This was done by taking into consideration two important aspects of these messages – message creativity and message humor – that were used to empirically test the first four hypothesis. This is one of the first studies in the marketing literature that scientifically confirmed that whenever SNS users encounter timely RTM messages on these platforms, they are likely to contribute to the brand ad by clicking like, inserting a comment or sharing the message. Moreover, it also proved that when users see these types of ads on their social media timelines, they are willing to spread the word about them to other people in their community.

Second, this study successfully verified that consumer brand engagement on social media has a positive effect on brand eWOM intention. This means that, the more people engage with the RTM ad, the more they are willing to engage in word-of-mouth communications online. These results were in line with previous studies by Schivinski (2016) or Haikel-Elsabeh (2018), however, findings from this research provided further insights and contributions for this specific hypothesis, given that the CBEN and EWOM relationship was tested in two different countries.

An additional incremental contribution of this research was provided the moderator effect analysis of two contrasting factors – self-enhancement and social bonding – in the relationship between the two variables just mentioned (CBEN-EWOM), whose comparison between China and Italy had never been carried out before. In fact, this study can be seen as pioneering in the cross-cultural marketing literature, considering that no previous research had ever presented a transcultural comparison of factors and moderators influencing social media consumer engagement and electronic WOM intention between such culturally distant countries.

In conclusion, it has become clear how the internet has entered this new era characterized by a fundamental emphasis on interactivity and information sharing, in

which traditional consumer-brand relationships and communications have been largely altered and modified. In this new age of social media, numerous businesses have now realized how necessary it is to find and think of new, imaginative ways of capturing consumers' attention, by trying to figure out and understand what they want and what they might like. Especially in these sensitive and delicate periods of natural disasters and crisis events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, governments, medical departments as well as brands and companies should use a combination of creative, funny and positive messages to impact people's emotions and their trust (Jia et al., 2021). Companies are now required to include one more important objective in their marketing efforts, which is making people feel good about themselves and the world around them, while participating in conversations and letting them know they're being heard. Whether it is just a momentary trend or a revolutionary marketing phenomenon, real-time marketing makes people appreciate brands even more and, most importantly, it is proving to be an efficient tool in reaching this new goal.

9. FIGURES

10. TABLES

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12. SUMMARY IN CHINESE – 中文摘要

自 2000 年代初以来，随着西方国家的 Facebook、Twitter、Instagram 或东方的人人网、新浪微博、微信等在线社交网络平台和社交媒体的出现，全球大量品牌和企业纷纷进入重塑和重新调整他们的营销工作，以一种全新的革命性尝试来寻找一些新颖的创新方式来与他们的客户在线交流。世界已正式进入营销格局不断变化和发展的新时代，现在要求公司跟上消费者的动态行为，以便通过使用这些新平台创造互惠互利。如今，全球有数十亿人使用社交媒体，预计到 2022 年用户数量将增长到 32.9 亿，占世界人口的近 42.3%。考虑到这些社交网站 (SNS) 现在已成为分发大量信息和内容的主要领域，人们可以通过这些平台轻松地与他人分享生活的方方面面并快速接收有关他们周围的世界的信息。研究表明，大多数用户从事社交媒体活动的主要原因有以下三个：1) 信息处理，2) 娱乐活动和 3) 社交联系。在 SNS 的背景下，知识共享在将信息在线分发给社交网络中的其他人方面也发挥着重要作用。事实上，这些渠道上的知识共享可以作为人们使用的有效工具，通过知识共享可以增强互动和联系、社区发展、自我实现和自我表现。过去，营销包括精心构建的活动，这些活动遵循特定的时间表和截止日期，通常在活动完成后数周启动。随着技术和消费者行为的这些新变化和发展，广告商现在需要找到创造性的方式来吸引客户的注意力并实时预测他们的需求。这些转变导致了近期实时营销 (RTM) 现象的产生和发展。

RTM 包括使用多个渠道在消费者方便的时间和地点以创新和非侵入性的方式与客户互动。RTM 可以采用以下三种形式之一：1) 自动化 RTM，2) 实时执行的个性化营销和 3) 实时开发的营销活动。第一种形式是指在正确的时间将正确的、预先编写的消息传递给正确的消费者。这些营销信息是自动化的，它们可以由客户执行的各种事件或操作触发，然后立即发送信息。例如，如果一个在线客户或用户有兴趣购买一双新的流行鞋，他们很可能会使用谷歌等搜索引擎来搜索新鞋。通过自动 RTM，在谷歌搜索之后，消费者的网页上肯定会出现一个弹出式横幅广

告，以显示当时离客户最近的鞋店。第二种形式的 RTM 涉及为客户创建并实时执行的营销信息。例如，零售商可以为他们的客户提供会员卡，每次购买后都可以用它来收集积分。每当消费者使用他们的会员卡付款时，这些积分将被使用并从卡中扣除，以便立即获得购买折扣。最后一种形式的实时营销是指由于特殊的趋势事件或场合，通过社交媒体平台和 SNS 等不同渠道实时开发和发送的营销信息。事实上，世界杯、奥斯卡、皇室宝宝的诞生或超级碗等事件都引起了极大的兴趣和用户对话。公司可以利用这些事件加入并成为对话的一部分，这可以让他们获得意识和认可。就本文而言，重要的是要强调本论文中提出的分析仅关注上述第三种类型或形式的实时营销。这是因为本研究旨在通过调查在这些平台上使用这些及时的策略和技术，来检查消费者在社交媒体环境中对 RTM 信息的行为。此外，作为 RTM 策略领域中第三种最近开发的及时技术形式，很少有文献研究评估其有效性。

随着社交网站的蓬勃发展，公司现在已经发现了不同且更有效的方式来宣传他们的品牌和产品，因此，他们开始使用社交媒体渠道来促进新的必要营销活动。消费者已经开始围绕社交媒体上的特定品牌账户将自己组织成粉丝和追随者网络，并且无需分配过多的广告预算，这些品牌的信息和广告可以轻松地通过这些网上社区推送，因为这些平台有实时传递这些消息的能力。例如，在中国，微信业务可以被视为传统电子商务平台和社交网络通信的混合体，为企业发展客户关系和加深企业对用户在社交媒体上的行为的了解提供了一种创新方式。此外，微信业务可以为微信上的品牌帐户提供一个前所未有的机会来制定和创建实时营销策略，并提高用户对其广告的喜好和参与度。

本研究中的检查旨在实证调查消费者和用户对品牌在社交媒体背景下应用即时营销策略的行为。通过关于用户在这些平台上对品牌使用 RTM 策略的看法和贡献的调查，来自中国和意大利 100 名受访者（共 200 名）的最终样本的数据表明 RTM 是一种有效的、可用于加强和提高两国客户参与度和网上口传（eWOM）意图的营销工具。更具体地说，本论文中进行的分析提供了一些重要

的增量贡献，填补了营销文献中的空白，拓宽了实时营销主题的知识。首先，本论文通过实验证明了在社交网站上的品牌广告中采用即时营销策略对消费者的参与度和网上口传意图的影响。这是通过考虑这些信息的两个重要方面——创造力和幽默——来完成的，这些方面被用来对前四个假设进行实证检验。本论文是营销文献中首批科学证实的研究之一，当 SNS 用户在这些平台上遇到及时的 RTM 信心时，他们很可能通过点击喜欢、插入评论或分享着一些信息来为品牌广告做出贡献。此外，本论文还证明，当用户在他们的社交媒体账户上看到这些类型的广告时，他们愿意将有关这些广告的信息传播给网上社区中的其他人。其次，本研究成功验证了消费者在社交媒体上的参与度对品牌 eWOM 意向有积极影响。这意味着，为品牌 RTM 广告作出贡献的人越多，他们就越愿意在线进行口传。本研究的另一个增量贡献是对这两个变量之间的关系（CBEN-EWOM）中的两个因素——自夸和社会纽带的调节效应分析。事实上，这项研究可以被视为跨文化营销文献的先驱，因为之前的研究从未对影响社交媒体消费者参与度和网上口传意图的因素和调节因素进行跨文化比较。

总而言之，很明显互联网如何进入这个以交互性和信息共享为根本重点的新时代，在这个时代，传统的消费者与品牌的关系和沟通已被大大改变和修改。在这个社交媒体的新时代，许多企业现在已经意识到寻找和思考新的、富有想象力的方式来吸引消费者注意力的必要性，试图弄清楚并理解他们想要什么以及他们可能喜欢什么。特别是在这些自然灾害和危机事件的敏感和微妙时期，如 COVID-19 大流行，政府、医疗部门以及品牌和公司应该使用创造性、幽默和积极的信息来影响人们的情绪和信任。公司现在需要在他们的营销工作中包括一个更重要的目标，即让人们对自己和周围的世界感觉良好，同时参与对话并让他们知道他们被听到了。无论是一时的趋势还是革命性的营销现象，实时营销都会让人们更加欣赏品牌，最重要的是，它被证明是实现这一新目标的有效工具。

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