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Impact of branding & social media marketing in the digital era: Sports apparel brands

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ABSTRACT

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The objective and aim of this research-based study on branding and social media marketing, within the sports apparel industry, was to distinguish the opportunities brought by effective completion of both procedures, especially in terms of operating with a smaller budget. The research findings are suitable for smaller startup brands, and existing brands, that haven't emphasized utilization of digital branding and marketing within social media as efficiently as possible, thus the findings are answering the research questions of how to effectively establish and further develop a branding strategy in social channels, and how to market the brand utilizing the different tools currently emphasized by many brands.

Acquiring the answers to the research questions, starts with the theoretical part of the thesis, that focuses on providing theoretical data and explanations of the important basics within both subjects, that guide the structuring of a successful digital branding and marketing strategy. Theoretical findings are supported by the empirical study, where a benchmarking comparison of sports apparel brands was concluded, to understand the commonly used practices, within the current state of digital branding and marketing. Data from the benchmarking is used to support both theoretical data of the study, as well as the authors own suggestions in the end of the thesis.

The research findings indicated the importance of finding strategies towards branding that enhance deeper relationships between the customers and the brand, thus emphasis on transparency and providing value is at the heart of the research and multiple parts that fulfil these matters, are introduced within the thesis. Furthermore, the importance of fulfilling value propositions and expectations regarding quality of products and utilizing influencer marketing came through as a large trend during the research, especially in the sports apparel industry. The empirical part showcases the mentioned phenomenon of influencer marketing, and other currently used strategies in social media marketing and branding, that have allowed brands to increase their reach towards the target audience, thus allowing some brands to grow at a phenomenal pace.

Keywords: Branding strategy, Brand image and equity, Social media marketing, Content marketing, Influencer marketing, Sports apparel industry

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1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study on the current environment of branding and social media marketing in the continuously growing digital era, with the goal of deepening the understanding of the possibilities of digital branding and marketing in social channels, as well as to understand how well-established brands, are currently operating, and what tools are being used to achieve and maintain growth. The main driver of the study is to identify the important parts to consider, especially for small and medium sized brands, as well as brands that are to be established, with a goal of giving the reader a deeper understanding of how and what is required and suggested to consider in branding and social media marketing, when operating with fewer resources.

Theory part of the thesis will dive into the effects of branding and social media marketing, and handling the common important procedures required to fulfil both effectively, while giving examples of how the different aspects may impact products and sales, through acknowledging what is missing from unbranded operations or within traditional marketing styles. This thesis aspires to introduce the matters that should be taken into consideration, when beginning to create a brand, and market a brand in social media, to ultimately be able to form a strong brand with tools that raise the longevity of the operations.

Benchmarking will be done to identify and understand the current operations of well-established sports apparel brands, to seek which matters and contributions have been crucial for the brands effective branding and social media marketing. After the theory and benchmarking, author is compiling own opinions and suggestions for further development in the given subject, based on the findings of the benchmarking, and theory.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Objectives

The objective of the thesis is to further analyse how existing small and medium sized enterprises, and start-up sports apparel brands can utilize effective branding and social media marketing to target the sports apparel industry with fewer resources digitally, and how brands are effectively using branding and social media marketing, to be able to build a strong environment to operate in. Briefly, the important aspects to this thesis are how strong brands are effectively created and marketed within social media, and how brands create value for their customers and how they ultimately approach the target market/audience.

The purpose of the thesis is to analyse and identify the most effective practices of building a brand, marketing it through social media and ensuring stable growth through proper utilization of the tools that are used to create strong brands. Focus will be in building a strong brand image, strong customer relationships, as well as providing value to the customers through effective branding and by utilizing effective social media marketing to spread and grow the brand. Understanding branding and effective social media marketing enables businesses to grow organically with fewer resources, and this thesis will focus on providing the steps and requirements to successfully brand and market a business.

The thesis will have a focus on building the brand digitally, and of course, social media marketing will fully be within the internet. The findings of the thesis can be utilized by businesses of all sorts and sizes, thus small or medium sized companies are kept strongly in mind during the proceeding of the thesis, to achieve a comprehensive structure and understanding of the most important steps regarding branding and social media marketing, that can be utilized without big budgets and ultimately, by anyone wanting to personalize and grow a brand.

The collected data during the research, will be accompanied by authors own views and suggestions on effective branding and the use of social media marketing based on theoretical data and current trends, thus identifying the important aspects in building a strong brand throughout. The results and suggestions after the research part, will compile and answer the research questions on the most important points of effective marketing, for companies starting to grow their operations digitally with smaller resources, through the theoretical data, and by identifying current trends and modes of operating from the benchmarking comparison.

Objectives include answering to the following research questions through research and analysis of businesses operating in the industry:

- How to effectively create a brand in the digital environment?
 - What are the key strategies of building strong brand image and equity?
- How can social media marketing be utilized in sports apparel brand?
 - What is the impact of SMM vs traditional marketing in branding?
 - How is influencer marketing affecting brands?
 - What are the best approaches to SMM?
- How can sports brands grow with fewer resources through branding and SMM?

2.2 Boundaries

This thesis will focus on businesses looking to grow within the digital environment through successful branding and social media marketing strategies. Although the businesses may possibly have stores existing, the findings and solutions will be towards building strong brand recognition virtually, thus businesses to be established and already existing brands can benefit from the study, if the goal is to make online branding and marketing more effective.

The thesis will have parts that refer to customer relationship management, thus not going deep into that, but rather referencing how CRM can be utilized through online marketing and branding, and what are the aspects in brand equity and image building that work as our base for customer relationship management. The research will not focus on analysing CRM throughout, as it would make the topic too wide. Unless traditional marketing and online operations are compared, the thesis will not go into further details of traditional brand marketing/brand image building.

Financial statistics of companies working in this segment, are not going to be part of this thesis, as the research is not going too deep into internal aspects of companies.

A questionnaire will not be concluded to understand the topics better, as the data would possibly be hard to interpret and acquire. In terms of understanding best branding and marketing practices from a consumer's point of view, the results of a questionnaire are hard to put in practice and define as successful branding/social media marketing. The questionnaire will be replaced with a benchmarking identifying the most used and effective practices by companies within the sport apparel industry currently, to illustrate the trends for growth.

The following research and the empirical study will focus on brands operating in the story or community-oriented approach to branding and marketing, to understand its effect on brand image and equity, forming of deeper relationships with customers, and thus into a brands value proposition. Service or product-oriented approach to branding and social media marketing will not be covered, thus the social media marketing aspects introduced in this thesis, give useful points for both approaches.

Boundaries are set so that we can deeply analyse the current environment of building a brand and marketing it digitally, so some important previously mentioned subjects are excluded to be able to just focus on the most important matters of the thesis – branding and social media marketing.

2.3 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is a graphic illustration to the key concepts of the paper and their relationships between each of the handled subjects. This thesis handles branding and social media marketing of sports apparel brands, with the goal of a deeper understanding of the subjects.

The branding perspective will focus on understanding the cornerstones of what is required for the establishment of a strong brand, through researching brand image and equity building, differentiation, and exclusivity, and looking on the different styles of branding.

Social media marketing part of the thesis focuses on the current aspects used in apparel marketing digitally, which is why this paper discusses the effects of content marketing within social media, and its relations to brand image and equity, the utilization of influencer marketing, and through analysing current effective approaches and different marketing channels, the author aims to identify current trends.

A benchmarking is done in the empirical part of the thesis, to further develop an understanding of the current environment of branding and social media marketing in the sports apparel industry.

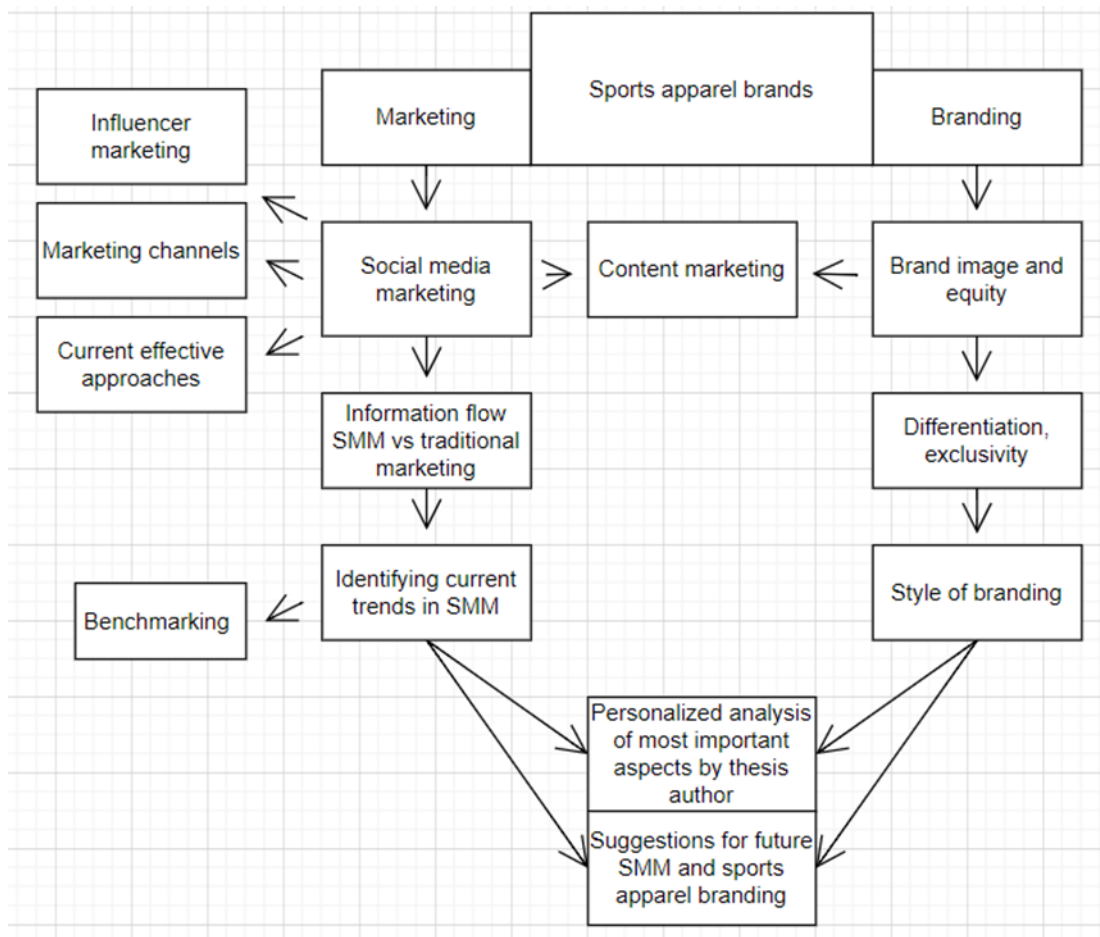


Figure 1. Conceptual framework (Harju, 2023)

2.4 Methods

The research for this thesis is completed with an abductive approach, meaning the theory is gathered around factual data, thus the author also gives own explanations and predictions surrounding the theory in the empirical chapter, so during the whole paper both deduction and induction will be used when handling or producing data (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 180).

The research methods for this thesis mainly consist of qualitative research, meaning holistic information is gathered from real/natural situations and databases that are structured based on the mentioned situations, thus the main databases used are books, documents, observations, case studies made by experts in the specific field. The goal of the qualitative research is to not list nor generalize the data, but rather understand the data deeply, and allow

interpreting the results in the empirical part. Literature materials are analysed to understand how brands are concluding operations on branding and social media marketing, thus requiring analysis of the effectiveness through examples of successfully concluded operations, which will be handled in the benchmarking part of the thesis. Interpreting the existing data in the qualitative research is done to provide text, based on published literature of the topics, to give an in depth understanding of existing procedures and tools have been used and are currently used to reach effective branding and social media marketing. Main information to be gathered will be primary data from books that focus on observations and studies on the topics, study journals, websites based on studying the given topics or so-called expert publications, newspapers, as well as some data will be gathered from concluded surveys and questionnaires. Primary data is data that is collected specifically for a given specific study, whereas secondary data is collected for a different purpose than for the given main study, thus both data are used in the paper, if necessary, to provide sufficient data about the subjects of this thesis. (Tekajarin, 2022.)

Benchmarking of brands in the end of the thesis, is handled as qualitative research also, where theoretical data of the brands is analysed and interpreted to understand and provide evidence of what are the success factors of a given brands branding and social media marketing efforts, to understand what practices are currently utilized.

3 BRANDING

3.1 What is branding?

Branding is defined as the process for businesses to create a specific identity of the business in the minds of its customers and the target audience. The surface of branding is having visual designs, logos, and the specific brand mission, which is often included with a distinct brand voice, thus the overall brand

must be well established with its operations in product quality, pricing, and customer service, to provide a full experience, that interests and encourages the customer to ultimately repurchase. Through a brand, customers can understand the businesses mission and what it is trying to provide for its audience, more clearly, as well as allowing to truly express what the business stands for with its values and aspirations, making it easier for customers to resonate with the brand on a deeper level. Branding can be seen as creating a persona around a business, thus making it more easily approachable and inviting, especially if the offering of the brand is distinct and provides value, which overall helps businesses to position in saturated markets. (Shopify, 2022.)

The benefits of successful branding include the following aspects, which are crucial for the longevity of a business:

- Increased possibilities to make more sales.
- More developed customer loyalty and recognition.
- Easier to accumulate a clear and inspiring mission throughout the business, thus affecting company culture positively (raised employee satisfaction).
- Strong branding attracts other talented individuals or businesses, resulting in raised opportunities for growth.
- Strong brand equity is developed through branding = Bigger chances of standing out from the competitors, resulting in stronger positioning.

Identifying the approach to branding, whether a brand is solely focused on an innovative product, or to a range of products represented by the brand, is important, as the customer acquisition is dependent on the value provided by the brand, thus affecting how to effectively approach the target audience. There are two common approaches:

- Service or product-oriented focus

Where the emphasis of communications is in showcasing the products or the service, and often in cases of this approach, the provided things include

innovation, price, usefulness, availability, and other factors that add value to the product/service, thus leaving the purchase decision, and forming of the connection to the brand for the customer, purely based on the product and the value adding features represented. This approach may bring challenges in results, if operating in a crowded market, with varying similar offerings, where successful branding might bring in more loyal customers.

- Story or community-oriented focus

Approach is changed to purely serving the target customer and forming of a deeper relationship between the brand and the customer, through the brands story/values, or from the formation of a brand community that reflects the brand in a way the customers want to refer/join to. The target market is often well analysed based on their needs and concerns, which then helps brands connect a comprehensive value proposition, to the desires of the target audience. The brand is focused on forming an experience around the encounter between the brand and its customers, thus allowing for a deeper connection and more loyal customers. If the approach is successfully designed and found effective, the purchase of the service/product is less steered by the price factor. (Berkbuegler, 2022.)

Building a strong brand is both an art and a science. It requires careful planning, a deep long-term commitment, and creatively designed and executed marketing. A strong brand commands intense consumer loyalty – at its heart is a great product or service. (Kotler et al., 2018, p. 275.)

Thinking of branding, the first thought may be logo's that circulate in different medias, creating visual representations of companies and most often about the things they offer and/or value. Brands include specifically designed images, videos, websites, and other visually attracting portraits of their brand, to reach and attract larger customer bases. Logos and websites are part of branding, but the true reality is that these are the smaller details, that have an impact

on the brand perception. Taking branding into a wider perspective, the true importance within successful brands, is not just about the visual presentation of it, but rather creating a brand persona, and creating differences through the brand to stand out from competitors (Rowles, 2022, p. 7).

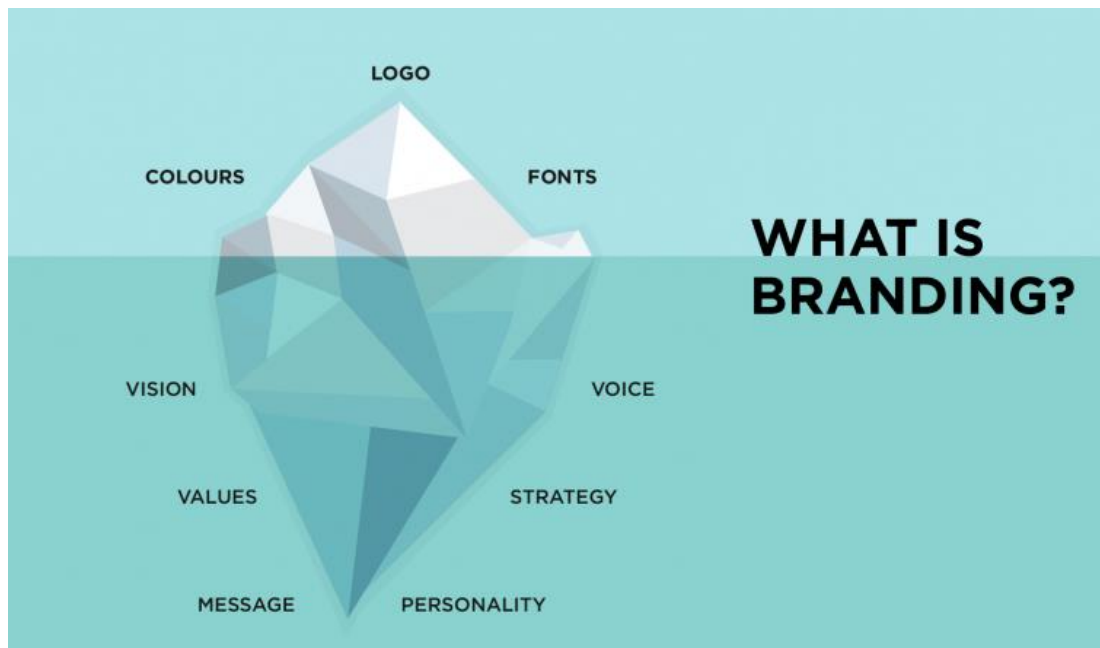


Figure 2. What is Branding? Why Is It Important to Your Business? (Designers, 2019)

The personality of a brand is specifically important to consider, as in the modern world, commodity markets include thousands of different brands, but how are some attracting more customers than others? Today, Customers value experiences, feelings, and thoughts over mindlessly scrolling through different brands and their offerings, which indicates how buying behaviour is moving towards being more and more value driven. People are keen on getting the most out of their purchases, and successful branding is the key towards providing value not only through the product they purchase, but rather getting the product, and being proud of what the specific brand represents – What are the values, beliefs, and goals of the brand. Customers are truly connecting with brands in today's digital world, which is why it is extremely important to be transparent and express the passion, feelings, and values behind the brand, to truly give the customers an experience through the brand, that the customer wants to refer to. (Rowles, 2022, pp. 7-9.)

The internet has brought many large opportunities for brands of all kinds, whether a brand is just starting, or already established, allowing brands to grow substantially faster than ever before. Reaching target audiences through various channels within the internet, has made branding and overall marketing more straight forward, as brands are able to consistently communicate the brand story, mission, and values to create traffic and drive sales, while constantly growing brand awareness within its target audience. Consistent growth requires consistent communication, which is where many small and medium sized brands might struggle, as creating quality content for a brand is a large task, that in most cases requires an individual team. (Mahr, 2022.)

Online branding allows the creation of many routes to success, as brands can create stronger relationships with their customers, by providing valuable aspects to support sales, such as providing information through their content and empowering the customers not just through the products, but the brand itself. When customers feel empowered of the brand, the value of the brand is created beyond the product, which is the route towards thriving and attracting customers towards the future. Longevity and consistent growth always require authenticity and value-driven branding throughout the operations if the goal is to build strong and long-lasting relationships with the customers. (Guzmán, 2020.)

Communication within the digital environment allows brands to consistently reach their target audiences through many different channels, which requires brands to put out content on all these channels, in order to reach as much people as possible. This is why when building brand awareness, the brand persona and the quality needs to be consistent within all platforms, as on the other hand, the course of branding may vastly change towards the worse, if not properly planned and executed, due to the reach of information. Word of mouth is exceptionally important in marketing, and when operating and communicating digitally, poorly executed branding pushes the target audience further away from the brand, and when some aspects are controversial or poorly executed, the word of it moves faster than expected. Branding communication

has also changed towards two-way communication, as also the consumers are now able to communicate directly with the brand, and this may be a cornerstone of successful transparent brand communication, that allows the creation of deeper relationships with consumers. (Guzmán, 2020.)

Marketing has been brought to a point by the digitalization where analysing brand and marketing communications has become more easily understandable, and trackable. This means brands can understand better, how different ways of communications work, when communicating digitally, allowing the creation of more personalized interactions towards consumers, while constantly being able to improve communication practices by analysing the reach and outcome of certain brand communication phases. The impact of successful personalized interaction can be directly seen in return on investment, when the brand persona and value of the offering is executed well and on a high level, thus making it even more important to clearly communicate and bring value to consumers in harmony. If the value of an offering is not there, then excellent brand communication might generate some positive reactions, but as consumers are connecting with the brand on a deeper level, and the brand is communicated successfully, the outcome is substantially greater. (Rosen et al., 2017, pp. 1-2.)

Successful digital branding is the total of value provided, quality of communication, transparency of the brands mission and values, and as quoted in the book *The Activation Imperative*:

Marketers need to shift from merely building brands to fully activating them – from simply projecting what a brand *is* to optimizing what a brand *does* in order to reach the right people in the right way to change their behaviour and move them closer to a transaction. (Rosen et al., 2017, p. 1.)

This is a perfect example of understanding what is important in digital branding, as no longer is the traditional way of brands competing by the positioning in the market, but rather competing by creating value, to accumulate strong

relationships with the consumers, through communicating what the brand truly is and what it stands for.

3.2 Brand image and equity

The overall perception of a brand has many crucial components, which usually starts with the brand identity, that includes visual elements, such as logos, colours, as well as even a tone of voice, if one specific is used for a brand. Brand identity is often the first part of building brand image, as consumers first acknowledge and see the visual representations of a brand through commercials or other marketing communications.

Brand elements that mould both brand image and equity, are the identifiable factors for consumers, that are meant to leave a positive mark of the brand, within the minds of consumers. For example, Nike has the swoosh logo that is known worldwide, in addition to the phrase “Just Do It”, which is seen as an empowering and motivating phrase for consumers. This kind of branding is both informative about the values and mission of the brand, and simultaneously it is short and easily identifiable, making it easier to get into the minds of consumers. Nike’s phrase can also be seen as a call to positive action, in form of exercising, which is also an important factor in deepening the relationship between the brand and the consumer. The name “Nike” also refers to the fighting spirit within sports. (Kotler et al., 2018, p. 285.)

Brand image and equity are essential parts towards creating brand awareness, customer loyalty and overall brand success. Brand image is the consumers perception of the brand and what the brand stands for, whether it’s built through a brands values, packaging, design, or marketing messages. Consumers perception of the brand is highly associated with brands differentiation in a saturated market. The positive perception for consumers can be built through attributes of a brand, if they are differing from the markets with quality, or benefits, and in the digital environment brands are able to express these aspects more profoundly. (Ramya, 2017, p. 2.)

Brand image can be successfully spread through different marketing methods. Fitness brands may link their brand image towards a strong and healthy lifestyle, which may be linked to greatness and attitude or a mind of a champion, which would be great towards gathering people that are keen on succeeding in life and wanting to be in good shape, whereas industries like tech, may have brands that create their brand image on being an innovator of the future, creating new technologies to solve different problems within its space. (Master-Class, 2022.)

The main point is to understand your target audience, while identifying their needs, and creating a strong value proposition to solve the need, which will require market research, so that the brand is able to stand out from current competitors and be unique. The value proposition should be in harmony with the brands values and features, as when spreading and communicating the brand, it is crucial to communicate the brand's values as well as the value proposition that the brand wants to offer for its customers. (Aaker, 2022.)

Successfully presented brand image should convince the consumers to be confident of the reliability of the company, driving sales and generating traffic towards brands offerings. Understanding how consumers perceive the brand image helps brands to elevate their communication of the brand, through identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their outbound brand communication. A well-established brand image is one of the strongest components to differentiate and compete with other brands, as having a strong brand image indicates that consumers have positive attitudes towards the brand, but a strong brand image is not formed without having a strong offering for the consumers, that provides the most value. (Ramya, 2017, pp. 2-4.)

Brand equity on the other hand, is the organizations point of view of value provided by the brand, often identified as the assets and liabilities that are linked directly to the brand. Brand products can be seen as the "premium", if they have good brand equity, which is why these kinds of products are often better known, than the generic and non-branded similar products. Equity can

be linked within consumers' minds to how reliable and stable the brand is. If a brand is well known and easily recognizable, most often it is already value added to the product that they offer. In conclusion, well established brand equity is the key to increasing brand awareness, and as an outcome of successfully doing so, brands are associated with positive and possibly defining attributes, such as luxurious, high quality, or premium, which leads to the perceived value of the brand growing. (YEC, 2022.)

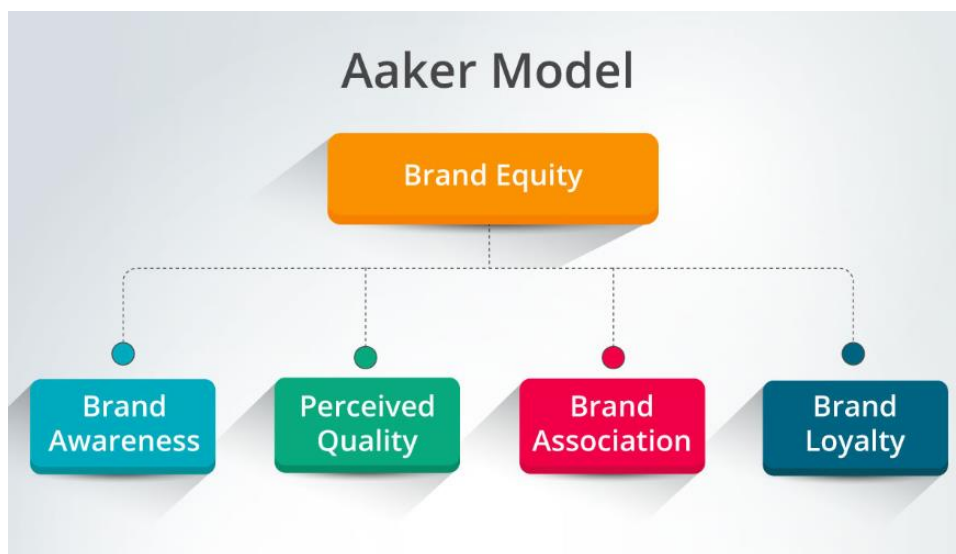


Figure 2. Aaker Model: A simple way to build brand identity (Schmidt, 2020)

The Aaker model of managing brand equity, is a well-rounded way to analyse and further develop strong brand equity, and it consists of the 4 main points:

Brand Loyalty – Providing value for customers, ultimately creates loyal customers, if they are pleased of the brands value proposition, thus leading positive attitudes towards the brand. This puts brands into position of being able to attract new customers through awareness and reassurance of the trustworthiness of the brand, which is key in growing positive brand equity and lowering marketing costs while impacting trade leverage. (Aaker, 2022.)

Brand Awareness – Positive awareness leads to higher possibility of consumers being familiar with the brand, that more effortlessly leads to ultimately liking the brand. This phenomenon, creates visibility that being positively in the minds of consumers, helps gain consideration and drive traffic towards sales.

Consumers view of positive brand awareness, works as a sign of commitment on behalf of the brand, which can be interpreted as higher trust towards the brand. (Aaker, 2022.)

Brand Associations – Powerful tool of positioning within saturated markets, as well as differentiating. Perceived quality is identified as a brand association, and it is a perfect example of positioning within a market, that is highly used. Associating a brand with positive features is the driver of giving consumers a reason to buy – High quality products can be marketed for their long usage time, or high-quality manufacturing processes, that give sense of commitment to providing more value for the purchase, which is why attributes are so important within brand equity. Brands may associate their value propositions/brand with creative ways, depending on the target industry, and associates should always be used, in order to create a bigger personality to the brand/product, and to show whom are part of fulfilling the brands mission. (Aaker, 2022.)

3.3 Branded vs commodity markets

Price, quality, and variety are the drivers of purchasing decision in many industries, as well as within the sports apparel industry. Consumers are circulating between these factors when trying to find the best solutions for their need, which leads to researching both unbranded, and branded commodities based on searches within search engines. Well executed Search Engine Optimization is key to differentiation and distinctiveness within search engines that include both unbranded and branded commodities.

Unbranded products are most often not specified by a name nor a company, which means that these products most likely don't include any additional information, apart from using instructions, and also brand equity is non-existing. Branded commodities on the other hand, distinguish a brand that includes a name, logo, or other trademarks, that make the product more easily identifiable (Marion, 2022). This creates a base for consumers to connect with the brand

more easily, thus creating a customer relationship, if the values or quality of the brand is in harmony with the customers' needs and values. Brands can connect to consumers in a way that provides a feeling of belonging as well as satisfaction through the purchase when the branding has been successfully executed. Profoundly provided value through a purchase from a brand, raises the brand perception in the mind of the consumer, which affects the respect and evaluation of the brand, that subsequently is linked to the possible repurchasing from the same brand. (Agarwal & Mehrotra, 2009, pp. 3-5.)

Markets are saturated with different apparel, both unbranded and branded, which makes differentiation and finding of value driven brands difficult. Based on a study of branded and unbranded search (Sterling, 2020), the number of branded searches is vastly increasing, at a higher pace than the searches done as an unbranded search. Perceived quality is the current driver of purchase decisions, as shown by a study on name brand vs. generic brand preferences (DISQO, 2019), that was concluded through a survey on 19 000 people, which also shows the impact of brand trust, reputation, and recognition. These matters are crucial in terms of branding communication, as well as due to positive Word-of-mouth from the consumers.

The branded sports apparel industry particularly, is growing as consumers are becoming more aware of apparel brands through various channels, with the main attractors for consumers being the durability, quality, diversity, and the status symbol of wearing branded apparel (Nalini, 2020, 8781-8783).

3.4 Branding strategy

Digital platforms have enabled rapid growth for new and existing brands due to the raised possibility of niche and other market entrances. Digitally brands are able to connect with consumers within almost all parts of the world, which in the history was not possible with physical stores. The reach and the fact that anyone is possible of doing it now, puts large global brands at a position, where their channel advantages are reduced, due to new upcoming brands

communicating to the same audience effectively, thus creating more competition and variety for consumers. (Steenkamp, 2020, p. 14.)

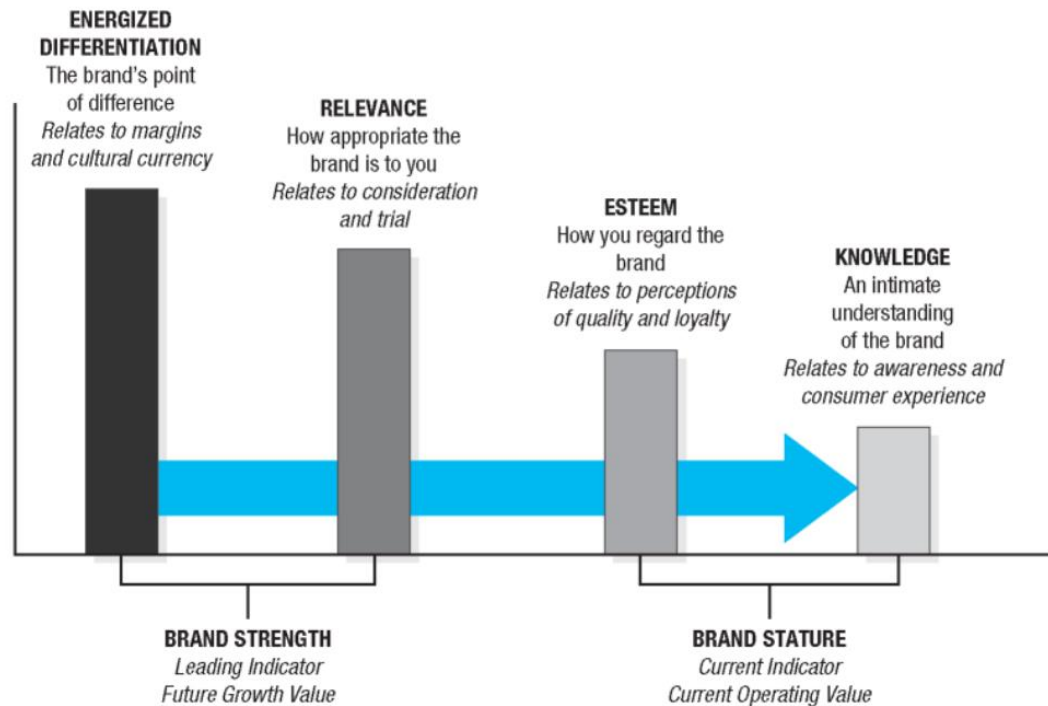
This phenomenon creates an environment where value driven branding strategies and operations are more effective, while making the brands more connected with the consumers. Transparency and authenticity are now bigger than ever within not only sports apparel brands, but all different brands, as trust, value, and loyalty go together when reaching for brand-consumer relationships, that are long-term. As markets are curving from consumers using global brands to a number of smaller niche brands that may be more expensive due to exclusivity or due to the fact that the business models in a SME are not able to compete with the lower pricing of large global brands, consumers are digitally reached much more effectively through niche channels, creating room for smaller brands to compete, while making the higher pricing more attractive through unique value propositions. (Steenkamp, 2020, p. 16.)

Brand strategy includes all matters handled to this point, thus in conclusion it is important to understand the wider perspective. Brand equity and image are part of the strategy as drivers of brand purpose, vision, and values, which are extremely important when it comes to communicating a brand in hopes of generating traction from consumers. Part of a successful brand strategy is the brand personality that is moulded to connect with people more profoundly and in a humanized fashion, to be able to attract like-minded people to support the brand and its values. Personality includes the brand voice, if communication is executed in speech form, rather than pictures, videos, or posts in text form. The personality is concluded with a brand tagline, that is informative and memorable for consumers, reflecting the mission of the brand. (Dvornechuck, 2022.)

Another important step if looking to penetrate a market in hopes of staying there, is the market analysis. Understanding the operations of competitors and knowing the target audience well is key to thriving in the markets and resonating with the target audience. Identifying the aspirations and goals of consumers in the niche such as the sports apparel industry, helps a brand to position

and create a sufficient value proposition in the saturated market. (Dvornechuck, 2022.)

3.4.1 Understanding your brand and the target market



Source: Courtesy of BrandAsset® Consulting, a division of Young & Rubicam.

Figure 3. Valuator Model (BrandAsset®, n.d.)

The figure above illustrates the most important points of thought, analysing the brand and its target market, as first it is important to understand the brands own key elements, that are able to uplift the brand by its values and strong points. When brands are entering markets, having knowledge of the competitors, and reflecting that information on brands own operations allows strong positioning. Creative differentiating from the competitors and identifying the relevance of the offering leads to brand strength, as knowing your target audience, and providing them a relevant and exciting solution/offering drives growth. (Kotler et al., 2018, 281-282.)

Although knowing your competitors is crucial, but keeping in mind that the main focus should still be on the audience that the brand is trying to reach and offer

solutions to, rather than focusing on the competitors that the brand is trying to beat, as the sole purpose (Malinic, 2019, p. 46).

Brand stature combined with the strengths of a brands offering completes this crucial circle. If a brands values include sustainable production and high quality, esteem is fulfilled by providing a product with these attributes, in exchange for brand loyalty, raised awareness, and raised amount of positive customer experiences (Kotler et al., 2018, 281-282).

3.4.2 Market segmentation and style of branding

In order to differentiate and succeed in a saturated market, having the customer value-driven approach and strategy is a top priority, but what fulfils this strategy, is segmentation and targeting combined with differentiation and positioning. Segmentation is dividing the target market into smaller niches or segments, based on attributes and features that the segment presents. After successful segmentation, a brand can target the desired audiences more effectively with an offer matching the specific audience's needs. (Armstrong et al., 2017, p. 198.)

Market segmentation strategies require identifying the segmentation variables, that reflect to the target audience, and such variables most commonly include either geographic, demographic, psychographic, and behavioural variable. Understanding which variables demonstrate the brands target audience, eases market segmentation, while making it more accurate, and making other parts of the branding strategy much more effective.

Geographical segmentation divides the target audience based on physical location, thus allowing insights on buying preferences in a specific area, making it easier for a brand to offer the right products/services to the right people, which may lead to more cost-effective marketing, and a higher rate of success. It is important to note, that this approach may be challenging if a brand is operating globally. (Doan, 2023.)

Demographic segmentation distinguishes the target audience based on personalized aspects such as age, gender, income, education, race, or

nationality, allowing more of a specific identification of a target audience, thus enhancing the ability to use resources more effectively towards the target audience. Effective, if the target audience is in a specified category demographically, thus can also be an important part combined with another segmentation approach. (Mialki, n.d.)

In the sports apparel industry, it is popular that brands are segmenting based on psychographic and behavioural variables, as the segments are also divided to team sports, bodybuilding, CrossFit, and other microsegments, creating specifically drawn categories, where different attributes related to the specific sport are used to gain traction towards brands from the chosen segment, while making it easier for the consumer to relate and like the brand due to brands tapping into the personal aspirations of the target markets consumers. Psychographic segmentation divides the consumers based on their social class, lifestyle, and personality characters, which as mentioned, relates to branding based on attributes and aspirations of the target audience, making it an effective approach, if the value proposition suits the consumers. (Armstrong et al., 2017, 200-201.)

Behavioural segmentation divides consumers “based on consumer knowledge, attitudes, uses of a product, or responses to a product” (Armstrong et al., 2017, p. 202), and this segmentation may include identifying an audience that buys products based on either occasions that leads to purchase decisions, buying based on benefits found in a product, and also based on user status or usage rate of a product, or purely due to loyalty status if a consumer has found a brand that it highly resonates with, thus wanting to be a loyal consumer of the specific brand. This approach has been identified as one of the best starting points of identifying market segments. (Armstrong et al., 2017, 202-204.)

Concluding market segmentation with the main elements to identify in order to attain effective segmentation. (Armstrong et al., 2017, p. 206.):

- Measurable market

The target market is sufficiently sized and has purchasing power, while being measurable on these profiles.

- Accessible

Target market is reachable and possible to serve effectively.

- Substantial

Target market at a size that has enough potential in terms of profitability to serve, with a specific marketing strategy.

- Differentiable

Possibility of differentiating segments and using different marketing elements with identifiable varying outcomes.

- Actionable

Possibility of designing multiple approaches to attract and serve target market/segment.

3.4.3 Differentiation & exclusivity/Positioning

Positioning requires carefully planned and executed steps as it is the brands strategy of creating an image of the offering for the target audience, with the goal of attracting the minds of consumers amongst the variety of choices within the same target market, which is why the brands mission and future goals is important to communicate, to establish strong positioning. (Kotler et al., 2018, p. 318.)

Viewing the brand positioning from a startup or either a small business perspective, to understand the most important aspects of positioning in tough markets, and how to position with fewer resources. Positioning for any brand starts by conducting the market research, and smaller brands may find cost-effective creative ways of concluding it, with the goal of understanding the strong points of competitors, that attract its customers to buy their products. After identifying the elements attracting consumers, it is crucial to reflect to brands own aspirations and product elements, by asking how to provide additional value and market the new idea effectively. This leads to identifying the brands elements

of differentiation – What is this specific brand's set of defining elements? Brands may innovatively package their products, use brand narratives and storytelling, form creative ads and marketing, create characterized and personal names for products or for the whole brand, or distinctively market the products based on strong attributes such as promised quality, or humane manufacturing conditions. Creating a loyal brand community through kept brand promises and effective consumer communication is another key point of positioning a small brand to the minds of consumers, which when positively conducted and left to the minds of consumers, will spread through word-of-mouth from one customer to another. This also creates buzz for the brand, that is crucial when working digitally and with fewer resources, and accompanying the brand community with social media marketing has shown to be very effective in today's digital world. Lastly, small brands require secondary associations to fulfil their operations, which is another key point to communicate, as positive associations such as manufacturers, sponsors, or persons associated with the brand, is another way of signalling credibility, quality, and positive bonds of the brand towards consumers, which is why forming as many positive associations is highly beneficial in terms of positioning. (Kotler et al., 2018, 332-336.)

Differentiating from the competitors is a form of communicating both points of parity (POP), which refer to the similar attributes within competitors in the same industry, such as responsibility or common benefits. Points of difference (POD), on the other hand are the points that distinguish a brand's product from other competitors, which may include faster delivery, a promise of quality, or high quality-low price promise. The last example high quality-low price is hard to distinct, as consumer might not correlate of the perceived quality, although the price is low, making the point controversial on an individual level. (Kotler et al., 2018, 328-331.)

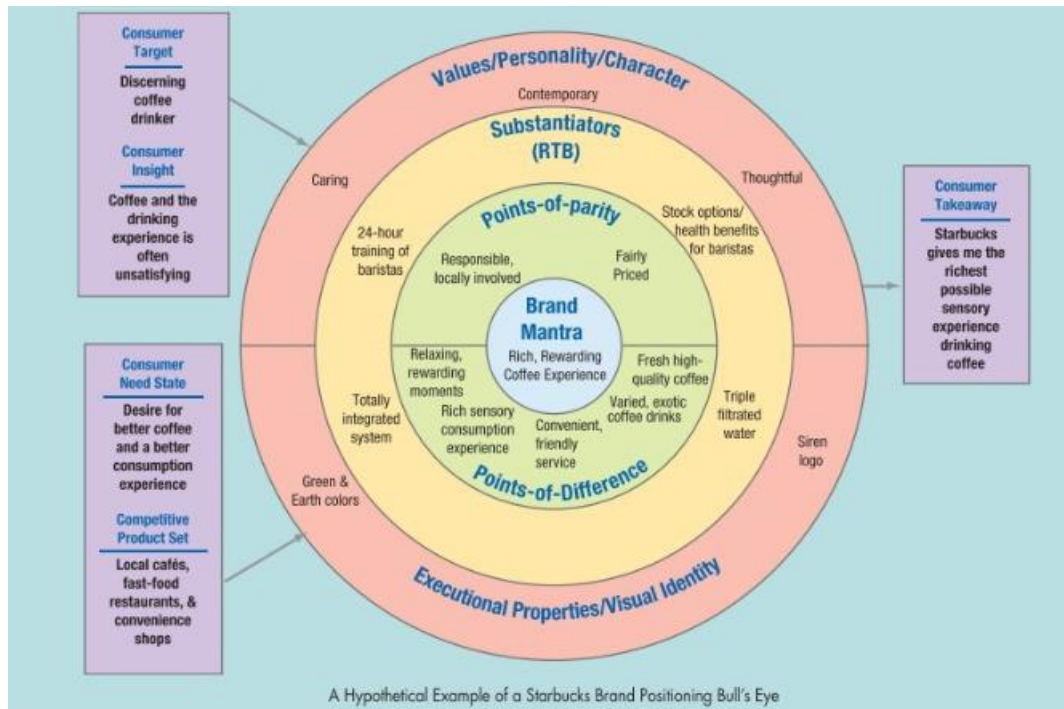


Figure 4. A Hypothetical Example of a Starbucks Brands Positioning Bull's Eye (Kotler, 2018)

Kotler's example of the brand positioning bull's eye is a great example to further develop and understand a successfully planned positioning strategy, that can be used for brands of any industry, as a starting point. The outer circle demonstrates the brand itself through values and the personality of the brand, whereas the second circle (substantiators) form the reason to believe the brand – meaning the different attributes or additional value the brand provides, which accompany the POP and POD. Lastly, the brand mantra, which is the core communication of the brands mission and image. The consumer takeaway describes the outcome of a successful brand positioning, that resonates with the consumers. (Kotler et al., 2018, p. 329.)

4 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

4.1 Information flow: Traditional vs social media marketing

Marketing has evolved tremendously since the beginning of the digital era, which has led to much greater opportunities for both existing companies and small businesses that are beginning to start operating. Traditional marketing has been challenging especially for smaller businesses due to greater costs of utilizing traditional marketing like the broadcast media, outdoor advertising or printed marketing flyers or newspapers, with the hopes of reaching target audiences, attracting customers towards the businesses offering, and trying to positively raise brand awareness. Although audiences of the traditional marketing are very broad, they often are limited to certain areas and lack targeting, making converging customers through marketing harder. Brands and companies have competed to attract customers, but social media has enabled the possibility of reaching global audiences and niches with far less effort. (Kovalenko, 2021.)

Marketing communication traditionally has only been one way, and engagement with the consumers has been minimal, whereas social media marketing allows the customers to communicate towards the business through comment sections, liking, sharing, and direct messaging, creating a great environment for customer engagement and formation of deeper customer relationships. Communication digitally has led to consumers knowing brands and businesses more throughout, as authenticity, transparency, and honesty are in the heart of successful marketing communication, which is also a key towards longevity, deeper relationships with the consumers, and overall raised brand awareness. With traditional marketing, businesses have not been able to truly target specific niches, but social media has now revolutionized targeting different niches and segments, with lower expenses and a greater reach. (O'Connell, 2022.)

Measuring the effectiveness of marketing communication has also been a point of difficulty in the traditional marketing, whereas social media marketing

allows precise measuring and analysis of different marketing campaigns digitally, due to more detailed analytics and tools to track reach, engagement, and conversions, helping businesses understand which strategies are the most effective in the field of their operations. The ease in analysing one's marketing efforts results in brands being able to constantly develop branding and marketing strategies, creating more room for error in the marketing communication, and additionally, traditional marketing does not have the possibility of changing the chosen advertisement after its set to be spread for a chosen duration of time. Social media marketing in the other hand is much more flexible when it comes to modifying the message and changing elements within ads or marketing communication. (Lawler, 2021.)

Both traditional and social media marketing evolve around providing value to consumers and when successfully communicated and approved by the consumer whether in the form of a product or service that has value adding features, the marketing continues in the form of word-of-mouth (WOM). The cycle of WOM has evolved tremendously since the beginning of digital era. Traditional marketing communication before social media, has been one way and consumers have either grasped on to the marketing message or not, resulting in a scarcer availability of information regarding the product or the brand. Now with social media, marketers are required to plant seeds in the minds of customers and create direct influence towards individuals through proper information and engagement, as when the customer is engaged with the brand and left with a positive experience, they tend to be the carriers of the marketing message, and with social media, the message is possibly spread far greater to individuals that are not affected by the marketers executed marketing. Information today is also so available, which enhances the consumers ability to connect with the brand and its offerings, as marketing is more informative within social media, and existing customers are aware of attributes of a brands products and its benefits, creating a more specific understanding of the brand and the product. (Dolbec, 2021, Chapter 1.)

Positive experiences leave positive thoughts and people are keen on spreading things that are found positively affecting life or overall state of mind, which

again, leads to the point of providing value to the customer. Examples of successful ways to promote WOM for brands include sharing customer reviews, encouraging consumers towards creating user-generated content, asking for feedback and ratings for products, or utilizing influencers. (Sukhraj, 2022.)

4.2 Consumer-oriented communication in social media

Building strong relationships with consumers requires specific strategies from brands and it is crucial to understand the pillars for engaging with the right consumers that could be potential buyers. The needs of consumers differ, making consumer-oriented communication crucial to be executed towards the right audiences, to excel with marketing campaigns, and push content towards people that have existing interests or aspirations, within the field of the brands operations. Understanding the persona traits of the target audience is needed in order to successfully deliver value to the right people. (Park, 2022.)

Social media has brought many opportunities to understand markets better and the reasons consumers are buying certain products, making it important to research different platforms, as well as competitors to find ways consumers are engaged with brands. Identifying which platform to communicate in and where the brands target audience is at its most engaged and active level, to reach the target audience effectively is another step to truly market more cost-effectively, thus requiring development of resonating messages to the audience based on the brands own value adding attributes and key benefits of the products, to raise awareness, loyalty and truly connect with the target audience. As already mentioned on this paper, authenticity of a brand is highly important in brand communication, and this reflects to the benefit of answering to feedback in an appropriate and timely manner, to generate a much more personalized level of consumer-oriented communication. Communicating with the target audience helps strengthen the relationship between the brand and the consumer, which is a sign of transparency and authenticity, resulting in a more trustworthy overall brand persona, where consumers can connect with the brand on a deeper level. (Zote, 2023.)

In the heart of consumer-oriented communications is to engage consumers and social media has enabled this in the form of content sharing, and brands now are using creative ways to form brand and product content. Creating engagement in marketing is in the form of providing information depending on the brand's mission, thus informative content based on what the brand is reaching for, is crucial to attract likeminded people. Informative content could be teaching of environmental factors that the brand is trying to affect, or if the brand's goal is to raise knowledge of more sustainable manufacturing, which would be more of an emotional standpoint of spreading information, or any other attribute that resonates with the brand's values and goals. Social media has its benefits, as brands communicate their own engaging content, in order to attract people to engage, which creates discussions around the brand, as well as attracts user-generated content, in form of reviewing products and expressing thoughts and opinions from the consumer's point of view, directly affecting other consumers' thoughts. (Pride & Ferrell, 2019, pp. 277-280.) Chapter 4.4 will handle user-generated content in a more precise manner.

Apparel brand Uniqlo has its own example of consumer-oriented communication, as before the brand was seen as low-quality fast fashion, but in 2004 the brand launched a pledge in Global Quality Declaration, to stop the manufacturing of low-quality, low-price garments, which helped switch the consumer perception of the brand. Now the brand's communication focuses on delivering transparent information of product quality: High quality, performance enhancing, fit-to-all clothing, as well as communicating the efficient supply chain of the company, which enables providing high quality apparel at a very competitive price. The brand has been always dedicated to innovation within their products and services, as well as innovatively developing customer experience, and expressing them in-store, as well as digitally. Uniqlo has also used collaborating with different designers to raise brand awareness through associations, resulting in high amounts of consumer generated content. (Martin Roll, 2021.)

4.3 Content marketing

“Content marketing is defined as a marketing approach that pertains to the creation and distribution of valuable and relevant content with an intention to entertain, educate, inform, or inspire the target audience to guide them through the buyer’s journey.” (Deshpande, 2020.)

Attracting consumers towards brands and products, through exciting and engaging content is now one of the most effective marketing strategies within social media in terms of customer acquisition (Dolbec, 2021, Act: Creating Content). Providing consumers with relevant educating, informative and engaging content of the brand or its products is a way to educate and attract consumers towards the brand, and through these procedures’ brands aim to promote brand awareness, showcase brands expertise, and make sure the brand is positively in the minds of consumers, as well as creating discussion of the brand within social media. Based on a survey of video marketing completed with 528 participants, in 2023 89% of the respondents in the survey said watching a video of a brand or its product has impacted them to buy a product or a service, as well as 96% agreed of watching explainer videos of the products or the services, which are an example of informative and educating content. (Wyzowl, 2023.)

Marketing both digitally or traditionally have included different ways of engaging and attracting consumers towards products and brands, with the goal of acquiring long lasting deep relationships with consumers. Emotional marketing and branding have been a tool for forming deeper relationships through emotions, for example giving consumers a cause to buy a certain product, which can be then identified as making a purchase towards positive change within a given matter or issue. Whether the cause is social issues, or other relevant matters, or if the communication from the brand includes emotions like joy, sadness, admiration or trust, the emotional bond that can be formed with the consumer, creates an experience of doing business with the certain brand deeper and more meaningful through different emotional aspects. Red bull for example has its inspiring “Red bull gives you wings” phrase, and through their

campaigns and contents with the usage of athletes they share an example of their achievements within their goals and dreams, which for Red bull is an effort to inspire and emotionally push consumers towards their aspirations. (Decker, 2018.)

Ensuring effective content marketing, it is crucial to put out high-quality content that represents the brands values or mission, benefits, or other value adding features, in a creative way to ultimately be able to stand out from competitors, while making sure the brand understands its target audience, to be able to provide solutions that truly serve the specific niche. Knowing the current market and competition and the efforts that are used towards creating engagement within the market, helps brands create individually designed content based on own strengths and points of differentiation. Understanding the market and competitors' ways of marketing is important to acknowledge in order to know how current needs of consumers are met, and how is it possible to offer more value and solve the needs more effectively, in an attractive manner that resonates value for the consumer and trust on behalf of the brand, thus making sure the content is not deceptive or use manipulative tactics. (Dolbec, 2021, Act: Creating Content.)

Successful content strategies are nothing without consistency, as when the target audience is clear, and the strategy allows reach towards that audience, it is a matter of quality and consistency, until the content starts gaining traction from the consumers, so results should not be expected without consistent high-quality communication through content (Floam-Greenspan, 2022).

Consistent high-quality content that gains traction either through being educative, informative, or inspiring, also increases search engine optimization (SEO), which for online brands is crucial. The more efficient SEO a brand achieves, the easier it is for consumers to find the brand through different searches digitally, although increasing SEO requires loads of content for the engines to identify the input as valuable in terms of information, making it even more crucial to put out consistent content on various platforms, such as blogs, social media pages, and other communication funnels. (Rampton, 2016.)

Achieving effective content marketing may not be the easiest of tasks, thus one needs to know the possibilities within the whole of content marketing. Different channels and ways of spreading content may suit a different brand better than the one strategy that a successful brand is already using, which leads to the importance of identifying the right channels, best suitable for the brand, its mission, and future aspirations, while keeping in mind what kind of a target audience is the brand trying to reach.



Figure 5. Content marketing matrix (Chaffey, 2022)

The figure above illustrates the different content marketing possibilities, and the matrix works as a great tool for analysing and designing content strategies that may best suite certain brands. As seen in the figure, the cornerstones of successful content marketing are within entertaining, inspiring, and educating which raise awareness, trust, and loyalty towards a brand, ultimately impacting consumers purchasing decision making, or in other words driving sales. It is

also important to acknowledge the different stages of customer acquisition as funnels, due to certain customers already being active, while others are just beginning to acknowledge the brand, thus creating a demand for certain content for the consumers within different funnels, where the content marketing matrix helps in designing where to put out what content and to whom. (Dolbec, 2021, Act: Creating Content.)

- Top of the funnel

Stage of awareness and identifying a need or a problem, where it is necessary for the content to educate consumers of the brand and the solution that the brand is providing, while raising awareness and trust towards the brand

- Middle of the funnel

Stage of evaluating solutions, as the need is now clear for a consumer. Content should now focus on the solution that the brand is offering and serve as a route from education towards the brands solution.

- Bottom of the funnel

Convert stage, content is now focusing on guiding evaluating consumers to buying a product from this specific brand over the competitors, or simply guiding towards the purchase or the product.

4.4 Influencer marketing & user-generated content

Influencers can be identified as the micro celebrities of social media, that have built a large following through their own content, thus being more real and accessible leading to individuals relating to and imitating them on a deeper level, which for companies and brands is a positive route to growth (Tran and Stratton, 2014, as cited in Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023, p. 6). Having acquired a large following, these influencer individuals can be seen as opinion leaders due to their status and efforts, whom can have a large impact on forming opinions on products and brands in the minds of consumers, making influencers exceptional “celebrities” to endorse products and brands as associates, raising awareness, building trust, and driving sales. (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023, p. 6.)

Influencers are categorized based on the number of followers they have as follows:

- Nano-influencers – 1000-10 000 followers
- Micro-influencers – 10 000-50 000 followers
- Mid-tier influencers – 50 000-500 000 followers
- Macro-influencers – 500 000-1 000 000 followers
- Mega-influencers – 1 000 000+ followers

Important aspect to influencer marketing for brands or companies is to identify which influencers can be the best fit for the brand and its purpose. Hence mega-influencers having an enormous following, studies have found the engagement levels dropping, as the following increases, thus resulting in mid, macro, and mega-influencers reaching higher possibilities in raising brand awareness (Sanders, 2023). Influencers with smaller followings are able to achieve better connection with the followers, resulting in a very engaged audience, which is why it is predicted that in 2023 influencer marketing will go more towards utilization of nano and micro-influencers due to the enhanced ability to engage, thus having the raised ability to influence others and affect their purchasing decisions and preferences (Schwarz, 2022).

User-generated content or UGC, a form of consumers self-published content from influencers or normal social media users, is identified as WOM in the digital realm, and with the reach of internet, it is becoming a stable procedure to encourage consumers to share information of brands and its products in this form. UGC is a form of sharing crucial information such as reviews and personal opinions that affect the minds of other consumers when it comes to building brand awareness, loyalty, and create a sense of trust towards the brand and its offerings. Accessibility is key in UGC as reaching target audiences in a trustworthy manner through the honest opinions and reviews of people that are already consuming certain brands offerings, helping to create true engagement and awareness, as the information is based on personal experience rather than advertisements made by the brand. Social media being accessible 24/7 and global, the potential of this digital WOM is enormous in reaching

target audiences. The relevant places for UGC are in social media in forms of pictures, videos, and posts, as well as within personal blogs, and it is important to notice that these online reviews from consumers are seen as one of the most trusted sources of information of a brand. Utilizing UGC can help brands with a strong value-proposition grow and form deep trusted relationships with its consumers. (Moriuchi, 2016, p. 12.)

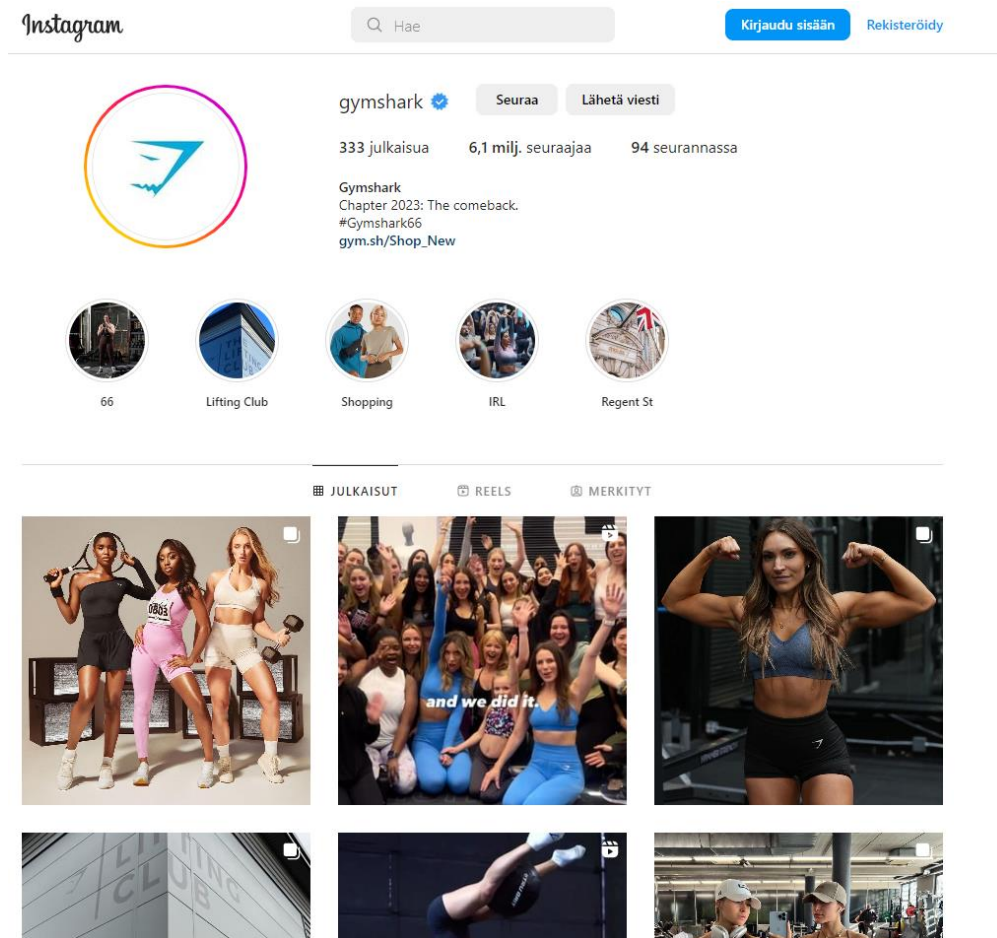


Figure 6. Gymshark's Instagram page (Gymshark, 2023)

Fitness apparel brand Gymshark is known for utilizing social media marketing to grow from a garage startup in London established in 2012, to a global brand currently valued at \$1.4 billion with customers in over 200 countries, having mainly used influencer marketing (Tagliaferro, 2022). Gymshark's main strategy consisted of creating a community or as they have described it as a family, consisting of various YouTube, Instagram, and other social media influencers, that had strong engagement with their followers, as well as own aspirations in the fitness or gym world. Popular long time ambassadors of Gymshark include

athletes like [Steve Cook](#), [Matt Ogus](#), and [David Laid](#), among many other influencers. One of Gymshark's most important values include authenticity, and influencers for their campaigns are often transparent and authentic individuals within their own content creation, thus truly engaging with their followers. One of the most effective strategies used by Gymshark, is creating buzz before dropping a new collection, through influencers showcasing new products for a certain period of time before a drop, in a way as a countdown towards consumers being able to buy these new products. Another part of the strategy is ensuring engagement and connection between the brand, the influencer, and the consumer, which is ensured by organizing different events for example in fitness expos or bodybuilding competitions, where consumers are able to meet with the influencers representing the brand at various events and connecting with followers, which has shown to be effective in building engagement and brand loyalty. Products are also often sold and given away at the different events. (Parfrement, n.d.)

4.5 Marketing channels

There are various free channels for social media marketing that hold large potential of customer acquisition and spreading brand awareness through content. All the channels have different routes for sharing content, as some may be focusing on long video form content, whereas some may have bigger impact through text posts or short videos.

Facebook – Powerful tool to be used with other channels. Possibility of utilizing advertisement through Facebook in form of pictures and videos, but the main benefit being in engagement, such as maintaining and managing a brand community, where brands can engage deeper with its customers through posts, organizing events, or with other different engaging methods, that create discussion and buzz (Kiron, 2022).

Instagram – Focus on posts, stories, pictures, reels/short videos, allowing targeting a specific target audience through hashtags. Important tool for brand

image building, as content and the Instagram homepage can be effectively personalized and made to truly represent a brand and its products. Effective for sharing behind the scenes content from the brand, UGC, product development, customer stories, as well as team member takeovers, to ultimately be more transparent and allow consumers to connect with the brand. (Universal Class, n.d.)

YouTube – The second most visited site in the world, focuses on both long and short form video content, and serves as a great place for marketing a brand and products, as with the usage of keywords in the titles and creative thumbnails, brands can be recognized within YouTube and google searches more effectively, thus being effective for raising brand awareness within YouTube, as well as outside of it. Both forms of content being effective on educating and engaging the target audience, thus it is suggested to research a specific target audience, and competitors to understand how to achieve effective marketing efforts. (SendPulse, 2022.)

TikTok – One of the fastest growing social media apps, having both children and young adults as the main users. Focus on short form video content, with the algorithm basing on showing its audience videos based on their previously liked or viewed videos that they have stayed to watch, thus creating an environment to effectively finding specific niches and reaching them. Often used to create engaging videos that are “easy to digest” as quoted by Forbes council member Justin Grome, which can be extremely beneficial in spreading educative, entertaining short form videos to raise brand awareness and create buzz around products. Due to the possibility of going viral, the reach within TikTok is global, making it a great tool for growth, thus keeping in mind that users of the app are mostly younger generation, which is why it is important that marketed products and brands serve this audience. (Grome, 2022.)

Snapchat – Platform that allows sharing temporary pictures and videos to a story, or to send them to individual users. Snapchat has 400 million active users, and the platform can be an excellent way to make content for a brand for example by documenting typical daily operations or interacting with other users

by answering to their messages on story. Snapchat also has features such as buying sponsored lenses that work as filters that other users can use, implementing brands own features to the lens can be an effective way to raise brand awareness within Snapchat. In addition to sponsored lenses, it is possible to have sponsored ads within the platform. (Driver, 2023.)

Among the mentioned social media outlets, are numerous others that are suitable for social media marketing, acknowledging which best suite different brands, is a matter of what are the brands operations and to whom is the brand trying to communicate. Utilizing the different social media platforms together for marketing is suggested in efforts of trying to reach as wide of a target audience as possible, thus the importance of a consistent brand image and communication raises, when marketing on various platforms, as the message on all platforms should feature the brand in similar ways to avoid mixed marketing messages and formation of varying brand images. Important factors to keep in mind, regardless of the chosen platform, authenticity today is key for strong customer relationships, authority is built on a brand being accessible on different platforms, thus resulting in raised trust towards a brand, engaging customers in different ways to deepen the relationship between the brand and the consumer, and combining these matters is a route towards building brand awareness and growing organically with lower costs on marketing. (Zylyk, 2022.)

5 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING & BRANDING IN SPORTS APPAREL BRANDS

5.1 Benchmarking

This benchmarking will include the following brands: Nike, Gymshark, Alphalete, NVGTN, and ICANIWILL. The brands are not picked based on the size or turnover, but rather based on their success in branding and social media marketing. The chosen brands have been able to successfully identify and

approach their specific target audiences through social media marketing, thus some of the examples have also used traditional marketing, due to having existed already before social media. The goal of this benchmarking is to have different points of views to how different sized sports apparel brands are branding and marketing within social media, to raise awareness and grow the brands successfully, to understand and analyse the different social media approaches and strategies throughout. During the benchmarking, the research will not be going too deep on statistical data, due to the different sizes of the brands, but purely focusing on the actions that the brands are taking with social media marketing. Additionally, all of the chosen brands, except Nike have been built by using social media, as one of the main drivers of growth, which is why the author chose these brands, as to see how the approach to digital branding and marketing changes between the brands, and how Nike has approached the subjects, as the brand was well-established already, before social media.

The brands chosen for this benchmarking, will be introduced first, as the author identifies the background and main contributions of branding and social media marketing of each brand. After the brand introductions, the gathered points from each brand are put to the benchmarking comparison chart, and further analysed from there. Within chapter 5.2. the comparison chart will be introduced in-depth after the brand introductions, and the main comparison points, will be explained, before moving to the actual comparison, and findings of the benchmarking.

5.1.1 Nike

Established as Blue Ribbon Sports in 1964, but rebranded as Nike in the 1971, the U.S based global market leader as one of the biggest influential sports apparel brands in the world currently, with brilliant commercials and advertisement throughout the brands history, for not only being accessible for everyone, but having the focus in encouraging its customers towards an overall fit and healthy lifestyle, without appearing too dependent on pushing sales. Focus for

the brand is emotionally creating deep relationships with its customers through inspiring, motivating, and being an innovative brand. The social media strategies for Nike are amongst the biggest in the industry due to the brand having a well-established place within the sports apparel markets and backing it up with a timely customer support that is engaging with the customers within social media. (Keyhole, 2023.)

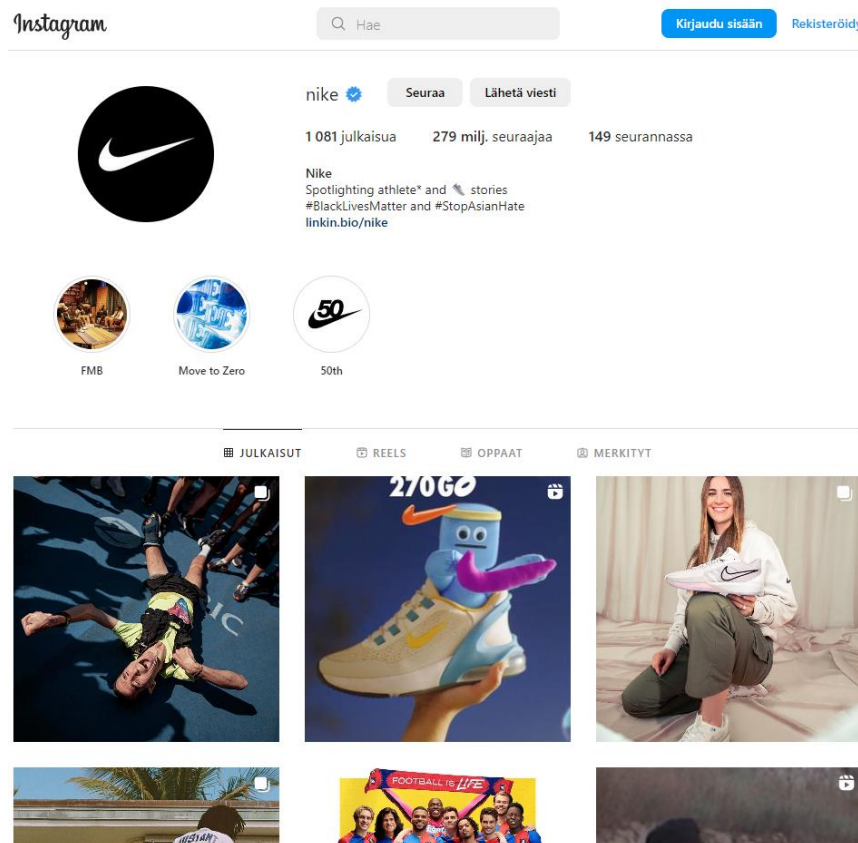


Figure 7. Nike's Instagram page (Nike, 2023)

Currently having a whopping following of 279 million people on Instagram, Nike is among the most followed pages on the platform. The brand's social media presence with Instagram being the biggest one, also includes presence in Facebook (36 million), Twitter (9.7 million), LinkedIn (5.3 million), TikTok (3.8 million), YouTube (1.7 million), and Reddit (600k), as of March 2023. Apart from the mentioned main pages on different platforms, Nike is known for having sub-accounts that are focused on different niches, such as basketball, sportswear, and a dedicated page for women ([@nikebasketball](#), [@nikesportswear](#), [@nikewomen](#)). The sub-pages also amass millions of followers, where the

brand is consistently uploading content based on either the different niches, or just overall brand advertisements on the main pages, of upcoming products, projects, or collaborations.

Across platforms, Nike has successfully been focusing on creating engagement between the brand and its customers, which is why the brand has been able to build such loyal customers through a deeper connection with them. Engagement is embraced within the brands posts, but with an emphasis on encouraging customers to share own experiences and stories of the brand, by utilizing hashtags, and with the utilization of user-generated content, the brand is creating buzz and conversations among its customers, while also providing a feeling of belonging to a community. This is also Nike's strategy of uplifting the customer relationship, as customers sharing their experiences of using the brands products, trust and excitement is created from personal reviews of other individual customers experiences. Another way of ensuring strong customer relationships for Nike, include creating a sense of a community within the brand, as seen on the main Instagram page of Nike (#BlackLivesMatter, #StopAsianHate), the brand also shares its own initiatives to affect social problems, such as diversity, to further deepen the relationship between the customers and engage them on an emotional level through inspiring and motivating for better.

The social media strategies of Nike include following viral trends, to stay relevant and up to date for its customers, as well as sharing updates of their upcoming products. Informing and sharing the customers of upcoming products and projects creates engagement and through highlighting different features of the new products, Nike aims to raise excitement and anticipation towards the brand, as well as its upcoming and existing products.

Excitement and anticipation are also raised through collaborating with athletes and known individuals utilizing the new products, and the segment of collaborating is one of the strong points of Nike's social media marketing, to raise awareness and trust towards the brand. The brand is known for collaborating with the biggest sports figures in different sports, such as football, basketball, skateboarding, and tennis, and these examples are among the thousands of

collaborations across different sports, that the brand has established. One example of a sports collaboration is with footballer Cristiano Ronaldo ([@Cristiano](#)), who is representing the brand's apparel, as well as co-creating creatively designed football shoes, and another example is the own line of Nike Air Jordan shoes, made in collaboration with basketball legend Michael Jordan. Apart from sports, Nike is consistently also collaborating with known artists such as Travis Scott ([@travisscott](#)) with unique shoe and clothing collaborations. These collaborations create such traction and demand towards the brand, that there are businesses that operate purely based on reselling the products that have been bought from the collaboration drops. Safe to say, collaborations have been a gold mine for Nike, and the brand has successfully raised brand awareness and trust from these actions, as well as raised the overall demand for the products, through providing a social proof from the big figures using and embracing the brand's products.

Nike's use of social media platforms is strategically planned, and they have identified the best forms of content for specific platforms, with an emphasis on trying different approaches to creative content creation. Instagram being the main page for photo posts with engaging captions and short peaks to new projects and products, YouTube serving as the main video platform, along the shortform video platform TikTok, and Twitter being used as a more overall communication platform for sharing photos, links, and statuses. Although the brand has millions of followers within Facebook, the brand has not been active with its pages there recently, and the occasional posts that are posted, usually consist of links to other posts or sites. (StudyCorgi, 2023.)

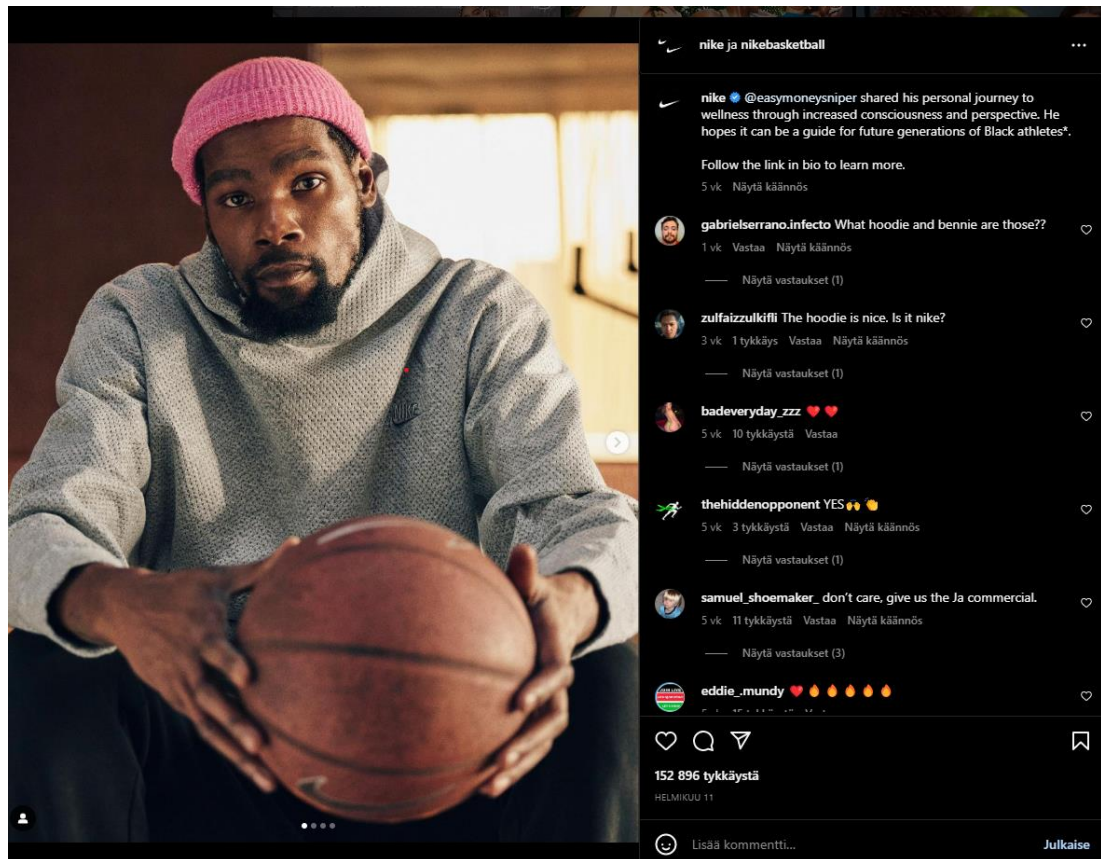


Figure 8. Instagram post from Nike & Nike Basketball (Nike, 2023)

Engagement with the target audiences is boosted through sub-page posts shared on the main Instagram page, and content forms such as athlete stories and takes on different social subjects are used. Often these posts may also be emotional branding/marketing as the shared stories are personal and often resonate with the person and the brand values.

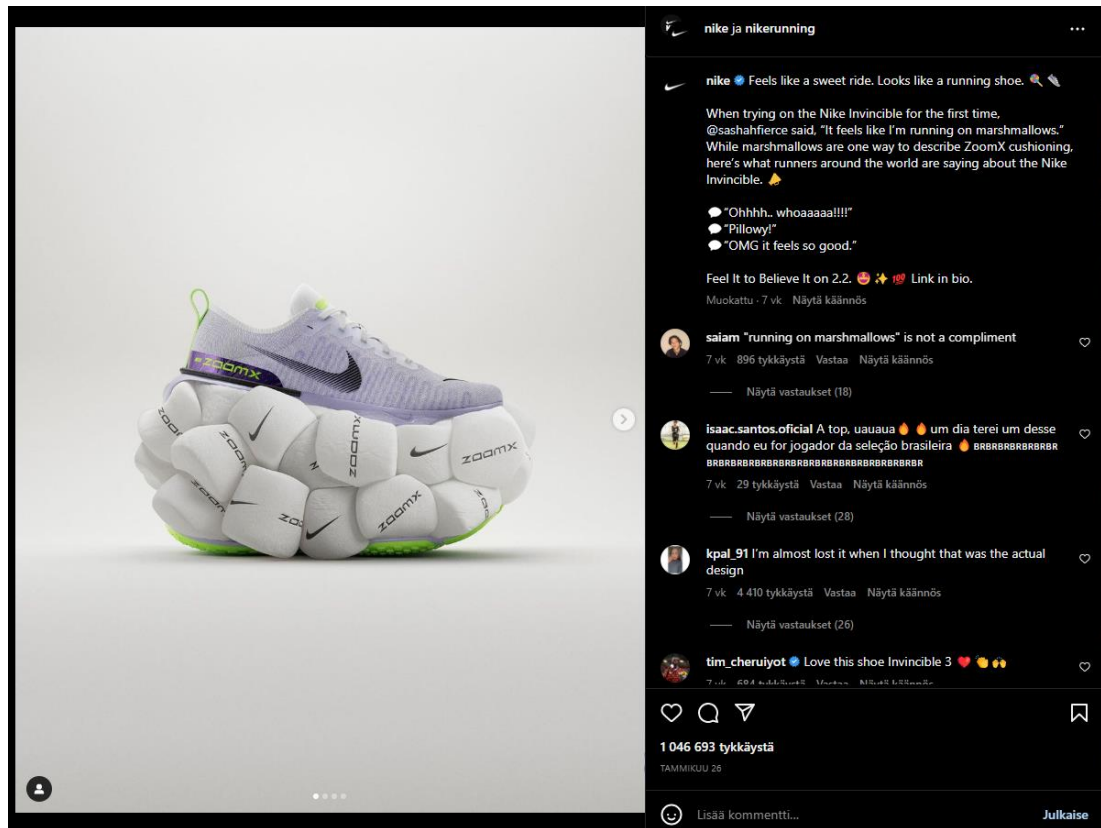


Figure 9. Instagram post from Nike and Nike Running (Nike, 2023)

New products are advertised in collaboration with the sub-pages, with a review from professional athletes in the bio. A call-to-action link is used in most advertisement posts for a certain product, and in this case, the product was pre-advertised, and customers were guided to the official Nike site, with information on the release date. The product videos are exceptional for Nike, as the designs for the videos are highly creative for each post. Already released products that are posted, often contain a store link, where customers may purchase the item directly.

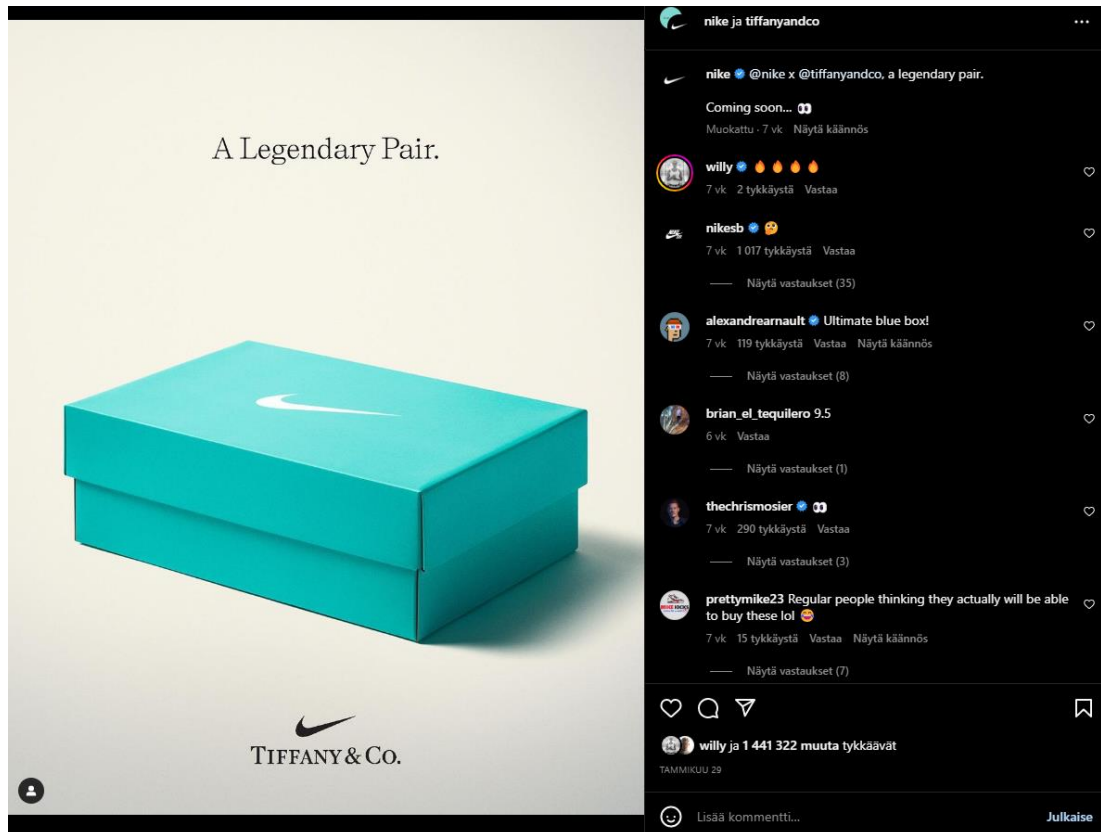


Figure 10. Instagram post from the collaboration between Nike & Tiffany and co (Nike, 2023)

Exclusive collaborations with other brands are advertised within social media on behalf of both the brands, and the marketing starts by hinting of an upcoming exclusive collaboration to generate buzz and engagement.

Nike as an example in the benchmarking represents a brand that is well established and has already gathered a worldwide customer base, thus still it is important to analyse the main actions the brand is taking with its social media marketing to continue growing the brand, although the amount of resources Nike has towards social media marketing is far greater than what smaller brands have, there are still important takeaways from their actions, that may be introduced to brands that are in different situations within own operations. As a well-known global brand with large amounts of resources, Nike's strategy on influencer marketing, focuses on mostly big names or individuals, categorized as mega-influencers and celebrity collaborations.

5.1.2 Gymshark

The brand was established in UK in 2012 by two classmates, with an emphasis on sports apparel and accessories, with a niche focus on fitness and gym wear. Gymshark was valued at \$1 billion in 2020, and the brand's growth has been exponential, while having the success acquired digitally. Gymshark has had its focus on a specific niche of gym and fitness personnel, having pushed engaging content to the right audiences directly from the beginning of their operations. Large portion of the brand's success is due to influencer marketing, and the way it was executed. Gymshark focuses on forming a community of athletes and influencers around the brand, who all share similar values and aspirations in the fitness scene, thus having created a tight circle of transparent ambassador individuals, who already have their own audiences through the creation of persona brands. This approach has led to far deeper customer relationships, as most of the ambassadors are seen as role models, that already have been engaging with their own audiences deeply, whereas the deep engagement continues also through Gymshark's own operations to ultimately bring the different audiences together, through the variety of influencers or ambassadors. Gymshark's main platforms for social media marketing consist of Instagram (6.1 million), Facebook (1.9 million), YouTube (463k), Twitter (362K), and additionally the brand has its own dedicated pages in Instagram for women (3.3 million) and weightlifting (1 million). Through the different pages Gymshark is known for sharing loads of content and including its athletes and ambassadors in most of the posts, having the people represent the brand in the brand's own designs. (Samaniya, 2022.)

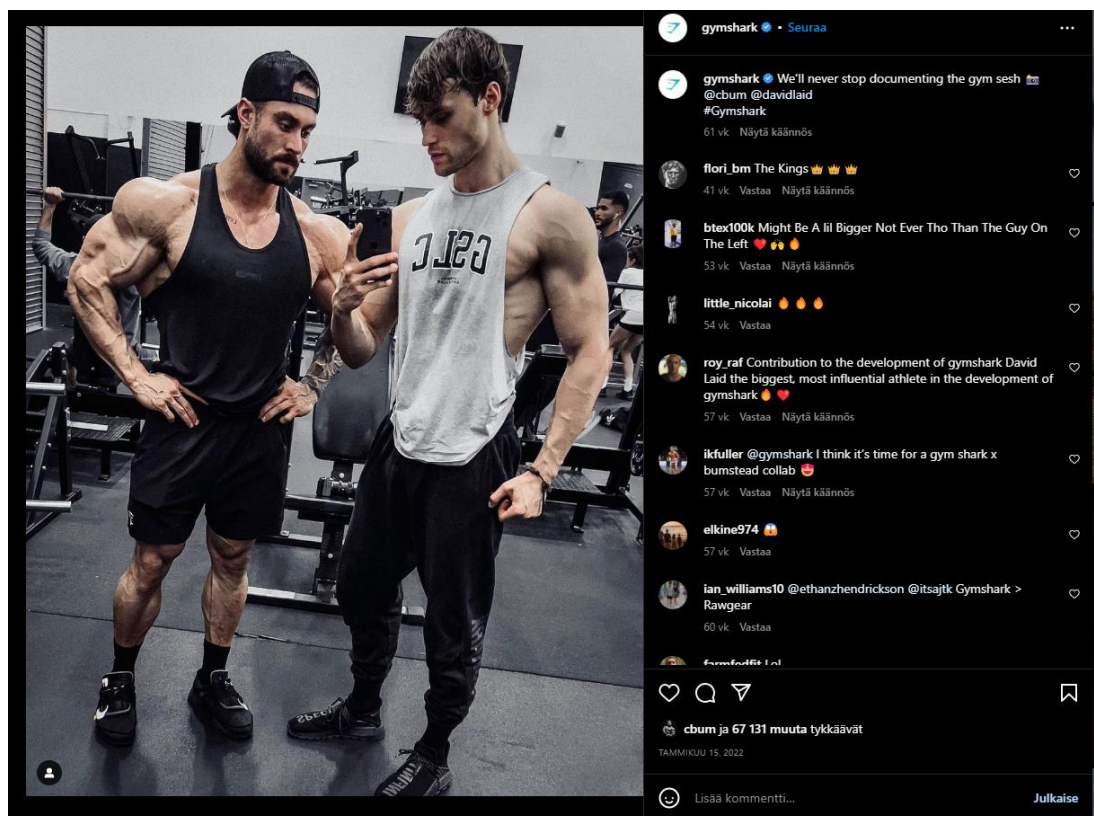


Figure 11. Instagram post from Gymshark (Gymshark, 2022)

From daily life posts to specific photoshoots with its ambassadors, Gymshark is engaging its audience through including known figures in its content. Instagram is the brand's biggest platform, and the content there consists of similar posts like the example, having the athletes involved in typical training sessions, or having posts from Gymshark events where there may be hundreds of brand associates present. Sharing a glimpse of an event in Instagram is typical, as the brand's YouTube channel is the main place for longer form video content from events, challenges, and different gatherings where many ambassadors are present, as well as creating content from individual reviews, training guides, and discussions from the ambassadors. The YouTube content is engaging and shows the life of the known ambassadors in a transparent manner, which for Gymshark has been a route to deeper engagement and relationships with its customers, and having the audience crave for more similar content. Having established different events around challenges, the brand is inviting its customers to the events, where people can meet their idols representing the brand. Gymshark is an advocate for a healthy lifestyle through sports and proper nutrition, not forgetting doing sports in fashionable apparel, they

establish challenges for its audiences to take part in for example a 66-day fitness challenge, where a lifestyle change is the main goal. Customers are invited to take part in this 2-month transformation and asked to share their results after completing the challenge, thus creating engagement and inspiring individuals to live a healthier lifestyle.

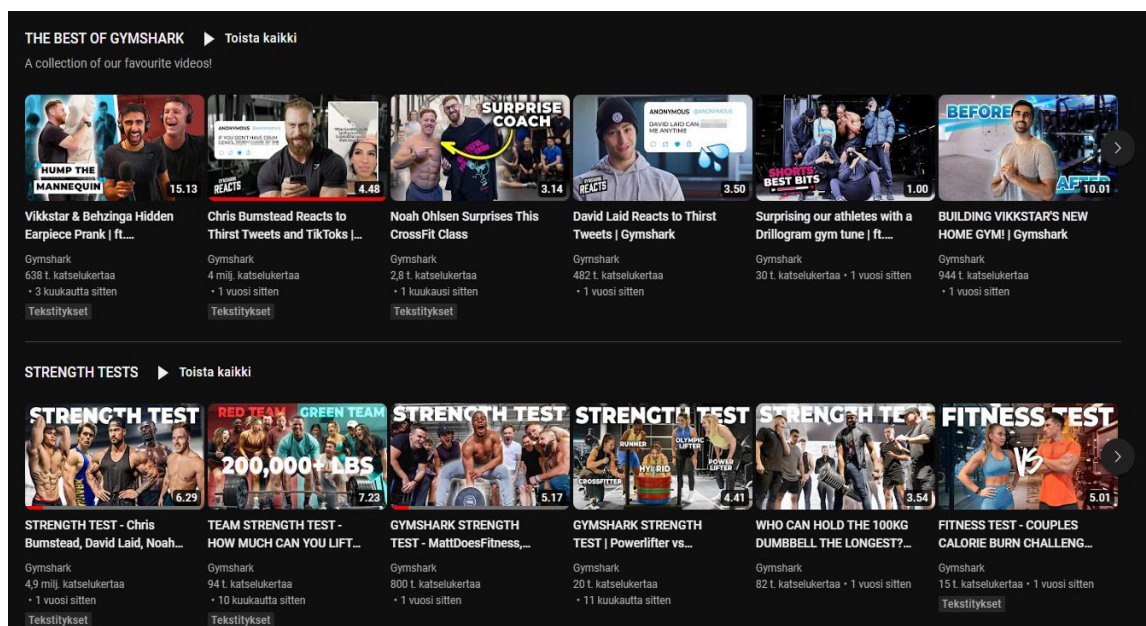


Figure 12. Main page of Gymshark's YouTube channel (Gymshark, 2023)

Above is the homepage of Gymshark's YouTube channel, and as seen, the brand has variety of content from events, challenges, reviews from athletes, and different daily life content, thus having a focus on entertainment, to raise the brand awareness and showcase the brands mission on a deeper level. Content is also created from events such as Gymshark's pop-up store gatherings, where products are sold, and customer can meet the brand ambassadors. These pop-up events are also a stable in the marketing strategy of the brand.

On behalf of Twitter, the brand is commonly interested in asking their audience questions to create discussion on different topics, either through making a statement, or genuinely asking for opinions on given matters, as well as sharing inspirational phrases, and humorous fitness and gym related pictures/memes. Engagement is truly deeper and transparent as customers can

communicate directly with the brand, which leads to identifying how customer centric Gymshark's approach to marketing and branding is. The core of forming strong and deep relationships with customers is in two-way communicating transparently, having icons represent the brand, and asking for customers for feedback and opinions, thus long-term trust is built towards the brand and connecting on a deeper level. Emotional branding and marketing are also within Gymshark's strategy, as the brand has its own takes to support social matters. It is also important to note, that the brands influencer marketing evolves around utilizing mainly macro-influencers that specialize in different niches of sports.

5.1.3 Alphalete

A brand established in 2015, by a fitness entrepreneur and influencer Christian Guzman ([@christianguzmanfitness](#)), whose journey started in YouTube and other social media platforms by sharing fitness and nutrition tips, and other bodybuilding related everyday life content. Having acquired a fan base, Guzman started his own coaching business and later established his own gym. The journey in the clothing business started as he started selling CG Fitness branded apparel as a secondary purchase within his gym, thus inspiring the entrepreneur to go into the sports apparel industry. The secondary clothing that Guzman was selling, was strategically rebranded to Alphalete, with a brand mission of providing apparel which's quality and design would speak for itself, putting a large emphasis on custom-made fabrics, that are engineered to endure high performance, and simultaneously having such control on the production that the quality was to exceed the price points, making the apparel both high in quality, but affordable in price. Alphalete's mission includes inspiring its users towards an overall more successful life, thus the brand phrase represents that – The L.D.B. Philosophy, meaning Learn more, Dream more, Be more. (DiBiase, 2022.)

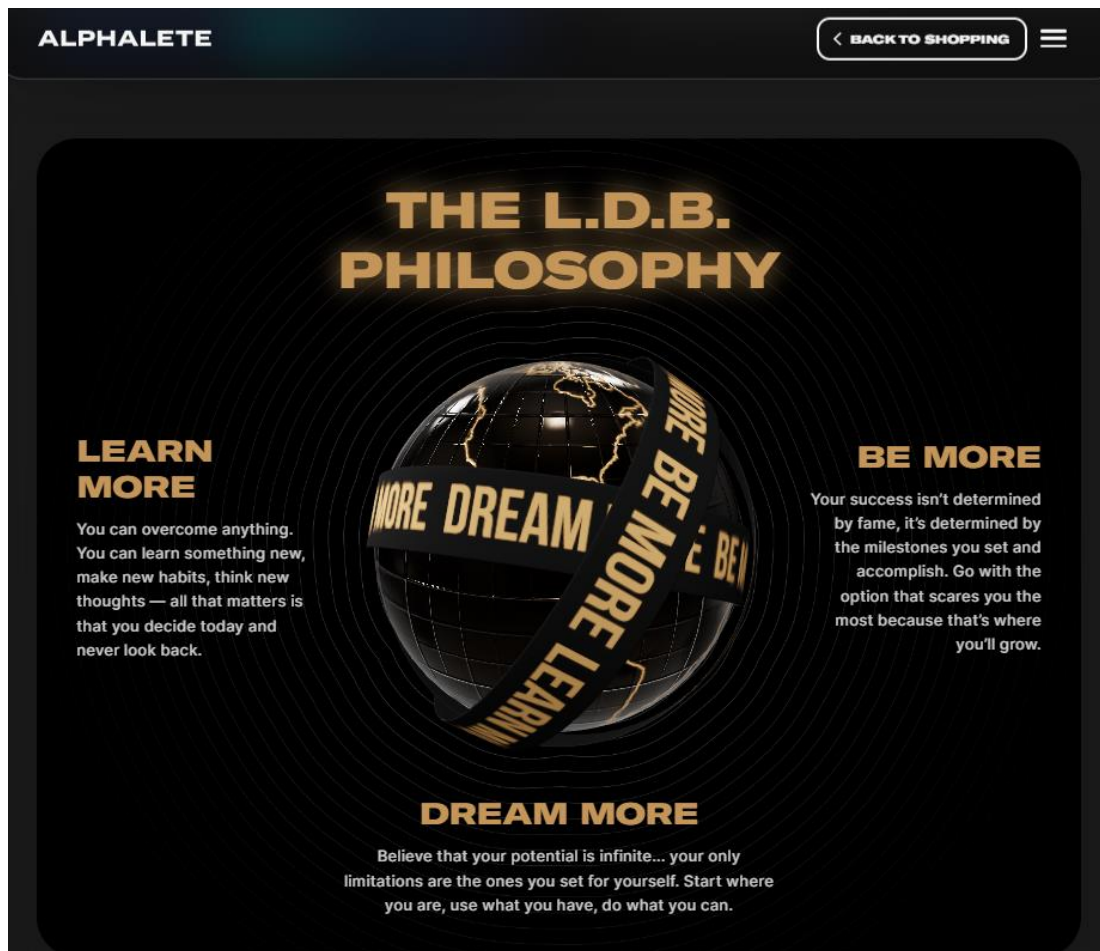


Figure 13. The L.D.B. Philosophy (Alphalete, n.d.)

The brand has been able to achieve a multi-million-dollar revenue, a following of 1.4 million within Instagram that are highly engaged with the brand, as thousands of fans are attending meetups, that are arranged by the brand in different locations, as well as in the brand's own dedicated gym in Texas, called Alphaland, where also the brand's apparel are sold.

The growth strategy for Alphalete is an interesting one, as the brand focuses its operations to launch-based ecommerce, meaning the approach to sales was to launch a limited range of exclusive products, that possibly would not be restocked, meaning their emphasis on year-round marketing of existing lines would not be needed, thus the launches were marketed and hyped up around social media, to create buzz towards the launch dates, resulting in quickly sold out launches, making room for new designing and planning of future launches. This approach can be identified as the FOMO approach (Fear of missing out),

due to the low stock being sold, and without restocks, the pieces become more exclusive, as the opportunity to buy a certain product may be a one-time offer. The approach led Alphalete to not use influencer discounts, but rather marketing the products through appealing content, to acquire as much reach as possible.

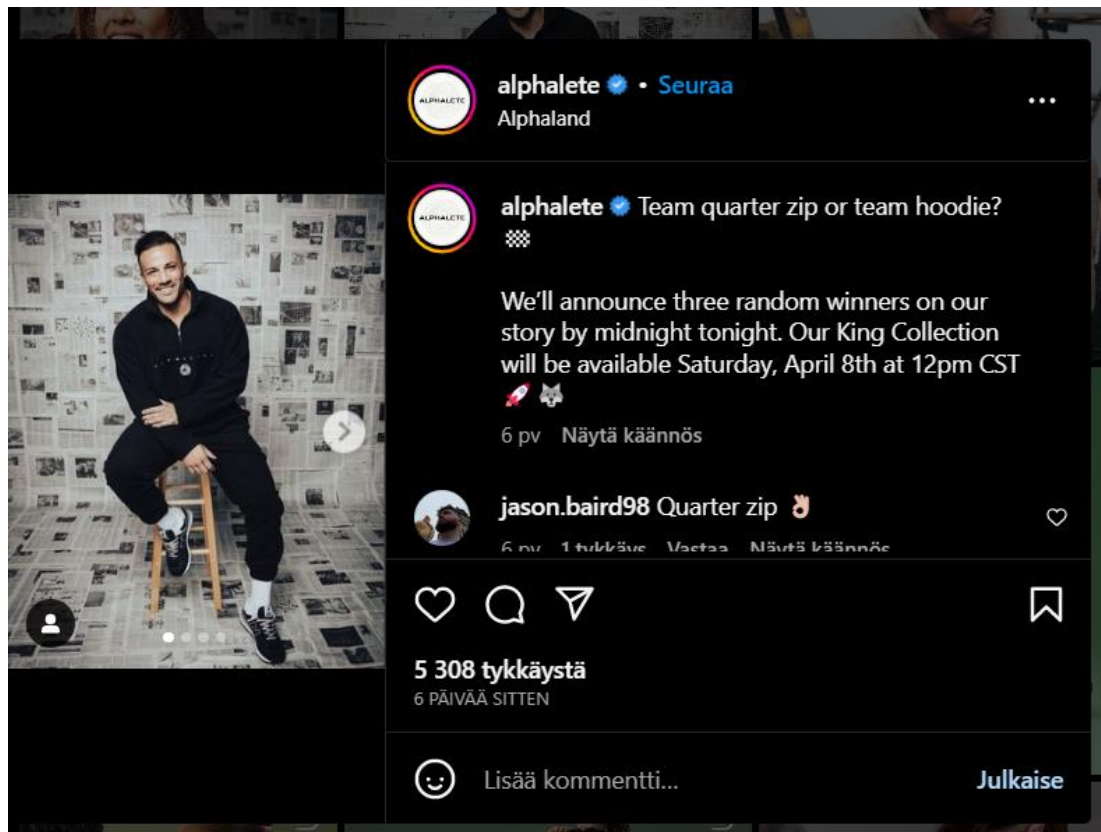


Figure 14. Alphalete's Instagram post (alphalete, 2023)

Above is an example of the typical posts to the brands main Instagram page. A look on a new product, alongside Christian Guzman, with details of the launch, and announcement of the possibility for 3 people to win these products.



Figure 15. Alphalete's Instagram post (alphalete, 2023)

Special dates, such as the brand's birthdays, are celebrated with sales, thus in a launch-like manner, with a countdown to the start, to create buzz.

Acquiring such growth has been a result of several successful aspects, such as attaining loyal customers, having a great value proposition, and creating engaging content around the brand, thus the brand relies on authenticity and engagement within its own community, by putting an emphasis on creating quality content for the target audience, from professional photoshoots, motivational videos and posts, vlogs and daily life content from Guzman's own channel, along collaborations and interviews of Alphalete athletes. Additional value is brought by detailed content of sizing guides and product reviews. The brand's own content is mainly spread on their main Instagram page, whereas Guzman markets the brand on his own channels, especially YouTube, through different forms of lifestyle content from daily life vlogs, showing behind the scenes of the brand, to content from the brands events, thus bringing value and engaging the target audience, inspiring loyal customers to share their experiences with the brand, making user-generated content, also a large part of the brand's content strategy.

Guzman credits the success of his brand, for 2 aspects, the quality of the apparel itself, and the use of influencer marketing. The brands approach to influencer marketing has been acquiring associates to the Alphalete family, based on sharing similar values, having a global reach, individual style, and through having an engaged audience existing, so the range of influencers often varies between micro and macro influencers, having allowed the formation of such engaged brand community. Their influencer marketing business model consists of the actual official Alphalete athletes who get a salary on top of commissions, and a separate program for the Alphalete family, which includes influencers that take part in the affiliate program, meaning they get paid only of commission.

When it comes to customer loyalty, Alphalete is a firm believer in creating a real, in-person experience for its customers, to bring the community together and raise customer loyalty, and the efforts can be seen in the brands world tours, where the influencer team is touring in different cities of Europe and North America. The emphasis of the tours is not in sales, but in building and raising awareness towards their community, and create social media buzz around the brand, as attendees share own posts and experiences to social media, alongside the brands own content and marketing.

5.1.4 NVGTN

Fitness and lifestyle apparel brand founded in 2018, by Ashleigh and Brett Schneggenburger. Newest apparel brand of the benchmarking although currently identified as the fastest growing brand in the United States, as the brand serves its customers in 170 different countries. Brand mission includes embracing individuals to discover their true potential, with a focus on building a movement of bettering yourself and others around you, through the brand values of equality and empowerment. As a relatively new brand, NVGTN has been able to position in the saturated market successfully, thus gaining a relatively large audience already, and NVGTN's strategy emphasizes creative designs and quality with its products, while having the products at an affordable

price. The product lines include designs both for men and women, thus it is noticeable, that the focus is on the women's apparel, or the men's lines are so new, that no marketing is executed yet. The women's line is designed creatively to enhance body features, while being durable and high quality, which is one of the biggest reasons for the brands success, thus the gender distribution within the brands clients is heavily female oriented. (NVG TN, 2023.)

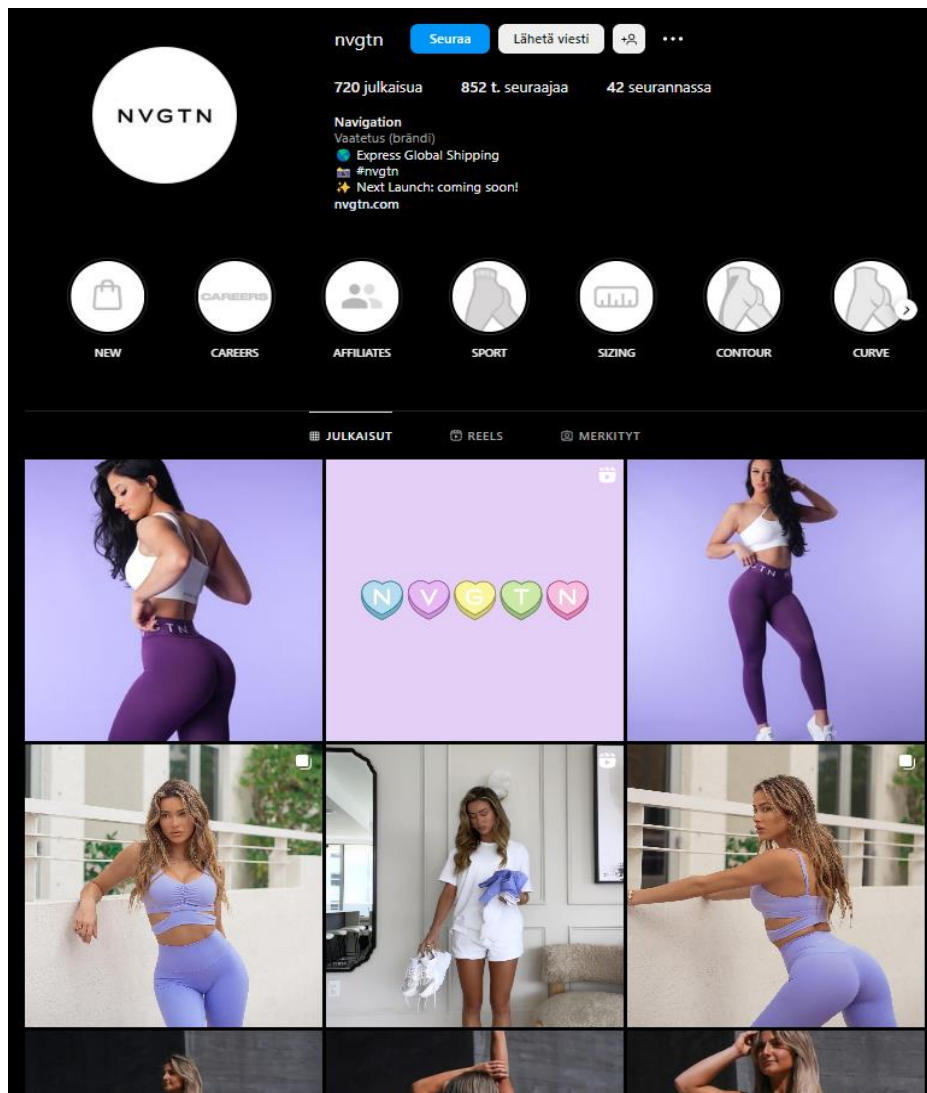


Figure 16. NVG TN's Instagram homepage (nvgtn, 2023)

Above is the homepage of NVG TN's Instagram, showcasing the typical posts from the brand, where new product ranges are shown and marketed. Additional information is provided for the customers with highlighted sections from sizing to more in-depth views of the type of certain product lines. As mentioned, the brand has a line for men, although their Instagram posts are presumably

all towards the female audience, thus the men's lines are represented on the brands own website.

The main marketing channels for NVGTN are Instagram (852k followers) and Facebook (76k followers) for brand to consumer communication, thus the brand is heavily advertised in YouTube through user-generated content, and paid advertisements, within these sites. UGC is also a part of the brands strategy, in spreading brand awareness and acquiring new customers, along influencer marketing, as influencers and ambassadors of the brand are creating product review videos to YouTube, among different content regarding the brand to other social media platforms such as Instagram, while the brand embraces customers to share their own experiences of the products within social media. Influencers are hired to represent the brand in their own content, and paid posts dedicated to market new products, thus given an exclusive affiliate code, that gives a certain percentage off the product prices, and benefits the influencer. The growth strategy with influencers for NVGTN is using mid-tier to macro influencers, with a following of 50k – 1 million followers, that are active ambassadors of the brand, and additionally, the main marketing on the brands own channels is done through photoshoots with the influencers showcasing the products, and also by utilizing known models that can be categorized as mega influencers or celebrities, thus these celebrities or mega influencers do not represent the brand on their own social media pages. Influencer marketing is the brand's main growth driving aspect, which has shown to be very successful for the brand, as combined with the innovative designs and honest reviews from other people, the brand has been able to acquire many customers.

As a relatively new brand, their strategy is stable on the mentioned aspects, and has allowed sufficient growth mainly due to innovative designs for women, thus it is important to note, that during the research, it is noticeable that the brand's communication is mostly one way, and urgent customer questions are mainly handled via email presumably, although within comment sections of brand posts, it is seen that some are not getting answers even with email. Engagement with the target audience is minimal, and mostly from influencers engaging with their own audiences representing the brand, and from the

brand's own social media channels, it is identifiable that as people are commenting on posts, the brand is not communicating back to them, although many comments involve certain questions towards the brand. Improving customer engagement and two-way communication would benefit the brand in terms of customer loyalty, as reviews could be negatively affected by the current way of communicating and handling of displeased customers.

5.1.5 ICANIWILL (ICIW)

Nordic brand that focuses on developing, manufacturing, and selling high quality sports apparel with its distinct designs for both men and women, mostly in the niche of gym wear. The brand is based in Sweden and the growth of the brand has made it one of the fastest growing apparel brands in Scandinavia. Having the motivational and inspirational name of ICANIWILL, the brand's mission is to encourage and embrace people to push themselves and dream big, to up their performance, with the addition of accompanying high quality sportswear to support individuals to achieve their goals. The brand was started by Gustaf Ollas, whose journey in the apparel industry started from a blog, which in 2007 soon became one of the biggest exercise and diet blogs in Sweden, and from there the brand ICIW started. (Icaniwill, 2023.)

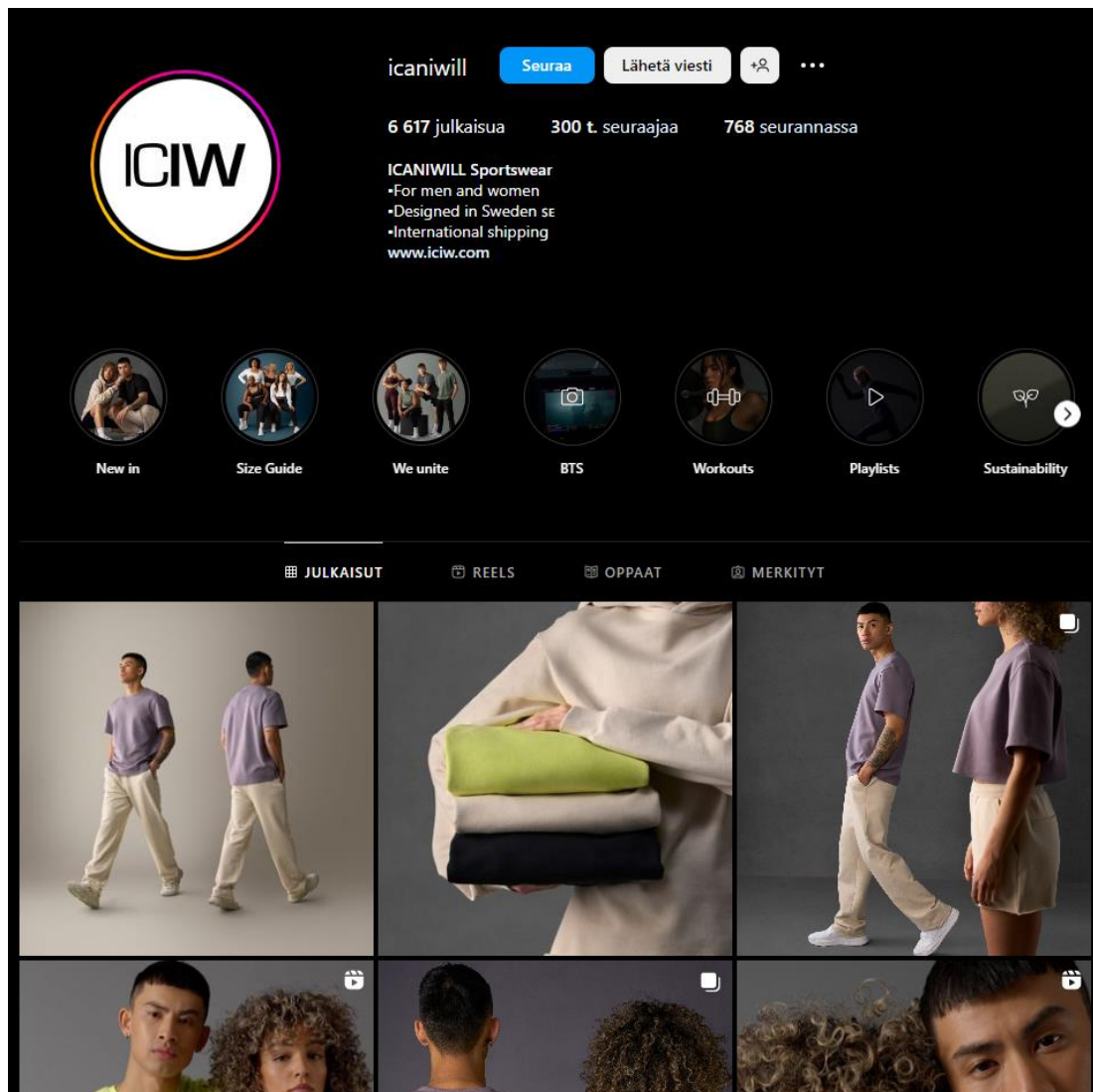


Figure 17. Main page of Icaniwill in Instagram (Icaniwill, 2023)

The brand currently has 300k followers on its main Instagram page, where most of the brands own advertising happens, thus the brand still has a brand page in Facebook, with 229k followers, their main communication channel is Instagram, where they post insights to new products, through their own set of ambassadors representing the brand with the new products.

ICIW's social media marketing is highly focused on micro-influencers that have a following of 10 000 – 50 000, thus having higher levels of engagement with their followers, and the brand is often seen within social media, not through their own posts, but within the posts of the influencers representing the brand. The brand's strategy with influencers consists of the ICANIWILL community/family that consist of these influencers, and the brand provides the influencers with a discount code of usually around -20%, that are then promoted

on the pages of these influencers, with pictures of them wearing the brands clothing. This approach brings the influencers a commission, each time someone buys products using their codes, which makes this strategy effective, due to raised engagement between the influencer and their followers, the individuals affect their own commissions, through how and how often they advertise the products, which for the brand is beneficial as the advertising is constant, through having multiple ambassadors. As mentioned, these advertisements can be seen often within social media, and this is the brands strategy to raise awareness of the brand, and market its products only on their own pages, and with the use of influencers.

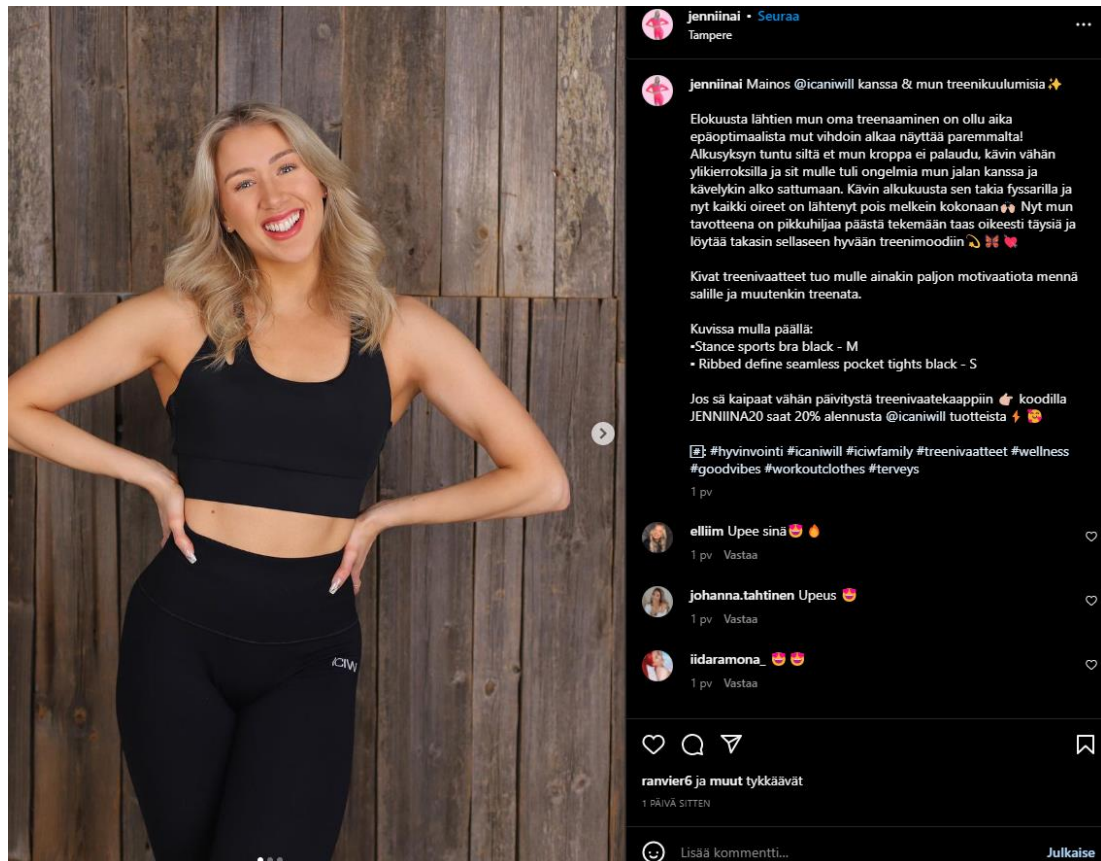


Figure 18. Instagram post from Jenniinai (Jenniinai, 2023)

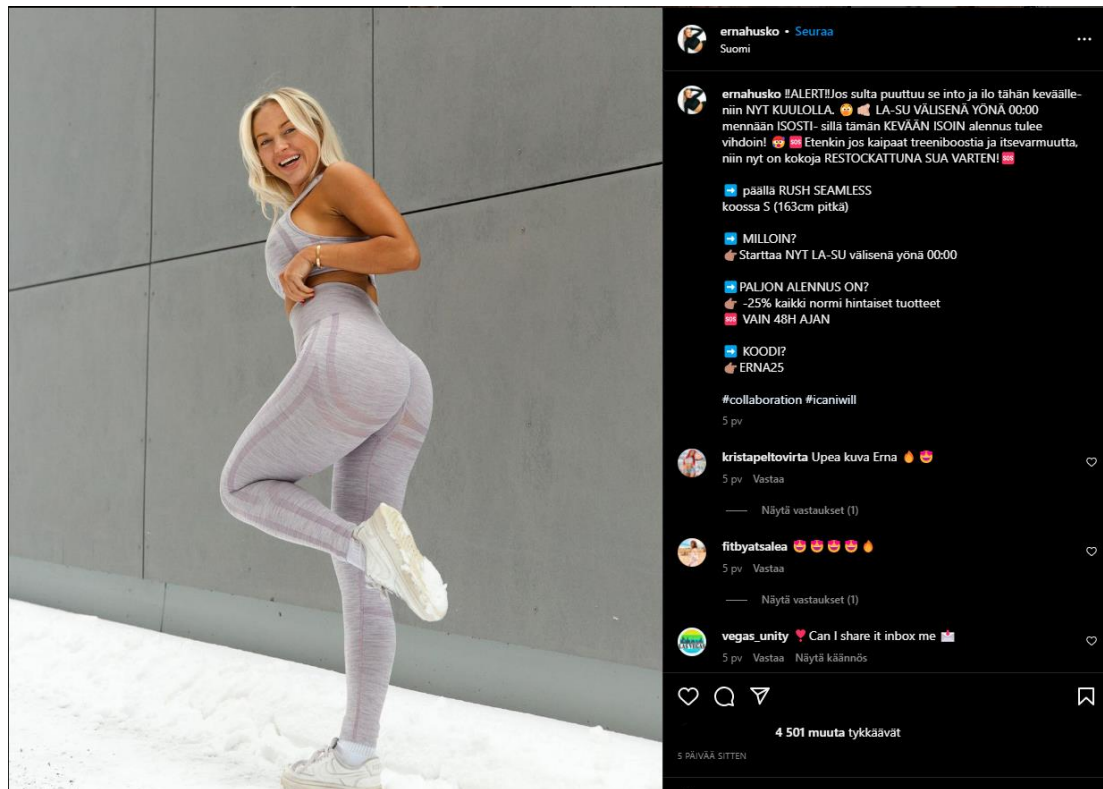


Figure 19. Instagram post from Erna Husko (ernahusko, 2023)



Figure 20. Instagram post from Azizi Khaled (azizi.khaled, 2023)

Above are a few examples of the typical posts of ICIW ambassadors, and as can be seen all posts include the discount code and the brands products are showcased and, in some cases, described in the posts. These posts are the brands success drivers, and it is important to note, that Instagram has 1,8 million posts with the usage of the hashtag #icaniwill, which is used with these promotion posts. The number of posts just within Instagram is a load of promotion for the brand, and similarly the ambassadors may be advertising the brand in their stories additionally, and with engaged audiences of the influencers, ICIW has proved the effectiveness of this approach to marketing, thus making sure the products and the operations to fulfil orders is at a high quality. This approach is also a strong way of establishing the brand image in the minds of consumers, as advocates of healthy lifestyles praise the brands products and the quality of them and attracting new customers through offering discount codes.

5.2 Brand comparison

The following figure illustrates the comparison of the case brands presented, with the main goal of distinguishing the key actions taken towards branding and social media marketing, that drive the brands individual success. Branding and social media marketing is compared and analysed by identifying the following aspects:

- Brand mission

What the brand wants to achieve and inform to its target audience through its mission, to have customers resonate with the brand.

- Target audience segmentation

Has the brand distinguished its target niche or is the target audience identified by segmentation.

- Brand breakthrough

What actions or matters have been the breakthrough point of the brands.

- Value proposition

What is the brand's value proposition to its customers.

- Engagement

Is the engagement/communication from the brand one way, or two-way.

- Social media marketing channels

How many social channels is used in brand and product promotion.

- Frequency of brand posts

How often are marketing/brand posts released by the brand's main channels.

- Influencer category

Is the brand using a specifically sized category of influencers in a specific niche.

- Volume of user-generated content in Instagram

The identifiable amount of UGC Instagram posts with the main hashtag of the brand. (Instagram being the platform, where all brands have the most following)

- Active paid brand advertisements within Meta platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Messenger)

How many active ads the brands have currently in Meta platforms worldwide.

The brand comparison figure (Attachment 1) can be found on the attachments section of this thesis, located on the last page.

5.3 Key findings from the brand comparison

Based on the side-by-side comparison of the five case brands, it is noticeable that certain aspects have truly allowed these brands to form such customer bases, that are connecting with the brand deeply, thus being more loyal to the

brand and supporting the growth of these brands. Stable growth comes from successful factors in branding and social media marketing, combined with the products of the brand itself fulfilling the expectations of the target market and matching their needs, thus bringing value through the product and the brand as well.

Brand mission represents what the brand wants to achieve with its operations and its messaging, thus in the sports apparel industry, it is noticeable that the brand missions of these brands, are truly focused on affecting and attaching customers emotionally, as the missions in one way or another, focus on inspiring the user and those around them to develop further in life, get better physically and ultimately mentally. Affecting emotionally shows as the main points in the mission statements refer to inspiring, motivating, empowering, encouraging, and additionally, some brands have an emphasis of the brand community, thus encouraging not only to develop further alone, but with the community together, giving customers a sense of belongingness simultaneously, which may lead to a deeper relationship between the brand and the customer.

The target audience segmentation indicates the effectiveness of acknowledging your target audience, and positioning correctly towards that specific audience, as we can see based on the growth of the brands, excluding Nike, that the growth can be exponential, when the target audience is understood, and approached properly. Nike has done the mentioned approaching of the target audience better than anyone, but the newer brands indicate the possibilities of growing a brand in far shorter time, to a very successful level. Nike itself has been establishing and growing the brand for far longer, than the other brands, and proper target audience segmentation has been crucial for the brand too, and it is seen in their operations by using multiple channels and sub-categorized profiles to attract customers in more specific niches.

From the comparison, key takeaways in segmentation show that in targeting the correct people, the segmentation is mainly done through demographic, psychographic, and behavioural segmentation, as the main points include knowing demographically, what is the age, gender, and perhaps income of the

people targeted, combined with the psychographic aspects such as personality, lifestyle, interests, and activities the target audience does, and lastly the behavioural aspects, such as existing knowledge, attitudes and responses to other products in the same category. Combining these segmentation points, serve the sports apparel industry as for example, people interested in fitness, the biggest mass of people in the niche circulate between a determined age range, the behavioural patterns indicate their interests in the sport, allowing brands to position better in the eyes of these people, and lastly the behavioural patterns can help further develop products to bring more value than the competitors' products, directly affecting better positioning as well.

As seen based on the brand breakthrough points, Nike shows an example of positioning within the biggest brands at early stages through innovation and successful branding, thus giving a sense of brand growth before social media and showing that the innovativeness and overall branding and marketing has been exponential, in terms of allowing the brand to grow so much before the whole world was connected digitally. The other 4 brands share the same aspects in their breakthroughs, as most have found biggest success with influencer marketing, as it has made targeting the specific target audience much more effective. Accompanying influencer marketing by having a community, has also been a point of success to attract loyal customers, that are proud to represent the brand and its products. The effect of a persona brand can also be identified from the comparison, as with a persona brand, an individual has already engaged its own followers that are inspired by the person, thus giving better starting points for a brand, as the person might already have supportive followers that ultimately want to support the person on new ventures, such as building a brand.

Value propositions of sports apparel brands showcase the importance of innovative designs, that are unique and distinguish the brand, and through having an emphasis on quality of apparel, without prices raising too high, the brands can provide great value for the customers. Brand community is also a part of some brands value proposition, for the formation of a deeper relationship between the customer and the brand. Having resources allows brands to further

develop their value proposition, thus Nike for example, includes customization, accessibility to its value proposition, as customers can get the brands product almost anywhere, with the possibility of even creating customized features to existing products, through Nike's own website. Accompanying the mentioned matters, Nike has also the brand status in its value proposition, as the brand is so distinguished, many identify the brand's clothing as a mark of status.

Engagement comparison indicates the importance of two-way engagement, as the root for developing a deeper relationship with the customers, raising the possibility of repurchases and longer customer relationships. Many of the brands emphasize customer engagement, which is crucial, for the longevity, future growth, and image of the brand. Lack of customer engagement was seen within the research of the case brands as one brand had minimal engagement within social media, where customers were asking important questions, without getting answers from the brand, and within these questions was mentioned, that the customer neither got a response from the brands email/customer support, nor from the social media. It is important to think of the effects on brand image in such cases, when the most valuable asset (the customer) of the brand is not getting answers regarding their purchase or other important questions, thus making two-way interaction as valuable, as the product itself, in terms of fulfilling brand promises and value propositions. Engaging with the customers is also suggested, because of word-of-mouth, and attracting new customers through the positive experiences that an existing customer has had with the brand, and vice versa, having no engagement like in the example, can lead to negative WOM spreading about the brand, further impacting the brand image negatively.

From the main social media marketing channels used by the brands, Instagram serves as the so-called home for the brands, as the brands have the largest amount of following there. Thus, Instagram being the largest platform for the brands, it is not used alone, as all of the case brands accompany social media marketing through utilizing Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and some even LinkedIn, and Pinterest all together, to ensure larger reach and possibility of attracting new customers. Within the different platforms,

Instagram serves mainly as the marketing platform, where the brands share posts of new product ranges, through short videos or pictures, with distinguished captions. Facebook is used similarly, for many of the main posts of new ranges. YouTube is used to share lifestyle content in video form, from behind the scenes and different brand events, where also the brands influencers are often involved. Twitter is shown to be for engagement and communicating with the customers, in forms of questionnaires, and other types of posts that ask the opinions of the followers, thus engaging the target audience.

The frequency of brand posts within these channels were also shown to differ between brands, although when new product releases are planned, the typical number of posts per week, is at a minimum of 5 posts, and can go up to more than 10 posts a week, depending on the situation. These statistics mainly apply to Instagram and Facebook brand marketing posts, as within twitter the amounts vary, as the communications may be more relaxed and engaging for the customers, rather than being strictly marketing posts.

The effects of influencer marketing are currently far greater, than traditional marketing strategies in the sports apparel industry especially for smaller brands, as the brand is brought close to the target audience, through an influencer who has been engaging with its audience, and formed a relationship with them, guiding the followers to get to know the brand represented, and ultimately allowing the customers to form a relationship with the brand as well, thus giving new brands bigger possibilities for growth, if the brand brings value to its target audience sufficiently. As seen in the comparison, it is common that mid-tier to micro influencers is used, and the reason for that is in the deeply engaged followers that the influencers of this size have. Celebrity or mega influencers may have a far greater reach, but the engagement with the larger audience is not as deep as with relatively smaller audiences, making mid-tier to micro influencers the key to attracting loyal customers in a specific niche.

Attaining user-generated content through the brand and through the influencers can also be identified as a highly important aspect, in terms of building brand image and growing the brand. As seen in the comparison the amounts of user-generated posts just within one platform, are massive, thus when thinking how many people see the post, where the brand is represented, the amount

of people seeing the apparel from actual customers of the brands, can impact individuals that don't know the brand positively, bringing in new customers, and growing the brand image and recognition.

Lastly, paid adds within social media channels are accompanied with the overall marketing, to further raise knowledge of products and the brand, and to attract new customers that are not following the brand. It is identifiable that well established brands, that have access to large resources, use paid adds to further grow the possibility of reaching new customers, and generating sales, as the adds often serve as a call to action.

Overall, the comparison showcases the important aspects and actions that are done correctly, to ensure growth for the brand, thus the importance of having loyal customers is raised in many points, due to its impact on the longevity of operations. When strategically planning to penetrate a niche, the handled matters need to be considered in the formation of the strategy, for the brand to be able to provide as much value to its target audience as possible.

6 AUTHORS SUGGESTIONS ON BRANDING & SMM

Many important suggestions arise from the theory and the benchmarking itself, giving the reader a point to decide and reflect on the importance of the individual aspects, depending on what kind of a brand is in question, and some points are crucial for all brands. In addition to the findings of the research part, the following matters are suggestions from the author, that in the authors opinion, are required to be taken into consideration when planning and executing branding and marketing within social media. The suggestions are compiled on sub-sections based on the given research questions, with the goal of distinguishing the results. Thus, the research question of: What are the best approaches to social media marketing, is answered when handling the sub-sections related to marketing.

6.1 What are the key strategies of building strong brand image and equity?

Brands should start building the foundation of the brand through distinguishing the brand through its unique identity, values, and mission, to truly create a persona, that customers can connect and refer to, thus the branding needs to be executed in a way that represents the reliability, transparency, and willingness to provide value for the customers at the highest level. When executed successfully, the effects of word-of-mouth can truly raise brand awareness and grow the brand substantially, thus requiring not only well executed branding, but having the product quality bring value to its user and fulfil the needs of the customers. Brands may creatively provide even further value through different operations, for example, by creating engaging content, establishing brand events, and pop-up stores.

Understanding the difference in service or product-oriented focus and story or community-oriented focus, is crucial when building and marketing a brand, thus in sports apparel markets, if the products are highly innovative and one of a kind in the markets, the marketing may be product oriented, and when branding clothing for lifestyle use, the most suitable approach is to distinguish the brand and every important aspect behind the products and the brand itself, to ensure connecting between the customer and the brand, and not only connecting through the products.

6.2 What is the impact of social media marketing vs traditional marketing in branding?

Market research is mentioned several times in the theory part, but the importance of knowing the competitors and the target audience cannot be emphasized enough, as it helps brands to understand how to differentiate and position, and ultimately bring added value for the target audience. Social media

and its level of connection, bring large opportunities for growth, and simultaneously helps brands to understand and analyse the competitors better than before. Both establishing a brand and further developing an existing brand, can benefit enormously from analysing factors that may not yet be at a sufficient level, through understanding how competitors may be executing some actions better. Knowing your competitors combined with proper market/target audience segmentation, knowing who the target audience is and what distinguishes them, is key to finding the right customers and providing a sufficient solution to their needs, thus showing a way for product development, if value proposition needs to be distinguished better.

In terms of marketing the brand, its products, engaging the target audience, and communicating with them by utilizing multiple platforms is suggested, and it is important to note, that certain target audiences may be in varying platforms, thus making individually varying quality content that entertain and engage the audience is required to attain new customers in different channels, and ultimately drive results. As showcased in the benchmarking, it is suggested to engage and interact with the brand community/audience on all platforms in some way, but especially Twitter, can be a great platform for two-way interaction, whereas Instagram and Facebook may be more for brand posts, promotions, and sneak peaks to upcoming projects and products. YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok are suggested to be used in entertaining the audience through high-quality content, that is inspiring, engaging, educative, and perhaps showing what happens behind the scenes, as customers can connect deeper with the brand, when communications are consistent, authentic, and transparent. As the uploading of content becomes consistent, the search engines allow people to find the brand better digitally, which is why consistent high-quality uploads are important to execute. Branding and marketing through quality content, behind the scenes, and collaborating with people behind the brand, such as influencers, staff, and associates to showcase truly what the brand stands for, and does daily, thus further raising authenticity and transparency.

6.3 How is influencer marketing affecting brands?

Utilization of influencer marketing is highly suggested if a brand has the resources to execute campaigns, although influencer marketing can be done with fewer resources as well, for example by offering influencers free products for them to review and showcase them or have an established influencer program, where the influencer gets a percentage from each purchase made through their code. In terms of the success of an influencer marketing campaign for a small to medium size brand, if the goal is to drive sales, it is suggested to use influencers in the nano to mid-tier category, due to the more engaged audiences that are found within these categories. Utilization of macro to mega, or even celebrity influencers can be a great way to still drive sales, but overall, the bigger effects are then on brand awareness and recognition, and spreading knowledge about the brand, as these influencer followers are not as engaged, thus being less likely to buy a product just from a mega-influencer's advertisement. When choosing influencers to represent a brand, it is beneficial to find suitable individuals that already resemble a specific niche, where the brand operates, as attracting like-minded customers becomes easier, through an influencer that has attracted an audience through own actions for example, in showcasing a fit lifestyle, giving fitness and health advice, and other similar things, that interest both the influencer and the followers. It is highly suggested also that encouraging the target audience through influencers and the brand, to post user-generated content, as it helps a well-established brand to raise brand awareness, and attract new loyal customers, due to the digital word-of-mouth, that raises both trust and overall knowledge of the brand. Encouraging customers to posting UGC can be also done through fun challenges and other engaging things, that the brand establishes just to engage and board the target audience to an activity, where everyone is welcome to join.

Overall, the authors suggestions point out important matters, thus the theoretical data provides more depth to these research questions, from a different perspective. When starting to operate, it is suggested to deep dive in to

knowing your brand throughout, and utilizing the identified aspects, in a way that suits the specific brand the best.

7 EVALUATION AND THOUGHTS OF THE THESIS PROCESS

The research during this thesis enabled the acquiring of an in-depth understanding of the topics regarding the research questions, thus distinguishing the most important aspects that answer the questions. From the authors standpoint, the questions were covered profoundly and in a composed manner, and a structured view and understanding of the results was gathered, thus fulfilling the search of answers to the research questions, with an instructive, educative view of the given topics. The gathered information illustrated some of the main aspects that should be well thought and executed when looking to grow a brand, and accompanying the data with the benchmarking results, the outcome showed the current trends in SMM and branding. Thus, the results indicated how the current environment is in the sports apparel industry, where emphasis is on a positive and engaging brand mission, quality of products, two-way brand communications, and forming of a community through influencers and the actual customers. Accompanying the mentioned aspects with a well-developed brand persona, that is authentic and transparent is also key in growing a brand, as it is a way to provide more value to the customers and develop deeper relationships.

Due to the heavy emphasis on research during the thesis, the author finds the whole process of the thesis to be very educative, not only based on the findings shown in the thesis, but also through the points that were not written to the paper, thus giving a wider knowledge of the topics, and motivating to further research and learn within the topics.

Ethical rules were met throughout the thesis process, from forming the thesis contract, to finishing the research and gathering the outcomes. Research was

concluded based on sufficient and reliable sources, and the correct authors were recognized and referred to, if data was acquired from different literature or other public sources. Personal information of individuals was not gathered at any point of the thesis process, and information regarding the brands was acquired from public introductory sources. Reliability of sources is proved through using primary data in the research and accompanying the research gatherings by real examples from brands, in the benchmarking, to form a reliable outcome from the whole thesis.

Accessibility was ensured through different points throughout the thesis, by sufficient, logical, and progressive structuring and usage of a guiding thesis template, to clearly marked topics in the different sections, graphs, and other illustrations. Main and subtopics, as well as graphs were identified with heading styles. Accessibility of the graphs and illustrations was raised also through providing alternative text explanations, and additionally, an accessibility test was concluded to the paper in the end, to ensure unhindered access.

The boundaries were set to narrow the ultimate amount of research and keeping the author within the most important matters of the thesis as shown in the conceptual framework (Figure 1), without crossing to other important aspects linked to the same topics, that would have required to be covered profoundly, although not being main points, but rather additional information. The boundaries have created moments of consideration, whether a topic should be covered and included in the thesis or not, thus making the choosing of covered matters more important within the thesis, to be able to provide a comprehensive study, that is structured in a way that gives a deeper understanding of the big picture of branding and social media marketing in sports apparel brands, without going too deep into individual data and other additional processes within their operations.

The research has shown effective procedures to consider, when planning branding and social media marketing, although new solutions or operations are not brought up, the overall combination of certain aspects is distinguished within the research, that is suggested to consider as a whole, in order to fulfil

a well-rounded strategy, that aids the acquiring of loyal customers, a sufficient brand persona, deeper relationships, and additional value provided for the customers. Based on the research and empirical part, the suggestions and results are trustworthy, as successful examples are included and analysed to provide a sense of the biggest factors of success in the operations of these brands and accompanying the real operations with primary research data. Although utilizing the results, the route to success is not easy and straight forward, but when combined with the right ethics, values, and approach of a brand that brings value and serves the customers, brands are able to distinguish themselves and position successfully. The results can serve and aid brands in different industries, as the baseline for building the brand persona, thus the findings are not only chained to sports apparel brands, but can be used for any operations, where the importance of distinguishing the brand and marketing it within social media is high. For brands looking to benefit from this thesis, the importance of deeply knowing and understanding their brand and the target audience is key, before implementing and developing the points considered within this thesis, to get the best results, and being able to distinguish an individual brand that competes with other brands through individual qualities.

To further examine the topics handled in this thesis, the author would suggest diving deeper into the different details of branding and social media marketing, such search engine optimization, marketing strategy planning, sales traffic data analytics, and different operations measuring tools, that would be beneficial to use when already doing marketing and branding. These matters would serve the understanding of how to measure and develop current operations further, distinguish weaker points, and to understand the true reach of the brand.

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Comparison of the 5 benchmarking case brands

Category	Nike	Gymshark	Alphalete	NVGTN	ICANIWILL
Brand mission	Bring inspiration and innovation to everyone	Uniting a community in various sports to go further together	Inspire others to dream more, learn more, be more, and ultimately give more	Empower and help each other and those around you	Motivate and encourage others to work hard and embrace their performance
Target audience segmentation	Sports enthusiasts Demographic Psychographic Behavioural	Fitness niche Demographic Psychographic	Fitness niche Demographic Psychographic	Fitness niche Behavioural Demographic	Sports and outdoors niche Psychographic Demographic
Brand breakthrough	Innovation Branding	Influencer marketing Influencer community	Influencer marketing Pre-existing persona brand of owner	Influencer marketing Pre-existing persona brand of owner	Influencer marketing Influencer discount codes
Value proposition	Accessibility Innovation Customization Brand status	Affordable and trending apparel Brand community	Premium fitness apparel Quality exceeds price points	Affordable prices without sacrificing quality Distinct design	High quality apparel with distinct desing
Engagement	High emphasis on two-way interaction	High emphasis on two-way interaction	High emphasis on two-way interaction	Low to medium level of two-way interaction	Low level of two-way interaction
Main social media marketing channels	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, TikTok, Youtube	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Youtube, LinkedIn	Instagram, Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok	Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest	Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Tiktok
Frequency of brand posts (Instagram)	minimum of 5/week per account	6-10/week	6-10/week	3/week around product launches	6-8/week on launches 3-5/week
Influencer category	Celebrity/Mega influencers with 5k followers and upwards	Mainly macro-influencers	Mainly mid-tier influencers	Mid-tier to macro-influencers	Mainly micro-influencers
User-generated content (Instagram posts)	115 000 000	12 700 000	1 700 000	127 000	1 800 000
Active paid brand adds (Meta platforms)	46 000	2500	430	0	250

Figure 21. Brand comparison (Harju, 2023)