#AIRMAXDAY2019: IDENTITY AND ENGAGEMENT WITH

AIR MAX DAY 2019 ON TWITTER

by

Isabella Martucci

B.A., Concordia University, 2019

An MRP

presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Professional Communication

in the program of

Communication Studies

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2020

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION FOR ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION OF AN MRP

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this MRP. This is a true copy of the MRP, including any required final revisions.

I authorize Ryerson University to lend this MRP to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I further authorize Ryerson University to reproduce this MRP by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I understand that my MRP may be made electronically available to the public.

#AirMaxDay2019: Identity and Engagement with Air Max Day 2019 on Twitter
Master of Professional Communication, 2020
Isabella Martucci
Professional Communication, Ryerson University

ABSTRACT

Nike's invented holiday, *Air Max Day*, is celebrated annually on March 26th by sneaker enthusiasts worldwide. Participation in this event occurs predominantly across social media platforms. This pilot study analyzes how Nike's Air Max consumers engage with this holiday and with other sneaker fans across Twitter on Air Max Day 2019. This will be discerned by studying the images, captions and replies of the top fifty tweets posted to the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag on March 26th, 2019 using Schreiber's (2017) praxeological approach. By studying the themes and patterns present in these elements, this study seeks to better understand the content posted to #AirMaxDay2019 and users' motivations for posting it. For the purpose of this research paper, a "fandom" is defined as a distinct community of devotees, and this concept will be explored using John Fiske's 1992 work entitled "The Cultural Economy of Fandom" to discern examples of *fan productivity*, a term referring to the ways in which fans perform or express a social identity based on their object of fandom.
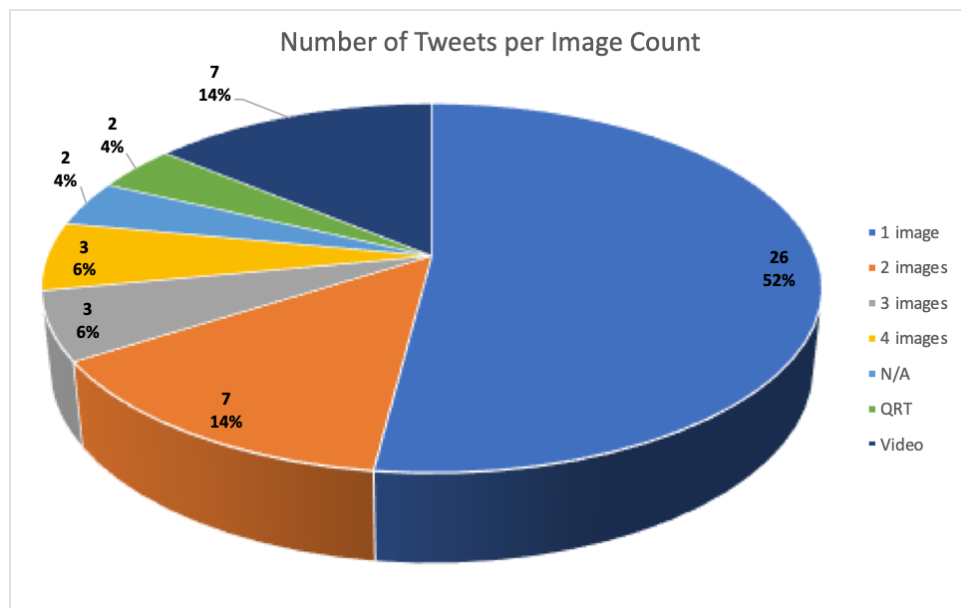
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES
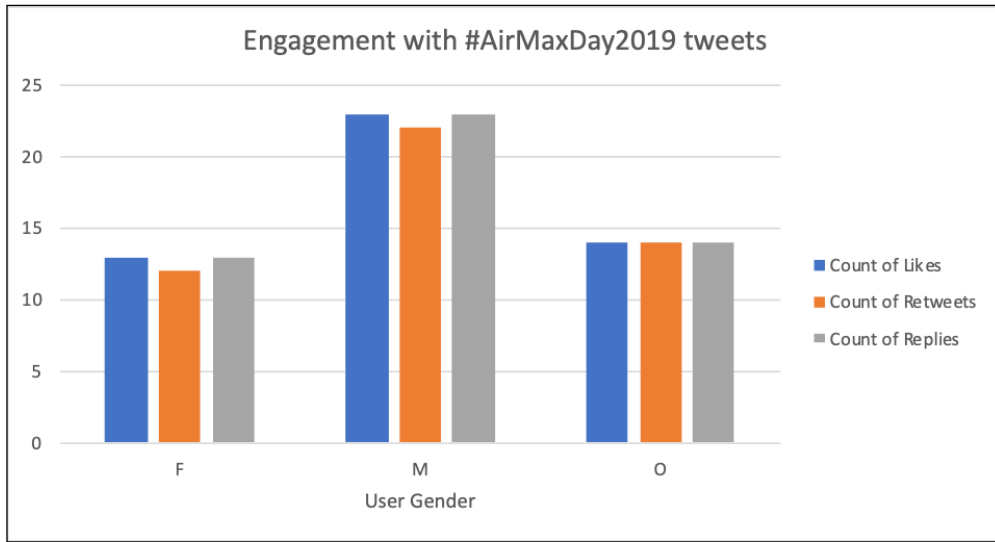
Figure 1 — Average number of "likes", retweets and replies per tweet, according to user's perceived gender.

Figure 2 — Breakdown of sample tweets according to the number of images they included (if applicable).
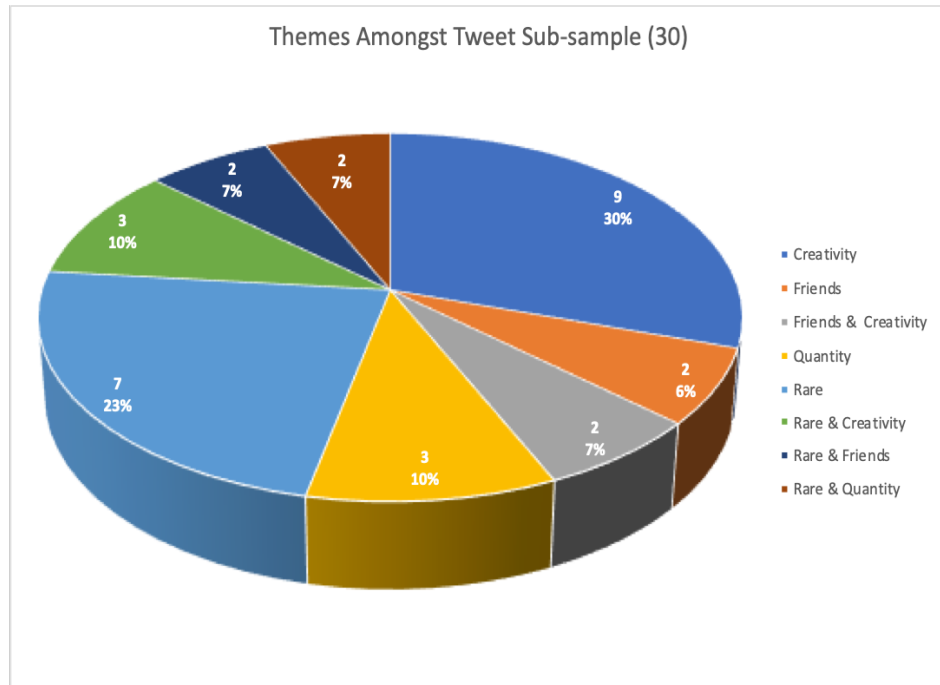
Figure 3 — Themes visible in the data sample's images, seen in different permutations due to my non-mutually exclusive coding process.
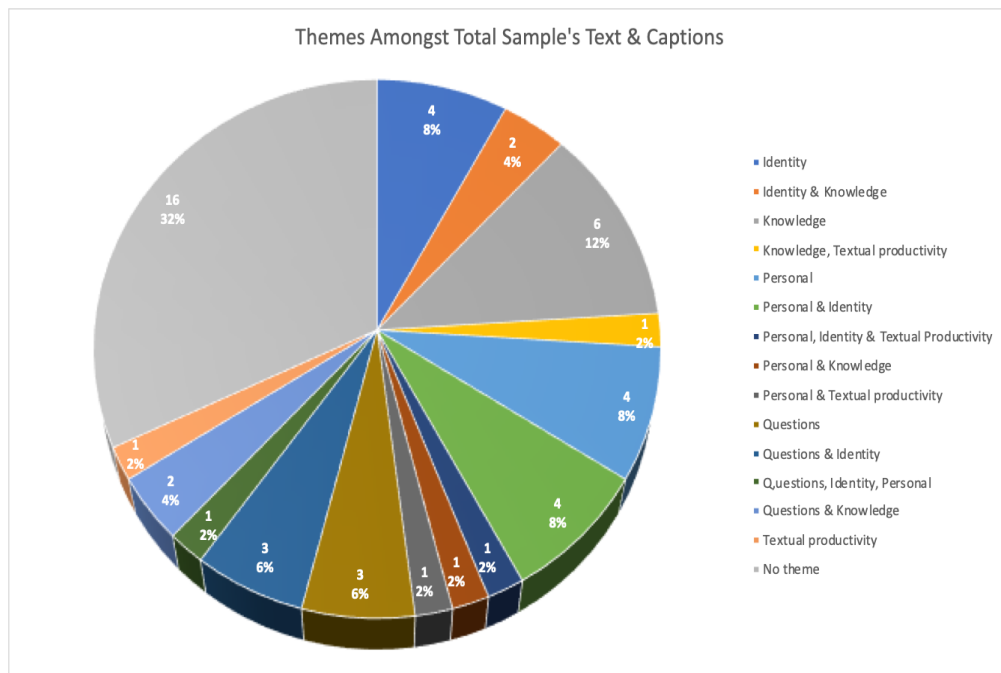
Figure 4 — Themes visible in the data sample's text and captions, seen in different permutations due to my non-mutually exclusive coding process.

Total replies to sample tweets	68
Images replies to sample tweets	11
Images replies featuring text	5
Images replies without text	6
Replies to sample tweets voicing critique	38
Replies voicing positive critique	22
Replies voicing negative critique	12
Replies voicing mixed critique	4
Anti-Nike replies to sample tweet	6
Replies to sample tweets asking questions	4
N/A (No applicable codes)	9

Figure 5 — Breakdown of different types of replies to the data sample's initial tweets.

INTRODUCTION

Nike, Inc. (NKE) is the world's most valuable apparel brand by a considerable margin, displaying "undeniable" success (Thomas, 2019) through its annual sales revenues totaling $38.7 billion (Forbes, 2020). Nike's high volume of sales may be attributed in part to its Air Max sneaker line which debuted in 1987 and today represents "one of the most iconic franchises" in the brand's history, even inspiring the creation of a holiday in its honour (Barker, 2018). Since its establishment in 2014, Air Max Day is now "celebrate[d]" annually on March 26th by sneaker enthusiasts worldwide (Barker, 2018). Although Air Max Day appears to be a predominantly "social media-focused holiday" (DePaula, 2020), its significance lies perhaps in the fact that it is even celebrated at all, since celebrations entail partaking in ceremonies which honour or commemorate important events or people ("Celebration", n.d.).

To a certain extent, celebrations are similar to *fandoms* in that they both negotiate concepts of identity and self-expression. Thus, in order to study the celebration of Air Max Day more thoroughly, it might prove appropriate to inspect Air Max Day from a fan studies perspective, which" focuse[s] on media fans and fan cultures", which are otherwise known as "fandoms" (Jenkins, 2012). For the purpose of this pilot study, the terms "fan cultures" and" fandoms" will designate distinct communities of devotees. To study Air Max enthusiasts in this context, one may apply media scholar John Fiske's framework for identifying *fan productivity*, a concept he defined as the ways in which fans "do or perform" a social identity related to their object of fandom (De Kloet & Van Zoonen, 2007, p. 325). Fiske's (1992) conceptualization of fan productivity views identity as a series of contrived performances rather than a fixed or genuine representation of oneself (p. 40).

Fan activities do not exist within a vacuum; fandoms are constantly interacting with their surrounding social and economic systems. The fiscal advantages of studying fan sentiments were presented in Crisp, Hickman, Janes, & McCulloch's (2013) article wherein the authors explained how fan opinions provide companies and franchises with invaluable marketing insights (p. 325). This strategy of monitoring fan voices is seen across multiple forms of entertainment, from sports teams to movie franchises to music audiences.

For some, Air Max Day honours Nike's "visible air" technology (Barker, 2018) and provides an occasion for the conspicuous consumption and display of limited-edition sneakers. For others, Air Max Day's emphasis on sneakers, an item closely associated with "youth subcultures" (Miner, 2009, p. 73), may offer an avenue for self-expression and for performances of identity related to such subcultures. This research aims to study online Air Max Day-related activity to discern fan or fan-like practices. To meet this objective, my pilot study will first review the current literature regarding common branding practices, Nike's marketing, fandom and social media research. Following this, I will explain the methodology applied for collecting and coding data, along with my rationale for its use. Lastly, my pilot study's findings will be discussed to extrapolate meaning. Altogether, my pilot study seeks to qualitatively examine user-generated content posted to Twitter on Air Max Day to extrapolate meaning by inquiring *what patterns or themes are visible in the user-generated content posted to Twitter on Air Max Day?* This question will provide a basis for answering a second one concerning users' personal connections to this holiday and their reasons for celebrating it: *Do consumers and fans participate in Air Max Day for the sake of performing an identity or for other reasons?*

CHAPTER 1 – LITERATURE REVIEW

OVERVIEW

In part due to its "savvy" and oftentimes provocative marketing (Draper & Creswell, 2019), Nike has received a great deal of both media and scholarly attention. The literature relevant to this pilot study includes not only sources related to Nike's specific use of marketing, but also sources reviewing generalized branding practices. In addition, other articles pertaining to the discipline of fan studies and social media research practices were equally essential. Altogether, the existent literature provided a solid basis for approaching my pilot study's research questions. However, there was an absence of sources that discussed the relationship between Nike's branding, its social media presence and its consumers. Further, Nike-related studies and articles frequently evaluated the brand as a whole, ignoring nuances between its products.

BRANDING

With respect to sources that discussed branding practices in general, Achenreiner and John's study (2003) examined the capacity for brand recognition in young children and found that this process begins at a relatively young age and creates enduring impressions. Achenreiner and John argued that brands can be "associated with conceptual or symbolic meanings", thereby "conveying status, prestige and "coolness"" to their consumers and influencing their purchasing decisions (p. 206). Building and strengthening these associations among consumers remains central to brand growth, competitiveness and profit generation (p. 216). Kozinets's (2016) article spoke to the popularity of brand identities and explained how brands with strong or desirable perceived traits are more successful in attracting consumers. Kozinets argued that, in addition to promising "quality, consistency, and reliability", modern brands are increasingly advertising their products to consumers as a means of achieving their idealized self-images and "states of being"

(p. 441). Kozinets also highlighted how this strategy is strengthened by hiring spokespeople or famous figures to better represent the brand and its identity to the public (p. 442). Another study by Archer, Hollingworth, and Halsall (2007) examined how adolescents and young adults construct their identities and communicate their status through personal style and brand identification. The authors referenced the existent literature discussing the sociology of fashion, which underscores" the relationship between clothing or dress, identity and social class" (Archer, Hollingworth, & Halsall, p. 222). Archer, Hollingworth, and Halsall maintained that these social processes relate directly to younger consumers' "performances of style through the coding and associations of brands like Nike with 'cool'" (p. 224). Meanwhile, an article by Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal (2011) introduced a caveat to this theory, arguing that lifestyle brands are less effective in expressing and validating consumers 'identities when this need is being fulfilled by other means. Still, Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal claimed that social media platforms provide an online space for consumers to come together and discuss their common interests, "thus enriching their social identity" (p. 66). Another study by Raju, Unnava, and Montgomery (2009) investigated how consumers with high degrees of brand loyalty view competitor brands and how they process negative information about their preferred brand. Raju, Unnava, and Montgomery found that consumers with high levels of brand loyalty consistently "underrate competitive brands" and demonstrate "attitudinal resistance" when presented with unfavourable information about their brand of choice (p. 21). Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli explained how consumers invariably form "strong relationships" with brands that exhibit" values and personality associations that are congruent with their self-concept" (p. 248). Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli's article presented how consumer-brand relationships can be forged through either "individual or group-level connections" to a brand (p. 248). In the case of the latter, the authors argued that these

4

"brand communities" represent spaces where brands can connect with consumers and "enhanc[e] customer retention" (p. 258). Wang, Sarkar and Sarkar (2018) introduced the concept of "brand religiosity", which they defined as "the centrality of a brand in a consumer's mind", not unlike an object of worship (p. 4). Further, Wang, Sarkar and Sarkar also noted how an individual's appreciation of brands may escalate to the point of brand religiosity through "a sense of belonging to [a] brand community" which entails "group interactions and participation in brand related activities or events" (p. 7). These and other branding concepts were explored specifically with respect to Nike in several other sources.

NIKE, INC.

The literature that examined Nike's specific use of branding included Araujo, Caldwell, and DeFanti's (2018) article which explained how brand recognition constitutes a critical part of Nike's marketing strategy. Araujo, Caldwell, and DeFanti asserted that Nike's focus on "brand recall and relevance" benefits the brand by inspiring "high perceived esteem" in consumers (p. 110). The authors also cited Nike's tactical use of collaborations and limited-edition releases as effective means of attracting media attention and "hype", which increases brand recall among consumers (Araujo, Caldwell, & DeFanti, p. 112). Carducci's (2003) piece claimed that Nike's market success may be partially attributed to its strong brand "aura", an intangible element which favourably distinguishes Nike from its competitors. Carducci defined Nike's "aura" as the "value added by the brand", which exceeds the "value contained in the materials of the product itself or the value derived from the product's use" (p. 39). Moreover, Carducci highlighted how Nike's brand strategy includes "lifestyle marketing", a concept which "casts the brand as the mirror of individual identity" and reflects it back into the public domain (p. 41). Kim and Sullivan's (2019) article explored Nike's successful use of emotional branding and explained the logic behind this

approach. The authors explained how emotional branding "stimulates consumers 'affective state" and represents a "critical factor in developing brand loyalty" (p. 2). Kim and Sullivan then defined brand loyalty as a "long-term, committed, and affect-laden partnership" between a consumer and a brand (p. 2), and argued that Nike leverages consumer affect by promising to deliver "energy and motivation" through its products (p. 11). Kornum, Gyrd-Jones, Al Zagir, and Brandis's (2017) study spoke to Nike's positioning as a "performance brand" and explained how this conceptualization appeals to consumers (p. 435). Moreover, Kornum, Gyrd-Jones, Al Zagir, and Brandis regarded Nike's advertising campaigns as "artifacts" which communicated Nike's competitive brand image to consumers and emphasized the performance-enhancing qualities of its products (p. 435). Warren, Batra, Correia Loureiro, and Bagozzi's (2019) article offered a "mixed-methods approach" to studying "brand coolness", which they defined as the consumer's perception that a brand possesses "aesthetically appealing", "high status", "iconic" and "popular" qualities (p. 36). Many of their study's respondents identified Nike as a "cool brand" and attributed part of the brand's appeal to its "highly desirable" shoes of "extraordinary quality" (Warren, Batra, Correia Loureiro, & Bagozzi, p. 52). Miner's (2009) piece appraised Nike sneakers as "object[s] of cultural product" in a" market of social identity" (p. 73). Miner proposed that consumers invariably make purchasing decisions based on not only "brand loyalty", but also based on the perceived "transformative" properties of the products in question, which they seek to internalize (p. 82). Moreover, Miner argued that identity is "not something biologically mediated", but rather it exists as a by-product of consumerism and performance (p. 91).

FANDOM

Among the literature discussing fandom and fan activities was Fiske's (1992) book chapter which provided a framework for evaluating and classifying acts of fan productivity. Fiske

distinguished three dimensions of fan productivity: semiotic, enunciative and textual productivity. Fiske defined semiotic productivity as an individual exercise whereby" meanings of social identity and social experience" are derived from the object of fandom in question (p. 37). Enunciative productivity was described by Fiske as "the circulation of certain meanings" within a local community and the "styling of hair or make-up" and "clothes or accessories" to reflect a social identity that "asserts one's membership of a particular fan community" (Fiske, p. 38). Fiske then explained how textual productivity involves" produc[ing] and circulat[ing]" texts of high quality among fan communities (p. 39). Further, Fiske highlighted the economic value of fan productivity by asserting how fan communities "provide[ ] valuable free feedback on market trends and preferences" and these insights are directly "related to the commercial interests" of brands and franchises (p. 47). De Kloet and Van Zoonen (2007) emphasized how fan culture harnesses performances of "difference" and involves claiming social identities related to one's object of fandom (p. 325). The authors built on Fiske's framework of fan productivity (1992) and proposed three new dimensions: cultural, performative and local (De Kloet and Van Zoonen, p. 323). Furthermore, De Kloet and Van Zoonen argued that fan consumption practices constitute strong examples of the "performative dimension" of fandom (p. 331).

SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH

Among the sources which addressed social media research, Crisp, Hickman, Janes, and McCulloch's (2013) article specifically underlined the value of fan discussions on Twitter, citing how brands frequently study this online activity to develop more effective marketing practices. This process, known as "brand management", exploits the "productivity and creativity of consumers" for corporate gain (Crisp, Hickman, Janes, & McCulloch, p. 321). Crisp, Hickman, Janes, and McCulloch also claimed that fan activity on Twitter represents a critical source of data

to marketers, who study and harness this affective labour to "engage more effectively with their consumers" (p. 325). Similarly, Carah and Shaul's (2016) study suggested that brands increasingly push consumers to adopt specific hashtags across social media to advertise on their behalf. Carah and Shaul cited the online "interaction between brands, cultural intermediaries, and consumers" as a popular marketing practice wherein users engage with branded content, as well as create and circulate their own images or hashtags about the brand in question (p. 73). Carah and Angus (2018) argued that brand-related user-generated content found on social media signifies the "increasingly ordinary participatory labour of promotional culture" and represents an important source of free advertising for brands (p. 179). Carah and Angus moreover explained that as consumers continue to document their lives across social media platforms, brands are increasingly engineering new methods of advertising on these sites to envelop users in a more profound marketing experience (p. 179). Hills '(2013) article explored Fiske's dimensions of fan productivity from a Web 2.0 perspective, finding that "digital fandom's affordances and activities indicate a fluidity of semiotic, enunciative and textual productivity" (p. 130). In addition, Hills differentiated "explicit" from "implicit participation", explaining how the former requires greater effort, while the latter is more casual and rendered more accessible by the many Web 2.0 platforms which encourage nonchalant participation (p. 138). Lastly, Harrison's (2003) piece acknowledged visuals as an important vehicle for communication and outlined a framework for studying photos and other visual content to extrapolate meaning. Harrison also specified that images exist as by-products of social processes rather than as instances of isolated creative activity (p. 47). Moreover, Harrison stressed how visual meaning is dynamic in that it is continuously negotiated between image creators and image viewers, while both parties are influenced by their own "values and attitudes", as well as by their social, political and cultural beliefs (p. 47). The final source consulted in the literature review

directly influenced this pilot study's choice of framework and is therefore discussed in the following *Methodology* section.

CHAPTER 2 – METHODOLOGY

FRAMEWORK

The methodology applied in this pilot study was predominantly influenced by Schreiber's (2017) article "Showing/Sharing: Analysing Visual Communication from a Praxeological Perspective", wherein she proposed a new framework for studying" visual practices on social media" through qualitative empirical research (p. 37). Her framework examined social media "practices, pictures and platforms" to better understand "patterns of picture sharing and sense-making within networked environments" (Schreiber, p. 37). Schreiber's research question asked how the "collaborative meaning-making of visual media take[s] place on social media platforms" and how this meaning-making relates to practices of "performing and constituting identities online" (p. 37). She acknowledged that individuals' identities are widely "understood as collaboratively produced" through communication practices (Schreiber, p. 39) and suggested that the ubiquity of social media has rendered identity construction "more accessible and potentially more reflexive", and therefore also more dynamic (p. 46). Further, she explained how a praxeological approach to her research would provide insights into how "everyday media practices" interact with their surrounding contexts using "social-constructivist, cultural theoretical perspective" (p. 39). Schreiber collected her visual data sample using screenshots and considered these photos' "corresponding framing" by also noting their" captions, likes, comments" and other forms of engagement (p. 42

Schreiber's analysis first examined the sample images' visual elements, namely their subjects, composition, structure, and lighting, among other considerations. Emphasizing the importance of studying users' pictures and personal photos, Schreiber claimed these "depict and display taste, aesthetics and embodied performances" of the individuals who post them (p. 39).

Next, her analysis explored the verbal "communicative elements" present in the sample posts, such as their captions and comments, to ascertain how they represented" discursive practices of collaborative meaning-making" (p. 42). Finally, Schreiber contemplated the "default settings and interface structure" of Instagram and Facebook, the social media sites she visited in her research (p. 42). Here, she stressed how the features and algorithms specific to Instagram and Facebook directly shape users 'experiences and interactions on those platforms. Altogether, Schreiber's framework proposed an in-depth method for analyzing user-generated content on social media in order to extrapolate deeper meaning. By adopting a praxeological approach to her research, Schreiber proposed that studying user-generated content, inter-user exchanges, and platform features simultaneously provides a more holistic understanding of social media practices.

Although Schreiber's research sampled posts from Instagram and Facebook, Twitter was instead selected as the platform of interest for studying user-generated content on Air Max Day for this study. This decision was made due to Twitter's reputation as a discursive social media site (Schiffer, 2019) and its platform-specific affordances which facilitate and promote verbal exchanges between users. For the purpose of this pilot study, affordances will be defined as the functions and practices that a social media platform extends towards its users. Twitter's" reply", "retweet" and "quote-retweet" functions grant users the ability to engage with content posted publicly by others, suggesting that the platform encourages commentary and dialogue among users. However, these interactions are necessarily brief given the constraint of Twitter's 280-character limit (Larson, 2017).

In addition, Twitter's specific use of hashtags was another contributing factor to its selection as the platform of interest in this pilot study. Across many social media platforms, hashtags serve as a means of "categoriz[ing]" content or text, rendering it easier for people to find

information relevant to their interests. ("Hashtag", n.d.). On Twitter, users employ hashtags to "index keywords or topics" online, allowing them to "easily follow topics they are interested in" and contribute to related discussions (Twitter, 2020, How to use hashtags, para. 1). Further, hashtags remain central to Twitter's organization and presentation of content; they are constantly monitored by the platform's "Trending", "Search" and "For You" pages, which display topical or popular tweets to site users at all times (Twitter, 2020, Twitter trends FAQs, para. 2).

To establish a specific time frame for the pilot study, Air Max Day 2019 was chosen as the sample year, chiefly due to its comparatively ordinary circumstances. A year earlier, Air Max Day 2018 proved to be a successful celebration for Nike. Many consumers were pleased with the brand's lineup of sneaker releases (Silver, 2018) which included both new Air Max models and "cult classics from the Air Max line that share[d] a visibly pioneering trait" (Nike, 2018) (Appendix 1). Conversely, Air Max Day 2020 occurred under unusual, indoor circumstances due to the pervasiveness of the COVID-19 pandemic and the stay-at-home orders in effect across many countries (World Health Organization, 2020, Advice for the public on COVID-19, para. 2). Air Max Day 2019, meanwhile, was less exceptional and likely more representative.

Due to the limited scope of my pilot study, a data sample of fifty tweets was collected from the "Top Tweets" of the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag posted on March 26th, 2019. Twitter's display of "Top Tweets" is not manually curated, but rather these tweets are "selected through an algorithm" which prioritizes posts which users "are likely to care about most first" (Twitter, 2020, Search result FAQs, para. 1). Within a given hashtag, the "Top Tweets" presented are those determined to be "the most relevant Tweets for [users'] search[es]" based on the tweet's engagement, keywords and other criteria (Twitter, 2020, Search result FAQs, para. 2).

Moreover, the sample size of fifty tweets was selected to accommodate the level of detail required by Schreiber's (2017) praxeological framework, which would entail studying many social media elements simultaneously to discern patterns or themes in the content. My decision to manually collect data for the study was also made following Schreiber's example and was feasible due to the small desired sample size. In addition, collecting data without the use of an automated scraper made it possible to become more immersed and familiar with the sample tweets during the research stage.

The research and analysis components of this pilot study were guided by two frameworks outlined by Schreiber and Fiske, respectively. Both were applied to study Twitter users' Air Max Day-related content and their personal connections to this holiday. The research process and initial analysis stages of my pilot study followed Schreiber's praxeological method and entailed collecting data on the photos, social practices and platform relevant to the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag to examine the patterns or themes visible in the user-generated content posted to Twitter on Air Max Day. Following the data collection and early analysis stages, Fiske's (1992) conceptualization of fan productivity, which also emphasized notions of self-presentation and expressions of identity, was then applied to answer the study's second research question of whether consumers and fans participate in Air Max Day for the sake of performing an identity.

CODING PROCESS

The coding process began with assessing the fifty sampled tweets on the basis of their engagement metrics, which would later be used to support the examination of my four main areas of interest, namely the users who posted the sampled tweets, the images included in these tweets, the text or captions accompanying these tweets, and the replies to the initial tweets posted by other users.

ENGAGEMENT METRICS

Where engagement metrics were concerned, the sample's tweets were assessed quantitatively for their number of "likes", retweets, and replies. Although these values provide only surface-level insights, they would likely become more significant when studied in conjunction with the tweets' respective authors (henceforth referred to as "users"), images, text, and replies. In addition, studying tweets' engagement metrics would highlight which items performed well in the Air Max Day 2019 hashtag.

USERS

The next element coded was the data sample's "user" population. The users behind the data sample's tweets were examined to better understand whether consumers and fans participate in Air Max Day on Twitter as part of their respective identity performances. Tweets were coded as either male (M) or female (F) based on the perceived gender of their users. This variable was coded to distinguish any possible differences between the tweets sent by male versus female participants in the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag. Alternatively, tweets sent from accounts presenting as genderless entities or organizations (O) were coded as such. This distinction was made to highlight any possible differences seen in the tweets sent from corporate versus personal users concerning Air Max Day 2019. Admittedly, this step in the coding process presented a challenge since it is

difficult to ascertain with absolute certainty the genders presented online by users. In spite of this, tweets were coded for gender (or lack thereof) at face value, primarily based on the Twitter handles and profile photos of their users. Perhaps an expanded version of this study might be able to obtain information about how all the users involved identify, but that was beyond the scope of this work.

Next, the sample tweets were coded by whether they had been sent from verified (1) or unverified/regular accounts (0). Twitter offers" verified badges" to "account[s] of public interest" to certify that they are "authentic" or recognized by the platform as being legitimate (Twitter, 2020, About verified accounts, para. 1). Given the legitimacy of these accounts, they are usually more popular online and frequently boast both higher follower counts and rates of engagement.

IMAGES

Once the users were coded, the sample's images were assessed based on the quantity of images per tweet, their visual composition, and on the themes seen in their contents. With respect to *quantity*, tweets were coded for the number of images they contained, with values ranging from (1) to (4), Twitter's maximum number of photos per tweet. Exceptions to this coding scheme were made for tweets that did not contain images ("N/A" was used to code text-only tweets), and for "quoted retweets", a particular type of retweet which displays a user's initial tweet below a replied message (these were coded as "QRT"). As well, the sample's few tweeted videos were coded as "V". The sample's tweets were then coded according to patterns visible in the *composition* of their images. Images which featured Air Max sneakers photographed alone were coded as (0), while images which featured users wearing their Air Max sneakers were coded as (1). In the event that a tweet featured images of both the sneakers by themselves *and* a user wearing the sneakers, it would be coded as (2). The following codes were used to discern *themes* present in the sample's images and videos. Images or videos that featured limited-edition or particularly expensive Air

15

Max sneakers were coded as "R" to highlight their rarity. Images or videos which displayed an assortment or extensive collection of Air Max sneakers were coded with "Q" for their emphasis on quantity. Images or videos that featured more than one subject, or depicted people celebrating their Air Max sneakers together were coded as "F" to signify the presence of family or friends. Finally, images or videos which demonstrated a sense of consideration for aesthetic factors, such as coordinated backdrops, outfits or produced "works" were coded as "C" to denote to their creativity. Tweets which did not contain any images or videos were coded only in terms of their available text and were therefore evaluated on the same basis as captions.

TEXT & CAPTIONS

Following the above-mentioned categorization of images, the text elements featured in each of the sample's tweets were coded to discern themes in content or meaning, either literal or inferred. All text elements from the data sample were examined using the same coding conventions, regardless of whether the text appeared by itself or accompanying a tweeted photo, in the form of a caption. Text (or captions) which posed direct questions to other users, or incited additional participation, discussion, or debate were coded as "Q". Text in the sample which articulated users' personal views and opinions on Air Max sneakers, as evidenced by personal pronouns, was coded as "P". Similarly, text which implied a users' performance of identity on some level, such as thorough contrived appearance, behaviour or dress, was coded as "I". Text which communicated a user's niche or "insider knowledge" of Air Max sneakers was coded as "K" to denote that they required a certain level of background information or context for a complete understanding of the tweet. For instance, in order for a tweet discussing a specific sneaker and its value to resonate, other users must also necessarily possess this knowledge. Lastly, the text

from the sample tweets which referenced acts of textual productivity or alluded to the creation of artistic works was coded as "T".

REPLIES

Excluded from the above-mentioned "text and captions" section were the "replies" posted to the data sample's tweets. While the sample's "replies" were also studied for their textual content, they were coded differently. Image replies, or replies to tweets which included photos, were coded as "IR". Replies which voiced a sense of critique or deliberation, either positive or negative, were coded as "D" to signify that they displayed elements of discussion. Furthermore, given the prevalence of emojis and the usage of specific or niche expressions across social media, these were coded together as "E". Attention was also paid to the specific types of emojis used and whether they negotiated a *specific understanding* of their use. The results from the above-mentioned inquiries are detailed in the subsequent section, *Research Findings*.

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH FINDINGS

ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW

Once the data sample was collected and coded, its components were analyzed, beginning with the tweets' engagement rates. The 50 sampled "Top Tweets" from #AirMaxDay2019 boasted an average 32.4 "likes", 4.12 retweets, and 1.6 replies per tweet. There was an average of 2.04 hashtags used per tweet, which suggests that many users were tagging their tweets with at least one other relevant hashtag in addition to #AirMaxDay2019.

USERS

While coding the sample's user makeup, certain disparities became apparent (as is illustrated in Figure 1 on the following page). Perhaps most significant was how 23 out of 50 sampled tweets were sent by male-presenting users (M). Not only did this figure represent 46% of the total sample, but tweets sent by male users constituted 34.4% of total "likes", 32.8% of total retweets and 47% of total replies. Meanwhile, only 12 of the 50 total tweets, representing just 24% of the sample, were sent by female-presenting users (F). Tweets sent by female users also exhibited lower rates of engagement and accounted for just 13.6% of total "likes", 9.6% of total retweets and 13.2% of total replies. The remaining 15 tweets, which constituted 30% of the sample, were written by companies or organizations (O) who were also tweeting in #AirMaxDay2019. Tweets sent from organizations or companies enjoyed 51.9% of the sample's total "likes", 57.6% of total retweets and 39.7% of total replies. Although the tweets sent by organizations boasted higher engagement rates, this may also be attributed to the fact that these companies had significantly higher follower counts than most average users. Finally, while tweets sent from verified accounts

represented only 12% of the sample, they constituted over 14.4% of total "likes", 20.7% of total

retweets, and 14.7% of total replies.
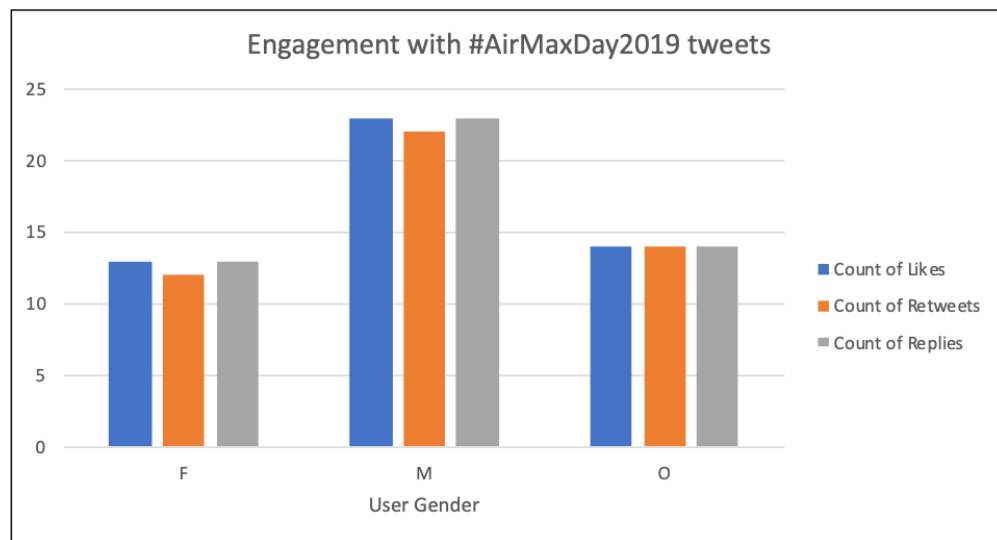
Figure 1 — Average number of "likes", retweets and replies per tweet, according to user's perceived gender.

IMAGES & VIDEOS

While coding the sample's next category of images, it appeared that 39 of the total fifty

tweets in the sample included a minimum of one photo, resulting in an overall average of 1.56

images shared per tweet. In addition, seven tweets from the total sample contained videos in lieu

of images (a visualization of this data may be seen on the follow page in Figure 2). With the

exception of one video that was longer than seven minutes, most videos were under 60 seconds in

duration.

Where the images' composition was concerned, 38 out of the 39 image-containing tweets

featured Air Max sneakers, and each of the sample's seven videos contained footage of Air Max

sneakers. However, the sample's sneaker-centric images exhibited certain differences. While nine

tweets from the total sample (18%) featured images of Air Max sneakers depicted by themselves,

26 tweets (52%) included photos of Twitter users specifically wearing their Air Max. Three other

tweets (6%) featured images of both the sneakers shown alone, as well as images of users wearing them. Among the images that depicted Air Max sneakers on their own, many showed the sneakers arranged in a specific layout, usually to display a user's collection. However, some users instead opted to photograph the sneakers in their hands to offer a better view of their details. Meanwhile, among the images that depicted users wearing their Air Max, there were slight differences seen in the angles at which the photos were taken. In the case of 60.5% of the tweets depicting Air Max, the photos showed only users' feet wearing the sneakers. Fewer photos (representing approximately only 15.8% of the tweets depicting Air Max sneakers) revealed users' bodies and their accompanying outfits. Furthermore, ten out of the sample's 38 tweets bearing images of sneakers contained two or more photos of a user's feet wearing the same pair of Air Max, taken from somewhat different angles.
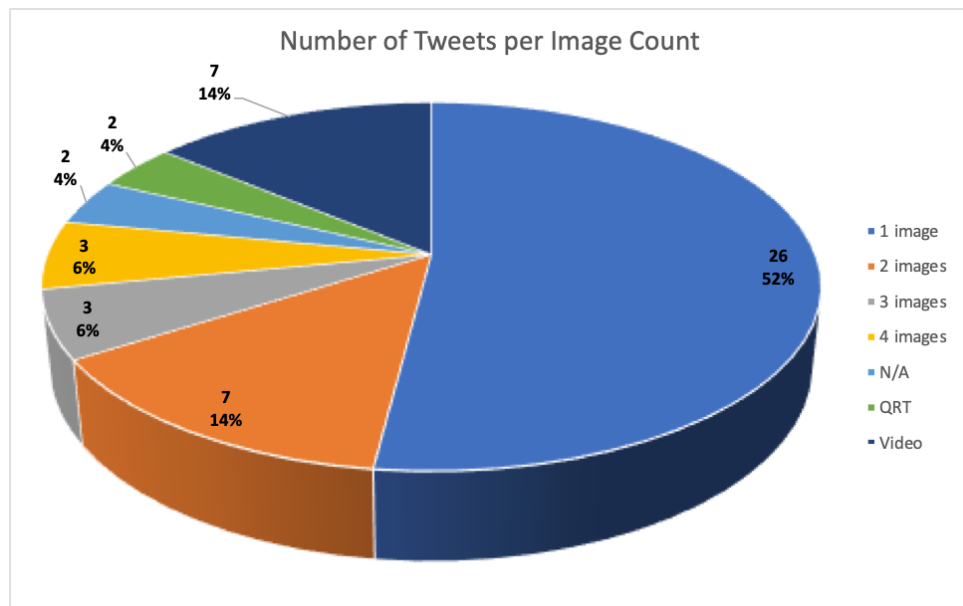
Figure 2 — Breakdown of sample tweets according to the number of images they included (if applicable).

Next, where the images' contents were concerned, 30 of the 38 tweets which presented images of Air Max sneakers featured discernible themes and were coded according to four visible variables: rare or exclusive Air Max, collections or large quantities of sneakers, the presence of family or friends, and creativity. Since many images exhibited more than one of these themes, they were not coded as being mutually exclusive (visible in Figure 3 below, which presents different coded permutations of themes found in the sample's images).
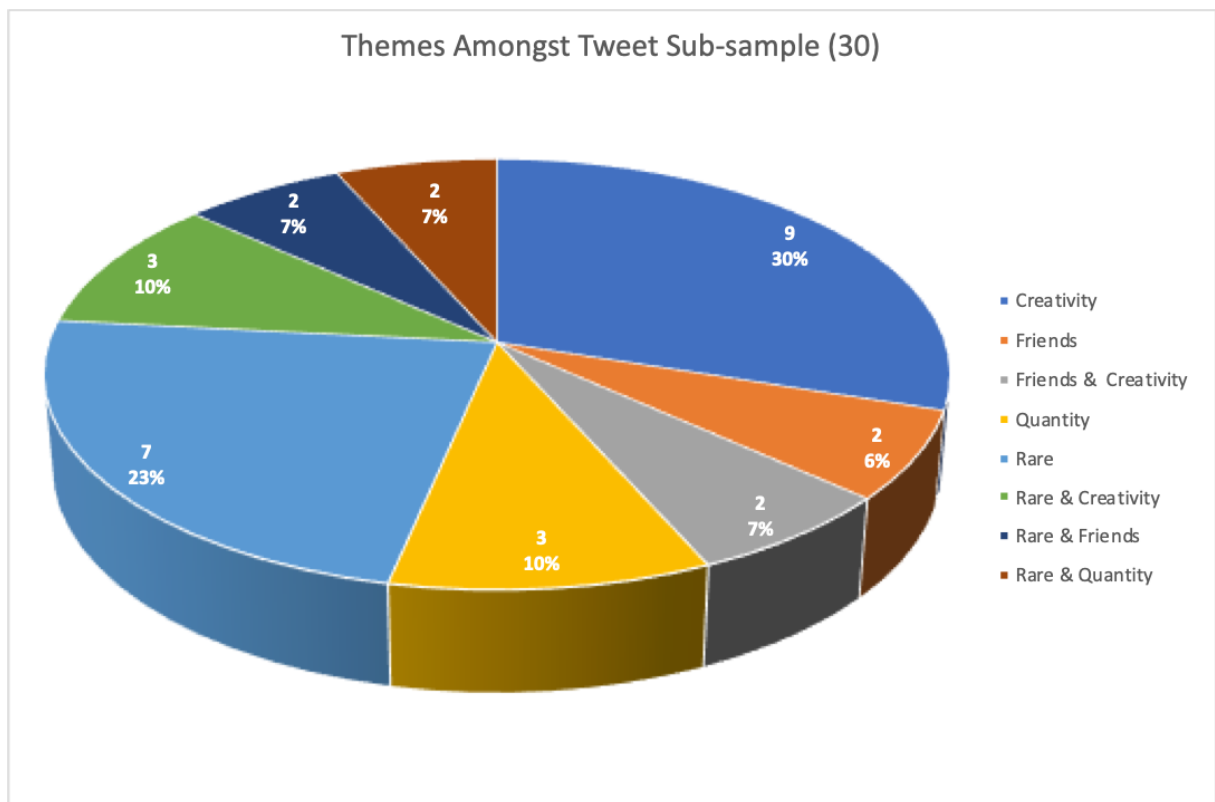
Figure 3 — Themes visible in the data sample's images, seen in different permutations due to my non-mutually exclusive coding process.

The sample's tweets were analyzed following the same order in which they are listed above. The first theme of "rare" sneakers was found among 12 out of 38 tweets that featured images of exclusive Air Max. Coincidentally, seven of these tweets depicted sneakers from the "Have a Nike Day" capsule collection (Appendix 2), released during March 2019 in anticipation of Air Max Day (Deng, 2019).

The next theme of "quantity" was visible in the images of three tweets from the total sample of 38 images in the form of depicted collections of Air Max sneakers. Furthermore, four tweets from the total sample featured two people in the same photo. Given the physical proximity of their subjects, these images communicated a sense of closeness and were coded as displaying "friendship". This idea was perhaps also supported by the fact that all four of these photos showed individuals wearing matching or coordinated Air Max sneakers in the same model or colour scheme.

Meanwhile, a total of ten tweets conveyed the next theme of "creativity" through their photos. Among them, three tweets contained images which used graphic design to produce Air Max-related art. The images in six other tweets implied user attention to aesthetic considerations such as photography and stylistic choices. An example of creativity in the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag was a tweet's images which presented four pairs of Air Max sneakers that the user had customized herself (Appendix 3). Finally, one tweeted image showcased an extreme instance of creativity through a user's tattoo of an Air Max 1 sneaker (Appendix 4).

Despite their brevity, the Air Max Day-related videos and their contents were coded using the same non-mutually exclusive themes applied to categorize the sample's images. Two of the seven videos tweeted to #AirMaxDay2019 included footage of exclusive Air Max sneakers. Two other videos depicted several pairs of Air Max sneakers assembled in a montage to display collections of shoes. Finally, four of the seven tweeted videos demonstrated a sense of creativity, either due to their editing techniques or because their content emphasized the creativity of the video's subjects.

TEXT & CAPTIONS

With respect to the sample's text and captions, this data was coded according to five themes: inciting the participation of other users, making personal statements, performing an identity, exhibiting a sense of "insider knowledge" and displaying evidence of textual productivity. As many of the tweets' text and captions portrayed more than one theme, these were not coded as being mutually exclusive (presented in Figure 4 below, which displays different coded permutations of themes found in the sample's text and captions). In addition, two quoted-retweets and two tweets without any visual content were also found among the top fifty tweets of #AirMaxDay2019, representing 8% of the total data sample. The four image-free tweets were studied only on the basis of their text components and therefore followed the same coding conventions as the sample's captions.
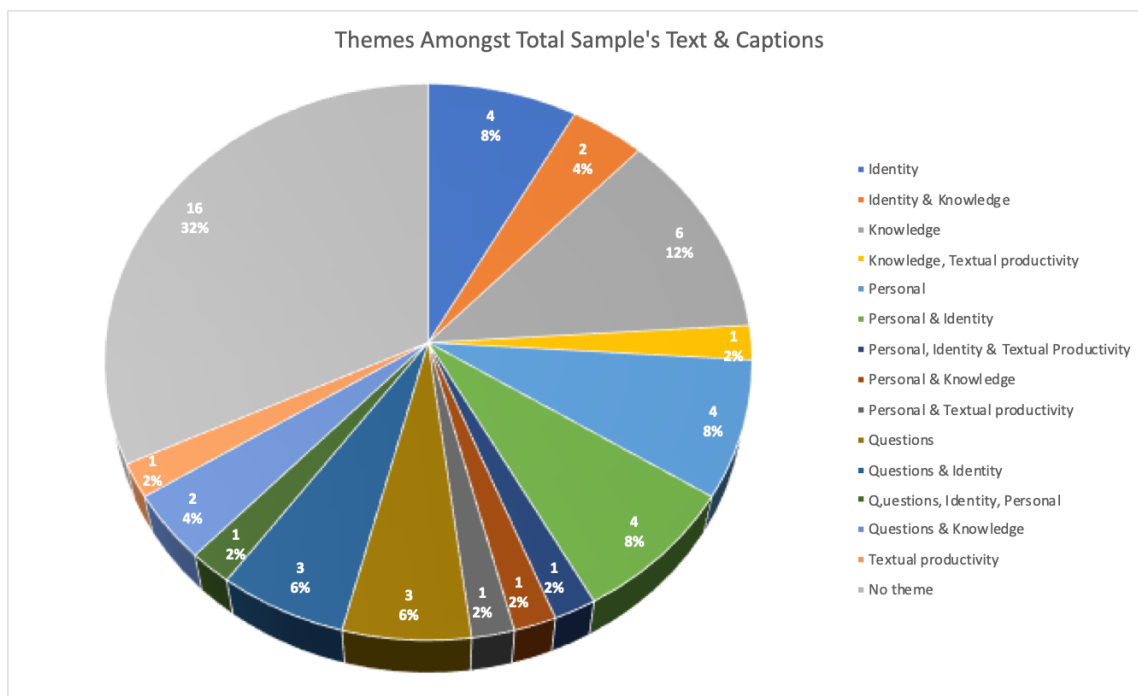
Figure 4 — Themes visible in the data sample's text and captions, seen in different permutations due to my non-mutually exclusive coding process.

The first coded theme of text inciting participation was visible in the captions of nine tweets, representing 18% of the total sample. In three of these tweets, an invitation to participate, discuss, or contribute to the holiday and its corresponding hashtag, was extended to other users in the form of a direct question asking for their opinion on specific sneakers. One of the sample's most engaged-with tweets, which received a total of 97 "likes", 15 retweets and 14 replies, featured a collage of six pairs of limited-edition Air Max sneakers with the accompanying caption:" Happy #airmaxday2019 what do you think of the lineup this year?" (Appendix 5). This direction question prompted 14 users to reply to this tweet with their thoughts about the sneakers Nike released for Air Max 2019. Two other tweets included captions which asked users what they thought of specific models of sneakers, while another tweet asked users whether they had been able to secure a limited-edition pair of Air Max from a collaboration Nike released with an art brand (Appendix 6). Meanwhile, three other tweets solicited participation in the form of image-replies by imploring users to reply to the initial tweets with photos of the Air Max sneakers they were wearing on March 26th.

Meanwhile, the captions of 11 tweets from the total sample were coded as displaying the theme of "personal" because they contained personal statements or made references to individual users' opinions. In four of these captions, users declared their appreciation of particular models of Air Max sneakers. One user expressed their enthusiasm by saying "The Air Max 180 has to be my favorite model of @nike Air Max's. Especially these @steadmanart joints. #AirMaxDay #AirMaxDay2019" (Appendix 7). Another user simply declared "#airmaxday2019 love my airs!" and included an emoji of a gust of wind or air (Appendix 8).

The next theme of "identity" was seen among other tweets' captions which expressed users' more profound sentiments for Air Max sneakers, suggesting they perhaps experienced a

24

deeper connection to Air Max Day. 14 tweets from the total sample illustrated how individual users related to Air Max Day on a personal level, or implied that this holiday aligned with their performances of identity. An example of this may be seen in one user's caption which read "3.26 is one of my favorite days of the year! Today we celebrate the visible air that @nike has blessed us with for decades!" (Appendix 9). Another user's caption wished a "Happy #airmaxday2019 to all the sneaker heads in the world", implying that there exists a community of people who identify as "sneaker heads" and "observe" this sneaker-honouring "holiday" (Appendix 10). Additionally, ten captions from this code group hinted at the performance of identity through dress and other stylistic choices. These users referenced wearing their Air Max specifically in celebration of the holiday. One user remarked, "Went with the classic 95s [for Air Max Day]", while another captioned their tweet "Air Max Day 2019. Rocking my favourite pair of Air Max. Air Max 97 Reflective Logos Black Red" (Appendix 11). Another user tweeted a photo of two people wearing matching Air Max and commented "Get you a girl that's as fresh as you. #HisAndHers" (Appendix 12), attributing the personal quality of being "fresh" to someone based on their taste in sneakers.

While analyzing the next text code of displaying "insider knowledge", it was found that 12 tweets from the total sample included captions which engaged specific knowledge of Air Max sneakers, such as which sneakers were exclusive and desirable versus those that were ordinary or uninteresting. Certain keywords were employed to distinguish and appraise sought-after sneakers, with users referring to rare Air Max as "killer" and "heat", or noting which ones were "unreleased" or "limited". Seven of the tweets coded for "insider knowledge" also received replies from other users who acknowledged the specialness of these Air Max as well.

Lastly, one tweet referenced an act of textual productivity in its caption which read "My participation for Air Max Day 2019", above a digitally illustrated image of a woman in a bird mask

sitting atop a car wearing a pair of Air Max sneakers (Appendix 13). This caption displayed participation in Air Max Day on two levels: both through the artwork included in the tweet as well as through contributing to the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag.

REPLIES

The final components for analysis were the replies to the sample's tweets. These were coded according to whether they contained images, whether they evidenced discussion between users, and whether they employed niche expressions and emojis. These categories were not coded as being mutually exclusive (a breakdown of the occurrences of these themes is visible in Figure 5, right).

Total replies to sample tweets	**68**
Images replies to sample tweets	11
Images replies featuring text	5
Images replies without text	6
Replies to sample tweets voicing critique	38
Replies voicing positive critique	22
Replies voicing negative critique	12
Replies voicing mixed critique	4
Anti-Nike replies to sample tweet	6
Replies to sample tweets asking questions	4
N/A (No applicable codes)	9

Figure 5 — Breakdown of different types of replies to the data sample's initial tweets.

Under four tweets from the total sample, a combined total of 11 image-replies which depicted Air Max were found. With one exception, these image-replies were all found under tweets in the sample which incited users to show off their sneakers. Furthermore, three of these tweets displayed *additional* replies to the image-replies, sent by the users who had posted the initial tweets (Appendix 14). These exchanges seemingly offered acknowledgement and affirmation among users. Six of the total 11 image-replies were not accompanied by any additional text or captions. Meanwhile, the text or captions which accompanied the five other image-replies were quite limited in nature and only included a

few emojis or simple messages. Overall, 63.6% of image-replies did not include any Air Max-related nor any Air Max Day-related hashtags and were thus only associated with the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag through their replies to other users' tweets.

A total of 38 text replies voicing critique were seen across ten tweets from whole sample. The text in these replies voiced users' critiques and appraisals of the Air Max sneakers shown in users' initial tweets. Of the 38 text replies which included discursive elements, 22 were positive in nature (representing 57.9% percent), and 12 communicated negative sentiments (representing 31.6% percent). The four others echoed mixed opinions. The sample's 22 positive text replies included many compliments on the images that users tweeted of their sneakers, confirming the appeal of these Air Max. For instance, this was seen in the replies of two users who commented "[those are] A staple" and "I need those".

On the contrary, the sample's 12 negative text replies voiced users' dissatisfaction with certain models of Air Max sneakers. For instance, one user remarked how they were not fond of any of the Air Max styles from a recently-released collection: "guess its just me. Dont like any of them and [the] Paris [model] is just terrible." Further, two negative replies from this group voiced users' disillusionment with Air Max Day 2019 celebrations. One remarked how "Nike did nothing this year to celebrate. Thos *[sic]* in the NY area got a last minute performance to Rich the Kidd n Jay critch at Brooklyn Steel which was cool but we though they'd drop some heat at the event. This whole lineup should've dropped before the 26th not after". Another user echoed this sentiment, commenting "Air max day was trash my dude. Nike pulled out all the stops to set air max day to another day in April. Fucking trash."

Meanwhile, the data sample included one tweet that was anti-Nike and anti-Air Max, wherein a user participated in the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag only to voice their preference for

Adidas sneakers (Appendix 15). Each of the six text replies found beneath this tweet agreed with the initial author's position; one user commented "I'm just amazed that #airmaxday2019 is actually a thing. Obsessed weirdo's", while another user claimed, "Most Nike's are shit". Altogether, three of the six replies to this anti-Nike tweet featured the symbol "///", mimicking the three slanted stripes of the Adidas logo.

Moreover, four of the total 68 replies asked questions concerning the availability of specific Air Max sneakers. For instance, one user inquired "Gotta have the Long 97s and NYC 98s… Anyone know if they are women's exclusive?" while another asked "Any shoes they selling or is it just a party?" about an Air Max Day event.

Certain emojis were repeatedly seen throughout both the positive and negative replies to tweets. The sample's most popular emoji was that of the "flame", which was used to convey appreciation for nice Air Max models. Other positive replies included the "hundred points symbol", the "thumbs up", "flexed bicep" and the "OK hand sign" emojis. On the other hand, replies which expressed negative sentiments featured the "thumbs down" and "face with tears of joy" emojis (Appendix 16). Overall, the sentiments conveyed by these emojis seemed to be widely understood by the users participating in #AirMaxDay2019.

Similarly, several niche expressions communicating users' enthusiasm were seen among the sample's replies. These included terms such as "flames" and "clean", which were seemingly used to designate nice items. Another user replied "stop flexing on us peasants" to a tweet which featured exclusive Air Max sneakers, praising the rare sneakers while seemingly lowering their own status as a result of not owning such a product. Conversely, the term "trash" was seen in several replies which communicated users' dislike of certain Air Max models.

CHAPTER 4 – DISCUSSION

TWITTER

In addition to the sample tweets' themselves, the platform on which they were posted was another component relevant to my overall analysis. This step was dictated by Schreiber's (2017) approach which requires examining a site's features to understand their impact on user-generated content. While some of Twitter's features are similar or the same as those of most other social media platforms and serve the same function, such as "likes" and replies (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 20), the retweet and quote-retweet features remain somewhat unique to Twitter. To retweet an item on Twitter is to display it on one's own profile and to present this tweet to one's followers. The quote-retweet function follows the same logic but also allows users to add their own comments in the process. By retweeting and quote-retweeting posts, users are arguably able to express stronger sentiments than they would be through simply "liking" or replying to tweets.

As was presented earlier, users' engagement with "hashtagged" tweets is shaped by Twitter's algorithms which determine how content is prioritized and displayed (Twitter, 2020, Search result FAQs, para. 1). Although users have the option to view tagged tweets chronologically, or sort them by photos and videos, the default setting remains that of "Top Tweets", which affords already-popular tweets even more visibility. Furthermore, Twitter's structure seemingly incites users to engage with tweets in an ephemeral fashion; tweets are published quickly and usually disappear as newer tweets are published. Overall, user participation in hashtags on Twitter appears somewhat fleeting and does not necessarily convey their sustained interest in or connection to a subject.

USERS

Once Twitter's features and functions had been analyzed, the data sample's users were the next area for consideration. The composition of users in this data sample was noticeably uneven. Given Nike's positioning as a sportswear brand, and the fact that athletics are frequently associated with masculine stereotypes and male gender performances (Archer, Hollingworth, & Halsall, p. 229), it seems perhaps unsurprising that more men than women contributed to #AirMaxDay2019. Another fact which might explain the disparity in the male-female ratio of the data sample is how Nike has historically "avoided producing and marketing apparel for women" to maintain their "masculine corporate identity" (Miner, 2009, p. 76). Today, sales to female consumers still only "represent less than 25% of Nike's total revenues" (Thomas, 2019).

When looking at the organizations from the data sample who participated in #AirMaxDay2019, it became apparent that these were predominantly companies or publications oriented towards sneaker-culture or streetwear. Due to the fact that these publications cover topics aligned with Nike's product offering and brand identity, their contributions to #AirMaxDay2019 seem fitting. Although, the tweets sent from organizations featured higher rates of engagement, these were not as relevant to the context of studying fan communities and online performances of identity.

IMAGES

Thereafter, the data sample's images were then analyzed to discern any patterns or themes and to extrapolate greater meaning. Overall, 78% of the fifty "Top" tweets of #AirMaxDay2019 contained images, suggesting that visual content was a significant dimension of Air Max Day 2019 discourse on Twitter. As mentioned earlier, the average number of images shared per tweet was 1.64, implying that many users posted multiple photos of Nike sneakers in celebration of Air Max

Day. Among these photos, there were certain differences visible in how the images presented Air Max sneakers. While several images presented only the sneakers by themselves, many others displayed users specifically wearing their Air Max. Further, select tweets displayed users' entire outfits, many of which matched their choice of sneakers in colour or styles. The coordination of Air Max sneakers and outfits seen in these images suggests an element of contrivance behind the photos, implying they were curated to acknowledge this holiday on social media. Another observation from the sample was that 26.3% of tweets featured two or more photos of the *same pair* of Air Max, taken from different angles. This seemingly implied that the users who tweeted these images evaluated their sneakers as being worthy of multiple photos.

With respect to the coded theme of "rarity", the notion of uploading a photo of "special" Air Max and this image then resonating with others online is significant because it suggests a common, yet still niche, understanding of these products, which would likely elude persons outside of this community. Moreover, the act of flaunting limited-edition or expensive sneakers in circles where these items are recognized and celebrated arguably communicates one's high status. Similarly, De Kloet and Van Zoonen (2007) have spoken to this phenomenon by referencing how fandom frequently involves "conspicuous consumption of collectors' items" and rare finds (p. 331).

Another theme coded and analyzed in the sample was that of "quantity". The few images and videos in the sample which featured assortments of Air Max sneakers, and boasted relatively high rates of engagement, suggested that this community values collections in the same sense as traditional fandoms. The concept of sneaker-heads amassing Air Maxes for the sake of collection aligns with Fiske's (1992) description of fans as "avid collectors" (p. 43). However, there is a

caveat to this observation; it remains difficult to determine whether Air Max collections are the result of a passion for sneakers or of conspicuous consumption.

The next theme of "friendship" was observed in tweets which included images of two individuals posing together wearing their sneakers, seemingly implying a sense of closeness and a shared interest in Air Max. In addition, each of these photos displayed the users wearing matching or coordinated Air Max, which was possibly a conscious creative choice.

Instances of creativity were also visible among the tweets coded as demonstrating consideration to aesthetics. These curated photos displayed outfits, graphic design work, colour schemes and artistic angles which drew attention to their users' Air Max. These photos were notable because of the user effort they demonstrated; users who shared these images had taken the time to assemble outfits, design graphics and organize amateur photo shoots.

TEXT & CAPTIONS

Several insights were gained through studying the text and captions present in the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag. Many of the sample's engagement-heavy tweets included direct questions or statements which incited participation from other users in the form of replies. In soliciting participation from others online, these users conveyed their views that Air Max Day is an occasion worth discussing. Moreover, the captions which contained direct questions arguably represent acts of affective labour wherein social media users are marketing on Nike's behalf by encouraging others to discuss the brand's sneakers online and contribute to the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag. This concept was explored by Carah and Angus (2018), who argued that there exists a "dynamic relationship between the commercial objectives of brands" and the "creative capacities of humans in cultural space" (p. 183) among other factors.

In addition, users' Air Max Day-related opinions were also communicated through captions which contained personal statements. Although many of these statements did little more than express users' preferences for certain Air Max models, these captions were still relevant because they included the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag and were therefore framed in the wider context of users discussing this holiday online. As Hills (2013) initially expressed (p. 138), the acts of using hashtags and participating in discussions online may constitute implicit participation in digital fandoms by social media users.

The sample's captions which suggested that users were performing an identity through wearing Air Max sneakers, and coordinated outfits, on Air Max Day were also significant. By curating their appearances in this way, users were arguably able to express themselves creatively and simultaneously assert their membership to a community that values sneakers, or streetwear more broadly.

Another code found among the sample's captions was that of "insider knowledge". This was largely seen in captions which leveraged specific sneaker-related expertise or demonstrated one's familiarity with Air Max models. By demonstrating their Air Max expertise, these users were able to assert their membership to a community that understands this information. In addition, these users' niche knowledge of Air Max also implies that a certain amount of time was devoted to learning about these sneakers.

REPLIES

The data sample's final components for analysis were the replies found below users' initial tweets. By replying to tweets with images of their own Air Max sneakers, users who had not tweeted directly in #AirMaxDay2019 were able to contribute to this hashtag and assert their interest in this topic through these acts of secondary participation. However, text replies to the

sample's tweets were far more common and featured other users' opinions on Air Max Day 2019 and Air Max sneakers, voicing both positive and negative sentiments, as well as asking questions. Overall, the replies included many recurring emojis and expressions. Not only did the use of specific emojis and expressions suggest a common vocabulary among members of this niche community, but these also implied the existence of a shared understanding of which Air Max sneakers were worthy of praise and excitement and which were not.

FISKE'S FRAMEWORK

Fiske's (1992) framework for studying fan productivity was applied for a secondary analysis of #AirMaxDay2019 tagged tweets. In particular, Fiske's approach was used to assist in speculating whether consumers and fans participate in the Air Max Day hashtag on twitter for the sake of performing an identity. As is suggested by the findings above, certain individuals' appreciation for Air Max sneakers goes beyond that of the average consumer. Through their contributions to this hashtag, these sneaker enthusiasts drew attention to the existence of a very niche community which celebrates "the revolutionary cushioning platform" of Nike's Air Max Sneakers (Nike, 2020). Given the research findings of this pilot study, it seems somewhat appropriate to consider these passionate users as "fans" of Nike, which allows for the study of their actions using Fiske's (1992) framework that proposes three dimensions of fan productivity. While it is perhaps unusual to consider sneaker consumers as a fandom, Fiske (1992) maintained that "[f]andom is typically associated with cultural forms that the dominant value system denigrates" (p. 30). This conceptualization fits Miner's (2009) view of the sneaker as "marker of social identity" for the oftentimes disenfranchised "subcultural groups that inscribe them with signification" (p. 73-74).

Fiske's first dimension of semiotic productivity concerns individuals' personal appraisal of their object of fandom, attributing to it a sense of value and importance (p. 37). Among the tweets sampled from the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag, this is perhaps best exemplified by the captions and replies which express their enthusiasm for Nike's sneakers and for Air Max Day, since these suggest that their users possess a favourable view of Nike.

Enunciative productivity, Fiske's second dimension, entails a deeper level of fan commitment. At this stage, fans congregate in communities and demonstrate their belonging to these groups through their personal style and choice of dress (Fiske, p. 38). Additionally, at this level, fans exchange opinions and views on their object of fandom (Fiske, p. 38). Certain instances of enunciative productivity may be found among both the photos and captions of tweets tagged #AirMaxDay2019. This is perhaps best exemplified through tweets which verbally and visually described the act of getting dressed in Air Max sneakers specifically in celebration of Air Max Day. Further, the hashtag itself arguably serves as an online space for this fan community to assemble and exchange thoughts on these sneakers. Fiske argued that fan communities "discriminate fiercely" and are strict in determining "what falls within their fandom and what does not" (p. 34), a practice which leverages a common and shared understanding of these terms. This may be seen in the replies to the sample tweets which critique select models of Air Max sneakers.

Finally, Fiske's third dimension of textual productivity involves fans creating and sharing high-quality texts among their communities (p. 39). With respect to the data sample of #AirMaxDay2019 tweets, the images which demonstrated creative choices insofar as graphic design, photography and styled outfits could be construed as casual acts of textual productivity, albeit of a lower caliber.

Overall, it would be inaccurate to attribute the above-mentioned examples of fan productivity to users performing an identity rooted solely in an appreciation of Air Max sneakers. Rather, the instances of fan productivity seen in the sample tweets from #AirMaxDay2019 align with Miner's (2009) view that "shoes have been decontextualized by youth subcultures to serve as objects that separate these cultural groups from outside social control and domination" (p. 73). Thus, by participating in #AirMaxDay2019, these users are perhaps articulating identities related to streetwear, hip-hop and youth subcultures, which have all been historically associated with sneakers (Miner, p. 81).

LIMITATIONS

Although my research probed the world of Air Max enthusiasts on Twitter, offering certain insights into the actions of this community, it was admittedly of limited scope. Although the small sample size of my pilot study allowed for manual data collection and the detailed inspection of each item, it would be ideal to reproduce the study on a larger scale. Similarly, this pilot study could also be reproduced on an annual basis to discern any changes visible from year to year in terms of the content or sentiments expressed in the #AirMaxDay hashtag. Further, this research could perhaps generate more compelling insights on the topics of Air Max Day and online participation if it was investigated using visual cross-platform analysis. This methodology, conceived by Pearce et al. (2020), studies a single theme across various social media platforms simultaneously to obtain a more complete sense of users 'sentiments on the issue. An added benefit of visual cross-platform analysis is that it also highlights differences in user-generated content across platforms (Pearce et al., p. 175).

CONCLUSION

Since its establishment in 2014, the celebration of Air Max Day has highlighted a unique community of sneaker enthusiasts both online and in person. However, Nike's reasons for creating such a holiday remain fairly evident and underscore the brand's continual aim to increase sales (Welty, 2020). For most, Air Max Day represents an occasion created by a brand "with the goal of selling more shoes" (Welty, 2020), but for others, March 26th provides an opportunity to connect with people online and communicate their interest in these sneakers as well as their sense of "self".

The decades-long "retail race" between Nike and other sports brands such as Adidas, Reebok, and Under Armour is as tense as ever (Danziger, 2017), and given Nike's competitiveness and success in the sportswear industry (Araujo, Caldwell, & DeFanti, p. 109), its strategy of fabricating a holiday could prove an interesting avenue for other brands to explore in the future. Although Nike still holds a pronounced lead over other brands in terms of sales (O'Connell, 2019), this situation could certainly change in the years to come if other sportswear brands adopt similarly immersive marketing practices.

My pilot study sought to examine how consumers engage with Air Max Day on Twitter and understand their connection to this holiday, as well as their reasons for celebrating it, by asking the following questions: what patterns or themes are visible in the user-generated content posted to Twitter on Air Max Day? Do consumers and fans participate in Air Max Day for the sake of performing an identity or for other reasons? These questions were addressed by examining the images, text, and replies of the "Top" fifty tweets in the #AirMaxDay2019 hashtag posted by men, women and organizations. The majority of tweets in this hashtag featured one or more images of Air Max sneakers, both worn by users and depicted by themselves. Various themes seen across

these images included rare Air Max, sneaker collections, friends or family members, and displays of creativity. Among the captions of the sample tweets, several users asked direct questions or made remarks to incite participation from others browsing the hashtag. Users also expressed their personal views and referenced their participation in Air Max Day by wearing their sneakers. Several other captions alluded to possessing knowledge uniquely relevant to this community. The replies to the sampled tweets featured a combination of images of Air Max sneakers, as well as examples of critique or discussion of Air Max Day, and emojis and expressions.

This pilot study suggests that certain patterns and themes exist among the tweets posted on Air Max Day, namely that these consist predominantly of visual content in the form of photos and videos which display users' Air Max sneakers. Additionally, discursive textual content was also found in the form of captions and replies to tweets. With respect to whether consumers and fans participate in Air Max Day on Twitter for the sake of performing an identity, it could be argued that they do, but in a limited sense. As mentioned previously, Fiske's (1992) conceptualization of fan productivity posits that identity is not a fixed representation of oneself but rather an ongoing contrived performance (p. 40). In the case of the twitter users in this pilot study, their identity performances are likely not related directly to Air Max, but rather to youth and other subcultures for which sneakers represent accessories "located within the context" of their communities (Miner, 2009, p. 84). Furthermore, the extent to which these identities were conveyed varied considerably across tweets found in the sample.

Overall, in addition to providing a space for individuals wanting to express their identity or simply voice their enthusiasm for sneakers, Air Max Day's celebration across social media also suggests that brands occupy an important space in consumers' daily lives. Wang, Sarkar, and Sarkar (2018) have discussed the concept of consumer loyalty and dedication towards brands,

citing how consumers invariably identify with brands that reflect their self-concept and therefore offer a "vehicle by which a person can express his or her self" (p. 8). In these cases, this consumer affinity for labels, fuelled by individuals' ongoing construction of self and performance of identity, more closely resembles "brand devotion", a term coined by Wang, Sarkar and Sarkar which "indicates a long-term commitment" consumers feel towards brands (p. 12). As is perhaps exemplified through participation in Air Max Day across social media, consumers' devotion to brands oftentimes manifests in a sense of membership to a larger brand community. Although brand communities sustain a facet of these individuals' self-concept, they simultaneously uphold the consumer capitalist system under which this pseudo-sense of self is artificially constructed. In belonging to brand communities, individuals seemingly conflate impassioned consumerism with identity expression.

10365 words

Appendix

1.   Air Max Day 2018 Line up (Nike, 2018)

2.   "HAVE A NIKE DAY" — Nike Capsule Collection, March 2019 (Sneakernews, 2019)

3. Example: Tweet featuring images of a user's customized Air Max

4. Example: Tweet featuring image of a user's Air Max 1 tattoo

5. Example: Tweet caption asking a direct question concerning the Air Max Day 2019 lineup

Happy #airmaxday2019 what do you think of the lineup this year?

6. Example: Tweet caption asking users for their opinions on an Air Max collaboration

Who all snagged the (crazy) limited Kidrobot x @Nike Air Max? Released in 2005, each pair came with a Kidrobot Bot Keychain and 1/5 blind-chase sock liners designed by artists.
#kidrobot #nike #airmaxday #nikeairmax #kidrobotairmax #kidrobotnikeairmax #airmaxday2019 #airmax

7. Example: Tweet caption wherein a user discusses their favourite Air Max

8. Example: Tweet caption presenting a user's opinion of their Air Max

9. Example: Tweet caption conveying a user's enthusiasm for Air Max Day

3.26 is one of my favorite days of the year! Today we celebrate the visible air that @nike has blessed us with for decades! I'm gonna start today with the VaporMax 2's. Something lite I picked up last year.#AirMaxDay #airmaxday2019 📷: @kenny_bobbyy

10. Example: Tweet caption wishing "sneaker heads" a happy Air Max Day

Happy #airmaxday2019 to all the sneaker heads in the world 👟💨

11. Example: Tweet caption describing Air Max worn for Air Max Day

Air Max Day 2019. Rocking my favourite pair of Air Max. Air Max 97 Reflective Logos Black Red. Which is your favourite pair? #NIKEairmax #airmaxday2019 #AIRMAX #AirMaxDay
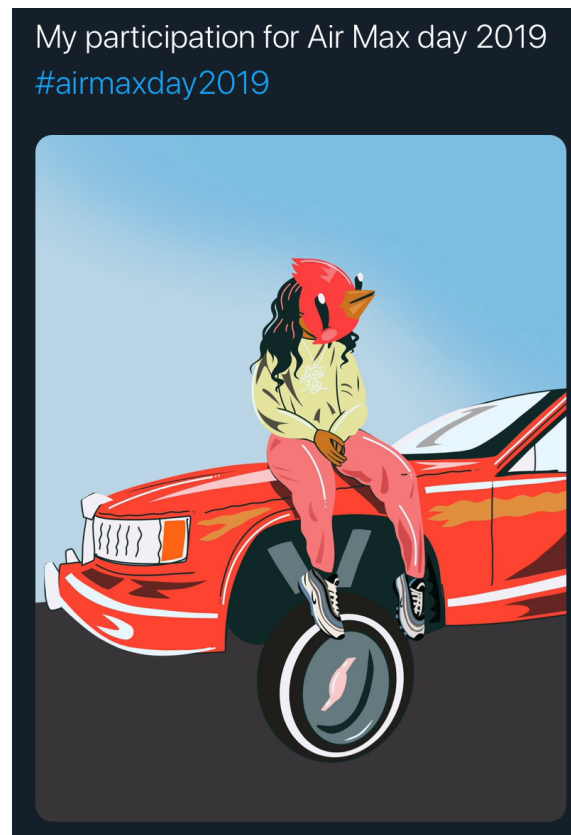
12. Example: Tweet caption attributing personal qualities to someone based on their Air Max

Get you a girl that's as fresh as you. #HisAndHers #AirMaxDay #FreshAir #AirMaxDay2019 @nike #HaveANikeDay #Spring

13. Example: Tweet featuring user-generated Air Max-themed graphic design artwork

My participation for Air Max day 2019
#airmaxday2019

14. Example: Replies acknowledging the image-replies of other users to an initial tweet

15. Example: Tweet from anti-Nike, pro-Adidas user

Didn't celebrate it last year, not celebrating it this year ...... 😂

#airmaxday2019 #adidasoriginals

#noairneeded

16. Assorted emojis seen among replies to tweets in the sample

Description	Emoji
"flame"	🔥
"hundred points symbol"	💯
"thumbs up"	👍
"flexed bicep"	💪
"OK hand sign"	👌
"thumbs down"	👎
"face with tears of joy"	😂
"gust of wind"	💨

References

Achenreiner, G. B. & John, D. R. (2003). The meaning of brand names to children: A developmental investigation. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 13*(3), 205-219. DOI: 10.1207/S15327663JCP1303_03

Araujo, D., Caldwell, H., & DeFanti, M. (2018). Nike's utilization of brand strategy to increase global competitiveness. *Competition Forum, 16*(1), 109-115. Retrieved from http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/docview/2133356891?accountid=13631

Archer, L., Hollingworth, S., & Halsall, A. (2007). 'University's not for me— I'm a Nike person': Urban, working-class young people's negotiations of 'style', identity and educational engagement. *Sociology, 41*(2), 219-237. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/42856983

Barker, C. (2018, March 26). *Nike Air Max Day: A brief history*. SemiPermanent. Retrieved from https://www.semipermanent.com/articles/air-max-day

~~Brand Finance. (2019). *Brand Finance Apparel 50*. Retrieved from https://brandfinance.com/knowledge-centre/reports/brand-finance-apparel-50-2019/~~

Carah, N., & Angus, D. (2018). Algorithmic brand culture: participatory labour, machine learning and branding on social media. *Media, Culture & Society*, *40*(2), 178–194. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718754648

Carah, N., & Shaul, M. (2016). Brands and Instagram: Point, tap, swipe, glance. *Mobile Media & Communication, 4*(1), 69-84. DOI: 10.1177/2050157915598180

Carducci, V. (2003). The aura of the brand: 'Just do it'. *Radical Society: Review of Culture & Politics, 30*(3-4), 39-50. DOI: 10.1080/1476085032000215718

Celebration. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary* (11th ed.). Retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/celebration

Chernev, A., Hamilton, R., & Gal, D. (2011). Competing for consumer identity: Limits to self-expression and the perils of lifestyle branding. *Journal of Marketing, 75*(3), 66-82. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/41228597

Crisp, V., Hickman, J., Janes, S., & McCulloch, R. (2013). Of proprietors and poachers: Fandom as negotiated brand ownership. *Participations*, *10*(1), 319–328. Retrieved from https://www.participations.org/Volume10/Issue1/15McCulloch10.1.pdf

Danziger, P. N. (2017, November 4). Winning the sports retail race: Under Armour and Nike hit the wall. *Forbes.* Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/pamdanziger/2017/11/01/winning-the-sports-retail-race-under-armour-and-nike-hit-the-wall/#620ef46f1a96

De Kloet, J., & Van Zoonen, L. (2007). Fan culture—Performing difference. In *Media Studies: Key Issues and Debates* (pp. 322-341). Thousand Oakes, CA: SAGE Publications. Retrieved from http://jeroendekloet.nl/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Kloet_vanZoonen_Devereux.pdf

Deng, V. (2019, January 15). *These Air Max 95s celebrate Air Max Day 2019*. Sole Collector. Retrieved from https://solecollector.com/news/2019/01/nike-have-a-nike-day-air-max-pack-release-date-march-2019

DePaula, N. (2020, March 27). *Nike athletes celebrate Air Max Day*. ESPN. Retrieved from https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/28960716/nike-athletes-celebrate-air-max-day

Draper, K., & Creswell, J. (2019, September 16). Colin Kaepernick 'Dream Crazy' ad wins Nike an Emmy. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/16/sports/football/colin-kaepernick-nike-emmy.html

Fiske, J. (1992). The Cultural Economy of Fandom. In L. A. Lewis (Ed.) *The Adoring audience: fan culture and popular media* (pp. 30-49). Retrieved from https://sta.rl.talis.com/items/2DB9812C-6F12-2F1D-7100-5DAF5637ECA5.html

Forbes. (2020, April 3). Nike. *Forbes*. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/companies/nike/#66a0dd926eb5

Harrison, C. (2003). Visual social semiotics: Understanding how still images make meaning. *Technical Communication, 50*(1), 46-60. Retrieved from http://stc.uws.edu.au/popcomm/assets/week12_harrison.pdf

Hashtag. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary* (11th ed.). Retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hashtag

Hills, M. (2013). Fiske's 'textual productivity' and digital fandom: Web 2.0 democratization versus fan distinction? *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies, 10*(1), 130-153. Retrieved from https://www.participations.org/Volume%2010/Issue%201/9%20Hills%2010.1.pdf

Jenkins, H. (2012). Fan studies. *Cinema and Media Studies*. doi: 10.1093/obo/9780199791286-0027

Kim, Y-K., & Sullivan, P. (2019). Emotional branding speaks to consumers' heart: The case of fashion brands. *Fash Text, 6*(2), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40691-018-0164-y

Kornum, N., Gyrd-Jones, R., Al Zagir, N., & Brandis, K. A. (2017). Interplay between intended brand identity and identities in a Nike related brand community: Co-existing synergies and tensions in a nested system. *Journal of Business Research*, *70*(Complete), 432–440. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.06.019

Kozinets, R. (2016). Brand networks as the interplay of identities, shelves, turtles: Commentary on "Interplay between intended brand identity and identities in a Nike related brand community: Co-existing synergies and tensions in a nested system". *Journal of Business Research, 70*(2017) 441- 442. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.06.020

Larson, S. (2017, November 7). *Twitter will double its character count for most users*. CNN. Retrieved from https://money.cnn.com/2017/11/07/technology/twitter-280-character-limit/index.html

Miner, D.A.T. (2009). Provocations on sneakers: The multiple significations of athletic shoes, sport, race, and masculinity. *The New Centennial Review, 9*(2), 73-107. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/41949645

Nike. (2018, January 16). *Air Max Day 2018 line up*. [Press release]. Retrieved from https://news.nike.com/news/air-max-day-2018

Nike. (2020, March 12). *Nike's latest releases for Air Max Day 2020*. [Press release]. Retrieved from https://news.nike.com/news/air-max-day-2020-releases

O'Connell, L. (2019, December 13). *Leading sportswear companies by sales worldwide 2019*. Statista. Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/900271/leading-sportswear-and-performance-wear-companies-by-sales-worldwide/

Pearce, W., Özkula, S. M., Greene, A. K., Teeling, L., Bansard, J. S., Joceli Omena, J., & Teixeira Raballo, E. (2020). Visual cross-platform analysis: Digital methods to research social media images. *Information, Communication & Society, 23*(2), 161-180. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2018.1486871

Raju, S., Unnava, H. R., & Montgomery, N. V. (2009). The moderating effect of brand commitment on the evaluation of competitive brands. *Journal of Advertising, 38*(2), 21-35. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/27749633

Schiffer, Z. (2019, September 20). *Twitter rolls out 'hide replies' to let you tame toxic discussions*. The Verge. Retrieved from https://www.theverge.com/2019/9/19/20874847/twitter-feature-launch-us-japan-rollout-hide-replies

Schreiber, M. (2017). Showing/sharing: Analysing visual communication from a Praxeological perspective. *Media and Communications, 5*(4), 37-50. DOI: 10.17645/mac.v5i4.1075

Silver, M. (2018, March 29). *Nike's annual Air Max Day creates buzz for past and future designs*. Front Office Sports. Retrieved from https://frntofficesport.com/nikes-annual-air-max-day-creates-buzz-for-past-and-future-designs/

Sneakernews. (2019, March 11). *Have A Nike Day collection, photos, release info*. Sneakernews. Retrieved from https://sneakernews.com/2019/02/05/nike-have-a-nike-day-collection-photos-release-info/

Swaminathan, V., Page, K. L., & Gürhan-Canli, Z. (2007). "My" brand or "our brand: The effects of brand relationship dimensions and self-construal on brand evaluations. *Journal of Consumer Research, 34*(2), 248-259. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/518539

Thomas, L. (2019, June 22). *How Nike became No. 1. and how it plans to stay there*. CNBC. Retrieved from https://www.cnbc.com/2019/06/21/how-nike-became-no-1-and-how-it-plans-to-stay-there.html

Twitter. (2020). *About verified accounts*. Twitter. Retrieved from https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/about-twitter-verified-accounts

Twitter. (2020). *How to use hashtags*. Twitter. Retrieved from https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/how-to-use-hashtags

Twitter. (2020). *Search result FAQs*. Twitter. Retrieved from https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/top-search-results-faqs

Twitter. (2020). *Twitter trends FAQs*. Twitter. Retrieved from https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/twitter-trending-faqs

Wang, C. L., Sarkar, A. & Sarkar, J. G. (2018). Building the holy brand: Towards a theoretical model of brand religiosity. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. Accepted Author Manuscript. DOI:10.1111/ijcs.12430

Warren, C., Batra, R., Correia Loureiro, S. M., & Bagozzi, R. P. (2019). Brand coolness. *Journal of Marketing, 83*(5) 36-56. DOI: 10.1177/0022242919857698

Welty, M. (2020, March 26). Why we finally need Air Max Day. *Complex*. Retrieved from https://www.complex.com/sneakers/2020/03/why-we-finally-need-air-max-day

World Health Organization. (2020, June 4). *Advice for the public on COVID-19*. World Health Organization. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public