

# Stories that stick: the power of storytelling in social media communication of bean-to-bar chocolate businesses in Brazil



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## ABSTRACT

The present work sought to identify how Brazilian brands of Bean-to-Bar chocolate communicate on social media and how storytelling contributes to making this communication effective and attractive to the consumer. The research methodology involved a multiple-case design focused on the former brands of the 'Bean-to-Bar Brazil' Association. Data collection took place for three months from Instagram. Thus, 194 Instagram posts were submitted to qualitative content analysis. This paper is the first to address the storytelling strategies of brands associated with the Bean-to-Bar Movement on social media. Bean-to-Bar chocolates are those made by the same producer, from cocoa beans to chocolate bars. This industry is growing steadily, but only a few studies can be found in Brazil and abroad. The study's main results indicate that storytelling enhances communication strategies on social media, improves brand perception, and generates positive outcomes for them. The work highlights the main aspects that constitute the theoretical field of social media storytelling and shows them through the seven case studies. Furthermore, it



strengthens the arguments about the importance of storytelling for the marketing of handmade products.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Bean-to-Bar chocolate movement started in the United States in the early 2000s, and it comprehends a series of values related to product quality, *terroir* valorization, and respect to those involved in all its productive chain (Giller, 2017). This type of chocolate spread out in Brazil after some cocoa producers noticed the international market's interest in the fine Brazilian cocoa bean, which demands more attention in the planting, harvesting, and processing steps, and gives it a higher quality than that of the commodity type of cocoa.

Thus, to test the quality of the raw material produced on their farms, a few farmers started to produce the first Brazilian bean-to-bar chocolates (Andrade-Matos, 2018). The movement and the valorization of fine types of chocolate are growing nationally and internationally, which places Brazil in an attractive chocolate setting. According to Frangioni (2020), there were around 30 bean-to-bar chocolate brands in Brazil in 2017. Nowadays, there are over 140. Although it is a small market compared to the traditional industry, it has grown considerably in the number of companies and sales volume. Hence the importance of studies related to this market, which can bring theoretical and managerial contributions.

By considering the homemade production character of bean-to-bar chocolates, these brands typically have a relevant story to tell, and they involve both their creators and the bean-to-bar movement itself and the production methods – from harvesting to preparing the final product, the



chocolate bar. Concerning the founding partner brands in the Bean-to-Bar Brazil Association, we can see that the companies try to add value to the product by including exclusive and sustainable characteristics. Since this is a product whose price is higher than the market's average (between R\$ 15 and R\$ 25 a bar), they need to use good communication to approach and touch the consumer concerning the products' differential.

The new communication ways that came with the internet and mobile devices also brought new ways of interaction between companies and consumers. Digital media – such as cellphones, smartphones, and computers – and the internet connect daily activities and are part of contemporary life (Martino, 2015). That is the birthplace of internet social networks (ISNs), and they stand out due to the critical role they have played in marketing since they enable more interaction and proximity between people and organizations (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2017). ISNs are, then, a new way that companies have to issue information. The use of such communication platforms grows each year, which shows how important it is to have better and deeper knowledge about their effects and characteristics. In this sense, academic and market studies can give their contributions.

Moreover, as they try to stand out in the market, several brands seek to develop different communication strategies to spread their messages in an unforgettable way, such as storytelling (Xavier, 2015). Generally, stories are an essential social communication tool that individuals can use to tell others about their world, which plays a critical role in society (Godsil & Goodale, 2013). In publicity, storytelling is essential to build the brand's image (Xavier, 2015; Beverland, 2009).

From this perspective, it is also important to mention that people nowadays have the power to share their thoughts and impressions with an infinite network of users through the internet. With the more active participation of clients in evaluating products online (Kotler et al., 2017), companies tend to be less of a primary source of information, and the



communication takes place mainly through consumers' interaction (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). Thus, we see the brands' progressive need to develop different tools to reach clients positively, such as storytelling.

Based on that, we understand that communication can influence a consumer's purchase decision or add value to a brand and that, nowadays, these efforts are very present in ISN and are intensely used and disseminated by consumers. Therefore, this article aims to understand how the communication of the leading Brazilian bean-to-bar chocolate brands occurs in social network services and how storytelling contributes to this communication to be practical and attractive for the consumer.

The importance of this article lies in the fact that it is the first study that involves ISN digital communication, storytelling, and the Bean-to-Bar Movement. Moreover, studies about the communication of bean-to-bar chocolate companies in Brazil are scarce, even though the country's environment is favorable for producing this type of chocolate and has grown consistently. Therefore, this article develops a literature review about the constructs addressed, discusses the methodological procedures used, and presents the results and conclusions.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This section will discuss the theory used as a basis for data analysis and is divided into three sub-sections: 1) Internet social networks, which will explain what a social network is and how it differs from an ISN and a social network site; 2) ISN Marketing, which will discuss the importance of communication strategies that use social network sites to reach the consumer and enable the interaction between companies and clients; and 3) Storytelling as a communication strategy, including this tool's theory, which can maximize ISN communication strategies, especially in companies that sell not only products but also added stories.



## **Internet social networks (ISN)**

By analogy with the concept of signs in the Peircean semiotics model, the cyberspace social network actors must be seen as depictions of these very social actors in the offline world, which happens because of the detachment between the actors, and this is the main characteristic of the communication mediated by a computer (Recuero, 2009). Therefore, the ISN actors can be identified as blogs, Facebook profiles, or even role-play characters, not as material and physical beings.

When connected, these actors make the so-called nodes of social networks. However, Martino (2015) explains that the concept of node or actor depends on how the general structure is analyzed. That means that the actors can also be nodes of social networks transformation. For example, when seen from a network perspective of similar blogs, a blog is an actor. On the other hand, this blog is also a node that gathers social interactions in every comment posted. Therefore, one of the main characteristics of social networks is their relational character (Martino, 2015). In other words, social networks need interactions between individuals to exist.

With that in mind, studying social networks means seeing connection patterns of social groups and actors – or social structures—which makes the detachment of actors from their connections implausible (Recuero, 2009) since there would not be a social interaction but individuals who are socially isolated.

Furthermore, to understand ISNs, it is essential to separate the term “social network” from the way it is used daily in the society connected by the internet – e. g., online social groups – and the concept developed and studied by social sciences to explain types of interpersonal relationships. As Martino (2015) states, the social network concept used to explain the phenomena in cyberspace (Lévy, 1999) only means transposing a social analysis model into the digital context.



Therefore, an essential work to understand the ISN dynamics is that of Granovetter (1973). This author created the – strong and weak – ties concept to describe the interactions in social networks. The strength of these ties is measured based on three key factors: 1) The amount of time two people spend with each other; 2) the emotional intensity of this tie; and 3) how intimate they are. The stronger these factors, the stronger the ties are, and vice-versa (Granovetter, 1973; Martino, 2015). In other words, strong ties – in general – are represented by friends, family, and spouses. Weak ties are those between people who do not keep in touch much, such as distant colleagues.

However, the most crucial contribution of Granovetter's work (1973) for ISN does not lie in classifying social ties concerning their strength, although that is where it comes from, but in acknowledging the influence that weak ties have on creating and expanding social networks (hence the title “The strength of weak ties”). As weak ties are primarily present in people's lives more than solid ties, they can spread out in several directions and create new paths to connect them. Not only is that different concerning ISN, but it gets more potentially visible (Recuero, 2009). The sharing, interacting and consuming dynamics in digital social platforms exist the way they are today only due to weak ties.

Because of the quick way these weak ties multiply on the internet, the growth of the ISN population gets more and more prominent. More than three billion people worldwide are connected through these platforms, and this number grows 13% each year (Kemp, 2018). Thus, it is true that lots of information reach weak-tie users. Depending on solid ties in such environments exclusively would exponentially decrease the amount of data we access (Martino, 2015).

Finally, it is essential to differentiate “internet social networks” from “social network sites”. In this article, the tools used by individuals as interaction spaces, commonly known as “social networks” – e.g., Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram – will be called “social network sites” (SNS) as defined by Boyd and



Ellison (2008). To these authors, SNSs are software that allows 1) the creation of a persona through an account or personal page; 2) the interaction through comments; and 3) the public view of the social network of each actor.

Therefore, having presented the main concepts related to ISN and understood the differences between social networks as a sociological analysis tool and SNSs, the following subsection will address the relative theoretical exposure to digital marketing, which uses these virtual environments to spread its communication strategies.

### **ISN Marketing**

In environments with virtual connections, ISNs are responsible for changing the ways people interact by decreasing geographical and demographical barriers and, consequently, expanding the relationship networks (Kotler et al., 2017). According to Kotler et al. (2017), ISNs are responsible for empowering clients and making them more active in their choices. Frequently, people are only a click away from sharing their experiences with a particular brand and influence other users looking for similar experiences as consumers.

These users, in turn, play a fundamental role in the marketing strategies developed by influential organizations. The search for competitive advantage is more lively than before, and consumers' needs have become the focus of entrepreneurial marketing strategies more and more (Kotler et al., 2017; Solomon, 2016), especially after the rise of digital media (Kotler et al., 2017). Some examples are taxi companies and hotel chains, which have been hit by startups such as Uber and Airbnb.

Moreover, digital platforms – such as SNSs – are now essential support for marketing strategies since they enable closer relationships with the consumer (Kotler et al., 2017; Silva, 2018). In fact, with the massive ISN spread, new client support channels have been created, which is highly fruitful from the marketing point of view since it creates proximity relationships and even





brand identification (Alves, Costa, & Perinotto, 2017; Pinochet, Pachelli, & Rocha, 2018; Silva, 2018).

However, the same way ISNs play a positive role in marketing strategies, companies have negative consequences. For example, many consumers use SNSs to comment about and express their frustrations with a product's quality – or the service – related to a specific brand (Kotler et al., 2017; Pinochet et al., 2018), which can bring concerns for the marketing professionals since the noxious effects of negative word-of-mouth decrease the beneficial effects of positive word-of-mouth (Reichheld, 2003).

This situation intensifies as the number of SNS users increases. More than three billion people worldwide are connected through these platforms, and this number grows 13% each year (Kemp, 2018). To some users, sharing a moment through ISN has become more critical than even experiencing it (Yilmaz, 2016).

Based on that, companies have taken the opportunity to spread their marketing strategies in digital media. In Facebook, for example, it is possible to find over 140 million companies that use the application to connect to consumers (Facebook, 2019). Besides, this social network offers companies several tools to help them grow, generate jobs, and strengthen the economy.

Instagram, on the other hand, also has similar tools. Business accounts can offer products with prices and links directly on their posts. This tool can advertise products and services, expand the relationship with followers, strengthen empathy, and raise brand advocates (Alves et al., 2017). Moreover, as Instagram is mainly an image type of social media, it can make users' experiences more tangible (Alves et al., 2017).

After addressing ISN marketing in this sub-section, the following section will deal with storytelling as a tool that can help and maximize ISN communication strategies.

## **Storytelling as a communication strategy**





Storytelling is a traditional type of art. Before humans could share information through writing, storytellers were those responsible for carrying on the story of the world and sharing it through different cultures and religions. These stories also play a crucial role in building sense, identity, and behavior in different peoples (Godsil & Goodale, 2013; Xavier, 2015).

As humans who live in a society, we tell stories, whether about life experiences or simply about life itself. Godsil and Goodale (2013) state that the narratives surround us daily, influence our decisions, create meanings, and help us go through different situations. Mossberg (2008) agrees. To her, narratives work as a tool to increase emotional development and make people's lives more meaningful.

The essence of storytelling lies in the text by Joseph Campbell, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" (Campbell, 2004). Besides the book's importance in building mythical structures for storytelling – which are frequently used in literature, theater, and cinema – its arguments also carry a tremendous philosophical load. Scholars such as Durkheim, Jung, and Frazer, for example, have directly influenced the creation of such work.

Therefore, the storytelling structure developed by Campbell has been used in several knowledge areas, mainly because it is not linked to fiction, but it deals with the human psyche and works as the world and life's decoder. According to this author, mythology can express the obsessions and demands of a person, ethnicity, and era. That provides storytelling with a universal and omnipresent character (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008).

This structure is inseparably connected to the persuasive language processes addressed by Citelli (2002), as in the playful speech. Telling stories, especially with a promotional bias, implies that the reader is convinced of what is being delivered. In this case, the playful speech is the one that will cause persuasion from emotions and use different types of narratives that try to penetrate the user's imagination, such as music or literature. Thus, this discursive type becomes interesting for the commercial message, for it helps



to strengthen the ties by building an intimate relationship between the information's deliverer and receiver (Carrilho & Markus, 2014).

Therefore, from the communicative point of view, storytelling positively affects the user, for, through it, he can process information better (Escalas, 2004; Woodside et al., 2008). After all, humans are attracted by stories (Simmons, 2006) and learn mainly through them (Woodside et al., 2008). This topic is related to what was addressed in the article by Paul (2012), who argues that stories stimulate our brains and can even change the way we act.

According to her, this happens because narratives activate different parts of the human brain, and storytelling works on it as if the receiver were, actually, experiencing what is being told. In other words, listening to stories provides the users with the feeling of really experiencing that (Paul, 2012; Simmons, 2006). That is why narratives are such robust structures.

To marketing professionals, storytelling is even more critical since the act of telling stories can involve and catch the user's attention and works as a support to understand the main idea (Escalas, 2004; Hauff, Carlander, Gamble, Gärling, & Holmen, 2014; Woodside et al., 2008; Xavier, 2015). For example, to Woodside et al. (2008), people connect to others through stories, and products and brands frequently play a – primary or secondary – role in their lives.

Having that in mind, as the digital context started to be established among people – bringing in new connections, expression opportunities, powers, and uncertainties –, storytelling was also inserted more vividly so that today everyone can be seen as potential content creators (Laurell & Söderman, 2018; Xavier, 2015). This condition grew even more with the arrival of ISNs. They were responsible for changing the ways people interact by decreasing geographical and demographical barriers and, consequently, expanding relationship networks (Kotler et al., 2017).



In other words, together with the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and, consequently, the ISNs, the number of people who become part of this context has also increased. Likewise, with the growing number of researches backed up by storytelling, marketing professionals see the application of this concept in their communication strategies more clearly (Laurell & Söderman, 2018).

In this sense, Martinus and Chaniago (2017) point that Instagram, for example, is now very frequently used by companies, especially when it involves starting the construction of the brand image or being the pioneer in their field of operation. This entire context shows that ISNs are now a fundamental part of the marketing of several organizations (Martinus & Chaniago, 2017).

This way, it should be mentioned that the vast amount of information is one of the ISN characteristics, which enables debates, opinion exchange, and decision making. These factors are highly relevant for they directly influence the offline world (Kotler et al., 2017; Martino, 2015; Solomon, 2016).

At this point, we also take two statements into account: 1) the digital marketing's key role is to enable brand's action and defense (Kotler et al., 2017), and 2) storytelling can involve and call the user's attention and works as a support to understand the main idea (Xavier, 2015). Thus, consumers are no longer called the target audience for marketing but placed in a central and active position since they become potential storytellers.

For example, those seen as brand devotees are a great help to marketing professionals who share news about them in their own ISNs. Moreover, this type of client is authentic: their narratives are told from the client's perspective, which is of great value for those who are listening and has a much more significant impact than company publicity (Kotler et al., 2017). From the point of view of storytelling applied to marketing, Massberg (2008) adds that if the stories are sufficiently unique or different, they will be more exciting and spread out through word-of-mouth marketing.



The statements above comply with Martino (2015), who emphasizes that ISNs changed how companies have to tell their stories, and the process of creative reception starts to take paths that are different from those imagined by marketing professionals. In this sense, Xavier (2015) also states that companies themselves must produce stories, making their organizational positioning clear to prevent consumers or competitors from doing so – which can be disastrous.

Thus, as we take into account that a brand's essential role is to identify and differentiate (Cameira, 2016), we notice that storytelling enables the creation of elements that are unique to the brand – that is, its identity (Delgado-Ballester & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Mossberg, 2008; Ryu et al., 2018; Xavier, 2015), which places it in an exclusive market position.

After understanding what ISN and SNS are, how they can be used in the companies' marketing strategies, and how storytelling can influence and help these processes, the following section will address the methodological processes adopted.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study has a qualitative nature since it focuses on the essence, the understanding, the description (Bogdan, Biklen, & Alvarez, 1994), the discovery, and the meaning of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998) by taking the context into account (Godoy, 1995).

The multiple-case study is the most suitable research strategy for this study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Merriam, 1998), which involves data collection and analysis of several cases. The more cases are included in a study, and the more the variation between them, the more convincing its interpretation (Merriam, 1998).

Observing a series of similar and contrasting cases can reassure the findings' accuracy, validity, and stability (Miles; Huberman, 1994). Therefore,



even though the research clipping focuses on a specific association, selecting seven different brands that encompass this universe and that are the founders of the Bean-to-Bar Association contributes to this study's proposition.

Based on Merriam (1998), corpus selection happened on two levels. Firstly, the association that would be researched was selected, followed by the seven companies. This association is influential because it gathers 25 Brazilian bean-to-bar chocolate brands and deploys and leads the country's artisanal chocolate production. The companies were coded and represented by the first Latin alphabet letters (A-G) to keep the information confidential.

Data collection took place through March, April, and May 2020. During that time, we collected data from every post by the seven founding partners of the Bean-to-Bar Brazil Association on Instagram, which was the platform chosen in the country because, according to Martinus and Chaniago (2017), among the ISN tools available, it offers the best structure for public and direct communication, which makes it ideal for connecting companies or brands to their consumers. Therefore, a total of 194 posts were collected.

Data analysis was made through content qualitative analysis. To Bauer (2011, p. 191), this technique is used to "make inferences from a focal text into its social context". Therefore, we should observe the material's syntactic and semantic dimensions through the organization, categorization, and systematization of the data collected. The syntactic analysis must look at how something is said or written: vocabulary, word types, grammar characteristics, and forms. On the other hand, the semantic analysis must look at the correlation between (indicative and connotative) signs and meanings. Thus, Bauer (2011) defends that these two sets of characteristics allow authors to identify a context's intentions, values, attitudes, and views.

Based on that, the posts were organized and coded into spreadsheets along with the preliminary information on each one: type of post (image,



carousel – which consists of a sequence of two to ten images –, short video – up to one minute – or long video – from one minute to one hour); post's date and place; the number of likes and views; list of comments and captions assigned to the content posted. After this first separation, codes were assigned to each post and type of content to organize the corpus into categories.

After organizing the material, we went through the syntactic and semantic analyses of the contents posted by the companies so that we could browse through the reflections and generalizations that led to the conclusions that could answer the study's central question.

The following section will present the results and discussion in two sub-sections: 1) brands and posts' comprehensive data, and 2) storytelling as an ISN strategy communication.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Before reaching the results that answer the research question, the reader should be aware of the ISN accounts of the brands researched, that is, the data collected. The following sub-section will provide the reader with essential information, like the number of followers in each account, the number of posts in the temporal cut analyzed, how often each brand posted during three months, and the types of posts based on Instagram options.

### **Brand and posts' comprehensive data**

As previously mentioned, 194 posts of the founding partner brands that comprise the Bean-to-Bar Brazil Association were collected from Instagram for three months. Table 1 shows the brands whose accounts were used in the research, the number of followers during data collection, the number of posts within the study's temporal cut, and each company's location (city and state).



**Table 1.** A thorough layout of the brands selected for the study within the temporal cut

(Coded) Brand	Number of followers	Number of posts	Headquarters
A	3,9k	46	São Paulo (SP)
B	2,3k	15	Barro Preto (BA)
C	3,9k	6	São Paulo (SP)
D	12k	22	São Paulo (SP)
E	5,8k	51	São Paulo (SP)
F	7k	40	São Paulo (SP)
G	10,9k	14	Ibirataia (BA)

**Source:** The authors (2021)

The numbers shown in Table 1 were taken from Instagram during data collection. The brands' headquarters location was taken from the Bean-to-Bar Brazil Association under the "Associates" tab, where you can also access links that will take you directly to their accounts. It should be mentioned that, in the accounts of over 10 thousand followers, the platform does not show accurate numbers for these metrics but only an approximation. That is why we chose to use the symbol K when necessary in Table 1 to say that the unit was multiplied by a thousand.

From Table 1, it is worth noting that the brands with the highest number of followers are the most active on SNS. Brand A, for example, has the account with the highest number of posts in the temporal cut, but with less than 4 thousand followers. Brand G, on the other hand, has 7 thousand more followers but 33 less posts. To Paine (2011), the number of followers and the relative frequency users update their accounts may mean more or less network influence.

However, this quantitative bias observation does not mean that each brand's quality of the content posted is higher or lower. In other words, the sheer number of followers concerning the number of posts does not influence the competency of the work performed, and it only works as an extra

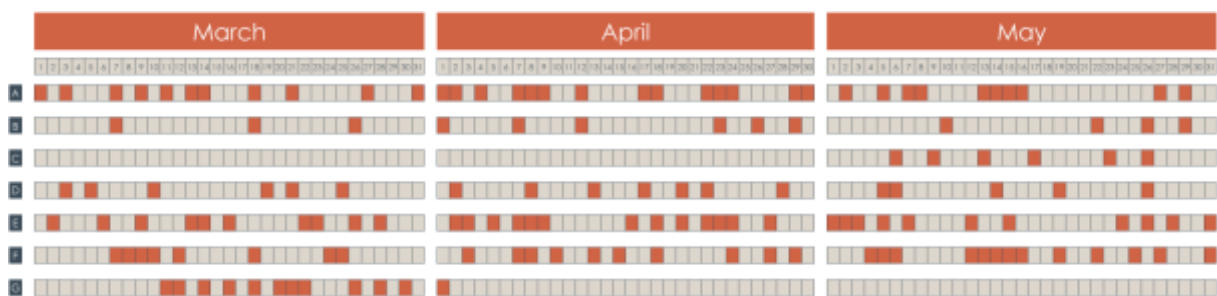




counting measure. On that, Paine (2011) points out that, to a company, counting measures add up numbers and come to a result, but it is necessary to measure this result through researches carried out by the companies themselves based on the definition of objectives, target audience, investments, and benchmarks, among others.

Figure 1 goes deeper into this analysis and shows the frequency of posts by each brand within this study's temporal cut.

**Figure 1.** Frequency of posts by each brand



**Source:** The authors (2021)

Based on Figure 1, it is possible to see that the Instagram accounts of the brands analyzed do not follow a posting pattern. Brand C, for example, has no posts in March and April, whereas G has no posts in May. Even the brands that posted every month (A, B, D, E, and F) did so disorderly with long periods without any posts whatsoever. It should also be mentioned that, in some cases, the brands posted more than once a day, which is relevant for, as previously mentioned, the relative posting frequency of a social actor in the network may show a higher or lower authority level (Paine, 2011).

Concerning the types of Instagram posts, there are four options: 1) Regular posts – only one image in the post; 2) Carousel – two to ten images; 3) Short videos – one to ten one-minute videos; and 4) Long videos – between one minute and one hour.

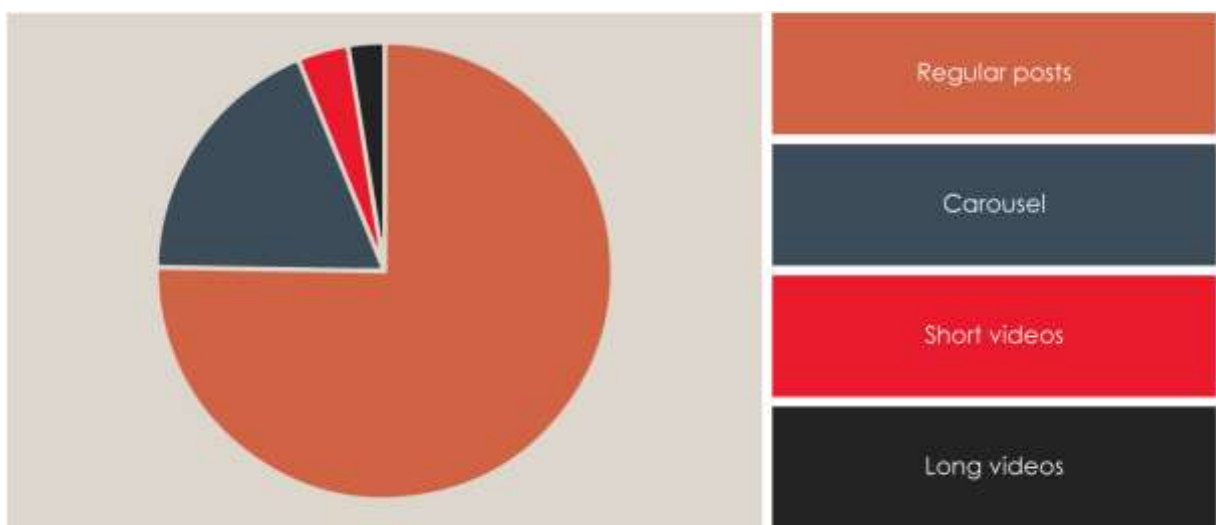
Academic researches show that public engagement to a social network is profusely related to the type of post. Strelakova and Krieger (2017), for example, show that photos with short captions can involve users more



efficiently. Thus, a company's more significant effort to create Regular Posts or Carousels can be more interesting than investing in videos, whether they are short or long. Although videos have a higher potential to make information richer and more efficient (Neiger et al., 2012), they are not seen as the most appropriate format to engage audiences (Strekalova & Krieger, 2017).

Concerning the Bean-to-Bar chocolate brands' accounts in this study's sample, regular posts are the most common type (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Types of posts from the brands analyzed



**Source:** The authors (2021)

From Figure 2, we can see that the most common type of post by the founding partners of the Bean-to-Bar Brazil Association contains only one image. Out of the 194 posts analyzed, 146 of them (75.26%) are regular posts; 36 (18.56%) are carousel; 7 (3.6%) are one-minute videos; and 5 (2.58%) are longer videos. It is important to emphasize that not every account had all types of posts. For example, only Brands A, D, E, and F posted short videos, and Brand A posted longer videos.

As data characteristics have been described, the following sub-section will present the analysis done to answer the problem concerning this study's research.

### Storytelling as an ISN communication strategy

The SNS accounts of the founding partner brands of the Bean-to-Bar Brazil Association are marked by narrative structures. It is possible to see that many posts address short stories that cooperate to building a differentiated brand turned to value the product as a result of an artisan and minute work, where everyone that is part of the process is equally acknowledged – these habits are essentially positive for the brand, according to Beverland (2009).

The post from May 14th in the account of the D Brand, shown in Figure 3, serves as an example.

**Figure 3.** D Brand post



**Source:** Research data (2020)

In this post, it is possible to see the humanitarian character given to the production processes of the D Brand chocolate. More than selling chocolate, upon sharing this type of image and narrative about cocoa harvest, the company introduces the consumer to the care given during product preparation, the value given to all those involved in this process, and still shows part of the process itself – cocoa being transported via waterway.

Thus, through storytelling, the user dives deep into the narrative universe and, for a split second, does not see an organization there (Magalhães, 2014). When perceived afterward, the individual's potential subjectivities have already been reached, and the imagination of that post has already hit the



To celebrate Easter in April, these brands gathered with other participants in a project to hand out their in-house-produced chocolate to weak institutions and communities. Again, storytelling was present in this ISN action. For example, Brand A's post about this attitude was one of the most liked and commented on during the temporal cut (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Brand A's post



The image shows a screenshot of a social media post. At the top, there is a horizontal carousel of 10 small images. The first image shows a chocolate bar being unwrapped. The second shows a person in a white shirt. The third shows a chocolate bar. The fourth shows a person's hands. The fifth shows a chocolate bar. The sixth shows a person in a red shirt. The seventh shows a chocolate bar. The eighth shows a chocolate bar. The ninth shows a chocolate bar. The tenth shows a chocolate bar. Below the carousel is a table with two columns: 'Posted on' and 'April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020'. Below that is another table with two columns: 'Type of post' and 'Carousel (10 images)'. Below that is a section labeled 'Brand caption' containing the following text: 'We feel whole today. From the idea of [@brand's name], [@brand's name] created an advertising campaign to donate bean-to-bar chocolate of a batch especially made for this campaign. A chocolate hand-out will take place this week, and the comments of those who received it and who donated it mean a lot to us. May we continue our journey with health through these difficult times, and may Easter bring us more love and solidarity! Let's spread these feelings through chocolate. [Brand A] donated chocolate bars to 15 lookout security guards along with a basket containing 250 small chocolate eggs to [shelter's name].'

**Source:** Research data (2020)

Besides announcing that the company was taking part in the campaign, the post photos and the caption layout suggest a sequence of events that appeal to the users' senses and emotions. Therefore, from this account, we can infer the existence of storytelling (Feijó, Frandaloso, & Gomes, 2014; Schneider & Pereira, 2018) on the post. This storytelling's appealing character turned out to be very positive since the post had likes and comments above the average in the temporal cut.

In the accounts analyzed, we also noted that 47 posts have photos of people, which corresponds to 24% of the total posts in the temporal cut. From these, 28 had a reasonable engagement rate, which complies with Bakhshi, Shamma and Gilbert (2014), who state that portraits on SNS are more likely to receive likes and comments.



On the other hand, the general results of this study show that the main focus lies on product-oriented posts. For this article, these posts comprise those that describe the products sold by the company and mention their history or their formulation. The temporal cut analyzed includes 36 posts with such bias. From these, 30 of them (83%) have the number of likes and comments above the average in each account.

Although the C Brand account, for example, has the lowest number of posts in the temporal cut, it had the highest number of likes and comments among all the brands analyzed. Moreover, it outnumbered likes and comments of brands that had twice as many posts, such as the B and G Brands.

It is worth noting that only one post from the C Brand is not product-oriented. Its posts are frequently very descriptive concerning aromas, flavors, ways of production, and the experience around the artisanal chocolates they produce. The brand tries to show the difference in their products, which has become a great way to engage users.

Besides, we can see that the descriptions of the C Brand posts have a well-designed narrative structure, as seen in Figure 5.

**Figure 5.** C Brand post





Posted on	May 17 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	
Type of post	Carousel (six images)	
Brand caption		
<b>The Time of Chocolate</b> From cocoa beans to bar.		
<p>Bean-to-bar chocolate can be produced with only 2 ingredients: cocoa and sugar. Today, I will talk about cocoa, our primary raw material. In most places where cocoa is cultivated in Brazil, it's not available all year long. There are two very defined harvests, and they vary from region to region. From blossom to harvest, it takes around four months. After the fruit blossoms, pulp and seeds are fermented. Significant chemical transformations happen during this process, and they change the flavor, acidity, and aroma, which results in the kernels used to produce chocolate. They are dried out to be stored appropriately without any humidity. These steps take around 15 days – and vary according to climate. Some producers let the kernels mature out, which may take 3 or more months, and improve their aromas and flavors. At [C Brand], we take around 5 days to wash the kernels, select, toast, crack, peel, refine, and conch them. The maturation process of raw chocolate takes around 1 month before it is tempered and molded into bars.</p> <p>From blossom to the wrapped bar, the whole cycle takes at least five months and involves several people and steps: a product with simple ingredients but a complex result.</p>		

**Source:** Research data (2020)

This post was one of the most successful in the account within the temporal cut. It should be noted that the storytelling in the product description added unique elements (Delgado-Ballester & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Mossberg, 2008; Ryu et al., 2018; Xavier, 2015), an effort of the brand to be in a different market position concerning the non-bean-to-bar chocolates, which can be inferred both from the post description and from the photos' visual appeal.

Another aspect of storytelling identified in the data collected is the virtual sampling posts present in the F Brand account. In these posts, the company announced they had mixed chocolate bars from several parts of the world and built kits that could be purchased through their virtual store (Figure 6).

**Figure 6.** F Brand post







**Source:** Research data (2020)

In this post, the company uses a playful speech (Citelli, 2002), which, as summarized by Carrilho and Markus (2014, p. 131), is the type of language that “brings in emotional aspects without creating any clear, convincing awareness”. This factor is essential since storytelling is connected to this type of language, strengthens ties with the public, and appeals to their emotions (Carrilho & Markus, 2014).

Upon offering the virtual sampling kit to “navigate the world”, the company uses a playful speech that carries a strong narrative. Not only is the chocolate being sold, but the opportunity to know the world without leaving home. This statement is true because bean-to-bar chocolate attracts consumers worldwide due to their different origin possibilities, which gives the product some specific raw material and production characteristics according to where the cocoa beans were planted and harvested (terroir). In other words, their history and origins are what make them different in the market (Delgado-Ballester & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Mossberg, 2008; Ryu, Lehto, Gordon, & Fu, 2018; Xavier, 2015).

Something similar was observed in the E Brand account post from March 2<sup>nd</sup> (Figure 7).

**Figure 7.** E Brand post





**Source:** Research data (2020)

Just like in Figure 6, in Figure 7, when the E Brand states that they “brought the Northeast region” into their product, they are using a playful speech (Citelli, 2002) to tell us a story (Carrilho & Markus, 2014) and add emotional value to the product. Concerning Figures 8 and 9, Szabluk et al. (2015) reinforce this point of view by stating that storytelling comes up as a tool that the brands use to create immersive narrative environments and make the audience adhere to the stories they tell.

It should be mentioned that these posts had the number of likes and comments above the average and, therefore, we can state that, within their ISN accounts, this narrative strategy succeeded.

On the other hand, the B Brand is one brand that most focuses on artisanal production in their Instagram posts. From the posts analyzed in their account, 93% refer to cocoa through photos or texts, and 57% of these posts show the fruit as the main element, with direct references.

The post with the most significant emphasis in this account (Figure 8) is a carousel with two photos showing the artisanal production backstage, bringing the user closer to a process that is still under development compared to purchasing the final product at a store.

**Figure 8.** B Brand post



**Source:** Research data (2020)

By comparing the metrics of this post with other posts from the same brand, the post in Figure 8 had the highest number of likes in the temporal cut analyzed besides the number of comments above average, which shows that the immersion approach, the narrative environment, and the focus on the bean-to-bar chocolate artisanal production has brought good results to the brand in SNS.

During the temporal cut analyzed, the G Brand was the one that had the lowest quantitative metrics among all the brands analyzed, even though it is among the brands with the highest number of followers on Instagram (10.9K) – behind the D Brand only, with 12K. Not only is the absolute number of likes and comments the lowest, but its metrics too. This scenario can negatively affect the brand's image (De Vries, 2019; Ehrhardt, 2018).

The recent experiments by De Vries (2019) show that Instagram accounts with a highly disproportionate number of followers compared to the number of likes – as in the G Brand – tend to impact other users negatively. Some blog articles also agree with this statement. Ehrhardt (2018), for example, points that accounts with many inactive users – that is, with many followers and few likes – may mean that these followers were bought instead of gained organically. Likewise, accounts with many likes and a few followers may mean that the likes were bought (Osman, 2020). One way or the other, this may be negatively interpreted by the users of the network.

Moreover, by analyzing the G Brand posts, we did not find any text that could be linked to emotional aspects or that told a story. On the contrary,

their advertising approach is always very straight, and 92% of their posts within the temporal cut have highlighted apparent actions, as seen in Figure 9.

**Figure 9.** G Brand Post



**Source:** Research data (2020)

From the 14 posts in the temporal cut analyzed, 11 reposts only change the illustrative image. Based on the structure described in Figure 9, it is evident that the G Brand is trying to generate more engagement: “Tag a friend [...]”. However, the results show that this strategy has not been successful since most posts have up to one comment and a low number of likes.

Therefore, we can see that, through ISN, these companies have found more channels to create proximity and even identification relationships with the brand (Alves et al., 2017; Pinochet et al., 2018; Silva, 2018). After the impact of the internet on society, these brands need to create content that engages network audiences since the consumers are interested in the product’s quality and what the brand can add to them (Schneider & Pereira, 2018).

Figure 10 summarizes the findings and relates them to the main works and authors of the theoretical discussion about storytelling. We should remember that the results came exclusively from the posts of the brands’ Instagram accounts. Therefore, Figure 10 outlines how each company behaved in the temporal cut analyzed based on the SNS dynamics, but they

do not necessarily reflect their total values and actions out of the social internet environment.

**Figure 10.** An overview of the results and main works used for storytelling

Highlights	Authors	Brands analyzed	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Users' engagement and attraction	Escalas (2004); Hauff et al. (2014); Woodside et al. (2008); Xavier (2015).					X	X	X	X	
Brand's identity elements: artisanal production and commitment to society	Beverland (2009).		X	X	X	X	X			
Appeal to users' senses and emotions	Feijó et al. (2014); Schneider e Pereira (2018); Carrilho e Markus (2014).		X		X			X	X	
Exclusive brand elements	Delgado-Ballester e Fernández-Sabiote (2016); Herskovitz & Crystal (2010); Mossberg (2008); Ryu et al. (2018); Xavier (2015).				X	X				
Playful speech and immersion into the narrative environment	Cifelli (2002); Carrilho e Markus (2014); Szabluk et al. (2015).			X			X	X	X	

**Source:** The authors (2021)

Finally, after presenting and discussing the main findings in the research, the following section will present the conclusions, contributions, and recommendations for future studies.

## CONCLUSIONS

Storytelling has been relevant for humankind since its origins and has also been present throughout communication history. However, with cyberspace and the omnipresence of ISN in society, narratives become a society for companies.

Since ISNs are connection environments and powerful interaction tools, the organizations in these spaces need to have contents that can engage their followers and constantly expand their relationship networks, whether by creating ties with new consumers or strengthening bonds with those who are already clients of the brand. In this sense, ISNs have now become an essential support tool for marketing strategies.

This article is the first to analyze storytelling in brands connected to the Bean-to-Bar movement in Brazil from the ISN marketing point of view. It meets its primary research objective, which was to understand how the communication of the leading Brazilian bean-to-bar chocolate brands occurs in social networks and how storytelling contributes to turning this communication practical and attractive for the consumer. Thus, the results show that storytelling can transform SNS communication strategies by strengthening the brand image and generating favorable results that can be used on behalf of the companies.

Concerning the Brazilian bean-to-bar chocolate brands, the positive effects from including narratives on SNS strategies are enhanced and happen because, in this case, the stories are not limited to the companies. They are part of the products (e.g., the chocolates), which is emphasized by the study results since the storytelling posts were always highlighted in the temporal cut analyzed, with a higher number of likes and comments. Those that insisted on the classical type (e.g., explicitly focused on selling the product) generated very weak metrics compared to those that sought more public interaction through storytelling.

Moreover, this article has relevant managerial implications. From the study results, the business managers in the sector analyzed can set different





communication strategies based on storytelling and lean on the products' historical and conceptual paths and characteristics through the production means and the companies' human resources, thus improving their results and reaching consumers more humanely and efficiently. Based on this study, the companies analyzed can establish communication whose core lies in the authenticity of their brands, as Beverland (2009) suggested upon pointing out the construction of authentic brands.

To the academic community, the study contributes to the discussion on storytelling as a communication tool for the brands, especially artisanal products, such as bean-to-bar chocolates. From the empirical analysis, this article reinforces literature on communication in social networks and storytelling as it addresses a movement that shows positive results when adding these constructs to their stratagems. This article also discusses and seeks to popularize the topic around bean-to-bar chocolates that is still underrated but has ethical, social, environmental, and health commitments that are unique and highly relevant for the future of food.

As a limitation, this study lacks interviews with ISN managers or heads. The data used for analysis were collected from metrics and information made available by Instagram, and, therefore, it was not possible to go further into the decisions and intentions of the marketing strategies used. Therefore, for future studies, a suggestion is to conduct qualitative research to interview bean-to-bar chocolate managers or companies managing ISN in these organizations. We suggest that this study is carried out again in the future, since the bean-to-bar market is constantly growing, along with researches on ISN and storytelling to be applied into other contexts of artisanal foods to produce possible general reflections about the constructs and these products.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, although this article searched for the metrics provided by Instagram to analyze the quality of the results reached by the companies in the network, it does not mean that the bean-to-bar





chocolate brands should try to maximize their number of SNS followers and become strong network clusters or set posts to receive more likes or comments. On the contrary, we believe that ISNs must be used to strengthen the social ties with clients so that the metrics reached in each post work only as a sign of what is either pleasing or annoying the consumer.

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