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The «i-Generation» and its Interaction in Social Networks. An Analysis of Coca-Cola on Tuenti

La «i-Generación» y su interacción en las redes sociales. Análisis de
Coca-Cola en Tuenti

ABSTRACT

Teenagers and young adults are increasingly using social networks as a means to interact and participate in constructing a multiple speech. Companies take direct options with followers in networks and use these virtual structures to approach their target. The purpose of this paper is to study, using empirical and observational methodology, how to build «Coca-Cola» brand image in «Tuenti», followed by the network over the public sector. Among other things, we will see how involved the brand and how followers, what are the issues that are introduced on the inputs and through what kind of formats. In conclusion, we noted that the interest in the brand of free speech to let the followers is just a strategy, the actual entries of «Coca-Cola» are very rare but they all have a high effect, a language that challenges the user to activate and resume his speech so directed. Moreover, there is no mechanism differentiating between information, entertainment and advertising, which combined with continued exposure to advertising impacts across different formats, leads us to propose the need for media education to encourage responsible use critic and social networks by young people.

RESUMEN

Los adolescentes y jóvenes utilizan cada vez más las redes sociales como medio para interactuar y participar en la construcción de un discurso múltiple. Las empresas aprovechan las opciones de relación directa con los seguidores en las redes y utilizan estas estructuras virtuales para acercarse a su «target». El objeto de este artículo es estudiar, mediante una metodología empírica y observacional, cómo construye «Coca-Cola» su imagen de marca en «Tuenti», la red más seguida por este sector del público. Entre otros aspectos, observaremos de qué modo interviene la marca y cómo los seguidores; cuáles son los temas que se introducen en las entradas y a través de qué tipo de formatos. Como conclusión, advertimos que el interés de la marca de dejar libertad de expresión a los seguidores es solo una estrategia, en realidad las entradas de «Coca-Cola» son muy escasas pero todas ellas tienen un elevado efecto «gancho», con un lenguaje que interpela al usuario para que se active y retome su discurso de manera dirigida. Además, no existe ningún tipo de mecanismo diferenciador entre la información, el entretenimiento y la publicidad, lo que, unido a la exposición continuada a impactos publicitarios a través de diferentes formatos, nos lleva a proponer la necesidad de una educación mediática para fomentar el uso responsable y crítico de las redes sociales por parte de los jóvenes.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Internet, social networks, interaction, strategies, target, youth, advertising.
Internet, redes sociales, interacción, target, jóvenes, publicidad.

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1. Introduction and state of the question

The «i-Generation», as its name implies, refers to those «interactive young people» (Martínez-Rodrigo & Marta-Lazo, 2011) born and brought up in a world in which screens are a natural part of their everyday habitat. The social communication media environment with its multiple permeable screens has gone from being a macro-context to a basic socializing factor of the first degree, in other words a micro-context that is widely used and always to hand. The opportunity to interact via social networks makes social relations easier to achieve, and this socializing agent has become a prime reference system for young people to construct their own social network of friendships and relationships.

In recent years we have seen how young people have progressively migrated from the TV to the computer screen. Viewing figures show how TV consumption among 13- to 24-year-olds has dropped year-by-year while Internet use has risen. Cáceres, Ruiz-San-Román & Brändle (2011: 28) state that «not only is almost every young person connected but they also use this technology in a highly intensive way».

Data from Kantar Media show how TV consumption among 13- to 24-year-olds has fallen by over 20 minutes a day in the last 10 years, while the study of «Attitudes towards Information and Communication Technologies» carried out by the CIS (2011) among 15- to 29-year-olds shows that 63.2% use Internet several times a day and 18.8% use the Internet once a day. This report states that young people mainly use the Internet to search for information or documents (82%), for interacting on social networks (79.6%) and checking emails (76.3%). A total of 47.8% use the social networks several times a day and 27.3% once a day. Young people use the social networks to: «keep in touch with those who they do not see very often» (73.9%), «see or share photos, videos, etc» (51.5%) and «out of curiosity, to find out what others are doing or saying on their social network» (38.4%).

Besides this, the time consumed and frequency of use of these multi-screen environments in youngsters' scenarios has increased, and the range of usage is more diversified. The Pfizer Foundation states that both Messenger and the mobile phone have been crucial tools for young people to organize, socialize and communicate but Internet use via mobile terminals is fast becoming the platform of preference for keeping their social diaries up to date. This institution adds that the social networks are an ideal setting for opening up and consolidating connections that become relationships and friendships with a greater or lesser degree of

intensity: 71% of users have more than 46 friendships and the average number of contacts is 116. And users are joining social networks at an ever early age, as demonstrated in the «Study of safe behaviors in ICTs usage by children and young people and the e-confidence of their parents» by INTECO in 2009. The report states that the starting age for ICTs use is between 10- and 11-years-old, with half of this age group connecting to the Internet on a daily basis, and spending an average of 14 and a half hours per week online.

Companies aware of the vast amount of time teenagers and young people spend on their social networks and their potential as an interactive medium have started to use these platforms to promote their products among this population segment, which is seen as a direct consumer with influence on the family whose loyalty is worth cultivating for the future (Sánchez-Pardo & al., 2004: 58).

Channeling a positive brand image and the chance to interact with their target consumers are keys to company marketing on the Net. Strategies are based on the analysis of «digital sociability» which means discovering consumer needs and preferences in order to get ahead of the competition by using these virtual environments (Hernández & Ramón, 2009: 19-36). Teenagers and young people striving to become adults demand to take part and feel independent when they communicate online, and this has led to a business strategy to promote brands through the medium of social networks to target this segment (Exler, 2006). As Tur & Ramos-Soler (2008: 119) suggest: «In order to make an emotional connection, a brand must allow young people to interact with it by providing them with an environment that enables them to be themselves».

The brand, as a design or symbol aimed at identifying a product with specific features that make it stand out from the rest, joins the social networks to seek out a strategic and effective market position based on interactivity (Hensen, Shneiderman & Smith, 2011). The advantages over traditional media are considerable, as Hernández & Ramón (2010: 48) point out, because «some one billion active users could see your advert without the excessive cost associated with advertising in the traditional media».

The potential and appeal of the social networks together with the closeness that brands have been able to generate within these environments attract young people and convert them into the brand's social constructors. An example of this is the «Happing» online platform created by «Coca-Cola», the company under

study in this article, which encourages the involvement of the «Emerec» (Cloutier, 2001: 91-92), or prosumer, who not only selects what s/he wants to read but also adds comments to a communal text as a message constructor in a collaborative campaign created by «smart mobs» (Rheingold, 2002: 13). An analysis of this platform by Llorente (2009: 174-200) concludes that «users and the brand are satisfied with the results of this type of campaign; the users because they have a platform on which to express themselves free of charge, and the brand because it can execute a creative marketing campaign at very low cost». As a result the social networks are «transforming the laws of marketing techniques (Caldevilla, 2010: 65).

The relation of the «i-Generation» to advertising via social networks is creating new models of interaction with the brand and provides further opportunities for internet users to participate in the creation of the corporate image. Companies also take advantage of these interaction and multiple creation platforms to profile the consumer and let them take part in producing campaigns, which enables them to feel as if they were co-creators. This is the case with «Coca-Cola» with its corporate communication

strategies that enable it to «strengthen its brand and extract information from all the conversations that take place on its website; and also (...) benefit from the fact that some users get very excited about taking part in creating a discourse» (Llorente, 2009: 194).

«Coca-Cola» operates within several social networks including «Tuenti», the most widely used among Spanish teenagers and young people with more than 12 million users. According to the latest study, «Observatorio de redes sociales IV Oleada» (2012), 32% of «Tuenti» users have made contact with a company or brand and 55% state that they find it interesting to follow a brand that they like. The typical «Tuenti» user profile is of a person aged between 12 and 24 studying, or having studied, at secondary school up to the age of 16 (Alexa, 2012). With this age segment in mind, «Coca-Cola» joined this social network to approach this target group and to develop various strategies. Its website not only includes information about the brand but also promotes activities with the

aim of getting close to each user individually, such as sending a congratulatory message on joining its community and on their birthday.

«Coca-Cola» was one of the first brands to adopt the Net as an effective medium for getting close to young people (Alet, 2004: 80). In 2001, it created the «The Coca-Cola Movement» virtual platform which achieved high levels of regular and active participation among its users (Coca-Cola, 2004: 30-31). It set up the first social community with spaces for young people to meet and relate, with opportunities to take part in communal activities, themes and content: music, electronic, mobile phones, videogames, sports and outdoor activities, travel, fashion and financial products.

Teenagers and young people need to be trained in media literacy so that they are aware of the type of strategy brands deploy on the social networks, to understand advertising tactics and when an authentic shared discourse is taking place, so that they can follow the brand intervention from a critical viewpoint and become responsible contributors to the co-creation of content.

The platform also enabled young people to interact among themselves and with the brand via text or voice, and to construct their own image in a virtual society by using an avatar. Participation increased year-by-year (table 1) (next page):

This community yielded considerable benefits for the brand by fomenting relations between young people and allowing it to insert advertising content within a social and entertainment environment. More than one million people signed up and 50,000 accessed the site daily. The company increased its sales by 4% in just one year with a turnover of 2.5 billion euros (Sicilia & Palazón, 2006).

Despite its success, «The Coca-Cola Movement» closed down in 2008 as young people started signing up to «Tuenti» and «Facebook». These social networks attracted the most users and offered greater scope for interaction and creation because their technology enabled instant and fluid communication with friends, brands and a diversity of formats, etc.

Year	Number of users
2001	183,145
2002	600,000
2003	900,000
2004	1,100,000

Table 1. Number of users of «The Coca-Cola Movement» («Coca-Cola» Social Report, 2004: 31).

So «Coca-Cola» opted to get in direct contact with its fans in Spain through various formats on «Tuenti» and is now one of the biggest advertisers on that social network. Neither is it a coincidence that a brand that identifies itself with well-being should have selected a network that describes itself as «bursting with vitality» (Caldevilla, 2010: 51).

Although the social networks appear to offer a broad landscape where opinions can be freely aired, the majority of companies shield themselves from the possibility of anti-brand users posting negative messages, by deploying control and filter mechanisms to guard and protect their image (Hernández & Ramón, 2010: 55). So it is that campaigns such as «Coca-Cola's» «Flapping», far from the impression they give of offering a free speech forum, are in reality Corporate Communication-controlled strategies, since «it is unthinkable for «Coca-Cola» to tolerate opinions that do not conform to the positive Corporate Image» (Llorente, 2009: 197). To counter these control mechanisms which operate inside the social networks, teenagers and young people should be given media literacy guidelines so that they can be aware of the real function of these brands on the social networks and know how to analyze the discourses and understand their objectives, be they to inform, to entertain or advertise.

If the Internet user does not reach this state of awareness via a series of mediations, he/she cannot move up to the next stage which is to appropriate content and adopt a critical and reflective attitude towards the messages, knowing how to interpret them both in form and content, understanding what their objective is and thus allowing them to become true «perceptive participants» (Marta-Lazo, 2008: 36).

2. Material and methods

«Coca-Cola» created a site on «Tuenti» in May 2010, the same month that brands were given permission to launch their own websites on social networks and engage in interaction with users via these virtual communities. It quickly attracted a lot of visitors and became one of the most widely followed brands on «Tuenti» (table 2).

The aim of this study is to analyze the communication strategies at work on the «Coca-Cola» website

on «Tuenti» through various activities developed by the brand and the users of this social network. Firstly, we categorize the different formats used by «Coca-Cola», such as «Advergame», which is a gallery of ima-

Date	Number of users
February 2011	201,000
October 2011	219,000
May 2012	332,000

Table 2. Number of followers of the «Coca-Cola» website on «Tuenti» (Compiled by the authors from data supplied by «Tuenti»).

ges and videos, «Entertainment» and direct communication. The latter is the focus of our study as it involves more interaction between the brand and its followers, and unlike the other two formats it is a horizontal form of communication.

Our objectives are to: 1) Note the type of themes around which communication between «Coca-Cola» and young people takes place; 2) Measure the extent of the interaction between both on «Tuenti»; 3) Describe the brand image promoted by «Coca-Cola» on «Tuenti».

This study is part of a broader investigation that allowed us to know beforehand which month of 2011 saw the highest levels of participation among its followers; as a result we selected December of that year, which was also when the brand celebrated its 125th anniversary. The sample contains the complete direct communication activity between the brand and its followers during that month: 14 interventions by «Coca-Cola» and 3,425 responses by young people. The variables analyzed by means of empirical and observational methodology and which help to define the brand strategy on «Tuenti» are: the themes presented by the brand; the number of «Coca-Cola» interventions; the frequency of brand publications throughout the month; the number of responses to these interventions by young people.

3. Analysis and results

Our analysis showed that «Coca-Cola» made only 14 interventions in December 2011 but they generated considerable user activity. The themes presented by the brand that month were cinema, gifts, social awareness and interventions directly related to «Coca-Cola» itself. However, one theme was missing in December that had been present in previous months and which is usually very popular among young people: music.

The themes presented in December 2011 were typical of that time of year, in particular gifts. Some

interventions combined themes with the objective of grabbing young people's attention even more. This was the case of cinema and gifts, and cinema and «Coca-Cola» (figure 1), in which free tickets were given away to see the latest films, emphasizing that it was the brand inviting the fan to the cinema, or of the pleasure of consuming the brand while watching a good film.

Most of the interventions were themes related to the brand (28.5%), followed by cinema and gifts (21.4%); to which we can add the combinations of the two. The «social awareness» theme only appeared once that month (7.1%) from which we deduce that it merely represents a formula by which the brand can

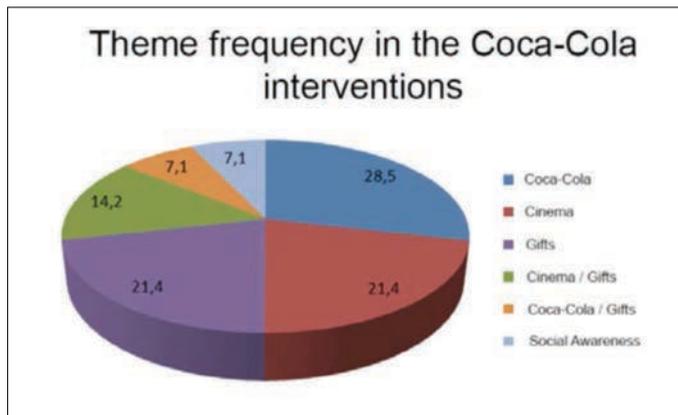


Figure 1. Proportion of the themes in the interventions by «Coca-Cola».

be identified with certain good causes in a symbolic and hardly representative way. Yet the intervention that aroused most young people to take part was precisely «social awareness», with statements that refer to building a better world, bringing about global change or highlighting the «good things» in life.

It is important to note that all themes used by the brand contain references to «Coca-Cola», but there are no mechanisms to help the user to separate informative content from advertising. All the interventions allude to the product indirectly, thus cloaking the advertising at work, and associate the brand with the many advantages that young people can find within product profile, especially gifts and entertaining experiences (Martínez-Rodrigo & Sánchez-Martín, 2012: 478).

Also noteworthy is how the brand attracts followers by using a style that is tailored to young people (figure 2). The brand addresses itself to its

fans as We and communicates with them directly with the singular or plural You; it repeatedly resorts to exclamations to emphasize those elements that interest young people, to interrogative constructions to encourage user participation and imperatives to stimulate them into action. It often uses «emoticons» at the end of sentences, those smiley faces that so aptly match the brand's narrative.

In terms of the second objective, relating to the extent of the interaction between young people and the brand, we see that «Coca-Cola» always starts the conversation via its interventions. It normally launches a new intervention each day, although December was different in that no intervention appeared on public holidays (December 6th and 8th, Christmas Day and on New Year's Eve) or on most weekends. However, it intensified its activity on the days after December 6th-8th and on the following weekend with two interventions per day. Also, there was a daily intervention on each of the three days leading up to New Year (figure 3). The brand strategy on this social network seems to follow the lifestyle pattern of young people who spend those days with family and friends, values which the brand promotes in many of its adverts.

This analysis reveals the importance of dates to highlight a fact that we mentioned previously related to the themes, that the only time «Coca-Cola» used the «social awareness» theme was at the end of December (in the middle of Christmas festivities and at the year's end), which justified the brand's choice of theme and which elicited a huge response by its followers with 1,500 reactions. In this way «Coca-Cola» aligns itself with young people's sensibilities and the Christmas spirit that society exudes over this period.

Our records show that the 14 interventions generated a total of 3,425 responses from young people. Figure 4 shows that the number of responses increased as the month progressed. While interventions 6 and 7 elicited few responses (4 and 2, respectively) others stimulated greater participation, such as interventions 13 and 14 on December 29th and 30th

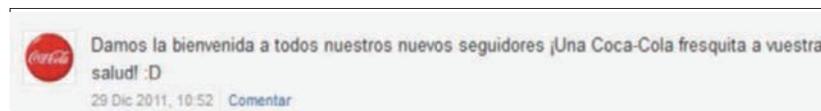


Figure 2. Example of a «Coca-Cola» intervention on «Tuenti» with its welcome message to young people (www.tuenti.com/cocacola).

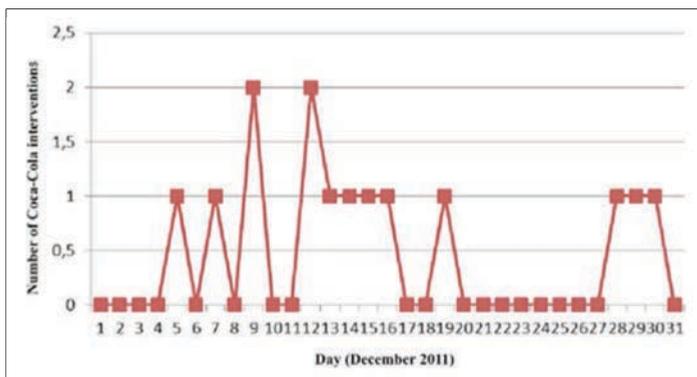


Figure 3. Frequency of interventions by «Coca-Cola» on «Tuenti» in December 2011.

which saw 1,055 and 1,514 responses respectively. Young users respond spontaneously and directly, as is their way, via short text messages that are rarely mediated, with frequent use of «emoticons»; syntactic and morphological errors abound in about 80% of the messages, as do spelling mistakes. We also recorded the number of responses made by the brand in the interventions, which amounted to no more than two per intervention and whose purpose was to encourage young people to take part, speed up dialogue or answer specific questions from users seeking information. In these brand responses, «Coca-Cola» even calls users by their first names, personalizing its responses and calling on them directly to take part and get actively involved in the group. However, this personal contact in the interventions does not go beyond the use of the singular You or We, as pointed out previously.

The considerable activity of young people within this brand area, where they talk about their tastes, interests and even expressing repeatedly their predilection for the product, means that it is the followers themselves who contribute towards the creation and conception of the brand, and even act as its ambassadors by publicizing the soft drink. They also influence other individuals and provide the brand with important feedback for future interventions or campaigns aimed at this same target audience.

In the third objective of our study, to describe the image pro-

moted by «Coca-Cola» on «Tuenti», we found that all the followers' messages sent to the brand were positive which would imply that some kind of filter was in place that enabled the brand to weed out any undesirable messages that might damage its image, a common tactic among major companies when using these networks. A positive image is also reinforced by the fact that the users can only respond to conversations initiated by the brand which in reality limits freedom of expression. The lack of maturity normal to the average age of users of this social network might make it easier for «Coca-Cola» to restrict them within its brand discourse, since the responses always seem to suit the interests of the brand and followers are rewarded with gifts that placate them or distract them from exercising their critical faculties.

4. Discussion and conclusions

As a final synthesis of our analysis of the subject, we have drawn the following conclusions:

1) The unstoppable youth migration towards the computer and, particularly in recent years towards the Internet, and away from TV has made social networks an ideal medium for companies to engage in the social construction of their brands with the public. The mass presence of young people in this virtual environment

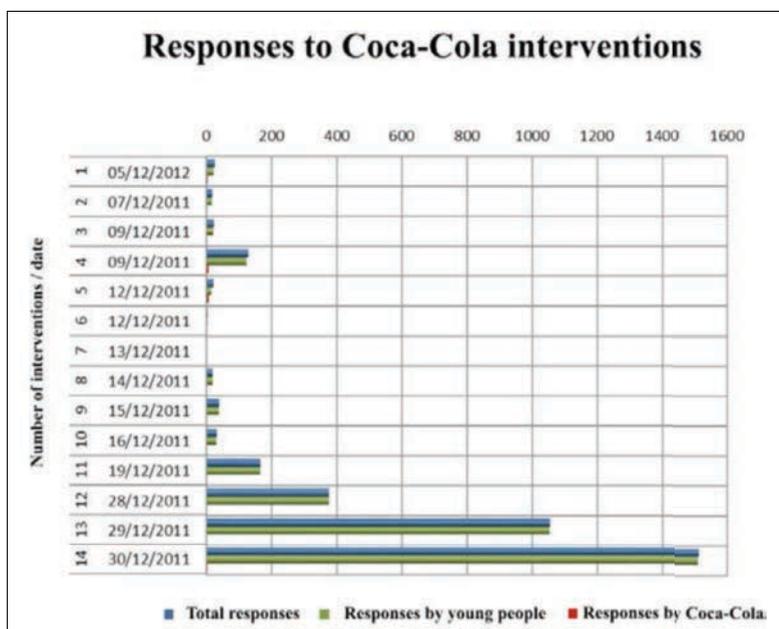


Figure 4. Interaction between «Coca-Cola» and young people on «Tuenti».

represents a big shift towards a new scenario where users maintain multiple interactions with brands.

2) Since teenagers and young people represent a special sector of the public that can be targeted to foment loyalty to their products from an early age, brands such as «Coca-Cola» use the social networks where this segment is grouped in greater numbers and have switched their advertising campaigns away from traditional outlets to new communication platforms such as «Tuenti».

3) Companies normally use the social networks as a medium to get to know their target clients, and to control their tastes and preferences via low-cost, high-impact campaigns.

4) The image that these social network users project of free expression and «participative culture» (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008) is conditioned by brand strategies that deploy messages to grab the users' attention and motivate their followers to participate in restricted themes proposed and managed by the brands.

5) «Coca-Cola», like all brands that focus on teenagers and young people, use formats and themes that interest this target consumer. They make symbolic use of certain themes to establish a link between the brand and its commitment to social causes, which our study shows actually created more impact than other more conventional and popular themes.

6) The brand habitually mixes information, entertainment and advertising content without defining or declaring which format the theme belongs to, so young people are continually bombarded by advertising in different formats.

7) Teenagers and young people need to be trained in media literacy so that they are aware of the type of strategy brands deploy on the social networks, to understand advertising tactics and when an authentic shared discourse is taking place, so that they can follow the brand intervention from a critical viewpoint and become responsible contributors to the co-creation of content.

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