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How young people perceive brands with purpose through social networks in Spain

Cómo perciben los jóvenes las marcas con propósito a través de redes sociales en España

Como os jovens percebem as marcas com propósito através das redes sociais na Espanha

Ana Sebastián-Morillas, Universidad de Valladolid, Segovia, España (ana.sebastian@uva.es)

Irene Martín Soladana, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, España (irenem14@ucm.es)

Jorge Clemente Mediavilla, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, España (jclemen@ucm.es)

ABSTRACT | This article analyzes how brand purpose can influence the way brands develop their communication strategies to reach young people and the importance given to it to change the world. A self-administered online questionnaire was sent to a sample of 500 students from Spanish faculties of Communication Sciences to find out how important brand purpose is to their communication. The results show that brand purpose is important and should be reflected in brands' communication strategies so that young people buy them in the future, as the vast majority of them want a better society. It can also be said that in today's society, brands can use their communication strategies as a means to improve the world. However, many young people do not know what brand purpose means and do not rule out buying products that do not meet the brand's purpose. Therefore, brands need to put more emphasis on developing clear brand purpose strategies to reach more young people and change society to make the world a better place.

KEYWORDS: brand purpose; communication strategies; youth; social networks; youth trends; brand communication.

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RESUMEN | *Este artículo analiza cómo el propósito de las marcas puede influir a la hora de elaborar sus estrategias de comunicación para llegar a los jóvenes y la importancia que le dan para poder cambiar el mundo. Se aplicó un cuestionario autoadministrado en línea a una muestra de 500 estudiantes de facultades de Comunicación en España para conocer la importancia del propósito de las marcas en su comunicación. Los resultados muestran que el propósito de marca es importante y debe reflejarse en las estrategias de comunicación de las marcas para que la juventud pueda comprarlas en un futuro, ya que la inmensa mayoría desea una sociedad mejor. Como conclusión principal, podemos decir que estamos ante una comunicación que mejora la sociedad. Ahora bien, muchos jóvenes no saben lo que significa el propósito de marca y no descartan comprar productos que no lo reflejen. Por ello, las marcas tienen que hacer más hincapié en desarrollar estrategias claras sobre su propósito para llegar a los jóvenes y cambiar la sociedad para crear un mundo mejor.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *propósito de marca; estrategias de comunicación; jóvenes; redes sociales; tendencias juveniles; comunicación de marca.*

RESUMO | Este artigo analisa como o propósito das marcas pode influenciar a forma como elas desenvolvem as suas estratégias de comunicação para atingir os jovens e a importância que dão a esse propósito para mudar o mundo. Foi aplicado um questionário autoadministrado online a uma amostra de 500 alunos de faculdades de Comunicação na Espanha para conhecer a importância do propósito das marcas em sua comunicação. Os resultados mostram que o propósito de marca é importante e deve ser refletido nas estratégias de comunicação das marcas para que os jovens possam comprá-las no futuro, já que a grande maioria deles deseja uma sociedade melhor. Como conclusão principal, podemos dizer que estamos diante de uma comunicação que melhora a sociedade. Entretanto, muitos jovens não sabem o que significa o propósito da marca e não descartam comprar produtos que não o refletem. Portanto, as marcas precisam dar mais ênfase ao desenvolvimento de estratégias claras sobre seu propósito para atingir os jovens e mudar a sociedade para criar um mundo melhor.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: propósito da marca; estratégias de comunicação; jovens; redes sociais; tendências juvenis; comunicação de marca.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

There has long been great interest in brand purpose from the professional sector; however, research does not seem to be progressing at the same rate, although academic interest has increased considerably in the last decade (Ignatius, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2019; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Fernández-Blanco et al., 2021; Fernández-Gómez et al., 2023; López-Aza, 2020). In 2011, some authors (Porter & Kramer, 2011) pointed to the purpose as an element that leverages the assets of organizations to take an enhanced competitive position, and assesses the needs of society. On the other hand, Craig and colleagues (2014) referred to purpose as an essential tool for the existence of organizations and with a meaning that should positively reinforce their connection with society.

To date, this has led to an admittedly limited understanding of the concept (Alegre et al., 2017; Salem Khalifa, 2012; Neff, 2019). Although the academic literature on branding has so far focused on brand mission (Alegre et al., 2017; Salem Khalifa, 2012; Urde, 2003), brand meaning (Batra, 2019; Fournier & Alvarez, 2019; Holt, 2004), and core values (Yoganathan et al., 2018; Urde, 2016), these concepts largely refer to categories of identity and communication issues and their outcomes, while the mechanisms of change in consumer behavior patterns as a result of such communication have not yet been explored in depth. Moreover, feelings toward brands and behavioral intentions evoked by brands (Dapena-Barón et al., 2020; Oliver, 1997; Vinhas da Silva & Alwi, 2006) leave unanswered questions about the relationships between meanings and actions in real, specific practices. As Naidoo and Abratt (2018) point out, brands can act as catalysts for behavioral change, so scholars should focus on the transformation of practices in this regard (Holt, 2012).

Consequently, brands with a purpose (Milagro, 2021) aim to build a better world that will improve the lives of the people who make up today's ever changing society. In this regard, communication strategy is key, as most consumers find brands that actively communicate their purpose more attractive. Furthermore, as explained by Fernández-Blanco and colleagues (2021), this purpose must be meaningful, relevant, and coherent to people and reflect their concern to connect the brand with the emerging trends in society.

On the other hand, the purpose must be understood as a brand strategy to better reach the current consumer, i.e., it must be part of the corporate strategy. In this regard, the purpose can include three main dimensions: authenticity, coherence and integrity, which must be able to be reflected in the corporate purpose (Corporate Excellence, 2022). If the purpose is to change society ethically, environmentally, economically, etc., to make the world a better place, the purpose must have an impact

on the company's image: without purpose there is no engagement and no positive social impact, and companies that do so could be accused of greenwashing (Breves et al., 2022). Thus, many companies are changing their advertising strategies as a result of a change in global perspective (Fernández-Blanco et al., 2021), based on building or consolidating their corporate purpose, which us understood as a change in corporate communication priorities. Consequently, the purpose can cover three dimensions that affect the company (corporate purpose) and at the same time be reflected in the brand values through trust, service, commitment and the relationship that are very relevant to the execution of the strategies of the brand, i.e., the purpose is a strategic concept (Corporate Excellence, 2022), it is the basis of the strategy, with a key role reflected in the creation of trust and differentiation from the competing brands.

In addition, in an increasingly digitized world, brands have chosen to use social media platforms to communicate more directly with their younger audiences. These platforms have become an important tool for promoting the brand and building a relationship with young people. This communication can have a significant impact on their perception of the brand and their loyalty towards it. Brands have started to adopt a new approach that focuses on creating added value for consumers by promoting social awareness. This new trend is helping brands connect with young people in a more meaningful way, not only through their product or service, but also by promoting a social cause (Florenthal, 2019).

This new form of communication has made many brands allies of young people and helped build a stronger and more lasting relationship with them. Young people are aware of the impact that purposeful brand communication can have on their daily lives, and this makes them more receptive to brand messages and allows them to establish a deeper emotional connection with them. Brands with purpose are perceived as a positive force that wants to contribute to more than just the brand's own success, thus allowing young people to feel more connected and engaged to it and with its cause (Florenthal, 2019).

As brands embrace this new trend of purpose, it is crucial that they understand how young people perceive communication strategies on social media. Brands should consider the interests of their younger audiences when creating content and work to build a deep emotional connection with them. Through a well-designed strategy, brands can harness the power of social media communications to build lasting relationships with young people and position themselves as a positive force in society.

The future that awaits us goes hand in hand with the pandemic that society has collectively endured in recent years. The pandemic has changed consumer behavior,

so companies have had to adapt to this new situation and reinvent themselves. This crisis has also brought an evolution of values that will reveal the cultural change. Culture upholds values, and values reveal cultural change and what is important to a society; for example, society today places more value on health, family, and living in the present more than in the past. These changes do not affect everyone at the same time, so change creates tensions, and brands are there to mitigate them.

It is also important to study consumer and market trends to identify opportunities that unfold in this new environment and help companies find their new place. In the current context, the purpose of brands has gained importance and has become a key element in the development of corporate communication strategies. But what is brand purpose? According to Sánchez (2021), cofounder of the Jaimito Agency, is "what has made brands, over time, move from the territory of 'saying,' to a territory that forces them to 'do,' far beyond greenwashing".

Elements such as values and culture have evolved and created new trends that brands must demonstrate through their communication strategies. Purpose forces brands to rethink their objectives and goals to build a better future for society. According to the study entitled *A purpose for all: from economic benefit to social dimension* (Kitchen & Hotwire, 2021), 66% of Spanish consumers agree that the brands they consume should have a purpose; yet 75% do not know whether the brands they consume have a purpose. Although purpose is essential in the relationship between consumers and brands, there is a gap between what is desired and what is real.

Most people do not know what a purposeful brand is, and many of them assume is something related to the environment. However, younger generations are more aware of this concept and attach more importance to it because they know that what they consume now will have a greater impact on their future. They are more conscious and discerning consumers and will certainly consider purpose in their purchasing decisions.

Brands need to communicate more honestly and sincerely and position themselves on issues related to the environment, sustainability, etc. They need to make consumers understand the brand's purpose, choose the right channels to reach them, and develop communication strategies that convey not only their purpose but also their values, culture, and trends. All of this will make their communication successful. Brands need to be built from by they do, not by what they say, and to achieve this, they will have to move from pure storytelling to storydoing (De Miguel-Zamora & Toledano-Cuevas-Mons, 2018). Moving from storytelling to storydoing means replacing the concept of brands telling stories to people telling brand stories about what they do. In addition, Rodríguez-Ríos

and Lázaro-Pernias (2023) show how storydoing is a communication tool that aims to convince the audience to take action and, in addition, fosters an attitude toward social change.

Brands have had to step out of their comfort zone because the way we work, live, and enjoy ourselves will never be exactly the same; consumer expectations have changed over time. According to Walker-Smith (2020), brands have gone through three major eras:

1. The first was the commodity era, which began with the Industrial Revolution and lasted until the end of World War II. Everything revolved around the product.

2. The second coincided with the values revolution of the 1960s: suddenly, people wanted brands that were about the person buying a product, not the product itself. Buying was a path to a better self.

3. The third era is the current one. Now, brands have to do more. The coming era is more about society than about what a person owns and who they are. People expect brands to work for a better society and contribute to the common good.

This is where brand purpose comes into play. Some companies confuse purpose with mission, others omit it from their strategic focus, and many just talk about purpose without engaging. In the current context, however, it is very likely that this approach will no longer work. It is time for companies to confirm whether what they have been doing in response to the *should do* was real or just a one-time event based on a specific consumer moment that is now less intense ("Las tendencias de consumo"..., 2021; "¿Qué tendencias...", 2021; "Wallapop ficha...", 2022).

Brands have to act, not just say. In addition, before they do anything, they must actively listen to identify product needs and solve them. Furthermore, brands that listen learn how to create awareness and social engagement. In this regard, Mayorga-Gordillo and colleagues (2020), talk about the personality attributes of socially responsible brands, which must be humanitarian, ecological, committed, responsible, generous, hopeful, kind, noble, positive, helpful, trustworthy, supportive, charismatic, equitable, and collaborative.

This paper aims to show how brand purpose is one of the elements that influences the communication strategies of brands on the social networks they use. Unilever has stated that its purpose-driven brands are growing 69% faster than its traditional brands and account for 75% of its current profitability (Maram, 2019).

If they have not already, companies should do strategic planning to change their communication strategies and to build useful brands that convey a service

mindset and offer solutions to consumers (Castelló-Martínez & Barrilero-Carpio, 2021). More specifically, they should provide solutions to young people, the segment we focus on in this study through a case analysis and the completion of a pilot questionnaire designed to help brands develop better communication strategies.

To this end, this study provides a review of the existing literature on the subject under research. Research questions are then posed to explain how young people perceive brand purpose through their communications, namely what would happen if brands did not change their communication strategies to make the world a better place, and what values are important to them for a better future. Then, both the methodology used and the rationale of the sample are described. Finally, we present the results, which lead into the conclusions and the possible research limitations.

OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Knowing that social media communication is becoming increasingly important for brands to reach young people, the main objective of this study is to use communication strategies to evaluate whether young people consider brand purpose important and whether they are negatively influenced when a brand does not reflect their purpose. To this end, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

Q1. How do young people perceive brand purpose through its communication?

Q2. What are young people's opinions of brands that do not develop purposeful communication strategies to change the world?

Q3. What do young people consider to be the most important values and trends for a better future?

METHODOLOGY

Methods and sample

The results of the literature review, in which academic, professional, and advertising publications related to the subject of the study, allow us to highlight the findings and their implications.

The literature review is fundamental for contextualizing (Machi & McEvoy, 2016), developing new ideas, capturing contradictions in current contributions (Aveyard, 2010), and making critical evaluations of the existing knowledge (Coughlan & Cronin, 2017; Lambert, 2012; Jesson et al., 2011).

Therefore, references consulted contain information, ideas, data, and evidence that help achieve the objectives and answer the research questions posed in the article. The search for information provides complementary and comparable research with other types of quantitative studies (Díaz Herrera, 2018). It also identifies important concepts, applied methods, and findings to reveal future lines of research (Baker, 2016).

To support the theoretical framework and increase the validity of the research, a self-administered online questionnaire was conducted. It was created using Google Forms, which allowed for clear and easy collection of information for subsequent analysis. The Internet survey has tremendous advantages such as high speed, better response due to the ability to include audiovisual items and a lower research costs compared to self-administered surveys (Díaz de Rada, 2012).

The questionnaire consisted of 20 items related to the research questions.

Table 1 shows the issues raised in the questionnaire and the connection to the research questions.

This technique was chosen because it allows for data to be obtained and processed quickly and efficiently and because it is considered appropriate to collect information on the object of study. The purpose of the questionnaire is to obtain structured information regarding the target group addressed on the variables studied.

The research was based on a non-probabilistic sample of students from Spanish Communication faculties, with a total of N=500 individuals answering the questionnaire items between November 8 and December 23, 2022.

The specific university where they studied was not a relevant study variable; it was rather established that the students represented the majority of the Spanish autonomous communities. Completion of the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous.

500 responses were obtained, of which 77.7% were women, 21.3% men, and 0.9% preferred not to say. 94% of respondents were between 18 and 24 years old, while 6% were over 24 years old. They resided in Spain in different autonomous communities: Madrid, Castile and Leon, Castile-La Mancha, Extremadura, Catalunya, La Rioja, Aragon, Andalusia, Asturias, Galicia, the Basque Country, the Canary Islands, and the Balearic Islands. Table 2 shows the sample data.

With this sample, the validity of the approach to the object of study was guaranteed, allowing us to obtain relevant information to draw conclusions that show the way forward in brand communication.

Research question	Guide to questionnaire items
Perception of brand purpose through its communication among young people (Q1)	What do you understand by brand purpose? Do you follow any brands on social networks? Which one(s)? Why? Relationship with brands: Have you seen brands change their communication on social networks? How did they do it? What do they give importance to?
Critical questioning by young people of non-activist brands (Q2)	Would you buy brands that did not have a brand purpose? Do you trust brands' communication? Do you think brands are participating in activism?
Values of and trends important to young people (Q3)	What do you value the most in the wake of the pandemic? Which trends are most important to you?

Table 1. Correlation between research questions and questionnaire items

Source: Own elaboration.

Responses	Women	Men	Age	University courses	Autonomous communities
500	77.7%	21.3%	18-24 years old, 94% +24 years, 6%	Years 1, 2, 3, 4	Madrid, Castile and Leon, Castile-La Mancha, Extremadura, Catalunya, La Rioja, Aragon, Andalusia, Asturias, Galicia, the Basque Country, the Canary Islands, and the Balearic Islands.

Table 2. Total number of students who responded to the questionnaire and student characteristics

Source: Own elaboration.

RESULTS

Analysis results and interpretation of questionnaire data

Responses from the questionnaire sent to participants at the beginning of this study were used to answer the research questions originally posed:

Q1. How do young people perceive brand purpose through its communication?

Q2. What are young people's opinions of brands that do not develop purposeful communication strategies to change the world?

Q3. What do young people consider to be the most important values and trends for a better future?

Before learning about young people's perceptions of brand purpose, it was necessary to determine whether they knew what the concept of brand purpose was in itself and whether they distinguished it from other similar concepts such as brand activism. From the responses, 59.4% of respondents knew what a purpose-driven brand is, and 73.6% correctly identified the concept's definition: a promise to actively seek to change the world at large. It is worth noting the large number of respondents (40.6%) who said that they did not know what brand purpose is, and that 19.8% did not define it correctly, confusing it with the activity to which the company is dedicated. Given the confusion caused by the concept, it is not surprising that 50.3% of respondents could not distinguish it from brand activism. When respondents were asked what they understand by brand activism, the confusion seemed even greater, and although 59.4% of respondents did identify the definition correctly (brands that position themselves or lead different social causes), many believe it is greenwashing, pinkwashing, and so on, or that it is the same as brand purpose.

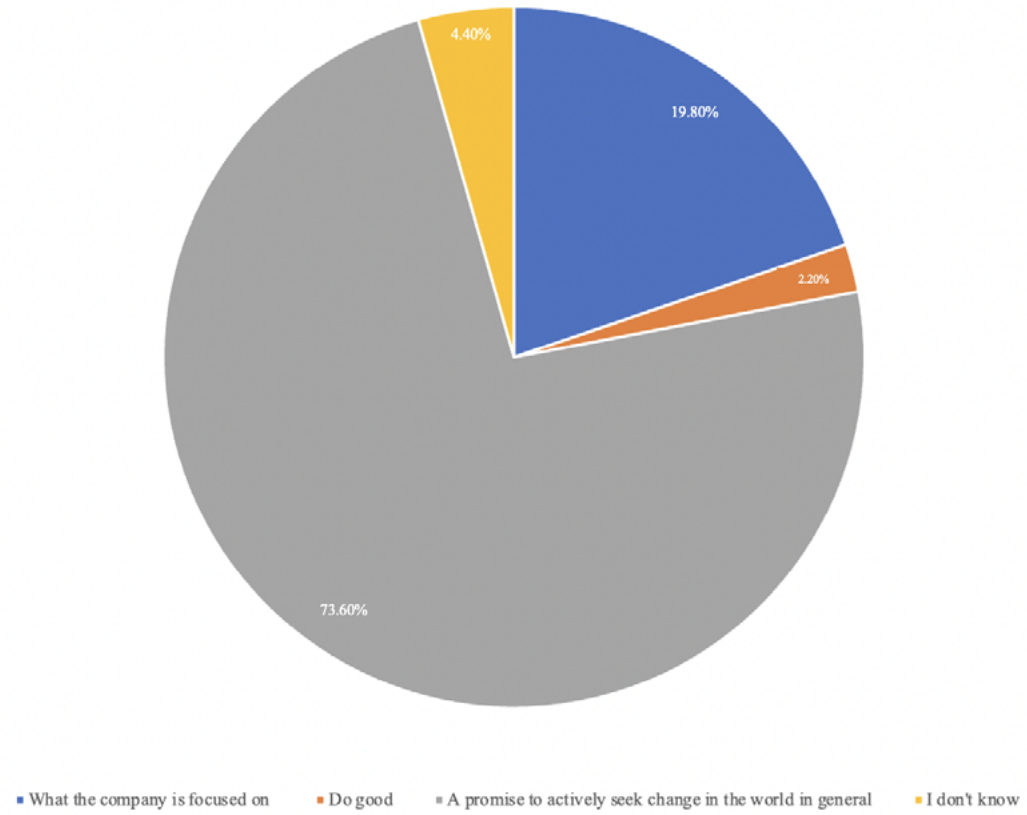

Figure 1. What do you understand by brand purpose?

Source: Own elaboration.

At this point in the questionnaire, participants were asked to clarify the definition of the two terms and were also asked if they perceive a difference between them. The following is the explanation given in the questionnaire: brand purpose is about actively seeking and bringing in about change in the world, not just about doing good; it is about creating real, meaningful, and relevant change for people. Brand activism is not so much about profits for companies as it is about reaching out and engaging people and mobilize them for this cause. For 87% of the participants, this cleared up all doubts, while the remaining 13% still did not recognize the difference.

After clarifying the terms, they were asked if they found that the brands they consume have a purpose or conduct brand activism campaigns. 63.8% answered in the affirmative with 80.5% acknowledging that they would buy from brands even if they did not have a purpose.

A total of 82.4% of respondents say they follow a brand on their social networks, primarily on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, followed by YouTube, LinkedIn, and others. Only 11.8% say they do not follow any brand on social networks. Those who follow brands on social networks were asked what brands gave importance to in their communication. Product sales, communication strategy, and brand purpose were highlighted, followed by creativity, product features, and brand activism.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to evaluate whether participants noticed any change in the brand strategy of four brands selected for their resonance with respondents, as well as their noteworthy adaptation of their purpose, manifested in their communication efforts. For Mahou, 61.9% noticed a change; for Ikea, 61.5%; for Wallapop, 63.3%, and for Converse, only 21.8%. Among the changes participants noted in these campaigns was placing more importance on people than product (42.8%), followed by communicating the brand's purpose (18,2%), brand activism (18%), and emphasizing communication strategies (10.4%). A total of 4.2% said they had not noticed any changes.

This first part of the questionnaire answers the first two research questions. Regarding the first (How do young people perceive brand purpose through its communication?), most respondents were able to identify what the brand purpose is, both conceptually and in the communication of the brands with which they are in contact, indicated that they had noticed changes in the brands that had altered their strategy in this regard. However, when we tried to go into detail and distinguish it from another concept such as brand activism, there was more doubt about the definition.

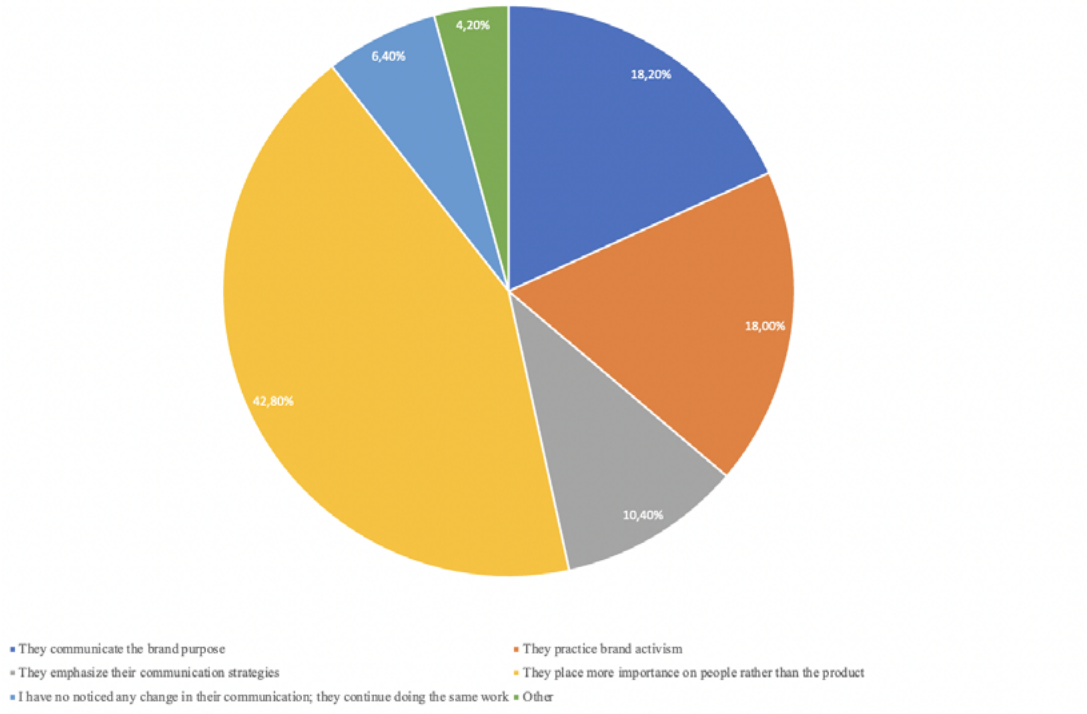

Figure 2. What changes have you detected?

Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding the second research question (What are young people's opinions of brands that do not develop purposeful communication strategies to change the world?), a large number of participants (80.5%) indicated that they would continue to buy the same brands they did not engage with society.

The last three questions of the questionnaire relate to the third research question: What do young people consider to be the most important values and trends for a better future?

First, participants were asked what topics they thought a brand should position itself on to avoid being rejected, and they named, in order of priority, inclusion and equality, environmental awareness, sustainability, recycling, and diversity. Second, they were asked what was most important to them, especially after the pandemic. In order of priority, they mentioned family, which clearly stands out compared to other values, then friends, money, freedom, safety, physical appearance, travel, building the future, work, living in the present, leisure, physical and mental health, and sports.

To achieve the final objective goal of this study, respondents were asked about the trends that were most important to them. Mental health topped the list, followed by responsible consumption, supporting local businesses, automation

(shopping without interaction), a quieter life, smart homes, mixed leisure (more innovative formats, streaming, virtual reality, etc.), teleworking, virtual dating, and brand activism.

These responses show that the young people surveyed find personal relationships (family and friends) by far the most important compared to the other values surveyed. It is not so clear in the case of trends, where the answers are much more homogeneous, although mental health and responsible consumption stand out.

Thus, the objective of this research, to determine whether young people attach importance to the purpose of brands through their communication strategies and whether they are negatively influenced when a brand does not reflect their purpose, was achieved. It can be seen that many of the young people do indeed recognize the purpose of the brands they consume when there is one, although the majority (80.5%) state that they would buy such brands even if they there was none. However, it is noted that in their values and trends, young people give importance to responsible consumption, brand activism, building the future, etc.; however, these aspects are not the ones that stand out the most in the list presented to the participants.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

From the beginning of this study, the importance of brand purpose for companies has been emphasized. Many of them are committed to issues such as sustainability, diversity, responsible consumption, environment, etc., which are always in line with their mission and vision. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe if this is just a corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy or if, on the contrary, it goes even further and companies have a real purpose that could even be considered brand activism, as they are not only commit to the causes they mention, but also try to mobilize consumers around them.

Table 3 shows the main results of the survey and provides information on how young people perceive brand purpose, what their opinion is of purpose-oriented brands, and the importance they attach to values that were not a priority just a few years ago, as well as trends reflect aspects that are important to them and show how society is changing. This coincides with the objective of this study, which seeks to analyze these dynamics.

The results of this study are significant for brands and their strategies, as brand activism is starting to become a trend and consumers are positive about companies' commitment to the environment. As Mayorga-Gordillo and colleagues (2020) noted, brands that excel in social and environmental sensitivity build more enduring relationships between the brand and its audience because of the importance of evaluating these attributes in the decision-making process.

Most respondents correctly identified the brand purpose: the promise to actively change the world.
It was not easy for respondents to distinguish brand purpose from other similar concepts such as brand activism, but when they read both definitions, they could tell the difference.
More than half of the respondents identified that the brands they consume have a purpose.
The majority of respondents indicated that they would continue to purchase the brands even if they did not have such purpose.
Several respondents perceived a change in the communication strategy of the brands analyzed.
As for the most important values of the young people interviewed, family and friends are far ahead of the other values mentioned.
In terms of trends, mental health seems to be one of the most important for them.

Table 3. Research results

Source: Own elaboration.

Although it currently appears that interest in brands is more important, even if those brands do not have a commitment to social causes, and young people say they would continue to buy from a brand, maybe for reasons outlined by Bianchi and colleagues (2015), as many young people just want to enjoy the wellbeing that other have achieved and have no interest in advocating for change, the results of this study nevertheless show that there is still an interesting percentage of consumers, which should not be ignored, who choose their brands considering the impact they create.

As important as content is, channel is equally significant. As discussed at the beginning of this study, social media is a critical touchpoint for brands to connect with youth and communicate their purpose. As noted in the survey, the brands that change their communication in this direction are also perceived noticed by the audience, and such changes are positively appraised.

Respondents seem to find it difficult to separate purpose from strategy or brand activism on a conceptual level. They may not even be able to distinguish them in a campaign, but it is conceivable that a campaign with these elements in its entirety will generate an affinity with the audience aware not only of the social causes but also of the positioning of marketing and take responsibility for what is communicated and what can be done to improve the environment that surrounds companies. Brands will encounter increasingly conscientious and demanding consumers, who will place more value on the brand's purpose, the values it is built on, and the trends it follows.

Future research opportunities could include expanding the sample and administering the questionnaire in more faculties, in addition to those of communication, to substantiate the findings of this study. The challenge would be to conduct this research in communication faculties in Ibero-America to compare the results and observe any differences.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ANA SEBASTIÁN-MORILLAS, Ph.D. in Audiovisual Communication and Advertising. Tenured professor at the Universidad de Valladolid in the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising. She teaches in undergraduate and graduate programs. International head of bilateral agreements (Rome). Her main lines of research are related to strategic brand planning, advertising, communication, and marketing. She has been a fellow of the RCC at Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts). Researcher of the Complutense Branding & Integrated Communication Center.

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9073-3483

IRENE MARTÍN-SOLADANA, Ph.D. in Advertising from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Her main research focus revolves around the study of insights and effectiveness. She holds a degree in Advertising and Public Relations from the Universidad de Valladolid (2014) and a master's degree in Event Management, Protocol, Production, Organization, and Design at the Universidad Camilo José Cela (2015). Since 2014, she has been working in the account department at Hogarth agency.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6262-9483

JORGE CLEMENTE-MEDIAVILLA, Ph.D. in Communication. Tenured professor. Dean of the School of Communication at the Universidad Complutense. President of the Universities with Information and Communication Degrees Association (ATIC, by its Spanish acronym). Researcher of the Complutense Branding & Integrated Communication Center. Director of the Complutense master in Audiovisual Production. Director of the Complutense Master in Screenwriting UCM-MEDIAPRO. Author of more than 50 scientific publications in publishers and indexed journals.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9819-1129