Instabranding: Shaping the Personalities of the Top Food Brands on Instagram

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Abstract

Instagram is a growing social media platform that provides a means of self-expression and communication through creative visuals. Businesses are responding to this trend by using it as a cost-effective marketing tool. This paper examined the accounts of the leading food brands on Instagram: McDonald's, Taco Bell, Shredz, Ben & Jerry's, and Oreo. Photos were classified according to 11 elements: product, person and product, people and product, humor and product, world events, recipes, campaign with no products, user-generated, regram from a celebrity, and video. They were further analyzed along five dimensions of personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Results presented common themes revealing that brands are using Instagram to promote their products and, more significantly, to colorfully express their personalities.

I. Introduction

One of the newest forms of social media to influence modern-day culture is Instagram. This mobile photo and video sharing application channels the inner-photographer in users. It grants users the freedom to publicize their personal memories and interests through their edited photos. According to Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati (2014), "Since its launch in October 2010, it has attracted more than 150 million active users, with an average of 55 million photos uploaded by users per day " (p. 595). Instagram has been so successful because it appeals to society's values and needs by providing a means of communication that can conveniently and uniquely express users' personalities.

This platform presents an effective and engaging way for brands to reach consumers. Bob Marshall (2012), a social media strategist for SociaLogic Marketing, explains that "brands are viewing social media as a crucial piece in the overall marketing strategy . . . and the food and beverage industry is leading the race in finding cost effective ways to mobilize an enthusiastic audience" (as cited in Bui, 2014, p.7).

This study explored how food brands are using Instagram as an inexpensive, yet effective marketing, communications, and branding tactic. The researcher analyzed the official accounts of the top five most popular food brands on Instagram: McDonald's, Taco Bell, Shredz, Ben & Jerry's, and Oreo. Because all of these brands have different personalities and values, this analysis allows for a reasonable exploration of the photo elements used by each account. The researcher aimed to investigate the type of photo content the brands are using and how it helps to express and shape its brand identity.

II. Literature Review

In order to gain a complete understanding of Instagram, one needs to have a background on the growing popularity and influence of social media before delving deeper into this specific platform.

Background

Social Media has gained so much popularity because it serves as a free means of self-expression and communication. Specifically, Instagram is a growing platform, as a Pew report reveals, because "photos and videos have become the key social currencies online" (Hu et al., 2014). Instagram provides a glimpse into every user's life, colorfully allowing users to share their personal stories and interests with the network. Through filters and captions, users can personalize their content and create their own unique photo galleries. Long (2011), a writer and photographer for Macworld, explains, "'Instagram images tend toward abstraction, and are more powerful to viewers because they have to work harder to interpret the images. And, as they do so, viewers escape to whatever feelings, memories and experiences the images evoke'" (Bui, 2014, p. 5). Viewers can effortlessly share these emotions with others through comments, "likes," and direct messages. Instagram encourages users to "follow" others to maintain these relationships, bringing people together from all over the world. Instagram represents the shift to user-driven media forms. Accordingly, a discussion of audience-oriented media theory can help to set proper grounding for this study.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Many mass communications researchers often explain the success and growing interest in social media using Uses and Gratifications theory. This theory suggests that individuals seek out communications outlets and media that fulfill their needs and will lead to gratification" (Whiting, 2013, p. 362). According to Park et al. (2009), "the major uses and gratification factors of [social media] users are: socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information (Gallion, 2014, p. 3). These needs are easily satisfied due to the instantaneous communication, personalization, and representation offered on social media. In particular, Instagram fulfills such needs due to its freedom of self-expression. Users' personal profiles serve as virtual representations of themselves, expressing their individual interests, personalities, and values. Instagram allows users to creatively portray themselves in the ideal way in which they would like to be seen by others.

Gallion (2014) suggests that the digital connections and relationships formed on social media gratify users' socializing needs. Instagram allows users to effortlessly interact and converse with each other through photo content and comments. They can easily track and follow appealing accounts by searching content-specific hashtags, such as #food. These hashtags can bring users with similar interests together, forming smaller niche communities within the platform.

According to the first published, in-depth study of photo content and users on Instagram, there are eight major content categories. Using computer vision techniques, researchers studied the photo contents of a random sample of Instagram users. The eight categories were: self-portraits, friends, activities, captioned photos (pictures with embedded text), food, gadgets, fashion, and pets (Hu et al., 2014). This categorization was influenced by the type of accounts that focused on posting a specific type of photo content. These accounts were owned by the early innovators who are responsible for diffusing this trend of Instagram's content-specific photo categories. Among many significant categories, this paper focused on food photos posted on Instagram, also referred to as "foodstagramming."

Foodstagramming

Foodstagramming complements the rise of the community of "foodies" in society. Coined in 1980, "foodie" has become a regularly used term describing individuals obsessed with food. They view food as a type of art that has a deeper spiritual and personal meaning, having the ability to shape individuals' identities (Poole, 2012), and therefore, Instagram serves as a way to display this form of "art." Experts are recognizing this trend and formulating theories about why people are photographing their food. Possible theories explaining why society finds food photography so appealing are: people begin each meal by "eating with their eyes"; photos serve as a way to "share" food with others; or the photos help to establish users' social media hierarchy (Broyles, 2010). Whichever theory is more valid than the others, each reveals that foodstagramming is affecting today's culture and social experiences. In addition, food brands are reacting to this trend and begin-

ning to utilize Instagram as a marketing and branding tool.

The Effects on Brands

During 2013, brand engagement grew 3.5 times as 55% more brands started using Instagram ("Study," 2013). Social Business and Digital Advisor Mirna Bard explains that it "has given us the possibility to put our finger on the pulse of our customers, which is absolutely priceless" (2010, p. 6). Instagram is a direct link into the lives of consumers—showcasing their interests, passions, values, and personalities. Brands are, therefore, able to better understand, target and communicate with them. Brands are creating lives of their own through the "visual storytelling" aspect of Instagram (Momentfeed, 2013). Through their galleries of photo and video content, they can feature and promote real experiences—such as the social eating experience. As a result, brands can illustrate the quality and type of experiences consumers will have by purchasing their products. This finding suggests that through Instagram, brands can present how they can add value to the daily lives of consumers.

In 2014, Bui conducted an in-depth study that applied Uses and Gratifications theory to Instagram, exploring how this platform can be beneficial to mobile food vendors. The study investigated the ways in which Instagram users characterize an effective photo and their current engagement with brands. Although the brands are reacting to the foodstagram trend, they did not limit their content to only food photos. According to Bui's content analysis and survey of 111 users, "social-integrative and tension release components present in Instagram posts were more likely to activate engagement from users" (p. 25). Social-integrative content includes photos portraying a sense of belonging with brands and the community, while tension release posts consist of funny or creative content. Additionally, Bui's focus group of 10 participants ages 20-28 revealed that in order to be considered an appealing account, brands must have a variety of relevant content in their feeds (p. 23). Bui suggests that brands should categorize these planned posts to maintain Instagram's organic promotional influence (p. 26). This finding suggests that brands' photo content should go beyond their products, and entertain, engage and connect with consumers.

Goor (2012) further explored the effectiveness of Instagram as a marketing tool through a content analysis that investigated 100 photos of 20 brands. The brands were categorized by function, and the photos were coded for specific characteristics of strategy: "persuasion, sales response, symbolism, relational, self-efficacy, and emotion" (p. 19). The study found that brands that represent product, those strongly associated with a certain product or product attribute, "mainly use persuasion, relational and emotion strategies, by applying branding, making the emotional connectedness with the brand most important, and using slice-of-life scenarios in their photos" (p. 31). Goor's same study also found that the persuasion strategy is typically evidenced through photos with the brand logo or colors. Relational strategies connect a product to its brand identity and personality, while emotional strategies are evident when products are shown with the emotions that brands intend their consumers to feel when using the products. Goor found that, in particular, Ben & Jerry's was a brand that evinced these two strategies by featuring feelings of happiness and their values of peace and love.

Goor (2012) suggested that brands should clearly express identity by "using the profile section on the brand feed, and making the brand name, product or brand related events visible in the photo they are posting" (p. 32). Goor also noted that brands must find a balance between establishing relationships with their followers and advertising their products.

These findings support Bui's recommendation that in order to build strong brand names on Instagram, the accounts must post diverse photo content. Such content can highlight the multidimensional nature of brands, presenting their brand personalities, which "refer to the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). Aaker (1997) suggests that there are five dimensions of brand personality: sincerity (honest, genuine, cheerful); excitement (daring, imaginative, spirited); competence (reliable, responsible, efficient); sophistication (glamorous, pretentious, charming); and ruggedness (tough, outdoorsy, strong). The researcher used this study to further analyze how brands are using Instagram.

This paper addressed the following research questions:

RQ1. What kind of photo elements do leading food brands use on Instagram as a marketing and communications tactic?

RQ2. What kind of brand personalities do the photos posted by these brands portray?

III. Method

The Sample

This study analyzed the photo elements used in the accounts of the top five food brands on Instagram. According to TOTEMS List, a site that ranks the most popular brands on Instagram, the top five food brands in the United States are Taco Bell, McDonald's, Ben & Jerry's, Shredz, and Oreo ("Most Popular Food Brands on Instagram," 2014). This ranking is based on the number of account followers and the number of posts on their hashtag—for example, the number of times #TacoBell is used on Instagram. These accounts all have at least 200,000 followers and 600,000 hashtag posts, revealing that consumers are currently engaging and interested in their brand and photo content. This sample was chosen to represent the ways in which food brands are using Instagram.

On October 16, 2014, the researcher analyzed 500 photos each for all accounts except for McDonald's, which only had 156 photos to sample. McDonald's is currently the top food brand on Instagram, so the researcher decided it was beneficial to still investigate the company's account despite its lack of posts.

Analysis

A quantitative content analysis was used for this study because it investigates the frequency of specific characteristics and elements of these photos. Krippendorf (1980) states that a content analysis is "a way of understanding the symbolic qualities of texts, by which he means the way that elements of a text always refer to the wider cultural context of which they are a part" (as cited in Rose, 2012, p. 85). This method allowed the researcher to examine the frequencies of photo elements used by the leading food brands. These insights may be limited because this method is solely based on content, and therefore, it disregards any of the underlying thoughts of its producers (Rose, 2012, p. 102). To further explore the brands' personalities, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis that identified, analyzed, and reported themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), "there are six phases to conducting a thematic analysis: (a) familiarizing yourself with the data; (b) generating initial codes; (c) searching for themes; (d) reviewing themes; (e) defining and naming themes; and (f) producing the report" (as cited in Chang, 2014, p. 29).

The Protocol

The researcher conducted six phases of a thematic analysis Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested. First, the sample of photos were analyzed for 11 elements: product, person and product, people and product, humor and product, world events, recipes, campaign with no products, user-generated, regram (repost for Instagram) from celebrity, lifestyle, and video. Every photo was coded according to the content definitions code (see Table 1). The findings were tallied and organized on a coding sheet. The researcher treated posts that include products and campaigns as a sign of promotional tactics, while posts that incorporate elements of humor, world events, recipes, user-generated content, and lifestyle as evidence of the brands' personalities. To further explore these personalities, the researcher applied Aaker's (1997) five dimensions of brand personality in her analysis: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness, and marked any similarities and differences between each brands' content. This analysis was done to find overarching themes and the types of content that brands are posting to positively promote their products, engage consumers, and shape their brand personalities and identities.

Table 1. The 11 Photo Element categories.

Photo Element	Exemplary photos	Photo Element	Exemplary Photos
1) Product – A brand product with no people.		7) Campaign with No Products - Promoting a campaign without featuring brand products.	
2) Person and Product – A brand product with only one person.		8) User-Generated-Content created by a consumer that has been reposted by the brand.	
3) People and Product – A brand product with a group of people. Portrays the theme of socializing.		9) Regram from Celebrity - Content created by a celebrity that has been reposted by the brand.	
4) Humor and Product – A brand product is presented in a silly or humorous manner.		10) Lifestyle - Content that is not directly promoting a product, but is related to the brand.	
5) World Events - Content about a world event.		11) Video - 15-second long video clip.	
6) Recipes – A dish that incorporates a brand product in a creative way.			

IV. Findings and Analysis

McDonald's

According to TOTEMS List, McDonald's is the No. 1 most popular food brand on Instagram; however, its Instagram account only had 156 photos to sample. Despite this lack of content, McDonald's had the most evenly distributed content. McDonald's is known for being an inexpensive food brand that appeals to a large target population; therefore, posting a variety of photos suggests that the brand is responding to its diverse consumer market. Furthermore, the brand appeals to its global consumer audience by posting 13% of its photos about "world events" (Refer to *Figure 1 in Appendix I*).

The two most popular categories were "person and product" and "people and product." This content suggests the brand's values of the social and cultural aspects of food. The photos show consumers

enthusiastically socializing while eating McDonald's—suggesting that the brand brings all ages and types of people together through its products. The brand's content suggests a personality of sincerity and excitement: genuinely trying to unite consumers over its food in a positive and light-hearted manner (Refer to *Figure 2* in Appendix I).

Taco Bell

The majority of Taco Bell's Instagram profile consists of promotional product photos. Twenty-eight percent of its account is dedicated to promoting traditional menu items and the latest featured specials. These product shots reveal Taco Bell's value of presenting its food in an enticing, yet simple manner. The brand only features teens in its photos, suggesting that Taco Bell is using Instagram to target its Millennial consumers. Twelve percent of its content consists of "people and products," emphasizing the brand's social aspect (Refer to *Figure 3 in Appendix II*).

These photos feature male and female teens undertaking different activities outdoors with Taco Bell nearby. When presenting this demographic inside the restaurant, the brand promotes it as the ideal place for "date night," or the "after party." These situations promote that the perfect "hang out" includes Taco Bell. This content suggests the dimensions of sincerity and excitement of the brand's personality. It displays the genuine social element of its brands and products as well as its fun and easy-going nature (Refer to *Figure 4 in Appendix II*).

Shredz

As a supplement brand, Shredz focuses on the user-experience and health benefits of its products. Twenty-six percent of its account consists of user-generated content, featuring real Shredz users sharing their transformation stories and product reviews. This content suggests the brand's values of empowering and inspiring users to push themselves toward their fitness goals. These powerful visuals show other users that a healthy transformation is possible with the use of Shredz (Refer to *Figure 5* in Appendix III).

The brand dedicates 21% of its posts to "lifestyle" content, which includes workout tutorials and inspirational quotes. Dedicating this much of its account to this category suggests the brand's belief that in order to achieve results, users must make an entire lifestyle change. Through the photos, the brand provides both visual and textual inspiration and support for users, serving as a quick, yet impactful way to present this information. This content suggests the brand's role as an inner coach, powerfully conveying its motivation, compassion and dedication to its fans.

Unlike the other food brands, Shredz does not post any "people and product" photos. Instead of promoting the social element of food, the brand focuses its account more on consumers' individual relationships with food. This content suggests that Shredz uses Instagram to express a more serious and determined brand personality. The images convey strength, efficiency, and reliability highlighting the brand's dimensions of competence and ruggedness (Refer to *Figure 6* in Appendix III).

Ben & Jerry's

Ben & Jerry's dedicates 52% of its Instagram account to user-generated content. These photos consist of users holding their ice cream in different locations. Sharing this content suggests Ben & Jerry's inclusive nature and appreciation for its community and fans. Through this approach, the brand engages with consumers, strengthening relationships and brand loyalty. This approach serves as free publicity as it encourages followers to share their own photos in hopes of being reposted on the brand's account (Refer to *Figure 7* in Appendix IV).

These user-generated photos are simple and unprofessional, suggesting the brand's laid-back and welcoming nature. This content highlights its sincerity—honestly portraying its products and genuine appreciation for its consumers. It shows Ben & Jerry's value of sharing its products with a diverse audience and uniting together over the universal love for ice cream. The variety of backgrounds in these photos highlights the idea that Ben & Jerry's can be taken anywhere—suggesting the versatility, diversity, and creativity of the brand. These elements suggest a dimension of excitement in Ben and Jerry's brand, displaying its products in imaginative and fun ways (Refer to *Figure 8* in Appendix IV).

Oreo

Compared to the previous food brands, Oreo posted the least amount of product photos. Instead of using Instagram mainly for product promotion, Oreo used it as a way to convey its fun, quirky, and social personality. Thirty-nine percent of Oreo's account consists of user-generated content, suggesting its value and dedication to its loyal consumers. It dedicated 13% of its account to both "recipes" and "humor and product" content, sharing creative and funny ways to use its products (Refer to *Figure 9* in Appendix V).

Although this technique is somewhat promotional, these photos present unique ways to go beyond the basic uses of its products. This content highlights the personality dimensions of sincerity and excitement. It suggests that Oreo is promoting its creative and multidimensional personality, which has made its not so "cookie-cutter" brand name so popular (Refer to *Figure 10* in Appendix V).

Video

Each brand used videos in less than 10% of posts in their accounts. Shredz, McDonald's, Ben & Jerry's and Taco Bell dedicated the majority of their posted videos to product promotion, whereas most of Oreo's videos incorporated elements of "humor and product." This finding further suggests that Oreo is using Instagram to promote its fun and creative personality with consumers. Although the brands only dedicated a small amount of their accounts to video content, this tactic served as a way to express more information and personality with it.

V. Conclusion

Although marketing on this platform has been explored in the past, this study was the first to analyze Instagram's five leading food brand accounts. One of the major themes found was product promotion by all of the brands, which dedicated a significant amount of their accounts to showcasing their products in appealing ways. These promotional photos demonstrate Goor's (2012) finding that product-representation brands use persuasion strategies through applying branding to their photos, although the ways in which the products were presented in the posts varied among the brands. Photos that only featured products seemed promotional; however, when people were included, the photos conveyed a more inclusive and inviting feeling. This type of content highlighted the theme of socializing. Featuring people in the images offers a more organic approach of encouraging consumers to purchase their products. Brands that highlighted people socializing with their products suggest their values of promoting the social and cultural characteristics of food. These photos support Bui's (2014) finding that brands should include social-integrative components in their posts to engage consumers.

Previous research suggested that brands should share a variety of relevant photo content to keep consumers entertained and connected. All of the accounts in this study shared content from multiple of the coded categories, suggesting that they stand for something more than just their products. This finding is evidence that the brands are using Instagram as more than simply a marketing tool.

This variety of content suggests that brands are using their personalized profiles to showcase their multidimensional personalities. Goor (2012) proposed that these identities are evidenced when the product, brand name and product related events are featured; however, this analysis suggests that it is possible to portray these attributes without featuring products, such as through lifestyle content. This type of content presents aspects of their brands that would not be seen through the product posts, and allows for further brand individualization. The lifestyle posts suggest a more in-depth depiction of brands' identities by presenting content about their personal interests, values, and activities. Their accounts share a visual and engaging glimpse into the lives behind their brand names, presenting themselves as loyal friends, social butterflies, inspirational coaches, and quirky creatives. These findings highlight the theme of personification, suggesting that they are using Instagram to seem more "human" in the eyes of consumers. This approach creates the opportunity for a more genuine, relevant, and meaningful relationship to be formed with consumers.

Creating these identities suggests a theme of approachability, offering a way for brands to connect and communicate with consumers on a more intimate level: evoking emotions, laughter and curiosity. Through this emotional connectedness, the brands are able to form their own communities of followers within the platform. This sense of community suggests a way to gratify users' socializing needs Gallion (2014) mentioned.

Connecting with consumers on this level could ultimately influence their buying behavior and brand loyalty.

Key limitations of this study include a rather small photo sample size due to fact that some brands are relatively new to Instagram. A larger sample could have revealed additional effective photo elements that brands are using on Instagram. Future researchers should also take into account user engagement expressed through the number of "likes" and comments on each photo. Lastly, researchers should investigate whether brands are monitoring the types of photo content their target users are posting. This insight could present new photo elements that brands should incorporate into their posts to reflect the taste of their consumers.

Acknowledgments

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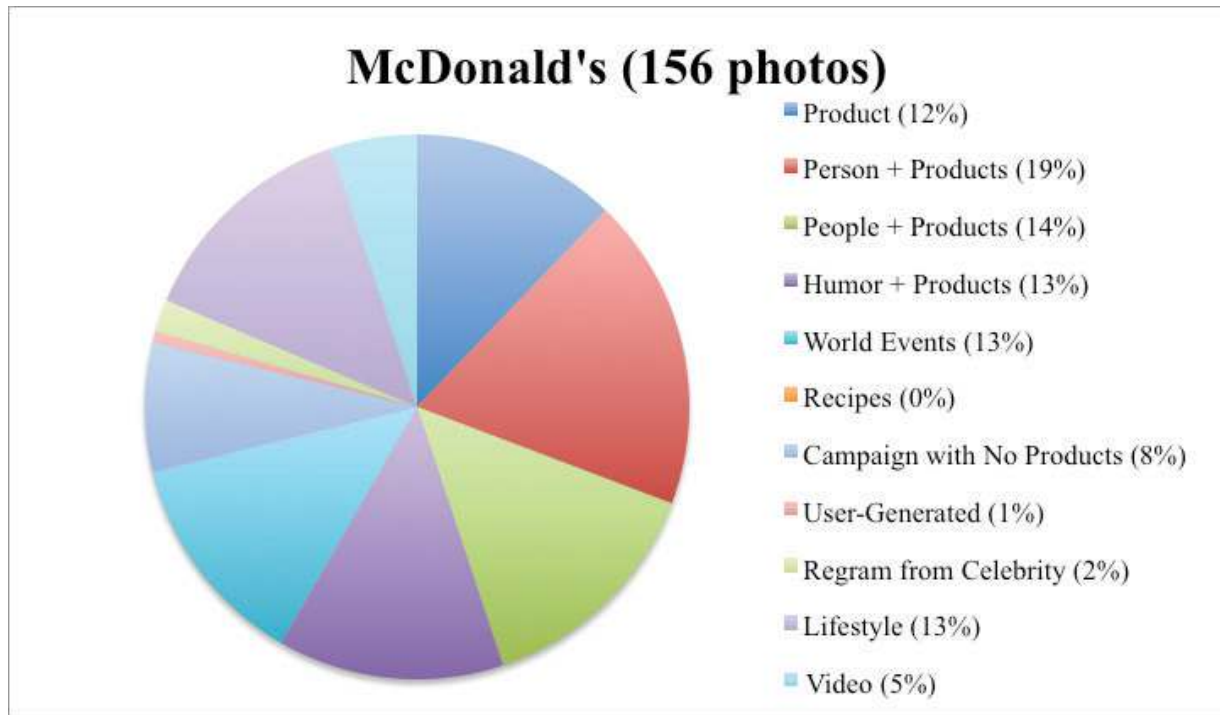## Appendix I: McDonald's

Figure 1. Photo elements featured in McDonald's Instagram account.

Figure 2. Examples of McDonald's cheerful and spirited personality.
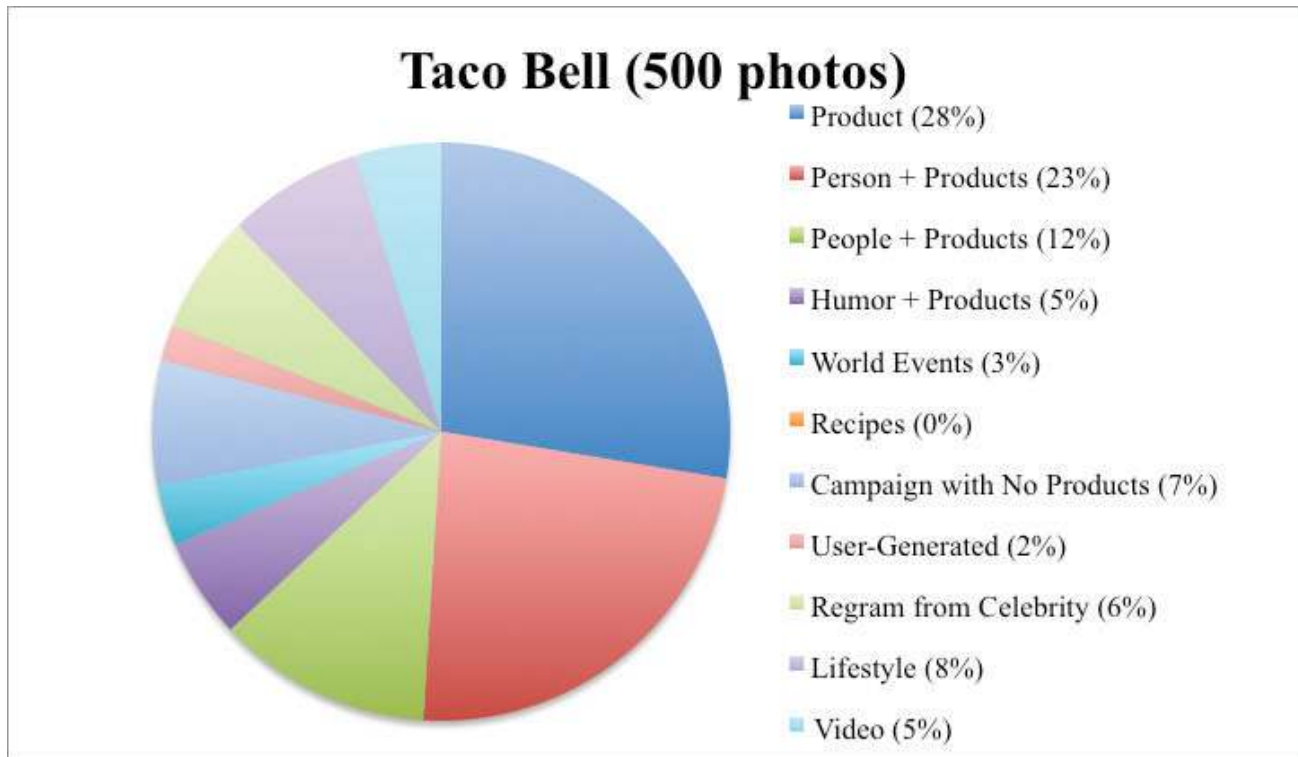
Appendix II: Taco Bell

Figure 3. Photo elements featured in Taco Bell's Instagram account.

Figure 4. Examples of Taco Bell's genuine and imaginative personality.

Appendix III: Shredz
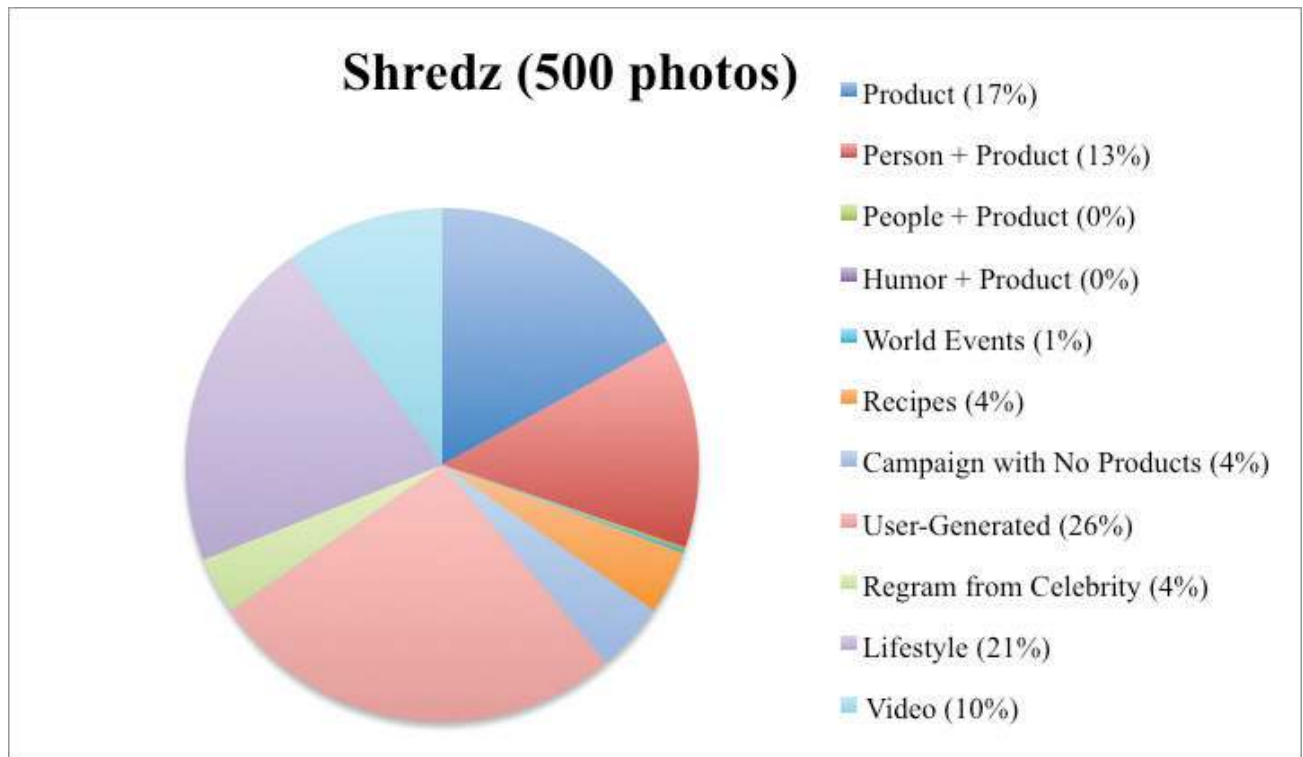

Figure 5. Photo elements featured in Shredz's Instagram account.

Figure 6. Examples of Shredz's tough and reliable personality.
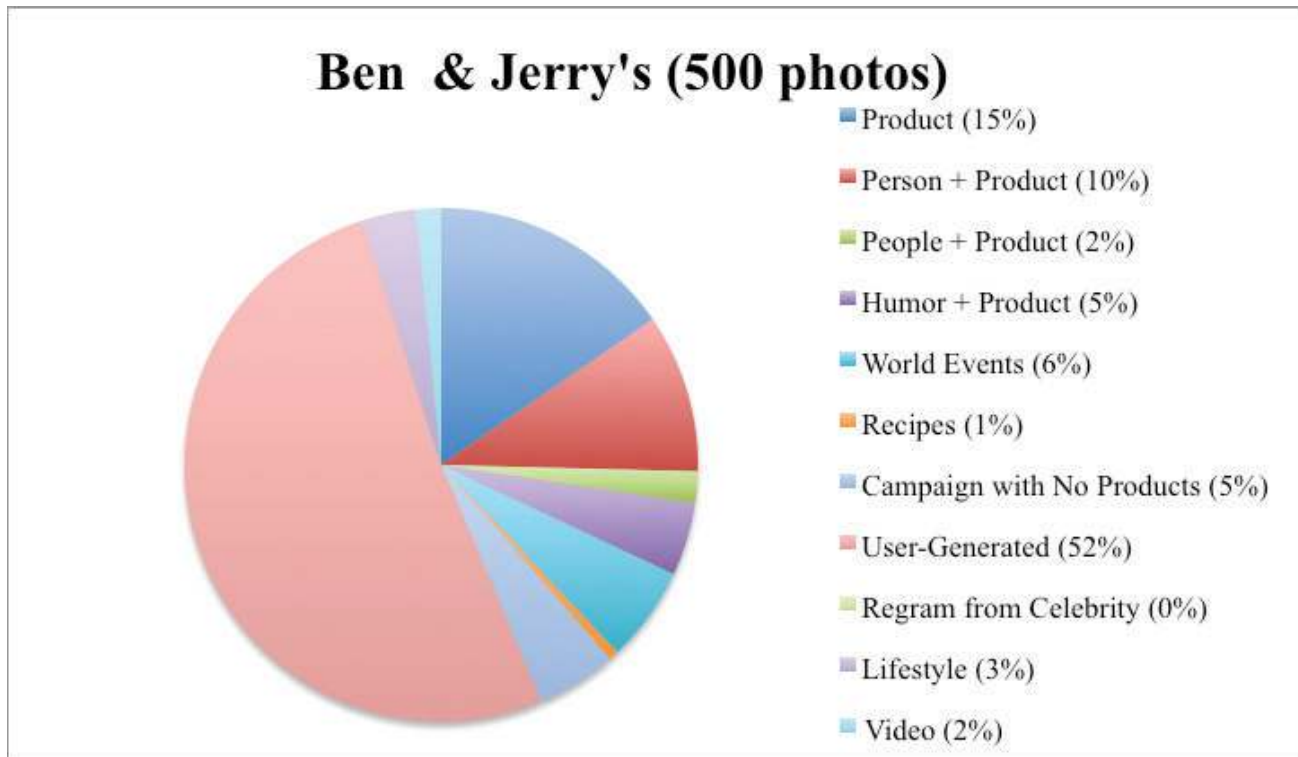
Appendix IV: Ben & Jerry's

Figure 7. Photo elements featured in Ben & Jerry's Instagram account.

Figure 8. Examples of Ben & Jerry's honest and light-hearted personality.
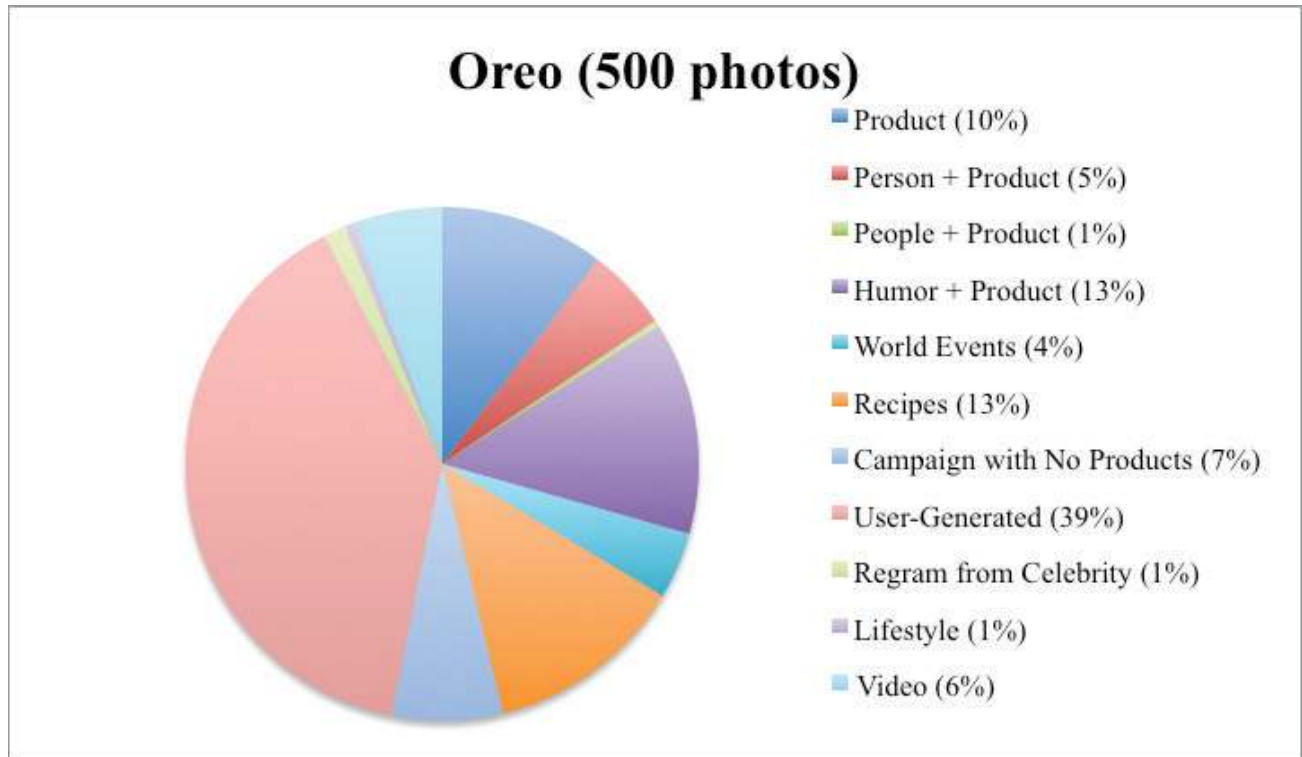
Appendix V: Oreo

Figure 9. Photo elements featured in Oreo's Instagram account.

Figure 10. Examples of Oreo's genuine and imaginative personality.