

When brands burst into consumers' spontaneous practices: mapping consumers' reaction to brands' entrance in the FantaSanremo competition

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Abstract

In the past two decades, technology has led to a reversal of hierarchical power structures within the digital landscape, giving consumers more power to create their own trends, and making brands increasingly attracted by these bottom-up practices. But what happens when brands attempt to insert themselves into these consumers-driven trends? This exploratory study aims to investigate social media consumers' reactions to brand entrance into the FantaSanremo competition, a fan-made fantasy game related to the Sanremo Music Festival. By means of a netnographic approach, approximately 600 posts from X (formerly Twitter) have been analysed and both positive and negative consumers' reactions have emerged. A strategy for brands to adopt in order to organically integrate into consumers-dominant competitions has been outlined in the discussion.

Keywords: Consumer-driven practices; fantasy game; authenticity; consumer engagement

1. Introduction

The rise of online platforms and digital content has revolutionised the way consumers interact with brands and products across industries (Larkin et al., 2020). According to recent research, a phenomenon that has had a relevant impact on consumption in different industries is the emergence of fantasy game competitions, which are mostly prevalent in the sports arena (Larkin et al., 2020). Fantasy sports are defined as online activity based on customizability and interaction “where users accumulate points based on real-time statistics achieved by athletes on their fantasy roster” (Ballouli et al., 2013, p. 1; Dwyer & Drayer, 2010). More in general, we define fantasy game competitions as a type of games where participants create and manage virtual teams or entities based on real-world characters, events, or outcomes. These teams compete against each other based on the actual performance of their chosen characters or entities in real-life events. A fantasy game competition is characterised by the following key elements: player selection, scoring system, competition nature, customization and management of teams, rewards.

This study focuses on the Italian phenomenon of FantaSanremo, a fan-made fantasy game related to the Sanremo Music Festival, i.e. the country's most important annual song contest. FantaSanremo was launched in 2020 by a small group of festival fans and within a few years it reached over 4.2 million registered teams (Rossini, 2023). Throughout the years, brands' presence into the music festival has also expanded notably, shifting from mere advertisements and product placements during the main event to active participation in the FantaSanremo game. Brands can enter the competition in different ways. For instance, by creating their own leagues, often offering prizes to encourage user participation, or by introducing branded “bonuses”

and “maluses” (i.e. penalties) related to the artists’ performances, in addition to the standard rules of FantaSanremo, which impact how points are awarded to users. The purpose of this study is to investigate consumers’ reactions to the brands’ entry into this kind of consumer-driven competition.

Throughout the years, the literature on fantasy games has predominantly focused on sports consumption, and particularly football. Most of the studies exploring this phenomenon investigate motivations for participating in fantasy game competitions, different modes of consumption, and different types of fantasy game consumers (e.g., Ballouli et al., 2013; Dwyer & Drayer, 2010; Dwyer & Kim, 2011; Oğuzhan et al., 2018). However, research on fantasy games within the context of music consumption is still lacking. Moreover, to date, no study has yet investigated how the entry of brands into fantasy game competitions impacts consumers’ reactions and engagement. With brands increasingly taking part in these games through sponsorships and partnership deals, examining this influence could provide precious insights both for academics and practitioners.

Hence, our research seeks to fill this gap and answer the following research question: how does brands’ entrance into consumers-driven competitions impact consumers’ reactions? In order to address it, a netnography has been undertaken using platform X (formerly Twitter) to collect data.

The contribution of this exploratory study is threefold. First, it identifies the main consumer reactions to brands’ entry into fantasy game competitions. Second, it reveals the mechanisms triggered by these reactions as second-order consequences in terms of consumers’ engagement. Third, it identifies the steps that brands have to undertake to organically become part of consumer-driven media dominant competitions and benefit from it.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Fantasy game competitions and FantaSanremo

The development of fantasy gaming has been most prominent in the realm of sports, with football serving as a primary catalyst. As fantasy sports is a multibillion-dollar industry (Drayer et al., 2010), scholars and marketers have begun to study this phenomenon to understand its underlying dynamics and processes.

The main findings on fantasy football indicate that participation in this activity is more purposeful and active than the use of traditional media. Users’ motivations fall into three main dimensions: entertainment/escapism, competition, and social interaction (Dwyer & Kim, 2011). Studies also show that higher participation levels in fantasy football positively affect team identification, team loyalty, leagues fandom, and consumer behaviour, leading to more time spent watching football games as well as more time spent online researching and updating fantasy football teams (Lee et al., 2013). These factors have prompted marketers to adapt their strategies in terms of how they deliver the sports product (Ballouli et al., 2013). Furthermore, recent research shows that participation in fantasy games related to football impacts

the brand associations that users make toward players and their purchase intentions toward those players (Larkin et al., 2020).

Thus, although there are references in the literature to brands intended as athletes' brand images, there are no studies investigating the role of brands as partners or sponsors of fantasy games. This could be due to the fact that in football fantasy games, sponsors are included in online game headers and banners, but it's rare to see interactive features that incorporate the sponsors, nor do most sponsors effectively leverage fantasy football in offline marketing (Russo & Walker, 2006). While external brands seem to play a minor role in this specific context, the same cannot be said in the case of the fantasy game that is the subject of our study, FantaSanremo.

FantaSanremo can be defined as a music fantasy game competition based on Sanremo Music Festival, the most important song contest in Italy, held annually in the city of Sanremo since 1977. The festival is broadcast live on national television and is watched by nearly 11 million Italian viewers (Boscolo, 2019). It is the longest-running annual TV music competition in the world on a national level and boasts both national and international coverage. Usually, the Sanremo Music Festival takes place over one week in February, where singers compete with unreleased songs written by Italian authors. During the last night, a winner is declared based on audience and jury votes and various awards are assigned (e.g., critics' award) (Festival Di Sanremo, 2024).

FantaSanremo was born in 2020 from the idea of a group of Sanremo Music Festival fans, who set the initial rules and started the game. The first year the fantasy game took place only offline and had 47 participants, but soon caught the attention of mainstream media (Gagliardi, 2022). The following year, FantaSanremo switched online and, by 2024, had over 2.8 million participants (Quelli di FantaSanremo, 2024; Altea, 2023). To date, the fantasy game involves creating teams consisting of 5 competing singers, who will gain or lose points each day (i.e., bonus and malus) according to a specific set of rules.

Over the years, FantaSanremo has gained much popularity. As a result, several brands have seen the game as an opportunity to interact with the public, increasing their visibility and creating a direct link with fans. Well-known brands (e.g., Lavazza, Pandora, TicketOne) have begun to take part in this activity as official sponsors. They actively participate in the fantasy game, creating their own league and offering prizes, discounts or promotions to winners.

Considering the nature of this fantasy game, which originated as a consumer-driven phenomenon, this paper aims to investigate how brands' entry into a spontaneous consumer activity affects consumers' reactions.

2.2 Music consumption

Music consumption can be defined as a peculiar research context. Music is often conceived as an ordinary product to be sold, but studies demonstrated that it can also represent an important part of individuals' life and of the shaping and expression of their self-identity (e.g., Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Shankar et al., 2009). Music is a resource that people use creatively to enrich their lives and make connections (e.g., Frith, 1996). It is intricately bound up within the realm of the subjective and the

personal (Oakes et al., 2013) and it can be used to satisfy personal needs and to fulfil identity projects (DeNora, 2000). Music consumption not only serves to shape and renew individual identity, but is also useful in creating a sense of community identity with other consumers (Oakes et al., 2013). In particular, it is the communication of music consumption experiences and preferences that contributes to the construction of individual and collective identity (Larsen et al., 2010). Furthermore, music consumers are characterised by an active and reflexive agency (Corciolani, 2014; Hesmondhalgh, 2008), which may explain the consumer-driven emergence of phenomena such as FantaSanremo.

In this regard, previous studies indicated that identity goals and music consumption are intrinsically linked to the concept of authenticity (e.g., Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Corciolani, 2014). Authenticity could be defined as a quality that “necessarily depends on a judgement of genuineness” (Rose & Wood, 2005; Trilling, 1972, p. 294). Scholars show that individuals do not assess an object’s authenticity by evaluating its intrinsic characteristics but by considering its capability to fulfil their identity goals (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Beverland et al., 2010). In this peculiar context, this means that music consumers would also attribute authenticity to music depending on who they are and how they use it (Corciolani, 2014).

Given that “consumers crave authenticity” (Nunes et al., 2021, p.1) and that marketing strategies are typically considered as inherently inauthentic (Deibert, 2017), this study aims to investigate how consumers react to the marketing initiatives of brands that take part in spontaneous and authentic practices such as FantaSanremo.

In order to explore this research question, we adopt a qualitative netnographic approach by examining consumers’ reactions elicited by brands on the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter). In recent years, the growing popularity of social media has begun to play an important role in influencing music consumption (Lei et al., 2021). During the week of the Sanremo Music Festival, the number of event-related posts and interactions on social media reaches significant figures (Capone, 2024). In addition, social media engagement has also become an integral part of the consumer experience related to FantaSanremo. Previous research found that the emotional bonds that consumers develop through social media interactions influence the strength of their relationships with brands involved in music festivals (Hudson et al., 2015). Therefore, analysing consumers’ activity on a social media platform like X (Twitter) can provide useful insights into their reactions.

3. Method

Given the digital-based nature of the technoculture under study (Kozinets, 2022), netnography was considered to be a suitable research method for a deep comprehension of the engagement dynamics at play within the context of the FantaSanremo game. Netnography represents a particular kind of online ethnography whose purpose is to study the social interaction that occurs on interactive media by means of a cultural perspective (Kozinets & Nocker, 2018).

Following Kozinets’ rigorous guidelines (2019), data were collected using a three-step process composed by investigation, immersion, and data integration. Within

the investigative phase, the FantaSanremo corporate website, social media pages and related comments have been carefully examined to gain a more comprehensive glance on the phenomenon. Moreover, websites, social media pages, comments, and press releases of all brands involved in FantaSanremo have also been analysed.

Then, data collection shifted on X (formerly Twitter), where FantaSanremo has obtained an increased popularity thanks to its unique blend of competition, community, and entertainment dynamics. Whilst several hashtags (e.g., #fantasanremo, #fantasanremo2024, #fantasanremo2023) and related posts have been scouted, the vast majority of data have been retrieved by using the search tool on X and inserting “*brand*” and “FantaSanremo” as keywords – where *brand* stands for the brand name of both the companies which were explicitly mentioned in the FantaSanremo regulation over years (e.g., Lavazza, Chanteclair, Perlana, etc.) as well as those which created their own league to let users participate in (e.g., Ticketone, Pandora, Wizzair, etc). Data collection was not limited to the latest edition of FantaSanremo but rather covered all the X posts – formerly known as “tweets” – published since 2022, resulting in a total of approximately 600 commentaries. Subsequently, the research encompassed a deep and extensive immersion phase. An immersion journal, namely the netnographic equivalent of the ethnographer’s fieldnotes, accompanied both authors during all the phases of data gathering and analysis, allowing for a more profound engagement with the research topic. Finally, during the integration phase, data have been coded and analysed by researchers separately, and then compared in order to avoid potential biases.

The recommended ethical procedures for netnography have been scrupulously followed. Due to the lighthearted, playful, and commonplace nature of the commentaries, the topics were not considered to be sensitive and thus posed only minimal risk to users (Kozinets, 2019). Moreover, informed consent and researcher disclosures were not deemed necessary (Kozinets & Seraj-Aksit, 2024), as there was no direct interaction with social media users. For purposes of confidentiality, users’ names have been anonymized and their quotes have been slightly edited in order to prevent traceability. Finally, minor spelling corrections have been undertaken to improve readability.

4. Results

The analysis of the data allowed us to identify different consumer responses to the entry of brands into FantaSanremo. The main reactions identified were divided into positive and negative ones (1st order coding). Then, to understand the effect of brand involvement in fantasy games on consumers’ engagement, we analysed the relationship between consumer reactions and their influence on the fantasy gaming experience (2nd order coding).

Figure 1 and Figure 2 illustrate the coding system we followed. In the first stage of the analysis the two researchers independently read and manually coded the online comments into a set of 1st-order reactions. The second stage involved a 2nd-order analysis whereby the authors sought to understand links between

consumers' reactions and the influence they have on the fantasy gaming experience. Due to space constraints, only two relevant comments from each main category have been included for illustrative purposes.

4.1 Positive reactions

Quotes	1st order coding	2nd order coding
<p>“Oh my god if you participate in the Ticketone league at FantaSanremo you can win a voucher LET’S GO”</p> <p>“I signed up for the FantaSanremo brand league to try to win coupons even for things I don't care about. [...] I’m thrilled”</p>	Excitement related to the chance to win prizes	Increased commitment
<p>“@colla_zio I believe in you, if I win in the Ticketone league I use the voucher to get a ticket to one of your concerts”</p> <p>“[Cugini di Campagna] I knew I could count on you for the Pandora bonus! #FantaSanremo2023”</p>	Strengthening of fan-artist relationship	Enhanced brand identity
<p>“[I am the] 20th on Ticketone league I consider it a win honestly #FantaSanremo”</p> <p>“[I am] 33rd in the World Fantasy League and 17th in the Ticketone league!”</p>	Desire to share	Community building
<p>“I joined FantaSanremo</p>	Elevation in supporting	Increased consumer trust

this year because it shares a good cause! #uniamomalattierare @uniamofimronlus! #FantaSanremo” “FantaSanremo’s Action Aid bonus: you guys are great!”	social causes	
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Figure 1. Data coding exemplification of consumers’ positive reactions.

The most common positive reaction is related to the possibility of winning prizes raffled off by brands. Brands create their own leagues, i.e., private leagues that can have an indefinite number of teams in them and that will eventually have their own ranking based on the points obtained by each team. The winners of each league will obtain prizes of various kinds banned by the brands. Thus, excitement related to the chance to win prizes is the first positive reaction found in our analysis: *“Oh my god if you participate in the Ticketone league at FantaSanremo you can win a voucher LET’S GO”*. Sometimes, the desire to win prizes seems to outweigh even the pleasure of the game itself: *“I signed up for the FantaSanremo brand league to try to win coupons even for things I don’t care about. [...] I’m thrilled”*. These feelings of excitement can boost consumer commitment. Moreover, the prospect of winning prizes can motivate consumers to engage more deeply with the brand and the event.

Another interesting positive reaction is related to the strengthening of fan-artist relationship. Through the game, fans deepen their connection with their favourite artists, and the presence of brands and prizes to be won could make this effect even stronger: *“@colla_zio I believe in you, if I win in the Ticketone league I use the voucher to get a ticket to one of your concerts”*. Consumers appreciate the fact that their favourite artists earn them points in the fantasy game: *“[Cugini di Campagna] I knew I could count on you for the Pandora bonus! #FantaSanremo2023”*. From a brand perspective, this can translate into an enhanced brand identity, as association with talented artists can help brands establish a stronger and more authentic identity.

Associated with the positive reactions just mentioned is the desire to share. Consumers feel the need to share thoughts and information about the fantasy game on social media. For example, they want to share their ranking in brand leagues: *“[I am the] 20th on Ticketone league I consider it a win honestly #FantaSanremo”*; or again, *“[I am] 33rd in the World Fantasy League and 17th in the Ticketone league!”*. This kind of reaction can contribute to community building. Sharing can help build a sense of community and connection among consumers who participate in the event and support the brand.

Finally, another positive reaction linked to the entry of some brands into FantaSanremo is a sense of elevation that consumers feel in supporting social causes. This reaction occurs particularly toward those nonprofit brands that take part in FantaSanremo as sponsors and partners: “*FantaSanremo’s Action Aid bonus: you guys are great!*”. Consumers appreciate the entry of nonprofit brands into the fantasy game, as it gives them a sense of contributing to a good cause, allowing them to feel like they are making a positive impact simply by participating in the game: “*I joined FantaSanremo this year because it shares a good cause! #uniamomalattierare @uniamofimronlus! #FantaSanremo*”. As a consequence, this can lead to an increased consumer trust. Brands that demonstrate a commitment to social causes tend to foster trust and goodwill among consumers.

4.2 Negative reactions

Quotes	1st order coding	2nd order coding
<p>“FantaSanremo was fun and useful when it was spontaneous because no one knew about it and without a thousand sponsorships. Yet another entertainment taken away from us by capitalism”</p> <p>“The #FantaSanremo was funny three years ago. Now it has become a circus of brands [...] and the singers, because of people that don’t know how to play, are treated like clowns. The songs take second place”</p>	Perceived commodification of the event	Reduced authenticity
<p>“Why does the TicketOne bonus of FantaSanremo seem to be made specifically for Mengoni Marco and his song?”</p> <p>“The winners are leagues</p>	Perceived piloting of the event	Resentment

of brands, the game is super fake”		
<p>“I made the team at FantaSanremo but sorry how endlessly sad with all the brands and tiktokers everywhere, how boring”</p> <p>“The first contamination of FantaSanremo by brands was also funny. Now the total branding of FantaSanremo is testing my nerves.”</p>	Rise of negative emotions (e.g., boredom, sadness, discomfort)	Alienation
<p>“What a pity, there is no FantaSanremo action that is not associated with a brand. You know what? I'm going to boycott them all [...]”</p> <p>“Boycott these brands no revenue from FantaSanremo was given to charity”</p>	Threat of negative action (e.g., boycott)	Damage to brand reputation

Figure 2. Data coding exemplification of consumers’ negative reactions.

The main element to consider when talking about negative consumer reactions is the fact that FantaSanremo began as a consumer-driven phenomenon. It originates from an insight of consumers themselves and acquires a character of spontaneity and authenticity totally unrelated to market strategies. Thus, the main negative reactions are related to the threat that brands pose to these features of the fantasy game.

In fact, the first negative reaction identified concerns the perceived commodification of the event. Consumers interpret brand sponsorships as a transformation of the game into product/goods to sell. They express dissent toward the loss of original spontaneity: *“FantaSanremo was fun and useful when it was spontaneous because no one knew about it and without a thousand sponsorships. Yet another fun that capitalism has taken away from us”*. Furthermore, consumers have

the perception that brands diminish the solemnity of the game and the festival itself in favour of marketing strategies: *“The #FantaSanremo was funny three years ago. Now it has become a circus of brands [...] and the singers, because of people that don’t know how to play, are treated like clowns. The songs take second place”*. The perceived commodification and loss of spontaneity could lead consumers to a perceived loss of brands’ authenticity, resulting in a decreased consumer engagement. If brands are seen as exploiting the event, consumers may question the authenticity and sincerity of the brand. These findings support the literature on authenticity and music consumption, confirming how much consumers value this quality. Even when consuming a fantasy game, the aspect of authenticity and spontaneity remains a priority for consumers. It is important for brands to take this into account and to be able to enter bottom-up activities without denaturalising them.

An additional reaction identified is the perception of piloting the event: *“Why does the TicketOne bonus of FantaSanremo seem to be made specifically for Mengoni Marco and his song?”*. Consumers think that the entry of brands into the fantasy game may involve piloting the game, particularly in the scoring system: *“The winners are leagues of brands, the game is super fake”*. In this case, the main risk for brands consists in the arising of a feeling of resentment in consumers. If brands are perceived as interfering with the original rules of the game, consumers may feel that they are being cheated and develop resentment toward them.

Another common reaction that has emerged related to brands’ participation in the fantasy game is the rising of negative emotions in consumers. Indeed, some consumers refer to emotions such as sadness, boredom, and nervousness: *“I made the team at FantaSanremo but sorry how endlessly sad with all the brands and tiktokers everywhere, how boring”*. In particular, some denote how initially a soft entry into the game was fun, but the ever-increasing presence of brands creates discomfort: *“The first contamination of FantaSanremo by brands was also funny. Now the total branding of FantaSanremo is testing my nerves”*. Consumer engagement can be affected by these types of emotions. In fact, negative emotions can lead to feelings of alienation or disassociation from the brand.

Finally, some consumers have even threatened brands with negative actions against them, particularly boycotts: *“What a pity, there is no FantaSanremo action that is not associated with a brand. You know what? I’m going to boycott them all [...] #sanremo2024”*. Not only are consumers announcing online that they will boycott the brand, but they are also inviting other consumers to do the same: *“Boycott these brands no revenue from FantaSanremo was given to charity”*. This type of threat can have damaging consequences for brands and consumer engagement. Negative consumer actions and sentiments can damage the reputation of the brands involved, potentially leading to decreased sales or consumer loyalty.

5. General discussion and conclusion

This exploratory study expands the stream of literature on fantasy game competitions (Ballouli et al., 2013; Dwyer & Drayer, 2010; Dwyer & Kim, 2011; Oğuzhan et al., 2018) by focusing on consumers’ responses to the entrance of brands

into spontaneous and bottom-up practices originated in the realm of music consumption.

The presence of brand partnerships and sponsorship into the FantaSanremo game was found to trigger both positive (e.g., excitement related to the chance to win prizes, strengthening of fan-artist relationship, desire to share, and elevation in supporting social causes) and negative consumers' reactions (e.g., perceived commodification of the event, perceived piloting of the event, rise of negative emotions, and threat of negative actions) which can in turn lead to increased or decreased consumers engagement, respectively.

However, what is interesting to note from our analysis is that brands can successfully integrate into these consumers-driven competitions in a natural and organic way. More specifically, analysis of the results allowed us to identify five steps that brands should undertake in order to organically become part of bottom-up trends derived from the collected X posts and commentaries (see Figure 3).

First, brands can engage in a strategy of "incentivized participation", that is, offering branded prizes as rewards for consumers' involvement in the game. Although this strategy may be seen as an over-commercialization of the event (*"FantaSanremo began as a fun game, but now it's a revenue-generating business. Every scoring action feels like a delay that detracts from the show, with each action tied to a sponsor"*), it was found to increase consumer participation and engagement even among those who had never watched the Sanremo Music Festival before (*"I've never watched Sanremo before never participated in FantaSanremo before but this year I'm in because I want to win vouchers for Ticketone and Wizzair"*).

Nonetheless, this engagement is sometimes more opportunistic rather than genuine (*"I only participated in Fantasanremo for the Ticketone contest but I won't even watch it lol"*), and thus brands should take a further step in order to more organically become relevant within consumers-driven practices. This second step concerns becoming part of a community that brands should actively support and participate in. Several users were found to openly share excitement (*"I just found out I'm in the top 20 of TicketOne's league @FantaSanremo. I remain humble also because it's truly random"*) or frustration (*"I have changed my team in the Pandora League to one that I thought was stronger, but it turned out to be the worst choice I CRY"*) online, where platforms serve as public arenas to discuss strategies, performances, and outcomes, contributing to a communal narrative around the FantaSanremo game. Hence, involved brands should actively participate in and leverage these online communities, enhancing consumers' engagement into the fantasy game as well as into the main event.

Once that brands have established their active involvement in online communities, they can start to propose branded bonuses or penalties that can organically impact artists' performances. If brands fail to build a strong base of community engagement before this step, the risk is that participants perceive the insertion of branded bonuses and maluses as an increasing piloting of the event (*"@FantaSanremo with this Perlana bonus you ruined the Festival outfits, seeing all the artists dressed in total black every night made everything sad and everything the same, how bitter"*), resulting from the tension between the artistic/hedonic nature of

FantaSanremo and the entertainment interests revolving around it (*“if singers didn’t know the bonuses and penalties perhaps the game would make more sense. Now they are almost forced to say/do certain things on stage, and if they don’t do them they are insulted like Matteo Romano and others who last year preferred to focus on the festival instead of the game”*). However, if managed effectively, brand bonuses and maluses can be accepted by consumers as consistent and valuable additions to the game experience (*“this is all for the damn Philadelphia bonus and I’m laughing so hard”*).

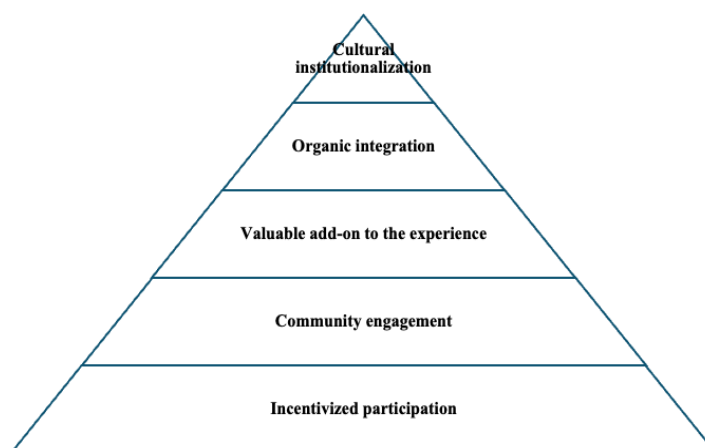


Figure 3. Conceptual model for organic brands integration into consumers-driven competitions.

The following step is where “organic integration” occurs. At this point, the brand’s presence within the game is so normalised and widely accepted that brands organically become part of users’ conversations. Brand names are frequently mentioned in users’ commentaries on social media, becoming an integral part of the narrative surrounding the main event, and consumers strategies within the game are strongly influenced by brands’ participation (*“Cugini di Campagna have taken FantaSanremo seriously with the little flower in their hair, spreading themselves on stage, Pandora bonus, wearing sunglasses. I knew they would earn me a lot of points!”*). This step can also translate into users’ participation in the fantasy game just to support their favourite brands, as in the case of Taffo, where consumers were found to adopt the brand’s black humour narrative when naming their teams to participate in the company’s league. For instance, this informant shows his willingness to take part in the brand’s discourse by playing on the assonance between the surname Morandi and the Italian word for “dying”: *“Fantasanremo team done! Gianni Morendo #Sancremo @taffoofficial”*.

The final step of the model proposed concerns the cultural institutionalisation of the brand into consumers-dominant competitions. Our findings provide evidence of the establishment of Fantasaremo as a cultural practice by consumers, which accompanies the daily enjoyment of the main festival (*“Minus seven days to #Sanremo2023! I’m ready for the day with my #FantaSanremo team, my TV Sorrisi e Canzoni and a cozy plaid on the sofa with herbal tea”*). Sanremo indeed is not just an event but a significant cultural phenomenon that people eagerly anticipate, blending emotional and cultural attachment thanks to its strong significance in crafting national identity (*“I’m ready to gather the demoscopic jury at my house (my friends), to participate in the fantasy Sanremo and to download the evaluation grids of TrashItaliano #Sanremo2023”*). Several participants were found to be so enthusiastic and passionate about the festival and the overall imagery surrounding the event, that activities such as FantaSanremo turned out to be an integral part of their social and cultural lives, also influencing their daily routines (*“Now we’re just waiting for the release of the Fantasaremo shares to plan our teams. My God, the festival truly is the most wonderful time of the year! #Sanremo2024”*). Once a brand becomes an organic part of a legitimised bottom-up practice such as Fantasaremo, it can leverage all the related cultural meanings and associations to enhance consumers’ engagement and interactions. Additionally, this strategy not only impacts consumers’ practices, but also enables brands to gain greater prominence within the context of popular culture – e.g., Italian music culture – leading to an increased cultural relevance of the brand within the broader marketing landscape.

6. Implications and directions for further research

From a theoretical perspective, this exploratory study has contributed to the literature on fantasy games by investigating for the first time the effect of brands’ sponsorships and partnerships in this context. To our knowledge, this exploratory study represents the first attempt to understand consumers’ reactions to brands’ entrance into consumers-dominant competition. The findings showed how the presence of brands can trigger both positive and negative reactions. In particular, it seems that the main risk for brands of entering consumer-driven practices is related to the loss of authenticity and the perception of commodification. On the other hand, consumers seem to highly appreciate brands that put up prizes. These findings pave the way for future studies on the different brands’ modes of entry into these consumer-dominant fantasy activities.

In addition, this research makes a contribution to the literature on music consumption. FantaSanremo is in fact a fantasy game developed in the music field. The results support the literature on music consumption and authenticity by showing that even when it comes to fantasy games related to music events, authenticity is a key quality for music consumers. This paves the way for reflection on the paradox of consumers’ need for authenticity in fantasy worlds, and different meanings of authenticity.

From a managerial perspective, this study offers valuable insights for developing effective branding strategies. Analysis of the results allowed us to develop

a conceptual model useful for brands to take concrete actions to naturally enter into consumer-driven competitions. Brands need to take an organic approach, demonstrating sensitivity to community cultural trends and ensuring that their involvement adds value rather than detracts from the consumer experience. For example, to incentivize participation (step 1) offering prizes to participants seems to be a successful strategy. To boost community engagement (step 2) brands should actively participate in online conversations surrounding fantasy competition, such as by creating social media campaigns that encourage participants to share their teams' strategies or progress in a specific league. Once the brand is well integrated into the community, to help add value to the experience (step 3), it could introduce bonuses or penalties that align with the spirit of the game. For example, a clothing brand might introduce a "Best Dressed" bonus, awarding points to performers who wear stylish or creative outfits, subtly tying the brand to the fashion and lifestyle elements of the festival. Results seem to suggest that consumers are more likely to accept brand-related elements in the game when they feel the brand is already part of the community. At this stage, to achieve organic integration (step 4), a brand could embrace the tone and culture of the game by aligning with fan rituals and language. Finally, to become culturally institutionalised (step 5) a brand would need to tailor different strategies to naturally weaving into the cultural fabric of the event. This could range from subtly inserting itself into the music context, for example by promoting ad hoc playlists that align with the brand's image, to developing products or services directly related to the fantasy game.

Although this research revealed interesting results, it represents a preliminary exploratory study with several limitations. First and foremost, this research is based on a single-case netnographic study. Although generalisation was not the goal of this inquiry, the investigation of fantasy games requires a broader glance which expands beyond the music consumption context. Second, our data collection mainly revolved around the platform X (Twitter). Future research should also examine other platforms (e.g., Whatsapp or Telegram groups created to discuss specific events) in order to gather all the nuances at play when brands enter into consumers-driven competition.

In the future, it might be interesting to investigate which elements mediate or moderate the relationship between brand presence and consumer reactions, such as individual consumer traits or prior brand evaluation. Further research could also investigate the different ways in which brands enter the fantasy game (e.g., prizes, bonuses/maluses, silent sponsorships, etc.) to see which one is the most effective. In particular, it might be worth investigating whether more subtle or more invasive modes have different effects on consumer reactions, and on the authenticity and spontaneity perceived by consumers.

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