

Research Paper

EMOTIONAL VS. FUNCTIONAL APPROACHES ON INSTAGRAM: THE DISNEY BRAND

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper aims to analyze how the Disney brand uses emotional and functional content strategies on Instagram to influence the emotional engagement of its followers.

Methodology: Based on a quantitative approach, an online questionnaire was administered to users who follow Disney or related communities on Instagram. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests.

Results: The results show that emotional content generates higher levels of enthusiasm, pleasure, and interaction, whereas functional content is perceived as more informative and interesting. These findings validate the multidimensional model of emotional engagement and reinforce the importance of emotional strategies in digital brand communication.

Research limitations: The study is limited by its sample, which is predominantly female and within a specific age range. Further research could use mixed methods and more diverse samples to deepen understanding.

Practical implications: Brands can optimize their social media communication by combining emotional appeal with practical information to foster stronger engagement from their audiences.

Originality: This study contributes to the literature by applying validated emotional engagement models to Instagram content strategies in the context of a globally iconic brand.

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1. Introduction

The growing competitiveness in the digital landscape has led brands to adopt communication strategies that go beyond simply transmitting information. The focus has shifted to creating meaningful connections with consumers, grounded in authentic and emotional experiences. In this context, social media has become a privileged space for building emotional bonds, allowing brands to interact directly with their audiences in a dynamic and personalized way. The social network Instagram has stood out as an effective platform for fostering emotional engagement among users, thanks to its visual interface and high capacity for generating interactions. Thus, it has become a strategic necessity for digital marketing to explore how different types of content impact this engagement.

Disney, a globally recognized brand, stands out for its ability to create emotional connections with consumers across generations. Through captivating storytelling and communication aligned with emotional values, the brand is considered a benchmark in emotional branding (Holt, 2016). This research focuses on how Disney communicates on Instagram and explores the impact of different content approaches (emotional and functional) on the emotional engagement of its followers.

The main objective of this article is to understand how these approaches influence users' emotional reactions, specifically evaluating two hypotheses: (H1) the type of content influences emotional engagement; and (H2) emotional approaches generate more interaction than functional ones.

The collected data demonstrated that Disney's emotional content, particularly content that evokes its classics, promotes higher levels of excitement, pleasure, and interaction among followers. In contrast, functional content was perceived as more interesting but less effective in terms of emotional engagement. To achieve the research goals, this article proposes the following specific objectives:

- Analyze whether the type of content (emotional vs. functional) published by Disney on Instagram influences the emotional engagement of its followers;

- Verify whether emotional content generates higher levels of excitement, pleasure, and interaction than functional content;
- Assess the consistency of followers' perceptions regarding different content approaches;
- Identify which sub-dimensions of emotional engagement are most impacted by emotional approaches.

The results highlight the importance of a content strategy that combines practical information with emotional appeals, allowing brands not only to capture attention but also to strengthen emotional connections. The study's conclusions reinforce the relevance of branding and emotional engagement as fundamental pillars for building loyal digital communities, especially on platforms like Instagram, where visual storytelling is central.

In addition to its global recognition and emotional branding legacy, Disney represents an exemplary case for analysis due to its unique ability to adapt its storytelling to highly visual and interactive platforms like Instagram. Despite the brand's wide presence, few empirical studies explore how its communication strategies specifically foster emotional engagement on this social network, revealing a research gap this study aims to address.

This article is structured as follows: section 2 presents the theoretical framework, including definitions of emotional engagement and content typologies; section 3 details the methodological design; section 4 discusses the main results; section 5 presents the main conclusions; and, finally, Section 6 addresses the limitations and suggestions for future studies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Emotional Engagement

The concept of emotional engagement refers to the affective bond between a consumer and a brand, characterized by feelings such as enthusiasm, pleasure, and emotional involvement (Dessart et al., 2016). This type of connection results in a deeper and more lasting emotional relationship with the brand: once established, the consumer

does not merely consume the product or service but actively promotes it, demonstrating behaviors such as sharing content and spontaneous recommendations to others (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

According to Dessart (2017), emotional engagement is composed of several sub-dimensions, including attention, identification, enthusiasm, pleasure, and interaction. These are fundamental to understanding how consumers relate affectively to brands, especially in digital contexts, and make consumers less sensitive to competitors' offers, as the brand ceases to be merely functional and becomes an emotional and symbolic connection.

In the digital realm, Instagram stands out as a particularly interesting platform for fostering emotional engagement. With its visual and interactive interface, this social network facilitates the creation of content that evokes emotions and generates closeness between the brand and the consumer. Dessart (2017) emphasizes that constant interaction on social media allows brands to cultivate a close relationship with users, reinforcing affective engagement.

Brands use strategies such as storytelling and personalization to create relevant emotional experiences. Visual posts featuring familiar characters, nostalgic elements, or narratives that evoke childhood memories have great potential to generate emotions such as happiness, empathy, and nostalgia, essential elements for promoting emotional engagement. These strategies are particularly effective in the case of Disney, a brand that, over the decades, has built a rich and emotionally appealing symbolic universe for different generations (Dessart, 2017; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

Thus, emotional engagement, especially on Instagram, does not result solely from frequent exposure to content but from brands' ability to provide meaningful experiences that stimulate emotions and create a sense of belonging. This phenomenon becomes even more relevant when the brand, like Disney, has a strong emotional identity based on consistent narratives and values shared with its audience.

2.2. Content Approaches: Emotional vs. Functional

In digital marketing, how a brand communicates with its followers online can directly influence their level of engagement. According to Ashley and Tuten (2015),

content can be divided into two broad categories: functional and emotional. This classification serves as a basis for understanding how different types of messages affect the connection between consumers and brands.

Functional approaches focus on transmitting practical information. This type of content highlights product or service features, such as functionalities, prices, news, or usage instructions. Its primary objective is to help consumers make rational decisions by providing clarity and utility. In the case of the Disney brand, this translates into posts that promote new features on the Disney+ streaming platform, announcements of movie releases, or information about attractions at its theme parks.

In contrast, emotional content aims to create affective connections with users by appealing to values, memories, or feelings. This type of content frequently uses storytelling techniques, striking visual elements, and iconic characters to evoke emotions such as nostalgia, empathy, and happiness. In the Disney universe, emotional content tends to include references to the brand's classics, such as historical animated films, the use of characters like Mickey Mouse, and campaigns that evoke childhood experiences and family connections.

Moreover, the Disney brand employs elements such as stickers, interactive filters, and temporary content on Instagram Stories, creating visual and interactive experiences that contribute to the brand's emotional branding. These strategies make consumers feel like integral parts of the community and encourage spontaneous brand promotion by users themselves.

In this study, the distinction between approaches was operationalized based on the categories proposed by Ashley and Tuten (2015), including questionnaire questions that measured preferences between emotional messages (such as content about the brand's classics or Walt Disney) and functional ones (about products and services). These approaches were analyzed for their impact on three sub-dimensions of emotional engagement: enthusiasm, pleasure, and interaction, as proposed by Dessart et al. (2016).

2.3. Instagram as a Strategic Communication Channel

In the current digital marketing ecosystem, Instagram has established itself as one of the most effective platforms for strengthening brand identity and creating

affective connections with consumers. Its visual, dynamic, and interactive nature provides the ideal space for brands to promote their products and services while simultaneously developing engaging narratives that enhance emotional engagement (Cleto et al., 2022).

Disney exemplifies how Instagram can be used to create meaningful digital experiences. Through features like Stories, Reels, and thematic hashtags, the brand transforms sporadic interactions into continuous relationships based on emotion and shared experiences. The focus on visual storytelling, with iconic characters and recognizable narrative universes, has been one of the main strategies for establishing emotional connections with the audience (Boguszewicz-Kreft et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Disney demonstrates a strong ability to adapt to different cultural contexts in which it operates, evidenced in personalized campaigns like the Global Poster Series. In this initiative, visual content is adjusted according to cultural context without losing coherence with the brand's identity (Soto-Vásquez, 2021). This attention to local particularities allows Disney to maintain a global presence aligned with the expectations and sensibilities of its diverse audiences.

According to Melo et al. (2024), Instagram has evolved from being merely a dissemination tool to assuming a central role in creating dialogue between brands and consumers. Disney has explored this dimension through initiatives that encourage active follower participation, such as contests, challenges, and socially impactful campaigns. A notable example is the #ShareYourEars campaign, which combined emotional communication with a philanthropic aspect, inviting followers to participate in a cause while reinforcing their relationship with the brand.

Thus, Instagram should be considered a strategic tool for developing loyal and engaged digital communities. In Disney's case, the use of this social network goes beyond product promotion, integrating into a broader communication strategy centered on emotion, symbolic identification, and interaction—elements that underpin emotional engagement and the brand's successful positioning in the digital environment.

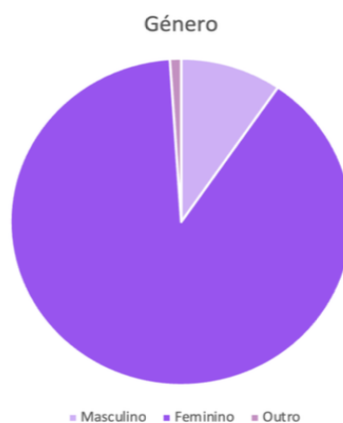
3. Methodology

This research adopts a quantitative approach to empirically test the formulated hypotheses and understand the influence of different content approaches (emotional and functional) on the emotional engagement of Disney brand followers on Instagram. This type of study was chosen for its ability to identify response patterns, compare groups, and objectively assess the impact of specific variables, such as content type, on users' emotional reactions.

Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire, constructed based on validated theoretical models. The instrument was made available via Google Forms between May 20 and June 17, 2024, and included a total of 13 questions, mostly closed-ended and evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale. This format allowed for standardized and quantifiable responses, essential for rigorous statistical analysis.

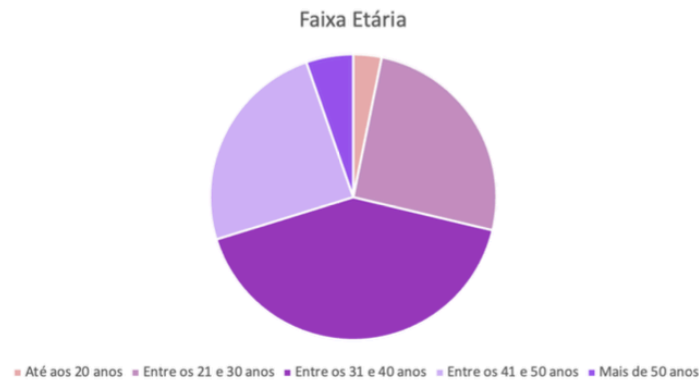
The research sample consisted of 94 participants, selected after a filtering process based on inclusion criteria, namely being active Instagram users, following Disney's official page, or being part of communities related to the brand on the platform. The sample was predominantly female (89.4%) and mostly composed of individuals aged between 31 and 40. This demographic characterization ensured that participants had regular contact with the brand's content, making them suitable for evaluating the impact of communication approaches on Instagram.

Figure 1: Participants' Gender



Source: Own Elaboration

Figure 2: Participants' Age Range



Source: Own Elaboration

To make the distinction between emotional and functional content clear for respondents, the questionnaire included practical examples. Functional messages referred to product-related communications such as explanation of product features. Emotional content included nostalgic or symbolic messages related to the brand's creator, Walt Disney, for instance.

Questions 6 to 9 were designed to assess respondents' preferences regarding different content types (functional vs. emotional), based on four sub-dimensions of emotional engagement (interest, enthusiasm, pleasure, and willingness to interact). The content typology followed the proposals of Ashley and Tuten (2015), while emotional engagement evaluation was based on contributions from Dessart et al. (2016). Statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Descriptive analyses were conducted, accompanied by the construction of Boxplot graphs, which enabled the observation of response medians, interquartile ranges, and the presence of outliers. This analysis was essential for interpreting the consistency of participants' preferences regarding emotional and functional approaches. Additionally, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was applied to evaluate statistically significant differences between sociodemographic groups, although the results related to hypotheses H1 and H2 focused exclusively on the analysis of questions 6 to 9.

Thus, the adopted methodology was designed to ensure data reliability, maintaining a consistent connection between research objectives, the instruments used, and the applied analysis methods. All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with ethical standards. Participation in the survey was voluntary, anonymous and preceded by informed consent. The study was submitted for ethical consideration and approved by the internal academic board of the Master's Program in Marketing, ensuring full compliance with ethical research protocols.

4. Results

The data analysis revealed a clear and consistent distinction between the effects of functional and emotional content on the emotional engagement of Disney brand followers on Instagram. The results, based on questions 6, 7, 8, and 9 of the questionnaire, indicate that content type significantly impacts different sub-dimensions of emotional engagement, namely interest, enthusiasm, pleasure, and interaction.

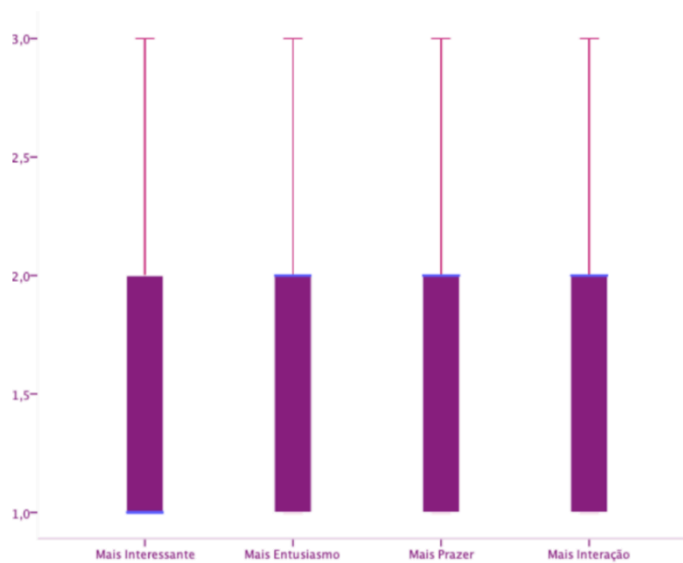
Regarding question 6, as seen in Figure 3 (Most Interesting), which evaluates participants' level of interest in different content types, the data point to a significant preference for functional content, particularly posts focusing on explaining the brand's products or services. The median responses fell into the highest category for this content typology, indicating strong consensus among participants about its informative and utilitarian value. This preference suggests that, despite Disney's emotional nature, followers still place great importance on posts that provide practical and clear information.

In contrast, responses to questions 7, 8, and 9, observable in Figure 3 (Most Enthusiasm, Most Pleasure, Most Interaction, respectively), showed that emotional content predominated as the main driver of emotional engagement. Content referencing Disney classics, nostalgic characters, or emotionally appealing campaigns proved most effective in generating positive emotional responses. The medians for these three questions consistently aligned with emotional approaches, indicating that most participants felt greater enthusiasm, pleasure, and willingness to interact when exposed to posts evoking memories and emotions tied to Disney's symbolic universe.

Additionally, the low dispersion observed in the data, reflected in the short height of the Boxplot graphs used in the analysis (as seen in Figure 3), reinforces the

homogeneity of responses. The absence of significant outliers further indicates that participants' perceptions were largely consensual and consistent across the sample. This uniformity in evaluations suggests that preferences for certain content types are shared by most followers, lending robustness to the study's conclusions.

Figure 3: Boxplot Graph of Questions 6, 7, 8, and 9 Regarding General Opinion on Brand Communication



Source: Own Elaboration

These findings reinforce Dessart et al.'s (2016) multidimensional model of emotional engagement, while also aligning with Ashley and Tuten's (2015) argument that emotional appeals in brand content are more effective in fostering affective responses and interaction. However, this study reveals an interesting nuance: although emotional content triggers more interaction and pleasure, functional content still holds a key informative value, which is not always emphasized in prior literature. Thus, our findings add complexity to the binary classification of content and suggest the importance of strategic balance.

5. Conclusion

Based on these results, the validity of the study's two central hypotheses is confirmed. The first hypothesis (H1), proposing that content type influences followers' emotional engagement, is clearly supported by the data ($p = 0.001$). The distinction between the interest generated by functional content and the enthusiasm and pleasure elicited by emotional content demonstrates that different content typologies have distinct impacts on users' emotions. The second hypothesis (H2), positing that emotional content generates more enthusiasm, pleasure, and interaction than functional content, is also confirmed. Emotional content proved more effective in the emotional engagement sub-dimensions most related to affective connection, reinforcing the importance of narrative and symbolic strategies in brand communication. These results align with the theoretical framework supporting the superiority of emotional approaches in building lasting relationships between brands and consumers. Authors like Gobé (2010) and Dessart et al. (2016) emphasize that emotional engagement occurs when consumers identify with the message and experience provided by the brand, something particularly evident in Disney's case, whose communication relies on nostalgic and affective elements.

However, it is important to note that functional content also plays a relevant role in the brand's communication ecosystem. The appreciation of practical information demonstrates that followers value posts offering utility and clarity, especially when integrated into a broader emotional strategy.

Based on the defined objectives, it can be affirmed that all were fully achieved. The analysis clearly showed that content type significantly impacts emotional engagement sub-dimensions, validating the proposed hypotheses. Disney's emotional content, particularly posts referencing its classics and nostalgic narratives, proved significantly more effective in promoting enthusiasm, pleasure, and interaction. In contrast, functional content demonstrated informative utility but had a reduced emotional impact, confirming the difference between the two approaches. These results reinforce the pertinence of combining functional and emotional strategies to optimize follower engagement on social media.

Thus, the data suggest that effective communication on social media, particularly Instagram, can benefit from a balanced combination of functional and emotional content, simultaneously addressing consumers' informational and affective needs. This complementarity between emotion and functionality may be decisive for brands' success in an increasingly competitive and message-saturated digital environment.

These results highlight the importance of emotional storytelling for brands aiming to foster deeper engagement on social media. For practitioners, the implication is clear: emotional narratives, especially those grounded in nostalgia, identity and symbolic meaning, should be crucial in Instagram strategies. However, functional content should not be excluded, as it plays an important complementary role in communicating updates, services and product information. This dual approach enhances both informational clarity and emotional resonance, which is a synergy particularly relevant in the digital landscape.

In sum, this study contributes to the literature on emotional branding and content strategy, offering empirical evidence from the Disney case. It encourages marketers to rethink content planning, emphasizing emotional triggers without neglecting the role of functional communication.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Although this study's results offer relevant contributions to understanding the impact of content strategies on emotional engagement, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample composition was relatively homogeneous, with a predominance of female participants (89.4%) and a specific age range (31–40 years). This imbalance may limit the generalizability of findings to other population segments, such as Generation Z or male users, whose responses and perceptions might differ.

Second, the study relied solely on quantitative methods, which, while enabling objective and statistically robust analysis, do not provide an in-depth understanding of users' subjective motivations and meanings attributed to emotional or functional content. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could complement these results by exploring the reasons why certain content generates more enthusiasm or pleasure.

Finally, it would be pertinent to explore other variables related to emotional engagement, such as brand authenticity perceptions, identification with communicated values, or content exposure frequency. These dimensions could offer additional insights into the mechanisms underlying emotional connections between consumers and brands in digital contexts.

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