

HEALTH, CONSUMPTION AND ENTERTAINMENT: THE NIKE BRAND EMBODIED AS A PLAYFUL EXPERIENCE

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1. INTRODUCTION

Entertainment and digital social media are leading landmarks of contemporary culture. From countless mobile devices with wireless connection to more traditional modes of access, people are increasingly connecting themselves blurring the lines between online and offline. One aspect of these developments – and the focus of this paper – is self-care technologies, providing a vast array of methods for individuals to track their physical health and sporting activity. It becomes evident that we are watching the emergence of a new form of consumption, defined by the symbolic appropriation of technological goods and ruled by the fluid boundaries of cyber culture (CASTRO 2012).

Since the first experiments on the Internet in the early 90s to the complex integrated platforms of today, we can see a clear evolution in terms of communication, technology and behavioral aspects. This evolution (among other characteristics) transforms this subject in a privileged space for epistemological reflections. Within this context, Castro says (2010:94) that the “social appropriation of technology modulates the open architecture of the networks in a continuous process of expansion, consolidation and increasing complexity”.

Acknowledging the prominence of digital networks in today's *Mediapolis* (SILVERSTONE 2007), digital social media can be considered a privileged space for social communication of all kinds. The new category of mass self-communication (CASTELLS 2009) poses further challenges to understanding current modes of sociability and consumption. As Castells says (2009:135) the great amount of content access by multiple platforms – digital TV, tablets, smartphones, video games etc. – offered to the public is an essential characteristic of global communication in the digital age. In this digital scenario many governments, citizens, business groups and entertainment companies have begun to explore ways to integrate these multiple platforms in their everyday communication processes.

The contemporary multiplatform environment, with so many connections between different devices, becomes a privileged ambient for the wide use of digital social networks and mobile technologies. In this context, all kinds of content can be consumed, shared and modified by the users, who also control their own modes of distribution. Following this reasoning, Ford, Green and Jenkins work with the idea of spreadable media (2013) and remind us that audience members are using available content to forge connections, mediate social relations and “make meaning of the world around them” (FORD; GREEN; JENKINS 2013:294).

The understanding about health also is influenced by all these new technologies and sensibilities. In the last decades many new technologies invaded healthcare and in recent years the ubiquity of mobile technologies fostered many products aiming to improve people's health, ranging from hundreds of “Fitness and Health” apps to smartphone accessories like blood pressure monitors and blood glucose analyzers (CHA 2014). Some of these are for health practitioners, but most are for the general public (TUCKER 2011). Such popularity raises questions about the mixing of market, technology and health.

Inside this complex communicational ecosystem, our focus in this paper will be Nike+ Fuelband, a device that hybridizes experiences of healthcare, entertainment and social networking. This rubber band developed by Nike records user information — like cardiac beats, thermo impressions, distances traveled — and offers the possibility of sharing it in a digital social network named Nike+, where it is possible to verify

improvements in rankings against other users and obtain trophies, badges and prizes by achieving a good performance in physical exercises.

We intend to discuss Fuelband's implied health claims and how it employs playful experiences (competition, skill, rankings, etc.) and the discourse of health (self-care, physical improvement, etc.) in order to foster brand recognition and possibly to convince users to submit themselves to vigilance by other users and ultimately by a corporation. For this we will first describe the Nike+ Fuelband and present empirical data from a quantitative research made with Brazilian users. Such data will be discussed in the light of classic health promotion tenets as presented in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, 1986). Lastly, we will discuss the current tendency to treat health as a personal issue that can be controlled, publicized and improved by commercial means; its potential harmful effects in making the individual the only responsible for his or her own health and the new configurations in understanding health, as a disputed field between individual, public sector, industry and technology.

2. NIKE+ FUEL BAND: AN EXPERIENCE OF DIGITAL SOCIAL NETWORK, ENTERTAINMENT AND HEALTH-CARE

Nike+ Fuelband is a rubber wristband with features for recording tangible information from the user's body. While the apparatus remains connected and in touch with the user, it is possible to monitor heart rate, body temperature and caloric expenditure. The device also has an accelerometer, an instrument capable of measuring acceleration on objects. Increasingly used in portable electronic devices, the accelerometer enables new kinds of man/machine interaction and, in the case of Nike+ FuelBand, allows recording the amount of steps and distances traveled by its user.

The gadget has another important feature in its configuration: the data captured from the user by the bracelet can be transmitted to a digital social network named Nike+. These data allows the user to set goals to overcome and compare their sports performances with great athletes or to simply compare their information with other network users. The Nike+ FuelBand also has a reward system based on video gaming language that uses virtual trophies, badges, points and rankings to encourage the users to continue breaking their own records and competing against others inside the network. It

is important to highlight that these trophies and other playful elements can even be shared on other social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter.

The first version of the rubber band was launched in 2012 and the second one in 2013 (named Nike+ Fuelband SE). Websites like *Business of Fashion* categorized this kind of product as “wearable technology” and “social product” (SHERMAN 2014). As Lacerda (2011:128) says, nowadays we have media prosthesis around us involved in the process of meaning production and in the setting of the environment. The device in question points out a new direction for appropriation of entertainment and technology for a global brand and puts into question some changes within the panorama of contemporary times.

3. METHODS AND RESULTS

Mobile devices, like Nike+ Fuelband, connected with different kinds of screens, allow for a myriad of possibilities for research. As Castro (2012: 65) says, these "multiple screens act as sensory, cognitive and identity prostheses" after all, through them we can consume content, communicate and also show who we are. It is important to have a clear focus in this kind of complex ambient. As such, we emphasize that we do not intend to make a full account of the qualitative and quantitative aspects surrounding our research in this paper, but to highlight some relevant data captured in the process.

Our initial insights came from empirical data where we observed the multiple ramifications from the device Nike+ Fuelband. We tried to observe certain habits of the users and the complex relationships between fitness, healthcare, social networking and playful elements inside the product's experience.

Our first step was qualitative research with Nike+ Fuelband's users. We conducted interviews with 10 users, which were the basis for identifying key aspects of the product and, consequently, also the basis for the creation of a survey for a quantitative research with 60 users that will be our focus for this paper.

For the quantitative research we used the website www.surveymonkey.com to collect our responses. Hine (2000: 63-64) emphasizes that cyberspace is not to be thought of as a space detached from any connections to “real life” and face-to-face interaction. Similarly, Turkle (1995) understands virtual experiences not like alternatives to “real”

life, but as new spaces for relationship and growth, inseparable from one's identity. From this perspective, our study explored the process of making connections between online and offline routines and sensibilities.

All individuals who responded the survey are Brazilians, most of which are from the state of São Paulo. The answers showed that 69% of our respondents were male and the remaining 31% female, and the average age of respondents was 32 years. All respondents participate in social networking websites. In addition to 100% of them being users of Facebook there was also a significant number of users of LinkedIn (83%), Twitter (71%) and Google+ (52%).

We identified that the Nike's wristband has a high degree of satisfaction among its users and 67% of respondents gave scores between 7 and 10 (on a scale of 0 to 10) to this question, which can be considered an extremely high satisfaction rate.

We discovered that, for users of Nike+ Fuelband, the playful component is a quite relevant experience in product, ranking among the four attributes with the best average issue. When asked directly what degree of importance to each of the features of the platform, using a scale of 0 to 10 (where 10 means very important and 0 means not important), we see that the most important item is "Encouraging physical exercise" with average importance of 8.04. The following item is "Being able to share and compare performance information in social networks" with average importance of 7.86, then we have "The endorsement of Nike brand" with 7.26 and "Competition as entertainment: rankings, trophies and medals" averaging 6.96.

Dealing specifically with the playful aspects of the experience of Nike+ Fuelband, when we asked respondents to rank the aspects of entertainment in the product, we had as results the "individual statistics and evolution of levels" in the first place, the "iconic record table" in second, "trophies/medals" in third and "competition in rankings" as the least important.

The Nike+ Fuelband allows personal data to be viewed by day, month and year. Nike materializes these graphs and statistics using life bars, icons, energy meters and other languages of the universe of games. The user can compare his or her evolution through a highly graphical system and an intuitive interface. Participants declared to consider important to be able to visually check the statistics of their performance.

Finally it is important to point out that 42% of respondents said they felt motivated to purchase products (mainly running shoes) from Nike to improve the experience provided by the Fuelband. This is an important relationship to the brand and the user because, in a certain way, Nike created a new platform to establish contact with consumers using ludic language.

4. ASPECTS OF PLAY AND THE DISCOURSE OF HEALTH EMPLOYED IN THE NIKE+ FUEL BAND

Even taking into account its playful aspects, Nike+ Fuelband is much more associated with the field of fitness than with the field of play, and from this point of view it is valid to consider how it links to health ideas.

Among other important advances, the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion enlarged considerably the concept of health, going beyond the clinical aspects (The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, 1986). Health became more than only the opposite of disease, and health promotion started including initiatives aimed at increasing the physical and mental well-being of individuals, highlighting "quality of life" as a desirable and achievable goal through their own efforts (CARVALHO 2004).

Such understanding confirmed fitness (i.e. good physical condition as result of exercise and nutrition) as an important element for maintaining one's own health. However, the charter also defined health as result of intersectional actions between the fields of education, work, security, food, housing and other social determinants of health, and not as isolated efforts by individuals. As such, it highlighted the community aspect of health promotion, recommending the creation of healthy public policies (SÍCOLI; NASCIMENTO 2003).

It is possible to see such influences on Nike+ Fuelband, as it presumably would foster exercise and achieving better health. Although not directly associating its device to health promotion, Nike takes advantage of the association "active life" = more health. Such connection is implicit in the company's discourse and only made tangible in the conversations of users, product reviews and categorization into sections of on-line stores ("Health & Fitness"). So, even without a scientific basis, the company reaps the benefits

of an association with its users' health improvement without compromising on unfounded assertions.

Our data showed how aspects of play (competition, skill, rankings, etc.) and the discourse of health (self care, exercises benefits, physical improvement, etc.) blended during users' experience with the Nike+ Fuelband. Despite no one claiming to be part of a game, they enjoyed game-like aspects of the product like the rankings, medals and trophies. This is another example of what some define as *gamification* – the use of game elements in products other than games (DETERDING *et al.* 2011).

We can see effects of such strategy on the users' publicizing of their own health, their continuous quest for improving their statistics, setting personal goals and, ultimately, generating improvements in the relationship with the brand. It can be considered as part of a larger trend, where integrating playful goals and behaviors in one's life creates a "playful identity", better fitted for dealing with the requirements of everyday life. This would result in a large ludification of culture, as more and more sectors are invaded by play elements (RAESSENS 2006).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Nike+ Fuelband allows multifaceted views for epistemological observation, exemplifying how entertainment and digital mobile devices are intertwined with several aspects of contemporary culture, becoming a privileged ambient for advertising and marketing campaigns. Fostering a social network centered on performance in physical exercise, Nike intends to expand the dialogue with consumers, while measuring and collecting data about their physical exercise routines through Fuelband it gathers potentially valuable information about their habits. Such information, ranging from users' daily heart beats to the places where they exercise, may inform strategic decisions of advertising, allowing a better targeting to each specific consumer profile.

However, it is dangerous to see technology as a mere helper or disguised as inconsequential playful practice, unaware of the worldviews embedded in products like Nike+ Fuelband. For example, it is worth noting that it has no guaranteed medical monitoring and might contribute to damage the user's health if used inappropriately. In this sense, it is implied that users assume full responsibility for using the product,

exemplifying a larger tendency to treat health as a personal issue that can be controlled, publicized and improved by commercial means. In this sense, health is understood as an individual and private issue, something isolated from other parts of one's life and from the rest of society, contradicting the tenets of health promotion. Fuelband seems to embody these ideas and, despite its potential benefits in fostering exercise routines, it carries an understanding of health that may be potentially harmful for individuals and society as a whole.

This is a first approach on the subject and we plan to conduct more studies about this connection between gadgets, play and health. However, it is clear from this initial study that the Nike+ Fuelband is but one example of the new practices of current business. Many companies are blending mobile technology, digital social media, entertainment languages and health care to promote a branding experience unique for the users. The remarkable growth of this technological trend in health care and fitness industry has attracted even more investors and entrepreneurs, which contributes to accelerate such process. This creates new configurations in health promotion and public health, where the search for better health becomes a disputed field between individuals, governments, worldwide brands and the entertainment and industry.

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