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*Net-Activism on Twitter:  
McDonald's and Coca Cola @Expo2015*

*Introduction*

In recent years the practices of boycotting or buycotting (Stolle *et al.*, 2005; Neilson, 2010) companies have become very common among consumers. Moreover, political participation and political consumerism (Stolle *et al.*, 2005; Shah *et al.*, 2007) have highlighted the ethical and responsible side of consumption practices. In Italy, according to recent data (Rapporto Demos and Pi, 2014), consumers are more and more likely to boycott global brands through online activities. Although there is a common debate on the decline of political participation, the widespread use of forums, mailing lists, discussion groups, and social media has reinforced political down-up movements. Thus social media represent a potential space for citizens' action. The numerous cases of collective web mobilisation demonstrate the importance of analysing different forms of activism as preconditions for active citizenship in the digital culture, in which new forms of communication and social interaction influence the democratic relationship (Colucci, Coelho *et al.*, 2015). Thus the Internet at large and social media have increased the likelihood of engagement in political consumerism (de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2013).

Among the social media, Twitter, the most famous of the microblogging sites, is more focused on the sharing of opinions and information (Kwak *et al.*, 2010) than others platforms like Facebook, which is more focused on reciprocal social interaction (Huberman *et al.*, 2009). Twitter is more likely to be used as a means of debate about political consumerism and political participation (Tumasjan *et al.*, 2010; Kim and Park, 2011; Bekafigo and McBride, 2013). Indeed, according to

Zimmer and Proferes (2014), activists have used Twitter as a communication and coordination tool during global political and social protests, e.g. the 2007 Nigerian election protests, the 2008-2009 Iranian protests, the 2011 Arab Spring protests, and the Occupy movement. Moreover, social media have become an important channel for expressing and measuring consumer behaviour and attitudes. Frequently, marketers and brand managers use Twitter to gauge feeling about their products (Jansen *et al.*, 2009); and also the financial industry has used the sentiment of Twitter messages to predict short-term performance of the stock market (Bollen *et al.*, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2011). Finally, over the last few years, many academics have used Twitter to gain knowledge about the thoughts and opinions of Internet users (Zimmer and Proferes, 2014).

This paper presents the results of a qualitative analysis conducted on Twitter posts. The aim was to analyse Italian consumer reactions to the news concerning McDonald's and Coca-Cola's official sponsorship of Expo 2015.

### *Research objectives and methodology*

To understand Italian consumers reaction, authors have content-analysed the posts in order to detect the emerging sentiment, manually extracting the most relevant categories and themes. Authors preferred manual extracting because, in analysing the sentiment, as the context often determines the different meaning of words (Liu and Zhang, 2012). Moreover, authors have studied user practice and cultural processes, which create a collective sense around the participation of McDonald's and Coca-Cola at Expo.

To gather the sample, authors have used the Twitter search function<sup>1</sup> at first with the generic hashtag #expo 2015, then selecting 'all tweets' and 'all people', in the advanced search form, combining it with several relevant hashtags (see [table 1](#)). Authors have collected and subsequently analysed 741 'top tweets'<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> As of 19 May, 2015 Twitter offers a new search function to all logged-in users, allowing the filtering of content results by date range, language, and even feeling (advanced search).

<sup>2</sup> Twitter enables the filtering of results by Top, Live, Accounts, Photos, and Videos. The Top Tweets are the most relevant, which are selected by a special Twitter algorithm able to detect the most popular tweets according to the users (FAQs about top

Tab. 1 – Search key combination

HASHTAG	LANGUAGE	PERIOD
#expo2015 AND #mcdonald's	Italian	02/27/15 <sup>3</sup> -09/15/15
#expo2015 AND #cocacola	Italian	02/27/15-09/15/15
#expo2015 AND #mcdonald's AND#cocacola	Italian	02/27/15-09/15/15

### Results

Table 2 summarises the results according to the total number of tweets and the keyword combinations, highlighting also tweets coming from institutional, corporate or public accounts.

Tab. 2 – Number of tweets according to keyword combinations

	#COCA COLA	#MCDONALD'S	#COCACOLA AND #MCDONALD'S	TOT
#EXPO 2015	302 (162 coming from non-personal accounts)	415 (119 coming from non-personal accounts)	25 (6 coming from non-personal accounts)	741 (287 coming from non-personal accounts)

Authors have then content analysed the posts as of the expressed sentiment. The negative sentiment mostly highlights the inconsistency of the value system of the two corporations with the Expo core topic. 'Feeding the planet', the Expo value proposition, and the ethical value system fostered by the Expo communication as opposed to the trash food, health concerns, the bad choice of Italian authorities, and the

search results - Twitter Help Center <<https://support.twitter.com/articles/253356>> (last access 09.18.2015)).

<sup>3</sup> The initial date is the release date of the news concerning the official sponsorship of McDonald's and Coca Cola at Expo2015.

inconsistency of Italian citizens.

However, the positive sentiment, quantitatively less evident, highlights more of a marketing oriented approach sustaining brand equity of the two companies. The presence of the two sponsors allows a more meaningful experience to visitors.

#### *Negative sentiment*

Most of the negative remarks appear just after news of the sponsorship deal. The tweets often share online articles about the ‘defeat’ and inconsistency of the two corporations’ image and value system with the Expo 2015 main topic<sup>4</sup>:

Expo 2015, again a defeat: McDonald’s and Coca Cola sponsor. Il Fatto #Expo2015#cocacola #mc#zeroconsistency (1 March 2015)<sup>5</sup>

#Expo 2015, # Italy wordlfamous 4 #mediterraneandiat, has #McDonald’sasOfficialSponsor&#CocaColaasOfficialSoftDrinkPartner (1 March 2015)

Really #cocacola & #McDonald’s are sponsors of #expo 2015?! #eatinghealthy?! (4 March 2015)

@NoExpo 2015, #Expo2015 highlights organic food and then chooses, as official sponsors #CocaCola and #McDonald’s (11 March 2015)

#### *#Trashfood vs Expo*

Since the documentary film ‘Supersize me’ (2004), McDonald’s has been the icon of bad dietary choice. Public opinion, media, and medical research point the finger at the junk food served in fast food restaurants. The topic of a healthy diet is one of the main inconsistencies

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<sup>4</sup> On 28 February, 2015 Il Fatto Quotidiano reports the news using the term defeat <<http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/02/28/expo-2015-lennesima-sconfitta-mc-donalds-e-coca-cola-sponsor/1463991>> (last access 31.03.2017).

<sup>5</sup> In order to comply with ethical standards, authors have anonymised all the tweets and then translated them from Italian, trying to maintain the original colloquial language.

regarding the general knowledge that MacDonald's and Coca-Cola represent a very unwise alimentary choice. Junk food as opposed to the Mediterranean diet and lovely Italian food are the reasons to criticise the poor choice of sponsors.

#Expo2015 represents the world window of Italian healthy food. Say NO to McDonald's as sponsor. It'll be a shame for Italy.

McDonald's hamburgers are good for a balanced diet. Even the exhausted oil is not so bad #Expo2015.

#Expo2015: #Italia worldwide famous 4 the #mediterranean diet has #McDonald's as OfficialSponsor and #CocaCola as OfficialSoftDrinkPartner.

#### *Global companies vs local promises*

As multinational companies, McDonald's and Coca-Cola are perceived as global corporations able to impose themselves as sponsors, forcing their marketing strategies and deepening the inequalities among countries. Thus consumers, trying to resist and re-create commercial culture in order to transform society (Sandlin and Milam, 2008), redefine the Coca-Cola iconic can, which does not symbolize sharing among friends but the exploitation of people.

#CocaCola is often mentioned with the hashtags of other big companies and brands, which are held responsible for exploiting people. The eloquent image (below) underlines the inconsistency between the Expo promise 'feeding the planet' and the actual activities of many companies.

In the struggle between global and local, Twitter users highlight the superiority of the Italian pizza compared to the Big Mac, criticizing the recent commercial in which a kid chose a happy meal over a pizza.

#### *The defeat*

If choosing two of the biggest global companies as Expo 2015 official sponsors sounds like a defeat, citizens also criticise the work of Italian politicians and institutions in managing the event. The inconsistency of



Fig. 1 – Reappropriation of a Coca-Cola can<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 2 – Inconsistency between Expo value proposition and sponsors<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The tweet says: #water more expensive than#CocaCola at #Expo2015, it's a marketing strategy too.

<sup>7</sup> The tweet says: 'feeding the planet...' have we finished speaking about it?

institutional choices emerges as one of the main topics together with the visitors' feeling of betrayal as the political failure to maintain the Expo value propositions. Moreover, citizens remark the bad image of Italy in an international scenario and the scandals related to Expo procurements.

McDonald's at Expo, as if Herod were a witness for Unicef #food #EXPO2015 #sustainable #development<sup>8</sup>.

I can't decide, it's worse the corruption in the construction sites or McDonald's stand? #Expo2015 #ready4Expo #feedthebigmacenergy4life.

Why did #Expo2015 CEO Sala lie during #Report saying he didn't get money from the sponsors, while according to #CocaCola they have paid 10mil?

#Expo2015 it's all about organic and then chooses #CocaCola e #McDonald's as official sponsors.

McDonald's at #Expo2015 the biggest restaurant with 300 seats. Healthy food? Italian food? No #consistency at all.

#### *Positive sentiment*

Besides the negative sentiment, the presence of McDonald's and CocaCola at Expo 2015 fosters some positive thoughts too. Consumers – who actually love the brands – appreciate the possibility to try different flavours (the Coca-Cola pavilion presents products not available in the Italian or even European markets) and new products (McDonald's offers special burgers and interactive totems to place orders). Brand fans use Twitter to propose old and vintage packaging or commercials and to highlight the great experience that they are going to have.

#Expo2015 #CocaCola Pavilion...Could I miss it?! Never!!!! What a pavilion!

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<sup>8</sup> The tweet refers to the following article: <<http://popoffquotidiano.it/2015/03/12/mcdonalds-a-expo-come-erode-allunicef/>> (last access 31.03.2017).

Among the topics of positive sentiment some tweets criticise those who assume a tough position against the brands encouraging extreme ideological positions and fostering a rhetorical discourse of Slow Food<sup>9</sup> against fast food.

### *Conclusions*

Digital media confirm themselves as relevant tools which analyse socio-cultural relationships that 'shape and structure our possibilities for social action, education and cultural expression across all generations and walks of life' (Radovanović *et al.*, 2015).

Social media, particularly Twitter, offer a space which expresses different identities. In the 'connective' action, differently from the 'collective' action, political content is often manifested through personalised ideas that are highly inclusive and easily transferable to different platforms. Thus, identity can be seen as a 'collective identity' within a limited time span (Giglietto and Yenn, 2015).

According to previous research (Kwak *et al.*, 2010; Bennato, 2011), Twitter confirms itself as a useful means of sharing opinions and information. As for political stances, the analysis highlights the habit of proposing and sharing content from more authoritative sources, typically on-line and off-line newspapers. Moreover, many tweets propose topics concerning the most common criticisms against the two brands; producing trash food with a very high content of sugar or fat underlines the inconsistency between the sponsors and the main topic of Expo 2015.

On average, McDonald's elicits more critical remarks compared to Coca-Cola probably because of the reputation for unhealthy, processed, sugary foods that the brand has gained over the years. Despite recent efforts to offer healthier products, McDonald's is losing market share, also in the domestic market (Sutton, 2015), no matter how much it claims to be improving the quality of its products. Twitter users underline the scarce credibility of McDonald's offering a vegan burger – or completing the menu with sliced apple – and interpret such efforts as deceptive. Italian food, as a prototype of the Mediterranean diet, emerges as a benchmark for healthier food.

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<sup>9</sup> By the way, the Slow Food brand at Expo2015 is also criticised.



Conversely, Twitter users are overall less critical towards Coca-Cola; the brand engages them promising a rewarding experience inside its pavilion. The main accusation is towards the high quantity of sugar contained in a can of Coke, which is held responsible for obesity and diabetes.

In order to have a more complete picture regarding the different forms and tools of net-activism and the differences or similarities between net- and traditional activism further research could be useful. Indeed these qualitative results could be integrated through qualitative or quantitative data describing the multiform world of political participation. Such data could be gathered surveying different social platforms.

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