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From passive consumption of media goods to active use of media brands: on value generation and other differences

Abstract

Analyses of business models and media consumption within the traditions of media economics and media management explicitly – but mostly implicitly– rely on the representation of a media consumer that rationally pursues the maximisation of utility. Such concept provides the basis for the generalised understanding of the passive consumer of media goods, motivated by subjective wants, needs and preferences. Yet, the digitalisation of media production and distribution has fundamentally changed consumers, producers and their relationship. Users of digital media platforms select, purchase or attend the output of media providers, and leave traces of their digital activities for marketers and advertisers. In addition, they supply content, rate, comment, and share or promote among their network the offers of media providers. The increasing variety of media providers are better understood as brands proposing different value generating activities rather than substitute products at different prices. Critically and by drawing from literature from a variety of research traditions, including political economy of

communication, sociology, philosophy and marketing, this theoretical paper discusses the features of the active user of media brands, the hypothetical recipient of the business models of digital media services such as YouTube, Google, Netflix, Amazon Video or Facebook. It is argued that practical knowledge, affect, different types of gratifications and universal values, which are guiding principles for a better life, should be taken into account.

Keywords

Media consumption, active user, business models of digital media, social values, media brands, digital platforms.

1. Introduction

The extent and the importance of the transformation processes affecting the media landscape over the last twenty-five years and beyond are far-reaching and profound. During this period, new media have emerged and incumbent media have been dramatically transformed. The drivers of this change are diverse and include the digitization of all forms of text, speech, image and sound, the convergence of information and communication technologies, the increasing ubiquity of digital communication networks, changing social and cultural habits and the establishment of standards and other institutions. As a result of these processes, the

relationship between consumers and providers of media goods and services has substantially changed and the opportunities to create value have multiplied (see, for example, Flew, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins & Deuze, 2008; Napoli, 2011). As Jenkins and Deuze eloquently stress, the diversity of stakeholders involved in the media environment is now much larger (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008, p. 5):

(T)he expansion of new media resources has led to what Yochai Benkler has described as a ‘hybrid media ecology’ within which commercial, amateur, governmental, nonprofit, educational, activist and other players interact with each other in ever more complex ways. Each of these groups has the power to produce and distribute content and each of these groups is being transformed by their new power and responsibilities.

In the literature of various academic traditions, consumers of traditional media have been represented as mass audience or “a collection of people who are anonymous to one another and act independently” (Webster, 2014, p. 26) when selecting, purchasing or passively absorbing media content and commercial messages. Next to this mass audience, a growing proportion of media consumers is now accessing digital platforms and networks in order to select and purchase media products, including narrow-focussed and specialized content (Doyle, 2013; Napoli, 2011), but also to interact with other users and with media providers. Notably, also with the simple act of researching and selecting media content using digital platforms, consumers provide vital information to marketers and other providers. In general, the consumer emerging from the new media environment is considered active and a participant, because, among other things, she initiates, rates, discusses or even produces content, but also responds to solicitations, shares and promotes media content and brands in her networks (Bolin, 2012; Bruns, 2008).

Therefore, here it is argued that the representation of consumption described as the act of watching, listening or reading content determined by wants, needs and perceived utility (as described by Albarran, 2010, p. 41) does not fully describe the potential actions of a growing share of active media users. For simplicity, this representation of the passive media consumer, a rational consumer that is part of the mass media audience, is referred to as ‘consumer of media goods.’ The characteristics of this representation are discussed here only briefly because they are widely known, but they are compared with the motives and other characteristics of the ‘user of media brands,’ which is the main subject of this paper.

Understanding the user of media brands is important for scholars of political economy of communication, media economics and media management because it is complementary to the analyses of emerging business models in the media and communications sectors. Indeed, first, it is rather ineffective to explain the differences between the value propositions of media and communications giants such as Youtube, Google, Netflix, Amazon Video or Facebook, and assume that the beneficiaries of these models are passive consumers of media goods, because different forms of interactions are at the core of these business models. Second, since the 1990s, research on business models departed from the more traditional approaches to emerge as a new field because of its focus on the co-creation of value between users and providers (Massa, Tucci & Afuah, 2017; Zott & Amit, 2010). Embracing this change, this paper discusses and defines the co-producing consumer of media and communications activities, that is alternative to the one (implicitly or explicitly) used for describing the recipient of business models according to more traditional approaches.

The success of the business model of Netflix exemplifies the importance of defining the characteristics of the interactive user of media brands also on a more practical level. Netflix provides users with a digital interface that tracks and elaborates on the inputs of users (i.e. a folksonomy based on choices and ratings). The use of this interface proved to be an important factor for the success of a service that initially provided only reruns of feature films and series (Auletta, 2014; Chan-Olmsted & Shay, 2015). The interactive relationship with the user is part

of the success of Netflix because, first, the order created by a folksonomy helps users quickly locate their preferred type of content from a vast catalogue. Second, by exploiting the detailed information about the preferences and habits of its users, Netflix changed its business model and successfully engaged in the production of original series such as *House of Cards* (Willimon, 2013) and others (Auletta, 2014; Chan-Olmsted & Shay, 2015). However, assuming that the users of Netflix are passive consumers would mean considering the access to a catalogue of audiovisual content and the production of original material as independent elements of the business model, instead of interdependent, as they clearly are.

The argument presented in this paper starts from the issues just introduced: since the digitisation of the production and distribution of media, which led to what we have summarily called above the ‘new media environment’, the relationship between media users and producer has substantially changed. Scholars in the fields of media management are actively engaged in analysing different forms of relationships between media users and providers (for example, Bolin, 2012; Chan-Olmsted & Shay, 2015; Ots & Hartmann, 2015; Picard, 2010; Van Dijck, 2009; Webster, 2014). However, there is not yet an analysis of the user of media brands that defines motives and characteristics in generalised and abstract terms that might be applicable across different studies of markets and industries, as it is the case of the rational consumer of media goods. In the next section, the consumer of media goods is presented as a specification of mainstream economics’ rational consumer. Also, building on this, arguments are provided in order to explain the existence of a gap in the understanding of media consumption between the theoretical traditions of media economics and media management, and analyses of case studies (i.e. the applied tradition).

In the following sections, it is also argued that considering the essential characteristics of media users and the relationship with the provider is a useful exercise, and that the shaping of these characteristics should start from, and partly address, the flaws identified in the representation of the consumer of media goods. Such considerations should also address the creation of value, which is the rationale of the relationship between media users and producers. The description of the relationship between users and providers according to a service-centred dominant logic of exchange (here thereafter, ‘service-logic of exchange’) is identified as an important contribution to this debate, as it provides some of the features necessary to describe the interactive role of users in the new media environment. The representation of the media user is completed by addressing the question of motivations and the creation of value, by drawing from writings in the fields of political economy of communication, sociology, philosophy and marketing. Finally, the conclusion argues that the paper sketches some of the abstract features of media consumption in the digital media environment compatible with the recent analyses in the applied tradition of media economics and media management.

2. The rational consumer of media goods from mainstream economics’ foundation of media economics and media management

Picard (2005) defined media economics as “a specific application of economic laws and theories to media industries and firms, showing how economic, regulatory, and financial pressures direct and constrain activities and their influences on the dynamics of media markets” (p. 23). He distinguishes three traditions in media economics: a theoretical tradition, an applied tradition and a critical tradition. The most fundamental, theoretical concepts about media economics belong to the first tradition, which originates from the work of economists and attempts “to explain choices and decisions and other economic factors affecting producers and consumers of communications goods and services” (p. 28-29). More importantly, the theoretical tradition is “primarily based on neoclassical economics” (Picard, 2005, p. 28), an opinion that was also shared by many other well-known authors in these fields (for example, Cunningham, Flew & Swift, 2015; Flew, 2011; Lacy & Bauer, 2005; Wildman,

2005). In more recent years, the publication of new textbooks of media economics confirms the trend highlighted by Picard (2005). While the description of the new media environment and relevant theoretical issues provided by Albarran (2010) is certainly very insightful, it does not attempt to ‘update’ or redefine the consumer of media. Also Doyle (2013) persuasively revisits many key concepts in media economics and media management in light of the digitisation of media production and distribution, but does not address the issue of consumption. Equally important, but also more experimental is the work of Cunningham, Flew and Swift (2015), where it is acknowledged that “media economics follows the main aspects of consumer behaviour derived from neoclassical economics and applies them to media markets” (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015, p. 23). Also, considering the general theme of the book, which is to explain the potential contributions from traditions in economics “that have been neglected in the field” (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015, p. 1), they argue for a more realistic representation of consumption by considering the concept of bounded rationality, a concept from institutional economics, that assumes that individuals act rationally, but based on imperfect information and limited cognition (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015).

Fundamental concepts used to analyse the behaviour of media producers and media consumers inspired by principles of mainstream economics are also extensively applied to scholarly writings in the field of media management. Mierzewska and Hollifield (2005) reviewed 309 articles published in the *Journal of Media Economics* and *The International Journal on Media Management* between 1990 and 2005 and found that 33% of the studies relied on economic theory and another 44% on management theories. Among the latter, 54% developed arguments informed by theories of strategic management, and 21% by theories of technology, innovation and creativity. Both these approaches, at least partly, rely on economic theories and/or assumptions of economic rationality (Mierzewska & Hollifield, 2005, p. 41).

Furthermore, the paper also acknowledged that media management is a field of research that tends to be “fragmented, unsystematic, and non-programmatic,” also because research in this field tends to apply “different conceptual frameworks [...] or use different operational definitions” (Mierzewska & Hollifield, 2005, p. 57). Essentially, Mierzewska and Hollifield (2005) illustrate some of the consequences from the trends described in Picard (2005): basic definitions and concepts used in the theoretical tradition, which are shaped by mainstream economics, are different from the same concepts used in the applied and critical traditions. Such a difference also concerns the assumption of economic rationality and, therefore, the definition of media consumption. This ‘gap’ between theoretical and applied and critical traditions, which, also according to Mierzewska and Hollifield (2005), represents an obstacle for the field of media management, is illustrated here with two key examples: the concepts of media experience and digital platform.

The term ‘experience’ is very popular among scholars of media economics and media management to describe how users, consumers or citizens engage with the products of media activities. A media experience is commonly interpreted as the consumption of an experience good (e.g. in Hougaard & Tvede, 2010; Ulin, 2009), from Nelson (1970), who explained that the value of certain goods cannot be adequately anticipated (or compared) prior to consumption and by using the price as a proxy measure. However, different scholars have extended the notion of media experience, while maintaining this feature related to the uncertainty of the outcome. Picard, for example, defined an experience occurring “when something is not merely noted but the individual becomes involved through *a relationship* to the object or occurrence. It creates knowledge through that personal involvement that involves the senses, perception, emotions, and personal interpretation” (Picard, 2010, p. 44, emphasis added). Similarly, Hesmondhalgh (2013) supported the idea that the musical experience, and responses to culture more generally, should not be treated primarily as a matter of intellectual interpretation and evaluation, but also as responses involving sensations, moods and feelings (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 13). Therefore, in both cases, these authors propose an understanding

of the media experience, the outcome of which is uncertain, but also determined by affect, a person's feelings or emotional states (as defined in OECD, 2013). Therefore, the choice of media experience and the gratification that users generate from it, is not only the result of rational choice, but also conditional to their subjective and emotional status.

The second example concerns the topic of digital platforms. On the one hand, credit is commonly given to the model of Rochet and Tirole (2003) for providing a mechanism used to understand the implications for platform providers from simultaneously operating in different sides (for example, in Ballon, 2014; Doyle, 2013; Wikström, 2015). On the other hand, many research questions that writings of media and communication scholars indicate as important can hardly be answered by economic models based on simplifying assumptions focussed on the role of prices as coordination mechanisms between sides. For example, key questions that ought to be addressed in the literature intertwine issues of consumption, technologies and regulations, and include how "media companies can best utilise the large amounts of return path data now at their disposal" (Doyle, 2015, p. 5), "how public policy at national and transnational level needs to evolve further in order to remain in step with the contingencies of a multi-platform environment" (Doyle, 2015, p. 5), or, how platform providers can stimulate the contribution from active users (Wikström, 2015). Therefore, both of these examples show that, although economic models offer useful explanations of partial dynamics (e.g. Nelson, 1970; Rochet & Tirole, 2003), studies attempting to answering complex research questions that go beyond the possibilities of economic models do not need simplified representations of consumers. On the contrary, they would benefit from the support of more complex and realistic representations of the users.

3. Learning from the consumers of media goods

Notably, consumers create value for themselves by experiencing media goods: in economic theory this is utility, or "the pleasure or personal perception of benefit an individual consumer derives from consuming various products and services" (Wildman, 2005, p. 69). More generally, economic theory is understood to be primarily concerned with the positive analysis of consumption: it describes it rather than explaining it. Through the hypothesis of economic rationality, consumption –in general, but also, of media goods– and the consequent creation of value are driven by needs, wants and preferences and limited by the availability of resources (Albarran, 2010; Hoskins, McFadyen & Finn, 2004). However, the rationale of wants, needs and preferences, as well as an explanation of why the achievement of these goals is a benefit (or simply a source of pleasure) are not delivered within this field of research. Accordingly, the need to justify motives is removed by assuming that utility and its components (wants, needs and preferences) are subjective and, therefore, they cannot be generalised. Mainstream economists did not necessarily argue that the motives of consumers are not worth researching, but "questions about the origins, desirability or legitimacy of preferences and motivations were considered to be outside the object domain of economics" (Arvidsson, 2011, p. 40).

In contrast, sociology, anthropology and other disciplines are concerned with the study of values (Arvidsson, 2011) and their influence on the behaviour of consumers. Values are measures of significance that individuals or society holds and generate benefits from (Picard, 2010) or "trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or group" (Schwartz, 1992, cited in Schwartz *et al.*, 2012, p. 664). People take decisions rationally, for example, after extended reflections on experience (Sayer, 2011). Commonly, however, most decisions are taken without extended reflections, from a handful of heuristics or 'rules of thumb' (Kahneman, 2003; Webster, 2014) and are guided by practical reason, a form of reasoning that is mostly tacit, concerned with ends, concrete, and it involves

know-how and ethical judgment (Sayer, 2011).¹ Therefore, alternatively to economic representations of the consumers of media goods where the notion of value has no affective dimension –meaning that feelings, moods, emotions and values do not influence choices of production and consumption– it is suggested here that emotions should be considered as factors influencing the choices of media consumption.

The consideration of emotions is in line with the definitions of a media experience by Picard (2010) and Hesmondhalgh (2013) provided above. Furthermore, an understanding of the premises of the behaviour of the consumer that is inclusive of affective concerns is fundamental for acknowledging that the prices of products can be influenced by values. The diffusion of Ethical Consumerism and Fair Trade testifies that affective concerns can influence economic decisions (Arvidsson, 2011). Additionally, as argued in the next section, a representation of the consumer that features affective concerns and practical reason can realistically explain a choice between different brands. In fact, consumers differentiate between brands to a point where they might even have different feelings for them, based on arrays of clues instead of rational constructs from extensive knowledge.

4. Building the alternative: users of media brands according to a service-logic of exchange

Using concepts from research in the field of marketing, it is possible to build a representation of the interactive user of media brands, which is alternative and complementary to the passive consumer of media goods. Adopting such a framework allows assuming that users –guided by rational thinking, practical knowledge and affective concerns– choose between substitute products, not only because of a difference in price, but because some of the latter fit better into their lives, aspirations and practices of everyday living (Ots & Hartmann, 2015). These substitute products are defined as different brands, a concept that until recently received little attention in the field of media management (Malmelin & Moisander, 2014) but is gaining momentum for explaining the value proposition of media providers (see Siegert, Förster, Chan-Olmsted & Ots, 2015a).

A brand has been defined as a “cluster of functional and emotional values that enables organizations to make a promise about a unique and welcomed experience” (de Chernatony, McDonald & Wallace, 2010, p. 31). Alternative to the consumers of goods passively choosing between substitute products, in the field of marketing users are themselves responsible for creating differences between proposals of different providers. This better describes an environment where the choice is larger and the differences between alternatives are becoming more nuanced and subtle. Accordingly, from the viewpoint of the audience, a media brand is also defined as a “construct carrying all the connotations of the audience in terms of the emotional, stylistic, cognitive, unconscious or conscious significations” (Siegert, Förster, Chan-Olmsted & Ots, 2015b, p. 1). Clearly, the concept of brand bears enormous potential for explaining choices of consumption between different media experiences. As it is commonly agreed that the value of a media experience cannot be evaluated prior to consumption (as explained above), it can be also agreed that when users decide to purchase a newspaper, watch a movie or buy a music record, they are guided by the opinion they have of a particular news organisation, television channel or artist. This opinion is based on past experiences of the brands, but also on conscious and unconscious processes of information gathering that are the result of media exposure (information and advertising) and social interaction (exchange of opinions with others).

In order to represent these dynamics, the relationship between users and providers of media brands is framed here as a service activity and according to the service-logic of exchange. This can be defined as “the application of specialized competences (specialized

¹ Practical reason is also considered here a synonym of practical judgement, wisdom, or phronesis.

knowledge, mental skills, physical skills and labour) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself” (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 2). The service-logic of exchange differentiate between activities by defining ‘operand resources,’ assets on which an operation or act is performed to produce an effect, and ‘operant resources,’ which are essentially mental and physical skills producing the effect (Constantin & Lusch, 1994). This differs from the view of the relationship between producers and consumers of goods that essentially considers operand resources the goods produced but also the consumers. In fact, goods are the object of the exchange while consumers are the passive recipients of the producers’ actions: after they are divided in segments, goods are proposed and sold to them. Alternatively, according to the service-logic of the exchange, producers and consumers are operant resources and co-producers. When the exchange involves goods, these are operand resources and the carriers of the skills and knowledge (i.e. of the operant resources). Moreover, in the service-logic of exchange it is the creation of value for the customer, which is understood as ‘value in use’ or utility that is the main driver for the exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 7).

The service-logic of exchange can be explained using the example of services offered by Google to its users. Google offers a variety of services, including email, different types of search engines, maps, and cloud storage. Similarly to analyses of multi-sided platforms (e.g. Ballon, 2014; Doyle, 2013; Wikström, 2015), these services are considered part of the value proposition of the same brand instead of being considered different markets. These services are offered by employing a variety of different resources: knowledge, skills, labour time (operant resources) and information technologies (operand resources). Users contribute to this relationship with the skills, time and knowledge so that they can learn and use these services, with financial resources (if they use the advanced, paid services), and by participating in the creation of the brand’s image, for example, by sending emails from a Google address, or by referring to a search for information on the Internet with the verb ‘to Google’ something.

Hence, the service-logic of exchange provides a suitable framework for conceptualizing the relationship between media users and media providers in the new media environment for the following reasons: first, it takes into account the active role of the users and considers the relationship between users and providers as an exchange. Therefore, such a representation of the consumer is compatible with recent developments in research in business models (see Massa *et al.*, 2017; Zott & Amit, 2010). It supports the understanding of the business model of digital intermediaries (e.g. Google, Facebook, Netflix, Amazon video, etc.) that rely on their users’ time, knowledge, mental and physical skills to participate in the design of their value proposition. It also allows considering that the choice of a media outlet can be motivated by what this outlet represents in the eyes of the users (that is, a brand), rather than purely by its functional potential. For example, a liberal and a conservative news provider can be considered different services although the functional value of their output is the same. Second, the division between operand and operant resources allows for a clear distinction between media content and the medium, and their respective roles. The content is the result of specialised knowledge, mental skills, physical skills and labour, while the medium is the good (tangible or not tangible), whose primary role is to carry the outcome of these efforts to the user. Third, as explained in more detail in the following section, it allows considering the relationship between users and providers as multidimensional and continuous, rather than discrete and ending with the trade.

Nonetheless, when applied to the representation of media brand users, the service-logic of exchange also presents some flaws. Firstly, Vargo and Lusch (2004) proposed moving the focus of the exchange from the producer to the user. However, a useful analysis of a service activity that applies to media markets should concentrate on the motives of all stakeholders, the value that each type of stakeholder produces in the exchange, and on the efforts that they

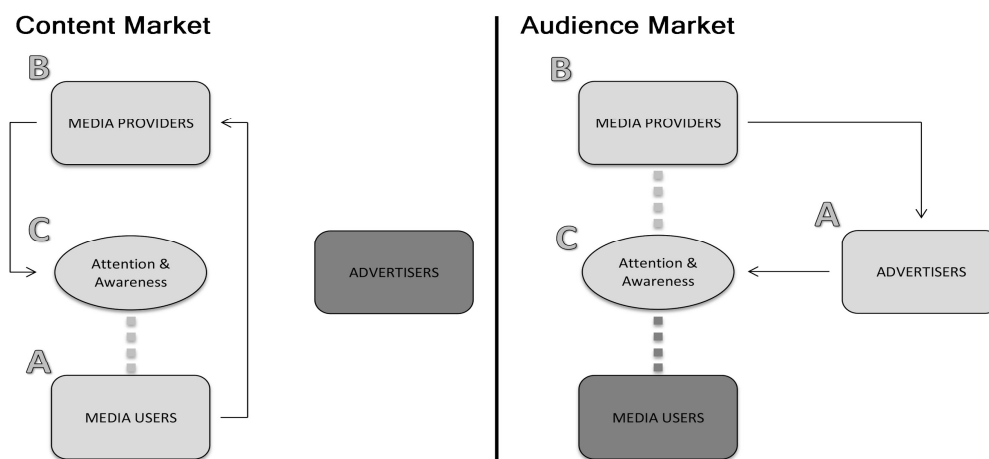
provide. In other words, the most important element of the exchange is the exchange itself. This point is related to a second concern: the service-logic of exchange inherited the utilitarian notion of value from mainstream economics. In order to understand the relationship between media users and providers, however, it is important to also consider non-functional value, and that affect and values influence their behaviour and decisions.

5. The relationships between media users and providers and the creation of value from their values

Informed by the concepts described above and the critical assessment of these concepts, the relationship between media users and providers can be described as an exchange of efforts aimed at the co-creation of value. These efforts are produced by both users and providers and they involve a combination of specialized competences (knowledge and skills), labour time (operant resources), and other types of resources, such as machinery and goods used for the production, distribution and consumption (following the definition of Constantin & Lusch, 1994). The efforts of users and providers are considered reactions and responses to each other's efforts, and hence a flow and continuous. This allows considering the realistic case scenario where past experiences (and related creation of value) provide the basis for the 'rule of thumb' that guides the selection of new proposals by media organisations (programmes of their favourite television channels, a subscription to a newspaper, or the purchase of a new records of the favourite artist, as explained above).

Moreover, inspired by the seminal metaphor of the service triangle, the standard exchange of efforts in media services described here features a service provider (the entity B) that transforms time and awareness, the entity (C) owned and invested by users (the entity A)². Moreover, by defining different entities and types of efforts, it is possible to frame different markets or 'sides' (in the language of platforms), for a better understanding of business models. For example, in the case of the audience market (famously defined in Picard, 1989) the exchange of efforts involves media providers (B), and advertisers (A) and the audience's time and awareness (C) generated (and now 'owned' from the content market) by the media providers.

Figure 1: The service triangle of media audience and content markets.



Source: Own elaboration.

² Building on Hill (1977), Gadrey (1996) described a service activity as “a set of processing operations carried out by a provider (B) on behalf of a client (A) in a medium (C) held by (A) and intended to bring about a change in the medium (C)” (Gallouj, 2002, p. 142).

In the standard representation of the exchange of efforts, users generate different types of value from attending a media output and interacting with media providers. In order to understand the types of value that can be created and their variety, it is useful to start from the rationale of media consumption. A review of a large sample of studies of the uses and gratifications approach, for example, identify the following motivations for attending media: diversion (for escaping from routines or for emotional release), social utility (for acquiring information for conversations), personal identity (for reinforcing attitudes, beliefs, and values), and surveillance (for learning about one's community, events, and political affairs) (Ruggiero, 2000). Here it is argued that in order to explain why these forms of value can be considered gratifications, they have to be connected to the values or principles that govern any action and behaviour of individuals and social formations. A type of value is the product of values, metaphorically, like interests are the product of financial capital. For example, a person appreciating honesty is likely to feel rewarded when she engages in an activity that features honest relationships. Accordingly, the rationale of attending media output can be part of people's aspirations and practices of everyday living, or simply put, of their attempts to flourish and live 'the good life'. Following the example of some communications scholars (for example, Garnham, 1999; Hesmondhalgh, 2013), the human development approach by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2003) can be identified as suitable theory of values and things that matter to people. This approach is born from a marriage of economics and philosophy (Nussbaum, 2015) and provides the basis for the *Human Development Report* (Jahan, 2016).

Therefore, it can be argued that the value of diversion that is generated from the media experience and that is connected with the act of escaping from routines or for emotional release (Ruggiero, 2000) is a gratification because of the values 'Senses, Imagination, and Thought' and 'Play' (as defined in Nussbaum, 2003). In fact, the first of these values refers to the capability of being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason in a 'truly human' way, while the second, refers to the capability of being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities (Nussbaum, 2003, pp. 41-42). Furthermore, the value 'Social utility' generated from the media experience (Ruggiero, 2000) is a gratification because the values 'Emotions' and 'Affiliations' are sources of flourishing for individuals. The former refers to the capability of being able to have attachments to things and people outside of oneself and of loving those who love and care for us. The latter concerns the capability of being able to live with and toward others, of recognizing and showing concern for other human beings, and of engaging in various forms of social interaction (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 41).

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that due to, on the one hand, the emergence of new business models in a new media environment, and on the other hand, an increased focus in research on business models considering the co-creation of value, it is important to define a new generalised and abstract recipient of the services proposed by these models. In other words, it argues that next to the established concept of the rational consumer of media goods, it is now useful to define a representation of the user of media brands. Clearly, a comprehensive list of the features that should be used to define the user of media brands and their rationale is beyond the scope of a single paper; here, an attempt is made to simply contribute to this issue. Nonetheless, it is deemed as useful because, first, many analyses of specific case studies are already providing a representation of the recipients of different media businesses that is different and ultimately incompatible with the representation of the rational and passive consumer of media goods. Second, to our best knowledge, reflections on what the features of the user of media brands might be have not yet been provided within the same strand of literature.

In order to define these features, an effort was made to integrate literature from different research traditions and overcome the flaws of the rational consumer, because

representations of rational, un-emotional consumers that attempt to maximize their utility are oversimplification of the reality (de Chernatony *et al.*, 2010; De Mooij, 2010) and unnecessary when economic models are not considered. It is argued that the user of media brands should be understood as rational, but also seen as making choices without extensive reflections and by applying practical reason. The paper also argues that users should not be necessarily considered passive, but also active, because it is with her actions (use, feedback, ratings, discussions with others, etc.) that she contributes to the creation of an image for the brand, which will influence her future choices and the choice of others. It is also argued that emotions, and more generally affect, matter and should also be considered because “media brands create emotional engagement among their audiences like few others do” (Siegert *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). Furthermore, informed by concepts from the field of marketing, the paper argues that the user of media brands with these characteristics is involved with the provider of media services in an exchange of efforts aimed at the creation of value, where the term ‘efforts’ indicates a combination of specialized competences (knowledge and skills), time and other resources.

It was also argued that the user of media brands should not be considered as pursuing only functional value (i.e. utility), but also the creation of a variety of different types of value from this exchange. To illustrate this point, example of studies of the uses and gratifications approach were provided, that identify diversion, social utility, personal identity and surveillance (Ruggiero, 2000) as users’ motivations for attending media. Last, the paper suggests that a better understanding of media consumption requires linking different types of gratifications that are created by users when they attend media, with those goals, that if achieved, lead the way to a better life. For this purpose, it was suggested to investigate the links between different types of value generated by media consumption and the values, understood as capabilities that empower people (Nussbaum, 2003; Sen, 1999), or goals of varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in their life (Schwartz *et al.*, 2012).

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