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FRENCH SKI RESORT' ATTRACTIVENESS THROUGH INSTAGRAM

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The purpose of this thesis was to examine the different ways to use Instagram for French ski resorts to support their branding strategy.

The research was executed in three stages: literature reviews, observations and an interview. In the literature review, the author first focused on branding and its components, the consumer decision-making process, consumer engagement and the different Instagram's features to achieve emotional connections between a brand and its followers/users. Building strong connections with customers is essential for brands to develop and maintain a loyal and lifelong customer relationship.

Observations examined the differences between the three most followed French ski resorts about their practices on Instagram. After this, the author focused on Val Thorens which is the highest resort in Europe. The two most successful posts and the two less were analyzed to determine which factors are causing success and which ones generate less engagement in the eyes of its followers. Then, the community manager of Val Thorens was interviewed regarding the branding strategy of the resort and his insights about Val Thorens' Instagram profile.

It was discovered that it would be beneficial for Val Thorens to create more appealing content, captions with more hashtags to have a better and bigger visibility. However, one of the main and relevant factors about Val Thorens' habits on Instagram and which reflects the global idea of the resort is to provide the best atmosphere for its visitors. It is achieved through the community manager's team which takes care of every tourists and skiers in a personalized and humanized way on Instagram. Val Thorens is a good example of a ski resort which has built strong emotional connections with its visitors.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS (OR) SYMBOLS

IG   Instagram

UGC   User-generated content

1 BACKGROUND

1.1. Personal motivations

An old saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words". Indeed, a picture delivers more than we could think. It describes a moment, a feeling but the reality cannot be really conveyed. However, nowadays, aesthetics is a big part of our lives and especially through the well-known social media that is Instagram.

Being a Millennial, I was born in the era of social media. I share, communicate, buy and socialize in a totally different way than my parents were used to. Having said that, I could not spend a day without checking my Instagram feed. It is a real entertainment: Instagram allows its users to edit and share both photos and videos. Currently, Instagram is one of the most popular social networks worldwide since its creation in 2010. As of June 2018, there are over 1 billion monthly active Instagram users worldwide (Statista, 2019). Instagram gives tools to people to stay in touch with their relatives but not only, it also connects brands with their customers. Using Instagram allows me to share my thoughts, good vibes, experiences, travels and the things I love. Thanks to this social network, I can be aware of every new trend as fast as they are released.

France is well-known for its ski-resorts in the Alps and Pyrenees. France accounts for around 350 ski resorts. Moreover, according to Statista 2018 36% of ski resorts worldwide are located in the Alps, region where the country has hosted 3 times the Olympic Games. France is home to the world's largest ski area which is called "Les 3 Vallées" with roughly 600 kilometers of slopes and 45 000 hectares (Les 3 Vallées, 2018). Since my early childhood, I was passionate about ski. I have developed a huge interest for Val Thorens - the World's best ski resort and the highest in Europe (Val Thorens, 2018) - where I go every year with my parents for more than 15 years. This ski area is part of the 3 Vallées and has been rewarded many times: 5 times as the best French ski resort and 4 times as the best European ski resort (Val Thorens, 2018).

Nowadays, as a business student, I would like to specialize myself in the management of the ski industry.

My personal motivation for this research is based on my interest in Instagram and how to use it as a ski resort to attract new customers. Moreover, I have already done a 6-month internship in social media and marketing which gave me some knowledge about the topic.

1.2. Research purpose and objectives

The purpose of the thesis is to find out how a ski resort can retain its loyal customers using Instagram and how the platform can be used as a marketing tool to support the branding strategy of Val Thorens. Main practices used on Instagram will be identified in order to find out how a ski resort can put them into practice. Primary and secondary data were collected to answer the following questions:

1. How can Instagram support the branding strategy of a ski resort?
2. How does a ski resort use Instagram to promote its brand image?
3. How to grow customers' engagement?
4. How can a ski resort use Instagram to promote its brand as a destination and retain its loyal visitors?

1.3. Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided in 5 main parts.

First of all, an introduction will introduce the topic, the personal motivations and the research purpose and objectives.

Afterwards, secondary data will be gathered in literature review chapter in order to start answering the research questions. First of all, there will be a French ski industry overview in France to gain a better understanding of this industry and a short introduction of Val Thorens as a destination will be presented. The second part will focus on branding, followed by the third part about social media marketing. Instagram marketing strategy will be studied, which means identifying: 1) what is Instagram as a social media, 2) how to use it as a business as part of a strategy? In the last part, customer engagement will be explained and how to use IG to engage more people.

The third chapter will focus on methodology and how the data have been collected, in order to answer research questions.

The fourth chapter will present the results and analysis of observations and the interview conducted.

The conclusion will sum up the key findings and further suggestions for Val Thorens' Instagram content as well as suggestions for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. French ski industry overview

France is well known for the Alps and its ski resorts. According to Statista (2018), during 2018, 8,6 million people skied in France, ranking the country as the second country with the highest number of ski participants behind Germany with 14,6 million people.

France offers plenty of destinations for all level of skiers. According to Statista, there are 325 ski areas in the country as of 2018. Each of them has its own characteristics and atmosphere. Ski info has ranked ski resorts in different categories based on several criteria. For example, Megève is more suitable for people looking for authenticity whereas families are more likely to look for a small and family-friendly resort like Les Menuires. People looking for luxe and high-quality stay would go to Courchevel which is very popular to host celebrities while people looking for parties would rather go to Tignes for example. (Skiinfo, 2018)

According to CNN Travel (2017) and its Top 12 of the world's biggest ski areas, 6 of them are located in French Alps including the 2 biggest. In 2016, among the 8,6 million skiers in France, about 1,5 million are foreigners as of 2016. This industry generates nearly 9 billion € a year in France and employs more than 120 000 people (Bajos and Haus, 2016).

However, due to global warming and the market's maturity (i.e. the competition becoming increasingly fierce), professionals face some challenges. The first one is the snow conditions: since the 80s, an average of 25 days of snow was lost per year which means that ski resorts open their slopes later than they were used to. Therefore, they have to expand their activities because mountains have so much to offer other than ski. Ski resorts have to renew their customer base, but seducing millennials with limited purchasing power (which is decreasing in France) can be tricky. (La Croix, 2019) A survey carried out by Poprock (2018) shows that younger generations (between 15 and 25 years old) ski less than previous younger generations. 38% of the people interviewed said that skiing is too expensive, and it is long to learn if you do not know how to since your childhood (Le mag des domaines skiables, 2018).

A study carried out by the "Association nationale des maires des stations de montagnes (ANMSM)" estimates the average cost of a ski day is 73€ per person for the winter 2017/2018 which is 8€ cheaper than the season 2016/2017. Therefore, diversification and customer renewal have become the keywords because even though it is getting cheaper, it is still considered as expensive. Ski resorts have expanded their offers by developing different and new kinds of activities. The customer experience has become very important besides skiing

and professionals have moved on to a more global approach with music festivals, club on the slopes, aquatic centers… The consequence is that, people do not say "we are going skiing" anymore but instead "we are going to the mountains" (Bajos and Haus, 2016). Trends are changing in ski areas but also on the way they are marketing and attracting people.

Despite these challenges, French ski destinations have the advantage to receive several awards and the country is the favorite destination for foreign skiers (Bajos and Haus, 2016). Over the weekend of 16th-18th November 2018 took place the 2018 World Ski Awards. World Ski Awards had been launched in 2013 and "aims to drive up standards within the ski industry by rewarding the organizations that are leaders in their field" (World Ski Awards, 2018). Votes are cast by professionals - travel buyers, tour operators, media – as well as by the public. World's Best Ski Resort has been awarded to Val Thorens 5 times out of 6 (not in 2015).

Val Thorens is the highest European ski resort at an altitude of 2 300 meters where a warm and cosmopolitan atmosphere is guaranteed. The village is located in the French Alps, in the ski area of the 3 Vallées and is open 5 and a half months for the winter season. The ski resort has been created in 1969 and "is right in the heart of the slopes which means that wherever you stay, the slopes are at your feet" (Val Thorens, 2018). As said above, the ski resort has been rewarded several times and is well-known for its state of mind "of attitude and altitude". Val Thorens is famous all around the world and is a good example when it comes to dynamic and trendy ski resort. They have developed plenty of activities besides skiing: events, zip line, cooking class, aquatic center, bowling, clubs, sled, mountain bike… The latest activity which was been launched is the double zip line in December 2018. The flight is 1 800 meters long with a maximum height of 65 meters above the slopes. The start is at the top of a chairlift of 2 500 meters to end in the heart of the village. People fly from platform to platform, flying above skiers, lifts and restaurants (Val Thorens, 2018). Val Thorens is also one of the most popular ski resorts on Instagram with 110 264 followers, 3 041 posts and 339 163 #valthorens on March 12, 2019. For these reasons, the Val Thorens ski resort was chosen to study branding as it has many factors which distinguish it from other ski resorts.

2.2. Branding

Branding has been defined by:

- "branding is endowing products and services with the power of a brand". (Kotler & Keller, 2015)

By definition, branding an essential marketing tool to give a feature that identifies one company's good or service as distinct from those of others. It is the process of shaping a brand image in consumers' minds to make them choose this product/service over the one from competitors. As Thimothy states in Forbes (2016), brand image creates recognition, which means that everyone can most likely recognize an Apple device or a can of Coca-Cola from afar. Thus, a strong brand image conveys the value of a company to create awareness, builds credibility and then extend customer loyalty. A brand promise with a strong brand image aim at guiding the consumers to remember what the brand stands for. In order to always better receive tourists and improve the quality of services, France has created the "Qualité Tourisme" which is a sign of national recognition that values a professional brand welcome and its quality services. Val Thorens tourist office has received this mark based on many different requirements: "a warm welcome, an attentive staff, proficiency in foreign languages, personalized services, clear and precise information, cleanliness and comfort guaranteed, the discovery of a destination, taking into account the opinions of customers (through the systematic analysis of satisfaction surveys and complaints)." (Direction Générale des Entreprises, 2017) As shown on its website, Val Thorens promises a "personalized welcome" as well as a "cool attitude" with several activities depending on the purpose of the stay: with family, with friends, for ski, for well-being, for example. (Val Thorens, 2018)

Wheeler (2017, p. 3) explains that there is a multitude of touchpoints, each of which is an opportunity to increase awareness and build loyalty. Among these are word of mouth, business cards, packaging or social networks for example.

Figure 1: Brand touchpoints (Wheeler 2017, p.3)

According to Walvis (2010), there is a "brain's algorithm" that has three criteria that guide consumer's choices of one brand over another: relevance, coherence and participation. It means that the brand must be as distinctive and as relevant as possible, spread the same message over the years and create an interactive environment to be successful and make it chosen by the customer.

Manninen (2019), lecturer at Turku University of Applied Sciences, explained that there are 3 pillars of branding which are the following: identity, customer experience and communication.

Brand identity is the representation of how a brand wishes to be perceived as a business, made up of plenty of components: what the values are, how a brand communicates them, what the brand says, what a company wants people to feel and all of these are communicated by the name, logo, front. Brand identity is the personality of a business, what makes a brand different from another and a promise to its customers.

Customer experience is a complex element composed of the entirety of the interactions, feelings and thoughts a customer has with a company and its products/services. Customer experience is about creating a unique, memorable and symbolic moment of exchange between the consumer and the brand. Customer experience is lived through customer service, interactions on social media, for example. It aims at creating a relationship between the customer and the company. It is important for business because customers who have a positive experience are more likely to become loyal of the brand.

Brand Communication is an important part of the brand management process. It is a tool by which brands inform, highlight, persuade and remind people about their values and promises. Brand communication is a technique used by brands to influence customers about the brand. To achieve it successfully, brands must deliver a meaningful and consistent message to create an impact on consumers' mind. Obviously, brand management requires a strategy. An effective brand strategy emerges with a thoughtful and unifying idea "around which all behavior, actions, and communications are aligned" (Wheeler 2017, p. 10). One can illustrate a brand strategy like a road map which leads all the marketing techniques.

2.2.1. Branding a destination

When it comes to branding a destination, the question is the following: what does the city have to offer? Branding a destination needs to communicate the emotional impact of the visit experience. According to Kolb (2017, p. 175), a successful brand must be "authentic, understandable, memorable, and useable". In addition to this, through the use of social media,

visitors are also involved in the creation of the brand image. However, this can be seen as a challenge for marketers because they cannot control the feelings of visitors. They can only strengthen the value of the brand every time the promise of what visitors will experience when visiting the destination is kept (Kolb, 2017, p. 177).

Branding a destination is much more complex as travelling requires time in addition to the price paid. When experiencing a disappointing travel, time cannot be returned and repurchased. Therefore, having a strong brand image rises awareness among potential visitors that the destination meets the desired needs (Kolb, 2017, p. 178).

2.2.2. Val Thorens branding strategy

According to its website, Val Thorens' branding strategy is to **provide ski holidays for everyone**: skiers, parents, kids, party-animals, seniors who want to relax and care about well-being, thrill seekers, etc and to "**Live United**". As it is the highest European ski resort with its 150 km of slopes, snowing conditions allow ski until beginning of May. To live unforgettable holidays, Val Thorens is definitely the place to be with all the activities available, one cannot get enough of everything offered: hiking trail, yoga, flying bee, ski, spa, shopping, restaurants, clubs, nursery and a lot of events all along the year. For example, in July 2019, Val Thorens will host the last step of the Tour de France. All of this is highlighted through their stories and posts to remember what the resort has to offer. (Val Thorens, 2019) Val Thorens wants to be perceived as the "excellence of ski resorts which offers the best of skiing, the best services and the best atmosphere by sharing unique, personalized, strong and sustainable experiences with everyone". (Office de Tourisme de Val Thorens, 2014)

The figures below illustrate the values of Val Thorens which are the following:

- Excellence and creativity to show that Val Thorens knows how to innovate
- Share and pleasure which means that Val Thorens offers multiple experiences to its visitors and that good moments are enjoyed when being together
- Simplicity and nonconformism which reflects the warm welcome offered by Val Thorens. Everyone can be her/himself in Val Thorens
- Dversity and openness which emphasizes the cosmopolitan spirit of the resort.

Figure 2: Val Thorens values (Office de Tourisme de Val Thorens, 2014)

2.2.3. Consumer behavior

Understanding and knowing customers is fundamental for marketers. The main focus is on consumer behavior: which factors influence them and how do they make their decisions to choose one brand over others?

Consumer behavior is the study of consumers and the process they use to choose and use in order to help companies to improve their marketing strategies. Several factors can affect one's behavior and decision-making which are the following:

- Cultural: Culture plays a vital role in the consumer behavior. Indeed, everyone learns a set of values, perceptions, wants, behaviors and preferences from family, society and other important institutions. (Kotler & Armstrong 2010, p. 161)
- Social: Social factors include family, reference groups, role and status. As potential consumers are surrounded by several people who have different buying behaviors, their environment is influencing their habits.

- Personal: It includes age, gender, their stage in their life cycle, their personality, lifestyle, personal income and values that are important characteristics which influence behavior. (Kotler & Keller 2016, p. 183)
- Psychological: Psychology plays an essential role in designing the consumer's preferences. Motivation, perception, experience and beliefs need to be taken into consideration while studying consumer behavior.

2.2.4. Consumer decision-making process:

After studying consumer behavior, decision making is the power given to the consumer. With the infinite choices of brands, one might wonder how people make their decision to choose one brand over others. The consumer decision-making process is a complex decision with multiple phases, but this is the process through which consumers go on when they have to purchase a product/service. Most of the marketing professional (see for example Kotler and Keller) refer to a 5-stage model. However, this consumer decision journey has been represented with a linear funnel in which the consumer starts by identifying his needs, following by the gathering of information, the evaluation of alternatives, the decision and the experience post-purchase.

Need recognition → Information search → Evaluation of alternatives → Purchase → Post-purchase evaluation

Figure 3: 5-stage model of the consumer decision-making process (Kotler & Koller 2016, p. 195)

Meanwhile, McKinsey (2009) developed an approach, with 5 steps - reflecting the model above - which explains that consumers begins with the consideration of several brands, narrowing down options through the process until the purchase of one specific product/service from a specific brand, before becoming loyal.

Awareness   **Familiarity**   **Consideration**   **Purchase**   **Loyalty**
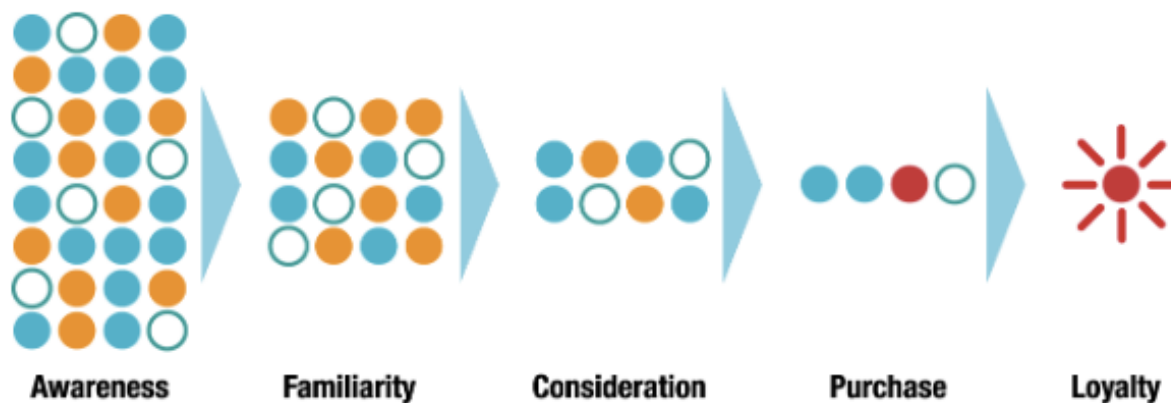
Figure 4: Consumers start with a set of potential brands and reduce this number to make a purchase (McKinsey, 2009)

However, McKinsey (2009) suggests a consumer decision-making journey with a loyalty loop is more suitable. A qualitative and quantitative research in several industries (skincare, insurance, automobile, electronics and mobile-telecom) shows that nowadays, something different than the funnel analogy occurs. McKinsey describes the decision-making process as circular with 4 stages where marketers can either win or lose. Instead of a linear funnel, a loyalty loop would be more accurate as it is considering the fact that if the consumer had a positive experience with the brand, he would be more likely to experience it again and become loyal. For example, if someone wants to go to a ski resort, he will consider several destinations, check what they have to offer, gather information and then make the decision to go to this specific place. Afterwards, he will experience his visit and if he had a positive experience which meets his needs and expectations, he will be more likely to not go on through all the process and choose the one where he had already been. In other words, when he will have to go to ski, he will go back to the same place without hesitation because he knows that it fits with his needs. All of this can also be achieved through Instagram – IG – as it is part of the branding strategy of Val Thorens. Indeed, IG is used to strengthen the post-purchase experience by communicating with its visitors about their past experiences which helps visitors to remember what Val Thorens stands for.
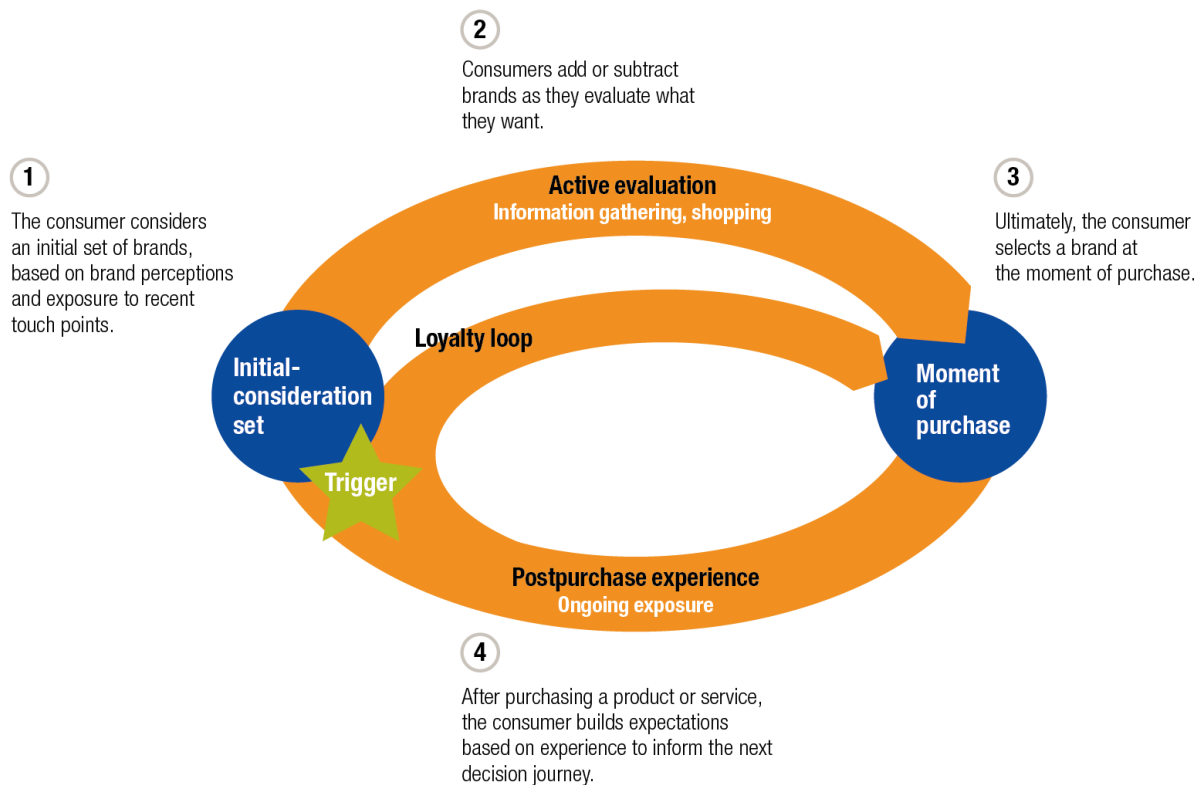
Figure 5: Circular consumer decision-making process (McKinsey, 2009)

2.2.5. Branding on IG

It is obvious that digitalization has changed our lifestyle. Businesses can now use this digital change to strengthen their brand. Tourism destinations have also new marketing approaches thanks to the digital era. According to National Geographic (2017), people are more and more influenced by social media and even when it comes to plan their future trips, especially tourism boards. Therefore, tourism boards officials need to use efficiently social media branding to create awareness of what the destination has to offer (Kolb 2017, p. 42). Kolb states that, now cities and towns must ensure that travel professionals, bloggers, reviewers and past visitors convey information about the destination to do an effective marketing campaign. The first step to achieve a successful marketing plan is to attract visitors and in order to do so, the city has to determine what it has to offer and on what experiences it can provide to its visitors (Kolb 2017, p. 56). Once more, these benefits will be conveyed through emotions. As an example, Kolb says that an amusement park provides a family togetherness feeling.

Concerning ski resorts, the feelings provided are feeling of freedom, breath of fresh air, and conviviality as conveyed in the branding strategy of Val Thorens "Live United". To illustrate this promise, Val Thorens shares many different posts on IG. However, all of them must follow the same criteria: transcribe spontaneity, show the pleasure to be together, reveal the wonder of the summits, enhance sharing scenes, for instance. (Office de Tourisme de Val Thorens, 2014)

2.3. Customer engagement

There have been researches about customer and digital engagement. Engagement has different meanings according to the context. However, in marketing, engagement is associated with the level of an active relationship that a customer shares with a firm (Palmatier et al. 2017, p. 3). Van Doorn et al. (2010) describe customer engagement as "the customers' behavioral manifestations towards a brand or firm (…) including word of mouth activity, recommendations, helping other customers, blogging, writing reviews". In this research, customer engagement is an important driver of loyalty for several reasons which will be explained.

Customer engagement can be defined as a customer's value addition to a firm, it can be either direct (purchase) or indirect (feedback, social media conversations). A customer is engaged when he has an emotional attachment to the firm and "where there is emotional attachment, consumers are more likely to recommend and participate in social media discussions" (Palmatier et al. 2017, p. 11). As reported by Chacon in Later (2018), there are different possibilities to calculate the engagement rate when social media are used as a marketing tool to develop a brand image. In this research, only one way was considered. The formula is as follows: **Engagement rate of a post = (Likes + Comments) / Followers x 100**. This formula was chosen because it is the only one which requires data which are publicly available. The other ones require impressions or saved, for example. Moreover, the number of comments may have more value in term of customer engagement than impressions for example as they require a bigger effort for customers.

As customer expectations are rising faster than ever before across every communication channel, an important aspect of consumers' connection to a brand is familiarity. According to a Salesforce research report (2018), 75% of consumers expect brands to provide a consistent experience wherever they engage with them. Obviously, when a customer enters a coffee shop and the owner can call him by his name, it can be a positive signal for the consumers. In today's digital world, it works the same way: most customers expect that brands will respond in social media channels (Social Media Today, 2016). Especially for customer service

exchanges, brands must be effective and prompt (Humphrey et al. 2015, p. 25). Because now brands are people, and people are brands. Indeed, people are part of the marketing process on the same basis than marketers do because they post on social media their experiences, they engage with other customers, so it influences others and people are more likely to trust one other rather than marketers as it will be explained further in the following subsection. When a brand talks to consumers, especially when it comes to consumer service, it should sound authentic, interesting and engaging. In order to do so, a community manager is "responsible for advocating a brand on social networks. They create their own social persona and actively go out within the online community to connect with potential customers and advocate accordingly." (Sprout Social, 2017) From time to time, the community manager is even known by his name and has conversations with customers as they would with another person, instead of a big company. (Britton 2015, p. 215-221)

According to Serafinelli (2018, p. 111), people follow their favorite brands get immersed in their real life as social media reduces the distance between them and the brand and above all, entertains. To drive customer engagement, according to statistics retrieved from Simply Measured, one of the most common tactics for starting interactions with customers and driving up follower numbers was holding a photo contest (Simply Measured, 2013). However, nowadays there are many different tactics on how a social network can engage with their followers. For example, something which is usually successful is to ask people to tag their friends. For instance, Val Thorens has posted a video on December 7, 2018 where someone is throwing snow on his friend when he stops, thus the caption is the following "to whom do you love to do this joke?" and the video received 5 184 likes and 412 comments as of April 9, 2019.

2.3.1. User-generated content

As of January 2019, 31% of the French population were active IG users (Statista 2019). According to Instagram (2017), people under the age of 25 spend on average more than 32 minutes a day on the social media while those older spend more than 24 minutes a day. To increase customer engagement, brands can interact with them by asking them to share their experiences, photos, comments or videos, review their product.

User-generated content, alternatively UGC is described as any type of content (i.e. photos, videos, blogs) created by unpaid contributors and shared through an online channel (Moriuchi 2016, p. 2). UGC is a good example of how customers advocate a brand and a good component of what is customer engagement. One of the biggest benefits of using UGC is that

if it is well down, it is a true win-win situation. Being mentioned or having content shared by a brand is exciting, their content not only help brands to get to their audience, but brands also expose their audience to the content created by customers.

UGC can be achieved through different ways: it could be just asking people to repost their content, or it can be part of a campaign. For example, every December, Starbucks asks its customers to share photos of their customized Red Cup. The aim is to promote its holiday-themed seasonal beverages. This campaign is pretty smart as customers have to buy a rep cup first to take the photos and then use a branded hashtag when sharing the photo. (Hubspot 2017)

According to Sprout Social (2018), many consumers are twice likely to share UGC with friends or family because consumers trust one another over brands, which means that UGC usually gets more engagement than promotional posts. According to a Sprout Social's customer survey (2016), 75% of people are likely to share a good experience on their own profile which is not insignificant. Indeed, UGC provides social proof. Social proof has been popularized by psychologist Robert Cialdini, he states that social proof is a psychological phenomenon which discern people of what to do through reference to what others think is correct. There are different kinds of social proof: for example, when a celebrity endorses some products or when a consumer recommends a product and services based on their experiences with a brand (Buffer 2017). Therefore, consumers find UGC more trustworthy and it allows brands to get a bigger and a better visibility.

2.3.2. Emotional connections

Emotional connection is one of the drivers of customer engagement. However, the consumer must first know the brand, then like it, trust it and finally feel an emotional connection to it which requires time and effort (Branding Strategy Insider, 2015). Frawley (2014, p. 17) claims that this funnel can be described as the Maslow's hierarchy of needs into the hierarchy of connections (figure 9). The bottom of the pyramid has to be achieved to enable achievement of the higher levels which means that as the customer connections becomes stronger, its effectiveness becomes stronger as well. The emotional connection is the peak of the pyramid which is the goal to achieve for marketers. Knowing what people feel about your brand adds value to your brand image that can drive to loyalty even over generations. (Frawley 2014, p. 19-20)
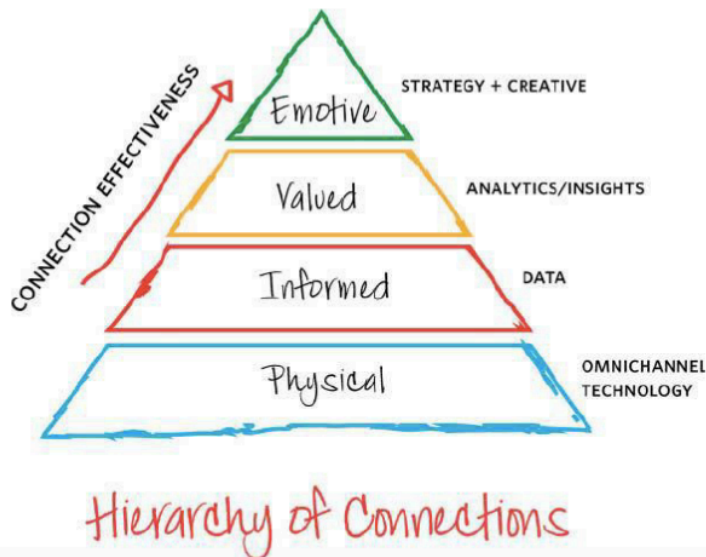
Figure 6: Hierarchy of connections (Frawley 2014, p. 17)

Thus, one might wonder: how to connect emotionally with customers and how to create lifelong relationships?

In order to reach the higher level of connection, brands must consider that people want authentic communication and speak to a brand as if they were talking to a human being. The idea is to reply thoughtfully to the comments that answer your audience's common questions, that will give the brand an advantage of building trust. Another element to consider to be authentic is to be as transparent and open as possible. Therefore, building customer relationships on social media helps brands to improve loyalty. In fact, a report from Sprout Social (2019) discloses that "92% of people believe in social's power to connect communities, 78% of consumers want brands to help people connect through social, 76% of respondents were more likely to buy from a brand they felt connected to on social media than a competitor". Providing helpful, informative and entertaining content is the key for establishing connections with customers. Val Thorens is a good example of a brand which establishes emotional connections with its followers and therefore, it extends loyalty. For example, they are very active on social media and respond to most of the comments to strengthen their branding strategy which is to convey conviviality.

2.4. Instagram as a business tool

IG is a powerful social media used by more than 1 billion people monthly (Instagram, 2019). The aim of this social media launched in 2010 is to share some parts of our lives through

pictures or videos. IG is not only used as a personal social media but also used for companies and business. Brands can broadcast their products, reviews and spirit through their pictures. According to Instagram Business Team 2017, over 80% of IG users follow their favorite brand on IG. Moreover, brands are able to create an online brand community grounded in social relationships among its users (Humphrey et al. 2015, p. 1). These brand communities are built based on the emotional attachment that consumers feel about a brand and its product/service. As shown on figure 6, an effective connection is settled when connections are emotive. In fact, the community share experiences, recommendations, provide support and communicate with the brand which can be produced with UGC as explained in 2.3.1. Brand followers can communicate with the brand by liking or commenting the content, tagging their friends under a picture. These interactions help both IG followers and brands to communicate and share. Having a strong brand online community is really valuable for companies as consumers moved online, the business environment has also changed, and interactions are spontaneous and instant which means that communities can grow quickly and even overnight (Humphrey et al. 2015, p. 3). However, in order to have a strong online brand community, brands first need to be competent, which means that they deliver what they promise. According to Humphrey et al. (2015) the brand must have a strong reputation and be perceived as representing high quality.

Thanks to social media, brands presence in people's everyday lives has been really strengthen. While traditional branding was mainly based on logo or graphic images, now online branding is based on the interactive experience of users (Scolari, 2008). Through their official accounts, brands tell the story of their products, meanwhile with the use of branded hashtags, photo contests and calls to action, brands lead customers to share photos of their everyday lives related to the brand which actually shows how products exist in real life with customers. (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 110) Nowadays, brands with a strong brand image use their stories to "create meaningful engagement and a lasting impact on their audience" (Britton 2015, p. 247).

IG provides new opportunities as well as challenges to previous marketing tools. In doing social media marketing, companies involve customers to be part of the marketing machine in posting content, building relationships, engaging with products online, sharing and participating in social media discussions. Nowadays, social media marketing is a big challenge for brands to improve their visibility on social media on a daily basis. Instagram is considered as the best platform for social media marketing as it allows to drive customer engagement because "photos can be used to showcase a product, document, offer, and influence buyer mood" (Barker 2013, p. 165).

2.4.1. Instagram features

As a marketing tool, Instagram provides several features that allow brands to communicate with their customers:

- **Posts and feed:** either photos or videos up to 60 seconds long can be posted on the platform, up to 10 photos/videos on the same post. However, according to Sprout Social (2018), photos generate 36% more engagement than videos. The reason might be that people just watch the video and keep scrolling.

  As a visual-center platform, emojis are a good way to express an idea or emotion as it catches our attention. They are used in captions and comments for example. A research conducted in 2015 by Instagram Engineering shows that French use emojis in over 50% of text.

  Posting at the right time requires a careful planning and consideration. Photos should be attractive and can be modified thanks to filters, but you also have to choose the right time. The more data you can collect about your followers, the better you will grow your audience and increase the engagement rate. After analyzing 12 million posts, Later (2019) found out that the best time to post on Instagram is between 9 and 11am. Another study carried by Sprout Social (2019) shows that between 3 and 6pm is also a good time to post on the social media. However, each business has to find its own best time to post and it needs to know its audience.
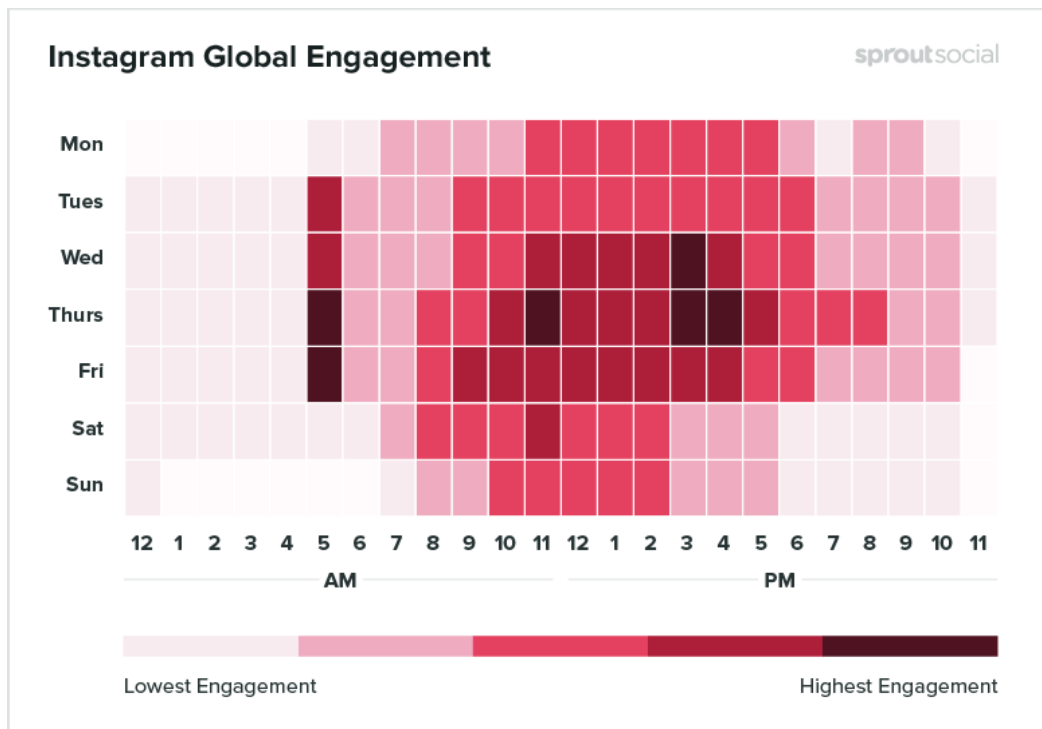

Figure 7: Instagram global engagement (Sprout Social, 2018)

- **Hashtag:** hashtags are an easy way to categorize photos according to people's interests, making it easier and more discoverable. Hashtags can be used on stories or bio in addition to regular posts. Anyone who clicks on a hashtag or is looking for it will see a page showing all the posts tagged with it. Therefore, it allows brands to get new followers and gain visibility as people can now follow hashtags (Hootsuite, 2019).

Figure 8: screenshot of a Calvin Klein Instagram post and bio to highlight branded hashtags

A study shows that a post with at least one hashtag have 12.6% more engagement than those without (Simply Measured, 2014). However, even though each post allows up to 30 hashtags, a research carried by TrackMaven (2016) shows that 9 hashtags is the optimal number for boosting engagement.
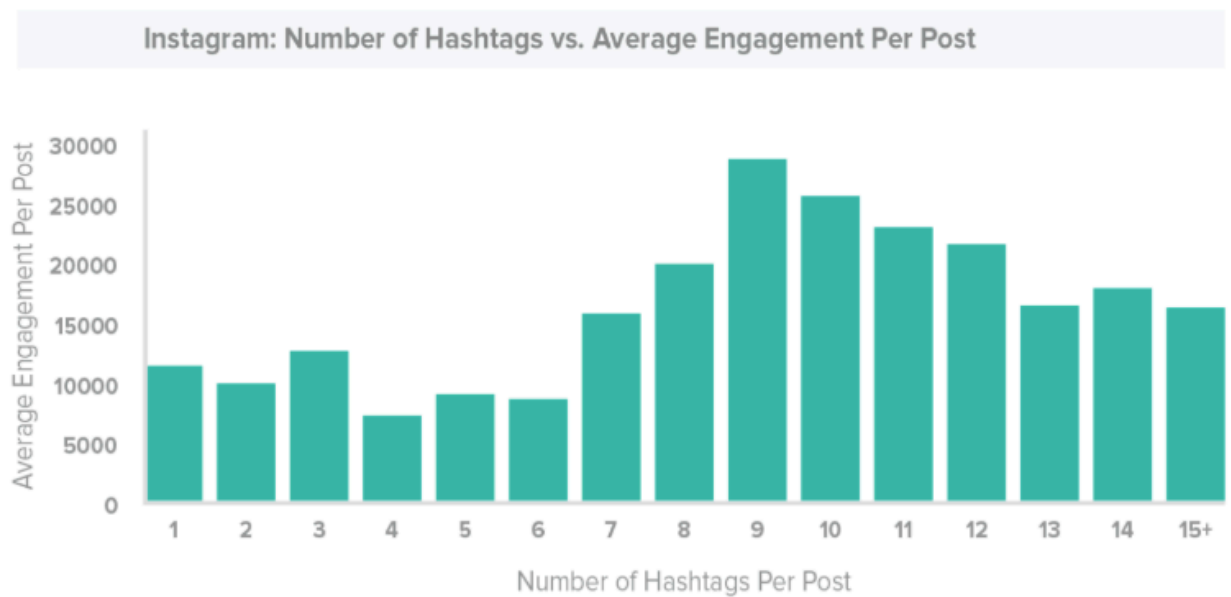
Figure 9: Number of hashtags vs. Average engagement/post (TrackMaven, 2016)

Moreover, branded hashtags are often used for a specific campaign or just to showcase a company's culture, products or services. Having branded hashtags will help drive engagement as it organizes all the posts around the brand on a specific hashtag page (Hootsuite, 2019). Sprout Social (2018) claims on its blog that 7 out of 10 hashtags are branded, therefore it becomes essential to use them to categorize your content thanks to your brand's name.

- **Location:** Another relevant feature is to tag posts with geotags. It works like hashtags which means that anyone who clicks or is looking for a location can find every post which has been tagged with it. According to Sprout Social (2018), a post with a geotag gets 79% more engagement than those without.
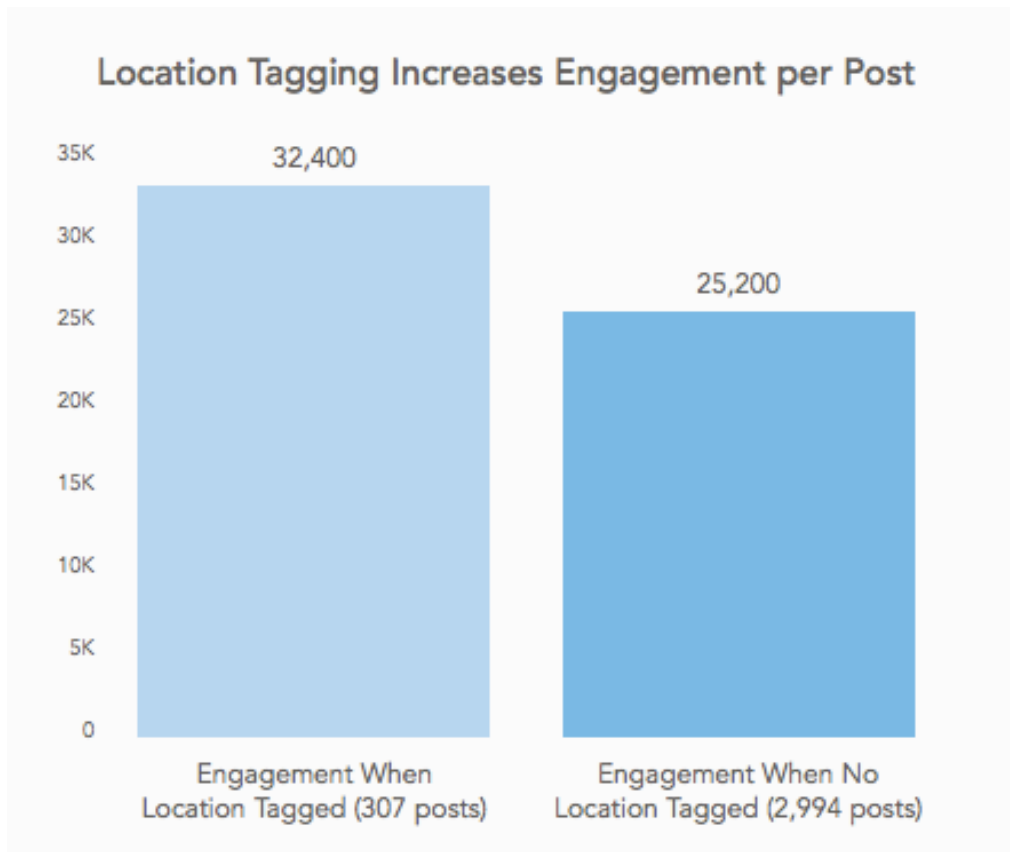
Figure 10: Difference between engagement when location tagged vs. no location tagged (Sprout Social, 2018)

- **Stories:** Stories on Instagram have been launched in August 2016 (Instagram 2016). This feature is to share photos or videos in a slideshow format but only available for 24 hours. Stories give brands the opportunity to share more raw and authentic content as it stays only 24 hours. It can be backstage or teaser for example. Instagram statistics (2019) reports that there are more than 400 million stories on a daily basis. Gifs, polls, questions, hashtags, location, countdown, text, drawings or musics can be added to stories. For example, gifs deliver a humorous tone. If a brand adds a poll or questions to its story, this will create interactions.

However, since December 2017, people can pin their own highlights stories with the stories they shared before and therefore, let it visible even after the first 24 hours. Highlights allow business to keep a consistent visual brand identity. Thanks to this recent feature, brands can categorize its stories and highlight them. For example, Gas Bijoux, a French jewelry creator has pinned different highlight: one for a specific campaign, one to show the studio, another to say that they are hiring with the link in swipe up. Highlight stories can also display an event, tutorials, backstage to humanize the brand, reviews from users or book guide to inspire people when it comes to tourism.

- **Live:** Instagram live is a feature that allows users to stream video to followers and engage with them in real time. Live can be beneficial for a marketing strategy to promote products through tutorials, launch announcements or it can show the behind-the-scenes in real time. In addition, people can ask directly their questions and have an answer quickly. (Sprout Social, 2018)

- **Shopping:** This feature gives businesses the opportunity to create an immersive storefront for their customers. With this, companies can identify their products on their photos. Therefore, people can click on the product and see a description page with a link that takes them to the website whsere they can purchase the product. (Instagram, 2019)

- **Collaboration:** Collaboration is beneficial for both sides and valuable for both audiences. Usually brands contact celebrities to talk about their products, review them, organize giveaways to win some products. Therefore, brands win visibility and followers.

In order to win consumers' attention, brands must focus on what they are offering makes the consumer feel and the ways in which it enhances their life. This is the main difference between social media marketing and traditional marketing: now brands must create content instead of creating advertisement. Britton (2015, p. 235) argues that "advertising is constructed of messages that are built to communicate and persuade one to buy what is being sold" whereas "content is constructed of messaging that adds value to a consumer's life". If marketers are successful in engaging their consumer, they may be lucky enough to have their content shared without asking: this is brand advocacy.

2.4.2. How is IG changing travel?

IG has changed our lifestyle and our relation we have with travelling. As a brand destination, Social Media Today (2015) reports that the first purpose is to inspire people and not to sell. IG and its features make it a suitable platform for showing off travel adventures. Indeed, 48% of users rely on Instagram to find a new travel destination and 35% of them use it to discover a new place (Social Media Today, 2015), having said that, IG is influencing our travel decisions. IG should be used to showcase destinations, activities, culture and the spirit of the destination. Thanks to the social media, people can get inspired, share their favorites

restaurants, hotels and places and experiences they had. IG is a platform full of resources when it comes to planning a trip thanks to hashtags and geotags. With the growth of influencers, wherever they travel, people often travel to these places because of their photos. Therefore, it is essential for ski resorts to take care of their IG account in order to win visibility, to attract potential visitors and retain loyal ones.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research methodology

This research aims to provide a better understanding of the efficiency of IG for branding a French ski resort. The main objective of this thesis is to study the possibilities of IG when it comes to branding a ski resort and to find out how a branding strategy is implemented on this social media by Val Thorens.

First data collection method was literature review. The aim was to study what branding is and why it is important for business. Then, how consumers make their decisions when they have to purchase a product/service was studied. Therefore, several information about branding applied to tourism have been collected. Afterwards, the literature review focused on consumer engagement in the social media area and how to create emotional connections with consumers for companies. Finally, IG features considered by brands were identified. The aim was to study how content marketing should be implemented on IG, i.e. how to generate engagement, when to post on the platform to have the best visibility, etc.

The empirical part focuses on finding out how Val Thorens uses IG to promote its destination and retain its loyal visitors. But first of all, a ranking of the most followed IG ski resorts has been established to compare Val Thorens and its competitors to see what differs Val Thorens from them. It appeared that Val Thorens is the second most followed ski resorts on Instagram. Therefore, the author decided on the 3 most followed accounts to see what the most followed does which Val Thorens does not apply and why it is more popular. The 10 last posts of each resorts have been observed to find out what Val Thorens does better.

The ski area has opened on November 17, 2018 and will close on May 5, 2019 for the season 18/19. However, the peak season is concentrated on February and March as public holidays started on February 8 and ended on March 10 for French people. Therefore, the author focused on this period for the research and analyzed the content posted during this period. The aim of this study is to identify which content receive the more engagement and why. The author relied on the 25 posts published between February 8, 2019 and March 10, 2019 to conduct her observations. She has retrieved the posts and their interactions, to finally calculate the engagement rate per post. In order to choose the 2 most successful posts and the 2 less successful posts, she looked at the number of likes, comments and the engagement rate of each post. It appears that the 2 most liked posts are also those which received the more comments and

which, consequently, had generated the highest engagement rate. Concerning the 2 less successful, the same is happening: the less liked is also the less commented and the one which had the lowest engagement rate. However, the second less successful has been chosen with only 2 criteria: a low number of likes and the lowest engagement rate of the 25 posts.

The original idea was to realize a survey to know the impact of IG on Val Thorens' visitors. However, the author chose to focus on the company's point of view to have some insights about its habits and how they perceive their strategy and how they want to implement it.

3.2.   Data collection

There are two research methods to collect data and analyze them to answer a question from the information they provide. However, the author chose to use a qualitative data. First, the author carried out a small benchmarking to compare the 3 most followed ski resorts to see what the main differences are.

To understand the company's point of view about their branding strategy and how IG is part of it, an interview was conducted by email with the community manager of Val Thorens, Thibaut Loubère. The interview (in French) is available in appendix. During the interview, 10 questions were answered. The author focused on the brand's point of view about their practices on IG to analyze how they use it as a tool to promote the brand. The interview was administered by email with structured questions. This method has been chosen because it allows the interviewer to formulate appropriate questions and it gives time to the community manager to provide a considered response. Consequently, the author wrote him and asked him 10 questions about Val Thorens' branding strategy and the habits on IG. Therefore, the author was able to discover more about the brand's point of view and its values. Moreover, the author did passive observation on the Val Thorens IG profile over the months of February and March, where there are the most people. It allowed her to have a better understanding of the relationship between Val Thorens and its followers and how Val Thorens tries to "take care" of them even online.

The interview and the observation gathered together allowed to answer the research questions and will release suggestions for Val Thorens to improve its content to gain a bigger and better visibility among IG.

3.3.   Limitations of the research

As part of the observation on Instagram, information is credible only on the moment one is looking at it. The numbers of posts, likes and comments are constantly changing. However, there are a lot of business blogs that provide advice to companies about IG: Social Media Today, Later, Sprout Social, for example. In addition to the blog, some of the websites provide social media management software for businesses.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter focuses on presenting and analyzing the results of the observations and the interview.

The author has ranked the 15 most followed IG accounts of French ski resorts which data have been retrieved in the following table:

	Number of followers	Number of posts	Number of hashtags
Chamonix	116 241	1 436	953 988
Val Thorens	110 264	3 041	339 163
Val d'Isère	70 358	1 219	272 186
Tignes	64 902	625	306 733
Courchevel	58 513	1 080	324 176
La Plagne	55 170	1 276	176 856
Les Arcs	49 536	1 241	161 507
Alpe d'Huez	38 659	1 205	143 936
Méribel	33 697	519	215 904
Les 2 Alpes	30 962	1 147	102 172
Avoriaz	29 216	1 505	197 684
Megève	26 176	410	211 597
La Clusaz	26 134	117	114 520
Les Gets	22 248	1 015	101 157
Morzine	12 377	353	253 356

Table 1: Top 15 of the most followed French ski resorts on IG on March 12, 2019

Compared to Chamonix (@chamonixmontblanc) and Val d'Isère (@valdisere), Val Thorens has almost twice as many publications, a lower engagement rate ((Like + Comments / number of followers) x 100) but a higher average comments per post as described in the table below.

	Chamonix	Val Thorens	Val d'Isère
Average likes/post	4 559	3 246	2 831
Average comments/post	39	42	28
Engagement rate	3,95%	2,98%	4,06%

Table 2: Comparison between the 3 most popular French ski resorts' IG (Phlanx, March 12, 2019)

Through observations of the 10 last posts of the 3 ski resorts, the author found out that Val Thorens is the only one to answer its comments and what is more, in a friendly way which means that replies are personalized. Every reply is different from another and there are real conversations between Val Thorens and its followers. Most of the comments aim at giving feedback or express excitement about future visits. Val Thorens always thanks its visitors for their reviews and comment, they often say "you're at home here" which conveys a feeling of good atmosphere and obviously, people want to come back as they are treated well. This reflects the brand strategy of Val Thorens which communicates "the best of ski in the best atmosphere". Many people express their satisfaction about a stay and say that they are going to come back. For example, on 2 of the screenshots, one can see that 2 people thank Val Thorens to share pictures and make them dream through the posts.
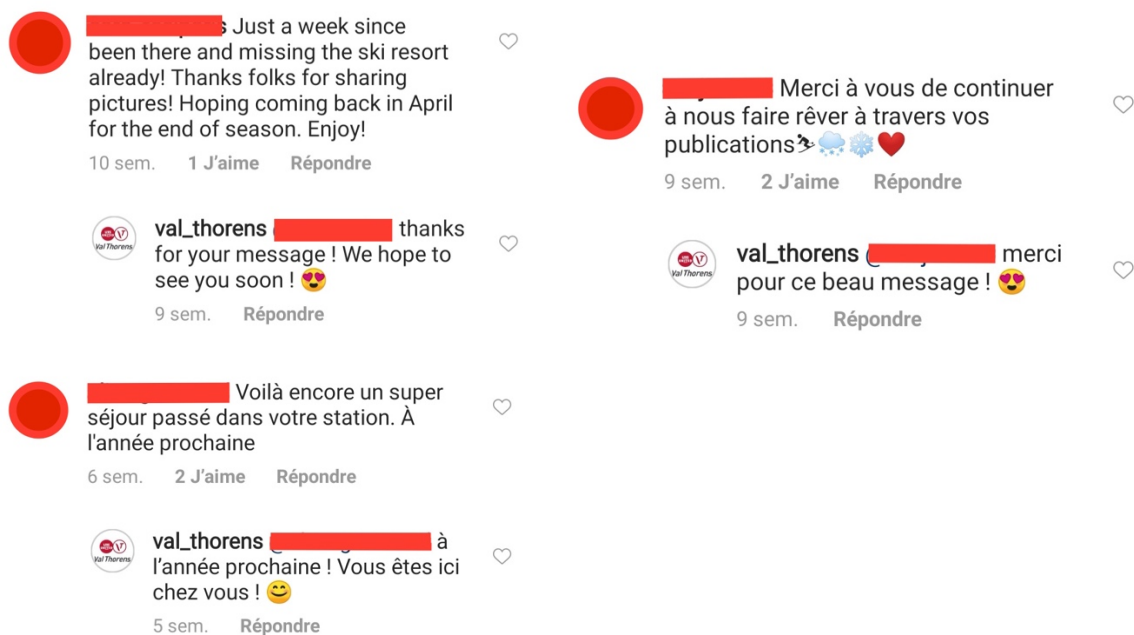
Figure 11: screenshots of comments under Val Thorens' photos (Val Thorens IG account)

Concerning the number of hashtags, Chamonix receive more. The main reason might be due to the Mont Blanc and it is not a destination focused only on ski activities. Many people are going there just to wander for a weekend trip. Moreover, both captions of Val d'Isère and Chamonix contain on average respectively 7 and 11 hashtags while those from Val Thorens contain only 3 on the 10 last posts. Therefore, this is why Val d'Isère and Chamonix generate a better engagement rate as hashtags provide a better visibility.

The difference between Val Thorens and its 2 biggest competitors based on the number of followers on IG, is that it posts more authentic and raw content which means that there is no filter used compared to Val d'Isère or Chamonix. Both Chamonix and Val d'Isère seem to use more professional tools to take pictures. Moreover, the focus and the center of attention are more on the peak of mountains while most of the photos of Val Thorens are just normal photos without using zoom for example.

4.1. Val Thorens Instagram profile analysis

As the World's Best Ski Resort and among the most followed French ski resorts, Val Thorens is ranked at the 2nd most popular on IG with 110 264 followers and 3 041 posts on March 12, 2019. Moreover, there are 5 highlights stories on their IG account, each one has a

specific theme: the longest toboggan run in Europe, the team, ice driving, hiking trail and the tourist information office. Highlights stories are a thoughtful tool for Val Thorens IG account as it allows them to easily categorize their content. As it is front and center content, it catches people's attention and they can get inspiration from there. Indeed, thanks to the highlight "hiking tour" they can discover from where to start and it teases the tour step by step. Therefore, it inspires people when they start to plan their trip. Highlights stories are more meticulous than the regular ones (those which are posted on a daily basis but only available for 24 hours) and supplementary airbrush apps were used. Furthermore, Val Thorens added branded hashtags in its bio to foster engagement and collect UGC.

The author relied on 3 websites that give statistics about Instagram users: SocialBlade, Phlanx and AnalyzeUser.
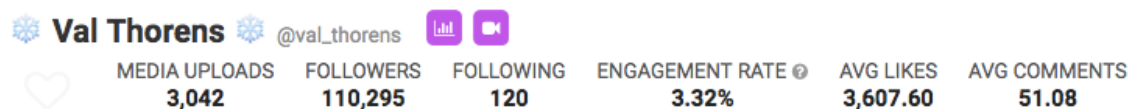

Figure 12: Val Thorens IG statistics (Social Blade, March 12, 2019)

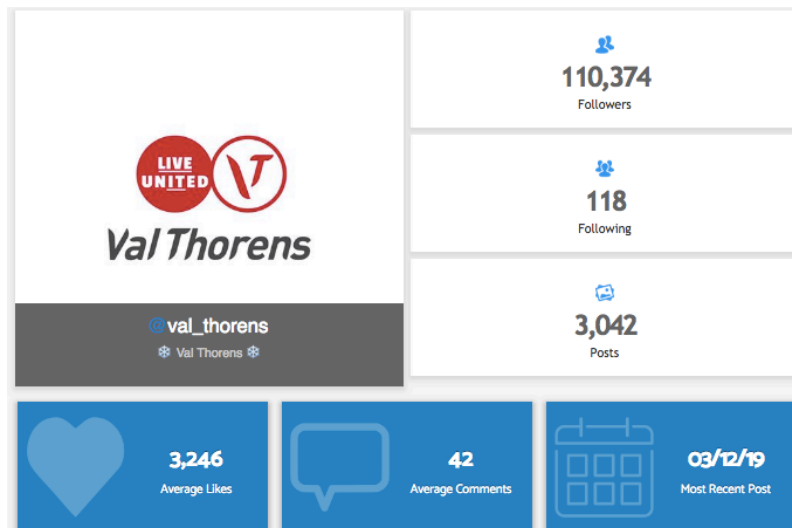*Figure 13: Val Thorens IG statistics (Phlanx, March 12, 2019)*

Figure 14: Val Thorens IG statistics (Analyze User, March 12, 2019)

Thanks to these tools, more insights about the IG account was gained. Indeed, the average likes per post is mentioned, however there is a small difference of data depending on the website. For example, while AnalyzeUser and Phlanx show that the average number of likes per post is 3 246, SocialBlade says that it is 3 607 likes per post. Therefore, the author considered that the average likes per post is 3 666. The same situation happened for the average number of comments: 42 according to Phlanx and AnalyzeUser against 51 for SocialBlade. Thus, the author considered that the average comments per post is 45.

As a city is a complex product, there are many elements to consider and to boost on social media: people, natural scenery, businesses, culture and activities. The main content of Val Thorens IG account is about highlighting the village and events. However, in the stories, content is more spontaneous and shows day by day how the weather is, how the snow is and what is happening. In addition to this, they try to interact with followers by asking questions like: "On which chairlifts are we?" or "Which slopes to start the day?" as seen below.
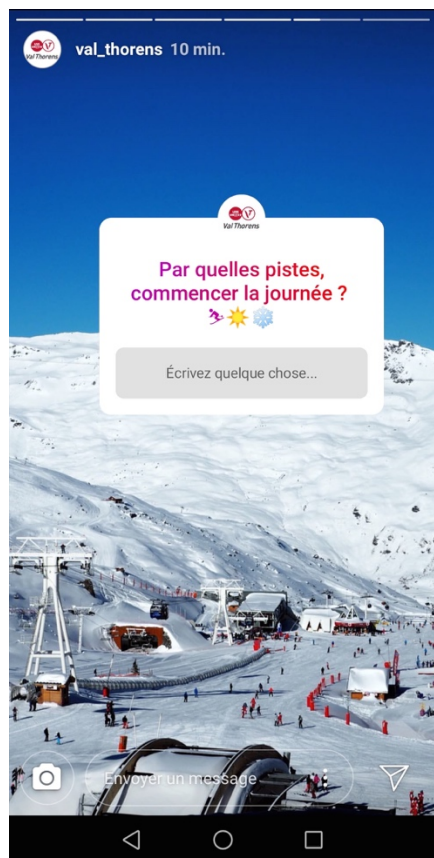
Figure 15: screenshot of a story posted by Val Thorens on March 19, 2019

Sometimes, the community manager's team even shoot skiing scenes on the slopes. Most of the content had been shooting with a GoPro camera as it is one of Val Thorens' sponsors. This means that whenever they can use a GoPro to create content they do so and use a hashtag #GoPro. Additionally, Val Thorens lends some GoPro to people for free some GoPro who do not have one but still want to make some memories of their holidays in Val Thorens. In order to profit from this, people have to become a member of the Val Thorens Club. As a member, one can benefit free of charge from many advantages (VIP invitations, discounts, experiences), it works like a loyalty program. Every week, members are invited by surprise to live experiences. Hence, almost every week, Val Thorens shares photos of the experience: cross-country skiing followed by a fondue in a restaurant, trip in a snow grooming machine, the opportunity to celebrate the Valentine's Day in an altitude spa with champagne. There are currently 8500 members to the Val Thorens club and the enrolment is free of charge as well! (Val Thorens, 2018) It shows the good atmosphere of Val Thorens and all the activities the destination has to offer. However, people have to enroll to the "loyalty" program to become sort of VIP people.

4.2.   Analysis of the 2 most successful posts

Figure 16: Best post of Val Thorens IG profile

This is the most popular photo of the peak season of the French winter holidays. There are 10 598 likes and 146 comments on March 12, 2019. Furthermore, it is a good example of how Val Thorens uses UGC as it is a repost of a photo taken by a visitor. Therefore, the theory assuming that UGC allows brands to get a bigger and better visibility can be confirmed based on this photo as it got the best engagement rate (9,74%) over the 24 other photos studied. In addition to this, 5 comments aimed at asking a question and each question has been answered by Val Thorens' account in a very friendly way with emojis. Geotag and hashtags related to Val Thorens were also used, which also allow the photo to get more engagement.

The second most liked photo, posted on March 5, 2019 received 7 109 likes and 174 comments, which means an engagement rate of 6,60% on March 12, 2019.

Figure 17: Second best post of Val Thorens IG profile

This time, 24 out of the 174 comments got an answer from Val Thorens, whether a question about the snow, the weather or just a comment from future visitors saying that they are more than excited to come as above on the screenshot. Once more, geotag, emojis and hashtag were used to catch people's attention and therefore, generate more engagement as explained in 2.4.1.

The 2 photos show the village and how it looks like whether it is sunny or during the night. The goal of Val Thorens is to make the resort live for those who are not there. Geotag and branded hashtags were used for the 2 posts which allow a better engagement rate. Furthermore, there is a real interaction between the followers and Val Thorens community team as they answer most of the time. Another detail to consider when observing these posts is the day when the photos have been posted: both were posted on a Monday so at the beginning of the week. In the chapter 2.4.1., Mondays have a lowest engagement rate than other days, but Monday is

the second day of a regular ski week (from Saturday to Saturday). Therefore, the engagement appears to be the higher as people are excited to arrive.

4.3.   Analysis of the 2 less successful posts:

Concerning the 2 less successful posts, both were posted on a Friday which is probably not the most suitable day for Val Thorens followers. Even though in chapter 2.4.1., Fridays receive the higher engagement rate, in the case of this research, something different occurs. Actually, Friday is the last day of a ski week, so people might not be on their phones to check and interact with the Val Thorens on social media.

Figure 18: Less popular post of Val Thorens IG profile

The post is a video, so it was expected that it would not generate a high engagement rate, as it has been said in the literature review (791 likes, 17 comments, that is to say an engagement rate of 0,73%). However, the video was shot with a GoPro and it spotlights the sun and someone is bringing people to the slopes with her GoPro. The post receives less engagement as it promotes Val Thorens' sponsors (Rossignol and GoPro). Therefore, one can assume that,

as said in 2.4.1., people tend to prefer content which adds values to their life than advertisement.

Figure 19: Second less popular post of Val Thorens IG profile

The photo above got only 1 322 likes and 3 comments, that means an engagement rate of 1,20%. Given the number of hashtags – 16 – and the optimal number presented in 2.4.1. which is 9 to have the better engagement rate, it was likely that the photo would engage less people because they could perceive the caption as "spammy".

4.4. Community manager interview:

Thanks to the answers from Thibaut Loubère, the author gained a better understanding of their IG strategy. First of all, the author asked about the promise that Val Thorens wants to give to its tourists and what they can expect from the resort. The global idea of Val Thorens' spirit is "**The best of skiing in the best atmosphere**", states Thibaut Loubère. Hence, IG is part of the branding strategy but more specifically of the content strategy. Content strategy

refers to the management of media in order to continuously express who you are as a business and to show what makes you unique.

The use of IG for Val Thorens is mainly to show the life of the resort on a daily basis to people who can only come once or twice during the winter season but who want to live Val Thorens from home as if they would be there. However, their central goal regarding IG and the content strategy is to *gain more visibility* even though it is also used to attract new potential tourists.

To promote the destination, Val Thorens wants to be as transparent as possible and wants to convey the "wow feeling". In order to create this feeling and to generate consumer engagement, Val Thorens shares videos, live, behind the scenes, UGC, virtual tours, photos of professional skiers on the slopes and last but not least they interact a lot with their visitors. By using this strategy, Val Thorens expects to create *positive and emotional* connections and reach the peak of the hierarchy connections. By achieving this, Val Thorens aims at fostering customer loyalty and improve customer lifetime value.

Concerning the engagement rate, thanks to IG Insights and Agorapulse (a social network management tool), the city tracks its performances to know better its audience which is mainly from France, United Kingdom, Belgium, Spain and the Netherlands. Having said that, it reflects the tourists' nationalities and the diversity of the resort. According to their website, Val Thorens is a cosmopolitan resort which is coherent with the followers' nationalities on IG.

By tracking the performances, the community manager noticed that there are some thematic which generate a lot of engagement, especially snowfalls because people are excited to have fresh powder. Furthermore, they try to create "likable, shareable and commentable" posts by asking questions, trigger emotions so that people can share their feelings.

However, according to Thibaut Loubère, the *right time to post for Val Thorens does not exist*, there are only beautiful moments to share. He explained that if the photo is nice and conveys a positive feeling, the content will be successful, no matter the time of the day.

There is still a seasonality on their social media. During September and October – when the first snowfalls happen – the engagement rate appears to be the highest. Thibaut explained that we're coming out of summer and everyone wants to ski. However, he mentioned that the further into the winter, the lower the engagement become. He claimed that it might be explained by the fact that skiers who come at Christmas for example, will show no longer their engagement and will wait for the next season.

5 CONCLUSION

This thesis was initied by the author's interest in the ski industry, especially her personal interest for Val Thorens and social media marketing.

This chapter concludes with the factors that should be considered by French ski resorts throughout their content strategy on Instagram based on the case study of Val Thorens. This chapter presents key findings and suggestions for Val Thorens to gain a better and bigger visibility among skiers and tourists and how to use IG to trigger loyalty among its visitors.

The main topic of the research was to explain how a branding strategy of a ski resort can be supported by the use of the social media Instagram and how a ski resort can retain its loyal customers thanks to IG. Research questions were designed to narrow down the topic and help the author to answer the issue.

The research questions for this thesis were:

1. How can IG support the branding strategy of a ski resort?
2. How does a ski resort use IG to promote its brand image?
3. How to grow customers' engagement?
4. How can a ski resort use IG to promote its brand as a destination and retain its loyal visitors?

The importance of social media in today's society is increasing faster than even before with 31% of the French population were active Instagram users. This digital change offers plenty of opportunities to companies to improve their brand image. Companies need a branding strategy to create awareness, brand recognition and therefore, loyalty. Nowadays, it is important both for people and businesses to stay in touch with one other as Generation Z – born between 1995 and 2012 (approximately) – is smartphones natives. Therefore, personalization and interactivity are enticing to Generation Z. In fact, Generation Z is easily influenced by peers which means that companies must have a robust social media presence. Moreover, people from this generation are part of the marketing process as they interact with the brand and influence each other. Thus, brands have to provide plenty of opportunities to engage people by asking to tag their friends, write reviews, etc. (Forbes, 2018)

IG is an efficient branding tool for brands if well-used. Indeed, IG offers many different features for companies to support their branding strategy. IG, as a branding tool, deliver many benefits for both consumers and brands as it allows a relationship between both parties.

Consumers follow their favorite brands to get closer to them and share their experiences they had with the product/service of the brand. Consumer engagement plays a large part in customers' loyalty to a brand. Comments under a post is a driver to brand image as it could influence other followers, their friends and family to enhance and spread the brand.

However, companies have to take into consideration that they have to know their followers to deliver them content they like. The author relied on observation and comparison between the 3 most followed ski resorts. Val Thorens could use more hashtags to obtain as much visibility as its 2 competitors. Moreover, the content posted on Val Thorens IG profile is not as professional as the 2 others ski resorts. This could be something that Val Thorens could improve by using drone for example, to create more appealing and inspiring photos.

Based on the observation, it appears that loyal visitors are more likely to interact with the brand either to thank the destination for sharing pictures or to express their excitement about their future visits. In order to preserve these valuable interactions, Val Thorens puts a lot of effort on the community management as the team answers to most of the comments. There are real conversations between Val Thorens and its followers, each of them is humanized and personalized so that people feel that they are special and at home when being in Val Thorens. This shows Val Thorens' branding strategy, "Live United" as it is displayed on their website. Much of the content on their IG is coherent towards their branding strategy, their values and promises to their customers. To promote its destination, Val Thorens shares photos and videos supporting its branding strategy "the best of skiing in the best atmosphere": good snow conditions, all the events going on and the wide range of activities offered.

However, due to the limited time and the scope of this research, the author carried out passive observations. This may lead to threats regarding reliability and validity because it can cause misinterpretation/bias as the observer has her own subjective view. (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 363)

For that reason, if further researches could be conducted, it would be a relevant idea to carry out a larger study. It would be really helpful and interesting to collect data with a quantitative method to have a better understanding of the followers' point of view and the impact of social media marketing on them.

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1) Pour vous, quelle est votre promesse ? A quoi les gens doivent s'attendre lorsqu'ils viennent à Val Thorens ? Quelle est votre stratégie de marque et ce qui vous démarque ?

2) Utilisez-vous Instagram pour développer votre stratégie de marque ?

3) Quelle est l'image que vous souhaitez donner par le biais d'Instagram ?

4) Quels sont vos buts concernant Instagram ? (gagner plus de visibilité, attirer de nouveaux visiteurs, développer du contenu généré par les utilisateurs, …)

5) Comment essayez-vous d'obtenir plus d'engagement avec vos followers ?

6) Suivez-vous vos performances IG ? Si oui, quels outils utilisez-vous ? (Instagram Insights, Hootsuite, Union metrics, Iconosquare…)

7) Quel est le meilleur moment de la journée pour poster pour vous ?

8) D'où viennent majoritairement vos followers ? (Pays) Y a-t-il un lien avec les touristes ?

9) Comment utilisez-vous IG pour promouvoir la destination and attirer de nouveaux visiteurs ?

10) Les vacances scolaires françaises engendrent-elles plus de visites/interactions sur votre compte ?