

Hospitality Brands Employing Brand Identity through Instagram:

Understanding Brand Identity

through CitizenM's One-of-a-kind Branding on Instagram

Student Name: Aarushi Roy Chowdhury
Student Number: 560993

Supervisor: Dr. Debora Ramos Antunes da Silva

Master Media Studies - Media & Business
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

Master's Thesis Draft
June 2025

Word Count: 19024

Hospitality Brands Employing Brand Identity through Instagram:

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, branding has always been used as differentiator by companies who strategically position their products or services by associating unique attributes to them. This enables brands to concur desired associations that they intend to the consumers when they interact with them. Hospitality is emerging as one of the leaders within the service sector and are recognizing the significance of having a distinct identity that resonates with their immediate and long-term goals. Today, social media purveys brands with tools that expand the extent of relationships between a brand and a consumer, from simply a consumer-service communication dynamic towards drawing emotional associations between guests and the hotel. On that note, this study seeks to observe how brand identity is employed on Instagram in a heavily saturated market such as the hospitality sector, by centring the study on CitizenM. CitizenM positions itself as a disrupter in the hospitality sector, which is saturated with traditional hotels, and sets forth a persona that is young, bold and one-of-a-kind. Using Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism as the grounding framework, the study implements thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns to learn more about the research topic, conducted over two distinct datasets- expert interviews, conducted with employees within the Brand Team at the company, and 150 Instagram reels, sourced from the official Instagram page of CitizenM. The study primarily employed three components from Kapferer's prism: 'personality', 'culture', 'self-image'- to formulate guiding sub-questions to answer the main research question while embedding the remaining three components within the conceptualization of the categories of sub-questions themselves. Subsequently, five Major themes appeared upon conducting thematic analysis, namely: 'Brand Communication Strategy', 'Brand Personality', 'Culture and Values rooted in identity', 'Instagram Affordances for brand communications', and 'Intended Consumer Mindset'. Furthermore, the research contributes to scientific research within the fields of branding, brand identity, social media communication, and hospitality. Simultaneously, providing significant observations pertinent for hospitality brands seeking to establish authentic and experiential identities by leveraging the affordances of Instagram.

KEYWORDS: *Brand Identity, Instagram, Hospitality, Brand Communication, Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism*

Word count: 19,024

Employing Brand Identity within the Hospitality sector through Instagram:

PREFACE

Firstly, I would like to extend my gratitude towards my Thesis Supervisor for her immense patience and guidance throughout this endeavour. I am equally grateful to my parents for supporting me through my education, and for their love and unconditional support that motivates to strive for my goals every day. Last but not least, I would like to thank me for believing in me.

Table of Contents

Abstract and keywords

[Preface]

1. Introduction.....	6
2.1. Research Questions.....	8
2.1. Scientific and Social Relevance.....	8
2. Theoretical Framework.....	10
2.1. Brand Identity within the hospitality sector.....	10
2.3.1. Brand and Brand Identity.....	10
2.3.2. Rise of Hospitality and Brand Identity.....	11
2.2. The Role of Social Media in Shaping Brand Identity.....	13
2.3.1. Social Media Affordances and Brand Communication.....	13
2.3.2. Instagram: Building Brand Identity.....	14
2.3. Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism.....	15
3. Methodology.....	18
3.1. Research design.....	18
3.2. Sampling and Data Collection.....	19
3.3. Sensitizing Concepts.....	20
3.3.1 Interview Guide.....	22
3.5. Data Analysis.....	26
3.6. Credibility and Ethical Considerations.....	27
4. Results.....	29
4.1. Brand Communication Strategy.....	30
4.1.1. Brand Associations through messaging.....	30
4.1.2. Strategic Positioning.....	33
4.1.3. Content Strategy.....	35
4.1.4. Consumer-centric communication.....	37
4.2 Brand Personality.....	39
4.2.1. Bold and disruptive Identity.....	39
4.2.2. Relatable Millennial Core.....	40
4.2.3. Approachable persona.....	42
4.2.4. Nature of Worldliness.....	44
4.3 Culture & Values rooted in Identity.....	44
4.3.1. Global vs Local Culture.....	46
4.3.2. Artistic and Aesthetic Sensibilities.....	48
4.3.3. Internalised Values and CitizenM Spirit.....	49
4.4 Instagram Affordances for brand communications.....	52
4.4.1. Platform Functionalities as Lifestyle Tool.....	52
4.4.2. Visual Storytelling.....	53
4.5 Intended Consumer Mindset for relatability.....	54
4.5.1. Aspirational Mindset.....	55
4.5.2. Distinct Consumer Identity.....	56
4.5.3. Emotional Associations and needs.....	59
4.5.4. Digitally savvy.....	61

5. Conclusion.....	62
5.1. <i>Summary of Findings</i>	62
5.2. <i>Theoretical Implications</i>	65
5.3. <i>Limitations and Suggestions for future research</i>	66
References.....	68
Appendix A [Coding Tree and Coding Frame].....	75
Appendix B [Interview Guide, Overview of Interviewees].....	81
Appendix C [Consent form: Sample].....	85
Appendix D [AI Declaration].....	88

1. Introduction

Branding stemmed from the fundamental desire of humans to become either a valuable addition to an existing community of people driven by set ideologies or emerge with a distinct persona that stands out from the crowd (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p.3). From a traditional perspective, branding has been used as a point of differentiation within the market where companies strategically position their products or services by associating explicit characteristics with the brand, and curating a unique and prolonged relationship with their intended consumers (Baker, 1996; Cooke, 1996, as cited in Simmons, 2007, p.3). These abilities have enabled brands to stimulate desired associations within the consumers' minds while engaging with the products, making the interactions relatable, memorable, and efficient in consumer decision-making processes, which has been streamlined with the advent of novel technologies such as the internet (Simmons, 2007, p.4). Brands utilizing digital spaces and the internet have relatively shaped how audiences familiarize themselves with the brand, giving them autonomy on perception of brand communication online and driving brand strategies through access to their behavioural preferences online; on the other hand, facilitating brands to educate themselves on relevant social channels that align with their long-term strategies, as well as curating a consistent user-experience by replicating the intended brand image online (Rowley, 2004, p.132-136).

Aaker (1992, as cited in Silveira et al., 2013, p.29) characterized brand identity with two essential traits: first, a collection of pre-determined associations to the brand that are constructed by the company themselves and are meant to perpetuate throughout the brand's lifespan; and second, a mechanism that steers the brand in the direction of its current and long-term goals as a company. As addressed by Martinez (2011, as cited in Veríssimo et al., 2015, p.26), social media has proven to be instrumental in drawing a sentimental affiliation between brands and consumers in the hospitality industry, where the internet is referred to as a testimonial of an anticipated experience of a brand. Based on this, the research examines the hotel industry to navigate how brand identity is employed on key social media channels, exclusively Instagram which has been selected due to its significance as a visual platform with interactive features that fosters connectivity not only amongst followers themselves but also with brands, with access to a wide demographic of users (Laestadius, 2016a, n.p.). Following this idea, this research aims to investigate the construction of brand identities on social media and strategies employed to communicate the intended narrative to the targeted audience through the main research question: *How does CitizenM employ brand identity on Instagram?*

Previous research within the tourism and hospitality industry suggests that the experience marketed to consumers is not simply limited to physical encounters or interactions with the brand,

but also involves a complete cognitive journey that includes multifaceted layers of engagement that influence the consumer journey (Mossberg, 2007 as cited in Veríssimo et al., 2015, p.23). In a highly competitive market such as the hospitality sector, where each hotel is looking for a window to position itself as a product designed to cater to the specific needs of consumers, a strong brand constitutes high-end solutions to consumer needs through an eminent product range, and crafting a brand image that resembles with the consumers and encourages them to be loyal long-term (Demirçiftçi & Kızılırmak, 2016, n.p.). By virtue of social networking channels today, hotels are able to establish with potential consumers despite geographic limitations at half the price compared to conventional communication tools, as well as leverage platform affordances to generate brand awareness and brand associations that translate through consumer retention and engagement (Su et al., 2015; Hoffman and Fodor, 2010, as cited in Garrido-Moreno et al., 2018, p.97). Amongst the wide variety of social networking tools, this research opted to focus on Instagram as a tool for employing brand identity strategies by hotels. This is because, beyond Instagram's popularity due to richness in visual affordances, brands choose to create digital personas on this social media tool due to its highly promotional nature as well as the possibility to build brand communities including that build and reinforce relationships with consumers by communicating brand narratives that consumers resonate or associate with (Ramle, 2019, p.4-5). Additionally, the study also incorporated observations gathered from 3 expert interviews of employees working within Brand and Social media at CitizenM in order to understand the complexities of brand identity and how the organization communicates them through their content on Instagram.

This study will be conducted on CitizenM, a chain of boutique hotels that has received recognition for their ability to identify and tame conventional obstructions to provide efficient services while ensuring customized experiences to their clients (Lillis, 2014 p.167). Buhagiar et al., (2023, p.208) addressed that the emergence of boutique hotels dates back to the 1980's, as a strategic standardization initiative made by luxury accommodation industry with well-defined distinguishing characteristics such as: discreet design philosophy, service environments and an unconventional identity that stands out compared to traditional hotels. Furthermore, the concept of boutique hotels also dwells on exhibiting an environment that resonates with 'home', which is noticeable through the integration of local or cultural elements along with high-end technology (Loureiro et al., 2019, p.46). The study will investigate how the official Instagram page of CitizenM reflects these attributes, observing the interplay of components such as the standardized design, art and bold personality which the brand advocates for, across their Instagram profile. This research therefore aims to explore how CitizenM communicates its brand identity through Instagram.

1.1 Research Questions:

Hence, as addressed before, the main research question guiding this research is: *How does CitizenM employ brand identity on Instagram?* The main research question is further guided by additional sub-questions that have been derived from Kapferer's brand identity prism, which will form the basis of theoretical explorations for this research:

1. *How does personality play a role in brand identity?*
2. *How does culture play a role in brand identity?*
3. *How does self-image play a role in brand identity?*

As briefly addressed before, the sub-questions were derived from Kapferer's brand identity prism, which lays an emphasis on six essential elements that constitute a brand's identity, namely: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image (Anderson, 2010). However due to the limited time-frame and word count constraints this study primary focuses on three components: personality, culture and self-image. The remaining three elements- physique, relationship and reflection- were integrated with the sub-questions as well as within the interview guide, and will be addressed later in the study.

The first sub-question aims to interpret cognitive attributes or associations that characterize a brand, such as addressing human-like features that a brand embodies and mimics (Kapferer, 2008, p.184). This includes elements such as humour, wit, and a brand's tone.

The second sub-question aims to interpret the brand's core principles not only from an aspirational or organizational perspective, but also as a differentiator amongst its fellow hotels (Mahdi et al., 2015, p.115). This includes elements such as inclusivity, diversity, art, and lifestyle.

The final sub-question aims to investigate how consumers see themselves when associating or interacting with the brand, and how this knowledge is utilized by CitizenM to scrutinize itself and their offerings (Mahdi et al., 2015, p.115).

This study will be conducted using qualitative methodology due to its compatibility with observing underlying meanings, notions and beliefs within texts as well as images (Brennen, 2021, p.14). Furthermore, thematic analysis will be implemented to observe, inspect and investigate recurring themes within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). In this regard, 3 expert interviews conducted with professionals working in the Brand and Social media team at CitizenM, as well as 150 Instagram reels were taken into observation.

1.2 Scientific and Social Relevance:

As Simmons (2007, n.p.) suggests that understanding the psychology of consumers during engagement and decision-making processes, fostering and maintaining relationships with them is key for the successful brands. Antwi and Adjei Oppong, (2021, p.9) discuss the increased use of social media platforms by corporates to advertise their offerings through strategic communication directed towards specified audiences, further examining existing research on client perception and cognizance. Branding in a digital spectrum enables brands to not simply perpetuate themselves and their consumers, but also equip the consumers themselves to freely discuss their motivations, experience, and views regarding brands (Hewett et al. 2016; as cited in Ranfagni & Rosati, 2023, p.215). Within the hospitality and tourism sector, varied studies in maintaining the image of the brand on one hand, and impact of positive or negative reviews has been examined previously. However, there is a gap in studies which explore how hospitality companies, specifically hotels integrate branding strategies to set forth their identities online. Most of the research touches upon the significance of recognizing a brand's identity in order to create avenues of differentiation amongst hotels (Mohammed et al., 2016; da Silveira et al., 2013 as cited in Fan et al., 2022, p.1273). However, not much research has been conducted beyond the role the employees in cocreating a hotel's brand identity on one hand, and the increased use of Instagram in digital marketing studies where hoteliers use this knowledge to leverage consumer engagement (Silva et al., 2024, p.392; Chung & Byrom, 2020, p.77). Limited research has been conducted to analyse how to integrate and consistently communicate a brand's identity through social networking platforms, such as Instagram (Syahputri et al., 2024, n.p.; Pitanatri et al., 2024, n.p.). And this is exactly the avenue this research aims to investigate.

This research is socially relevant as well, and the knowledge gained from this research can be applied in the tourism and hospitality sectors in particular. With a profound emphasis on building quality products in the hospitality sector, a strong brand identity has played a transformative role for companies to make a mark in the industry; several studies have proven the correlation between building a strong brand and generating a profitable model for hotels (Aaker et al. 2000; Berry, 2000; Gardini, 2015 p 248). Furthermore, hospitality is one of the leaders within the service sector (Kunwar, 2017, p. 59) and research within this field will provide brands within the industry at large to understand the nature of tangible and intangible associations consumers make with brands, and leverage them. This study will provide opportunities to explore an adept understanding of lifestyle brands such as CitizenM in fostering a global culture through storytelling through Instagram.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section lays the framework of key concepts and theories that will help answer the research question: *How does CitizenM employ brand identity on Instagram?* First, the relevance of brand identity, particularly in the hospitality sector, will be addressed. This section will also discuss the relevance of social media, particularly Instagram as a tool that aids how they communicate their brand identity on the platform. Secondly, the brand identity Prism by Kapferer will be broken down and discussed within the context of social media. Lastly, the final section will provide an overview of CitizenM's brand identity on Instagram to create a deeper understanding of their existing brand identity strategies with reference to Kapferer's prism.

2.1 Brand Identity within the hospitality sector

2.1.1 Brand and Brand Identity

In order to answer the main research question that seeks to understand how CitizenM builds its brand identity on social media, it is essential to understand what brand identity is, starting with the true essence of a brand. Brands are created after extensive scrutiny of demand within demographics of interest and analysing the distinctness of the product meant to fulfil the identified need in the market (Maurya & Mishra, 2012, p.1). Ghodeswar (2008, N.P.) confers that a brand encompasses several defining elements such as a logo, a colour palette, as well as its packaging that establish a unique positioning for the brand against its competitors; this aids brands to curate an identity which consumers can recall with ease. Brands are impalpable, but they become a crucial asset for companies as consumers develop a connection with them, not simply because of the products, but based on claimed assurances, uniformity and the ability to fulfil expectations (Davis, 2000, p.1). Aaker (2012) addresses that the ability to recall a brand indicates a probability of a former interaction between the brand and the consumer, giving them a competitive advantage in decision-making scenarios where the consumer is exposed to two choices- a familiar brand and a novel brand.

Kuhn et al., (2008, p. 41,42) build on Keller's (1993) perception of brand equity, which materializes once consumers have developed positive correlations with the brand; to achieve this, brands need to construct an identity that meticulously positions products specific to the brand in correlation with an established need. A consumer tends to lean more towards brands that demonstrate personality traits similar to themselves; therefore, brands often characterise themselves with human-like features that make them unique and authentic (Aaker, 1997). Lassar et al., (1995, as cited in Zhang, 2015, p.3) endorses key factors that brands can take into account to gain the trust of their consumers- ensuring functionality, emotional associations with the brand and what

it communicates, establishing reliability amongst the brand and the consumers, and the social identity that the consumers affiliate with on buying products from this brand. While it is essential for brands to take into account how a brand is perceived, the image of a brand does not fully define the identity as well (Chung & Byrom, 2020).

The concept of brand identity branches out of how a company perceives its own attributes and strategically communicates the same to its target audience (Nandan, 2004, p. 265). Brand identity is a cluster of alliances that are conceptualised and maintained by the brand that abides by cardinal standards such as: (a) a durable communication strategy that does not simply aim to inform regarding the brand but foster a connection with the clientele, (b) adaptable when there is a need of modifications, and (c) the continued ability to retain the need of the product pertaining to the brand (Aaker, 2003; Grundey, 2002, as cited in Janonis et al., 2007, p.70). However, in contrast to a brand, which is intangible, the constituents of brand identity can be experienced through our senses (Wheeler, 2017). Jain (2017, p. 2) discusses brand identity as a classification of elements that convey the morals, goals and personality of a brand; this is achieved when brands establish components unique to them such as logos, use of icons or symbols that visually distinguishes the brand from others, as well as taglines that represent the brand. Furthermore, according to Nandan (2004, p. 266) brand identity could also be a byproduct of conceptual values that are derived from the products that the brand aims to sell to the consumer, the success of which mainly revolves around 3 concepts- first that serves needs on the surface level, emblematic needs that aims to bring the consumer closer to their desired vision of themselves, and finally, triggering an intrinsic desire of consumption that brands gratify through a curated experience.

2.1.2 Rise of Hospitality Industry and Brand Identity

Hospitality has emerged amongst the leading benefactors in the service industry, where the narrative is no longer limited to a service which simply accommodates guests with a place to stay, but also covers emotional associations between guests, the hotel and the employees representing them (Ottenbacher et al., 2009 as cited in Kunwar, 2017, p. 59). Harvey (2007, p.190, 192) observed the systematic rise of travel and tourism since 2006 with a growing generation of aspiring travellers, simultaneously reinforcing the need for hotels to create and uphold a strong identity that resonates with their guests. Djordjevic and Jankovic (2015) discuss the impact of novel technologies on the hotel industry, and how guests interact with them, further influencing the branding of hotels and what it translates to the consumers. Furthermore, Chung and Byrom's (2020, p. 77) take on branding involves the exchange of information and values across the organization and highlights a pre-existing gap in studying the co-creation of internal branding by the employees of the company as well.

Therefore as King (2017, p.115) rightfully addresses, having a distinct brand and identity is no longer a tool to gain a competitive edge alone, but also facilitates conclusions regarding functionalities of the brands and how the products are marketed.

The concept of brand identity constitutes several defining elements that make brands distinct. The hospitality sector views brand identity as multifaceted, comprising palpable as well as impalpable components that work hand-in-hand, and keep evolving based on propositions made by stakeholders (Mohammed et al., 2016; da Silveira et al., 2013 as cited in Fan et al., 2022, p.1273). Chung and Byrom (2020, p. 75) address the constituents of brand identity, which exhibit the long-term goals of the company, as well as what it stands for through three dimensions: tactical, sensory, and managerial identity. Developing a blueprint is among the initial steps to create an identity for a brand, where the company decides on collective short-term and long-term goals, defines its target audience, and agrees on specified cultural principles (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012; Kapferer, 2012; Suvatjits et al, 2012; Tourky et al., 2020 as cited in Chung and Byrom, 2020, p.75). Next, the sensory elements are set up which include five essential elements that mimic our sensory experiences- taste, hearing, touch, sight, and smell- which aid consumers in the recollection of experiences in the future (Elder and Krishna, 2012; as cited in Fong et al., 2022, p.2917). The one that resonates with consumers the most amongst all sensory elements is visual identity, comprising graphic elements such as logos, icons or taglines exclusive to the brand as a defining characteristic (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012, p. 1051). This is particularly relevant in the case of hotels where brand identity is illustrated through discernible aspects such as commodities or physical features (Kapferer, 2004; as cited in Fan et al., 2022, p.1274). Finally, a fundamental facet within brands is organizational identity, which constitutes self-reflection to dive deeper and dwell on what the brand stands for and how it defines itself; this also comprises the possibility to be modified by the evolving expectations of internal stakeholders (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2010; Schultz, 2016 as cited in Ponting, 2019, p.8).

While brand identity itself plays a role in generating awareness around a brand, it also aids firms within the hotel sector, to leverage the unique value that a brand upholds to their consumers, in a highly saturated market (Demirçiftçi et al., 2016, p.51). Studies indicate that hotels have been differentiated from their competitors majorly through an economic perspective, not taking into consideration any figurative dissimilarities that accelerates one's awareness over the others in the market (O'Neill et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2015; Li et al., 2014 as cited in Su and Reynolds, 2019, p.1802). In order to emerge as a successful brand with a reminiscent identity, it is essential for brands to create avenues of differentiation by investing in generating brand equity, by actively working towards building a durable cognizance and persona (Cai & Hobson, 2004, p. 2).

To dive further into the adaptation of brand identity and integration of its elements within the hotel sector, CitizenM has been taken as case study for this research. CitizenM advocates itself as a dissident of the traditional hotel models, positioning the concept of 'affordable luxury' at the forefront of their identity, to bridge aspiring youthful travellers with comfort and luxury even when far from home (Stombelli, 2020 p.529). Affordable luxury within this context refers to brands that associate two distinct needs of the consumer: the need for an economical range to buy the products on one hand, and access to premium quality and experience on the other hand- which gives brands access to a pool of clientele which is relatively bigger than high-end market alone (Lo & Yeung, 2019, p. 248). CitizenM presents itself as a bold, expressive brand which aims to provide products and services that cater to the needs of their primary target audience- the mobile travellers (CitizenM, 2025). With their clear stance in comparison to traditional hotels, CitizenM fits into the boutique hotels category which aims to market an experience through limited rooms, mimicking the essence of a personal and close-to-home space, and a substantial emphasis on interior design as a distinguishing feature (Jones et al., 2013 p.716-717). Therefore, this research aims to draw conclusions regarding how hospitality companies such as CitizenM employ branding strategies to create a strong brand identity. In the next section of the framework, the research will navigate the role of social media in establishing identities for hospitality brands such as CitizenM, and how these affordances can be leveraged to communicate a brand's identity.

2.2 The Role of Social Media in Shaping Brand Identity

2.2.1 Social Media Affordances and Brand Communication

Social media creates opportunities for brands to market themselves in ways that were unattainable through traditional marketing strategies. According to data gathered by Monica and Balaş (2014, n.p.), social media yields possibilities to collect information about their audience and make more linear marketing strategies that target them, as well as generate awareness, build integrity, establish a compelling online identity that speaks to their clientele, while also generating revenue. The inception of 'affordances' within the social media spectrum has paved the way for interactions between brands and consumers, without essentially influencing the course of behaviours (Ronzhyn et al., 2022, p.3175). However, it is imperative to note that affordances are not indicative of the elements of the technology itself, but the concept itself explains the potential outcomes the social media tool was aiming to generate. To further this point of view, Gaver (1991, n.p.) addresses that affordances are meant to instigate social interchange and not simply individual engagement. Treem and Leonardi (2013, p.10-30) identifies four instances that build up to certain affordances upon engagement with social media: (a) Visibility: making any form of interaction, inclinations or opinions

detectable and available for companies, which can then be utilized to streamline their marketing; (b) Persistence: the perpetual nature of the content posted on social media that remains consistent with what was originally posted, unlike video conferencing tools where the interaction exists only as long as the call; (c) Editability: constitutes the ability to conceptualise, edit and improving the edit until the user is ready to publish it so that it ca be viewed at large; and (d) Associations: constitutes the nature of connection that people have with each other on social media platforms on one hand, and with a source of knowledge such as a news post or vlog online on the other hand.

In a corporate dynamic, companies can leverage these affordances to make their brands more accessible and visible to their target audiences as well as an extended audience by utilising the data online (Sedalo et al., 2021, p.4). Companies put a significant amount of labour in navigating strategies to increase brand awareness, thereby establishing an identity prominent enough to be instantly recognizable and relatable with their target audiences; and this can be leveraged by strategies that combine brand communication and visibility (Khaled, 2010, p.84). Brands exercise communication on social media platforms by using their affordances to transmit brand-related messaging through different content formats, simultaneously allowing consumers to take part in the ongoing discussions by commenting or sharing, for instance (Voorveld, 2019, p.15). Social media can be useful to brands as an online database for information regarding consumer preferences and attributes, which can further be utilized to conceptualize promotional initiatives to generate awareness and support brand-building (Capitello et al., 2014, p.131). This aligns closely with the persistence and association affordances that enable brands to foster relationships with their clientele online, as well as, access information based on their social media profiles and engagement Treem and Leonardi (2013, p. 10-30). However, besides affordances, there are additional considerations to be made. A study conducted by Duffy et al. (2017, p.2) suggests that while there is a rise in adaptation of social networking sites in curating a unique brand, the nature of platforms and the 'imagined affordances' associated with them also determine how brands envision identity. Therefore, this study emphasizes Instagram to understand how brands build an identity online, and this will be further discussed in the following section.

2.2.2 Instagram: Building Brand Identity

Instagram is an emerging social media platform that has gained admiration for unique visual and engagement features where users can not only upload, share, and fine-tune content with inbuilt editing features, but can also interact with one another (Yang, 2021, p.16). While serving as a networking tool where users can document significant moments in their life through systematic posts, the affordances of the platform are well-suited for organizations that are interested in using

the data for research or marketing purposes as what is posted online stays incessant (Laestadius, 2016b). Brand identity is established by setting forth an ardent approach that emits brand characteristics, narrative as well as differentiators amongst competitors through visual and communication components including attributes such as logos and a distinctive communication pattern which resonates the persona of the brand; subsequently, brands are required to be conscious of their engagement and communication patterns on Instagram to ensure consistency via coherent concepts, clarity on the target audience and uniform use of brand features across all content (Jurisova, 2020, p.120-121).

Longo and Saxena (2020, p.3-6) indicate that brands often become a gateway for consumers to envision the usual or an ideal version of themselves, creating avenues of reflection on the extent to which their brand's identity translates to their consumers. The findings of the study further suggest that the intended identity was observed as an essential element when it comes to identity displayed on Instagram, even in comparison to their personal identity. Instagram has also been closely associated with aesthetics as a central tool that not only reflects sentiments but also portrays an environment and sets forth a frame of mind with a storyline with each piece of content (Manovich, 2019, p.8).

2.3 Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism:

The idea of brand identity was conceptualized by Kapferer in 1986, emphasizing that any form of communication or portrayal of a brand should be reflective of a brand's unique identity that prudently differentiates them from other brands in the playing field (Mahdi et al., 2015, p.1). Kapferer describes six constituents in what is known as the 'brand identity prism' which transpires through representative elements between the brand and the consumer (Anderson, 2010, n.p.). This is further categorized under exterior features- physical attributes, relationship and reflection- and on the other hand, psychological features- personality, culture and self-image.:

a. Physique:

This falls within the tangible features category. Adler (2022, 66) emphasizes that the physical features become the cornerstone of a brand and its branding strategy. This involves the prominent characteristics of a brand that are readily recognizable when vis-à-vis with the brand or related conversations (Mahdi et al., 2015, p. 114). However, Kapferer (2008, p.185) recognizes that the physical representation of the brand, that reflects the value of a brand, is not sufficient by itself.

b. Personality:

This falls within one of the psychological elements that constitute the brand. Kapferer (2008, p.184) sketches the personality of a brand as something that can replicate human-like characteristics through brand communication or metaphorical representations of what the brand could look like if humanised. Aaker (1997, p.348) differentiates personality attributes in humans, which are influenced by and encompass physical features, faith, perspectives as well as features specific to geographic locations. Contrastingly, brands shape their personality attributes based on interactions with specific ranges of audiences they wish to connect with.

c. Culture:

This falls within the psychological elements of a brand. In the words of (Mahdi et al., 2015, p.115), the culture of a brand radiates the fundamental principles that is not only an aspiration for the brand, but also play a central role in defining what it embodies in a playing field against its competitors. Additionally, the essence of brand culture extends from an organization to its products as well, particularly because they harmonize the aspirational values of the brand through communication, which mediates to consumers via the products that (Kapferer 2008, p.186).

d. Relationship:

This falls amongst the features of a brand that can be materialized into a tangible element. The component on 'relationships' represents the supposition of the end user from a brand that they already have a relationship with, and these inferences go beyond the physical attributes of a brand, such as the products (Adler, 2022, p.67). To ensure longevity and loyalty, brands continuously engage in preserving their connection with their audiences (Mahdi et al., 2015, p.115).

e. Reflection:

This component, yet again, falls amongst the features of a brand that can be materialized into a tangible element. Kapferer (2008, p.186) defines the concept of reflection in correlation to how brands can step into the shoes of a consumer, and envision how they experience the brand through their expressions while using the products. This is an essential element for brands that give importance to the notion that potential buyers engage with, and thereby purchase products of brands, not to buy the identity that is being sold to them, but the one that fits with their own.

f. Self-image:

Finally, this component fits within the psychological attributes of a brand. In comparison to the previous component concerning the consumer's vision of themselves while interacting with brands, the concept of self-image concerns how consumers engaging with brands feel when exposed to the brands or products (Mahdi et al., 2015, p.115). This is indicative of the nature of links that individuals instigate with themselves when associating with brands (Kapferer, 2008, p.186).

3. Methodology

This chapter incorporates qualitative research methodology to dive deeper into the research question: *How does CitizenM employ brand identity on Instagram?*. Two data sets deemed suitable for this research were selected using purposive sampling and setting inclusion and exclusion criteria for selection: 150 Instagram posts and 3 expert interviews. The Instagram posts were sourced from the official CitizenM account on Instagram, while the expert interviews were conducted with the head of Brand Design, Marketing Coordinator, and Social Media Strategist. Furthermore, this chapter provides an overview of the research design, the sampling method, sensitizing concepts, data analysis, and the ethical considerations employed.

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative method was considered suitable for this research as it involves an in-depth analysis of underlying meanings, discourses, notions, and beliefs within texts and images (Brennen, 2021, p.14). Compared to quantitative methods, qualitative methods set forth the possibility to draw conclusions based on detailed scrutiny of data, observing recurring patterns, and developing categories by classifying similar themes based on concepts (Huston & Rowan, 1998, p.2456). Furthermore, conspicuous features embedded across several categories of information in the course of data collection and analysis are primarily observed by the researcher and examined through inferences (Kamal, 2019, p.1387). Therefore, qualitative methodology is deemed suitable for this study since it aims to understand how brands employ brand identity strategies through their Instagram page through two data sets- in-depth interviews and analysing Instagram reels on the official Instagram account for CitizenM.

In-depth interviews are amongst the most common methods of analysis in qualitative research which are availed in either formats- structured or semi-structured (Huston & Rowan, 1998, p.2455). Legard et al. (2003) discusses in-depth interviews in light of day-to-day conversations, which reflect understandings regarding distinct societal topics and flow organically if there is a well-established rapport between the amongst the conversers. In recent times, online interviews have become a popular choice amongst researchers as they patently resemble the features of in-person interviews through two distinct forms: (a) synchronous interviews, which replicates the properties of an in-person interview in a digital space, and (b) asynchronous interviews, which are considered in cases where the interviewee resides in a location different from the researcher and therefore, needs to be conducted through technological facilities such as emails (James & Busher, 2012p.179). For this research synchronous interviews were chosen in an online setting at a time suitable for the experts within the field of branding and communication as well as the researcher. Conducting in-depth

interviews made it feasible to incorporate real-time knowledge within the field of brand identity from an organisational perspective as well as identify how the identity is constructed and communicated on Instagram.

In addition to interviews, reels on Instagram were also selected and analysed to understand how brand identity is constructed and communicated online, as well as, to draw links with emerging themes within the interviews. Thematic analysis was implemented to observe, inspect, and review emerging patterns within the dataset, as well as identify several relevant underlying themes that can be useful for the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). This is a suitable mode of analysis since it enables the researcher to recognize the number of times each theme emerges and establish potential affiliations amongst recurring themes, creating numerous possibilities for conclusions (Alhojailan, 2012, p.10). Emerging themes within a dataset unveil significant connections that emerge within the dataset and lead to a reflection or information regarding the main research question, and eventually, are categorized amongst themes similar to each other (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). These attributes provide the feasibility to not only identify recurring themes within each of the datasets- interviews and Instagram reels- but also create the opportunity to observe, analyse, and report them in response to the research question across the datasets. An emic positionality was maintained to avoid any potential bias from the researcher's personal belief systems, thereby taking into account members of a specific socio-cultural scenario to understand how they are interpreted by its members (Azungah, 2018, p.386).

3.2 Sampling and data collection:

The aim of this research is to understand how CitizenM employs brand identity strategies on Instagram, in an attempt to examine how brands within the hospitality sector communicate their brand identity on their social media channels. The purposive sampling method was deemed suitable for this research due to its compatibility with research that requires participants who are expected to provide responses or knowledge that are beneficial for the study (Kelly, 2010, as cited in Campbell et al., 2020, p.654). As deliberated by Ahmad and Wilkins (2024a, p.3), this study seeks to intentionally choose context, information, and respondents who embody particular characteristics and will therefore be suitable to lead the research in the aimed direction through purposive sampling.

As the research incorporates the analysis of two distinct datasets- interviews and Instagram reels, to gain diversity in knowledge regarding the employability of brand identity, an inclusion and exclusion criterion was developed for both scenarios. Firstly, a company within the hospitality sector- CitizenM- was selected as a case study. In the case of interviews, the inclusion criteria were applied by ensuring that employees within the organization who worked closely with the brand team or

social media were approached with an interview request. This would provide the research with meticulous knowledge regarding the pillars of brand identity and how it was envisioned by the company. The employees working within specific locations in the hotels and not in general the brand were excluded as it was assumed that their expertise aligned more with operations rather than branding within the hotels. Inclusion and exclusion criteria was also developed for Instagram reels which were included within the sample. In this case, the inclusion and exclusion criteria included several factors. First, it was ensured that only reels from the official Instagram account of CitizenM were sourced for this research- @citizenm. Secondly, to bring diversity, reels that were distinct from each other in terms of content were considered as a part of the dataset, while ones that were reposted or were repetitive in nature were disregarded. Thirdly, only reels that were created by CitizenM were considered and any sponsored or third-party reels were disregarded .

The data collection process for both the interviews and Instagram reels were initiated in the month of April. For interviews, three employees who currently work within CitizenM within the brand team were approached via email and requested for an approximately 45 minute interview (See Appendix B). The employees were currently working within CitizenM as Brand Design Manager, Marketing coordinator and Social media strategist. After a series of exchanges over emails three dates were agreed upon for online interviews over google meet with the interviewees, and lasted approximately between 45 minutes to 1 hour 15 minutes each. For the interviews, an interview guide was formulated based on Kapferer's brand identity prism and key theories guiding the research. The participants were verbally informed of their rights before continuing with the interview and consent forms with the same information were read and signed by the participants in advance. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using a transcription tool by the researcher, which was then used for analysis.

The sampling also included 150 Instagram reels from the official Instagram profile of CitizenM. The reels were accessed through the personal Instagram profile of the researcher in April and were initially saved in an archived folder on Instagram. While selecting the reels the inclusion and exclusion criteria were taken into account by the researcher. Following this, the screen videos were filmed and stored on the researcher's laptop in order to conduct the analysis.

3.3. Sensitizing Concepts

To reiterate, the study employed thematic analysis to identify significant information about the main research question: '*How does CitizenM employ brand identity on Instagram?*' and observe recurring patterns that stipulate certain underlying meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). The researcher assumed an emic positionality to draw subjective observations from the dataset and

decipher how the participants elucidate socio-cultural contexts within their responses, rather than only relying on academic journals (Azungah, 2018, p.386). An inductive method was incorporated for this analysis, enabling the researcher to scrutinize the study solely based on the data gathered by participants or what the reels entail, by investigating the data itself to obtain theories relevant to the research question. Moreover, three supporting sub-questions were formulated on the basis of Kapferer's prism to guide the research:

1. *How does personality play a role in brand identity?*
2. *How does culture play a role in brand identity?*
3. *How does self-image play a role in brand identity?*

It is imperative to note that due to a limited timeframe as well as word-count this research primarily focused on the above mentioned components sourced from Kapferer's brand identity prism (Anderson, 2010, n.p.). The remaining three components: physique, relationship and reflection were integrated within the interview guide and will be later addressed within this section.

To introduce the first concept, brand identity, and how they are interpreted in hospitality companies was identified within the research. This was touched upon by sub-concepts such as core brand elements, emotional branding, personification as a human, brand storytelling, differentiation in terms of positioning, and Lifestyle branding. Personification as a human in this regard referred to the brand's ability to portray itself with humanistic characteristics such as humour and wit. Lifestyle branding addressed the brand's ability to identify how consumers envision themselves when interacting with the brand and set aspirations for its consumers. Brand storytelling encompasses the ability of the brand to communicate its stories to its targeted audience. These sub-concepts aimed to analyse and determine how hospitality brands portray brand identity through these related components such as core branding elements, storytelling and emotional branding to effectively communicate their identity to their targetted audience.

Sub-concepts such as core branding elements were operationalised through the use of logos, colour palettes, as well as packaging that worked as elements that differentiate the brand amongst its competitors (Ghodeswar, 2008). For instance, an Instagram reel fell within the category of core branding elements due to the emphasis on the bold red CitizenM logo as well as the exterior design of the hotel which is symbolic of the brand's identity. Similarly, this sub-concept was also recognised in the interviews when the respondent identified branding elements such as the logo, art, and architecture that represent the brand's identity. Another significant sub-concept within this category was on differentiation in terms of positioning, which addressed how the company stood out in the market. This concept was operationalised through the brand's ability to meticulously identify the

needs within the clientele and fulfil them with the offering through their products (Kuhn et al., 2008, p.41,42). For instance, an Instagram reel fell within this category by highlighting a visual representation of affordable luxury as a differentiator, through large beds, a nominal price range, a central location, and a bedside view across all hotels. Additionally, respondents also expanded on discussions where comparison to competitor chains were taken into consideration while positioning the brand.

The second concept identified was social media affordances within the context of communicating brand identity online. The integration of affordances in social media has made it easier for brands and consumers to establish relationships and communicate with each other without having to directly influence each other's behaviours (Ronzhyn et al., 2022, p.3175). This concept was approximated with segments such as visual storytelling, platform-specific affordances, and consistency. Affordances in this regard were observed through four defining elements: visibility, persistence, editability, and associations (Treem and Leonardi, 2013, p.10-30). The platform-specific affordances were specific to Instagram and its features that enabled interactions, longevity of posts originally published or posted online, the ability to edit and upload, and features that enable users to connect with each other or with brands.

The final concept identified was the Brand identity Prism by Kapferer in correlation to branding strategies. This concept was approached by elements such as physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection and self-image (Anderson, 2010). By examining these dimensions through Instagram reels as well as the inputs provided by the respondents, an understanding of how brands within the hospitality sector communicate their brand identity online can be drawn.

3.3.1. Interview guide

Participants were only informed that the interview will be on Brand identity with inferences to CitizenM, however the full scope of the research, the key theories or additional questions were not disclosed to the participants to avoid bias. The questions as well as the follow up questions were formulated with the purpose of answering the main research question in addition to the supporting sub-questions.

The interview guide (see Appendix B) was formulated keeping the main research question as well as the sub-questions in mind. Each of the interviews commenced with the consent regulations that were read out to the participants to inform them of their rights during after the interview process. The first set of questions were curated as an ice-breaker, delving into the participant's background, their role within the company and general perception of brand identity. An example of this is: *'Do you believe branding plays an important role in the hospitality industry?'*. The aim of these

questions was to lighten the conversation and build rapport, while gaining some general knowledge about the respondent. The first set of questions were designed to dive deeper into the role of brand identity in specific reference to CitizenM. The initial questions within this category were broader to get a general sense of the participant's perception on CitizenM's brand identity: *'How would you describe CitizenM's brand identity in a few words?, 'How do you associate these words with CitizenM?'* Eventually narrowing down the conversation through specific questions pertaining the hospitality industry and Instagram: *'What feelings or emotions do you aim to evoke through Instagram content?'* while discussing specific elements within the brand's identity. Following this were more specific set of questions which were curated keeping Kapferer's components: personality, culture and self-image in brand identity, while also embedding questions that addressed the remaining three components: physique, relationship and reflection. As previously mentioned, this was done in the interest of time and on the basis of how bendable some components were within each larger category of questions. In each of the categories, the questions were broader at first in order to gain insights regarding the respondents view of the topic at large. As the discussion progressed, the questions became more specific; for instance while discussing the role of personality in brand identity, a broader question grasping the participant's opinion based on their expertise within the hospitality industry was addressed: *'Do you think personality can contribute to a brand's identity?', 'Why do you think so?'*. Subsequently concluding the discussion on personality with more specific questions such as: *'Have you faced any challenges in maintaining a consistent brand personality across different markets [different CitizenM hotels in Europe and America?'*.

Similarly, within the next category of questions observing the role of culture in brand identity, the category commenced with some general questions: *'What are the cultural values that the brand abides by while branding online?'*. Then moving onto more specific questions such as: *'How do you balance maintaining a global brand identity while respecting local cultural preferences?'*. Subsequently, the category addressing the third sub-question followed: *'In what ways does CitizenM's Instagram content encourage followers to see themselves as a part of the brand?'*. Then concluding the section with the participant's perceptions regarding: *'What value do you think self-image alignment has in building long-term brand loyalty?'*. Within each of categories the components of 'physique', 'relationship', and 'reflection' were integrated through questions such as: *'Are there certain pillars that represent the core of CitizenM as a brand online?', 'How do you feel CitizenM's personality resonates with its audience?' and 'In your opinion, how do followers perceive CitizenM's brand on Instagram?'*. Finally, towards the end of the interview, some general questions were addressed regarding the ambitions with the brand's identity in the near future and final comments, if any.

The interview guide was useful to keep track of the topics of discussion, ensuring that all the components were discussed, and navigating the interviews through a semi-structured format. It was interesting to observe the similarities in defining attributes such as culture, and disparities in inferences when it came to the brands strategies or core elements. Details of the findings will be later discussed in the results section.

Table 3.1:

Coding Frame for Instagram Reels:

Concept	Open Code	Description
Brand identity	Core branding elements	The use of visual identity cues such as use of logo, brand-specific colours, slogans.
	Personification as human	Human-like characteristics to the brand such as the use of humour or boldness defining characteristic of the brand.
	Emotional branding	The use of emotional cues to evoke a sentimental connection with the consumers such as joy, belongingness, nostalgia.
	Differentiation in positioning	Use of cues that set CitizenM apart from other hotels- affordable luxury, non-traditional.
	Lifestyle branding	Use of cues that reflect a specific lifestyle- modern, tech-savvy, youthful, frequent traveller.

	Brand storytelling	Use of narratives or themes to resonate with the brand, such as travel, design, culture-reinforcing how the brand defines itself through reels.
Social media affordances	Visual storytelling	Refers to the brand's use of visual cues such as colour pallets, architecture and people to convey certain narratives or emotions through the platform's affordances.
	Platform-specific affordances	How CitizenM uses the features and tools in Instagram to communicate their brand identity online: Reels, filters, background music, voiceover, captions.
	Consistency	The uniform use of brand specific colours, tone of voice, narratives across CitizenM's profile.
Kapferer's brand identity prism	Physique	Use or discussion tangible and visible elements such as- design, architecture, rooms.
	Personality	Use of personality traits within the tone of voice- wit, humour, bold, approachable.

Culture	Use of cultural elements such as diversity (in art, employees, guests), destinations, values highlighted through reels that show work culture, different types of guests, travel habits.
Relationship	Use of cues that highlight relationships between CitizenM and the guest such as: curated experiences, check-ins, consumer interactions
Reflection	Use of cues that highlight the targeted consumer for CitizenM such as portrayal of professionals, travellers through visuals and use of tone of voice, inviting them to feel a part of a larger lifestyle brand
Self-image	Use of cues by CitizenM that enables the consumers to feel like they embody the traits reflected by the brand: trendy, modern day traveller, drawn to art.

3.4 Data analysis:

The thematic analysis conducted analysed three main themes, which was observed based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.87) recommendation on six steps to support the analysis, which involved: acquainting oneself with the data, producing initial codes, observing possibilities for themes amongst the generated codes and binding them into categories, reviewing if the themes worked hand-in-hand with the coding framework, naming the themes as well as the categories and, finally, moving ahead with the analysis. The researcher utilized an inductive method to observe the data and identify potential themes since they were closely connected to the data themselves (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.83).

The dataset included 150 Instagram reels and 3 interview transcripts from experts at CitizenM within the field of branding and social media. Taking into consideration the proposed steps, the researcher observed the collected Instagram reels as well as the interview transcripts several times to familiarize herself with the contents before moving on to coding. Initial codes were generated for both cases in this process, which included codes such as 'playful tone', 'bold colours', 'bold typography', 'mimicking user-generated content' while analysing content on Instagram reels. While on the other hand, distinct codes were also generated while analysing the interview transcripts, such as 'modern brand', 'modern traveller', 'storytelling' while observing how the conversation around brand identity and how it is communicated online was visualised and portrayed by the experts. These findings were also supported by the observations made while documenting the sensitized concepts. Following this, recurring themes within both the datasets were observed and grouped with codes similar to each other. For instance, codes such as 'logo', 'brand colour', 'brand name', 'brand tone' were assembled under one common sub-theme 'core branding elements'. Simultaneously, when there were codes that did not fall into any single category, they were compiled and categorized under a sub-theme labelled 'miscellaneous'.

These emerging themes and sub-themes were then reviewed and observed by the researcher once again to ensure efficacy. Following this, sub-themes that closely aligned with one another were categorised under one defining theme. Each of the assigned labels given to the themes and sub-themes were consistently revised to ensure that they corresponded with the findings and taking into consideration the research question itself. The theoretical findings were also taken into consideration while generating themes that corresponded both with units of analysis as well as the previously researched concepts.

3.5 Credibility and Ethical Considerations:

While conducting the research, it is imperative to take the credibility and ethics of the researcher. As addressed by Ramos (1989) in Orb et al., (2001, p.94) three common issues emerge in the course of qualitative research: the rapport established between the researcher and the participant, when the personal point of view of the researcher influences the data analysis, and the research design. To avoid the aforementioned issues, the researcher ensured that the findings were supported with previously explained theories derived from academic journals within the field of brand identity, hospitality, social media, and Instagram. Furthermore, interviewees who participated in the interviews were informed about the nature and purpose of the research. They were informed about their voluntary participation, which gave them the authority to refrain from answering or exiting from the interview in the course of a question they were uncomfortable with (Moriña, 2020, p.1561). Confidentiality of data is another significant step taken by researchers in qualitative studies, where the interviewees were assured that any delicate information discussed in the course of the interview would be restricted to the researcher and the supervisor's knowledge alone (Moriña, 2020, p.1562). The option to remain anonymous was also provided to the interviewees, however, in all three cases, the participants felt comfortable sharing their identities.

Furthermore, measures were to ensure the validity and reliability of the data were also taken by the researcher. Qualitative studies ensure validity and reliability of data by implementing information derived from diverse origins (Brennen, 2021, p.8). The research therefore, collected data from in-depth interviews conducted with three participants in distinct roles within CitizenM, and also collected Instagram reels from the official page of CitizenM for analysis. This enabled the data to provide rich and varied information which makes the study reliable. As highlighted by Coleman (2022, p.2042), while there is no singular way of ensuring the validity of a qualitative study, adapting to certain measures makes the research more credible. On that note, all the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. In the course of the interview, points of discussion articulated by the respondents were rephrased and verified by the participants to reduce bias (Coleman, 2022, p.2042). Transparency was maintained by the researcher in the sampling procedure, data collection, conducting analysis and coding the data through meticulous reporting of the process in the respective sections. The reels were ethically sourced from a public Instagram profile, and both datasets were objectively processed and analysed by the researcher.

4. Results

This chapter incorporates the findings of this study, which have been obtained by conducting a thematic analysis of both datasets, including expert interviews and Instagram reels. First, the findings from the interview transcripts will be reported, following which the analysis of Instagram reels will be discussed in order to answer the main research question- *How does CitizenM employ brand identity on Instagram?*- and the sub-research questions. While analysing the interviews, five major themes appeared within the dataset: ‘Brand Communication Strategy’, ‘Brand Personality’, ‘Culture and Values’, ‘Instagram Affordances’, and ‘Intended Consumer Mindset’. Each of the themes was grouped with relative sub-themes that collectively provided insights regarding the employment of brand identity on CitizenM’s Instagram profile. Furthermore, the themes and the sub-themes were also mapped towards Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism, which constitutes six elements transpiring through representative elements between the brand and the consumer, namely- physique, personality, relationship, reflection, culture, and self-image (Anderson, 2010, n.p.).

*Table 4.1:
Themes and Sub-themes*

Themes	Sub-theme 1	Sub-theme 2	Sub-theme 3	Sub-theme 4
Brand Communication Strategies	Brand associations through messaging	Strategic positioning	Content strategy	Consumer-centric communication
Brand Personality	Bold and disruptive identity	Relatable Millennial Core	Approachable Persona	Nature of Worldliness
Culture and Values rooted in Identity	Global vs Local culture	Artistic & Aesthetic Sensibilities	Internalised Values & CitizenM Spirit	
Instagram Affordances aiding Brand Communications	Platform functionalities as a lifestyle tool	Visual storytelling		

Intended Consumer Mindset for Relatability	Aspirational mindset	Distinct Consumer Identity	Emotional associations & needs	Digitally savvy
--	----------------------	----------------------------	--------------------------------	-----------------

4.1. Brand Communication Strategy

The first theme identified while analysing the interviews to understand how brand identity is employed across CitizenM’s Instagram profile was ‘brand communication strategies’. This reflects the communication strategy that incorporated layers of the brand’s identity in how they communicated or interacted on their social media channel, which in this case is Instagram. To reiterate what has been previously addressed by Cai and Hobson, (2004, p. 2), to establish a unique identity amongst other players in the market, it is imperative for brands to seek opportunities where they can to leverage brand equity by actively advocating their brand’s identity through diverse avenues of communication. In the case of CitizenM, this theme helped identify underlying sub-themes such as ‘brand mindset’, ‘Facilitating individual lifestyle’, ‘content strategy’, and ‘brand associations’.

4.1.1 Brand Associations through messaging

In the interviews, participants often referred to the way they personally associated with CitizenM- ‘bold’, ‘unique’- and even when they spoke about other brands such as Marriott or BMW while explaining their references. Brand associations are central to brand management, due to which companies invest significant time and energy interpreting the nature of connections that can be fostered in correlation to the brand which was observed under this sub-theme (Till et al., 2011, p.93). Simultaneously, the concept of associating with a brand from a consumer’s point of view enables them to process specific narratives in connection with the brand, making it easier to recall them and create a point of differentiation within their minds; as it appeared while discussing what the participants could think of in connection to brand identity.

When thinking of brands, they are often perceived as a marketing instrument executing creative strategies to distinguish themselves from other players in the market. This is because brands are trying to take every given opportunity to sway consumers with a specific image of the brand within their minds, which is triggered whenever there is a point of interaction with it (Jin et al., 2019, p.51). For instance, one of the interviewees mentioned:

....Like a lot of the Hiltons, my first association is like blue and grey, but I could never tell you what they feel like really. So I think Citizen M, obviously we're biased because we work for the company, but do a really good job at that.

From the response, it is clear that colours used by a brand to express its identity also have an impact on the nature of brand associations. CitizenM actively crafts brand associations through consistent use of intentional messaging styles, as well as integrating core branding elements within their messaging. The brand often uses 'bold' colours as well as communication styles that makes them appear as 'cheeky', witty, or clever while interacting with their audience online. This is evident in through their Instagram reels where shades bold or bright colours such as red and black are dominant across majority reels, and 'witty' tones are embedded within their reels:

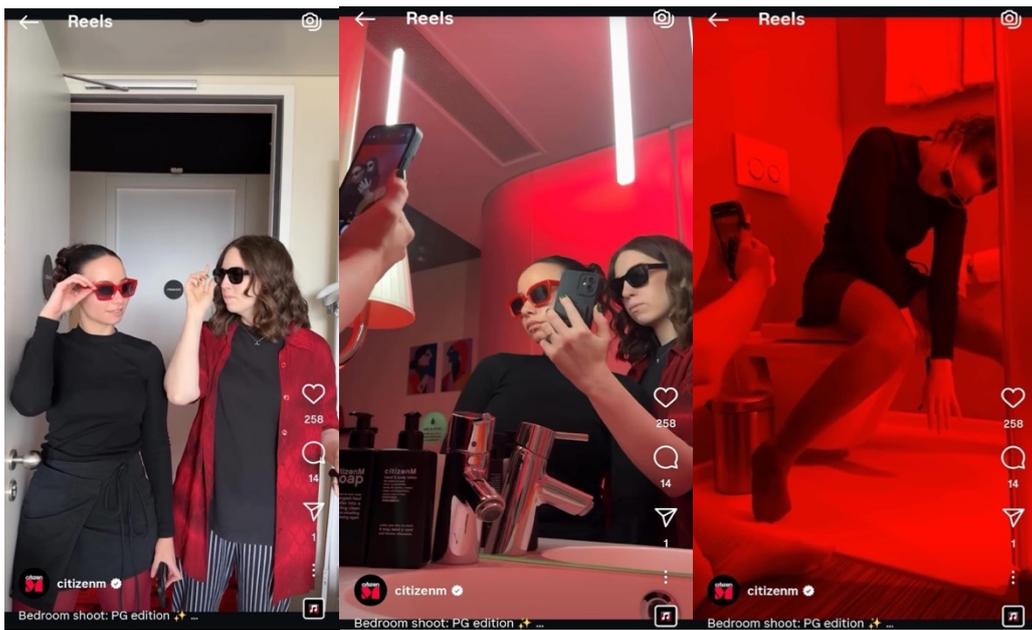


Figure 4.1: The dominant use of bold brand colours (red & black) to establish brand associations.

However, the messaging implemented by the brand is adapted to culturally relevant situations, touching upon themes such as art, modernity, and inclusion, setting them apart from traditional hotels as a non-traditional or unconventional brand. This fits coherently with the description of a boutique hotel as described by Buhagiar et al., (2023, p.208), highlighting discreet design and an unconventional identity as some of their defining features, which exclusively position them in a market saturated with traditional hotels. To corroborate this, on discussing the brand identity in a few defining words, one of the interviewees mentioned:

.... iterating on what you do, being true to yourself without confusing people, because building a brand takes many, many, many, many, many, many, many, many years. And obviously, a brand association also takes lots of time to build as well.

Another interviewee mentioned:

Primarily, when we look to our design philosophy, we call it, or you could probably say it's very bold. It's very unique. It's very colorful. It has a level of kind of disruptiveness to it in terms of we try to not be like any other hotel.

From the recorded responses by the interviewees, it seems clear that CitizenM defines its identity as multilayered, which sets it apart from the other hotels in the market due to its unique identity. The brand does not fit in within the formal corporate structure or conventional hotels with an increased emphasis on being 'modern' and 'different'. Within their messaging, the brand implements humanistic characteristics such as humour, shrewdness, and an informal tone to establish a human connection with their audience, making the interactions appear more like a conversation rather than a branding strategy. This for instance is visible in the following example, where the brand adapts an informal tone to converse with guests:



Figure 4.2: Brand using informal tone to converse with guests through reels.

This correlates to Kapferer's element of personality and relationship from the brand identity prism (Anderson, 2010). First, the component of personality since the brand replicates human-like features that humanize the brand and make it impersonable in the consumer's mind Kapferer (2008, p.184). Correspondingly, the element of relationship can also be mapped to this sub-theme since it materializes that the relationship between the brand and the end-user can also extend beyond physical attributes and products (Adler, 2022, p.67). However, based on the following response:

...in the near future would be our tone of voice, because we need to try and make sure that we're speaking the language of people online, and not just using our tone of voice, because we still need to connect with those people....

It is apparent the CitizenM intends to tap more into the communication preferences of its audiences rather than strategize their tone of voice from an organizational approach. From this response it is clear that resonating with people is a strategy that they intend to embed within a set of agreed associations with the brand in the future.

4.1.2. Strategic Positioning:

In an evolving industry such as the hospitality sector, it is essential for brands to identify and strategize how they curate their identities, not simply as a competitive weapon but also as a mirror image for consumers to gain clarity regarding the functionalities of the brand (King 2017, p.115). CitizenM's positioning online is very different from traditional hotels, especially since they identify themselves as a lifestyle brand which fits within a 'new breed of hotels' (CitizenM, 2025 n.d.). It does not simply portray itself as a place where guests check in, have breakfast, and check out, but it includes the hotel spaces within the lifestyle experiences of the guest, making it a space for like-minded individuals who are unafraid to express themselves. To corroborate this, one of the interviewees addresses how branding is an essential element particularly in a congested market such as the hospitality sector:

.... branding is, in its truest sense, the reason why you would buy anything...hospitality is also important as well, just because of how competitive the industry is, how many hospitality brands there are.....It's a very congested market.

A defining element that has occurred multiple times amongst the recorded responses and also emerged as a core element in their positioning strategy is differentiation. The brand leverages its Instagram profile in reiterating that they are a 'misfit' amongst other hotels; and building a positive and relatable ideology around it. This fits with the segment on tactical identity as discussed by Chung and Byrom (2020, p. 75), where the brand has prepared an initial blueprint of a defined set of principles that set forth the brand's identity based on their immediate and long-term goals, and a definite target audience. To expand on this, one of the interviewees mentioned how she felt the defining element of 'disruptive' was not necessarily applicable to other hotels within the market; however, in the case of CitizenM, it is very apparent within its strategic positioning:

...I don't think I would relate disruptive to the entire industry because when I think about other hotels, they're all the same...But citizenM is different in just like the service that we offer, ...ambassadors.....it's really specific to the brand, not..... the industry.

As recorded in this response in another response mentioned by an interviewer another significant element of positioning strategy becomes visible:

Hmm, to be honest, I think we do a pretty good job at maintaining consistency, because we're so lucky that the hotels look the exact same across every hotel. So if we're just filming in the hotel, that's already consistent...

This is evident in the consistent and deliberate use of physical spaces across all the hotel locations on Instagram, where CitizenM reaffirms its strategic positioning which emphasizes that no matter which location the guest chooses they will always have the 'CitizenM experience' because they look the same:

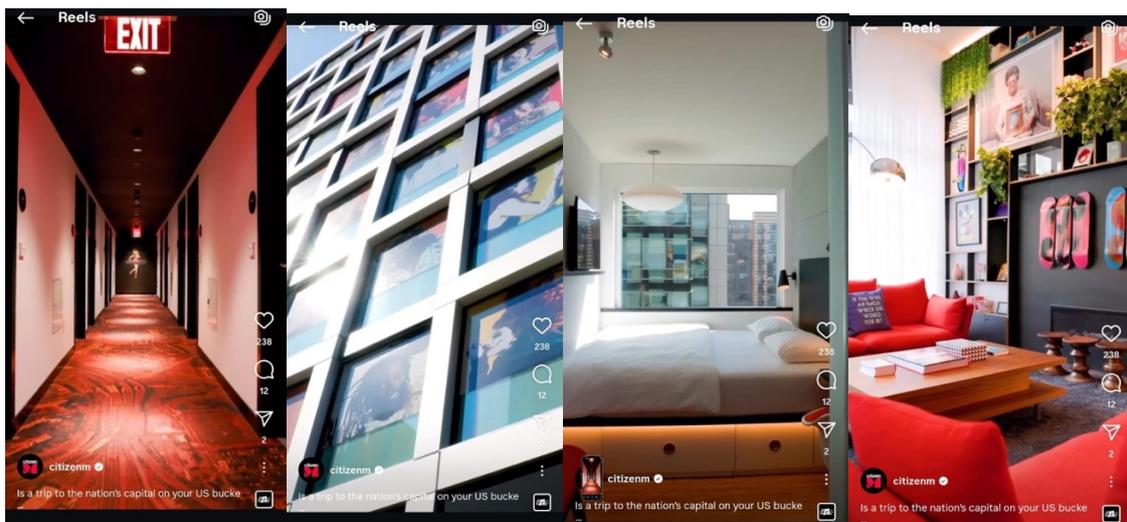


Figure 4.3: Reels showcasing the standardized interiors across all CitizenM hotels with promise of standardized experience for guests.

The standardization of the hotels as well as the physical spaces is another defining element of the hotels that is put to strategic use while communicating online. This correlates with Kapferer's element on 'Physique' within the brand identity prism, which defines physical attributes of a brand as a cornerstone of its branding strategy as well as a component that is readily recognizable or recallable by consumers (Mahdi et al., 2015, p. 114). The brand showcases its space and design in a way that makes it shareable and aspirational.

4.1.3. Content Strategy:

CitizenM employs a multilayered content strategy that blends 'aesthetics' and 'storytelling' to create content that accurately communicates the brand's identity and values, which is tailored to both Instagram's affordances as well as its targeted audience. This mix includes a combination of creator collaborations, locally relevant content in the case of hotel openings or promotional events, Instagram reels, as well as a 'cheeky' communication style through captions or text overlays within videos. This is evident through the following examples within Instagram reels:

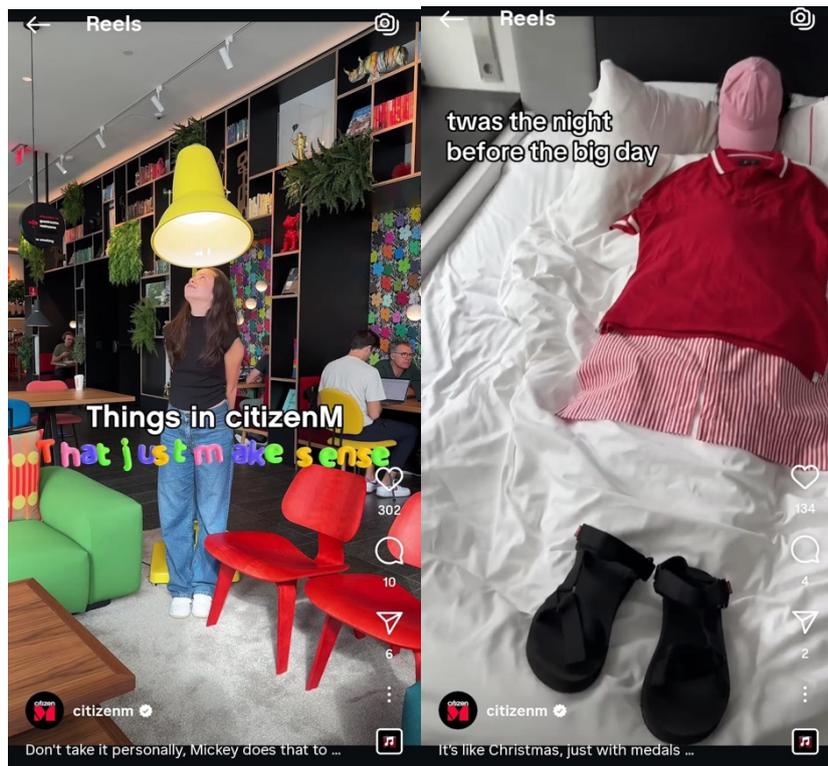


Figure 4.4: Example of communication styles adapted within text overlays
While storytelling.

Stories have the ability to equip companies with the possibility of building long-term relationships with their intended clientele, where each story helps audiences acquaint themselves with the brand and its offerings while fostering an emotional relationship (Tarigan et al., 2021, p.92). For instance, one of the respondents highlights creators with very specific communities that correlate with CitizenM's identity, and have a niche audience are often targeted for collaborations.

This is because their reach to a defined audience aligns with the brands target community as well:

So recently we've also been trying to tap into creators that exist in really small niches because that's an authentic way then for our brand to be there.....

..... So there's a mix of creators that are the mobile citizen versus ones who sit more in these niche communities that we want to try to break into.

From this excerpt, it is apparent that amongst the content strategies, authenticity is another element that CitizenM gives attention to. That is not simply in consistently communicating their 'fearless' and 'provocative' identity, but also partnerships with creators who have a defined community as well as are known for their authenticity. With that in mind, CitizenM, unlike other hotels, does not engage in posting content about simply service-related listings such as price ranges. Their content strategy heavily depicts 'the new generation of travellers' and realistic 'itineraries' of what a stay at CitizenM looks like:

Citizen M was already aware of the new generation of travellers, as we kind of coined it, were mixing their work with the pleasure or leisure, and it was not like a day or a trip for them wasn't like, okay, Monday to Friday, it's business meetings.

Then Saturday to Sunday, I'm going to go to do my leisure, whether it's visit a museum, go shopping, go to a cafe, go to a theatre, whatever it is....

And this is validated by the type of content CitizenM creates on their Instagram, showcasing travellers' point of view regarding how they experience the hotels, on one hand, and the before and after on a 'realistic' workday at CitizenM:



Figure 4.5: Reels showcasing 'realistic' examples of how working from CitizenM looks like for the new generation of travellers.

The response from the interviewee as well as the Instagram example is indicative of the brand's vision of how the consumer perceives or engages with the brand. CitizenM positions itself as

a 'non-judgemental' friend by stepping into the shoes of the consumer, it engages in shaping a narrative around the brand that is relatable and can be experienced by the travelers.

... try to also tap into how I don't want to say client or consumer, but the guests, how the guests would perceive their room when they step into it. So like when you try to create content.

This can be correlated to Kapferer's element on reflection within the brand identity prism, which seeks to understand the brand's understanding of how consumers engage with the brand or its products (Kapferer, 2008, p.186). CitizenM taps into this by curating content around realistic experiences by guests from their point of check-in to check-out, making it more relatable and memorable.

4.1.4. Consumer-Centric Communication:

As briefly touched upon in the previous section, CitizenM's take on communicating with consumers on Instagram involves their community of audiences, rather than excluding them and creating a divide, distancing the brand from the audience. This translates to the brand's attempt at establishing a self-concept for consumers where they view the brand not simply as a company, but as an individual with whom they can relate and feel like having a day-to-day conversation with (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016, p.130). This equally corresponds with Kapferer's definition of self-image in the brand identity prism, interpreting how consumers feel while interacting with brands or products (Mahdi et al., 2015, p.115). This community has been referred to as the mobile community, with a relationship founded at an emotional level, more than a transactional one. Having said that, one respondent defined a 'mobile citizen' with specific attributes:

.... brand identity that is also trying to appeal to a certain type of mindset, which is this mindset of being a mobile citizen, someone who travels regular, someone who sees themselves as a citizen of the world.

Instances of how the brand describes a mobile Citizen is visible through the Instagram reels where reels capturing travel content with CitizenM as a focal point within the travel experiences:

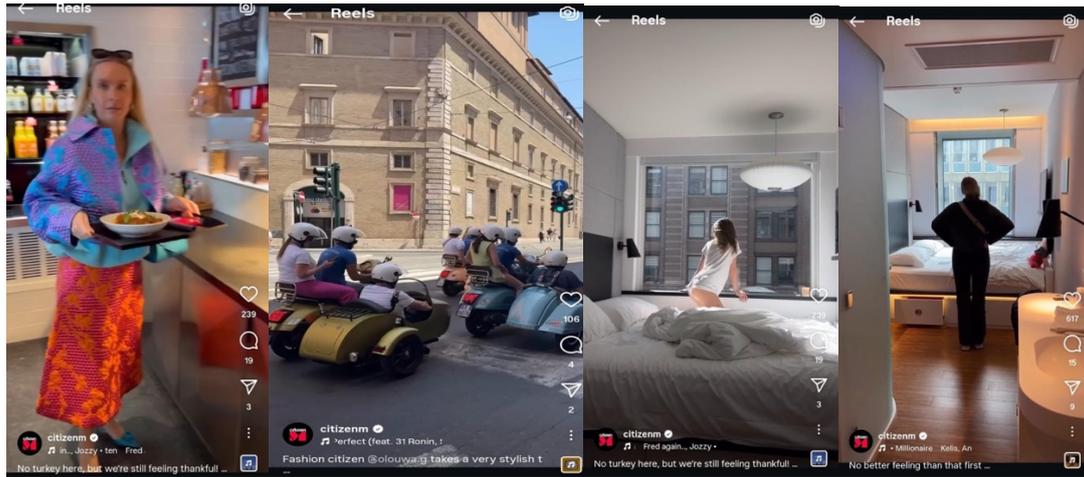


Figure 4.6: Reels showcasing the 'mobile citizen' who loves to travel by highlighting different cities and travel experiences.

Based on this recorded response, it is evident that the brand is aware of which audience it aims to target, and who their identity will resonate with. Corroborating this, another respondent specifies:

And she's around, like, I don't know, in her 30s. And she's international. And then another sort of persona is, are people like us, who are a bit younger,..... those are the people who, like, are, like, our ideal audiences.

In this regard, CitizenM's consumer-centric approach is also visible in its 'universal communication style' through a singular Instagram profile and consistent communication style across the platform, making it easier for audiences to relate to a standard communication style. Furthermore, its approach towards including lifestyle cues and inclusive language, for instance, portrays a strengthened core identity of the brand. Taking Nandan (2004, p.266) approach on conceptual values that determine the successful communication of a brand's identity, CitizenM is able to strategically meet the expected needs of its audiences by visually selling an experience or aspiration, and leverage opportunities to foster a relationship that brings them closer to their target community. In connection with this, one interviewee discussed CitizenM's attempt at maintaining a consistent persona that resonates with audiences despite its distribution of hotels:

So it's like finding the balance between making a reference to something that does make you seem worldly and like you're in the know.

Therefore, despite the wide range of hotels having a central Instagram platform to interact with its intended audience is a strategic move employed by CitizenM. And here, employing a consumer driven approach keeps them engaging and relatable for the viewers and potential guests.

4.2: Brand Personality:

The second theme identified while analysing the interviews was 'Brand Personality'. As the name suggests, the theme helped identify how CitizenM employed personality traits across reels on its Instagram profile. This theme substantiated Kapferer's description of personality within the brand identity prism which falls within one of the psychological elements that makes a brand's identity. As discussed by Kapferer (2008, p.184), the personality of a brand can be portrayed as characteristics that mimic human-like features embedded in brand related communications or in symbolic representations of how the brand would look like if in case 'personified'.

4.2.1: Bold and Disruptive identity:

The first sub-theme categorized within this theme was 'bold and disruptive identity'. CitizenM sets forth a distinct identity which is accompanied by traits that set its chain of hotels apart as a 'non-traditional hotel'. As previously iterated by Veríssimo et al., (2015, p.23), the tourism and hospitality industry is evolving; hence, their sole focus shifted from simply service related experience, to a complete cognitive journey for the consumer, where the customer journey expands beyond the engagement and consumption of products or services. CitizenM highlights bright bold colours mostly while showcasing their interiors and exteriors which is standardized across all locations and contributes greatly towards the brand's identity:

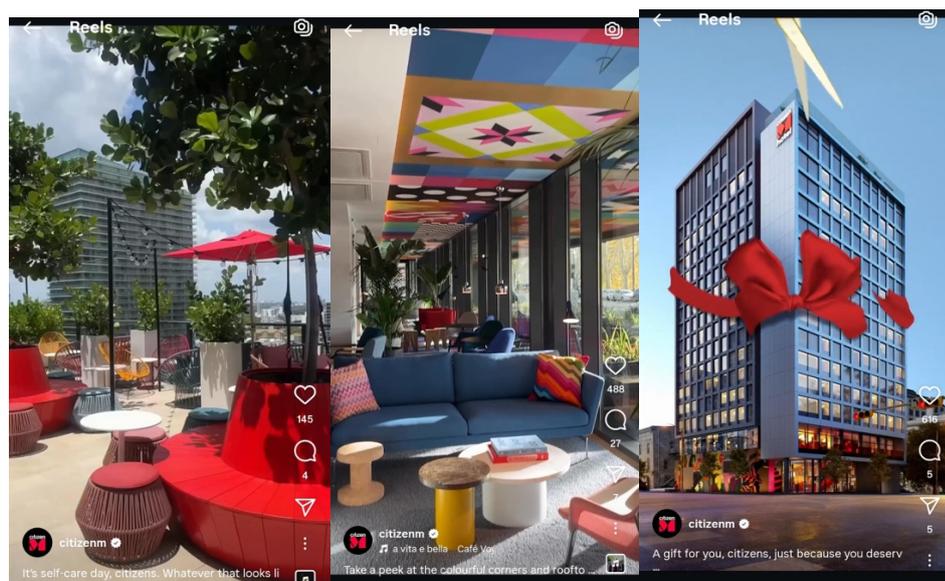


Figure 4.7: Showcasing the use of bold colours within physical spaces.

As evident on the reels attached, this sub-theme also touched upon Kapferer's element on physique which is observed as one of the tangible features within the identity prism; emphasizing on the prominent characteristics of a brand that are readily recognizable when vis-à-vis with the brand or related conversations (Mahdi et al., 2015, p. 114). Although not sufficient by itself, physical spaces do contribute largely the imprint of a brand the consumer has while interacting with it. For instance, in the case of CitizenM, their incorporation of 'disruptive' elements within their internal spaces through their distinct artwork also help curate a unique identity for the brand:

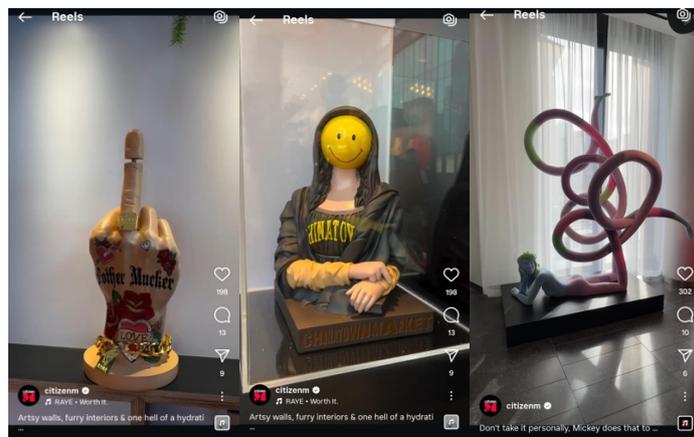


Figure 4.8: Showcasing 'unconventional artwork' within physical spaces that Positions CitizenM as 'disruptive'.

This point of view was also corroborated by one interviewee when discussing CitizenM's identity:

Citizen M's brand identity is very complex, so a few words is hard. Primarily, when we look to our design philosophy, we call it, or you could probably say it's very bold. It's very unique.

Therefore, it is evident that physical spaces within the hotels, especially the art and the vibrant interiors play a significant role when the brand associates itself with being 'bold' and 'disruptive'. And this is visibly leveraged as a differentiator in comparison to other hotels through the content they make on Instagram.

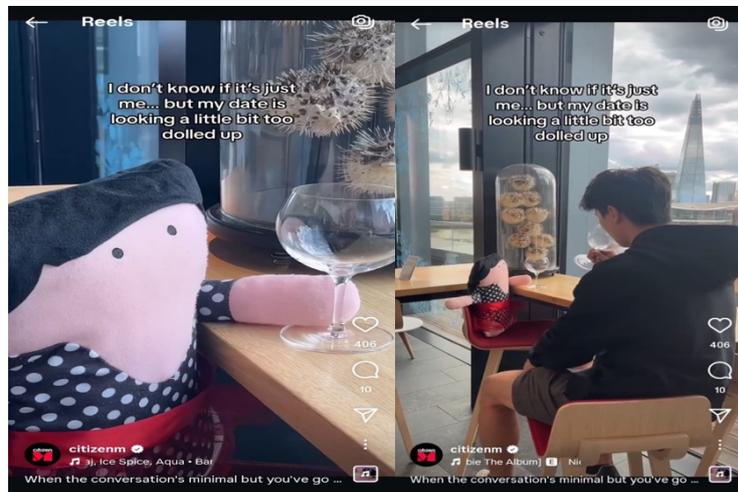
4.2.2: Relatable millennial core:

The second emerging sub-theme observed was 'relatable millennial core'. This sub-theme encompasses CitizenM's deep-rooted understanding of the 'millennial mindset' that they aim to replicate through content on Instagram. The brand adapts this through the use of 'informal tones',

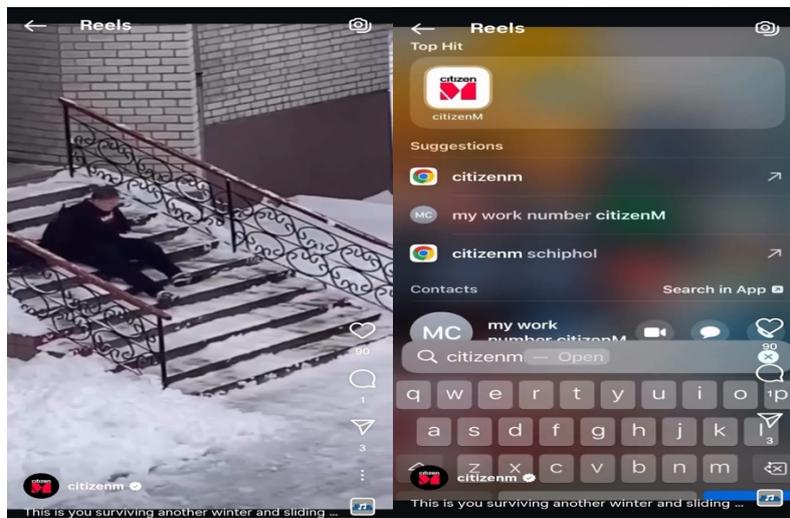
humour’, and sarcasm, that is specifically relatable to a widely millennial audience. Instances of this observation has been recorded in the interviews where the participant described CitizenM as more of a ‘millennial brand’ being a GenZ herself:

A little bit of like cringiness, although I say this because I'm Gen Z, so then I have like a view of millennials as being a bit like, yeah, some of the humor they find funny.

Evidence of this observation also appeared while analysing reels on CitizenM’s profile, where ‘millennial core’ was reflected through elements of ‘humour’ and ‘cringiness’ that is specifically catered to the millennial audiences:



Figures 4.9: Use of ‘millennial humour’ in an Instagram reel where CitizenM uses sarcasm to indicate that views never disappoint.



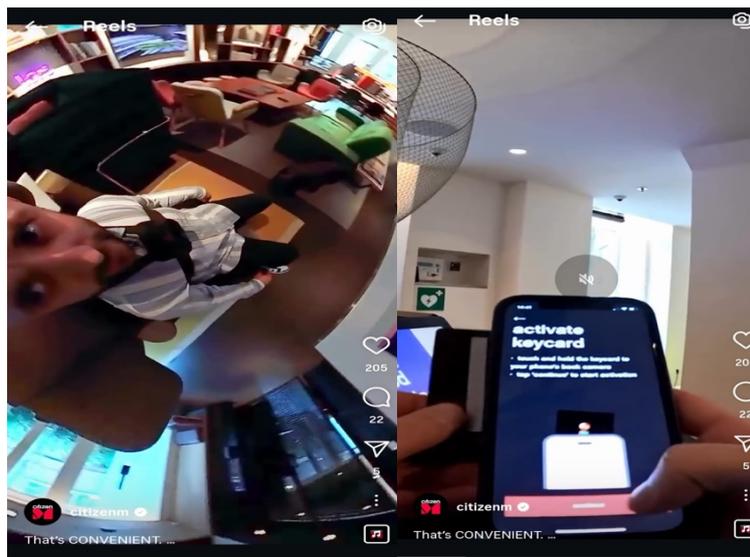
Figures 4.10: Using ‘millennial humour’ by incorporating cringe transitions and directing to bookings through the CitizenM application.

To further this observation, Aaker’s (1997, p.348), point of view regarding characteristics that build a brand’s personality, elements such as demographics, age and gender are attributes that can also be mapped out to envision a humanistic perception of a brand. This complements what one of the respondents discussed regarding CitizenM when personified internally, that it is envisioned as an ‘approachable’ British millennial with an accent who is very international:

...likes to say speaks in a British accent. So it's someone who's credible, I guess if that's the word.

Citizen M is worldly. Obviously, they're international, so they know about the world.

Moreover, attributes of this internalised British persona who is a traveller, an explorer, is also subtly replicated through their content where CitizenM uses POV (point of view format) videos to replicate how a guest experiences an interaction with the hotels:



Figures 4.11: Use of terminologies such as ‘beep’, ‘wee’ making it relatable for millennials, while using ‘crazy’, and ‘convenient’ to establish an expected experience.

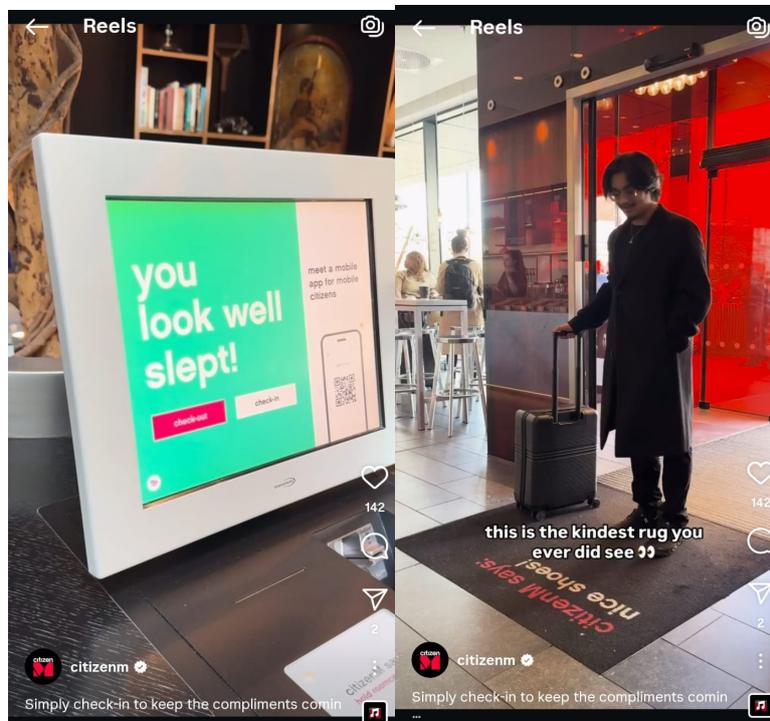
Evidently, the brand personifies itself as a millennial to cater to the wider audience who mostly engages with their content and relates to it. Humour and relatability as recurring factors that revolve around the brand’s personality when represented on Instagram, and this is equally used as a differentiating element amongst other hotels.

4.2.3: Approachable Persona:

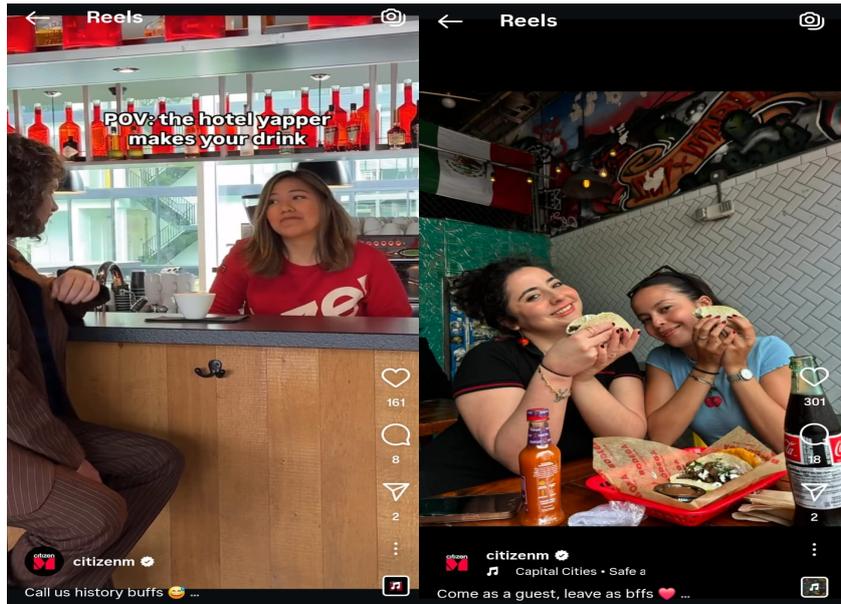
The third sub-theme observed was ‘approachable persona’. CitizenM positions itself as an informal host, by bridging the gap between a traditional service model where the hotel is simply a service provider while the guest is limited to being a consumer. Rather, CitizenM portrays itself a friend who is approachable by making strategic use of the brand’s tone of voice in all forms of communication on Instagram, by presenting a ‘warm’ and ‘welcoming’ presence. And this seems considerably an approach that the brand incorporates to identify traits similar to their intended consumers, which are then incorporated by the brand themselves to humanise itself and also appear as authentic and relatable at a personal level (Aaker, 1997; Keegan et al., 1995; as cited in Tuominen, 1999, p. 67). An interviewee highlighted the value of ‘authenticity’ in building a brand’s identity while discussing brand personality, emphasizing the significance of clear and honest communication styles in keeping a long-term audience:

...iterating on what you do, being true to yourself without confusing people, because building a brand takes many, many, many, many, many, many, many, many years.

This is also evident in the communication style adapted on CitizenM’s Instagram profile, where they position their hotels as ‘welcoming’, and its ambassadors, who are the front-runners across the hotels and are directly in contact with guests were positioned as ‘warm’ and ‘friendly’. This positions the hotel as a convenient space where there is room for everyone, thereby, avoiding hard-selling tactics and using psychological associations to tie guests for the long-run:



Figures 4.12: Use of Compliments ‘nice shoes!’ positioning themselves as kind and approachable.



Figures 4.13: Positioning Ambassadors as ‘friendly’ and people who one can easily have conversations/ hangout with.

Therefore, evidently CitizenM portrays an amiable persona online through very specific associations established in correlation to the ambassadors who will be the primary point of contact for guests while checking into the hotels. This sets forth as assumed or expected experience potential guests can encounter when at CitiizenM.

4.2.4: Nature Of Worldliness:

The final sub-theme identified under this theme was labelled as ‘nature of worldliness’, symbolizing CitizenM’s ‘international’ attribute that was portrayed through its inclusion of ‘worldly’, ‘diversity’, and ‘inclusion’ elements across its profile through Instagram reels. The brand taps into more of a cosmopolitan identity of a ‘citizen of the world’ and not simply any traveller:

...one of our brand characteristics,is being worldly... I've talked about this with the copywriters as well as like making specific like niche references to different countries or cities or whatever that people outside of that area wouldn't necessarily know.

One of the interviewee discussed what it meant to be a global citizen and how that constructed their vision of a mobile citizen who best fits with the identity they are building:

But ultimately, yeah, we're trying to create it for this idea of this mobile mobile citizen who is a human being..... They are they enjoy basically exploring the world and they understand.

It is apparent that CitizenM not only views themselves as an international brand, aiming to relate to the wider global audience; but also attempts to tap into a consumer's mindset who is open to the idea of different cultural perspectives or experiences when engaging with the brand's physical spaces:

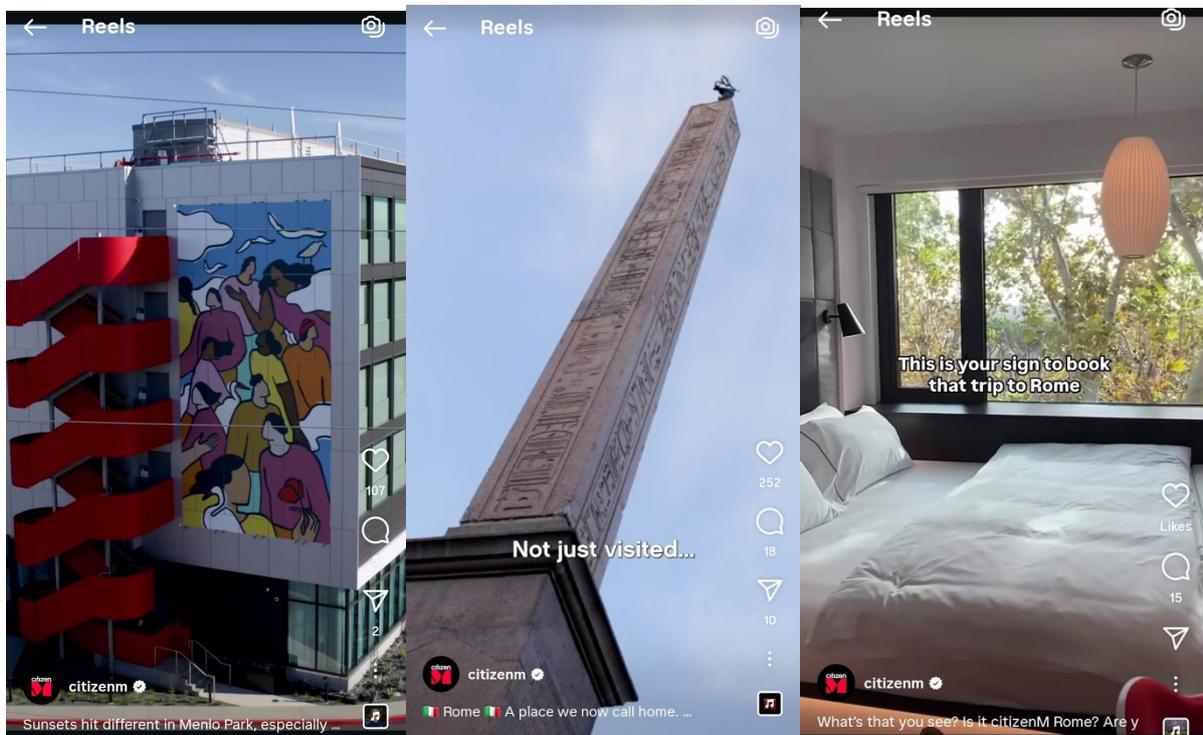


Figure 4.14: Reels showcasing worldliness through locations and diverse artwork.

The systematic rise of travel and tourism having inspired a new generation of aspiring travellers, hotels within the industry are having to reconceptualise a need for hotels which goes beyond service, and establish one that resonates with the guests or their intended audience (Harvey, 2007, p.190, 192). CitizenM incorporates this strategy in positioning themselves as an international and 'worldly' persona which is expressed through signs of multilinguality, including global artwork within the hotels, as well as, including content that highlights specific locations from time-to-time.

4.3. Culture and Values rooted in Identity:

The third theme identified was 'culture and values rooted in identity'. As the name suggests, this theme helped observe the key cultural pillars that are internalised within the organization and how they influence communication patterns through Instagram on one hand; and the 'cultural nuances' and 'values' that are employed within reels to relate to specific audiences in scenarios such as hotel openings for instance. This theme primarily leaned on the culture element within Kapferer's

identity prism that is not only reflective of the fundamental principles that are aspirational for the brand, but also influences how the brand extends these cultural values to its products and services as well (Mahdi et al., 2015, p.115).

4.3.1. Global vs Local Culture:

The first sub-theme identified was 'global vs local culture' which embodies CitizenM's ability to maintain globally consistent content with elements that occasionally draw references from specific local cultures. But this is done in a very strategic way without compromising the 'global identity' of the brand which is a key defining feature for them. On this note, an interviewee mentioned while there is on central Instagram account for all the communication related to the hotels worldwide, there is one exception- Taipei- which because of their distinct 'cultural nuances' needed a separate account:

the Taipei team actually have their own social account because we know that that region within Asia, it can be quite specific nuances that we probably don't understand as a global brand...

This response advocates for Loureiro et al., (2019, p.46) perspective on how boutique hotels imitate the feeling of 'being at home' despite being far away from it, by integrating noticeable local or cultural elements. The global vs local interplay is done by integrating multilingual messaging, locally inspired content such as itineraries walked by local guides who consider themselves a part of the CitizenM community- labelling themselves 'citizens'- and sharing a local's glimpse of the city:



Figure 4.15: Reel from 'citizens of Rome' showcasing a local guide of Rome.

Another observation in which local cultural nuances made their way in a globally relevant profile was in the case of hotel openings or geographically relevant scenarios. One example of this is CitizenM's post on National Tulip Day, which catered to the Netherlands, and on the other hand, in case of hotel openings a series of promotional posts showcasing the new properties as well as events that celebrated the local culture with people and stories from the region:

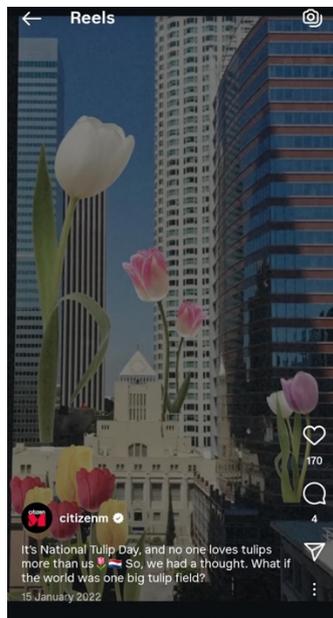


Figure 4.16: Locally relevant reel on National Tulip Day catered to the Netherlands.

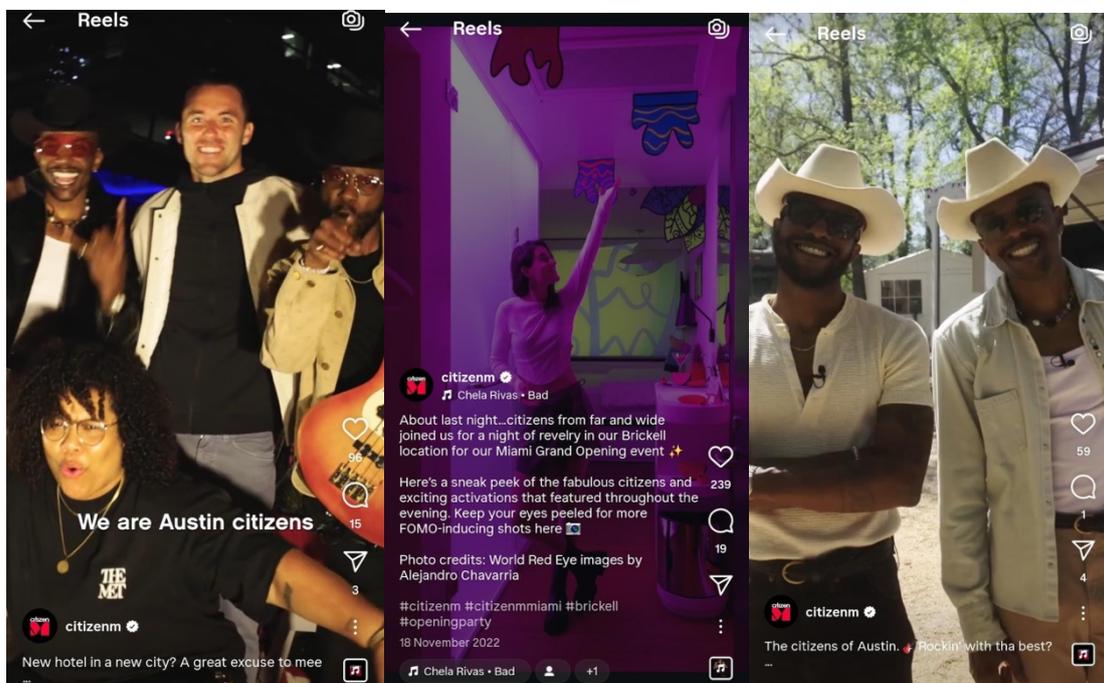


Figure 4.17: Reels highlighting new hotel openings by integrating locally relevant content.

This point of view has also been expanded on by an interviewee who discussed that CitizenM mostly maintains globally relevant messaging on Instagram to minimize confusion from a global audience:

Dublin, now actually speaking to Dubliners, and making sure that we have those nuances to integrate into content.....we have one in Rome, let's make sure that it feels like it's catering to that audience.

However, it is apparent that in the case of hotel openings, integrating culturally relevant content on Instagram is an essential part of community building as much as it intends to generate awareness. Despite mostly maintaining a globally relevant portfolio, CitizenM occasionally incorporates cultural components from the countries that CitizenM is based in, establishing a representative, diverse, and international image.

4.3.2. Artistic & Aesthetic Sensibilities:

Another sub-theme identified within this theme was 'artistic and aesthetic sensibilities'. As observed through the interviews and Instagram reels, art is not simply a lifestyle element within the interiors of CitizenM, but is used as a fundamental pillar to build community. The artistic elements are often provocative and unconventional compared to traditional hotels, reflecting a modern layer of familiarity and contributing to shared spaces within the hotels, such as the 'living rooms'- spaces where like-minded individuals interact. For instance, the following reel that highlights things that simply 'make sense at CitizenM', tying art closely with how guests identify with the brand:

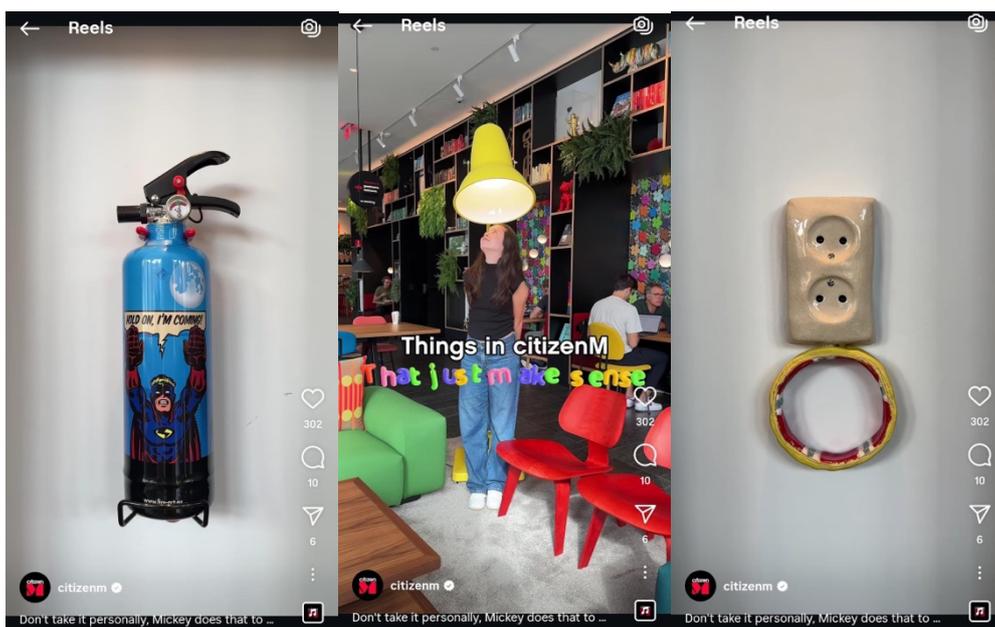


Figure 4.18: Reel showcasing distinctive art as an identifier of the brand for guests.

Upon discussing what makes CitizenM's identity distinct from other hotels with all the interviewees, art was mentioned as a differentiating element that adds to the hotel's identity:

The interiors of our hotels are very distinctive. No other hotel smells, sounds, or looks like the interior of our hotels. There's like curated art, the music's curated, sounds curated.

It was observed that while referring to art, CitizenM also highlighted the stories of the local artists whose art was displayed within their hotels, including their inspirations to produce these pieces:

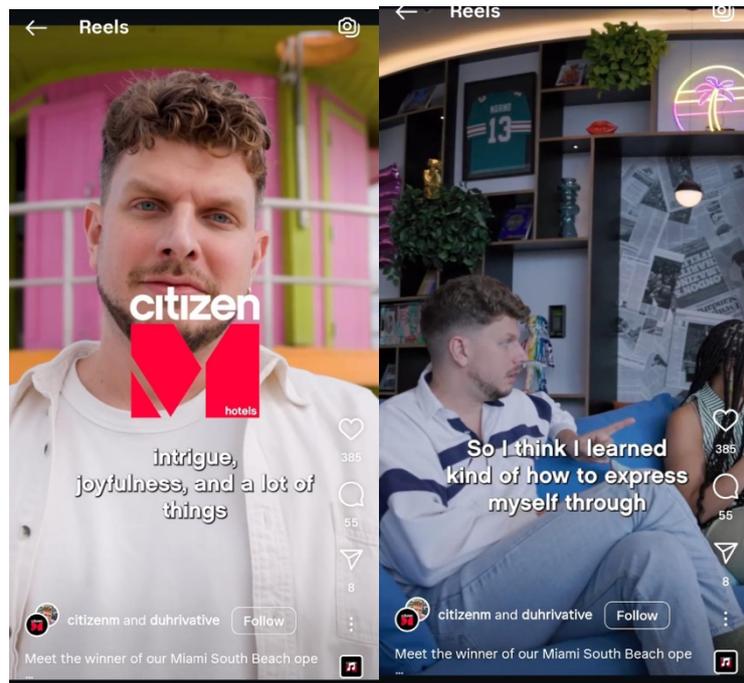


Figure 4.19: Reels showcasing local artists and their inspiration that adds to CitizenM's community culture.

Therefore, it is evident from these responses that CitizenM pays weightage to the aesthetic they create by adding visually bold and expressive art within their physical spaces, which receives a spotlight on Instagram as a part of their identity.

4.3.3. Internalised Values & CitizenM Spirit:

The third sub-theme identified was 'Internalised Values & CitizenM Spirit'. This encompasses two elements- the set of agreed-upon values that the brand incorporates within its messaging and integrates within its cultural pillars. On the other hand, the 'M feeling' which covers characteristics of the brand that they use to appeal to travellers and aspirants. Throughout the interviews, participants

mentioned that they essentially decided to keep themselves accountable at their core in addition to their established values as a brand on Instagram:

..as a brand.....we have our own cultural value.like genuine touch, smart thinking, real caring. We have a set of like different four, for example. So that's how we that's how we hold ourselves responsible internally.

This response agrees with Demirçiftçi et al., (2016, p.51) discussion on the role of brand identity in not simply generating awareness regarding brands, but also communicating the core values that a brand upholds to their consumers. And in order to create significant differentiation amongst competitors, brands consider figurative traits that stand out and can be leveraged to curate a strong persona (Cai & Hobson, 2004, p. 2). CitizenM embeds their values on 'genuine touch' and 'real caring' through the the way they position their ambassadors who are the front-runners of their services in the hotels, portraying them as humane, dependable and easy to talk to whatever the topic may be:



Figure 4.20: Reel highlighting 'real caring' through CitizenM ambassadors.



Figure 4.21: Reel highlighting 'genuine touch' through an ambassadors' recommended itinerary.

Amongst established values stands 'inclusivity' for all and 'open-mindedness' where guests stray away from the need to be formal and can simply be themselves. This is within 'M-feeling' which ties characteristics that CitizenM embodies- CitizenM Spirit- with travelers as a point of relatability. The brand encourages guests to be 'quirky' and 'bold' if that is what they feel comfortable with, or simply sleep in the beds designed for an uninterrupted sleep in mind if they resonate with this:



Figure 4.22: Reels showing you can be 'quirky' or 'sleepy' or whoever you want to be with CitizenM.

Subtle references to this ideology observed throughout the Instagram reels demonstrate how the brand positions its culture as independent, open-minded, and one that aims to foster connections. Thereby, setting a clear tone of communication that is honest and unpretentious.

4.4: Instagram Affordances aiding Brand Communications:

This theme was particularly relevant within the interviews, where the interviewees discussed how Instagram, as a visual tool, helps the brand communicate elements of its brand identity and build communities through storytelling. As discussed by Yang (2021, p.16) Instagram is an emerging social media platform that has gained popularity for its distinct visual features, enabling users to not only upload or share but also interact and edit their posts. CitizenM leverages the platform features as well as the visual nature of the application to maintain their community and communicate their intended narratives surrounding their identity.

4.4.1. Platform Functionalities as Lifestyle Tool:

The first sub-theme identified was 'platform functionalities as lifestyle tool', which capitalizes on how CitizenM makes use of Instagram's interactive features to communicate its brand identity online. Rather than solely using Instagram to display products and services, CitizenM uses the platform to curate a lifestyle that is aspirational and relatable for their audiences. Participants discussed how they viewed Instagram and an increasingly used search engine platform that brands optimised to attract more attention through elements such as aesthetics, so that consumers can have a visual tour or get to know the 'vibe' of the environment before physically exploring it:

you're going to search it on Instagram, right? To get the vibe, understand what it's like. And so that's why it's important that we post general videos about our space, but then also you're like kind of selling a lifestyle, right?

This can be corroborated by reels that highlight 'lifestyle' trends such as reels integrating transitions, embedded fonts within visuals, supporting captions as well as music to devise a lifestyle experience:

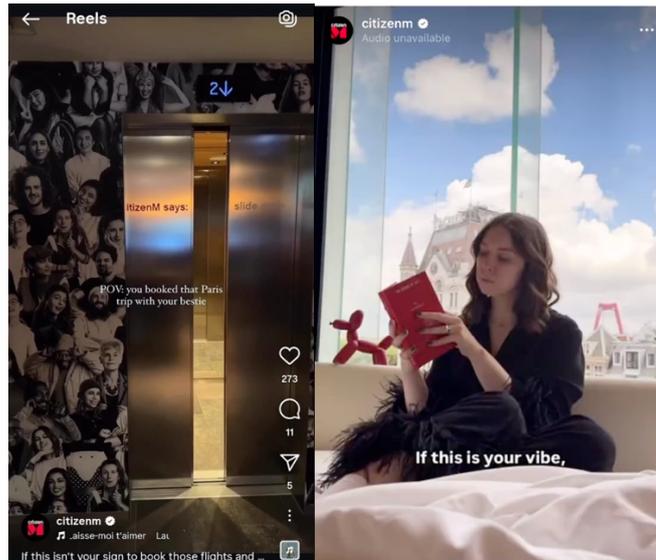


Figure 4.23: Use of platform features such as embedded fonts, captions and music to connect content with an experience.

Furthermore, Instagram being a visual tool also enables brands themselves to envision how to associate specific elements that are ingrained with their identity, such as ‘brand colors’, ‘brand fonts’ and brand specific ‘copywriting’ to tap into the consumer mindset as well as accurately portray themselves as a brand online: *“I think with Instagram, you can see how colorful it is..”* Therefore, platform itself fits with the personality of the brand itself which intends to appear as a ‘modern’ and ‘trendy’ brand, while creating opportunities to interact with their online audiences.

4.4.2. Visual Storytelling:

The second sub-theme identified was ‘visual storytelling’. This encompasses how CitizenM leverages Instagram’s unique proposition of creating compelling visual narratives to build stories that reflect the brand’s identity. As discussed by Longo and Saxena (2020, p.3-6), brands often become a gateway for consumers to envision an ideal version of themselves, that not simply reflects the brand but also their individual identity which they believe is synonymous to the brand as well:

Instagram tends to be our strongest kind of brand platform due to its visual nature and that kind of lifestyle sharing that happens on there generally...It's a great platform for you to see the visual side of it.

Instead of creating long form content that is heavy on text and demands a longer attention span, CitizenM makes use of short form content on Instagram- reels- to showcase experiences associated with the brand, subtly nudge brand values, as well as emphasize aesthetics such as art and physical

spaces. This is visible through the dominant use of narratives that highlight each of these attributes through smooth and organic transitions within a built narrative on their Instagram profile:

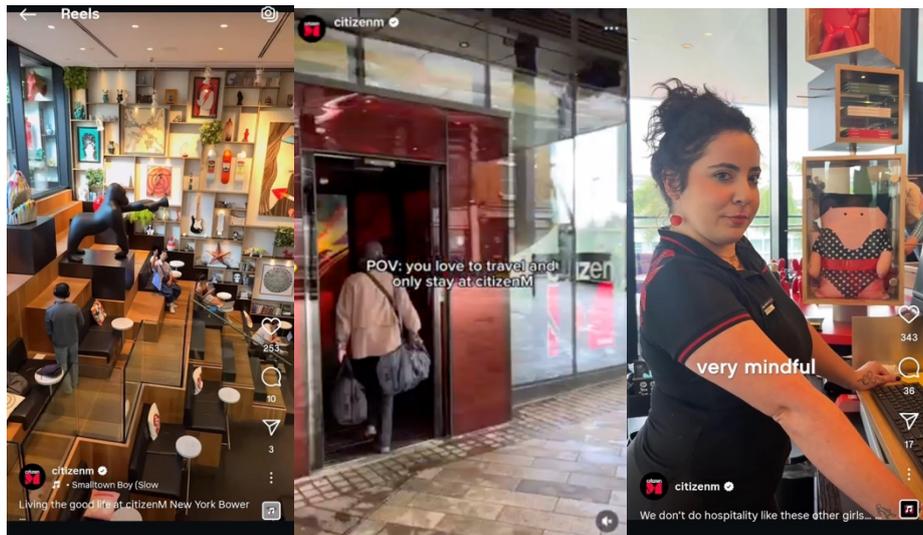


Figure 4.24: Use of reels to showcase aesthetics, physical spaces, and brand values.

However, one respondent did mention a contradicting opinion regarding the format that works best based on the intention of the post, the narrative, as well as the day of the week for instance:

....the posts probably work better just because of the longer format of them compared to like reels because they tend to be a bit shorter, right? I think that's just a creative challenge depending on what is the message ...

Evidently, the intended messaging determines the type of content format best suited to communicate the brand's identity.

4.5: Intended Consumer Mindset:

This theme covers the intended target audience of CitizenM and how they effectively communicate a specific mindset of the audience who they believe will resonate with not just the brand, but will feel they are a part of the shared spaces. While on one hand, the brand does lure guests through their picturesque views, physical spaces, and product offerings as a brand, they equally give weightage to the kind of psychological profile that would be in tune with their identity. CitizenM's messaging intends to emotionally and aspirationally trigger guests, creating visually appealing experiences involving its hotels, the destination, and a lifestyle that commences with checking in at a CitizenM hotel.

4.5.1. Aspirational Mindset:

The first sub-theme identified was ‘aspirational mindset’, which taps into the aspirations of the modern traveller who is not simply looking for a hotel to drop off their suitcases, but a hotel that involves an experience of its own. ‘Aspiration’ within this theme is observed in several lenses. One of them is the aspiration to travel for someone who either likes to travel and sees themselves as a ‘citizen of the world’, or someone who would like to live the ‘itinerary’ that they view as content on Instagram. This has been corroborated by an interviewee who mentioned that the aim is not simply to advertise the product, but also emulate the ‘feeling’ or the ‘experience’ associated with the product:

because we want to, one, communicate the product, but we also want to communicate what's the feeling, what's the experience you're going to have.

Evidence of this has also been observed on Instagram, where CitizenM creates reels echoing the ‘feelings’ as a brand that they wish to associate with, as well as a mindset that they want to resonate with:

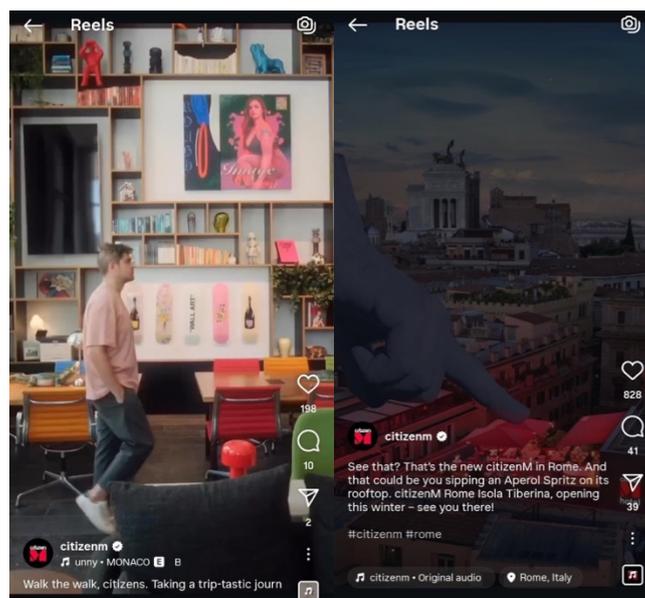


Figure 4.25: Reels showcasing ‘this could be you’, setting an aspiration to travel for the audience.

Apart from the examples mentioned, through their Instagram reels, CitizenM also creates a window to a desired lifestyle that consumers would like to emulate. For instance, reels that showcase ‘citizens’ who are portrayed as guests who check in, engage with ‘living rooms’, grab a drink on the terrace with a view, go for a stroll in the location, and interact with the culture:

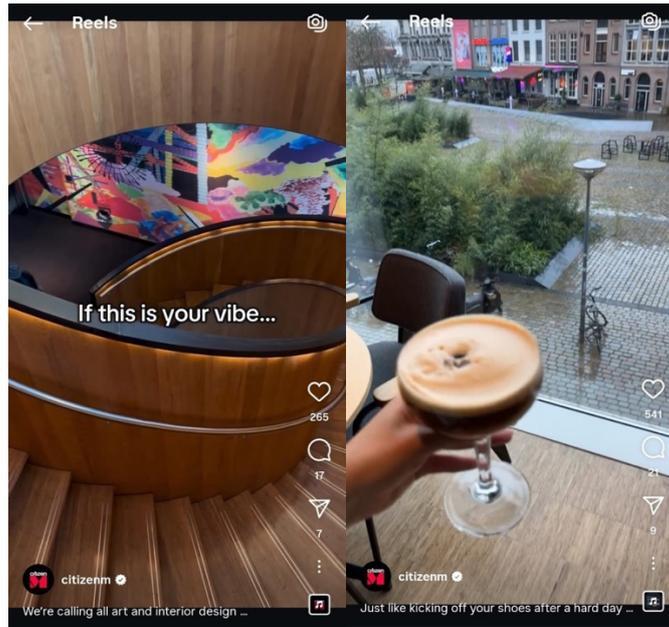


Figure 4.26: Reels emulating aspirational environments or ‘views’ where guests can imagine themselves before physically experiencing it.

This subtly nudges towards CitizenM’s intention to position itself as an aspirational brand, one that guests want to experience because of its vibrant, bold, and expressive spaces, as well as the avenue of locations where the hotels are available in. Positioning themselves as omnipresent- ‘wherever you go, you find a CitizenM’.

4.5.2. Distinct Consumer Identity:

The second sub-theme identified was ‘distinct consumer identity’, which encapsulates CitizenM’s definition of their desired ‘target audience’- who they believe, are guests identifying with their communicated identity- as well as the desired ‘target community’- the online community who get their ‘humour’. On one hand, there is a defined version of the intended audience the brand targets, keeping revenue in mind, while creating a unique portfolio of the brand online on the other hand that mimics ‘creator style’ reels to invite relatability:

.....we're quite specific in that we want it to relate to this mobile citizen, but that as a persona is so broad that I think it does strike a chord with people who are also just interested in travel.

An example of the intended target audience is visible from the repeated references to working professionals interested in working while travelling on Instagram:

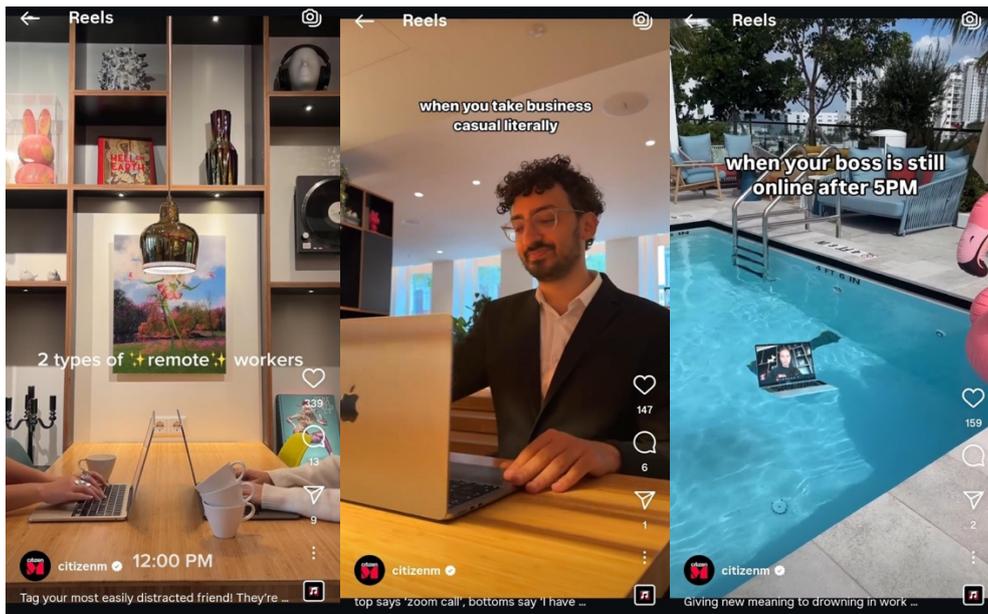


Figure 4.27: Example of repeated emphasis on working professionals in a travel setting.

The hotel, as defined by one of the respondents, is ‘designed for a very specific type of person’ who is also referred to as the ‘mobile citizen’ or ‘citizen’. The ‘mobile citizen’ was described as someone who is a frequent traveler and is cosmopolitan, not conforming to rigid definitions of what it means to travel. Furthermore, during the interviews, an interviewee mentioned how CitizenM follows a social media strategy- ‘misfit shit’- to tap onto social trends while adapting to the interests of the ‘online community’:

...we have a last one called misfit shit. I don't know if I'm allowed to swear.

... It's the last pillar where we're able to jump on trends and talk about online culture. And that's separated from talking about Citizen M.

Metaphorically, tapping into social trends is also a way that the hotel invites guests who feel they are different and do not fit in with set societal standards, or does not want to be limited to the traditional hotel models where ‘luxury’ is defined. This positions them as ‘different’, setting forth an ideology that being ‘one-of-a-kind’ is welcome at CitizenM, whether you are interested in travel or sleep.

So it's all about this idea of someone who really enjoys like convenient luxury to some extent, but not hyper luxury.

CitizenM curates an online brand identity that, on one hand, caters to potential guests who look for an overall elevated experience beyond a traditional service hotel model, while on the other hand, establishes a persona of a ‘trendy brand’ that ‘evokes resonance’. This can be seen through the kind of reels they create, which tap into social trends, while subtly showing off their physical features:

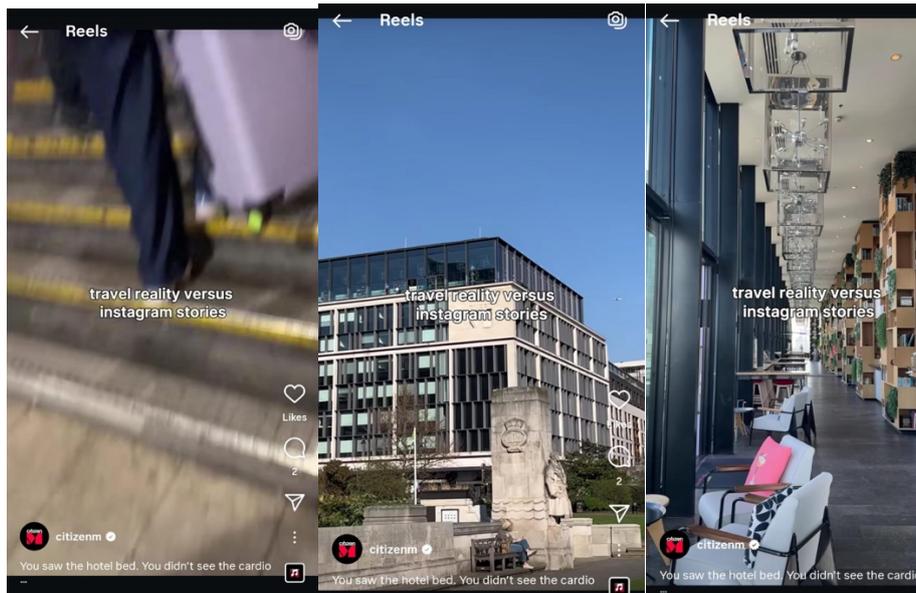


Figure 4.28: Reels tapping into social media trends while subtly showing off physical spaces CitizenM has to offer.

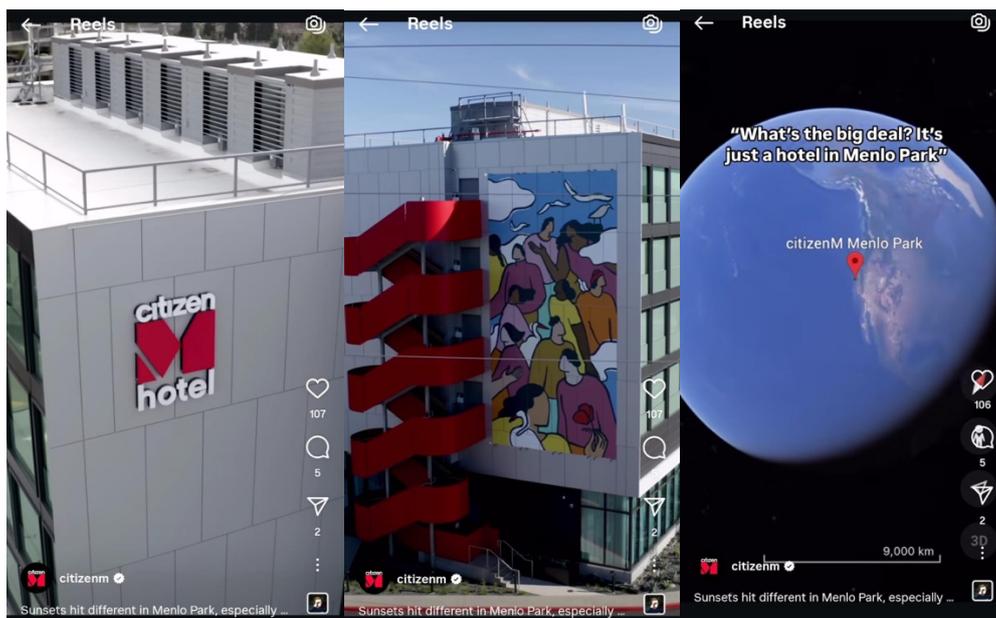


Figure 29: Reels tapping into social media trends, vividly showing physical spaces.

Therefore, as evident in the above examples, CitizenM often leverages social media trends as a bridge to maintain relevance amongst the social audience, while also selling an experience to a well-defined target audience.

4.5.3. Emotional Associations and Needs:

The third sub-theme identified is ‘emotional associations and needs’. Through this dimension, CitizenM steps into the shoes of the modern-day travelers who associate with hotels not simply as a place to stay, but also as a place of ‘belongingness’ and ‘inspiration’. This aligns with Kapferer’s component on reflection in particular, which emphasizes a brand’s ability to step into the shoes of the consumer and envision how they experience the brand through their expressions while using the products. This enables brands, and in this case CitizenM to identify how consumers engage with the products and resonate with their individual identities (Kapferer, 2008, p.186).

Honestly, they love to see our physical spaces, like our hotels....the view of the rooms, everyone loves that.

This indicates that CitizenM recognizes the value of their physical spaces in building relationships with guests, or creating a need for them to experience. As mentioned by an interviewee, it is ‘simple’ to create content in these spaces, because this gives their audience an idea of ‘what they can expect when they get there’. An example of this can be seen below:

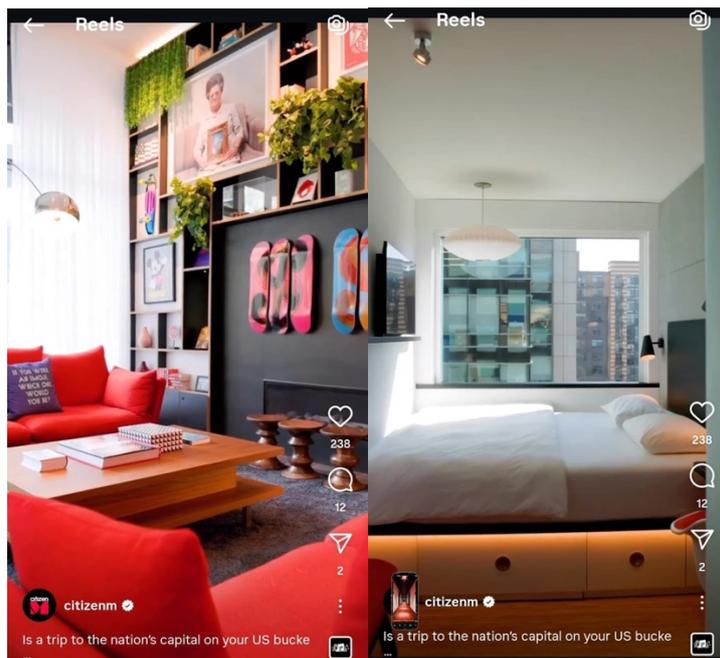


Figure 4.30: Reel showcasing ‘physical spaces’ to create a need to experience it.

Besides ‘humour’, CitizenM makes use of emotional tones to position ‘comfort’ and ‘individuality choices’ at the forefront of their identity to position themselves as ‘real caring’ for their guests. Therefore, they showcase their physical spaces as ‘social environments’ where there is room for conversations to grow, even if guests don’t know each other. One interviewee mentioned the significance of ‘sharing’ a living room with someone like-minded within the hotels that makes the stay more memorable in contrast to encountering unkind or reserved guests:

You want to share a living room with someone who you can have similar conversations with or you can have you can sit there comfortably and chat about different things and have some level of.

The emotional connection is therefore established by adapting warm, relatable messaging patterns, centring around people and interactions with ambassadors. This is addressed by an emphasis on community as well as expected interactions with ambassadors based on a brand's perception of how a consumer envisions them:

We get it and we travel the same. So you're basically fostering like a community feeling. Community is a bit of a dirty word, but basically it's about creating an understanding of like-minded people.

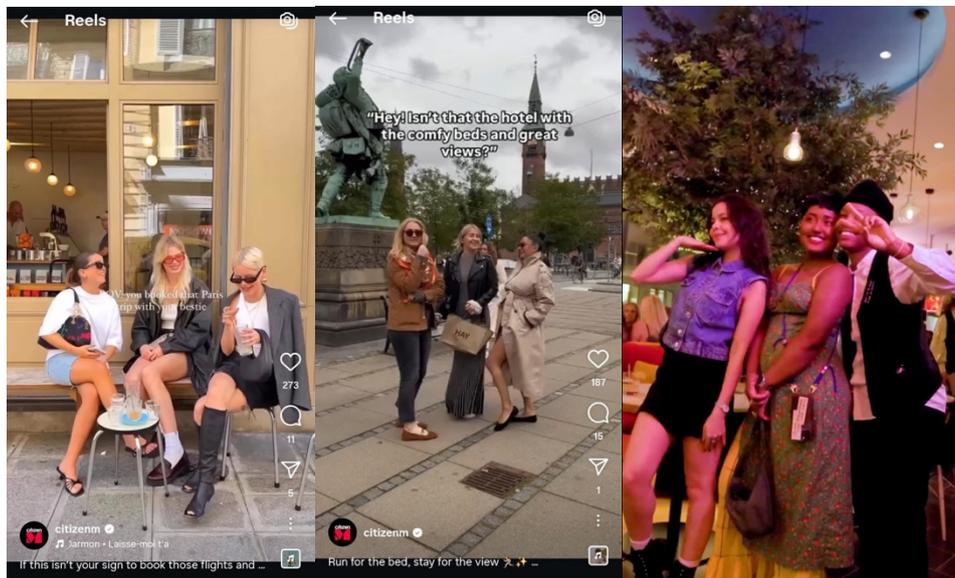


Figure 4.31: Reels showcasing 'community' and the brand's perception of how CitizenM is viewed by guests.

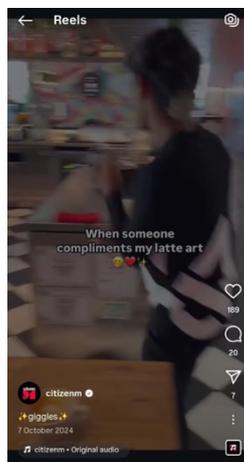


Figure 4.32: Reel showcasing a guests' point of view of how an ambassador interaction looks like.

Evidently, CitizenM identifies its consumers' need for a humane brand that is 'realistic' and taps into 'relatable moments that are kind of messy' simply because 'no one's life is like that' and is parallel to how people encounter their own homes.

4.5.4. Digitally Savvy:

The final sub-theme identified is 'digitally savvy'. This sub-theme highlights the CitizenM as a modern hotel with technology that facilitates the guest experience making it seamless and engaging. CitizenM aims to create an ecosystem for the modern-day traveller who is time-conscious, is hyper-connected, and is excited by technology ingrained within the products or services. This is evident in the subtle displays of technologies within the hotel spaces such as the living rooms as well as the guest rooms on instagram:

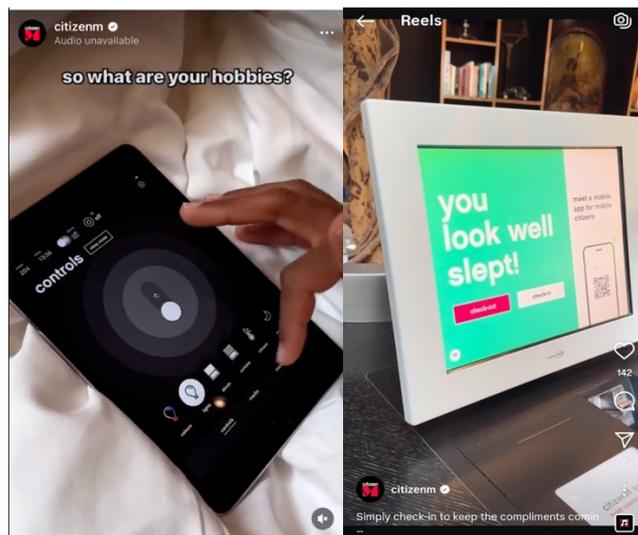


Figure 4.33: Reels showcasing CitizenM targeting consumers who are 'tech-savvy'

As apparent above, engaging with in room control systems through the iPad by adjusting the lights and lowering shades is seen as a part of the 'CitizenM experience', positioning it as a tool of personalisation where the guests can set the 'mood lights' that best reflects their moods while in their rooms. Furthermore, by targeting 'tech-savvy' audiences, CitizenM also pays an emphasis to individuals who understand social trends,

5. Conclusion:

The main purpose of the research was to investigate how CitizenM employs brand identity on Instagram. In addition to the main research question: *How does CitizenM employ brand identity on Instagram?*, this research also addresses three sub-questions to guide the research: *1) How does personality play a role in brand identity? 2) How does culture play a role in brand identity?, and 3) How does self-image play a role in brand identity?*. Two datasets were analysed to conclude with the findings: 3 expert interviews, conducted with employees working within the brand and social media team at CitizenM, alongside which 150 Instagram reels were analysed to observe how the elements of brand identity were embedded and carried out through reels. The findings of the research will be addressed in this chapter, following which the main and supporting research questions will be addressed. Finally, implications of the research will be discussed, and the chapter will conclude with limitations and the scope of future research.

5.1 Summary of Findings:

As briefly mentioned before, this research is guided by three sub-questions. To reiterate them, the first sub-question is: *'How does personality play a role in brand identity?'*. Reflecting on the analysis of the datasets, CitizenM has shown a very defined way of associating itself with attributes that they also consider a significant element of their identity pillars. The brand views itself as a 'misfit' within an industry dominated by traditional hotels and makes use of its physical spaces as well as an interplay of psychological components around personality to put forth this messaging on Instagram. Depiction of provocative artworks in shared physical spaces within the hotels, leveraging bright and bold colours that are standardized across all hotels on Instagram to advocate for an identity that disrupts the singular chain of perceptions when associating with a traditional hotel with significant emphasis on a service model. This aligns with two components within Kapferer's defined identity prism- personality and physique (Anderson, 2010, n.p.). Element on 'personality' from the brand identity prism, which believes that, similar to human characteristics, brands also have personality traits that make it simpler to picture them if the brand were in human form (Kapferer, 2008, p.184). Moreover, CitizenM recognizes the community of audiences that resonate with their brand persona, and specifically caters to them by adapting their sense of humor, lifestyle choices while travelling, as well as adding 'realism' to their content which taps into the consumer mindset. Revisiting the second component, the element of physique was also evidently utilized while drawing associations with the brand through its content on Instagram, which as defined by Kapferer is seen as one of the tangible features within the prism where the physical attributes of the brand become the foundation of a brand's identity, representing the visible and literal value of a brand (Adler, 2022,

n.p.; Mahdi et al., 2015, p. 114). Having standardized internal spaces aided the brand in maintaining a consistent persona through uniform messaging that is applicable across all hotels. This aligns with Chung and Byrom (2020, p. 75; Fan et al., 2022, p.1274) point of view on sensory elements being amongst the elements that easily resonate with consumers since they comprise discernible aspects such as physical attributes of a brand or graphic constituents such as logos or taglines. Therefore, these observations aid the purpose of the sub-question and sides with the notion that personality indeed plays a significant role while employing brand identity on social media platforms such as Instagram within the hospitality industry.

Reiterating the second sub-question: *'How does culture play a role in brand identity?'*

Drawing back on the findings of the research, CitizenM integrated culture in two distinct ways- first, a defined approach, which coincided with the brand's internally agreed upon discussions on what it stands for and will essentially be fused within its brand communications, and finally, a set of components that were established online to align with a specific community of audiences comprising travellers and aspirants. Across the interviews and evidently on Instagram, CitizenM upheld its singular Instagram profile and hotels across 36 locations as a symbol of being 'international'. While occasionally tapping into Loureiro et al., (2019, p.46) perspective on boutique hotels, mimicking the concept of 'being at home' by integrating local influences within hotels, such as- locally inspired art displayed within shared spaces as well as through its content surrounding conversations of CitizenM culture on one hand, and integrating itineraries inspired by local guides, promoting the location as well as the hotels. This subsequently taps into two elements defined by Kapferer in the identity prism- culture and reflection (Anderson, 2010, n.p.). Element of 'culture' in the brand identity prism emphasizes that culture reflects a brand or organization's fundamental principles that are not only aspirational for it to integrate, but also extend into the products and the brand communications surrounding them, influencing the interactions with consumers (Kapferer 2008, p.186). CitizenM integrates this perspective by embedding its own cultural values such as 'real caring' and 'genuine touch' by highlighting ambassadors working at the hotels as approachable, social, and amiable; and 'smart thinking' by building an ecosystem within the hotels that from the brand's perspective, keeps the consumer journey at the forefront. Moreover, the element of 'reflection' was also observed within the findings, which, as defined by Kapferer (2008, p.186), enables brands to step into the shoes of a consumer and envision how they experience the brand while engaging with the products in real time. This is evident through the brand's vision on 'M-feeling', embedding values that CitizenM believes aid guests or aspirants relate with the brand, which embodies 'inclusivity', 'differences', and 'open-mindedness' while portraying guest experiences on Instagram. Hence, the brand positions itself as one that aims to understand the culture of its primary audiences- guests,

travellers, and aspirational community that resonates with the lifestyle- and builds a strategic culture standing as a significant pillar of its brand identity. Therefore, it is evident through the observations that culture is employed within a brand's identity by employing not only a brand's aspirational values within the brand communications, but also their adaptation to the lifestyle preferences of its intended audiences.

Finally, addressing the third sub-question: *How does self-image play a role in brand identity?*. The analysis indicated that CitizenM positions itself as a lifestyle brand that expands further than the traditional perspective of hotels simply as a place to stay. CitizenM particularly leverages two of the instances provided by Treem and Leonardi (2013, p.10-30) where affordances such as visibility and associations build up upon consumers' engagement with social media platforms such as Instagram. Moreover, beyond these correlations drawn on the basis of affordances, Duffy et al. (2017, p.2) research highlights how 'imagined affordances' associated with the platforms or the content in particular also influences how brand's envision identity; consequently also impacting the perception of consumers. CitizenM views themselves as a 'facilitator', aiming to identify how their consumers engage with the brand and their services and employing similar messaging that also aligns with their brand identity across their portfolio on Instagram. This aligns with Kapferer's element on 'self-image' where consumers engaging with the brands feel when interacting with a brand and its products, including the associations they make with their individual identities in the course of interaction (Mahdi et al., 2015, p.115; Kapferer, 2008, p.186). While on one hand they utilize their physical spaces and picturesque views to resonate with guests, they also recognize a psychological profile that ideally is in tune with their offerings. Drawing back at the findings, the brand targets a defined audience who see themselves as aspirational, frequent traveller, and one who appreciates art and culture. These aspirants are emotionally bridged with the brand itself through the label- 'Citizens'- which emulate people who see themselves and their individual preferences while travelling in the brand. By mirroring the values, aspirations, and mindset of its target audience through consistent emphasis on these conversations across their Instagram profile, CitizenM ultimately aims to build a sustainable and emotionally invested relationship with a community that understands and embodies similar traits. This is mapped towards Kapferer's element on 'relationship' that revolves around the assumption that users engaging with the brand already have an existing relationship with them that involves emotional associations, and therefore, can be utilised by brands to establish a durable and loyal relationship over time (Mahdi et al., 2015, p.115). Hence, it is apparent that brands make use of consumer perceptions surround a brand and its products to navigate the strategy in embedding pillars of their brand's identity in order to create resonance and maintain long-term relationships over time.

The above mentioned questions guided the research in articulating insights to answer the main research question: *How does CitizenM employ brand identity on Instagram?*. In hindsight, the observations gathered from the findings stipulate the complexity of a brand's identity when communicated on a social media platform such as Instagram, where there is an interplay between tangible and intangible components such as 'physique', 'relationship', 'reflection' on one hand, and intangible elements such as 'personality', 'culture', and 'self-image' on the other, as discussed by Kapferer's brand identity prism (Anderson, 2010, n.p.). CitizenM leveraged Instagram's visual features to not only create a humanised image of the brand with defined traits and cultural nuances, but also anchored the platform's feature to engage consumers as an initiative to understand how consumers associate with the brand, and build relationships around them (Yang, 2021, p.16; Kapferer, 2008, p.184-186; Mahdi et al., 2015, p.115). As a brand, they positioned themselves as a modern and consumer-centric culture where the messaging mostly revolved around the 'mobile citizen' or the travellers who could be potential guests. Notably, CitizenM taps into Monica and Balas (2014, n.p.) perspective on the opportunities brought forth by social media, where brands have the possibility to learn more about their consumers from the data gathered through their engagement on the platform, and utilize this knowledge to build an identity that echoes with their intended clientele, while also generating revenue.

5.2. Theoretical Implications:

This research has theoretical implications as it contributes to research within the fields of brand communication and identity, hospitality industry, and social media with a particular emphasis on Instagram. Furthermore, the observations can also be leveraged within the field of consumer psychology, where brands can understand on what grounds consumers associate their individual identities with brands, and inculcate this knowledge within brand communication strategies while interacting with consumers online.

Previously conducted research within the hospitality and tourism industry indicated that consumers are not limited to physical encounters or interactions with brands, the guest experience involves a multi-layered cognitive involvement, which equally has an impact on the consumers (Mossberg, 2007 as cited in Veríssimo et al., 2015, p.23). This study expanded on this perspective using Kapferer's brand identity prism as a grounding framework to understand the complexity and dynamic nature of brand identity that is visible in any form of brand communication, illustrated through the use of affordances on Instagram (Mahdi et al., 2015, p.1). Hence, taking a different approach by investigating the applicability of the prism in a modern and socially relevant tool such as Instagram, instead of applying the identity prism in a static brand context.

Furthermore, this research can be considered a stepping stone for platform studies where platforms are not simply viewed as digital marketing or storytelling tools, but can also be observed as co-creators of brand meanings that are translated into long-term relationships with potential communities of consumers online. Despite geographic boundaries, hotels today leverage platform affordances to increase brand awareness and foster agreed-upon associations (Su et al., 2015; Hoffman and Fodor, 2010, as cited in Garrido-Moreno et al., 2018, p.97). Furthermore, by analysing CitizenM as a hotel, this study observed how hotels today work as cultural intermediaries besides being service providers. For instance, each CitizenM hotel displays local art and artists within their interiors, which, despite having a standardized design, is adapted to cultural and local communities. Subsequently, there is room for scholarship within platform studies as well as cultural studies within the hospitality and service sector.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research:

One of the limitations of the research is that it only focused on one social media application- Instagram- to gain knowledge regarding hospitality brands employing elements of its brand identity. However, it would have been interesting to investigate whether the observations remain consistent when other social media sites were taken into consideration, such as LinkedIn or X. On that note, it would have been equally insightful to take two distinct hotels into account to understand how the employability of brand identity is comparable in the case of boutique hotels, such as CitizenM, which advocates for affordable luxury on one hand, and Hilton hotels, which dispense a more premium service model. However, due to the limited time, word count, and resources, this research was not able to cover these dimensions, but it would be a compelling direction of research for future researchers that will further contribute towards studies within hospitality and branding.

Another significant limitation to the observations gathered in this research was posed by the recent acquisition of CitizenM hotels by Marriott which sets forth plausible speculations of rebranding across their social media platforms in the near future (Zohar, 2025, n.p.). This poses a probable challenge to the current brand identity and how it is communicated on Instagram, as content on social media is dynamic, and the observations gathered in this research only capture the brand's current strategy of integrating its brand identity within online communications. Although it would have been insightful to observe whether the brand shifts its communication strategy, and if the current identity pillars are maintained or replaced due to this handover, the limited time frame of the research unfeasible to gather both observations. However, this could be an interesting avenue for future researchers within this field to revisit and investigate how it is communicated on Instagram in

the upcoming months, and compare the evolution of the brand to determine which one is stronger and more impactful.

References

- Aaker, D. A. (2012). *Building Strong Brands*. Simon & Schuster, Limited. ISBN: 1471104389.
[https://books.google.nl/books?hl=en&lr=&id=OLa_9LePJlYC&oi=fnd&pg=PT14&dq=Aaker,+D.A.+\(1996\),+Building+Strong+Brands,+Free+Press,+New+York,+NY.+&ots=sENbPZ4Cf-&sig=gyjw35P5DEqLFz5dsVhn9y7tSTQ&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.nl/books?hl=en&lr=&id=OLa_9LePJlYC&oi=fnd&pg=PT14&dq=Aaker,+D.A.+(1996),+Building+Strong+Brands,+Free+Press,+New+York,+NY.+&ots=sENbPZ4Cf-&sig=gyjw35P5DEqLFz5dsVhn9y7tSTQ&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)
- Aaker, J. L. (1997a). Dimensions of brand personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(3), 347.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3151897>
- Antwi, S., & Adjei Oppong, E. (2021). Social media as a marketing tool: A review of existing literature. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4229288>
- Adler, M. R. (2022) BRAND ANALYSIS OF FERRARI USING KAPFERER'S BRAND-IDENTITY PRISM MODEL. ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOUR AND LEADERSHIP THEORY IN PRACTICE, 65.
https://press.mater.uni-mate.hu/38/1/Organizational%20Behaviour%20and%20Leadership_teljes_2022.pdf#page=1.00
- Abratt, R., & Kleyn, N. (2012). Corporate Identity, corporate branding and corporate reputations. *European Journal of Marketing*, 46(7/8), 1048–1063.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561211230197>
- Anderson, E. (2010). *Social Media Marketing*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-13299-5> Alhojailan, M. I. (2012, October). Thematic analysis: a critical review of its process and evaluation. In WEI International European academic conference proceedings, Zagreb, Croatia. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=0c66700a0f4b4a0626f87a3692d4f34e599c4d0e>
- Ahmad, M., & Wilkins, S. (2024a). Purposive sampling in qualitative research: A framework for the entire journey. *Quality & Quantity*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-024-02022-5>
- Alhojailan, M. I. (2012, October). Thematic analysis: a critical review of its process and evaluation. In WEI international European academic conference proceedings, Zagreb, Croatia
<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=0c66700a0f4b4a0626f87a3692d4f34e599c4d0e>
- Azungah, T. (2018). Qualitative research: Deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 18(4), 383–400. <https://doi.org/10.1108/qrj-d-18-00035>
- Brennen, B. S. (2021). *Qualitative research methods for media studies*.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003122388>

- Berry, L. L. (2000). Cultivating Service Brand Equity. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 28(1), 128–137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092070300281012>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bastos, W., & Levy, S. J. (2012). A history of the concept of branding: Practice and theory. *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 4(3), 347–368. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17557501211252934>
- Buhagiar, K., Pace, L. A., & Dingli, S. M. (2023). Defining attributes of Boutique Hotels: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, 7(1), 207–226. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jhti-09-2022-0435>
- Capitello, R., Agnoli, L., Begalli, D., & Codurri, S. (2014). Social media strategies and corporate brand visibility in the wine industry. *EuroMed Journal of Business*, 9(2), 129–148. <https://doi.org/10.1108/emjb-10-2013-0046>
- Cai, L. A., & Hobson, J. S. P. (2004). Making hotel brands work in a competitive environment. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 10(3), 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135676670401000301>
- Chung, S., & Byrom, J. (2020). Co-creating consistent brand identity with employees in the hotel industry. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 30(1), 74–89. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-08-2019-2544>
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020a). Purposive sampling: Complex or simple? research case examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 25(8), 652–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>
- CitizenM | Company Overview. (2025). <https://www.citizenm.com/company/overview>
- CitizenM. (n.d.). Retrieved in April, 2025, from <https://www.instagram.com/citizenm/>
- CitizenM. (2025). *A new breed of Hotel*. Boutique Hotels. <https://www.citizenm.com/company/about-citizenm>
- Coleman, P. (2022). Validity and reliability within qualitative research for the caring sciences. *International Journal of Caring Sciences*, 14(3), 2041-2045. <https://oro.open.ac.uk/81588/1/Coleman%20Validity%20and%20Reliability.pdf>
- Davis, S. M. (2000). The power of the Brand. *Strategy & Leadership*, 28(4), 4–9. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10878570010378636>
- Djordjevic, D., & Jankovic, M. (2015). Modern distribution and development of hotel industry in the world. *Ekonomika*, 61(3), 99–110. <https://doi.org/10.5937/ekonomika1503099d>
- Demirçiftçi, T., & Kızırmak, İ. (2016). Strategic branding in Hospitality: Case of Accor Hotels. *Journal of Tourismology*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.26650/jot.2016.2.1.0004>

- Duffy, B. E., Pruchniewska, U., & Scolere, L. (2017). Platform-Specific Self-Branding. *International Conference on Social Media & Society*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3097286.3097291>
- Fan, D. X. F., Hsu, C. H. C., & Liu, A. X. (2022). Transforming brand identity to hotel performance: The Moderating Effect of Social capital. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 47(7), 1270–1298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10963480221074278>
- Fong, L. H. N., Lei, S. S. I., Chow, C. W., & Lam, L. W. (2022). Sensory marketing in hospitality: a critical synthesis and reflection. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 35(8), 2916–2928. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijchm-06-2022-0764>
- Garrido-Moreno, A., García-Morales, V. J., Lockett, N., & King, S. (2018a). The missing link: Creating value with social media use in hotels. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 75, 94–104. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2018.03.008>
- Ghodeswar, B. M. (2008). Building brand identity in competitive markets: A conceptual model. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 17(1), 4–12. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10610420810856468>
- Gaver, W. W. (1991). Technology affordances. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems Reaching through Technology - CHI '91*, 79–84. <https://doi.org/10.1145/108844.108856>
- Gardini, M. (2015). The Challenge of Branding and Brand Management: Perspectives from the Hospitality Industry. In *Tourism and Leisure: Current Issues and Perspectives of Development* (pp. 247–268). essay, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden.
- Harvey, B. (2007). International Hotels. *Journal of Retail & Leisure Property*, 6(3), 189–193. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.rlp.5100061>
- Huston, P., & Rowan, M. (1998). Qualitative studies. Their role in medical research. *PubMed*, 44, 2453–2458. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9839063>
- Jin, C., Yoon, M., & Lee, J. (2019). The influence of Brand Color Identity on Brand Association and loyalty. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 28(1), 50–62. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-09-2017-1587>
- Janonis, V., Dovalienė, A., & Virvilaitė, R. (2007). Relationship of brand identity and image. *COMMERCE OF ENGINEERING DECISIONS*, 51(1), 69–79. <https://doi.org/10.5755/j01.ee.51.1.11465>
- Jurisova, V. (2020). Building Brand Identity on Instagram. In *ECSM 2020 8th European Conference on Social Media* (pp. 119–126). essay, Academic Conferences and publishing limited. ISBN: 1912764644. <https://books.google.nl/books?id=FCAEEAAQBAJ&pg=PA119&dq=brand+communication+i>

[n+instagram&lr=&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q=brand%20communication%20in%20instagram&f=false](https://doi.org/10.24247/ijssmrrdaug20171)

- Jain, R. (2017). Basic Branding Concepts: Brand identity, Brand Image and brand equity. *International Journal of Sales & Marketing Management Research and Development*, 7(4), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.24247/ijssmrrdaug20171>
- Jones, D. L., Day, J., & Quadri-Felitti, D. (2013). Emerging Definitions of boutique and lifestyle Hotels: a Delphi study. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30(7), 715–731. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2013.827549>
- James, N., & Busher, H. (2012). Internet interviewing. In *SAGE Publications, Inc. eBooks* (pp. 177–192). <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452218403.n12>
- Khaled, M. (2010). Increasing Brand Communication through Brand Visibility in Retail Outlets in Small Cities and Rural Areas of Bangladesh. *International Management Review*, 6(2), 83. <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1P3-2143106631/increasing-brand-communication-through-brand-visibility>
- Kamal, S. S. L. B. A. (2019). Research Paradigm and The Philosophical Foundations Of a Qualitative Study. *PEOPLE International Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(3), 1386–1394. <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2019.43.13861394>
- Kunwar, R. R. (2017). What is Hospitality? *The Gaze Journal of Tourism and Hospitality*, 8, 55–115. <https://doi.org/10.3126/gaze.v8i0.17832>
- Kuhn, K. L., Alpert, F., & Pope, N. K. (2008). An application of Keller's brand equity model in a B2B context. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 11(1), 40–58. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13522750810845540>
- King, C. (2017). Brand management – standing out from the crowd. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 29(1), 115–140. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijchm-12-2015-0711>
- Kapferer, Jean-Noël. (2008). *The New Strategic Brand Management: Creating and sustaining brand equity long term*. Kogan Page. ISBN: 0749450851 [https://books.google.nl/books?hl=en&lr=&id=8PoltiB7bicC&oi=fnd&pg=PR5&dq=Kapferer,+Jean-No%C3%ABl+\(2004\)+The+New+Strategic+Brand+Management+%E2%80%93+creating+and+sustaining+brand+equity+long+term,+London:+Kogan+Page+&ots=eAYd8BxESC&sig=qVUyGAOl3KjVBgw3Ow1-1WvFSYw&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Kapferer%2C%20Jean-No%C3%ABl%20\(2004\)%20The%20New%20Strategic%20Brand%20Management%20%E2%8](https://books.google.nl/books?hl=en&lr=&id=8PoltiB7bicC&oi=fnd&pg=PR5&dq=Kapferer,+Jean-No%C3%ABl+(2004)+The+New+Strategic+Brand+Management+%E2%80%93+creating+and+sustaining+brand+equity+long+term,+London:+Kogan+Page+&ots=eAYd8BxESC&sig=qVUyGAOl3KjVBgw3Ow1-1WvFSYw&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Kapferer%2C%20Jean-No%C3%ABl%20(2004)%20The%20New%20Strategic%20Brand%20Management%20%E2%8)

[0%93%20creating%20and%20sustaining%20brand%20equity%20long%20term%2C%20Lond
on%3A%20Kogan%20Page&f=false](https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2019.43.13861394)

- Kamal, S. S. L. B. A. (2019). RESEARCH PARADIGM AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF a QUALITATIVE STUDY. *PEOPLE International Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(3), 1386–1394. <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2019.43.13861394>
- Lo, A., & Yeung, M. A. (2019). Brand prestige and affordable luxury: The role of hotel guest experiences. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 26(2), 247–267. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356766719880251>
- Loureiro, S. M., Rita, P., & Sarmento, E. M. (2019). What is the core essence of small city boutique hotels? *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 14(1), 44–62. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijcthr-01-2019-0007>
- Longo, I., & Saxena, D. (2020). Self-brand connection in the Digital Age: A qualitative exploration of brand usage on Instagram for identity creation among millennials. *Conferência Da Associação Portuguesa De Sistemas De Informação3*. <https://aisel.aisnet.org/capsi2020/18/>
- Laestadius, L. (2016a). Instagram. In *SAGE Publications Ltd eBooks* (pp. 573–592). <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473983847.n34>
- Legard, R., Keegan, J., & Ward, K. (2003). In-depth interviews. *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*, 6(1), 138-169. https://dl1.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/484265/mod_resource/content/3/Legard_03_In-depth%20Interviews.pdf
- Laestadius, L. (2016b). Instagram. *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, 573–592. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473983847.n34>
- Lillis, B. (2014). Service Productivity in the Hotel Business. In *Driving Service Productivity: Value-Creation Through Innovation*. essay, Springer Cham Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London. ISBN 978-3-319-05975-4
- Manovich, L. (2019). The aesthetic society: Instagram as a life form. *Data Publics*, Routledge, forthcoming, 2, 19. https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/61535595/Manovich.Aesthetic_Society.201920191216-66761-1nubws0-libre.pdf?1576559806=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DThe_Aesthetic_Society_Instagram_as_a_Lif.pdf&Expires=1745785889&Signature=BIeA4VP2Y2qBTASX1~K1SMVOSUK7iDR9uySMzgorISG9eVI4BmuEz90nyrPCaIo5qjCq9T381mCt9znB~~Z5QCOtogZwnQLDEqUE2T1sF8zKVSPHoEOhgngoVCCQoOf-uBnAiC4o3IA9Z6y5le4VZ7iwxJ3Zbj~WtNcS3Ycb99pLjWLVvFBHUHn4Xwof-KcORvXQgM001qNa3pDaXu7pBBPqqsZrc4XWJj8JF~rkiMz-

[ijikhs7A3ZTEa5i~IRp~py5YjcKiN8RFRY3UdcljgJ0zOWew3-9S9iwVQaJgXYzkfcL57mr0QTa~z~iNPKYNY3cAFWcBlgg79u-3mKzA~kA &Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA](https://iiste.org/Journals/index.php/EJBM/article/viewFile/1322/1244)

- Maurya, U. K., & Mishra, P. (2012). What is a brand? A Perspective on Brand Meaning. *European Journal of Business and Management*, 4(3), 122–133.
<https://iiste.org/Journals/index.php/EJBM/article/viewFile/1322/1244>
- Mahdi, Z., Mobarakabadi, H., & Hamidi, K. (2015). Brand Identity and Its Models
https://web.archive.org/web/20180410090414id_/http://amiemt-journal.com/test2/vol2-no4/17.pdf
- Monica, B., & Balaş R. (2014). Social media marketing to increase brand awareness. *Journal of Economics and Business Research*, 20(2), 155-164.
<https://axware.nl/sites/default/files/fulltext/381-1130-1-PB.pdf>
- Moriña, A. (2020). When people matter: The ethics of qualitative research in the health and Social Sciences. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 29(5), 1559–1565.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.13221>
- Nandan, S. (2004). An exploration of the brand identity–brand image linkage: A communications perspective. *Journal of Brand Management*, 12(4), 264–278.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540222>
- Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 33(1), 93–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1547-5069.2001.00093.x>
- Ponting, S. S. (2019). Organizational identity change: impacts on hotel leadership and employee wellbeing. *Service Industries Journal*, 40(1–2), 6–26.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2019.1579799>
- Pitanatri, P. D., Hassan, A., & Witarsana, I. (2024). Digital impressions: Evaluating Instagram’s influence on hotel brand awareness in Bali. *International Journal of Tourism and Hotel Management*, 6(2), 01–11. <https://doi.org/10.22271/27069583.2024.v6.i2a.100>
- Ronzhyn, A., Cardenal, A. S., & Batlle Rubio, A. (2022). Defining affordances in Social Media Research: A literature review. *New Media & Society*, 25(11), 3165–3188.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221135187>
- Rowley, J. (2004a). Online branding. *Online Information Review*, 28(2), 131–138.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/14684520410531637>
- Ramle, O., & Kaplan, B. (2019). The power of instagram brand communities: An overview about cosmetic brands on instagram. *Florya chronicles of political economy*, 5(1), 1-14.
<https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/992946>

- Ranfagni, S., & Rosati, M. (2023). Triangulating online brand reputation, brand image, and brand identity: An Interdisciplinary Research Approach to design the pathways of online branding strategies in Luxury Hospitality. *Online Reputation Management in Destination and Hospitality*, 213–235. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80382-375-120231012>
- Stombelli, V. M. (2020). Corporate Social Responsibility in hospitality: are sustainability initiatives really sustainable? Case examples from CitizenM, Lefay and Six Senses. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 12(5), 525–545. <https://doi.org/10.1108/whatt-06-2020-0041>
- Silva, C., Silva, S., & Rodrigues, A. (2024). Instagram as a digital marketing tool of a hotel brand. *International Conference on Tourism Research*, 7(1), 390–400. <https://doi.org/10.34190/ictr.7.1.2103>
- Simmons, G. J. (2007). “i-branding”: Developing the internet as a branding tool. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 25(6), 544–562. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02634500710819932>
- Silveira, C., Lages, C., & Simões, C. (2013). Reconceptualizing brand identity in a dynamic environment. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(1), 28–36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.07.020>
- Sedalo, G., Boateng, H., & Kosiba, J. P. (2021). Exploring social media affordance in relationship marketing practices in SMEs. *Digital Business*, 2(1), 100017. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.digbus.2021.100017>
- Syahputri, R. Z. H., Muhammad Arfin, & Islahuddin, M. (2024). Enhancing hotel room bookings through Instagram marketing. *Journal of Economic Education and Entrepreneurship Studies*, 5(2), 218–227. <https://doi.org/10.62794/je3s.v5i2.3324>
- Su, N., & Reynolds, D. (2019). Categorical differences of hotel brand personality. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 31(4), 1801–1818. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijchm-05-2018-0354>
- Tuominen, P. (1999). Managing brand equity. *Lta*, 1(99), 65-100. https://lta.lib.aalto.fi/1999/1/lta_1999_01_a4.pdf
- Treem, J. W., & Leonardi, P. M. (2013). Social media use in organizations: Exploring the affordances of visibility, editability, persistence, and association. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 36(1), 143–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2013.11679130>
- Tarigan, K. E., Sawalmeh, M. H., & Stevani, M. (2021). Storytelling in instagram: Exploring a creative learning in digital era. *International Journal of English Language Studies*, 3(12), 01–09. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijels.2021.3.12.1>

- Till, B. D., Baack, D., & Waterman, B. (2011). Strategic Brand Association Maps: Developing brand insight. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 20(2), 92–100.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/10610421111121080>
- Voorveld, H. A. (2019). Brand communication in social Media: A research agenda. *Journal of Advertising*, 48(1), 14–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2019.1588808>
- Veríssimo, M., & Menezes, N. (2015). Social media as a tool to enhance customer experience in hospitality industry. *Revista Portuguesa De Marketing*, 38(34), 23-30.
<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/social-media-as-tool-enhance-customer-experience/docview/1780979994/se-2>
- Wheeler, A. (2017). *Designing brand identity: An Essential Guide for the Whole Branding Team*. John Wiley & Sons. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/lib/eur/detail.action?docID=7104518>.
- Zhang, Y. (2015). The impact of Brand Image on Consumer Behavior: A Literature Review. *Open Journal of Business and Management*, 03(01), 58–62.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojbm.2015.31006>
- Zohar, E. W. (2025, May 2). *Lifestyle brand citizenm acquired by Marriott International for \$355 million*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ericawertheimzohar/2025/05/02/lifestyle-brand-citizenm-acquired-by-marriott-international-for-355-million/>

APPENDIX A: Coding tree and Coding frame

1. Coding Tree

Themes	Sub-themes	Open codes
Brand Communication strategy	Brand associations through messaging	Good and consistent copywriting
		Modern travel culture
		Art and local culture
	Strategic positioning	Core Branding elements
		Positioning as a lifestyle brand
		Differentiating in positioning
		Appeal to creative audiences
	Content strategy	Convenience over luxury
		Visual brand consistency
		Aesthetics embedded in storytelling
Brand Personality	Consumer-centric Communication	Utilising humour and quirky elements
		Short form content [reels]
	Bold and Disruptive identity	Realistic and relatable content
		Emphasis on Community feeling
		Lifestyle branding
Brand Personality	Relatable Millennial core	Straightforward tone of communication
		Provocative and cheeky tone
	Approachable persona	Unconventional hotel cues
		Distinct design philosophy
		Personification as human
		Millennial humour
		Mimicking creator style communication
		Emotional branding
		Informal language

		Friendly persona Warm and welcoming persona Global and local cues Open-mindedness Cosmopolitan brand Inclusive and diverse
	Nature of Worldliness	
Culture and Values rooted in Identity	Global vs Local culture	Cultural nuances Locally inspired traditions in branding (Easter) Location based branding Integrating Global with local tone of voice
	Artistic and aesthetic sensibilities	Global and local art Bold colours Physical spaces and interior design Hotels as creative spaces
	Internalised values and CitizenM Spirit	Cultural values Emotional branding (M-feeling) Advocating Affordable luxury Encouraging differences and individuality
Instagram Affordances for Brand Communications	Platform functionalities as a lifestyle tool	Editability Engagement Visual features Shareability
	Visual Storytelling	Brand colours and aesthetics Visual representation of narratives Integrated brand values Storytelling abstract associations (CitizenM feels like home)
Intended Consumer Mindset	Aspirational Mindset	Citizen of the world

For Relatability

Depiction of desired experiences

Design awareness and artistic taste

Distinct Consumer Identity

Brand uniqueness over mass appeal

Mirroring consumer's lifestyle preferences (self-image)

Travellers as cultural insiders

Emotional associations and needs

Comfort and belongingness

Individual choices in guest experiences

Physical spaces for bonding and growth

Realistic interactions with ambassadors

Digitally savvy

Digital nomads

Resonate with social trends

Technological preferences

Seamless experiences

2. Coding Frame

Concept	Open Code	Description
Brand identity	Core branding elements	The use of visual identity cues such as use of logo, brand-specific colours, slogans.
	Personification as human	Human-like characteristics to the brand such as the use of humour or boldness defining characteristic of the brand.
	Emotional branding	The use of emotional cues to evoke a sentimental connection with the consumers such as joy, belongingness, nostalgia.
	Differentiation in positioning	Use of cues that set CitizenM apart from other hotels- affordable luxury, non-traditional.
	Lifestyle branding	Use of cues that reflect a specific lifestyle- modern, tech-savvy, youthful, frequent traveller.
	Brand storytelling	Use of narratives or themes to resonate with the brand, such as travel, design, culture-reinforcing how the brand defines itself through reels.
Social media affordances	Visual storytelling	Refers to the brand's use of visual cues such as colour

		pallets, architecture and people to convey certain narratives or emotions through the platform's affordances.
	Platform-specific affordances	How CitizenM uses the features and tools in Instagram to communicate their brand identity online: Reels, filters, background music, voiceover, captions.
	Consistency	The uniform use of brand specific colours, tone of voice, narratives across CitizenM's profile.
Kapferer's brand identity prism	Physique	Use or discussion tangible and visible elements such as- design, architecture, rooms.
	Personality	Use of personality traits within the tone of voice- wit, humour, bold, approachable.
	Culture	Use of cultural elements such as diversity (in art, employees, guests), destinations, values highlighted through reels that show work culture, different types of guests, travel habits.
	Relationship	Use of cues that highlight relationships between CitizenM

and the guest such as: curated experiences, check-ins, consumer interactions

Reflection

Use of cues that highlight the targeted consumer for CitizenM such as portrayal of professionals, travellers through visuals and use of tone of voice, inviting them to feel a part of a larger lifestyle brand

Self-image

Use of cues by CitizenM that enables the consumers to feel like they embody the traits reflected by the brand: trendy, modern day traveller, drawn to art.

APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

1. Interview Guide:

Expert Interview Guide:

Introduction

Purpose of the Interview: The aim of the research is to understand CitizenM's brand identity on Instagram.

Confidentiality: Ensure responses will be anonymized and used for academic research.

Consent: Confirm permission to record if necessary.

The data gathered through this interview will be used for research purposes only and the access will be restricted to me and my supervisor. This interview will be recorded. You may choose not to disclose your name and use a different one for this interview. The participation is voluntary and if you feel uncomfortable with any question, please feel free to say so and we can skip the question. I appreciate your participation in this interview and would like to thank you for taking the time to be here. If you consent to this, we can proceed with the interview:

● Background:

- ○ Can you introduce yourself and your role in CitizenM's branding or marketing Team? [you can also choose to pick a pseudo name if you choose not to disclose your name]
- Do you believe branding plays an important role in the hospitality industry?

1. Understanding CitizenM's Brand Identity

1. 1. How would you describe CitizenM's brand identity in a few words?
 - a. How do you associate these words with CitizenM?
2. Do you think these are particularly relevant in the hospitality industry?
 - a. If so, why?
 - b. If not, why?
3. Are there certain pillars that represent the core of CitizenM as a brand online?
 - a. What are they?
4. What is the role of social media plays a role in communicating CitizenM's brand identity Online?
 - a. Is Instagram a tool that aids this purpose?
 - b. How do you think CitizenM's Instagram presence reflects this identity?
 - c. What feelings or emotions do you aim to evoke through Instagram content?
 - d. How does Instagram help in reinforcing CitizenM's core brand values?

5. In your opinion, how do followers perceive CitizenM's brand on Instagram?

2. The Role of Personality in Brand Identity

6. Do you think Personality can contribute to a Brand's identity? [Hospitality sector]

a. Why do you think so?

7. How would you describe CitizenM's brand personality?

a. *What associations with the brand are you referring to through these personality traits?*

8. How do you think CitizenM reflects these when communicating their brand online?

9. Is there a specific audience you hope/ aim to resonate with this brand personality online?

a. Could you specify?

b. Is this also something that you consider when reflecting your brand online?

c. What personality traits do you target?

i. or replicate?

d. How do you do that?

i. Could you give an example of how Instagram plays a role in this?

10. How do you feel CitizenM's personality resonates with its audience? (

11. What types of Instagram content (Reels, Stories, captions, visuals) best express this personality?

a. *Why do you think so?*

12. Have you faced any challenges in maintaining a consistent brand personality across different markets [Different CitizenM hotels in Europe and America]?

a. *If yes, what are they?*

i. *Why do you think these challenges arose?*

b. *If No? Why do you think so?*

3. The Role of Culture in Brand Identity

11. What are the any cultural values that the brand abides by while branding online?

12. How does CitizenM integrate cultural elements into its Instagram branding?

13. What role does local culture play in shaping CitizenM's content strategy for different audiences?

14. Can you share any examples where cultural adaptation was necessary for an Instagram campaign?

15. How do you balance maintaining a global brand identity while respecting local cultural preferences?

16. How important do you think cultural authenticity is for brand success on Instagram?

4. The Role of Self-Image in Brand Identity

16. How do you think CitizenM's Instagram branding aligns with its audience's self-image?
17. In what ways does CitizenM's Instagram content encourage followers to see themselves as part of the brand?
18. Do you think users engage more with content that aligns with their lifestyle and aspirations?
19. How does user-generated content (e.g., guests tagging CitizenM) play a role in brand identity?
20. What value do you think self-image alignment has in building long-term brand loyalty?)

5. Wrap-Up

21. In your opinion, what makes CitizenM's Instagram branding successful?
 - a. *Why?*
22. Is there anything you aim to achieve from a brand identity perspective in the coming years?
 - a. *If yes, what are a few examples?*
23. Is there anything else you'd like to add about how CitizenM builds its brand identity on Instagram?

2. Overview of Interviewees:

(Pseudo) Names	Gender	Role within Organization	Place of Residence
James	Male	Head of Brand Design at CitizenM	The Netherlands
Elena	Female	Social Media Coordinator at CitizenM	The Netherlands
Kiara	Female	Marketing Coordinator at CitizenM	The Netherlands

APPENDIX C: Consent form [sample]

**CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY,
CONTACT:**

[Aarushi Roy Chowdhury, 560993]

DESCRIPTION

You⁴ are invited to participate in a research about [topic of the study]. The purpose of the study is to understand [RQ in lay language].

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to [participate in a survey / participate in an experiment / be interviewed / be part of a focus group / be observed while you X].

In general terms,⁵

- - in the interview my questions will be related to CitizenM's brand identity

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make [an audio / a video] recording of the interview / focus group.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS [alternatives A and B are presented below, but there may be further variations]

A. As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information [such as XXX] in the study. To participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc.].

B. I am aware that the possibility of identifying the people who participate in this study may involve risks for ... [Explain potential risks for the participant's reputation, help, social relations, etc.]. For that reason—unless you prefer to be identified fully (first name, last name, occupation, etc.)—I will not keep any information that may lead to the identification of those involved in the study. I will only pseudonyms to identify participants.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point. [If participant observation is involved]: Every time I want to accompany you in any activity (such as XX, XX, XX), I will ask you your permission again.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take [approximate amount of time]. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

DATA COLLECTION AND RETENTION

During [the interview/survey/focus group], the following personal data will be collected from you: Name, age, gender, ..., audio or visual recordings, occupation, cultural background, ethnic background, sentiments about / feelings about / opinions about, IP address, information about physical or mental health.

[In addition, it is also possible that you will talk about your political affiliation and religious or philosophical beliefs and those of others, as these may also relate to your opinion about [...].]

If compensation/credits/sharing of results applies.: I need your bank account number, to transfer the payment. // I need your student number, to award credits.

I also need your [email address; home address], to send the results of the study to you [by email; by post].

Your data will be retained for a minimum of [specify time, ex: 5 years]. I retain the data so that other researchers have the opportunity to verify that the research was conducted correctly.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your

identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— [contact person in the dept., faculty or university, e-mail address.]

Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email the [add name and email address of student], or visit www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl. (T: 088 - 1805250)

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name Signature Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name Signature Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep. ⁶

APPENDIX D: AI Declaration form

Student Information

Name: Aarushi Roy Chowdhury

Student ID: 560993

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. Debora Ramos Antunes da Silva

Date: 26th June 2025

Declaration: Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Turboscribe.AI (Transcriptions)], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

Extent of AI Usage

I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative

AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: 

Date of Signature: 26th June 2025

2. AI prompts:

b. Turboscribe.AI

The Voiceover files were uploaded and transcribed without a prompt. A selection was made to identify the speakers.