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Partnering Strategies of Music Media and Commercial Brands: the Case of Boiler Room x Ballantine's True Music

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Master in New Media Management

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PhD Jorge Samuel Pinto Vieira, Assistant Professor
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SOCIOLOGIA
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Resumo

O estudo centra-se nos tipos de parcerias de marcas em geral, e em especial, no caso da Boiler Room e Ballantine's. O objetivo principal da pesquisa é descobrir quais os tipos de colaborações possíveis entre os *media* e uma marca comercial e, em particular, das marcas mencionadas. Com base nisto, interessou aprofundar a questão de quais os potenciais resultados que poderiam ser alcançados com a colaboração e quais as possíveis oportunidades futuras.

O objetivo principal é a criação de uma proposta de classificação, baseada neste caso empírico, das alianças orientadas para a comunicação de marcas com características específicas.

A primeira parte consiste numa sistematização da literatura académica existente sobre parcerias. A segunda parte foca-se na parceria específica, sob a forma de um estudo de caso, alicerçado em entrevistas semiestruturadas com representantes de ambas as marcas e a análise de conteúdo das comunicações em rede nos *social media* da Boiler Room e da Ballantine's (departamento global e russo) ao longo dos últimos sete anos, resultando num corpus empírico de 19563 publicações.

Como principais resultados, a pesquisa mostrou que o caso específico de parceria é um exemplo de *co-branding*, e não tanto um patrocínio ou marketing de causa, embora a função de endosso de valores possa posicioná-lo de forma diferente. As principais funções dessa parceria não são apenas o alcance de um novo público, o crescimento da conscientização e do reconhecimento, mas também a transferência de imagem, o rejuvenescimento do público-alvo e a geração de conteúdo para ambas as marcas.

Palavras-chave: co-branding, alianças de marketing.

Abstract

The study focuses on brand partnership types in general, and the case of Boiler Room and Ballantine's in particular as an example of prolonged collaboration between a media and a commercial brand. The research question is what the possible types of collaborations between music media and a commercial brand in are general and particularly in the specific case of the mentioned brands and, based on that, what results could be achieved within it for both the media and the brand and what are its possible further opportunities.

The main aim is the creation of a proposal of classification of the communication-oriented alliances of brands and case-based relative characteristics.

The first part is achieved through the systematization of the existing academic literature on partnerships. The second part is focused on the specific partnership. It consists of a case-study, grounded on semi-structured interviews of the representatives of both brands and content analysis of social media communications of Boiler Room and Ballantine's (Global and Russian department) over the period of the last seven years – 19563 social media posts.

As main results, the research showed that the specific case of partnership is a co-branding example and not a sponsorship or cause-related marketing, although the function of the values endorsement may position it differently. The main functions of such partnership are not only the reach of a new audience, awareness and recognition growth but also image transfer, target audience rejuvenation and content generation for both brands.

Keywords: co-branding, marketing alliances.

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Introduction

Brand collaborations cannot be called “an emerging trend” since it has been highly popular in different industries for at least past few decades. A brief study of cases like Nike and Apple, GoPro and Red Bull, UNICEF and P&G, Coca Cola & the 2016 Olympics collaborations shows that it is possible to identify numerous variations of brand partnership types with a significant difference both in their terms and results. In relevant studies, scholars tend to call them in many names – from the most general “brand collaborations” or “marketing alliances” to “sponsorship” and “cause-related marketing”. What are the differences, if there are any, between those terms/concepts? Which of them work best for specific collaborations between different types of brands?

In this study, the case of an online music-focused streaming and media platform Boiler Room and a whisky brand Ballantine’s collaboration is chosen as an example of how a media and a commercial brand can partner, and how that partnership can be defined.

The specific choice of these brands was made taking into consideration, first of all, the duration of the partnership (more than 7 years) which indicates its success and value for both parties. The other significant reasons were the amount of the available data and the focus on brand collaborations in general from both partners. Last, but not least, it is important to mention that the brands are very different in their positioning and thus it is easier to follow the changes in respective brand images and communications.

At first glance, it seems that a niche underground music platform and a global mass-market brand are impossible to combine and to create a secure associative connection between, but an ongoing partnership between the mentioned brands has proven to last for more than five years on global and local levels and to get recognition of the targeted audiences. Moreover, to further attest this symbolical and media capital, the list of long-term partners of Boiler Room as media includes several international brands such as Ray-Ban, Red Bull, Adidas, Apple Music and others.

While Boiler Room has taken this approach for almost ten years now, many other music and niche art media started to follow this path only in 2020, forced by the pandemic crisis and a changing source of income and development. Not only the media but also the commercial brands seek to find new ways of reaching the audience, raising the awareness or even changing their image nowadays. That is why, apart from the importance of the definition and systematisation of the possible types of brand collaborations, it is essential to identify the types and the benefits of a working model that could be later applied to similar cases.

Thus, this study aims to analyse the case of Boiler Room and Ballantine's partnership in order to create recommendations for further development of the relevant brand partnerships.

This way, the research question can be articulated as follows: *what are the possible types of long-term brand collaborations between music media and a commercial brand in general and particularly in the specific case of the mentioned brands and, based on that, what results could be achieved within it for both the media and the brand and what are its possible further opportunities?*

The study hypothesises is: Boiler Room and Ballantine's Russia collaboration can be characterised as sponsorship within which Ballantine's aims to reach its target audience, yet to justify the lack of congruence between the brands' images both Ballantine's and Boiler Room portrait it as cause-related marketing.

In order to prove or deny the mentioned hypothesis, the more specific questions that will be addressed, such as:

1. What are the available types of long-term brand collaborations?
2. What is the difference between different types of brand collaborations?
3. What is the aim of Boiler Room x Ballantine's collaboration?
4. How do both brands communicate their collaboration?
5. Could be the Boiler Room x Ballantine's model of partnership applied further, to different commercial brands and niche media?
6. What are the possible outcomes of such partnerships for both media and commercial brands?

Thus, the study should result in the theoretical systematisation of the long-term brand collaborations, identification of the Boiler Room x Ballantine's Russia case and further recommendations for the brands.

To answer the questions mentioned above, the research will be conducted within the following steps:

1. Construction of a theoretical framework analysis of the brand collaborations concepts based on an academic literature review;
2. Boiler Room x Ballantine's Russia case study – including *online* social media and content analysis;
3. Expert interviews with the representatives of the Boiler Room and Ballantine's Russia

The theoretical part consists of determining the current state of literature and appropriate terminology. As it appears and mentioned later, there is no proper concept of brand collaborations study that could be applied to this specific case hence the analysis results in creation of classification system of brand partnerships and conceptualization that is applied to the further empirical part.

However, within the literature review, the main sources, that laid the foundation for the operationalization of the terms used, were reviews of similar brand partnerships conducted over time by Blackett and Boad (1999) and Geraldine Michel and Reine Willing. (2020) In their classifications, they largely complement each other, creating a basis for understanding various terms. However, after a more detailed analysis, contradictions and uncovered types of relations were noticed, which were further explained with the help of more narrowly specialized sources. Based on this, we have created our own classification system for long-term partnerships.

The empirical part includes mixed methods – respective case study, two semi-structured expert interviews and a.

The empirical research is aimed to understand and classify the respective case of Boiler Room and Ballantine's according to the created terminology and questionnaire. Thus, the primary aim is to answer the respective questions and the additional intention is to identify the specific characteristics of the case. In order to get reliable data and cross-confirm it, mixed methods are used.

Primarily, both brands are studied separately and within their collaboration based on open-source data – including financial and strategical reports for stakeholders from Pernod Ricard for the past decade and, as well, the archives of Boiler Room. That way, there is a primary information based on which it is possible to create more specific questions for the following studies.

Particularly, it created a basement for semi-structured interviews, as it allowed to identify the key points to be discussed. In both cases, the key questions referred to the aim of collaboration and brand transformations of each one on the respective side.

Last, but not least was performed a quantitative content analysis of 19563 social media posts of Boiler Room, Ballantine's and Ballantine's Russia that were extracted from their three main social media channels – Facebook, Twitter and a Russian social media VK. The data was collected via automatic platforms like Popsters and Phantom Buster and was coded based on mention of partnerships and analysed semi-manually using Microsoft Office Excel. The hypothesis for each test were formulated based on the questions required for the classification that were not answered withing first two empirical methods.

Thus, though a mix of the various types of analysis it was possible to not only cross-verify data, but to extend beyond the initial list of questions.

Brand collaboration types – theoretical framework

As mentioned, although brand collaborations are usual nowadays and play a significant role in modern marketing communications, it is still difficult to define a clear conceptual divide between different form of collaborations. First of all, the area is still relatively unstudied and considered to be more of a practical interest rather than a scholar which results in the lack of theoretical studies focusing on identifying the framework and the terminology (Bengtsson, Servais, 2004). Secondly, the possible differentiation would be contingent since, in search of new forms, brands often mix the different tools and approaches. Moreover, in the case of media, the divide between the different forms is even less clear due to the specifics of the product – symbolic and non-material. That said, it must be emphasised that a clear operationalisation and categorisation are still needed in order to differentiate the evaluation approaches.

The first chapter of this study is focused on a literature review and theoretical overview of the key terms that may characterise brand and media relationship in collaborative projects in general and the Boiler Room x Ballantine’s case in particular.

Brand collaborations may include partnerships on every level – from production or supply chain to communication only and even short one-time actions or promo. This particular study is focused on long-term partnerships that may be relevant to media-brand partnerships. It does not include traditional formats (such as traditional product placement or native advertising) as a separate form of a partnership but rather an instrument in a partnership – as on their own these actions do not require any strategic partnership with non-monetary involvement of both sides (Michel & Willing, 2020).

2.1. Marketing alliance

One of the proposed terms among the academic literature, used to identify the relationship between partnering brands, is “marketing alliance”. The term was introduced by Western scholars in 90s to explain the marketing partnering relationship between different brands that are different from classical vertical integration supplier-buyer (Achrol, Scheer, & Stern, 1990; Anderson & Narus, 1990; Bucklin & Sengupta, 1993).

It is based on the symbiotic nature of partnerships – and especially in co-marketing scenario. One of the pioneers of this concept of the “symbiotic marketing” is Adler who was studying the different forms of the relations between companies – including the aforementioned horizontal integrations. According to him, symbiotic marketing is a win-win scenario of consolidation of two or more independent companies’ resources that results in marketing enhancement for both. The resources include both material aspects (such as, for example, production or human resources) and marketing (e.g., research, promotion, etcetera). (Varadarajan & Cunningham, 1995)

Morgan and Hunt later specified this concept and suggested a classification for the relationship types from partnering organisations dividing it into four categories: suppliers, buyers, internal structures and external partners (such as competitors, non-profit organisations or government) (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

It is essential to emphasise the last category since some scholars before that did not include that kind of relations in their definition of the co-marketing or co-marketing alliances, focusing on partnerships of the producers of complementary goods (e.g., dog food and pet grooming) (Anderson & Narus, 1990).

Overall, being a broad concept, co-marketing may be defined not only by the partnership’s type but also by its aim which consists in achievement of the synergetic alliance that results in an outcome that is bigger than the sum of the ingredients (Ruekert, 1994).

For this dissertation, the latter approach seems to be the most relevant since it focuses neither on production nor on the product – which is crucial while speaking about media.

While mentioning marketing alliances, it is also essential to notice that the key characteristics that influence the choice, success and effect of a partnership vary within different studies. One of the primary and most proven models was suggested by Bucklin and Sengupta (1993) and implies that the key factors are the following:

- Project management (including the balance in power, managerial balance, conflict);
- Project payoff (as expectations about opportunities to achieve and costs);
- Partner match (prior history, organisational compatibility);
- Rate of technological change.

Speaking about the outcomes of such partnerships, most authors mention that the main profit of marketing alliance is an opportunity to reach new markets, raising awareness and reaching beyond their core competitions (Bucklin & Sengupta, 1993; Ruekert, 1994)

2.2. Co-branding

Co-branding is another form of collaborations between different companies. To begin with, it is necessary to mention that there is no consensus on whenever it differs from marketing alliance or is a form of it.

Currently, there is a gap between theoretical operationalisation of the term and the practical use. While most of the non-scholar articles tend to differ the terms by the outcome of both (Chmielewska, 2018), scholars tend to identify co-branding as a form of marketing alliance. (Капустина & Хмелькова, 2010, p. 93).

In this study, the second approach is adopted due to several reasons. Firstly, the adopted in this study definition of the marketing alliance focuses on the initial aim of the partnership and not on the resulting outcome. This way, the empirically acclaimed approach could not be adopted. Moreover, quite often, there is no possibility to determine certainly the potential specific outcome from the theoretical point of view.

Secondly, in most of the studies, both concepts are approached in the same way, and many scholars tend to use the same examples or definitions for both (examples given further).

Co-branding as a term is used more widely rather than marketing alliance, but when it comes to a clear definition that does not help much since there are several approaches and there is no one that would be generally and universally accepted (Richardson et al., 2008, pp. 1–12).

Before examining the differences deeply, it would be essential to mention that all the reviewed scholars agree that co-branding is a form of partnership between two or more brands in which all the participants' brand names are retained (Blackett & Boad, 1999). Geraldine Michel and Reine Willing in their recent book also specify that the names could be retained not only within the direct wording used but also through the symbolic meaning (Michel & Willing, 2020). Also, undoubtedly, is the aim of co-branding which consists of empowering brand image and brand awareness (Voss & Tansuhaj, 1999).

Even within those fundamental definitions of co-branded products, various approaches for the exact definition are available.

First, one consists of the generalisation of the brand partnerships and is somewhat similar to the aforementioned adopted definition of the marketing alliance. Among the others, Ruekert supports this approach, defining co-branding as a long- or short-term combination of two or more individual brands or products, that may be expressed physically, combining several products or names in one product or nominally through shared advertising (Ruekert, 1994). This conceptual approach is also supported by Leuthesser, Kohli and Suri, who determine co-branding as any pairing of two brands in a marketing context (Leuthesser, Kohli, & Suri, 2003).

Although the approach is comprehensive and could create misinterpretations, it is still one of the most used, especially when it comes to practical implementations. This approach gives both pragmatic and notional flexibility and subsumes the further categorisation of sub-types.

On the contrary, the second proposal defines the co-branding most narrowly, presuming that it always results in a new separate and unique product that incorporates both brands (Park, Jun, & Shocker, 1996)

This approach separates the co-branding from any other form of brand alliances, primarily promotional, and it is often used in case of consumer goods. Nevertheless, many academics tend to deny this definition, including such types of marketing as sponsorship as a sub-form of co-branding (Nunes, Dull, & Lynch Accenture, 2003).

In addition to that, it would be essential to include the distinction from other forms suggested by Blackett and Board and used at Interbrand that is based on the created values and the duration of the partnership. Based on it, co-branding is a form of co-operation between several well-known brands of medium-to-long-term duration. (Blackett & Boad, 1999)

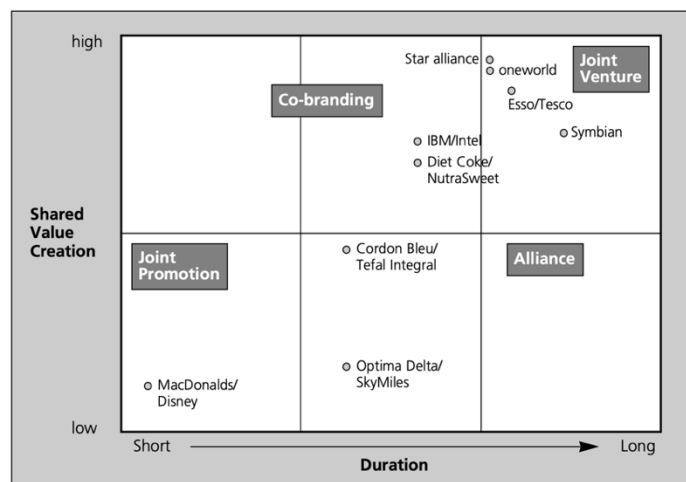


Figure 1. Co-branding distinguished from other forms of co-operative venture (Blackett, Boad, 1999)

Concluding all those mentioned above, it may be noticed that there are a few characteristics that do combine within most of them. While critical incorporating the stated definitions, a compromising concept is defined and adopted in this research. This meta-conceptual proposal may be articulated as: *a co-branding is a form of partnership between two or more brands in which all the participants' brand names are retained in use of either the respective wording or the related symbols, and that results in co-branded communications that support a product, a service or an activity in which both brands play a significant role.*

That said, the collaboration does not have to result in a unique and separate product ultimately, yet it allows not including the brand collaboration that happens only within the promo communications.

2.1.1 Co-branding typology

The further study of the terms used to describe the collaborations would not be comprehensive enough without a brief overview of the main of them. It is essential to mention that the further study only includes the classification that falls under the stated definition of the co-branding used in this study and does not include other concepts (for example, those that presume that co-branding ultimately results in the creation of a new unique product).

It is also important to note that the other characteristics are further applied in the case study of Boiler Room x Ballantine's collaboration.

First, one dates back to the study by Blackett and Boad (1999) and refers to their definition above. As they stated that one of the central values of the co-branding is the quick access to the other brand's customer base, they based their typology on the aim and results of brand collaboration and shared value creation, stated from lowest to the highest (Blackett, Boad, 1999):

- Reach/Awareness co-branding – the simplest and the most superficial type when the brands simply
- Values Endorsement co-branding – the co-operation based on the values that companies have or want to achieve (quite often related to charity or brands with a strong and clear mission statement);

- Ingredient co-branding – most often applied to products when one brand states that some parts/elements (“ingredients”) were produced by the other brand this way gaining the desired attributes and values of the other brand. However, Blackett and Boad highlight that this concept applies to them as well, stating as an example the HBO movie channel in premium hotels at that time;
- Complimentary Competence co-branding – the most potent form of co-branding that may even transform into a joint venture or long-term alliance. Usually applies to 2 brands that are of the same level recognition and have related products or services and includes a range of shared components.

This classification was later modified by Erevelles et al. (2008) with the focus on the relationship between brands and included ingredient co-branding, composite/ complementary co-branding, licensed co-branding, and umbrella co-branding. However, the authors neither proved the categorisation nor specified the meaning of each (Erevelles, Stevenson, Srinivasan, & Fukawa, 2008).

The most recent classification was suggested by Michel and Willing in 2020 and included different forms of collaborations, some of which fall under the “co-branding” category (2020):

- Co-branded products – include co-creation and co-naming of a product;
- Co-branded communications – includes the creation or promotion of a standard message;
- Co-branded experiences – a creation of shared experience (such as events, stores);
- Co-branded distribution – basically, exclusive distribution of products.

Michel and Willing use this classification along with a deeper one which is based on types of partners involved. For instance, they are one of the few to mention collaborations not only between two or more commercial brands but also about influencers, sports organisations cultural institutions, good causes (often mixed with sponsorship) (Michel & Willing, 2020).

Within this frame, Michel and Willing consider the collaboration between music festivals and commercial brands to be a co-branded experience collaboration with a cultural organisation. As for good cause-related collaborations, according to Michel and Willing, this is limited to non-governmental (non-profit) organisations (2020)

Both concepts seem to be close, firstly, to one another, and secondly to sponsorship concept.

2.3. Sponsorship

As mentioned previously, sponsorship is defined through different perspectives as sometimes considered to be a separate form of marketing (Blackett & Boad, 1999), sometimes a part of cause-related marketing and sometimes, as stated above, a form of co-branding.

Besides Michele and Willing, the idea of sponsorship as a form of co-branding is supported by Nunes, who claims that this form of co-branding is at its basic level consists in participating in activities that link its image to particular occasions in consumers' minds. Among others, Motion et al. consider a sponsorship to be a form of co-branding that maximises the benefits of a partnership and creates a proper context for a strategic partnership overall Motion, Leitch, & Brodie, 2003; Farrelly, Quester, & Greyser, 2006; Cliffe & Motion, 2005; Kahuni, Rowley, & Binsardi, 2009; Alexander, 2009). In addition to that, Nunes suggests that often sponsorship can create opportunities for more marketing activities or enhancement of the planned ones (Nunes, Dull, & Lynch Accenture, 2003).

According to Blackett and Boad, the exchange between brands is based on funding provided by the sponsor and audience for the sponsor's activities and publicity provided by the sponsee (Blackett & Boad, 1999). While the idea of funding as an only function of the sponsor is proven to be wrong as the collaboration effect is null unless the sponsor actively promotes it (Cornwell, 1994), scholars also consider that the sponsor also gets the positive image and additional brand value, since most often the sponsee side is a non-profit or charity organisation that aim correlates with cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility. This is additionally specified by Gardner and Shuman who imply that sponsorship may not only be aimed at the achievement of marketing objectives like rising the brand awareness, but also on the support of corporate objectives and enhancement of corporate image (Gardner & Shuman, 1987, 1998).

Apart from determining sponsorship as a type of co-branding, scholars tend also to refer it to either event-marketing, presuming that sponsorship is a component of event marketing (Cunningham, Taylor, & Reeder, 1993; T. B. Cornwell & Maignan, 1998) or cause-related marketing (Meryl P. Gardner & Shuman, 1998). While sponsorship is often a part of event marketing, still, currently with the rise of digital media and the lack of "events" in terms of happening due to covid-19, it is safe to say that sponsorship does not necessarily happen within an event. When it comes to cause-related marketing, it is not that clear, especially within the entertainment and art industry.

In this study, sponsorship is then defined with consideration of all the stated above concepts and can be formulated as following: *sponsorship is an exchange between the brands is based on funding provided by the sponsor and audience for the sponsor's activities and publicity provided by the sponsee, which may be relatively long-term (in this case it is a form of co-branding) and short-term (a component of event marketing).*

2.4. Cause-related marketing

Sponsorship should be distinguished from cause-related marketing as cause-related marketing term definition is also often based on the cause or organisation that acts as a recipient.

Sue Adkins in his book about cause-related marketing uses the definition of Business in the Community which implies that CRM is “a commercial activity by which businesses and charities or causes form a partnership with each other to market an image, product or service for mutual benefit” (Adkins, 2016).

Varadarajan and Menon specify that by defining it as a marketing program that aims to achieve both the improvement of corporate social responsibility performance and to create a benefit for a good cause (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). There is no unique and generally accepted definition for CSR as it involves several dimensions. However, the most common defines it as “a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and their interaction with their stakeholders voluntarily” (Dahlsrud, 2008).

Some particular scholars imply that only collaborations with NGO's may be considered as brand collaborations with good cause (Michel & Willing, 2020); however, this is an unpopular approach due to its juridical limitations which vary within different countries.

For this study cause-related marketing is defined as: *a marketing activity of business and cause, charity or similar projects for a mutual benefit that aims to achieve both the improvement of corporate social responsibility performance and creation of a benefit for a good cause.*

2.5. Hierarchy of terms

Summing up and articulating all the concepts as mentioned earlier, within this study, it is possible not only to identify the definitions of each one but based on that also specify the relations between the concepts:

- **Marketing alliance** – a partnership of two or more separately known brands with the aim which consists of achievement of the synergetic alliance that results in an outcome that is bigger than the sum of the ingredients;
- **Co-branding** – a form of partnership between two or more brands in which all the participants' brand names are retained in use of either the respective wording or the related symbols, and that results in co-branded communications that support a product, a service or an activity in which both brands play a significant role (**this way, it is one of the sub-forms of marketing**);
- **Sponsorship** – an exchange between the brands (**so it always a sub-form of marketing alliance**) is based on funding provided by the sponsor and audience for the sponsor's activities and publicity provided by the sponsee, which may be relatively long-term (**in this case it is a form of co-branding**) and short-term (**a component of event marketing**).
- **Cause-related marketing** – a marketing activity of business and cause, charity or similar (**not necessarily two brands or two companies**) projects for a mutual benefit that aims to achieve both the improvement of **corporate social responsibility** performance and to create a benefit for a good cause.
- **Corporate social responsibility** – a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and their interaction with their stakeholders voluntarily.

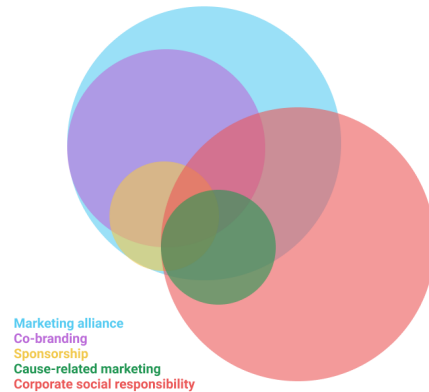


Figure 2.

Based on the outcomes, the relationships between the mentioned categories were established (fig. 2). Considering the broadness of such activities, marketing alliance and corporate social responsibility could be considered the most general terms, that include the other types. While co-branding may be related to a good cause and corporate social responsibility (e.g., “Check Out for Children” by UNICEF and Starwood Hotels & Resorts) or to sponsorship (Hyundai Mercury Prize), it still can also not include any of other categories (except for marketing alliance as it is always a sub-form).

To identify the form of a partnership, the following questions should be answered:

1. Are the brands known as separate?
2. Is it long-term, prolonged partnership, unique activation or prolonged campaign?
3. Is there any good cause related to the partnership?
4. Is there any third product or brand created within the partnership?
5. How does each brand communicate the partnership?
6. What is the aim and goals of the partnership for both brands and for each in particular?



Figure 3. Partnership type identification

2.6. Congruence as a characteristic of brand partnership

There are several studies that focus on whenever brands should be similar or different in order to maximise the effectivity of the partnership. The idea of brand congruence as a key to success was supported by several scholars (Bhat & Reddy, 2001; Aaker & Keller, 1990; Lau & Phau, 2007; Hoeffler, Bloom, Keller, & Basurto, 2006). Aaker claims that for the success of co-branding it is necessary to find brands suitable for each other (Aaker, 2010). Lindstrom points out that about 70% of marketing alliances fail because consumers do not understand the relationship between brands (Lindstrom & Kotler, 2010).

Heckler and Childers (1992) identify two dimensions of congruence. Combination expectation describes the degree to which new information follows a predetermined pattern. Relevance is the degree to which new information is relevant to the subject of the message. It reflects the extent to which the information contained in the incentive contributes to a clear definition of the topic or central message that the company is trying to convey to the consumer. According to these two authors, if the images and brand associations in the alliance are incongruent, this can lead to a misunderstanding of the reasons for the formation of the brand alliance, which, in turn, can reduce or eliminate the likelihood of successful transfer of positive associations from partner brands to a focal brand. Moreover, the consumer's attitude to a particular brand can be transferred to another brand if he sees some kind of global similarity between brands (Heckler & Childers, 1992).

Most research has considered brand fit to be the general association that consumers draw about the perceived congruence of the partnering brands; for example, a partnership between BMW and Rolex is likely to result in a high brand fit since both brands fit into the same category of luxury (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). There are several methodologies that aim to identify the level of brand image fit in order to evaluate the potential outcomes of the partnership (Шапиро, 2016). However, empirical findings for brand fit have been inconsistent, and some proved that the congruence is not a critical factor, claiming that previous studies failed to evaluate the context of such brand alliances where the brands were incongruent (e.g., Baumgarth, 2004). Decker and Baade suggest that the key factor is not the congruence of the brand images itself, but the dissimilarity in size, industry scope, and country-of-origin (Decker & Baade, 2016).

It should also be mentioned that brand partnerships can influence brand image, and the congruence can be modified through specific communications efforts (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Related research already has shown that specific types of communication strategies can decrease the negative attitudes associated with brand extensions that were initially incongruent (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994; Milberg, Whan Park, & McCarthy, 1997). In case of sponsorships, "the sponsoring brand generates consumer attributions of altruistic sponsor motives and enhances sponsor credibility and attitude toward the sponsor" (Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004).

However, it is clear that no matter of the congruence factor, an important characteristic to consider is how healthy and distinctive images do brands have (T. B. Cornwell & Humphreys, 2013) since better-known brands are likely to play a more significant role in the formation of attitudes towards co-branded products (Leuthesser, Kohli, & Suri, 2003). However, Washburn mentions that even in the case of partnership with low equity brands, the powerful brands gain more than the possible loss is (Washburn, Till, & Priluck, 2004).

Boiler Room and Ballantine's

While speaking about the partnership of two brands, it is essential to identify each one of them in particular and how they function together. In this section, a description of both brands and products in analysis is given and followed by a brief overview of the partnership. The aim of the section is to answer the research questions, that were specified in the previous chapter and create a basis for the future interviews and studies, while as well create an overview of the case.

3.1. Boiler Room

Boiler Room (BR) is a digital music media – an online music broadcasting platform of live performances mainly. Besides the live streams, the activity includes the production of documentaries¹, music curation and organisation of offline events that are streamed online. In this study, the Boiler Room is primarily studied as a broadcasting platform – according to its core activity.

The main focus is electronic music, but BR tends to cover more music genres – from neo-classic and jazz to hip-hop and reggae. According to its founders, there is no specific music genre they plan to stick to as their mission is to “be a global underground broadcaster” (Saxelby, 2016).

Boiler Room positions itself as “underground early MTV” taking the values of “glocal” culture – when local communities and creators get a platform to present themselves globally (Boyarinov, 2017). That is one of the key points of Boiler Room – being a platform that, primarily, connects content creators to its audience. (“Неожиданный формат...”, 2018)

3.1.1. History

Boiler Room as a project started in 2010 in a warehouse as a weekly broadcast of friendly DJs, initiated by Blaise Belville for his music culture website Platform. The first event hosted the future co-founder of Boiler Room, Thristan Richards and NTS Radio founder, Femi Adeyemi. A simple set up of a webcam attached to a wall was used to broadcast the event via a Ustream account.

¹ for example, 4:3, Sound Of, In Stereo.

Over the first six months, according to Belville, the project was non-commercial, and more of a hobby as most of the music projects were at that time. According to Michail Stangl, at first, it was a (do-it-yourself) DIY project — considering how live streaming was not that popular at that time yet and no proper software or hardware was available (Luchko, 2014). Nonetheless, with no website during the first year, the events and streams featured famous artists like Jamie xx, SBTRKT, Mount Kimbie, James Blake, and Ben UFO among other rising names.

After the first year, once the website was launched, the project started to grow. Firstly, going worldwide – Michail Stangl, a Russian-born German curator, joined the team with a suggestion to expand to Berlin. By that time, the project already gained recognition beyond London. The Berlin event and stream was a success and showed the demand for online streaming as the attendees were mainly those who followed the initial English streams. Besides, it was clear that the music scene by that time lacked international exchange.

Within the next years, Boiler Room expanded to 5 continents, and by 2020, Boiler Room hosted and streamed more than 5000 artists on more than 8000 transmissions from more than 200 cities all over the world (“Ten Years of Boiler Room,” 2020).

Besides the offline events and live streams, Boiler Room also has started to produce films and documentaries about music and underground culture – including the development of the 4:3 platform.

In 2020 with the pandemic situation Boiler Room cancelled almost all the offline events yet launched the “Streaming from Isolation” series of broadcasts (“Streaming From Isolation,” 2020) and a fund to support local music communities (“Boiler Room x Ballantine’s True Music Fund,” 2020).

3.1.2. Boiler Room in Russia

The first-ever Boiler Room event in Russia happened in 2014 in Moscow (“10 фактов о вечеринках Boiler Room,” 2017). However, the Boiler Room TV live streams were popular in Russia long before that. According to the Boiler Room’s team, they had a Russian audience back in 2010, and users from Russia watched the first Berlin streams. Even before coming to Russia, BR had a fan-created and administrated community on CIS social network VK. (Рузманова, 2016)

While the target audience of the offline events is based only in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg’s regions, the audience overall goes far beyond – from Moscow to Sakhalin (Бояринов, 2017).

The key partners of the Boiler Room in Russia are British Council, Ballantine's, Adidas and Present Perfect Festival.

3.1.3. Sponsorship and partnerships as the Boiler Room business model

Based on the first tries of international expansion, Boiler Room's founder Blaise Bellville, who did not want to monetise the project directly but had experience in traditional advertising, started looking for sponsors among brands. According to one of his interviews, that was the model he envisioned from the start ("How Boiler Room was born," 2016).

The first sponsor ever was Red Bull within Red Bull Music Academy (RBMA) that was also a sub-brand created in collaboration with consultation company Yadastar. Both RBMA and BR shared the same vision and an intersecting audience which, as a result, gave Boiler Room much more than merely founding. As per previously mentioned classification, this was more a multi-dimensional co-branding/marketing alliance rather than just a sponsorship as RBMA also brought its vision to the product as well as its audience. As for RBMA itself, it is most commonly referred as corporate social responsibility by Red Bull (Hogan, 2019).

The second brand to collaborate with Boiler Room was Ray-Ban ("Ray-Ban Uses Music to Inspire Creativity," 2013). The collaboration lasted for more than four years and went beyond a sponsorship as there was an attempt to create a unique separate brand – RBxBR Weekender².

Over the next years, Boiler Room partnered with cultural institutes like British Council and many international and local brands, including Topman (Elder, 2016), Tinder, Bumble, Huawei, Ballantine's, Absolut, Google Pixel and others.

According to Michail Stangl, Boiler Room is not looking to monetise the content directly, and it will always remain free to access online and mostly offline (currently the event with ticket sales is less than 3% of all the events of Boiler Room). That is why BR relies a lot on partner brands (Бояринов, 2017).

² See copyright at <https://www.ray-ban.com/usa/boilerroom>

When it comes to its business model, it may seem that with its free content, global mission and funding non-sponsored events, films and community work, Boiler Room might be a non-profit organisation. Nevertheless, on its website in the section “About – Partnerships and Founding” Boiler Room states that they are “a sustainable business” and that the funding comes from “people who believe in their vision” and “brand partnerships that generate revenue”. While the partnerships are, as mentioned, quite diversified, Boiler Room’s investors also remain undisclosed for the public – within the three founding rounds (2015, 2016, 2017) the company was funded by three venture capital firms: Upscale, Backed VC and, the lead investor, Connected Ventures (“Boiler Room - Funding, Financials, Valuation & Investors,” 2017).

Among other forms of monetising, the apparel should be mentioned – Boiler Room produces, and sales branded clothes and accessories. Also, in 2019 a branding agency was created. Currently, there is not publicly available on profits of any of neither of the activities.

3.2. Ballantine’s

Ballantine’s is Europe’s first Scotch whisky and also a second worldwide most popular brand of scotch whisky. The range includes 12 product variations, along with the most popular “Finest” and experimental “Brazil” and promo campaign “Club Collection” (“Explore our whisky range,” n.d.). It currently belongs to the French company Pernod Ricard along with such brands as Chivas Regal, Absolut Vodka, Beefeater gin, Jameson whisky and others. (“Our Story,” n.d.)

3.2.1. History

Founded in 1827 by George Ballantine in Scotland, the brand quickly grew and by 1910 started to export blended whisky to international markets with its Ballantine’s Finest whisky. In 1919 the company was sold to “Barclay and McKinnlay”, but the name was kept due to its significance and brand image. In 1988, Ballantine’s became a part of Allied Domecq PLC (Chadda, 2004) and continued so until the acquisition by Pernod Ricard in 2005 (“Pernod Ricard Registration Document 2013/2014,” 2014).

While being a part of Allied Domecq PLC, the brand started to import to Russia along with China and India as key markets. After 2005 Pernod Ricard started to promote the brand to the Latin America market (especially Brazil), Spain and, lately, Africa. Currently, the key markets are France, Spain, Poland, Germany, Brazil and Russia. (“Annual Report 2013/2014,” 2014)

In Russia Ballantine's is distributed and marketed by Pernod Ricard Rouss which is entirely subordinated to global Pernod Ricard.

3.2.2. Promotion strategy and brand partnerships

While Pernod Richards, as a house of brands, owns 13 brands of whiskies, 7 of which are scotch. That is why the distinction and clear contrast are essential, and some brands are positioned as "get-togethers with friends" (Jameson) or "chic" (The Glenlivet), while Ballantine's is positioned as "Nights Out" (Li, 2014).

It is important to note, though, that according to Pernod Ricard's annual reports, Ballantine's was not always positioned like that. The first campaign launched by Pernod Ricard was meant to "enhance Ballantine's reputation for quality, status and style", ("Annual Report 2006/2007," 2007) supported by the sponsorships of such events as golf championships ("Annual Report 2007/2008," 2008).

The first-ever try of introduction Ballantine's to a younger audience, and less formal reputation was done locally in Romania in 2008 by "Expressense parties" – although at that time the campaign was not shared globally.

After the second in 2009-2010 Ballantine's reported a decrease in both volumes and net sales, the "Leave an impression" campaign was adjusted to its second stage "Pan Ballantine's" (also called "Plan B"), and besides the traditional sponsorship of tennis and golf, a pioneering digital collaboration with a musician was launched locally in Spain.

In 2014 the company took a new challenge of rejuvenating the Ballantine's Scotch Whisky brand. Music-related activities, tested before on local markets, now were chosen as the key strategy and instrument to achieve a new younger audience. That included a "Stay true" creativity focused campaign ("Annual Report 2013/2014," 2014) and the True Music platform development with Boiler Room's partnership which was "pivotal in gaining credibility across this target" (McCarthy, 2020).

Starting from that point, all the Ballantine's markets joined the new positioning, and over the next five years, the focus on music and music activities was primary in all the countries.

In Pernod Ricard's annual reports 2017-2019 the Ballantine's brand in terms of positioning and marketing is always mentioned along with its successful partnership with Boiler Room. According to them, "the Boiler Room x Ballantine's True Music partnership has brought to stage more than 250 boundary-pushing artists at 30 events in 15 countries in a pure celebration of music. (...) Staying true' to music is not only important for Ballantine's audience, but something the brand to is genuinely passionate about." ("Annual Report 2018/2019," 2019)

What is also important to mention is that "True Music" in all the documents is referred as the partnership of Boiler Room and Ballantine's while the "Stay True" platform is a unique product of Ballantine's.

When it comes to Russia, it should also be mentioned that most of the promotion and advertising forms are legally prohibited for alcohol brands. This way sponsorship, event organisation or PR become the most valuable forms of promotion. ("Тренды в дарк-маркете: чему можно научиться у онлайн-казино?", 2017)

3.3. Boiler Room x Ballantine's: True Music

As a part of the strategy change in 2013-2014, Ballantine's started its partnership with Boiler Room (Enthusiast, 2014; "Annual Report 2013/2014," 2014). The new strategy "Stay True" was developed and implemented with the help of the international agency M&C Saatchi Sport & Entertainment that focuses on sponsorship strategy and activation, experiential, Sport PR, entertainment PR, content creation and social media. ("M&C Saatchi Sport & Entertainment | Award winning sponsorship & marketing agency," n.d.)

The very first region was Latin America (Mexico and Chile) – an emerging market for Ballantine's at that time. Boiler Room and Ballantine's introduced the "Stay True Journeys" with the aim to explore local authentic music scenes through music events, broadcasts and documentaries ("Boiler Room & Ballantine's present Stay True Chile - BOILER ROOM," 2014). In 2015-2016 "Stay True Journeys" also explored Europe and Africa: Neo-Classical scene in Germany, electronic music in South Africa, Poland, Spain and Scotland, underground beats and electronic music in Russia ("Boiler Room & Ballantine's present Stay True - BOILER ROOM," 2015), the cross-pollination of African sounds and Portuguese dance music in Portugal ("Portugal - Boiler Room," 2017).

In 2017 Boiler Room and Ballantine's launched an *online* sub-domain³ to show the results and ongoing activities of the partnership as by that time they produced more than five yearly events and numerous documentaries. That year True Music events took place in Brazil, Russia and Poland. ("True Music - Boiler Room," 2017)

By 2018 Boiler Room x Ballantine's partnership included more than 20 events live streams, several series of documentaries and a forum on music scene development. Also, within the same year, a Hybrid Sounds project started and included not only mentorship of young artists and international music events in Spain, Russia and South Africa, but also a collaborative EP. ("Ballantine's | True Music," 2018)

A primary focus of True Music partnership in 2018-2019 was Africa, while there were still several events in Europe ("Boiler Room x Ballantine's | True Music Africa," n.d.).

Besides the events and broadcasts from Bogota, Nairobi, Kyiv, and others, several funds were launched and distributed among local artists in Spain ("Now Closed...", 2019) and Africa ("Now Closed...", 2020) as a result of "Taking a Stand for True Music" campaign.

By the beginning of 2020 Boiler Room and Ballantine's partnership included more than 150 countries and 250 artists ("Boiler Room x Ballantine's | True Music," n.d.).

In 2020 the primary focused was supposed to be still Africa and a mix series "Sounds Of" was launched as a first step to continue and expand the partnership (Boiler Room, 2020). However, due to covid-19 limitations, both brands communicated that they are forced to stop and relaunch the partnership, focusing on digital-only as a medium and on supporting local communities. This way, "Streaming from Isolation" series started where Ballantine's was not exposed as a sponsor, but still supported it through its social media channels and by providing a fund that was aimed to be distributed among some of the playing artists ("Boiler Room (@boilerroomtv)...", 2020).

Speaking of online form of Boiler Room events, it is essential to note that although in this study we focus on digital and media aspect of BR, the partnership itself includes many offline attributes. The aforementioned parties allow the brand to interact with the audience in many ways, described in the table below:

³ <http://truemusic.boilerroom.tv/>

Touchpoint	Interaction	Details
Media and digital influencers	Paid and organic mentions in media and related influencers	Boiler Room events are often used as PR opportunities and media event.
Tickets	E-mail and contacts acquisition	Tickets are not sold but given away to random people from those who pre-registered (and gave consent to receive updates from Boiler Room and/or Ballantine's).
Event activities	Unlimited Ballantine's bar	Ballantine's fully organises the event free bar, including bartenders, drinks, decoration, etc.
Event visuals	Branded visuals	Posters, wall mapping, key event visuals include Ballantine's logotype and brand colours
Post-production	Photo & Video	Ballantine's often uses post-production media content in their promotions or social media

Table 1. BR offline event-related brand channels of communication with audience. (Based on own expert interviews and ethnographic observations from 3 events – Moscow 2017, 2018 and Lisbon 2019)

By October 2020 the brands tried to relaunch the partnership through the announced series of online Zoom events called “In the Round” (“Ballantine’s x Boiler Room True Music In The Round,” n.d.).

Presenting the new format, Ballantine’s Head of Music Tom Elton commented: “... now more than ever are striving to find ways to use music to bring people together again, both on and offline. We are excited to embrace the ‘new normal’ as True Music evolves, continuing to give a platform to the headliners of tomorrow, as well supporting the broader music and events ecosystem that we are lucky to be a part of” (“Boiler Room x Ballantine’s True Music Returns with In The Round Event Series,” 2020).

This is one of the possible forms of future partnerships as it allows almost the same brand exposure – brand visuals around DJs, publications regarding the event, new contacts and audience acquisition (Zoom events require registration in the same way that offline events did). However, the very first event did not succeed, gathering only 30 participants at the Zoom conference. (Figure 4)

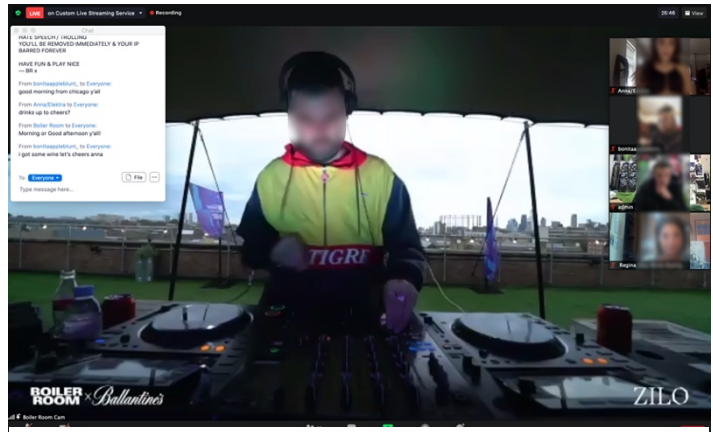


Figure 4. Boiler Room x Ballantine's "In the Round" Zoom event screenshot.

3.4. Boiler Room x Ballantine's partnership resume

Boiler Room and Ballantine's are both powerful brands with international recognition in their respective areas.

Boiler Room has a clear and widely articulated ideology of being the voice of authentic underground music promoting the "glocal" philosophy. While it is underground by its philosophy and brand image, the business model of the Boiler Room is yet built on partnerships with commercial, often mainstream brands as the events and content are free to access. However, this does not create conflict as BR present them as those that share the values and vision of the Boiler Room and do not affect the content:

"... we have taken investment from people who believe in our vision, alongside brand partnerships that generate revenue. This has allowed us to remain an independent publisher, whilst celebrating and contributing to the culture we love; funding non-sponsored events, films and community work" ("Boiler Room: about," n.d.).

Besides its media coverage and content production, a significant part of the promotion of partners is happening either at the offline event itself or regarding that event.

While Boiler Room has a clear brand image and positioning, Ballantine's at the beginning of the partnership was transitioning from a more classic, chic and old-fashioned image of vintage whiskey associated with golf, tennis and long history to a more youth-focused and party-related brand in order to differ from other brands of whisky of the Pernod Ricard house of brands (like Jameson or The Glenlivet). The brand tested the music-oriented positioning on several local markets, but the main change started at the same time as the partnership with Boiler Room.

Most of the activities of the partnership (e.g., the events, documentaries and funding) are focused on the same regions as the current markets of interest for Ballantine's. At the same time, Boiler Room also proved its interest in countries like Russia, Germany and the Latin American region, especially considering the audience of this media there.

Overall, the partnership is highly promoted by both parties, and in Pernod Ricard's annual reports, Ballantine's marketing campaigns are often associated with Boiler Room and mentioned as a successful strategy. That is also proved by the continuation of the partnership even after the changes of format caused by limitations of covid-19 related quarantine and social distancing regulations.

Summing up, it is possible to partially answer the questions that aim to identify the type of partnership:

1. Both brands are known as separate – Boiler Room was operating for more than 3 years by then and had a loyal audience, and Ballantine's was top sold international brand of whiskey;
2. The partnership is long-term – lasting more than 6,5 years now and still ongoing (lasting more than any other marketing brand alliances for both brands);
3. Although it may seem that it is positioned as corporate social responsibility and there is a “good” cause included, the partnership mostly does not directly contribute to it (except for the funding of upcoming young musicians within the “Taking a Stand for True Music” campaign). Still, this is not certain and should be additionally addressed further;
4. It is not clear, whenever the “True Music” sub brand was created in partnership or by one of the sides only, even though it appeared around the same time as the partnership started, and was primarily used for the joined events;

5. Both brands communicate the partnership and emphasize their partnership in that – yet it is not clear whenever they do it in equal amounts, symmetrically.

Based on the presented above information, it is possibly to preliminary classify this partnership as co-branding – however, at this stage it is not possible to exclude that it may be a sponsorship or cause-related marketing, as it was stated in the hypothesis.

The questions to be answered yet are:

- whenever the brands communicate the partnership in the same way,
- whenever the True Music brand is a joined one or was created before the partnership/belongs to one brand only;
- what initially was and currently is the aim of the partnership.

Answering this question would allow to classify the type of the partnership, as well as determine its outcomes.

Analysis of the Partnership of Boiler Room and Ballantine's

In this chapter, an empirical analysis of the partnership between Boiler Room and Ballantine's is performed in order to classify the type of the partnership while as well evaluate its results. Several questions are studied:

- What is the main aim of the partnership?
- How do the brands position the partnership?
- How much attention to the partnership and joined activities does each brand pay in its digital communications?
- How was the True Music sub brand created?
- What are the functions/outcomes for the brands?

Like the study overall, the further research focuses on Boiler Room as a media mainly and on global partnership in general and Russian market in particular.

4.1. Expert interview

To identify the key points of partnership, expectations and responsibilities of both brands, a semi-structured one to one theory generating interviews of representatives of both Boiler Room and Ballantine's Russia were performed. The interviews were conducted in Russian since both respondents preferred it. Both interviews were transcribed, and their relevant parts translated in English (see the annexes A and B).

The key questions for both respondents were focused on; the aim of partnership for each brand, on the further development in the respective area without the partnership, on the joined brands, on how each brand positions the partnership and on brand transformations caused or related to the partnership.

4.1.1. Ballantine's: Eleonora Afyuni

While Pernod Ricard Rouss functions as one organisation, it still has separate departments for each brand. Eleonora Afyuni is the head brand manager of Ballantine's Russia and is working both with True Music project and Boiler Room partnership in Russia. The interview was performed on June 16, 2020, via WhatsApp call (initially video, later switched to voice only due to connection issues).

The semi-structured form allowed to follow the main points, yet, considering that all of the questions were open-ended, it allowed the respondent to answer them extensively and express a personal opinion.

Eleonora answered almost all the questions asked, providing the full information on both local decisions of Russian department and the global, donor company Pernod Ricard.

According to her, the partnership started in 2013 on the global level and not as initiative of any local departments. One of the main goals at the beginning of the alliance for Ballantine's was to change the brand image and the core target audience. Eleonora emphasizes that before starting the partnership with Boiler Room, Ballantine's decided on rejuvenating the brand and changing strategic positioning – switching from “something my old father drinks” to fun-related drink for younger audience (20-30 y. o.). Since, according to Eleonora, Ballantine's carefully studied the audience to identify that music is their so-called “passion point” and it is precisely what could attract this audience, the Boiler Room appeared to be one of the ways to relate to that passion point and introduce Ballantine's into the music field.

BR influenced a lot the perception of the brand – not shifting it from “whiskey brand” yet shaping its communication strategy. Eleonora also admitted that Boiler Room partnership activities allowed Ballantine's to extend their communications and reach new regions thanks to associations with Boiler Room. *The True Music platform did not exist before the partnership with Boiler Room and BR influenced its creation.* The sub brand started as a joined one for the events organised in partnership, but extended further and now is used by Ballantine's for similar events that do not include BR.

Nowadays Ballantine's creates more music-related events and activations even without BR as partner or second brand – especially in Russia, where it started to extend to regions, work directly with DJ and influencer Nikita Zabelin as the brand ambassador (he was one of the first headliners of Boiler Room x Ballantine's True Music events) and *promote itself as a brand that supports music industry.*

Eleonora also mentioned, that due to the legal regulations of alcohol brand promotions in Russia, Boiler Room events also function as a fair and legal media event – apart from the event itself, the brand also drives the word of mouth through additional publications.

While speaking about the buzz created in media and the awareness raised by such events, Eleonora mentioned a significant improvement of brand recognition thanks to the attractiveness of Boiler Room events (she references to the studies of the market in Russia, that are confidential).

Also, Eleonora mentioned, that in Russia mainly Ballantine's and their advertising agency Affect were responsible for the promotion of the joined events – from social media publications to advertising, including outdoor and digital, so it was *the Ballantine's brand that was communicating or initiating the communication mostly*.

Speaking of congruence, it should be important though, that the aforementioned promo although generated extreme awareness about the event, negatively impacted the image of Boiler Room as while it is positioning as underground, the event was advertised through mainstream influencers, unrelated mass media and even in retailer stores next to the bottles of Ballantine's. This caused a negative reaction of the community and lack of trust to this partnership – and an immediate criticism of Boiler Room as a commercialised company.⁴

4.1.2. Boiler Room: Michail Stangl

The structure and the team of Boiler Room are changing in 2020. Several attempts to contact the employees responsible for partnerships failed left either with a redirect to other people or with no answer at all. However, the person available for discussion appeared to be Michail Stangl who, although not working for Boiler Room anymore since February 2020, was the curator and producer of the Boiler Room x Ballantine's partnership since its beginning and also was curating Eastern Europe. The interview was conducted in October 2020 via Facebook messenger video call.

According to Michail, the Boiler Room was among the first underground music institutions to start working with commercial brands, and it was forced to do so in order to continue the work and develop.

⁴ See, for example, the post from “Психо Daily” – one of the major media about the underground club culture and nightlife in Moscow: <https://t.me/psychodaily/1127>

However, there was a congruence gap between the commercial brands and underground culture that was difficult to overcome, and Boiler Room had to prove that it could partner with commercial brands. In order to do *Boiler Room started acting and positioning itself as an advocate of the underground culture* – educating the brands and creating limitations for brands and internal rules of what is allowed and what is not (according to Michail, they refused a potential partner brand of sports clothing due to an idea to perform a rather sexist contests of female DJs).

Another relevant point is the role Boiler Room plays for brands and what it can offer the brands. Michail compared the partnerships with influencer marketing where apart from raising the brand awareness, *brands get image transfer – get to share that “belonging to underground culture”*. He explained, that “when brands want to participate in underground culture, they actually want the access to the public and audience – either in order to sell something or for the transfer of image”. In case of Ballantine’s partnership, it was both, and that explains why the brand is also working in this field without Boiler Room – as an effort to support this image. That is also why the partnership is relevant and ongoing online in current situation as well. However, according to Michail, this partnership is specific even for Boiler Room as it differs a lot from more short-term collaborations as it affected the image of Ballantine’s more and created a strong association between the brands.

However, this might not work online for raising awareness (even in popular live streams) as brands cannot be fully integrated into online streams, as, according to Michail, there are some issues both in terms of integrations of brands due to platforms legal limitations and in terms of music license limitations.

It should be also mentioned, that even though the image of Ballantine’s changed significantly due to the partnership, the alliance was not completely incongruent at the beginning as well – Ballantine’s supported same “glocal” concept that was one of the messages declared through its “stay true” campaign.

4.1.3. The outcomes of the interviews

Based on the information that both experts provided, it may be concluded that:

- the brands do not communicate the partnership in the same way – though the inequality is not usual for sponsorships when the sponsee promotes the sponsor and, on the opposite, Ballantine’s tends to maximise the awareness about the joined activities;

- True Music brand is not a joined sub brand, although initially used for joined activities and created within the partnership;
- The aim of the partnership for Ballantine's consists in both rising the awareness about the brand and in image transfer and underground culture values endorsement. As for Boiler Room, such partnerships are the basis of the financial model;
- The brand image of Ballantine's changed over time from mainstream towards the underground culture, although it was partly congruent with Boiler Room from the start.

4.2. Social media content analysis

The social media content analysis aimed to identify both the representation of the partnership by both brands (thus answer the last questions for the classification of the partnership) and the results that were achieved by it.

The leading digital media channels for both brands are their websites and social media (globally for both – Instagram and Facebook, locally in Russia for both – VK and globally for Boiler Room only YouTube and SoundCloud).

Table 2. Followers of the respective brand pages on different social media platforms. Data retrieved through Popsters on October 10th.

	Ballantine's	Boiler Room
Instagram	33 900	1 100 000
Twitter	5 637	349 200
Facebook	4 550 208	3 067 254
YouTube	15 900 (views – 28 829 036)	2 540 000 (views – 849 092 818)
VK	1 812	96 169
Soundcloud	469	889 000

While Boiler Room obviously has more followers and reaches a broader audience (especially on SoundCloud and YouTube), it is clear that through its posts it creates awareness and recognition for Ballantine's by mentioning it. It was also additionally proved by both previously interviewed experts – Eleonora Afyuni mentioned that Boiler Room generates “hype” and awareness about the Ballantine's brand, while Michael emphasized that Boiler Room gives the brand access to its audience.

4.2.1. Research design and data aggregation

Considering all the data, acquired before, the following research focused on three hypotheses:

- H1: Being a sponsee, Boiler Room is more likely to cover the topic of joint activities with Ballantine's;
- H2: Ballantine's actively uses the partnership with Boiler Room as a topic for content on its social networks (over the period of co-operation, more than 10% of posts are associated with Boiler Room and more than 20% with the True Music platform);

- H3: Boiler Room content is more engaging within Ballantine’s communications than other brand communications on average.
- H4: Both brands refer to each other when communicating about the sub brand “True Music” this way aiming to present it as a joined one.

To test these hypotheses on both local Russian level and globally, data from 3 leading social media was retrieved on September 20th – October 3rd, 2020. The Facebook and VK posts were obtained via Popsters platform and the ones from Instagram via Phantom Buster (all the data unified later). These social media platforms were chosen as the most similar ones in terms of the content format of both brands, which made it possible to compare them.

The initial extracting period was October 2013 – September 2020, but later the timeframes on each social media were updated to match the same date of the first publication for both brands (e.g., Ballantine’s only joined VK in 2018 that is why the Boiler Room posts were also analysed starting the same year and month).

Once retrieved, the posts were semi-manually coded using a dichotomic scale to indicate the posts with the partnering brand or particular project mentioned. The action was performed in Microsoft Office Excel using words search and additional verification (especially for no-text posts that included media only).

After that, the outliers were defined using the quartile method as direct detection and additional manual check. In order to identify a post as an outlier, it should meet two criteria:

- The number of likes or comments should be above the Upper Bound;
- The post was previously promoted or activations like a contest of comments or call-to-action to comment regarding some particular subject.

After the data was coded and outliers excluded, the remaining data was analysed (annex C).

4.2.2. Results

H1: Being a sponsee, Boiler Room is more likely to cover the topic of joint activities with Ballantine's.

In order to test the hypothesis, absolute numbers of mentions of partnering brand (the articles coded as "1" on the dichotomous scale of mentioning the partnering brand) by partners in their communications were compared.

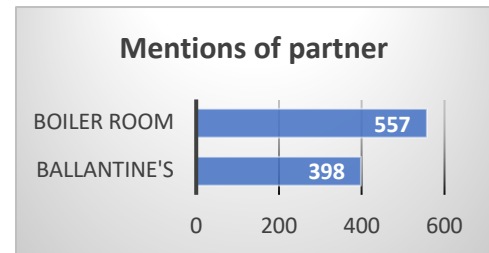


Figure 5. Posts that mention partner brands

It is important to note that while the hypothesis proved to be demonstrated, the overall results are of great interest, considering the small difference in numbers and the fact that Boiler Room on average generates more content.

If divided by country (Global or Russia), it is notable that Ballantine's Russia actively promotes the partnership and in general creates more content about that than Russia-targeted communication of Boiler Room.

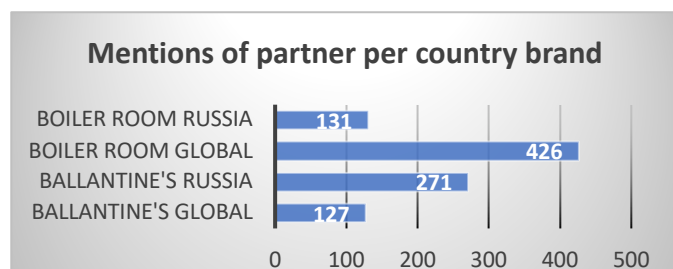


Figure 6. Post that mentions partner brand per region account.

If additionally verified by the relation of partnership related content to all the content generated by brands, we can see that sponsoring Ballantine's promotes the partnership even more than the sponsee Boiler Room.

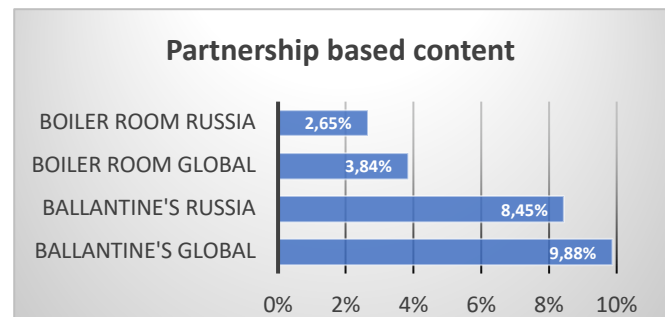


Figure 7. Posts that mention partner brand compared to all the posts.

H2: Ballantine's actively uses the theme of partnership with Boiler Room to create content on their social networks (over the period of co-operation, more than 10% of posts are associated with Boiler Room).

Within the same dichotomous scale, a proportion of Boiler Room related content to all of the content was built.

The hypothesis proved to be correct on the global level as Boiler Room related content plays a significant role and part in brand communications being the topic in 10% of the posts of Ballantine’s and insignificantly different within Russian local brand communications, where it is mentioned in 8% of the communications (figures 8 and 9).

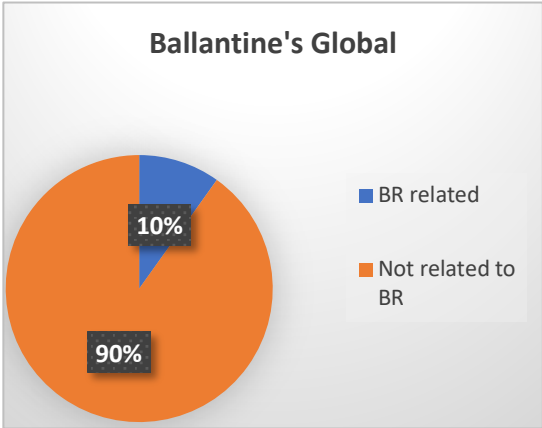


Figure 8. Boiler Room posts mentions

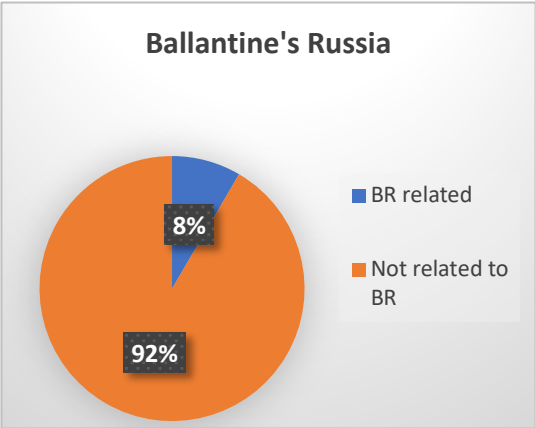


Figure 9. Boiler Room posts mentions

H3: Boiler Room content is more engaging within Ballantine’s communications than other brand communications on average.

The last but not least hypothesis related to the engagement rate of the posts mentioning the partnership was tested. It would be preferable to count the engagement rate per post reach, but since Facebook and Instagram do not provide data on third party posts reach, the engagement rate, in general, is also acceptable.

Based on the achieved data, we can see that H3 can be neither approved nor disapproved as in the majority of the cases, the difference is not statistically significant. The only significant difference can be seen within Ballantine’s global Instagram, and Ballantine’s Russia VK social media profiles and both deny the hypothesis as on average Boiler Room related posts appear to be less engaging than the content in general (table 3).

Table 3. Engagement rates of the partner related posts.

Description	Total	Partnership mentions	H3	Significant difference
Brand	ER (av./post)	ER (av./post)		
Ballantine's Global Facebook	0,00004	0,00002	FALSE	FALSE
Ballantine's Global Instagram	0,00368	0,00316	FALSE	TRUE
Ballantine's Russia Facebook	0,00001	0,00001	FALSE	FALSE
Ballantine's Russia Instagram	0,01089	0,01048	FALSE	FALSE
Ballantine's Russia VK	0,03895	0,00735	FALSE	TRUE
Boiler Room Global Facebook	0,00013	0,00017	TRUE	FALSE
Boiler Room Global Instagram	0,00134	0,00120	FALSE	FALSE
Boiler Room Russia VK	0,00019	0,00013	FALSE	FALSE

As for the other related topics, it can be noticed that the situation is mainly the same – except for the Ballantine's True Music related posts on VK (which prove to be more engaging) and Ballantine's Stay True related posts on global Instagram and VK (which prove to be less engaging) the posts are not significantly different in terms of engagement rate (Annex 3, tables 4 and 5).

Table 4. Engagement rates of True music mentioning posts

Description	Total	True Music Mention	True Music posts are more engaging	Significant difference
Ballantine's Russia VK	0,03895	0,05246	TRUE	TRUE

Table 5. Engagement rates of Stay True mentioning posts

Description	Total	Stay True Mention	Stay True posts are more engaging	Significant difference
Ballantine's Global Inst	0,00368	0,00147	FALSE	TRUE
Ballantine's Russia VK	0,03895	0,00814	FALSE	TRUE

H4: Both brands refer to each other when communicating about the sub brand “True Music” this way aiming to present it as a joined one.

While Boiler Room clearly almost always (99-100%) refers to the Ballantine’s while posting about True Music related messages, Ballantine’s does so about Boiler Room only in 49-59% of the global communications and in 31-36% of local Russian communications (table 6).

That way the hypothesis is denied as Ballantine’s not necessarily present the brand as joined neither locally in Russia nor globally, although on global level the majority of posts involves the brand mention.

Table 6. True Music related posts that mention the partnering brand.

Brand	Country	Social Media	True Music Mention	Both mentions	True Music related posts that mention the partner
Boiler Room	Global	Facebook	20	20	100%
Boiler Room	Global	Instagram	99	98	99%
Boiler Room	Russia	VK	125	98	78%
Ballantine's	Global	Facebook	56	33	59%
Ballantine's	Global	Instagram	39	19	49%
Ballantine's	Russia	Facebook	184	66	36%
Ballantine's	Russia	Instagram	86	29	34%
Ballantine's	Russia	VK	103	32	31%

Conclusion

The study allowed to classify the communicational marketing alliance types and create a relevant methodology to explore it further and determine each particular partnership case.

The defined possible types of marketing alliances are co-branding, sponsorship and cause-related marketing.

Based on the presented classification, the particular case of Boiler Room and Ballantine's may be considered a co-branding project, due to several reasons:

- Both brands are well-known as separate;
- It is a long-term alliance that had different forms (forum, events, joined funds, offline and online communications);
- Although there are some elements of cause-related marketing (funds for young artists, for instance and general idea of contribution to the development of underground music culture), overall, the good cause is not the focus of the partnership – although associating with it helps overcoming the gap between commercial and underground brands;
- There is a sub brand “True Music” that was created partly due to this partnership, but the brands proved to have different rights and positioning on that. Currently, Ballantine's mostly attributes the brand;
- Both brands communicate the partnership relatively equally – while Boiler Room applies more to its community, Ballantine's tries to maximise the awareness and involves additional channels.

It should be noticed, though, that the initially stated hypothesis is not fully denied and, as stated above, the partnership includes some elements of cause-related marketing and sponsorship, used to help the transition of the brand image and underground culture values endorsement – the goal that can be considered achieved.

The stated above also supports the idea of fluid brand image and proves that in case brands have basic common aspects (in this case geography and glocal concept) it may maximise the outcomes of partnership even better than initially perceived similarity – particularly, when the aim of the partnership is the brand image switch.

In this case this was one of the two identified goals of the partnership for the commercial brand:

- Raising awareness and brand recognition;
- Rejuvenating the brand and changing its image as a more underground and youth related (image transition and values endorsement).

According to the experts interviewed, both goals were achieved. It should be also mentioned, that for that several mechanics at once were applied – co-branded products (True Music brand); co-branded communications and co-branded experiences that overall create the customer experience and perception.

Additional finding is that such partnerships may be a good source of content generation for both brands – while the funding and support from Ballantine’s allows Boiler Room to create international events and reach new local communities, for Ballantine’s it means not only an ongoing topic of social media communications, but also a legitimate reason for media coverage.

Considering the legally limited possibility of promotion of an alcohol brand, this mix seems to create a unique opportunity for it. This also explains why other alcohol brands like Jägermeister, William Lawson, Absolut Vodka or electronic cigarettes IQOS (that are limited in most of the countries in the same way) are interested in such forms of partnerships.

Outcomes of the study

The results of the study may be also applied to identifying the proper type of partnership and partners for media and commercial brand alliances in future, even from different product and/or services segments.

The case of Boiler Room demonstrated that, overall, the audience of a particular niche media may be less rejecting than may appear at first. The key points are the consistence of the media communications and actions and the articulation of the community benefits from involving a third party in the activity. In this terms Boiler Room proved to be a success story that might be adapted further by other underground or culture related media.

As for the commercial brands, it is proven that prolonged marketing alliances with niche media with a clear brand image may not only raise the awareness and brand recognition, but also help to change the image and create a beneficial basement for the further communication in the related field.

At the same time, it should be mentioned that covid-19's related digital transformation may make it difficult to continue this kind of partnerships and the brands and media will be seeking new opportunities like Zoom-events. This also indicates, though, that Boiler Room model may not be relevant for most of the niche media since it became clear that a huge part of the partnerships is based on offline events and the buzz they create. That is also proved by the fact that Boiler Room related content on the social media channels of Ballantine's does not show a higher engagement rate.

Study limitations and further recommendations

The study was mainly focused on the Russian and Global parts of the partnership and did not include additional analysis of the other markets. It may appear that on other relevant for Ballantine's markets like Latin America or Africa the situation is different and that influences both other local and global partnerships.

Another limitation is the case itself – Boiler Room appeared to be an untypical case of a media as apart from being music niche media, it also proved to rely a lot on offline activities. It would be relevant to study more examples of music related brand activations like, for instance:

- Jager Vibes initiative from Jägermeister⁵,
- Red Bull Music Academy⁶,
- Hyundai Mercury Prize,⁷and others.

Last, but not least, the study is focused on the brand and media views of the partnership and does not include a proper study of the perception of it by its audience. Even considering the pre-partnership study of congruence is not available anymore, a study of how both brands is currently perceived should be relevant for other brands seeking to find a proper partnership and could be valuable to the congruence related studies.

The further studies of co-branding and other forms of brand alliances and partnerships could focus on:

⁵ CIS country award and magazine – <http://mag.jagermeister.ru/itogi-goda/>

⁶ <https://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/>

⁷ <https://www.mercuryprize.com/>

- the brand image evolution in terms of flexibility and changes of congruence of the partnering brands.
- legal limitations (especially when speaking about markets like alcohol or tobacco).
- Post quarantine forms, evolution and technical aspects (especially speaking about music-related partnerships).

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Annex A

Partial transcript and translation of the semi structure interview of Ballantine's representative Eleonora Afyuni

Question: Has Ballantine's image changed in connection with the partnership? Did you have to change communication somehow globally?

Eleonora: You are actually asking a cool question. Because one of the goals, when global colleagues signed a contract with the Boiler Room, one of the goals in general for all markets, was to rejuvenate the image of Ballantine's, because indeed and still it is perceived as a whiskey for respectable 35+ men. Very often in the analysis, we see the "whiskey that my dad drinks"; "the whiskey my grandfather drinks". Now and when we just signed a contract with them, over the course of several rounds of parties in Russia, we see that the brand image is significantly rejuvenated. Its recognition, consideration. We directly have such indices within the company that allow us to measure brand awareness. Furthermore, we see that year after year; recognition is growing among a young audience and among what we call the core target; this is the target group of consumers. For us, at the moment it is 25-30 years.

Eleonora: We call this the passion point of our consumers. We study consumers in sufficient detail, down to what brands of sneakers they choose, what clothes they wear, where they hang out, in what specific places. We studied the consumer's profile and realised that, in general, a person of 25-30 years old, one of his and what he likes to do or what he is fond of is music. Therefore, the music platform was chosen. ... Therefore, answering your question, until last year, music is one of the most critical areas that we have activated.

Question: So, before the Boiler Room, you did not interact with the music industry, or was there already anything in this field?

Eleonora: Yes, before the Boiler Room, since this platform of Ballantine's True Music did not exist, so to a lesser extent, there were activations related specifically to some musical events. Of course, Boiler Room influenced the creation of the Ballantine's True Music brand, this particular communication platform, and strengthened the brand's presence in music venues. Prior to that, Ballantine's Stay True, a corporate brand, was activated. It was also associated with music, but to a lesser extent, because the parties were not so large-scale. Ballantine's Stay True is primarily perceived by people as a whiskey brand, and not as some kind of musical brand.

Eleonora: Ballantine's works in music territory. The most exciting thing for us is a collaboration with artists, special projects on media platforms and parties. A unique project is created for each event. Moscow TRUE MUSIC was in co-operation with the music portal promo DJ, St. Petersburg - with the electronic music publication Mixmag.io.

Eleonora: The only thing we met was the enormous popularity of these parties and the overwhelming number of people who want to attend them. Therefore, what we most of all encountered when working with the Boiler Room was the outstanding popularity, which naturally was a benefit for the Ballantine's brand, achieving the goal of brand recognition.

Eleonora: In addition to Boiler Room, Ballantine's True Music is regularly activated on regional True Music tours. At one time we came up with the idea that since the success of the Boiler Room is tremendous, and usually, either Moscow or St. Petersburg (such key, central cities) is chosen for these parties, we came up with a question why the regions should not experience it too. Moreover, we created such a regional Ballantine's True Music tour, for which electronic artists were chosen at one time to make a complete parallel with the Boiler Room.

Annex B

*Partial transcript and translation of the semi structure interview of Boiler Room
representative Michail Stangl*

Michail: In 2011 no brands participated in club culture – except for Red Bull with its Red Bull Music Academy. At that time, there were no strategies or understanding how it could function as a business model. But around 2013-2014 Boiler Room found an exciting way to work with commercial partners and that allowed to become it a “serious company”. We knew that we would not be able to grow the project and to develop it without financial support – what we did not know was whenever there will be any interest in investing in the Boiler Room.

Michail: We have had an important goal while working with sponsors. We knew that we needed funding, but we also understood that an essential part of our activity was our authentic access to music culture. Moreover, we had an understanding that this access and our reputation and image should be protected. Not in the way that we would only protect our own brand and image but be an advocate for those artists that are presented on our platform. Mostly since at that time, there was no strategic model of working with sponsors in this field. Brands were not involved in underground culture, and no one thought they should, and they would be able to add some valuable input.

Michail: We build our relationship with brands from a perspective that we understand what they need (mostly access to the audience – Boiler Room and Vice were the most prestigious platforms at that time in this sense), and we would work only in our model and within our strategy. Furthermore, we convinced the brands to trust us. We gained trust from both sides so we could both protect the underground culture and pay the expenses. Since brands usually have more money, resources and experience, they in general mostly try to control and dictate the process – especially for young artists. So, the Boiler Room plays the role of some kind of buffer – we know what we can offer and where is the border that should not be crossed in order to keep the underground culture safe. So, there were some things that we would simply reject – like female DJs casting that one brand was willing to organise.

Michail: When brands want to participate in underground culture, they actually want the access to the public and audience – either in order to sell something or for the transfer of image (look how cool we are – we support underground culture). Basically, it is the same as influencer marketing right now – “this influencer is cool, and he is our brand ambassador, so we are cool as well”.

Michail: Music media does not earn money online or on streaming – and Boiler Room also did not. We earned from brands, tickets and merchandise, but never the streaming. Most of the artist you see do not earn money on online streaming. Currently, online is not an alternative business model for the music industry. Currently, the terms of services of Facebook and YouTube, for example, they prohibit product placement or brand integrations. In most of the cases and some countries like China, brands should pay the platform, not only the media. So previous strategies of just adding the brand are not functional currently. Moreover, another question is the license – the only fully cleared platform in terms of authorship rights right now is MixCloud. Others are still available just because no one cares about it.

Annex C

Quantitative content analysis of primary results

Description					Total (primary)						Mentions (primary)			Total (no outliers)					
Brand	Country	Social Media	Link	Followers	Total posts	First post	Likes (av./post)	Reposts (av./post)	Comments (av./post)	ER (av./post)	Partner	True Music	Stay True	Total posts	First post	Likes (av./post)	Reposts (av./post)	Comments (av./post)	ER (av./post)
Ballantine's	Global	Facebook	cebook.c	4542866	732	01/10/2013	1118,25	42,98	13,44	0,0003	97	62	104	604	01/10/2013	153,16	11,83	2,44	0,0000
Ballantine's	Russia	Facebook	ook.com	4542866	1655	01/10/2013	62,08	7,95	4,31	0,0000	97	184	567	1312	01/10/2013	46,04	2,72	1,27	0,0000
Boiler Room	Global	Facebook	cebook.cc	3070346	3008	01/10/2013	982,93	155,35	116,31	0,0004	138	47	57	2446	02/10/2013	341,12	30,52	25,18	0,0001
Ballantine's	Russia	VK	i/ballant	1812	205	01/02/2018	142,80	9,22	11,96	0,0905	43	145	9	155	01/02/2018	66,65	3,45	0,48	0,0389
Boiler Room	Russia	VK	k.com/bc	96169	4952	01/02/2018	27,00	1,83	1,56	0,0003	131	133	0	4251	01/02/2018	16,76	0,96	0,79	0,0002
Ballantine's	Global	Instagram	tagram.c	33600	554	10/02/2014	163,45	n/a	2,34	0,0049	30	41	118	498	10/02/2014	122,26	n/a	1,51	0,0037
Ballantine's	Russia	Instagram	ram.com	4637	342	19/02/2014	51,68	n/a	14,34	0,0142	46	93	135	320	19/02/2014	48,55	n/a	1,95	0,0109
Boiler Room	Global	Instagram	agram.c	1100000	8088	10/02/2014	1478,69	n/a	34,86	0,0014	288	99	40	7936	10/02/2014	1439,85	n/a	34,01	0,0013

Description			Partnership mentions (no outliers)								True Music Mention (no outliers)								Stay True Mention (no outliers)							
Brand	Country	Social Media	Total posts	First post	Likes (av./post)	Reposts (av./post)	Comments (av./post)	ER (av./post)	True Music Mention	Stay True Mention	Total posts	First post	Likes (av./post)	Reposts (av./post)	Comments (av./post)	ER (av./post)	Partner mentions	Stay True Mention	Total posts	First post	Likes (av./post)	Reposts (av./post)	Comments (av./post)	ER (av./post)	Partner mentions	True Music Mention
Ballantine's	Global	Facebook	93	11/02/2014	67,49	4,94	1,51	0,0000	33	25	56	10/05/2017	42,71	4,95	1,13	0,0000	32	1	80	16/10/2013	174,39	12,70	2,63	0,0000	25	1
Ballantine's	Russia	Facebook	83	20/03/2015	22,69	1,92	0,64	0,0000	66	17	184	05/12/2016	13,51	1,18	0,53	0,0000	66	14	567	07/07/2014	70,82	3,10	1,46	0,0000	17	14
Boiler Room	Global	Facebook	94	14/02/2014	457,34	36,82	22,17	0,0002	20	40	20	06/04/2017	501,25	31,65	25,10	0,0002	20	0	42	14/02/2014	596,43	53,02	28,55	0,0002	40	0
Ballantine's	Russia	VK	38	01/02/2018	12,74	0,26	0,32	0,0073	32	2	103	01/02/2018	89,92	4,57	0,56	0,0525	32	5	8	01/02/2018	12,38	2,25	0,13	0,0081	2	5
Boiler Room	Russia	VK	120	07/03/2018	11,29	0,73	0,40	0,0001	98	0	125	23/02/2018	12,48	0,71	0,35	0,0001	98	0	0					n/a		
Ballantine's	Global	Instagram	21	25/11/2014	104,14	n/a	2,00	0,0032	19	4	39	08/03/2017	127,54	n/a	0,00	0,0038	19	0	116	10/02/2014	48,48	n/a	0,74	0,0015	4	0
Ballantine's	Russia	Instagram	43	23/03/2017	46,40	n/a	2,19	0,0105	29	5	86	23/03/2017	53,07	n/a	2,63	0,0120	29	10	132	20/09/2013	47,51	n/a	12,97	0,0130	46	93
Boiler Room	Global	Instagram	286	14/10/2014	1288,84	n/a	27,02	0,0012	98	36	99	31/10/2016	1205,90	n/a	22,37	0,0011	98	0	40	14/10/2014	859,90	n/a	27,93	0,0008	36	0