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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the various stances and ideas that firms must both heed and consistently adapt to in the perpetuation of the Web 2.0 phenomenon of online social networks (OSNs). Within the article, the sociological implications of OSNs are explored before discussing various strategies, opportunities, and problems that are associated with the continued growth of OSNs within and outside of the firm, ending with the creation of a theoretical framework for value co-creation using OSNs and brand communities, and critical success factors in utilizing said framework.

## Keywords

Online social networks, brand communities, marketing, Web 2.0, critical success factors.

## INTRODUCTION

In lieu of Web 2.0 elements moving from niche usage to ubiquity on most Internet enterprise platforms, it has become more vital for firms to understand and implement these trends to a Web 2.0-literate market. Online social networks (OSNs ) are taken from the sociological term involving transfer of information between "nodes" to others (Kleinberg, 2008); formally, they apply to any Internet (or intranet) sites comprised of a "collection of user profiles" bonded through various relationships, wherein any amount of content can be exchanged, created, and consumed between related registered users (Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin, 2010). Diminutive literature exists on the theoretical applications of OSNs for value creation, approaching the critical value of OSNs from both intra-firm and external viewpoints, and the modeling of said value creation through exchange of social capital and other benefits.

This research explores the relationship between traditional social networks and OSNs, implications of use to gain personal competitive advantages through OSNs, improvement of value creation in business process management, and finally introduces a theoretical framework in which we divulge how a business can optimize their usage of OSNs, including critical success factors for practical usage in the specific case study and data set of Facebook fan pages. In doing so, we hope to conclude that businesses can use OSNs to gain social capital, or any number of tangible or intangible "resources accumulated through relationships" and through social activities (Benson, Filippaios, and Morgan, 2010), and ultimately amplify the business' product/service and processes.

Before addressing the purposes and long-term value creations of firms in OSNs through our theoretical framework, it is imperative to discuss the underlying sociological effects of traditional social networks, and hence, the goals of online social networks in delivering user-created content from connected users.

## SOCIAL NETWORKS, WEB 2.0 VIEWPOINTS, AND OSNS

The Internet has allowed OSNs to be a means for people to reinforce existing social networks found in physical life with family and friends (Benson et al., 2010), adding another framework to existing planes of communication. Despite the fact that framework is laid out to meet new people in new or existing networks, it is still easiest for users to simply recreate existing networks online (Bonhard and Sasse, 2006). Special focus exists on these networks, then, with reconnecting with friends in social networks to keep lines of information frequent (Grabner-Kraüter, 2009).

In light of Web 2.0's mass adoption and its participatory focus, OSNs help perpetuate ideas powerfully, with marked effects in both observed social behavior and economic spheres (Vannoy and Palvia, 2010). Because of their electronic basis, OSNs have allowed for social networks, typically difficult to quantify, to be modeled and observed through tangible information tracking and automatic updates. This type of new data capturing has allowed some to dub this point in time a "revolutionary era" for social network study. When further examining social exchange, techniques exist to both observe from a viewpoint of the individual, known as small world phenomenon, or from a macro scale as social information moves like an epidemic, known as social contagion theory. Both perspectives allow for extensive models, mostly centered on the transmission of information between various "hubs" of information and "nodes" through which information transfers as it progresses from its hub (Kleinberg, 2008).

Peer-centric technologies like OSNs are ascribing changes even at the societal level for how information is exchanged. The major change lies in the source of the information, where individuals are increasingly relying upon one another over institutions, aided by technological advances (Vannoy and Palvia, 2010). Even with increasing privacy concerns, users have never felt the need to consistently update their personal demographic information to the extent that currently is being displayed, including address and phone numbers (Grabner-Kraütner, 2009). Therefore, creating a forum where these types of interactions can be fostered is crucial, and various OSNs have adopted specialized business models to accommodate these different needs for information exchanges for replication of physical networks (Benson et al., 2010).

Distinctions between social networks and OSNs exist, however. Though mirroring physical social networks, OSNs are less geographically based, and rather more reliant on the nongeographic "distance," typically with the purpose of the node cluster existing in line with the site's goals (Kleinberg, 2008). However, the probability of joining these sites is very dependent on a potential user's existing social network and their tendencies to use them for information exchange. Because of the different locations and purposes for these networks, the network maps vary.

Another discrepancy exists in that the motive to formally establish a relationship with another user can effectively be skipped, thus disallowing the formation of a meaningful relationship. Consequentially, little true information about this node can be gained about information transmission, muddling business' efforts to model for influential users (Bonhard and Sasse, 2006).

These networks are driven through the transmission of information. To best take advantage of these sites, a firm should drive to influence the information being exchanged, as communication is the driver of the existence of OSNs. Through OSNs, firms can utilize existing networks from users. However, since not all types of consumers and people engage in OSNs, firms must first take proper time to decide if these bases match the qualities exhibited in a standard OSN, and if competitive advantages can be gained through such a presence.

## OSNS AND EMPLOYEES

Social networks increasingly play a substantial role in employees' lives. Having a social network that employees can post on without being monitored is healthy, allowing employees to post without fear of being watched (Smith and Kidder, 2010).

OSNs help bring about the increase in resources through the building of social capital. By investing in social capital, a company can bring about employment opportunities and business opportunities for the individual within and outside of a formal organization (Benson et al., 2010).

One such social network that has been created to help individuals find and maintain business connections is LinkedIn, a web site that has a global presence of 35 million members with the majority of those being in the finance and business sectors. The public nature of standard social networking among peers has led to a diametric use of public and private site using different social networking tools, such as separate profiles on Facebook and LinkedIn to create separate social networks for business and private lives. The average student in UK universities has a presence in 1.4 social networks, showing a trend for

multiple profiles; the largest dichotomy of these two sites (at the least) was for access to social and business networks (Benson et al., 2010).

What can be done about this problem of people creating two different social lives? Procter & Gamble came up with their own solution to this conundrum. They have created a massive intra-social network, PeopleConnect, which has created an innovative exchange where employees can interact with other employees, both removing geographic factors and easily assigning team projects based on similar interests within the organization. This system allows the organization to create a space where activity can be monitored, and sensitive organizational information cannot be leaked through technology like cookie data. PeopleConnect creates value through creating groups of interested employees worldwide in less than half the time it normally takes, creating voluntary work groups and surpassing traditional boundaries. (Swanborg, 2009).

In most workplaces, then, acceptance of online social networking must, at the least, be acknowledged. Corporate presence and encouragement of these sites, whether internally-created and intranet based or adopted from other sites, should take into account the financial or privacy risks, respectively.

## OSNS AND INTERNAL VALUE CREATION

Upper management can use OSNs as a way to screen and select appropriate employees for various job openings, adding value to appropriate human resources activities, such as gaining further insights about employees through their OSN presence (Smith and Kidder, 2010). Discrepancies should be noted, however. Inaccurate information is prevalent. People can post edited pictures and partake in hateful or offensive communication without the other's knowledge (Smith and Kidder, 2010).

There are also legal ramifications to take into consideration. The Fair Credit Reporting Act and Stored Communications Act give employees legal backing if a company decides to run a background check on them via Facebook (Smith and Kidder, 2010). These acts make companies required by law to notify their employees before running these checks and must have permission to access these profiles.

The generational gap in the workplace is another issue. Younger workers tend to be very open to OSNs and are less intimidated by the risks. Older people tend to have a more cynical view. Concurrently, though, graduates are expected to have literacy in social media upon arrival in the workplace (Smith and Kidder, 2010). This shows a disparity in new employment processes where employers are looking for candidates with experience in technologically-savvy realms like social networking, but at the risk of creating generation gaps in the workplace, having employees have an online presence, and overseeing a disparate workplace.

OSNs can not only alert management of problems, but begin to solve them as well. For example, the United Kingdom Bank had many problems with clients complaining about long waits in their lines (Billington and Davidson, 2010). They went to companies such as "a traffic-circulation-planning expert, a Disney theme park manager, and a manager from the UK grocer Tesco" (Billington and Davidson, 2010, 110). Without incurring additional costs, the bank was able to create a more efficient line system that improved their customer happiness and satisfaction. Such interactions are becoming more possible due to the rise of OSNs allowing companies to quickly access people with various specialties in the online realm.

There is a need for Governance—the need for clear rules, guidelines and leadership among a community—and maintaining quality—determining whether or not the new input being received is of a higher quality than what you already had. HR departments must have a standing grasp of OSN's capabilities for positive and negative employee experiences, as well as the implications of different generations' activities in relation to these technologies.

## OSNS AND MARKETING

Online social networking presents a lucrative market to attain, and are by far the most dominant presence of standard users' time in any Internet location. According to a 2009 study by The Nielsen Company, 2008 saw 45 billion minutes being spent on social networking sites worldwide, a 63% increase in usage. The average increase for all Internet use was 18% (including the major outlier of social networking). In 2009, it was estimated that 50% of Facebook users logged onto the site daily (Marandi, Little, and Hughes, 2010).

The most popular business model for OSNs has come in the form of selling advertising space and use of personal details about members to the captive audience of users who continue to return to the site for social interaction (Trusov et al., 2010). With a wider demographic since adoption and disproportionate growth of older members, more promotion types have been used than ever (The Nielsen Company, 2009).

Facebook is far and away the dominant player in the current OSN field (Marandi et al., 2010; The Nielsen Company, 2009). For users, the most common activities are all communication-based: creating original content through profiles, consuming others' content, and adding other users as "friends" to share profile information (The Nielsen Company, 2009; Trusov et al., 2010). The process of creating, maintaining, and evaluating relationships on Facebook has made it a time consuming, and thus, lucrative, space for firms. Recently, Facebook added the ability for organizations such as firms to create profiles with similar abilities to interact with members.

Prior to the presence of Web 2.0, marketing ideals were restricted to the trade of only tangible goods (Marandi et al., 2010), which gave a particularly rigid wall for value creation in marketing. More recent thought argues that skills and knowledge are exchanged more now in the "service-dominated logic" of IT-driven marketing, allowing for value co-creation, and changing the dynamics of the marketplace and organization (Marandi et al., 2010). Firms can maximize usage of OSNs through engaging users in the marketing/branding process, co-creating value. Such communications can help strengthen brand identity and foster a brand community (see Figure 1). The participatory nature of OSNs, and willingness of users to contribute, can allow for users to rally around firms (Marandi et al., 2010).

Value co-creation is a powerful tool, even online. A politically-charged case study is that of the recent Iranian elections, where media censorship was bypassed through activist use of Facebook and Twitter (Marandi et al., 2010), whereby the virtual realm allowed the creation of ad-hoc, rapidly created communities of devoted protestors in physical space. Qualitative studies showed that value was co-created when roles of existing actors changed, or when new actors were added to the same activity, showing information reaching new nodes. Marandi et al., argue that this value co-creation can be applied to business decision makers to rapidly disseminate information from one centered network page to many nodes of individual users to engage with customers.

Brand profile pages are a step in the right direction for more robust marketing strategies (Zhang, Sung, Lee, 2010). These pages offer a powerful way to boost brand awareness, increase information flow about the company, creating social capital about the brand accessible to all users on the OSN, and leverage this into future returns. The inherent social aspect allows for innovation and "socializing" of promotional strategies, such as social sweepstakes (Zhang et al., 2010).

However, as always, the question marketers must ask as social networks become ubiquitous and strategies continue to grow is this: will these OSN actions motivate the user to take actions? More quantifiable research must emerge in this discussion.

## THE "ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITY" MODEL FOR OSN FIRM PAGES AND CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS OF USAGE

Here we introduce the theoretical framework which firms should understand when implementing a social networking venture, followed by a brief discussion on other critical success factors that will naturally follow from this model from already successful brand communities (see Figure 1; Appendix 1).

The preceding arguments in this paper let us conclude that the driver for online social networks lies in the creation, co-creation, and consumption of content. Social capital and value creation is the goal for all users involved, and for firms to
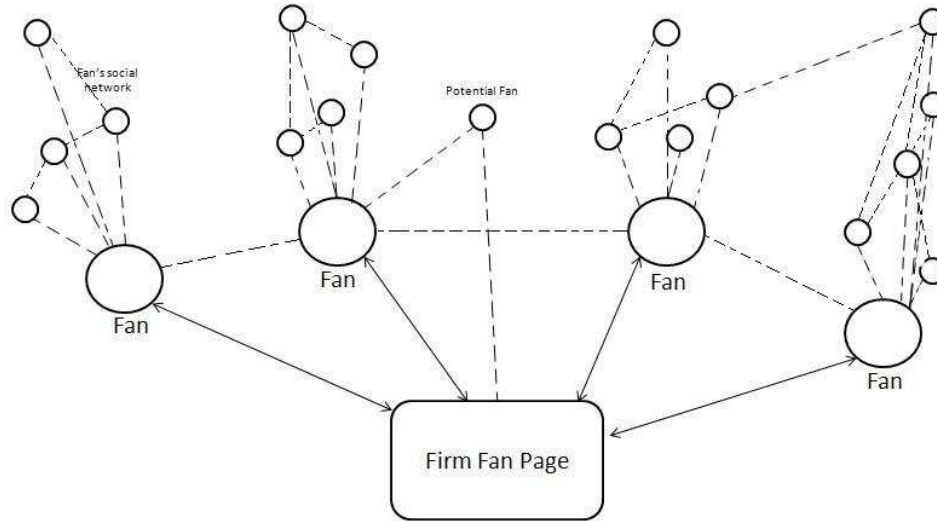
**Figure 1. Formation of a Firm's Online Brand Community through OSNs**

succeed in the venue of an OSN, it must realize the ideological motivation for these users. Without new information, multimedia, and ideas to share amongst its user base, there is no need for the portal the OSN provides, no reason for new members to join, and thus, no vehicle of communication to establish between firm and users of said sites. Therefore, successful understanding of the activity-centered model of a brand community lies with the mutual creation, discussion, and evaluation of ideas and content by both firm and involved followers of the firm through an established brand community page within these OSNs.

At the center of the model lies the firm's brand page, where "fans" can link themselves to this portal on the OSN to begin receiving content and information directly from the firm, allowing for the first wave of information and content to be centralized from the firm itself, as well as a direct line of communication between user and brand. These are denoted by the straight, undashed lines between fans and firm, and these fans become the main vehicles for perpetuation of content from firm to OSN "marketplace". Notice that arrows exist on both sides of these lines. This is because the crucial feedback and user-generated content created by fans of a page can be directly factored into business activities through the formal link, which allows for a formal dialogue between fans and firm through the OSN. The OSN provides a space for "fans" to seek out one another and help form a permanent presence, inciting co-creation (Tybout and Calder, 2010).

When a firm connects to individual fans, and due to the unique relationship between a brand and a user, these fans can bind together to form a "brand community" centered on the hub of the firm's page, uniting the geographically distant social networks together, and establishing a long-term orientation for customer loyalty and brand equity. Taking the view of the fan, where their own personal profile is the central piece to their social network, these fans can disseminate any information from the company's brand page to others within their own personal social network, who can, in turn, spread the information further in a macro-social network viewpoint. The array of dashed and solid lines expanding from the hub represents the vastness of the social network that the firm can access with proper capabilities, and further build social capital. These users can become a powerful tool for the exponential increase in spread of social capital about the firm, and reap in benefits from adding new fans to strengthening of brand equity.

The dashed lines denote a "potential information transmission" between parties, and can occur between any nodes in the model. Notice the "potential fan". This is the user who must decide whether to form the formal connection between the firm's profile and their profile, which involves an evaluation process about the possible social capital gained from the relationship. The importance of creating an interactive and current page is crucial to this decision, which will be discussed later.

A thriving brand community will help in this content creation, as an active online brand community will also generate content in addition to the firm for consumption by these potential fans, others in the community, and the firm itself in

assessing brand equity. From this, value can be co-created (Marandi et al., 2010). Some within the network of the firm may not be friends within their personal networks, or friends can all be mutual friends with a common interest, even the addition of more personal friends from the common ground of following the firm's activities. Mutual friends can even exist, stemming from the small world phenomenon (Kleinberg, 2008).

This strategy should be about reaching key influential members who will actually interact with the social media tools and create a niche within various other social networks to build the brand. Though the tangible ROI is still mostly unknown, the startup and maintenance/updating costs are so small that no debate particularly exists in comparison to the powerful, socially-driven and promotional intangible benefits (Tybout and Calder, 2010). Strategies are needed to lure these users, and maximize the size and strength of the web of social connections for the firm.

Building on the theoretical framework, a baseline of data (see Appendix 1) from successful brands were collected, consisting of nine of the 10 most popular brand pages on Facebook, plus one other highly-followed page in Nutella. Because of the nature of Facebook, a firm can create content through a post at any specific time, and can receive two types of feedback from any follower: a comment, in which they can leave their personal thoughts related to the content of the post, or they can "like" the post, which shows general approval of the post. The "success" of the brand pages selected were due to the high levels of followers present at the time of measurement, and from the baseline data analysis, we were able to find certain critical success factors (CSFs) from each page's unique situations. Our exploratory analysis led to the following CSFs:

## Social Branding Doesn't Replace Branding

All of the studied brands come with a distinct, established set of values and ideas emitted from historically strong branding prior to social penetration. Based on our analysis, the most successful brands in garnering voluntary responses from followers were Skittles and Victoria's Secret (Appendix 1). Both companies were able to extend their existing brand to a social sphere, garnering about a 2% of their following base per post through extending the persona found in other mediums into the portal of Facebook, extending their strengths (Skittles' bizarre personality and Victoria's Secret's models and sales promotions) with a social emphasis.

## Set a Purpose for the Page

The trademark to nearly all of the researched pages was the obvious use of the page to accomplish an organizational goal, not simply "to have a Facebook page." As aforementioned, Victoria's Secret used their page to promote recent and temporal sales promotions (13 of their 28 January posts featured either a sale or a marketable holiday). Starbucks used their Facebook presence to comment to disgruntled customers (who would post pictures of below-quality franchises) and begin a dialogue to personally quell customer complaints and improve franchise quality through OSNs. Such moves exemplify the constant back-and-forth dialogue that can only be achieved through the firm's fan page, empowering the page to tangibly impact future revenues of a brand, and consequently, maximizing value. Without a purpose, the page can only harm.

## Use the Page to Build the Brand and the Community over Building Products

OSN fan pages are ill-suited to appeal to the tangible aspects of the brand's product. Rather, the prevailing emphasis used by these brands was to evoke the spirit of the brand, and motivate the base to loyalty over promoting individual products to great length. This larger-scale brand focus is exemplified by Oreo, posting, "An Oreo cookie without milk is like…" for the entire brand community to display their answers ("life without music", "forgetting to put clothes on!") and rally around their common cause: the brand. Such posts were strategically done to force the user to recall past experiences with Oreo, which further cements the brand's nostalgic and quintessentially happy feel, accomplishing the goal of igniting devoted followers at the emotional level where brands thrive. The intangible growth of a brand is a difficult benefit to quantify, but in combination with social capital being built by both parties, the move is a definite success at little cost.

## Integrate with Multimedia, with Web 2.0, with the Firm Website, and with Facebook

Variation in not only the topic of the content, but the kind of content offered, should occur for followers. This specifically can be achieved through the addition of multimedia such as photos or videos, links to other Web 2.0 phenomena like YouTube and Twitter for consumption and feedback, and even utilization of intra-Facebook applications. For example, Red Bull used a strategy where the company would often embed a YouTube video of a Red Bull-sponsored action sports athlete, congratulate them for their feat, and link users to Red Bull's where further content of the same genre could be viewed. Doing so optimizes the use of an OSN to bridge the user from partial to full brand exposure.

**Let Users Share Multimedia with the Firm**

Of the 10 firms listed, eight of them allowed users to submit photos of the brand and let the users upload those pictures to the page's public photo stream. In fact, many of the firms reward such behaviors, often by attaching that user-generated content (UGC) to a public post or by rewarding them in a "fan of the week" contest (in Oreo's case), letting users engage socially with the brand. Such interactions promote an open atmosphere between OSN users and firms, breaking down the rigid lines between the parties and giving back to customers in a virtually cost-free manner. For example, Converse All-Star will go through some of the submitted UGC photos to compliment followers on their brand choice. Such attempts at personalizing the user-firm relationship will be remembered positively by users when making future purchasing decisions. In doing so, the firm is embracing the follower and rewarding them for choosing the firm's brand to fit within their social lifestyle. Exchanges between user and firm allows the brand to better suit the most devoted followers of the firm, as they typify the ideal loyal customers and repeat purchasers. Allowing followers to express their creativity and relationship with the brand, and then rewarding said efforts, is a powerful social capability that only a firm with the OSN brand community page can truly accomplish.

**Make the Experience Personal and Special**

Users looking to develop a further relationship with their brands of choice are doing more than investing their personal reputation and humility in the relationship (with expectation that the firm's brand will fulfill their needs). The firm should indicate a similar willingness to readily engage with each individual fan. The fan page is the ideal forum for this experience. Internet-savvy users like OSN users can distinguish between a well-kept page and a page that is merely a placeholder for the company. Company descriptions, profile pictures, and content should be personality-laden, familiar, appealing, and regularly updated. Any semblance of attention that makes the experience on their page different than others can cement the page itself into the mind of the user. For example, Starbucks created an app for use through their Facebook page to manage their Starbucks loyalty cards (as there is certainly some correlation between following Starbucks and being involved in their loyalty program), and, taking advantage of the social aspect, allowing users to have the ability to "refill" Facebook friends' Starbucks cards through the page (Van Grove, 2010).

**Ask Questions—Followers Want to Be Included**

This is a simple, effective, and heavily-adopted tactic that all explored firms used. Answerable questions are an easy means to garner feedback for crowdsourcing, immediately engaging the consumer, and most importantly, drawing interest to the page and the brand to inspire future engagement. These are best done by having questions that either relate directly to the brand experience (like Oreo) or a co-created persona (like Skittles). This reveals an important insight about the follower-firm relationship: that these followers not only willingly follow the page showing their approval of the brand, but have the intention to co-create and contribute value to see the brand have continued success in the future. This comes from a double-sided relationship with the follower-firm dynamic: the firm relies upon dedicated followers to continue making purchases and encourage others to adopt the purchasing of the product through social spheres, and followers rely on the company to create a product or experience that satisfies both their personal purchase decision, but at the same time, hinges their social reputation on associating with the brand in hopes that the brand will satisfy their peers. The joint desire for the other to contribute to creation of an even better product is a crucial gain for both parties, and firms should leverage it.

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In summary regarding these critical success factors, it is important to revisit the idea of social capital, and how this adds to the value of a company. Each new follower, in its very essence, is not a new customer, but: 1) a more loyal customer, which is cost efficient, and 2) a new node on the expanding social network of the brand and of the company, allowing for another channel of information flow to and from the firm for value co-creation. With better information management, unseen value, both tangible and intangible, can affect the bottom line of a company, and potentially anchor many future business decisions in the increased study of the social customer.

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**APPENDIX I: SAMPLE OF COLLECTED OSN FIRM PAGE DATA**

| Brand Name | Total Followers | Posts | Comments | Likes | Total Feedback | **Feedback per Follower** | Feedback/Post | Avg Days Between Updates | Comments/Likes Ratio |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Coca-Cola | 22,270,592 | 10 | 29151 | 128119 | 157270 | **0.706%** | 15,727.0 | 3.100 | 22.75% |
| Starbucks | 19,508,032 | 13 | 16105 | 146100 | 162205 | **0.831%** | 12,477.3 | 2.385 | 11.02% |
| Oreo | 16,582,338 | 11 | 33044 | 77853 | 110897 | **0.669%** | 10,081.5 | 2.818 | 42.44% |
| Disney | 16,742,641 | 9 | 13442 | 206371 | 219813 | **1.313%** | 24,423.7 | 3.444 | 6.51% |
| Skittles | 14,974,586 | 31 | 35883 | 263580 | 299463 | **2.000%** | 9,660.1 | 1.000 | 13.61% |
| Red Bull | 15,080,013 | 16 | 4660 | 48000 | 52660 | **0.349%** | 3,291.3 | 1.938 | 9.71% |
| Converse All-Star | 12,587,750 | 10 | 4359 | 38129 | 42488 | **0.338%** | 4,248.8 | 3.100 | 11.43% |
| Victoria's Secret | 11,393,001 | 28 | 12847 | 228650 | 241497 | **2.120%** | 8,624.9 | 1.107 | 5.62% |
| Pringles | 8,934,785 | 4 | 2684 | 15677 | 18361 | **0.206%** | 4,590.3 | 7.750 | 17.12% |
| Nutella | 7,530,635 | 2 | 1123 | 10068 | 11191 | **0.149%** | 5,595.5 | 15.500 | 11.15% |