



REPUTATION, IDENTITY, AND SYMBOLIC DEFENCE: The Role of the Consumer in Digital Brand Crises – The Frisby Case

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ABSTRACT

In digital ecosystems, brand crises have become arenas for spontaneous consumer activism beyond corporate control. This study examines the emotional and symbolic responses of Instagram users to the trademark dispute between Frisby Colombia and a homonymous Spanish company. Drawing on emotional branding, national identity, and brand defence frameworks, a computational approach was adopted. A total of 4,067 public Instagram posts were collected, preprocessed, and analyzed using TF-IDF, sentiment analysis, and K-means clustering validated through PCA. Results show that collective mobilization was driven by emotional resonance and symbolic identification rather than corporate communication, highlighting the role of cultural identity and social listening in digital brand crisis management.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital marketing environment, brands no longer build their value solely through planned strategies but through emergent narratives generated on social platforms, where emotions, identity, and collective participation have become fundamental intangible assets. Social media has altered traditional brand-consumer relationships by enabling content co-creation, digital activism, and, in some cases, symbolic defence by communities that perceive a brand as representative of their culture and identity (Carter, 2020; Choi et al., 2022). A recent case that illustrates this transformation is that of Frisby, a Colombian brand with strong cultural roots, which faced a legal conflict over the use of its name by a Spanish company (Stacey, 2025a). This widely publicised episode sparked a wave of spontaneous support on Instagram and X from consumers, allied brands, and Colombian institutions, who promoted hashtags such as #FrisbyLoHace, used memes with patriotic narratives, and expressed national pride as a form of symbolic defence (Reputation Up, n.d.; Stacey, 2025b). Unlike an institutional campaign, this mobilisation was organic and emotional, revealing a phenomenon that transcends commercial logic: the intersection of emotional branding, national identity, and digital activism as a collective response to a symbolic threat aimed at a brand that was assumed to be its own.

The literature has documented that virtual communities play a crucial role in building and redefining brand image, especially in contexts of controversy or disruption (Nikhashemi et al., 2023). These communities not only amplify content through virality but also act as arenas where cultural meanings around brands are negotiated. In particular, the concept of emotional branding has gained prominence as a theoretical framework to understand how emotional bonds activate prosocial behaviours towards brands, including active defence on social media (Honora et al., 2024). Furthermore, it has been shown that national identity can act as an emotional catalyst in digital environments, intensifying consumer engagement in response to external threats to brands associated with collective pride (Lim & Brown-Devlin, 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). In these contexts, defence is not merely rational or utilitarian, but a symbolic response incorporating elements of belonging, history, and social representation. Additionally, recent research has emphasised the strategic role of social listening and sentiment analysis as tools to identify and understand these dynamics, enabling brands to adapt their responses in real time (Chau et al., 2024; Sweta, 2024).

Instagram has become a key platform for analysing emotional brand phenomena in Colombia, especially in scenarios of digital activism and symbolic defence. In 2025, the social network had an estimated user base of 20.4 million in the country, representing 38.4% of the total population, and reached 49.6% of adults with internet access (Hootsuite, 2025). Its demographic profile is primarily female (56.9%), with the 25-34 age group being the largest, comprising nearly 7 million active users. In addition to being the preferred network for following brands and discovering products, Instagram is also the main channel for emotional expression in social contexts, making it an ideal environment for observing collective symbolic activations (Kemp, 2025). Representing 23.6% of the total social media usage in Colombia—only surpassed by Facebook, but with a steady growth of 1.7% compared to the stagnation of other platforms—this platform stands out for its visual and emotional nature, as well as its high penetration in younger and urban segments (NapoleonCat, 2025; StatCounter, 2025).

While previous studies have explored the role of social networks in brand emotional communication, such as Lalicic et al. (2020) on Facebook and X, academic research has paid scant attention to visual platforms like Instagram. Existing studies tend to focus on global brands and institutional campaigns, overlooking emerging phenomena in Latin American contexts where the link between consumption, national identity, and symbolic emotionality is particularly strong (Roy et al., 2021; Wahid et al., 2023). Instagram's multimodal communication logic—which integrates image, video, text, emojis, and hashtags—not only facilitates virality but also acts as a catalyst for emotional responses to perceived threats to local brands. Despite its centrality in current digital culture, there has yet to be a rigorous documentation of how these features facilitate spontaneous brand defence through collective narratives motivated by identity values. This study aims to address this gap by analysing, through contemporary analytical tools, a real case of symbolic activism that reveals the reputational potential of these emotional dynamics on visual networks.

Deepening the understanding of how national identity, collective emotions, and symbolic threats are articulated in digital contexts is key to advancing the study of spontaneous brand defence. From a theoretical

perspective, it is essential to expand current models of emotional branding to include cultural variables that modulate consumer responses in digital environments (Carter, 2020). From a practical standpoint, understanding these dynamics can provide brands with tools to manage their positioning in the face of unanticipated controversies, leverage spontaneous consumer support, and avoid reactive responses that could escalate the crisis (Choi et al., 2022). The relevance of the Frisby case lies not only in the volume of support generated but in the fact that this defence was initiated by consumers and replicated by other national brands, becoming a communication phenomenon of digital collective identity (Reputation Up, n.d.; Stacey, 2025b). This suggests that brand defence can become a reputational asset if understood and managed appropriately.

In this context, the study adopts a computational quantitative approach to analyse the emotional responses generated around the Frisby case on Instagram. To this end, a total of 4,067 public posts were collected using bots designed to track content, relevant hashtags, and direct mentions of the brand during the period of peak conflict activity. The textual corpus underwent a rigorous preprocessing phase that included cleaning, normalisation, and the conversion of emojis into a semantic lexicon, using specialised natural language processing libraries.

Subsequently, vector representation techniques such as Bag-of-Words and TF-IDF were applied to transform the content into numerical matrices. Based on this, a sentiment analysis was conducted to categorise the posts as positive, negative, or neutral. Finally, the K-means algorithm was used to identify thematic clusters, complemented by a principal component analysis (PCA) to validate the structural consistency of the clusters. This strategy enabled the identification of distinct discursive and affective patterns, as well as the mapping of symbolic and emotional activism expressed by users in response to the brand controversy.

The study does not seek to establish causal relationships, but rather to understand how national identity, emotional branding, and the perception of threat converge in digital contexts to trigger collective responses with tangible reputational effects.

This work offers a significant contribution to the literature on digital marketing and consumer behaviour by integrating theoretical approaches on national identity, emotional branding, and brand defence, applied to a real and recent case in Latin America. From an academic perspective, it expands existing interpretative frameworks on brand crises by incorporating cultural and affective variables that have been previously underestimated. From a professional standpoint, it provides practical guidance for managing digital controversies and for capitalising on spontaneous narratives generated by consumers.

The document is structured as follows: first, it presents a literature review on emotional branding, digital brand experience, national identity, and crisis management on social media; next, the methodology employed is detailed; then, the findings are presented; subsequently, their theoretical and practical implications are discussed; and finally, conclusions and suggestions for future research are provided.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotional Branding

Emotional branding has emerged as an essential approach in contemporary marketing, enabling brands to forge deep and meaningful emotional bonds with their consumers (du Plessis, 2023; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2021). This type of bond is established by activating emotions such as happiness, nostalgia, trust, or even sadness, which allow brands to differentiate themselves beyond functional attributes or economic advantages (Niharika & Yadav, 2023). In an increasingly homogeneous environment regarding products and services, this emotional connection represents a critical competitive advantage, fostering lasting loyalty, a greater willingness to pay higher prices, and spontaneous recommendations among consumers (Sharif & Sidi Lemine, 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). Various strategies enable the operationalisation of this logic, which includes: designing products that respond to emotional and psychological needs, using advertising with a high sensory impact, establishing prices that reflect emotional value, and consolidating long-term relationships through positive brand experiences (Gobe, 2010; Zhang et al., 2022). While these stages are general, their application varies depending on the cultural context, the product category, and the consumer profile, requiring a strategic and situated approach from brands.

Among the key strategies of emotional branding, empathic communication stands out, understood as the brand's ability to recognise and genuinely respond to the emotions and needs of its consumers, especially in digital environments where the relational tone acquires special relevance (du Plessis, 2023). This empathy is enhanced when brands employ symbols or values that resonate with the consumer's cultural identity and personal aspirations (L. Liu & Zhao, 2024; Zhang et al., 2022), or when they actively integrate users into creative processes, generating a sense of belonging that strengthens the emotional bond (Kalra et al., 2024). Association with celebrities can also act as an emotional catalyst, transferring public admiration towards the brand through symbolic identification mechanisms (Niharika & Yadav, 2023). This emotional approach is particularly effective in corporate social responsibility campaigns, where shared values and commitment to social causes generate greater credibility and connection (Manohar et al., 2023). On social media, these strategies find an ideal space for implementation, as the bidirectional and participatory logic allows consumers to express emotions, share experiences, and co-create meaning. This favours the construction of digital communities with a strong emotional load, which intensifies trust, loyalty, and spontaneous brand defence (Brandão & Ramos, 2024).

2.2 Brand Experience in Digital Environments

The increased access to the internet and the extended use of platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok offer companies the opportunity to develop emotional branding strategies, particularly aimed at millennials and Generation Z (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023; Hootsuite, 2025; Yanita et al., 2022). Unlike traditional media, which are characterised by unidirectional communication, social media enables bidirectional communication (Alzubi, 2022). Brands can respond to user comments and questions, creating a sense of proximity and customer care. Through features such as "likes", comments, and shares, users can express their opinions, emotions, and experiences related to a brand (Wang, 2012). This interactivity fosters a sense of community and belonging, where users feel part of a broader dialogue about the brand (Lalicic et al., 2020). Customers feel heard, as they have a voice and a direct channel through which to interact with brands, transforming them from passive recipients of messages to active participants in the brand narrative-building process (France et al., 2025).

User-generated content plays a central role in digital interactions, as it encompasses reviews, photos, videos, and social media posts that strengthen the bond between brands and their audience (Youn et al., 2024). This type of content is perceived as more authentic and reliable than traditional advertising, significantly influencing public perception of brands (France et al., 2025; Kream & Jerdan, 2023). In this context, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) acquires a strategic role within emotional branding, as spontaneous recommendations shared on social platforms can amplify both visibility and credibility (Brandão & Ramos, 2024). In these dynamics, digital audiences expect companies to be accessible, transparent, and culturally empathetic. Those who succeed in conveying authenticity and understanding in their digital interactions strengthen emotional bonds with their communities (He et al., 2022; Lee & Hsieh, 2022), which directly influences loyalty, reputation, and the likelihood of being recommended (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023). In contrast, poor communication management can lead to reputational ruptures that are difficult to reverse (Kumar et al., 2025). This highlights the need for brands to establish an active and responsive presence on social media, where the ability to respond quickly and emotionally intelligently becomes a key asset for maintaining lasting relationships.

2.3 Consumer Behaviour and National Identity

Consumption practices in digital environments have acquired a markedly symbolic character, where purchasing decisions are configured as expressive acts of cultural identity, national affiliation, and collective emotional positioning. Various studies argue that ethnocentrism and national identification, while related, act as distinct mechanisms that condition brand perception (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016; Lim & Brown-Devlin, 2023). While ethnocentrism is associated with distrust towards foreign products, the latter promotes emotional support for local brands through feelings of pride, justice, or moral duty (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016). This symbolic connection is intensified in scenarios of cultural polarisation or identity conflict, where brands function as references of collective belonging (Vecchi et al., 2021). Within

this framework, digital platforms facilitate the articulation of emotional bonds with brands, allowing consumers to engage in identity performances through content that reinforces the cultural cohesion of the group (Carter, 2020). Hashtags, memes, and visual resources thus become vehicles for emotional and nationalist expression, transforming consumption into a public manifestation of symbolic affiliation.

Empirically, national and cultural identity operate as an interpretive lens in consumer decision-making, especially in digital environments. A longitudinal review of consumer behaviour studies reveals that cultural references are a consistent feature of consumption patterns, intensifying in transnational or multicultural contexts (Jung, 2023). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among younger segments, who use social media not only for entertainment but also as spaces for cultural reaffirmation and symbolic projection through consumption (Wang, 2023). In particular, emotional narratives aligned with national values prove effective in activating brand defence behaviours, especially in collectivist contexts or those with high symbolic load (Yoo & Lee, 2020). Furthermore, digital communities reinforce this process by facilitating collaborative forms of meaning construction, where consumers become co-producers of the brand's symbolic value (Carter, 2020). The convergence between consumption, emotion, and national identity thus configures a new field of analysis where the act of consumption can be seen as a form of cultural participation and symbolic defence with real reputational implications.

2.4 Brand Crisis and Digital Reputation

The volatility of information and the active participation of consumers have transformed the dynamics of brand crises in the digital environment. In the face of a reputational incident, audiences no longer merely consume information but reinterpret and amplify it through symbolic and cultural codes, reinforcing their role as co-creators of digital reputation (Ridder, 2021). Controversies related to identity, politics, or ethics often trigger collective symbolic sanctions on social media, where national origin, cultural symbols, and emotional narratives are decisive (Davvetas et al., 2024). This requires agile and culturally sensitive responses, as conventional defensive strategies may intensify rejection. The challenge is not only to control the institutional message but also to manage the meanings attributed by active audiences. In this context, authenticity, empathy, and cultural coherence become key factors in mitigating reputational damage and restoring symbolic legitimacy (Elmokhtar et al., 2025).

Managing a brand crisis on social media involves going beyond controlling corporate discourse, as collective narratives emerge as forces that shape, challenge, or reinforce the public perception of an organisation, often spontaneously and emotionally (Elmokhtar et al., 2025). Digital reputation, in this sense, is a social construct in constant dispute, influenced by symbolic interactions such as hashtags, memes, comments, and visual expressions, which shape an environment laden with affectivity and difficult to anticipate (Ridder, 2021). Tools such as sentiment analysis, social listening, and ethnographic methodologies, when applied to digital spaces, are essential for interpreting this symbolic flow in real-time (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025; Ridder, 2021). Additionally, the level of emotional involvement between the brand and its community prior to the crisis may make a difference: when there is accumulated affective capital, consumers may act as spontaneous defenders, mitigating the negative impact of the crisis (Odoom et al., 2024). In this regard, brands that have built strong and culturally relevant symbolic relationships not only achieve better recovery but may even transform the critical episode into an opportunity to strengthen their positioning and social credibility.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative and computational approach to examine the symbolic and emotional responses (B. Liu, 2012) expressed by Instagram users in response to the trademark dispute between Frisby Colombia and its Spanish counterpart. The design followed a descriptive approach, with an inductive orientation and empirical foundation. As suggested by Chau et al. (2024), sentiment analysis in digital social contexts requires processes tailored to the informal, multimodal, and dynamic nature of social media platforms. Thus, a systematic analysis of the textual content of posts made on social networks was carried out, with an emphasis on extracting patterns of sentiment and symbolic meaning through natural language processing (NLP) techniques, vector modelling, and thematic clustering (Hridoy et al., 2015). The following

sections describe the data collection, text preprocessing, text vectorisation, sentiment analysis, thematic clustering, and PCA processes.

3.1 Data Collection

The data collection phase was conducted using automated content capture tools on Instagram (Aggarwal & Zhai, 2012), focusing on extracting posts and comments tagged with strategic hashtags related to the brand dispute. Bots were programmed to track posts by the Frisby brand and accounts that were tagged. These bots also searched for and stored posts that included references through hashtags such as #apollo, #FrisbyColombia, #Frisby, and #FrisbyEspaña, among others. Thus, each bot stored the following data: post URL, user, publication date, content access link, comment, hashtags, and the number of likes.

The final corpus included a total of 4,067 posts, collected between March 12, 2025, and May 24, 2025. Following the criteria of Chau et al. (2024), the collection focused on textual data, excluding images, audio, or external links, prioritising reproducibility and analytical traceability.

3.2 Text Preprocessing

In line with the second phase described by Chau et al. (2024), a systematic text preprocessing process was implemented, divided into three main stages: cleaning, enhancement, and normalisation, adapted to the informal and multimodal context of Instagram. This procedure ensures that the textual data is suitable for sentiment analysis and subsequent vector modelling, addressing the peculiarities of the Spanish language in contexts such as Colombian and Spanish dialects (in this case, specifically referring to Spain). The cleaning stage consisted of eliminating non-semantic elements that could introduce noise in the analysis, including punctuation marks, numbers, URLs, user mentions (e.g., @user), and redundant hashtags (e.g., #Frisby repeated in the same post). The NLTK library (version 3.8) was used to remove stop words in Spanish, selecting an adapted list that includes terms specific to the Colombian and Spanish dialects, as these words do not provide relevant semantic value for emotional classification (Symeonidis et al., 2018).

The enhancement stage addressed the characteristics of language in social media. Emojis and emoticons were replaced with lexical equivalents in Spanish (e.g., :) converted to happiness) using a pre-defined dictionary based on the work of Novak et al. (2015), adapted to Spanish. Additionally, spelling corrections were applied to normalise intentional letter repetitions (e.g., me encantaaaa to me encanta) and common colloquial expressions on Instagram (e.g., q for que), following the recommendations of Ahmad et al. (2023). For this, the TextBlob library was used with a spell checker trained on Spanish social media corpora. Finally, the text was normalised by converting all words to lowercase and applying tokenisation using the NLTK library, segmenting each post into discrete lexical units known as tokens. This step was essential for the subsequent vectorisation process, as highlighted by Jurafsky and Martin (2025).

3.3 Text Vector Representation

After preprocessing the corpus, two complementary feature extraction techniques were applied to numerically represent the textual content: Bag-of-Words (BoW) and Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF). These techniques, implemented through the scikit-learn library (version 1.2.2) in Python, transformed Instagram posts and comments into numerical matrices suitable for similarity analysis and thematic clustering, following the recommendations of Chau et al. (2024) for studying content on social media. The BoW technique generated a representation of the text based on the absolute frequency of each term in the corpus, considering a vocabulary constructed from the preprocessed tokens. Each post was represented as a vector, where each dimension corresponded to a unique term, and its value reflected the number of occurrences, as described by Manning et al. (2008). This representation captured basic lexical patterns in posts related to the Frisby controversy, such as recurrent terms associated with emotions or references to the brand. Complementarily, TF-IDF was used to weigh the relative importance of each term in the corpus, adjusting the frequency of appearance based on its specificity, as proposed by Chowdhary (2020).

The dual approach of BoW and TF-IDF allowed for the generation of two complementary feature matrices: BoW to capture absolute frequency, and TF-IDF to emphasise semantic relevance. These matrices

served as input for the subsequent similarity analysis, thematic clustering, and PCA, facilitating the identification of emotional and symbolic patterns in the discourse of users regarding the case study.

3.4 Sentiment Analysis and Thematic Clustering

To explore the digital narratives surrounding the controversy between Frisby Colombia and its Spanish counterpart on Instagram, a preliminary sentiment analysis was conducted to enrich the interpretation of emerging patterns, complemented by an unsupervised clustering approach to further refine the interpretation of the emerging patterns. Prior to clustering and PCA, a sentiment analysis was performed on the preprocessed corpus to classify the posts into polarity categories (positive, negative, neutral); this was done using a lexicon-based method, employing the VADER dictionary adapted to Spanish (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014) and enriched with dialectal terms specific to Colombia (e.g., *chévere*) and Spain (e.g., *guay*).

Subsequently, clustering was performed using the K-means algorithm on the TF-IDF feature matrix generated in the previous phase, employing scikit-learn (version 1.2.2). The optimal number of clusters (ranging from 2 to 10) was determined using the Silhouette coefficient, which maximises internal cohesion and separation between groups, as proposed by Goodfellow et al. (2016). Each cluster was characterised by extracting the 10 most important TF-IDF terms from its centroid, interpreted in the cultural and linguistic context of Colombian and Iberian Spanish. Integrating the results of the sentiment analysis allowed for the identification of correlations between clusters and emotional polarities. Finally, PCA was applied to project the clusters into a two-dimensional space, which enabled the visual validation of the structural consistency of the groupings and allowed for the observation of the semantic and emotional distribution of the discourses.

3.5 Ethical Treatment of Data

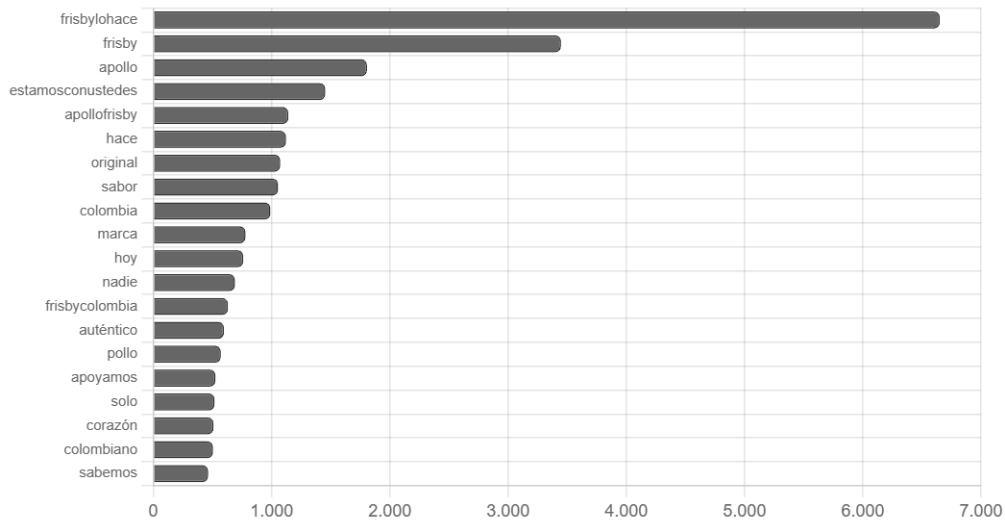
The study followed recognised standards for digital research ethics and data protection. Data were sourced exclusively from publicly accessible Instagram posts related to the case; no private accounts, direct messages, or restricted materials were accessed. The protocol avoided any contact with users and prevented the collection or retention of personal identifiers. Prior to analysis, textual materials were de-identified and handled under purpose-limitation, data-minimisation, confidentiality, and security safeguards; images and other multimedia were excluded. Reporting focuses on aggregate patterns (for example, topics and sentiment distributions) to guard against re-identification. This approach is consistent with international research-integrity frameworks and applicable data-protection principles. The following statements summarise the ethical status of the study.

4. Results

The frequency with which certain words appear (see Figure 1) in the cleaned texts allows for the identification of not only linguistic patterns but also the symbolic, emotional, and argumentative frameworks through which users construct meaning regarding the conflict. Words like “*frisbylohace*” (6,652 occurrences), “*estamosconustedes*” (1,455), “*apollofrisby*” (1,142), and “*apoyamos*” (526) constituted the base for collective support and discursive mobilisation. Terms such as “*Colombia*” (991), “*colombiano*” (505), “*corazón*” (509), and “*frisbycolombia*” (631) revealed a nationalist dimension that permeated the discourse. These terms not only denote geographic origin but also construct a symbolic opposition between what is authentically Colombian and what is foreign. On the other hand, the high frequency of words like “*original*” (1,074), “*auténtico*” (597), and “*sabemos*” (464) reinforces a narrative in which Frisby Colombia is portrayed as the legitimate, pioneering, and historically more legitimate brand than its foreign counterpart.

Furthermore, words like “*pollo*” (571) and “*sabor*” (1,056) anchor the conversation in the sensory experience of consumption, reminding that the central product is a food item. Expressions like “*nadie*” (691) and “*solo*” (518) suggest an exclusionary or confrontational tone, likely used to deny the legitimacy of the foreign competitor (“*nadie como Frisby*” and “*solo hay un Frisby*”). These words construct a framework of differentiation and reinforcement of uniqueness, drawing symbolic boundaries that consolidate the defence narrative.

Figure 1. List of the most frequent words in the comments. Note: the words are in Spanish and have not been translated so as not to alter the data.

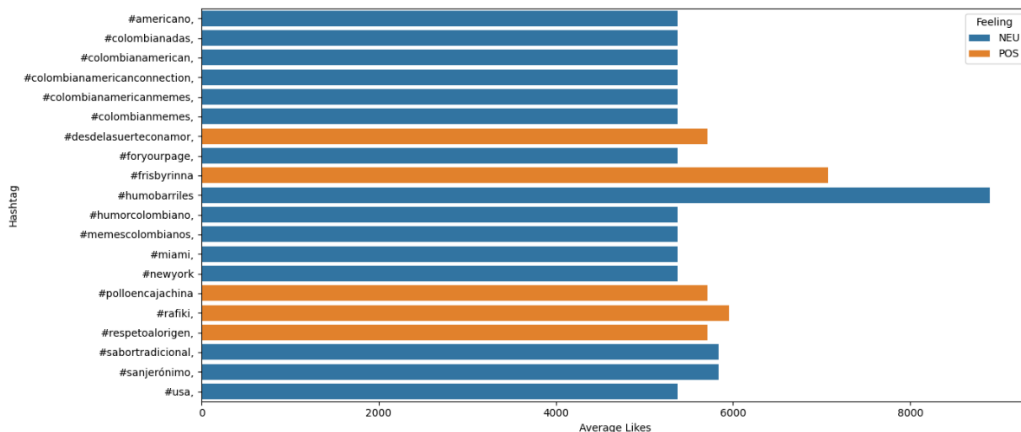


Source: Own elaboration, 2025

The sentiment analysis applied to the 4,067 posts enabled the identification of the emotional orientation of the textual content, categorising it into three categories: positive (POS), neutral (NEU), and negative (NEG). The results showed a distribution with a predominance of positive sentiment, corresponding to 2,431 posts (59.8%), followed by neutral posts, which accounted for 1,490 cases (36.6%). In contrast, only 94 posts (2.3%) were classified as negative. Additionally, 47 cases (1.1%) could not be classified by the model due to inconsistencies in the text, ambiguity, or reading errors.

As part of the analysis of reception and interaction associated with the published content, the average interactions received were examined, measured in terms of likes, based on the use of hashtags and the emotional polarity of the message, as presented in Figure 2. The results show that posts classified as positive tend to be associated with higher interaction levels compared to those classified as neutral. This difference is even more evident in hashtags that appeal to cultural, food-related, or identity-appropriating elements, where hashtags like #frisbyrinna, #polloencajachina, or #respetoalorigen, combined with a positive emotional charge, show superior performance in terms of audience engagement, suggesting greater communicative effectiveness when emotionality and symbolic identification converge.

Figure 2. Average likes by hashtag and sentiment. Note: the words are in Spanish and have not been translated so as not to alter the data.



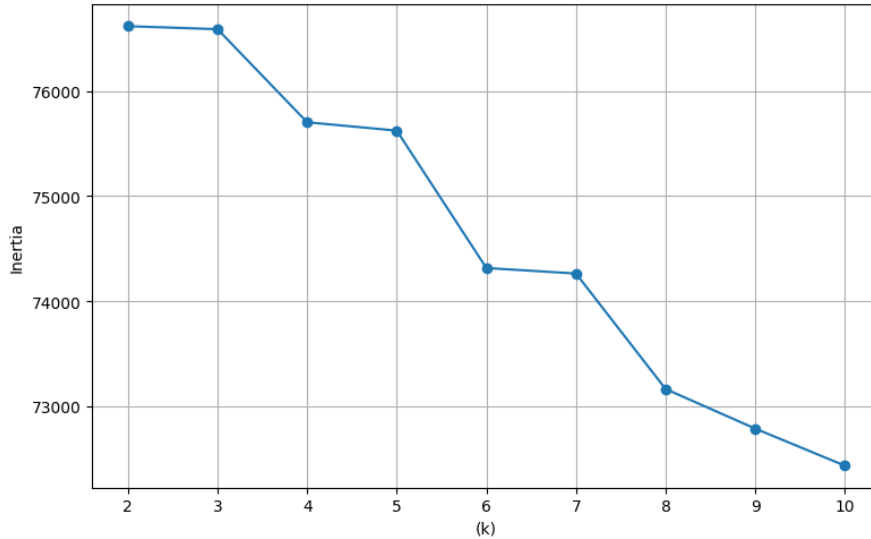
Source: Own elaboration, 2025

Neutral-oriented hashtags, many of which are related to geographic locations or broadly used tags such as #usa, #newyork, or #colombianamerican, show less variability in terms of interaction, with more homogeneous and moderate averages. Although their inclusion extends the reach of the content, their

capacity to mobilise an active response from the audience seems more limited when not accompanied by explicit emotional orientation.

To identify the latent thematic structure in the set of posts analysed, an unsupervised clustering technique was applied using the K-means algorithm. In this study, the visual analysis of the curve revealed that the slope change stabilises significantly at the value $k = 6$; this was taken as the reference to determine the number of clusters. Figure 3 shows the results of the elbow method.

Figure 3. Elbow method for selecting the optimal number of clusters.



Source: Own elaboration, 2025

In terms of post volume, cluster 0 grouped the largest proportion of messages ($n = 1,007$), making it the most relevant thematic core in terms of frequency. It was followed by clusters 3 ($n = 773$), 1 ($n = 750$), and 4 ($n = 652$), all with substantial representation. In contrast, cluster 5 shows a significantly lower frequency ($n = 122$), although its impact in terms of interaction is considerably higher, particularly in the number of likes received. The average number of likes per post shows a significant asymmetry in terms of reception and impact. While the larger clusters (0 and 3) present relatively low averages (200 and 217, respectively), cluster 5 stands out with an average of 422 likes per post, the highest among all groups. This figure is also accompanied by the highest standard deviation ($\sigma = 1,194$), indicating highly dispersed behaviour, possibly linked to viral or emotionally intense content.

On the other hand, the average number of hashtags per post also shows substantial variations. Cluster 5 stands out with the highest average ($\mu = 6.79$), followed by cluster 4 ($\mu = 5.10$). This behaviour can be interpreted as a deliberate discursive strategy aimed at maximising visibility and message reach by amplifying key terms. In contrast, clusters 2 and 0 show the lowest values ($\mu = 4.31$ and 4.55 , respectively), which suggests less digital performativity or a more spontaneous and direct narrative. From a temporal perspective, all clusters show activity concentrated between May 13 and May 24, 2025, with the partial exception of cluster 0, which shows activity starting from April 10, suggesting a relative historical seniority of the discourse. The previous results are expanded in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics by cluster.

Cluster	Number of Posts	Average Likes	Standard Deviation of Likes	Average Hashtags	Minimum Date	Maximum Date
0	1,007	200.54	740.42	4.55	2025-04-10	2025-05-24
1	750	273.16	808.86	4.96	2025-05-13	2025-05-24
2	297	239.63	925.36	4.31	2025-05-13	2025-05-21
3	773	217.15	738.48	4.67	2025-05-13	2025-05-24
4	652	256.13	834.16	5.10	2025-05-13	2025-05-21
5	122	422.71	1,194.02	6.79	2025-05-13	2025-05-23

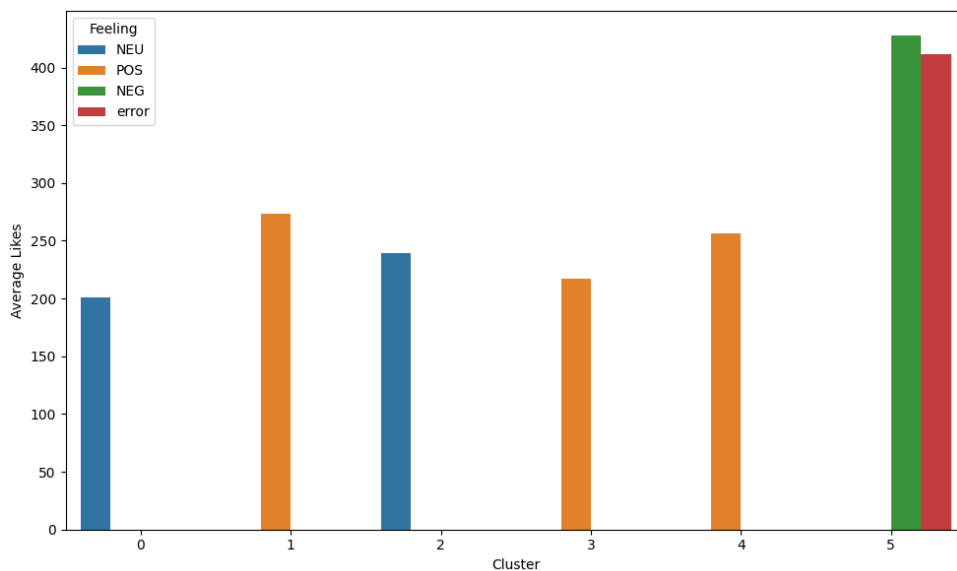
Source: Own elaboration, 2025

The emotional polarity distribution across clusters is particularly noteworthy. Negative sentiment (NEG) is notably concentrated in cluster 5, which indicates that posts classified with this emotional charge share a distinctive set of lexical traits that group them consistently around a common theme. Meanwhile, posts with positive (POS) and neutral (NEU) sentiment are mainly distributed across clusters 0, 1, 2, and 4. It is also worth noting that observations labelled as errors tend to concentrate in a specific region, suggesting that these instances share common structural characteristics despite not expressing a recognisable sentiment.

In terms of the average number of likes per cluster and sentiment type (Figure 4), significant differences in emotional reception by the audience were observed. Cluster 5 stands out with the highest values for posts with negative sentiment ($\mu = 426$) and also for those classified as errors by the model ($\mu = 411$), suggesting strong emotional resonance, possibly linked to content with high symbolic or controversial load. Meanwhile, clusters 1 and 4, dominated by positive messages, show higher interaction averages ($\mu = 273$ and $\mu = 256$, respectively), indicating that emotional support expressions are met with significant reception among users. In contrast, clusters 0, 2, and 3, linked to predominantly neutral content, recorded the lowest averages ($\mu = 200$, 240, and 217, respectively), reflecting a lower capacity for mobilisation or emotional involvement in their narratives.

The lexical analysis by clusters revealed differentiated discursive patterns in users' responses to the trademark dispute between Frisby Colombia and its foreign counterpart. Based on the relative frequency of the most recurring words, the dominant symbolic and emotional configurations in each cluster were interpreted. Cluster 0 presents a high frequency of terms such as *frisbylohace* ($n = 1,571$), *frisby* ($n = 734$), *apollo* ($n = 457$), *estamosconustedes* ($n = 296$), and *apollofrisby* ($n = 270$), indicating a thematic concentration around promotional slogans and explicit references to the brand. Additionally, terms like *Colombia* ($n = 188$) and *frisbycolombia* ($n = 172$) appear, possibly associated with an identification with the geographic origin of the company. However, overall, this cluster does not exhibit a particularly marked affective or evaluative load, but rather a neutral reiteration of identity and commercial elements, possibly resulting from automated interactions, campaign reproductions, or participation without developed discourse.

Figure 4. Average likes by sentiment and cluster.



Source: Own elaboration, 2025

In the case of cluster 1, the centrality of *frisbylohace* ($n = 1,248$), *frisby* ($n = 700$), and *apollo* ($n = 434$) remains. However, the presence of terms like *original* ($n = 372$) and *estamosconustedes* ($n = 341$) is reinforced, indicating a narrative focused on the brand's authenticity as a symbolic value. This cluster is characterised by an emotional defence that moves from affective support to the symbolic validation of Frisby's "authentic" character. Cluster 2 presents the lowest absolute frequencies among all groups, with

terms such as *frisbylohace* (n = 490), *frisby* (n = 336), and *apollo* (n = 134). The minimal presence of terms with symbolic and emotional load indicates a low level of discursive elaboration. This behaviour may be associated with users who reproduce content without developing their narrative.

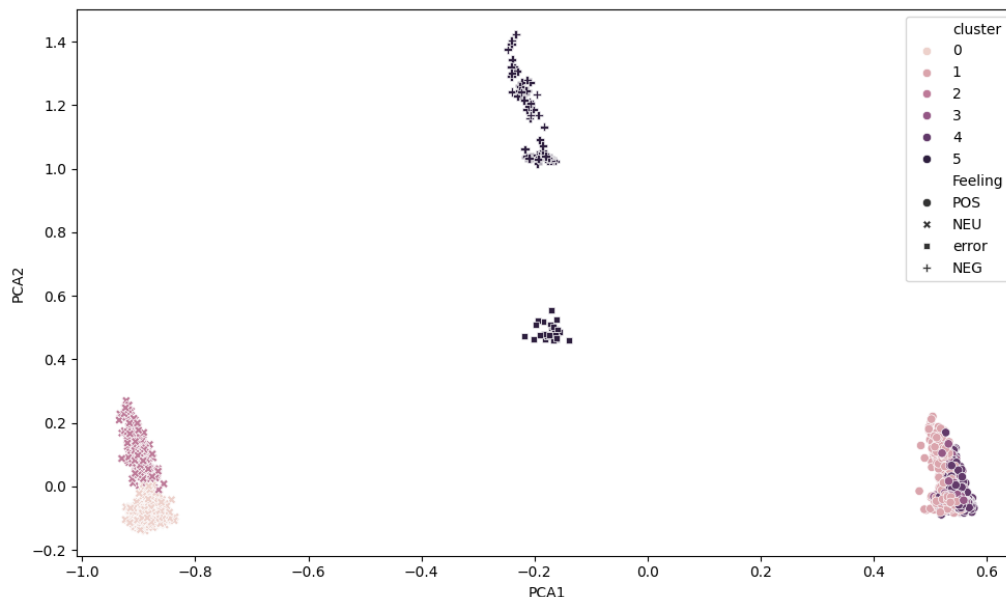
Cluster 3 is characterised by a strong affective charge, with prominent terms such as *heart* (n = 257), *love* (n = 133), *made* (n = 174), *history* (n = 165), and *thanks* (n = 149). These words structure a nostalgic narrative in which brand advocacy is articulated through its historical trajectory and the emotional bond established with its consumers. The high frequency of *Colombia* (n = 67) reinforces the nationalist tone of this narrative; however, unlike other clusters, this one is defined by a logic of gratitude and affective remembrance rather than reactive defence.

Cluster 4 is characterised by a discourse that combines strong campaign-oriented alignment with affective expressions. High-frequency terms such as *frisbylohace* (n = 1071), *frisby* (n = 577), *apollofrisby* (n = 267), *estamosconustedes* (n = 227), and *original* (n = 159) indicate a clear positioning of support and endorsement toward the brand and its communicative narrative. Simultaneously, the presence of affective lexemes such as *heart* (n = 257), *love* (n = 133), *made* (n = 174), *history* (n = 165), and *thanks* (n = 149) introduces an emotional layer centred on appreciation and positive attachment. The prominence of *Colombia* (n = 227) further anchors this discourse within a national identification frame. Overall, this cluster reflects a supportive and emotionally affirmative stance, where brand advocacy is expressed through both explicit campaign alignment and affective validation, rather than through confrontation or defensive rhetoric.

Despite grouping the smallest number of posts within the analysed set, cluster 5 distinguishes itself through a singular discursive configuration, characterised by a substantial symbolic load and an intensive communication strategy. Among the most frequent terms are *frisbylohace* (n = 218), *pollo* (n = 29), *apollo* (n = 40), and *identidad* (n = 25), which suggest a compact narrative, possibly related to the brand's representation and its symbolic dispute. However, the sentiment distribution in this cluster reveals a predominance of negative emotions and a high proportion of classification errors, suggesting a polarised and possibly reactive discursive environment.

To visually assess the semantic structure of the data and verify the internal consistency of the identified clusters, a dimensionality reduction technique based on PCA was applied. The results revealed precise and non-overlapping segmentation between the six defined clusters, which serves as an indicator of the structural consistency of the applied clustering algorithm. Each cluster is represented as a dense point cloud, with defined boundaries and no significant intersections with other groups, indicating high internal cohesion and effective separability in the reduced semantic space.

Figure 5. PCA dispersion by cluster and sentiment.



Source: Own elaboration, 2025

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a particular emotional and symbolic configuration in the spontaneous brand defence generated on Instagram in response to a national identity crisis. The high proportion of positive comments detected through sentiment analysis (59.8%) confirms that the perception of a symbolic threat activates collective mechanisms of digital solidarity, which aligns with previous studies that have highlighted the capacity of national pride to catalyse intense emotional responses to perceived attacks on iconic brands (Zhang et al., 2023; Lim & Brown, 2023). This behaviour is amplified when the brand is perceived as a cultural symbol, not just a provider of goods or services, reaffirming the emotional character of the brand-consumer bond in specific national contexts. In this sense, the reaction to the legal conflict involving Frisby expressed not only a commercial defence but also a collective attachment to a brand that has been integrated into the Colombian national identity narrative. The spontaneous use of hashtags, memes, and messages with patriotic connotations demonstrates that, in certain circumstances, brands can function as vehicles for cultural expression and national pride, amplifying their symbolic value beyond the economic realm.

From a theoretical perspective, the results reinforce the need to expand emotional branding models to include sociocultural variables such as national identity and symbolic capital, in line with studies that highlight how collective emotions can act as mobilising forces in contexts of symbolic crisis (Odoom et al., 2024; De Souza et al., 2024). In this case, the active defence by users does not respond solely to a logic of functional satisfaction or transactional loyalty, but to a shared sense of cultural belonging and collective narrative that transforms the act of consuming into a political-emotional gesture. The narrative that emerged on Instagram was not simply a commercial support response, but a symbolic reclamation of the identity role that Frisby occupies in the national imagination. Elements like the use of patriotic hashtags (#FrisbyColombia), iconic emojis (such as the Colombian flag), and references to local traditions acted as catalysts for an emotional defence that legitimised the brand as a collective symbol. This dynamic aligns with the suggestions of Carter (2020) and Zhang et al. (2023), underscoring that consumption on social media has become a performative space where cultural identity is negotiated in the face of global audiences. In this framework, emotional branding should be understood not only as an affective connection strategy but also as a tool to activate deeply rooted senses of belonging within the national context.

Graph analyses provide further evidence of the community structure of digital activism, as key non-institutional nodes (individual users and micro-influencers) were identified as the primary content disseminators. This finding is consistent with the literature on digital reputation as a distributed and constantly negotiated construct (De Ridder, 2021), in which consumers are not passive actors but curators, interpreters, and amplifiers of meaning. The decentralisation of narrative power and the ability of certain users to rally audiences around an emotional cause strengthen the idea of a participatory reputational architecture. In this context, influence does not depend solely on corporate status but on the symbolic legitimacy that actors gain in emotionally resonant contexts. This aligns with what Mulyono and Rolando (2025) argue, emphasising that digital communities reshape the processes of reputational authority through affective, visual, and collaborative mechanisms. The participation of other national brands replicating messages and symbols on their official accounts also demonstrates a process of reputational co-creation from the business ecosystem, a phenomenon that has been scarcely explored in previous studies and opens a new line of analysis regarding inter-brand solidarity during shared symbolic crises.

On the other hand, thematic analysis of the comments confirms that the predominant narratives revolve around pride, authenticity, symbolic justice, and cultural memory, validating the presence of moral emotions (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016) as the driving force behind symbolic defence. These discursive patterns illustrate how consumers reinterpret the brand from an ethical-cultural framework, attributing to it qualities that exceed its commercial value proposition and transforming it into a symbol of collective belonging. The emotionality expressed in the messages suggests a process of affective appropriation of the brand, where what is defended is not the product itself, but its shared cultural meaning. Furthermore, a rejection of perceived appropriation of identity elements was detected, resonating with the theory of consumer ethnocentrism. In this case, it is not oriented towards discriminatory consumption but towards the protection of national symbols. This reinterpretation points towards a form of cultural-affective

ethnocentrism rather than economic ethnocentrism, where consumers act as symbolic guardians of what they consider representative of their national identity. This finding extends the contributions of Yoo and Lee (2020), demonstrating how an emotional connection with national brands can escalate into collective, defensive, symbolic actions during times of crisis.

Furthermore, the results suggest that Instagram operates as a visually-affective space conducive to the articulation of such activism. Unlike textual platforms like X or Facebook, Instagram allows for a richer multimodal composition (image, text, emoji, video), which intensifies the emotional charge of the message and favours its symbolic viralisation. This observation expands upon what Lalicic et al. (2019) have noted regarding the emotional value in social media, demonstrating that the medium not only conditions the format of the message but also its affective and reputational impact. Instagram's visual interface facilitates emotional expressiveness and the convergence of meanings through national symbols, colours, and shared codes, generating an environment highly conducive to the circulation of identity-driven discourses. Likewise, the platform's algorithmic architecture, which prioritises content with high emotional interaction, contributes to amplifying collective narratives that reinforce symbolic cohesion around the brand, positioning Instagram as a strategic node in the reputational defence of brands with a strong cultural load.

Finally, from a practical standpoint, this study alerts brands to the importance of monitoring spontaneous conversations on social media, not only for their disruptive potential but also for their capacity to generate positive reputational capital. Understanding the emotional dynamics of symbolic defence allows brands to anticipate collective movements that can become assets or threats, depending on how they are managed. Organisations must, therefore, develop cultural and emotional competencies to interpret these expressions, respond with authenticity, and align with the identity values of their digital communities. This involves moving beyond traditional crisis management approaches focused exclusively on protecting institutional image and adopting strategies that recognise the active role of the consumer as a co-creator of meaning in the digital environment. In scenarios where the brand is deeply rooted in national identity, as in the case analysed, these expressions can escalate quickly, becoming mass phenomena that redefine the symbolic positioning of the organisation.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study confirm that brand crises linked to national identity transcend the communicational realm and enter the symbolic and emotional domain of the consumer. The spontaneous defence of a brand by Instagram users does not respond solely to a logic of functional satisfaction but to a complex process of cultural identification, where national pride, collective memory, and symbolic justice operate as the driving forces behind the discourse and affectivity. This type of digital activism, articulated through visual resources, hashtags, emojis, and collective narratives, demonstrates that audiences are no longer passive recipients but reputational agents with the capacity to re-signify brands from shared cultural frameworks. The case analysed shows that, when perceived as a national icon, the brand became a point of symbolic cohesion in the face of an external threat. This confirms that brand value is not solely constructed from business strategies but also shaped by the recognition, appropriation, and active defence by its cultural and emotional communities.

From these results, new lines of research emerge that invite further exploration of the links between consumption, collective emotionality, and national identity in digital contexts. In particular, it is recommended to compare how these processes operate in different types of brands (local versus global), sectors (food, fashion, and services), and geographies (collectivist versus individualist countries). Moreover, advancing studies that integrate computational methods with qualitative cultural analysis could capture symbolic narratives in social media more accurately. Finally, future research could investigate the role of visibility algorithms in amplifying or containing such digital activism, as well as the most effective strategies for brands to respond, reconnect, and co-create reputation in highly emotional and culturally charged environments. A future agenda could also consider how these dynamics are modulated based on the brand's previous symbolic capital and the type of digital community involved, as well as the limitations faced by current analyses in precisely tracking the narrative and affective evolution of these spontaneous defences.

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Ethical approval

This research is a non-interventional study based exclusively on publicly available Instagram content. No direct interaction with individuals occurred, and no personally identifiable information (e.g., usernames, post URLs, images) was retained or reported; analyses used de-identified text and aggregate indicators only. All procedures complied with international research-integrity standards (Declaration of Helsinki; COPE) and with Colombian personal-data principles of purpose limitation, data minimization, confidentiality and security (Law 1581/2012; Decree 1377/2013). In accordance with these standards and regulations, formal institutional ethics approval was not required for this study.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not required for this study. The research involved no recruitment or interaction with individuals and analysed only publicly accessible social-media content. Prior to analysis, textual materials were de-identified and processed under data-minimisation and confidentiality safeguards; no usernames, profile links, images, or other personal identifiers were collected, retained, or reported. Findings are presented in aggregate to preclude re-identification.