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Article abstract

Now considered part of the international management system, diaspora networks facilitate the dissemination of home country brands abroad and market entry into foreign countries. However, the possibility of more broadly engaging members of the diaspora in co-creating home country brand value remains underexplored. Therefore, this exploratory study adopts a qualitative longitudinal approach to examine how a new brand in a developing country can benefit from the value co-creation potential of a diaspora network. The findings show how members of the diaspora act as volunteers who provide unpaid work for the brand.

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Co-creacion del valor de la marca con la ayuda de inmigrantes voluntarios

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ABSTRACT

Now considered part of the international management system, diaspora networks facilitate the dissemination of home country brands abroad and market entry into foreign countries. However, the possibility of more broadly engaging members of the diaspora in co-creating home country brand value remains underexplored. Therefore, this exploratory study adopts a qualitative longitudinal approach to examine how a new brand in a developing country can benefit from the value co-creation potential of a diaspora network. The findings show how members of the diaspora act as volunteers who provide unpaid work for the brand.

Keywords: brand volunteers, diaspora, digital platforms, value co-creation

Résumé

Les membres de la diaspora d'un pays facilitent la dissémination des marques issues du pays d'origine et leur entrée dans des marchés étrangers. Cependant, l'opportunité de les engager plus sensiblement dans le processus de cocréation d'une marque n'a pas encore été investiguée. En conséquence, cette recherche exploratoire développe une approche qualitative longitudinale pour étudier comment une nouvelle marque dans un pays en développement peut bénéficier du potentiel co-créatif de la diaspora. Les résultats montrent que les membres de la diaspora sont prêts à agir comme des volontaires fournissant un travail non rémunéré pour la marque.

Mots-Clés : co-création de valeur, diaspora, plateformes digitales, volontaires de marque

Resumen

Las redes de inmigrantes de un país facilitan la difusión de marcas del país de origen y su entrada en mercados extranjeros. Sin embargo, aún no se ha estudiado el impacto que se tendría al involucrar a los miembros de la colectividad en el proceso de co-creación conjunta de la marca. Para comprender dicho impacto, proponemos un estudio exploratorio, cualitativo longitudinal en el que se analiza cómo una nueva marca en un país en vías de desarrollo puede beneficiarse del potencial co-creativo de los inmigrantes. Los resultados muestran que los miembros de la comunidad de inmigrantes están dispuestos a actuar como voluntarios brindando trabajo no remunerado en pro de la marca.

Palabras Clave: diáspora, plataformas digitales, co-creación de valor, voluntarios de marca



African countries and their diasporas provide a distinctive research context for international management, especially with regard to the entertainment industry. Consider the example of Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry that produces around fifty movies per week, second only to India's Bollywood, and surpassing Hollywood in the United States. The vitality of this industry is counter to "Afro-pessimism" and demonstrates the dynamism of the African entertainment industry with its large following in Africa and around the world (Krings and Okome, 2013). The globalization of Nollywood across the African continent and within the African diaspora is a topic that has attracted the attention of numerous scholars (Krings and Okome, 2013; Oguamanam, 2020). These studies shine light on the role of informal grassroots content distributors and their remarkably penetrating diaspora networks for international market diffusion. This grassroots fan base has fast-tracked Nollywood movies, and by extension Nollywood stars, to global exposure, despite having turned Nollywood movies into the most pirated products in the world (Oguamanam, 2020).

Diaspora, diasporans, and diaspora networks (see Exhibit 1 for definitions) are considered instrumental to the diffusion of new products or services and the building of brands in their country of residence (Kumar and Steenkamp, 2013; Elo and Minto-Coy, 2018), even if their value creation role has been scarcely explored in the international marketing management literature (Elo *et al.*, 2020). Diaspora studies tend to reduce the role of enthusiast brand consumers to broadcasting and word-of-mouth relays, whereas specific studies on fandoms (Hein, 2011; Chaney, 2012) and brand communities (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould, 2009; Cova, Pace and Skålén, 2015) show that enthusiast consumers can take on a productive and creative role that can benefit the brand.

Here, we go one step further by showing that diasporans can become part-time volunteers for a brand from their country of origin. In so doing, we focus on the case of BIMSTR, a Cameroonian brand that has succeeded in mobilizing consumers from different countries including its home country around its brand, all working without pay over several years for their brand's benefit. The brand BIMSTR (for Be in Music STReet) was first created by a former musician—who wanted to defend and promote young Cameroonian artists—as the name of a Facebook page. Then, by relying on the community generated on Facebook, BIMSTR also became the brand name of a start-up created to

offer members of this community a means of accessing the music they love. Such development for a new brand is quite common today. First the brand develops on social networks without any commercial focus by generating a community, and then a commercially focused company builds on that community (O'Regan and Choe, 2019).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the literature review, we examine first the growing importance of diaspora networks in international brand management with a focus on diaspora marketing. Second, we investigate the interrelated notions of brand enthusiasm and value co-creation through the study of fandom and brand communities. We then highlight the seven levers of brand volunteering work (Cova, Pace and Skålén, 2015) that will serve as a grid to examine how the co-creation of brand value occurs with diasporans. Thereafter, we describe the research methodology and the BIMSTR case. We then present the research results using the brand volunteering grid highlighting how a new brand in a developing country can benefit from the value co-creation potential of a diaspora network acting as a brand community. This allows us in detailing how the value co-creation with diasporan volunteers functions differently through pride in doing something for their country. Finally, the discussion section highlights three important themes related to the co-creation of value with a diaspora

EXHIBIT 1: Definitions

Diaspora is "a transnational community whose members (or their ancestors) emigrated or were dispersed from their original homeland but remain oriented to it and preserve a group identity" (Grossman, 2019, p. 1267).

Diasporans are "migrants who settle in some places, move on, and regroup; they may also be dispersed; and they are in a continuous state of formation and reformation" (Cohen, 2008, p. 142).

Diaspora networks consist of groups of individuals engaged in various ways in the economies and societies of their country of residence and their country of origin (Cohen, 2008).

Literature review

The growing importance of diasporas in international brand management

The topics of diaspora and diaspora networks have been latent for several decades in international management research, despite that their role in internationalization and foreign market entry has been documented in several instances. The existence of a diaspora of people from the same country as the firm is considered a factor of successful market entry into another country (Gillepsie *et al.*, 1999). Of the diaspora networks active in international business, the Chinese has received the most attention (Rauch and Trindade, 2002): Chinese networks are known to increase bilateral trade. The Italian case is paradigmatic of the impact of a diaspora network on the international food business: the proletarian diaspora of the 19th—20th century was the most important means of disseminating a culinary model that penetrated and remade the cuisines of many destination countries, especially the USA (Cinotto, 2019).

The last decade has seen the development of a full research stream dedicated to diasporas in international management (Elo and Minto-Coy, 2018; Elo *et al.*, 2020; Elo, Täube, and Servais, 2022). Within this research stream, diasporans and diaspora networks are deemed crucial in instigating the international diffusion of products and brands (Elo and Minto-Coy, 2018). Diasporas initiate and co-create exports in multiple ways and very independently. When a firm benefits from a diaspora network in a country, it can use it to expand markets for its country-of-origin brands (Kumar and Steenkamp, 2013). Diaspora presence and networks facilitate the immediate recognition and awareness of these brands in the country of residence. Companies have thus the opportunity to build on the ethnic and nostalgic brand loyalty of diasporans who balance between affiliation with host culture and desire to maintain home country identity (Sirkeci and Zeren, 2018). Diasporans, thus, appear as important actors in the introduction and development of brands from countries of origin in countries of residence.

Diasporans act not just in one country, but also in a transnational context, even in cosmopolitan settings (Elo *et al.*, 2020). Developments in communication technologies allow them to develop communal participatory practices at a global level (Lainer-Vos, 2010) and to play the role of intermediaries for home country brands in global markets (Sirkeci and Zeren, 2018). A diaspora has thus the ability to help

the brand grow globally (Bowen, 2021). By targeting diasporas abroad, home country companies can build international brands (Kumar and Steenkamp, 2013).

Diaspora actors (the “invisible diaspora hand”) are now considered part of the international management system, diffusing home country brands, and facilitating their market entry into foreign countries. Still, international management research (Elo *et al.*, 2020) is mainly interested in the role of diasporans as communication relays for the brands of the country of origin and as distributors for its products. Works in this domain remain attached to the image of a relatively passive consumer who does not intervene in the creation of brand value. However, research on brand culture (Cova, 2022; Muñiz and Schau, 2011) has shown that some consumers can be very involved, very active and very participative with the brand, and thus able to develop value-creating activities, most often not individually but collectively, within fandoms or brand communities. Through the production of consumer-generated content they co-create value for the brand, e.g., they build added content to the brand that can be captured by the company owning the brand to re-sell it to the market (Cova and Paranque, 2019).

Value co-creation with brand communities and fandoms

Diasporas can provide the context that supports the development of home country star fan bases or homeland brand communities as seen in Nollywood (Oguamanam, 2020). In recent years, researchers in the fandom and brand community fields have extensively investigated the participation of consumers in brand value co-creation.

Fandoms (Hein, 2011; Chaney, 2012) do not only comprise consumers of entertainment. Given their high involvement, they provide tangible support for artists and thus firms, but are also producers, “Fans are not just an economic resource but also a work force” (Hein, 2011, p. 37). Fans produce with or without the authorization of the firm managing the artist or the series. For example, thousands of novels written by Harry Potter fans appear on the web without the authorization of Warner Brothers, the owners of the Potter franchise (Brown and Patterson, 2009). In addition, bands such as Nine Inch Nails or Radiohead officially issued calls for user-generated videos to accompany the songs on the album (Bird, 2011). In both cases, the entertainment industry provides fertile ground to look at fans as co-producers (Chaney, 2012) or “producers” (Bird, 2011) operating in different parts of the world.

Brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) play an important role in international management by providing non-geographically bound sites for various value-creation practices whereby members create extensive brand content through their interactions (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould, 2009). Brand communities are workshops that enable enthusiasts to nurture and protect their favorite brands. In particular, they often unleash the desire of consumers to contribute to the culture, the myths, and the histories of the brands they love (Pongsakornrungrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011). Brand community members can be skillful and prolific creators of brand content, even when collaborating with relatively unknown others for no compensation. Some studies have focused on the value co-creation that takes place in direct interactions between firms and brand communities (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). In this vein, Antorini, Muñiz, and Askildsen (2012) show that the LEGO group has developed its capacity to collaborate with its brand community members to innovate and enrich the brand.

As part of fandoms or brand communities, fans and enthusiasts are active, creative, and ready to collaborate with organizations to co-create brand value (Ind, Iglesias, and Schultz, 2013). Because value co-creation depends on interaction (Hombourger-Barès and Barès, 2018), digitalization plays a major role in enhancing the contribution of consumers (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2018). By empowering consumers, digitalization has helped blur the boundaries between consumers and producers. Thanks to digital technologies, consumers can engage in numerous productive activities in a non-geographically bound fashion, generating added content, providing word-of-mouth leads, defining a brand’s meaning, and staging experiences for other customers.

Brand volunteering

While fans of a brand often produce a set of elements that can add value to it in a completely independent approach from the company, there are more and more collaborative programs organized by companies that invite fans to work in a structured way for the brand offline and/or online. As members of a brand community, some consumers are willing to do unpaid online and offline work on behalf of the brand, thereby acting as brand volunteers (Veloutsou and Black, 2019). Like all volunteers, brand volunteers agree to take part in a project governed by an organization. Based on the analysis of the digital platform created by Alfa Romeo to co-organize the brand’s centenary with the help of its fans

(Alfisti), Cova *et al.* (2015) elaborated a grid to assess value co-creation in brand volunteering programs. This grid has the enormous advantage of synthesizing the multidisciplinary literature on volunteering to apply and validate it in the specific case of brand volunteers. It also allows understanding whether the organization properly implemented the seven following levers to recruit and maintain brand volunteers:

- Lever 1: Recognition of efforts is the extent to which the organization thanks and rewards volunteers for their efforts.
- Lever 2: Skills used refers to the extent to which the organization mobilizes the appropriate competencies of volunteers.
- Lever 3: Autonomy and freedom relate to the way the program is tightly structured but at the same time flexible enough to accommodate the different contribution preferences of volunteers.
- Lever 4: Affective attachment is the emotional attachment to the program and to other volunteers.
- Lever 5: Normative attachment is the moral significance of the volunteering mission.
- Lever 6: Respect is defined as the extent to which people feel valued as individual workers of the volunteer organization.
- Lever 7: Pride is the extent to which people derive a sense of value from their association with the volunteer organization.

When a volunteer organization fails to implement one of these seven levers in activating volunteer work, it can lead to a decrease in the quantitative and qualitative engagement of consumers; in other words, it can bring about a situation where there are fewer volunteers and scarcer ideas. For instance, the Alfa Romeo-Alfisti digital platform that compressed participation into a few closed-question options limited Alfisti’s autonomy and caused some of them to disengage (Cova *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, when a volunteering program was set up by the Fairtrade Towns (FTT) movement (Samuel, Peattie, and Doherty, 2018) to promote the FTT label, the mainstream success of the movement changed the way volunteers perceived their role. No longer seeing themselves as promoters of “an ethical cause within their community,” they came to the conclusion they were “acting as unpaid marketers for major multinationals” (Samuel *et al.*, 2018, p. 770).

Research in the last ten years has detailed the importance of brand volunteers in value co-creation on digital platforms (Cova *et al.*, 2015; Samuel *et al.*, 2018; Veloutsou and Black, 2019). However, past research has not contemplated the role of diaspora networks in such non-geographically bound programs. The possibility of diasporans volunteering for a brand that originated in their country of origin raises two broad questions for international management: How can a new brand in a developing country benefit from the value co-creation potential of a diaspora network in acting as a brand community? How does value co-creation with diasporan volunteers function differently than other approaches to international expansion?

To answer these questions, we describe the case of the collaboration taking place between the BIMSTR brand created in 2015 and music enthusiasts gathered on its Facebook page. This collaboration is orchestrated by the initiator of the brand who has made several calls for volunteers (see Figure 1). We analyze this case by using the seven levers framework for activating brand volunteer work (Cova *et al.*, 2015). Thus, our study focuses on the mobilization of BIMSTR brand volunteers, individuals in diaspora networks and in the home country who gather in online communities to share their passion for music and co-create value on a digital platform.

Methodology

Our study examines how the co-creation of value with diasporans occurs for a home country brand. We adopt a case study approach (Yin, 2017) to examine how an individual initiated a new brand in the music industry in Cameroon through value co-creation processes. We were able to conduct this interesting case study of the mobilization of diasporans as a result of the Cameroonian initiator giving a presentation on the BIMSTR project at our business school and agreeing to become our key informant.

Interviews

We interviewed the initiator five times between March 2018 and March 2021. Each of these semi-structured interviews lasted between one and two hours and was recorded and transcribed. The first two interviews explored the BIMSTR project and the Cameroonian music context. The other three interviews centered

FIGURE 1

One of the calls for volunteering posted on the BIMSTR facebook page



on the BIMSTR organization and the way it co-creates value with diaspora networks. To deepen reflection on the issues that emerged during the interviews and obtain further clarification, we communicated with the initiator through email exchanges and Skype meetings.

As an important player in the music sector in Cameroon, the initiator shared his intimate knowledge of Cameroonian culture and provided valuable information about the role of various actors in the market. He vastly improved our understanding of what goes on behind the scenes in value co-creation with diasporans. Thus, the methodological approach adopted in the research is very similar to collaborative ethnography where key informants provide an emic perspective or insider's view (as opposed to an etic perspective or outsider's view) on the social phenomenon under study (Lassiter, 2005).

The initiator was also instrumental in putting us into contact with the brand volunteers who we interviewed from April to March 2021 using a semi-structured approach (McCracken, 1988). The initiator allowed us to select volunteers from the two categories he organized (see next, the BIMSTR venture). The first ones (*Les Bénévoles*) were all from the Cameroonian diaspora in Europe and North America and participated in various capacities in the BIMSTR project (4 persons). The latter (*Les Z'experts*) came from both Cameroon and the diaspora and were mainly active on the Facebook page (5 persons). The interviewee profiles are detailed in Appendix 1.

Each interview was conducted by phone or visioconference and lasted more than an hour and was recorded and then transcribed. The majority of the volunteers were interviewed twice, one year apart, to clarify issues related to the creation of value for the brand. Important to note is that our key informant provided the names and addresses but did not participate in these interviews.

To validate the role of BIMSTR in the Cameroonian music sector, we also conducted semi-structured phone interviews with two artists and two institutional actors in the sector that lasted between 45 minutes to an hour.

Secondary data

The initiator gave us full access to all the existing PowerPoint presentations linked to the BIMSTR project (18 PPT files). For three years (from mid-2018 to early 2021), we browsed the BIMSTR Facebook page, BIMSTR YouTube channel, and *Les Z'experts* (BIMSTR Community group page) for information on the digital engagement of volunteers and the co-creation of value. We also created an archive of web pages and press articles that mentioned the BIMSTR venture. This secondary data made it possible to confirm and/or complete certain volunteers' statements as to contextualize some of the information gathered through interviews.

Analysis

The analysis of the volunteers' interviews mainly drew on the brand volunteering grid of Cova *et al.* (2015). This grid provides a framework for drawing an accurate picture of the reality of brand volunteering and allows examining the possibility of mobilizing diasporans as brand volunteers through digital support. We supplemented the analysis of volunteers' interviews with the analysis of the initiator's interview to assess the impact of the volunteers' work on co-creating value for the BIMSTR brand. Finally, we presented the global analysis to the initiator for validation.

Representation

A major challenge for consumer culture researchers (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) is the task of accurately representing the lived experience of consumers to readers. Too often, the conventional means of representing results (summaries, tables, graphs) are "incapable of tapping into the richness of human experience" (Goulding, 2003, p. 155). As a result, researchers have to adopt "unconventional" approaches to the presentation and analysis of their results (Bryman and Buchanan, 2018). This is particularly true for case studies, as "summarizing case evidence within tables ... can be disappointing to readers who are expecting the 'richness' of detailed narratives from the empirical data" (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p. 29). The empirical and conceptual wealth of case studies requires focusing the descriptions of the events and practices on the lived experiences of the actors under study, with verbatim reports or even photographic evidence of these events and practices where possible. In their study of a British Royal Family brand tribe, Otnes and Maclaran (2007) provide an excellent example of this focus on the lived experience through their participatory observations, interviews with a key informant, and photographs of objects from her Royal Family collection. In line with this approach, the representation of our results is mostly structured around the lived experience of two BIMSTR brand volunteers: Camille, a BIMSTR *Z'expert*, and Rufine, a BIMSTR *Bénévole*.

The BIMSTR Venture

Up to early 2010, Cameroonians largely listened to music produced in other countries, a tendency accentuated by the fact that Cameroonian media outlets primarily played foreign music. In this respect, digital came as a blessing, offering a new alternative to media outlets, very selective broadcast networks, and the classic consumption channels. Timidly at first, listening audiences began to discover local artists promoted as admirable outsiders by certain web media. The original mission of the BIMSTR project launched in 2015 by the Cameroonian initiator, our key informant, was to accelerate this movement.

A former musician, he began his business career in computer maintenance in South Africa following his training in management information systems, developing experience in community management and as a smartphone reporter, blogger, and content creator. When he arrived in Nanterre, France, in 2014, he had difficulty integrating and decided to set up a project "to push people to

consume Cameroonian to the maximum". He thus created and managed the BIMSTR project, requiring him to make numerous trips back and forth between Douala (Cameroon) and Paris (France) where there is an important Cameroonian diaspora. At the same time, he developed competencies in digital communications, learning on-the-job how to organize an online community.

In one of the interviews, the initiator explained the Cameroonian origins of the BIMSTR project:

Because of the postulate that everything from outside is better, we Cameroonians weren't listening to our own music. Thus, it was a question of boosting the image of our music, not just in Cameroon, but also in other countries. Our first goal was to showcase our good side by revealing young talent to the listening audience, mainly young persons between 18 and 34 years old, while promoting Cameroonian music of every artistic genre at the same time. Second, it was a question of contributing to making the Cameroonian music sector more visible by developing important web media for digital broadcasting, promotion, and streaming of audiovisual content.

In other words, BIMSTR's goal was to increase consumption of Cameroonian work in the music sector and ensure it received the recognition it deserved. The commitment to the defense of "KMER artists [short for Cameroon]" and the "sound of 237 [telephone code of Cameroon]" is at the heart of the BIMSTR project.

Through a Facebook page, the BIMSTR project was able to offer a platform for consuming Cameroonian music. The initiator understood that artists are unique products, and as their success depends on bringing together a community of fans, fans have to identify with them personally, meaning they have to know their favorite artist's tastes, preferences, and opinions. As he asserted:

BIMSTR has allowed music fans to discover Cameroonian artists and their discographies, but also their universes, their favorite teams, their influences, and their friendships. Interactive, BIMSTR encourages people to talk about them together and thus to create a community around their artists.

To produce and nourish this platform, BIMSTR has called on an unpaid workforce, the fans of Cameroonian music. As the initiator stated:

We explain to potential volunteers that our project's a battle and that it's not just about promoting our artists, but also about promoting our culture,

reaffirming its value, boosting its image. Thus, supporting BIMSTR means doing your part to promote the development of Africa and Cameroon.

In line with this goal, BIMSTR has created two categories of volunteer workers: *Les Bénévoles* and *Les Z'experts*.

From the beginning of the project, the founder has surrounded himself with what he calls his "inner circle," *Les Bénévoles*, a small group of people who share his commitment and his values and who voluntarily take care of some of the tasks necessary for the smooth running of the platform. They are computer scientists, designers, students, self-taught people from different backgrounds. The majority of them are from the Cameroonian diaspora in Germany, France, England, Canada and the United States. They are multidisciplinary educated youngsters (designers, students, self-taught individuals with skills in various areas) who have helped BIMSTR develop a listening and discovery platform for Cameroonian music. The initiator oversees the work of *Les Bénévoles* by way of WhatsApp groups, which he prefers to emails "that take away the sense of being near". This organizational structure is divided into specialized subgroups that inform each other of what is happening and share ideas (although with little one-on-one communication) so that *Les Bénévoles* remain in a community-oriented work environment.

With the help of *Les Bénévoles*, the initiator was able to define an approach that put followers at the center of the action. This meant creating a category for highly motivated followers, a group called *Les Z'experts*. As the initiator explained, "These are 'experts' that have an opinion on everything—just like any Cameroonian does—but with a 'Z' in front of the word 'expert' to stress the difference between them and conventional experts". They are from Cameroon or from the diaspora. What counts is less their level of education than their enthusiasm and the willingness to share their opinions. The work of *Z'expert* volunteers is mainly digital, essentially producing content related to emerging artists in the Cameroonian music scene. This work is organized by the initiator who gives tasks to each *Z'expert*, for example, writing a daily news column or creating a weekly streaming program. The key word is "sharing", for the work is mostly about communicating their appreciation of new artists and commenting on the discoveries of other *Z'experts*. This means that *Z'experts*, most of whom are long-term volunteers, have to be online constantly.

Many *Bénévoles* and *Z'experts* have collaborated with BIMSTR for more than three years, and even if sometimes they stop participating to focus on their studies or on paid work, few have left the BIMSTR community permanently. There is now a team of 8 *Bénévoles* working with twenty key *Z'experts* who provide structured content on a weekly basis. In addition to these, there is the “Z'experts army” according to the initiator’s words, i.e., all those who feel part of the “Community of Z'experts” through a dedicated Facebook page which counted 30,000 members in 2021.

Beyond coordinating the functional aspects of the BIMSTR platform, the initiator does important emotional work (Burch, Batchelor, and Humphrey, 2013). In his posts and videos, he adopts a colorful style using *Camfranglais* (a mixture of Cameroonian French and English typical of this country which uses English or French depending on the region), a way of communicating that is much appreciated and has quickly made him something of an idol to Cameroonians. The work is punctuated with numerous moments of socialization connected to the life of the project. The anniversary of the creation of BIMSTR is celebrated every year—as are the birthdays of volunteers and the initiator’s—with an avalanche of posts containing photos and videos.

At the end of 2021, BIMSTR’s Facebook page had more than one million fans and close to 200,000 followers on Instagram. This success has established the notoriety of the BIMSTR brand. From there, the initiator made several attempts to monetize the brand he had created. He set up a means of paying music produced by independent artists with mobile money adapted to the everyday reality of music lovers in Africa (Humbani and Wiese, 2018). As for the artists, he offered them to sponsor BIMSTR by paying for advertising on the BIMSTR Facebook page that allows them to connect with a larger audience and increase the reach of the Facebook page at the same time. Finally, he created the BIMSTR Agency. It is an agency specialized in social media strategy. It offers Cameroonian companies personalized support to develop a presence on social networks. BIMSTR Agency relies heavily on the communication strength of the *Z'experts* community to support specific campaigns

Results

Our results are presented as follows. We begin by using the levers identified in the brand volunteering grid of Cova *et al.* (2015) to analyze the situation of a *Bénévole* and a *Z'expert*. The goal is to validate the volunteering approach adopted

by the BIMSTR brand with fans in the diaspora. We then detail the types of value co-creation that a *Z'expert* and a *Bénévole* can generate for themselves individually, for the BIMSTR brand in general, and for all BIMSTR stakeholders through the use of digital support. Specifically, the lived experience of volunteering at BIMSTR is presented through a detailed description of the BIMSTR experience of Camille, a BIMSTR *Z'expert*, and Rufine, a BIMSTR *Bénévole*, both of whom live outside of Cameroon and actively participate in the Cameroonian digital diaspora, making them ideal candidates to study this type of digital diaspora (Witteborn, 2019):

- Camille studied archival science (with a specialization in strategic information) at the *Université de Lyon III*. Thanks to the large Cameroonian community in Europe, she first discovered BIMSTR when she arrived in France in 2016. Today she works as a communications manager and strategic monitor at WeCashUp, a mobile money startup in Marseille, France. She has been a BIMSTR *Z'expert* since April 2016.
- Rufine lives in Plittersdorf near Karlsruhe in Germany. After obtaining her master’s degree in literature and media at the University of Bayreuth, she became a journalist. She is a very active *Bénévole* who became involved in the BIMSTR adventure early on when the platform was first being launched at the end of 2015.

Where necessary, the descriptions of Camille’s and Rufine’s BIMSTR experiences are supplemented with relevant information obtained from the interviews with seven other volunteers (see the interviewee profiles in Appendix 1). We also draw on information obtained from volunteers online and from the statements the initiator made in the five interviews.

The BIMSTR volunteering experience

Lever 1: The organization thanks and rewards volunteers for their efforts.

Camille points out that she receives “rewards for [her] performance and loyalty, such as a super fan badge or concert tickets”. Indeed, BIMSTR offers a “Super *Z'expert*” badge and small rewards to *Z'experts* for commenting on, sharing, and “liking” posts daily on the BIMSTR Facebook page. For example, *Z'experts* can win BIMSTR caps and T-shirts, or internet credit. Beyond these material rewards, the most active *Z'experts* win the admiration and respect of the BIMSTR community. For example, to praise Camille’s work as a *Z'expert*, the initiator

posted a 700-word text on the BIMSTR Facebook page titled “You’re Constantly on BIMSTR and You Don’t Know Camille Owono? You Lie Like a Politician”. A *Z’expert* named Ulrich told us that he has had the great privilege of being visited at home by the initiator many times. Other *Z’experts* have been thrilled to see photos of themselves on the opening page of the platform. The initiator says that BIMSTR “also regularly organizes professional photo shoots for *Z’experts* so that they can offer a better image on the different BIMSTR platforms”. The attitude to potential rewards is often anchored in self-sacrifice. This is highlighted in Rufine’s remark on her work as a *Bénévole* volunteer, “If you expect monetary or material rewards, you’re on the wrong track. We’re more in a logic that’s not based on calculation—and that’s the beauty of the community”.

Lever 2: The organization mobilizes the appropriate competencies of volunteers.

Having perceived that Camille likes to communicate on the internet, that she is not put off by criticism (which can be virulent in digital contexts), and that she is not afraid to say what she thinks, the initiator offered her the opportunity to host the program “The BIMSTR Recap by Camille Owono” that would cover the latest news of the Cameroonian urban music scene on the internet every Thursday at 7 p.m. One of BIMSTR’s key strengths is its capacity to mobilize “hard-working *Z’experts* with talent in particular sectors” (Marceline, Facebook post). This is also Rufine’s view, “It’s clear that nobody should burn themselves out, and so you have to concentrate on your own skill area, you have to be at the right place because there’s a lot to do”.

Lever 3: The organization manages the program in a structured but flexible way to accommodate the contribution preferences of volunteers.

According to Camille, the BIMSTR platform is organized in a fairly flexible way, “Days off—you decide when you need to take time off. We have a workplace, the BIMSTR platform, and full-time work 24/7”. *Z’experts* who hold other jobs have to juggle their work in their breaks and free time. Students work long hours at BIMSTR, explaining why most understand when they need to slow down. Rufine confirms that it is easy to speak to the initiator about this issue, and she says being a student, she had to adjust her work time at one point, “[W]ith my studies ... it was necessary to reduce my activities at BIMSTR in order to concentrate more on my master’s thesis”. Although flexibly organized, the work is intense for volunteers. The initiator admits this is the case:

I don’t really take account of each person’s specific program... I offer work and I give a deadline to deliver it. I’m in a configuration where it’s necessary to progress rapidly, so I’ve always been demanding with respect to what can be delivered in a given timeframe. What makes the team adjust to my program, and not the other way around, is the fact I listen when anyone indicates their workload is too heavy or a need to step back for a little while because of other life priorities.

Lever 4: The organization helps volunteers develop emotional attachment to the program and to other volunteers.

Camille says, “With BIMSTR, I remember where I come from while I’m in France”. According to Rufine, the explanation for her very demanding involvement is obvious, “It’s because of my love for the BIMSTR project, with the real connection, the sense of belonging you get from the music that links you to Cameroon”. In addition to fostering this nationalist attachment through its online presence, BIMSTR organizes offline meetings for *Z’experts* in Douala and Yaoundé in which the initiator plays a key role. The BIMSTR brand is personified by the initiator, and beyond being fans of the platform, *Z’experts* appreciate having a highly successful person in front of them who speaks the same way they do, who eats the same food, who lives in the same diasporan conditions, someone who is just like them. The initiator is a personage who creates emotional attachment through his empathy-based social capital. Moreover, his appeal to others is increased by his patriotic discourse, his use of *Camfranglais*, and his ability to showcase content that is 100% Cameroonian.

Lever 5: The organization ascribes moral significance to the volunteering program mission.

Camille says, “The project pleases me enormously. Anything to do with digital development in Cameroon, I’m fully committed to the cause”. Important to stress is that in digital development, Cameroon is well behind Nigeria and Ghana, which is one of the reasons that Camille appreciates the “sacrifice made by the initiator in order to take charge of the neglected music sector in Cameroon”. She insists that she is “ready to pitch in to help him” and stresses the sense of solidarity, “We all work for the culture we love so much, the one that brings us all together here”. Rufine expresses the same enthusiasm, emphasizing the fundamental role of this collective project, “If BIMSTR didn’t exist, we wouldn’t even know

we've got good musicians in Cameroon... BIMSTR is working to save our nation ... without any financial aid or government grants". *Z'expert* Ulrich agrees, "BIMSTR is a beautiful collective adventure. Today we're rediscovering our own rhythms; we're getting back to our roots, mixing our languages. BIMSTR's also one of the vehicles for this and helping us make progress".

Lever 6: The organization respects volunteers as individual contributors to the volunteering program.

Camille maintains that "sharing is [their] main job" and that they "have learned the strength that comes from sharing". There is a fundamental belief that *Z'experts* form a community and that each individual deserves respect for his or her contribution to the collective effort to create BIMSTR content. "Anyone can become an influencer, that's what's great about BIMSTR" (Ulrich, *Z'expert*). Referring to the contributions of individual volunteers, Rufine highlights the notion of complementarity, "In the end, what's really appreciated is that over time we get to know each other, a little like a family whose members are different but complementary without being singled out".

Lever 7: The organization fosters pride in being associated with the volunteering program.

Pride is very important to Camille. In August 2017, when BIMSTR was working on its website, Camille was asked to make a video to record her impressions of it, "It's an honor for me... The video's still online." Josepha feels the same pride, "In my family, everyone knows I'm a *Z'expert*." In a Facebook post, Linda Ruth writes this: [At the Jovi concert], when a man comes up to me and asks, "Are you from BIMSTR?" I answer with pride [that I am], and he says to me, "I commend you for your work. I actually follow you on all the social media and you're incredible... After that, I was moved when he asked how to get a BIMSTR T-shirt.

For Rufine too, pride is what she feels most, "A mere T-shirt is a little like a second skin, and all the *Bénévoles* are affected in a positive way. We're proud to be recognizable".

Co-creation of value through the volunteering program

Having established that these seven brand volunteering levers are the same for *Z'experts* and *Bénévoles*, we now provide a more precise picture of the co-creation of value at BIMSTR by highlighting some other aspects of the

volunteering program. For *Z'experts*, the co-creation of value mostly occurs through the creation of content, whereas for *Bénévoles*, the co-creation is usually linked to functional tasks that keep the platform running.

Here is how the volunteer work of *Z'experts* like Camille co-creates value at BIMSTR. For more than two years, Camille has been on Facebook live at 9 p.m. every Thursday for between 45 and 60 minutes. She has produced 70 Facebook videos and has had more than one hundred guests (artists, *Z'experts*, managers, producers, bloggers, influencers) contribute live on Facebook. The videos average 8,000 views for a total 500,000 views, "which is enormous" according to the initiator. This volunteer work also co-creates value for Camille herself, "It's thanks to the article on Facebook that I got my work internship in Marseille". The initiator explains in more detail:

We do zooms that are focused on our *Z'experts* designed to showcase them. Moreover, one of these zooms helped Camille get hired by a startup named WeCashUp, because the boss saw the zoom and was interested in her profile. This allowed her to begin her work internship and then be selected for the position.

Indeed, being *Z'experts* enables increasing their visibility and social network. Camille goes as far as to say that "for artists, BIMSTR is like a savior, a messiah." An artist named Lydol adds this:

BIMSTR is "the" platform for promoting Cameroonian music... They're the pioneers and the only ones. They're not just interested in talent that's already recognized but also, and above all, in talent that's emerging... BIMSTR's strength is in sharing... People shared my video that was posted on the platform, and I do the same. It's made easy by the close relations between *Z'experts* and artists. There's a sense of belonging to a group of privileged people... We have a WhatsApp group with *Z'experts*. We exchange sometimes, but I only retain the names of the ones like Camille Owono who publish the most... For each of my new songs, BIMSTR has exclusivity for one day before it goes to YouTube and other platforms ... without any financial agreement.

As for co-creating value through the volunteering work of *Bénévoles*, we focus on Rufine's experience to illustrate it. Among other tasks, Rufine says that she has to "publish regularly on the BIMSTR platform, organize meetings, and help translate many documents". Rufine began her volunteering work as a community

manager for BIMSTR groups on Facebook and then Instagram. She is currently working on new content for Twitter. The initiator describes her training:

I trained [Rufine] in community management, and she put effort into it to the maximum by doing it herself and by watching me do it. Finally, I made her responsible for our Instagram platform, and she was able to get close to 50,000 followers just by applying what I was doing on Facebook and asking lots of questions. And now it's Rufine who trains the new community managers to use our Instagram platform.

The initiator is very aware that, "BIMSTR's strength is its *Bénévoles*. Without them, nothing is possible, given our limited financial resources. We need a lot of people if we want to talk about this wave of new talent in our Cameroonian music". Rufine recognizes that she has learned a great deal at BIMSTR:

Working with a lot of different things, being independent, using tools that aren't very practical, that was hugely beneficial to me, professionally speaking. I learned how to take the lead and manage a team. First, I worked alone on the Instagram platform, then with two other *Bénévoles*, both under my supervision. Today I work at a radio station in Karlsruhe, Germany with a team of five persons under my supervision... I'm also in charge of defining the social media strategy.

Most *Bénévoles* agree that BIMSTR is a place for learning. Daniel, the first web designer, took advantage of BIMSTR to complete his work internship and used it as the research topic of his bachelor's degree at the University of Brighton:

[BIMSTR is where I had] my first project I was in charge of, one for which I had the lead and the freedom to take the initiative to test things. I learned a lot and gained a huge amount of self-confidence. Today I'm in charge of user experience at prettylittlething.com.

A *Bénévole* called Christian also stresses that BIMSTR is a learning experience, "BIMSTR gave me an approach and a way of thinking about a project. In my professional life, I learned to reconsider the creation process of an application".

The co-creation of value between BIMSTR and its volunteers is founded on collaborative digital work. Neither *Bénévoles* nor *Z'experts* have an offline office; all the work is done digitally from wherever they themselves prefer to do it.

Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (to a lesser degree) are used as diffusion platforms for most of the work of these volunteers. First Skype and then WhatsApp became tools for collective work. Rufine explains that for individual work, "everything begins online through different digital means because they're immediate and easy. You contribute on the Facebook thread and off you go". She also explains her experience of the collaboration between volunteers:

At the beginning of 2017, I began meeting other *Bénévoles* on Skype. The initiator organized Skype meetings with the whole team, like the one in June 2017 before the launch of the internet site. There were five Skype meetings, and that creates a connection. In December 2017, we had a concert by a Cameroonian artist in Paris and some of the *Bénévoles* got to really meet each other in person.

According to the initiator, the digital collaboration of *Bénévoles* involves various tools:

We use WhatsApp for quick exchanges, but also email for the reports, the documents, the directives, the needs, the preoccupations... We regularly use Skype for our different meetings—it's lively and interactive—and what's interesting is the possibility of screen sharing.

For *Z'experts*, there is a Facebook group dedicated to exchanges between community members (*Community BIMSTR — Les Z'experts*) as well as WhatsApp subgroups that allow *Z'experts* to "talk about anything they want to, they joke around, they flirt ... it's a form of well-oiled self-management, and me, I'm there more to refocus things when necessary".

Discussion

The BIMSTR case points to three important contributions related to the co-creation of value with diasporans that merit discussion to advance international management knowledge. First, brand value co-creation occurs with diasporans in a balanced way, with, first and foremost, the production of digital content for the brand. Second, brand volunteering at BIMSTR reveals that all seven levers of volunteer work can be activated with diasporans, but the pride associated with participating in a project promoting the national culture is key to success. Third, the digital aspect of the BIMSTR experience shows that social media

enable mobilizing volunteers—without almost any financial investment—everywhere in the world, particularly Europe, where there may be an important diaspora from the home country or region.

Co-creating value for the brand with diasporans

Brand volunteering has been conceptualized as a powerful means of co-creating with enthusiastic consumers (Cova *et al.*, 2015; Samuel *et al.*, 2018; Veloutsou and Black, 2019). The BIMSTR case provides strong evidence that Cameroonian consumers living abroad can be mobilized to participate in a volunteering program, hence shining a light on the potential of diaspora networks in co-creating brand value beyond their role as communication relays and as distributors (Kumar and Steenkamp, 2013; Sirkeci and Zeren, 2018).

The initiator of the BIMSTR brand effectively externalizes some of its activities to diasporans who are transformed into “producers” (Bird, 2011). Members of the diaspora, with their high level of education and competences, are able to take on the administrative tasks necessary to manage the brand (*Les Bénévoles*), and/or generate brand content in the form of video or live broadcasts (*Les Z’experts*). They all produce content for the brand on the digital platform. Indeed, the volunteers from the Cameroonian diaspora are young professionals who often have a university degree and have lived far from their parent’s homeland for many years. Although the Cameroonian diaspora is not the largest in Europe, it is one of the most active and visible. Contrary to the Malian and Senegalese diasporas, which stem from employment-based immigration, the Cameroonian diaspora has arisen from study-related immigration (J uompan-Yakam, 2016). This means that like Camille and Rufine, volunteers from this diaspora have both the technological and cultural capital—and very frequently also the financial capital (more than volunteers who have not left Cameroon)—to make a significant contribution to the co-creation of value for the brand. Without the help of the competent members of the diaspora, who are willing to collaborate without being paid, the initiator would never have been able to set up and develop the BIMSTR project.

If these diasporan volunteers create value for the BIMSTR brand, they also capture value generated by their membership in the brand’s volunteer group: they gain reputation, network connections and knowledge. There is thus a true co-creation of value. In doing so, the initiator of BIMSTR avoids the pitfall denounced in many critical writings about the co-creation of value for the brand,

that of turning to the exploitation of consumers by putting them to work without paying them (Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody, 2008).

The seven levers of volunteering and the fight for the nation

First, it is important to stress that the BIMSTR case shows that the seven levers of brand volunteering (Cova *et al.*, 2015) are all necessary to organize and manage a brand volunteering program with diasporans. Second, the BIMSTR case also highlights how value co-creation with diasporan volunteers functions differently than in the cases analyzed so far in the literature:

1. The pride that the volunteers develop by participating in the brand volunteering program goes beyond the brand. BIMSTR volunteers experience their work as a collective movement that stands up for an underappreciated and even threatened national heritage: Cameroonian music. In contrast to what often happens in other brand volunteering programs (Ainsworth, 2020), BIMSTR volunteers do not have a sense of brand ownership, at least not in the usual way. It is not the experience of owning the brand per se that motivates them to remain in the brand volunteering program. If they do have a sense of brand ownership, this feeling is centered on the fight for Cameroonian music, which they see as belonging to them and in dire need of defending. In their interviews and online posts, BIMSTR volunteers often evoked the idea of a national fight or struggle. It is clear that nationalistic sentiments were latent in the diaspora and that the initiator was able to organize and coordinate them through the BIMSTR project. Echoing Gusdorf (1987, p. 118), one might be tempted to say that the initiator has brought order to the “disorganized and badly equipped cohorts of [a] revolutionary army”.
2. The style and the language of communications at BIMSTR also distinguish its volunteering program from others previously analyzed. The success of brand volunteering at BIMSTR depends in large part on the initiator’s ability to embody the BIMSTR brand in a joyfully festive way on the platform, and above all, in a way that motivates the volunteer communities. Using WhatsApp groups to communicate simply and directly, he is able to create a truly convivial atmosphere. By speaking *Camfranglais*, a mixture of languages that typifies the Cameroonian identity, he distances himself from official discourse in French and English and establishes an authentic connection with volunteers. *Camfranglais* is “essentially a spoken language that favors orality” (Nyela, 2005, p. 110).

As such, it is a fundamental vehicle of national identity of the Cameroonian diaspora, so that its use at BIMSTR fosters pride among volunteers who see themselves as participating in the struggle to defend Cameroonian music.

Mobilization of the digital diaspora

The brand content created by BIMSTR volunteers and the initiator is essentially immaterial, for it is digitally enabled, produced, and shared online. Aided by digital technologies (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2018), brand value co-creation is thus the process and the result of the joint enactment of work on interactive platforms by BIMSTR volunteers and the initiator.

Fans are empowered by digital technologies that allow them to work from different locations: from France and Germany in Europe, or from anywhere else in the world including Cameroon. Through this work, they co-create value for BIMSTR as a brand, for the *Z'expert* community as a group, and for themselves as individuals. The same holds true for the *Bénévoles* since they too can work online no matter where they are in the world. Their ability to discover and analyze new artistic talent is easily communicable thanks to community sharing enabled by WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.

By providing a means to overcome the distance between those living in the home country and members of the diaspora, digital platforms make the co-creation of value possible in real time even though participants are physically far away from each other. Digital platforms eliminate numerous obstacles that would otherwise stand in the way of the collaborative work of diasporan volunteers. It should be noted, however, that even though all the collaborative work is done digitally, the initiator of BIMSTR has perceived the need for offline meetings between the different volunteers, either in Cameroon, on the occasion of soccer matches organized between teams of volunteers, or in Europe on the occasion of the joint presence of the initiator and some volunteers in Paris or elsewhere.

Conclusion

The BIMSTR case highlights how a new brand in a developing country can benefit from the value co-creation potential of a diaspora network and this along three lines. First, when asked to do so, diaspora networks are ready to create content for a new home country brand. Second, it is national pride that is the most powerful lever for their brand volunteerism. Third, digital media allow for their real-time collaboration with the brand.

The case proves that when supported by new digital communication technologies, the co-creation of value can take place between a home country startup and diaspora networks, highlighting a new role for diasporas in international management (Elo and Minto-Coy, 2018): from consumers and distributors of country-of-origin brands (Kumar and Steenkamp, 2013) to collaborators of these brands.

However, important to stress is that the case study presented here largely focuses on the role of the Cameroonian diaspora in BIMSTR's success, a group of individuals with a higher level of education than most Cameroonians. These individuals who—like the initiator—left Cameroon to study and/or work in Europe, represent a high percentage of BIMSTR brand volunteers, suggesting it would be interesting to contrast our results with those of studies on brand volunteering at startups that do not mobilize diasporas. Moreover, our study also raises the issue of the underlying goals that mobilize these brand volunteers. Beyond the BIMSTR brand, the opportunity to stand up for the nation of Cameroon—or perhaps for the entire African continent—may be what is ultimately at stake.

Notes

The BIMSTR case study has enabled developing research on the stages of building a brand community (Cova, Barès, and Nemani, 2021) and deducing the principles for the action of start-ups (Barès, Cova, and Nemani, 2021), without contravening the ethical principles of the research. As Gatignon (2019, p. 72) stipulates, “using the same data sets for several publications is possible, provided that each article clearly and specifically adds value”. In the present case, while the various publications use the same research context—the BIMSTR case—they make little or no use of the same data. For this article, we mainly mobilize data obtained from members of a diaspora to specifically answer our questions on brand volunteering with diaspora networks.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEWEES

Table 1. People living outside Cameroon

Pseudonym	Interview Date	Involvement with BIMSTR (role and duration)	Profile
Anicet	03/13/2018 09/17/2018 01/31/2019 08/07/2019 04/15/2020 12/10/2020 06/18/2021	Project initiator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resides in France (Paris region) • Initiator of the BIMSTR platform. • Experienced in community management • Frequent visits between France and Cameroon
Alice	04/12/2019	Bénévole volunteer (2017–2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resides in Canada • Master's student at the University of Toronto (Canada) • In charge of the distribution of artists' content on the platform
Christian	04/12/2019	Bénévole volunteer (since 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resides in Germany • Computer scientist by training • Developer in a large international company in Berlin. • BIMSTR developer
Rufine	04/11/2019 10/08/2020	Bénévole volunteer (since end of 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resides in Germany • Journalist • Management of BIMSTR's Instagram page for three successive years • In charge of formalizing and implementing the various BIMSTR strategies
Stéphanie	07/16/2019	Bénévole volunteer (2017–2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resides in France • Posted at an IT auditor in Paris • In charge of programming the songs for the next day
Camille	04/12/2019 09/23/2020	Z'expert volunteer (since 2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resides in France • Communication manager at a start-up in Marseille • Selected by the founder to produce the weekly show Récap
Ulrich	04/12/2019 09/25/2020	Z'expertvolunteer (since 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resides in France • ATER at the University • Finishing a PhD in economics in Aix-Marseille
Okio	04/11/2019	Institutional actor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resides in France • In charge of international development for Africa at SACEM
Alex	05/06/2019	Artist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resides in France • Performs hip-hop tracks mixed with African rhythms



APPENDIX: INTERVIEWEES

Table 2. People living in Cameroon

Pseudonym	Interview Date	Involvement with BIMSTR (role and duration)	Profile
Frédéric	04/11/2019 12/09/2020	Z'expert volunteer (since 2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Employee of the Private Institute of Higher Education of Douala• In charge of coordinating the various events of the Z'experts, reframing them and organizing the meetings
Josépha	04/13/2019 12/09/2020	Z'expert volunteer (since 2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Entrepreneur in Cameroon
Léa	03/11/2019 12/10/2020	Z'expert volunteer (since 2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Selected by the founder to contact the Z'experts to ask them to share (and check if it was done)
Inès	04/20/2019	Institutional actor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In charge of cultural missions and programs at the French Institute of Cameroon in Daoula
Lydol	05/02/2019	Artist	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Well-known Cameroonian artist whose musical style is described as 'slam'