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Branded Web Series as an Advertising Strategy. The #EncuentraTuLugar case

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Abstract

Introduction: Hybridization and communicative convergence encourage new advertising formats derived from the growing consumption of the new audiovisual trend, online and serial. The base of the study is the Spanish web series #EncuentraTuLugar created by the agency Neurads for international property consultant Jones Lang Salle. The aim is to know characteristics involved, perception of promoters as well as impact. **Methods:** It was required the Methodological triangulation to consider the three dimensions of the phenomenon: in-depth interviews with creators, producers and advertisers; content analysis of the stories contained and quantitative analysis of social interactions. **Results:** Reveal the positive perception of advertiser and agency performance and identify advantages in content creation to keep up to date corporate communication channels.

Keywords

Contents Marketing; Online Marketing; Advertising; Video-marketing; Web Series; branded content.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Bartering as a background for branded web series

Since former times, in the editorial industry there is a mutual dependency between producers, media and advertisers. As a result of their close relationships, the bond between them has been done through exchange, which in advertisement terms is known as bartering. In television, through the barter – payment through already elaborated contents–, the advertiser elaborates a program that gives to the chain for its diffusion in exchange for additional advertisement space for its advertisement messages.

The barter is a phenomenon closely linked to television where advertisers, producers and professionals of the media participate as long as “the advertiser assumes the role of producer, the broadcasting television company grants the time to release the program and the spaces destined for advertisement as agreed with the advertiser” (Medina, 1998: 154). Thus, the advertiser participates in the creation of television programs (Hersman and McChesney, 1999) up to the point it can create them in a tailored manner (Reinares and Calvo, 1999). Gironé and Zigoni (1993) mention the miniseries *A.D.* from Procter & Gamble inspired in the story of the Roman Empire after the death of Christ, where the brand had more than one hour of advertisement space available, as one of the first barterers in the history of the American television. This advertisement formula allowed the advertiser to generate contents with a high degree of creative freedom before the arrival of the new technologies and digital tools.

The advertisement integration doesn't have any limits except the ones imposed by laws and regulations, as well as those of creators and broadcasters of said contents. We even find the introduction of the brand in the own name of the program in Spanish cases such as *Zona Cuatro Philipps* (Cuatro, 2006), the sports program that was broadcasted on the occasion of the World Cup (2006) and *Zona Cuatro Kia Fest* (Cuatro, 2008) or the European version of the game that was broadcasted thanks to the main sponsorship of Kia together with Cruzcampo, Iberdrola and Burger King as official sponsors.

The advertiser works as a television actor under three different formulas: sponsor of audiovisual spaces, advertiser (placement) and creator (bartering). These roles are presented with a different degree of integration in the audiovisual work. The most passive is the sponsor role where the brand is linked to the program but with a certain distance. Regarding placement, the advertiser appears in the program, but is submitted to the strictness and orders of the director. On the other hand, in the bartering role, the advertiser conducts almost the totality of the process so that it has maximum control and decision capacity in almost every sense.

Advertisement practices described herein are considered precursors to the format object of our study.

1.2. Contextualization of branded web series

Corporate fictions are comprised within the entertainment marketing, that is, “the perfect symbiosis between advertisement and entertainment which main objective is to attract the public towards brand values in an appealing and suggestive manner” (Ramos, 2006: 39) which approach is shared by De Aguilera-Moyano *et al.* (2015).

Branded web series are the result of the fusion of diverse non-conventional advertisement formats, typical from special advertisement in television and of communication strategies based on the combination of entertainment marketing and the need for projection of brand image. The mentioned advertisement formats are: the sponsorship, understood as the support for production of audiovisual contents (Ford and Ford, 1995) which consists in brand bumpers on screen exclusive for the sponsor, usually coinciding with the beginning, during the advertisement and/ or change of advertisement spots and end of the program; brand placement or advertisement placement (Del Pino, 2006; Segarra-Saavedra and Del Pino, 2012) where the brand appears on scene in different ways, and bartering, which promotes the complete or partial creation of editorial contents by an advertiser (Rodríguez, 2012).

Branded web series are explained by the empowering of both users and advertisers to create and release their own contents, a process facilitated by the democratization of the new technologies.

Brand stories told through fiction, social networks and online platforms are part of the increasing trend of advertisement creative strategies; As for branded content, it is defined by the department of special solutions of Atresmedia as “entertaining and integrated advertisement in contents, allowing the advertiser to convey its brand values in a more subtle and less aggressive manner than conventional publicity” which objective is to generate engagement (Calder, Malthouse and Schaedel, 2009) with more effective and potential users (Costa-Sánchez, 2014).

Therefore, branded web series emerge from the need of advertisers to tell advertisement stories through diverse media and channels, turning into transmediatic narrations that diversify the stories into multimedia, multidirectional and hybrid platforms (Simelio and Ruiz, 2013). All this in a society that consumes entertainment through different screens –multiscreen phenomenon– which facilitates immediate and ubiquitous access to audiovisual entertainment content.

1.3. Conceptual delimitation and international cases of branded web series, advertising, corporate or brand web series

García-Pujadas (2010) states that web series are a tool of brands to connect and relate with different publics as the case of *In the Motherhood* co-created by *Mindshare Entertainment* in 2007 as a joint action of Sprint and Unilever.

Thorson and Duffy (2011) study the cases of *Buppies* (Procter & Gamble), *Easy to Assemble* (Ikea) and *The Real Women of Philadelphia* (Kraft foods). The Ikea’s case is a comedy created by Illeana Douglas for the furniture icon, being appraised with several awards, among them, the *Best Branded Deals* of 2010. Besides, Illeana Douglas achieved a nomination as *Best Individual Performance* in the *14th Annual Webby Awards*, international awards granted to the best websites, besides winning two awards as the best *branded content* and comedy episode.

Polo (2012) establishes limits and differences regarding the forms an audiovisual narration can adopt:

A *web series* is not a sponsorship, a product placement nor the incrustation of a logo in any fiction. The consumer is expecting coherence from the brand and an incorrect application of this format may cause a deviation of brand consistency (...).

This author detects the fundamental elements so that an online series can become a useful brand content: a storytelling able of telling stories with the brand linking its intangible values positively with people to whom it is targeted to, in such a way it establishes affine bonds with them.

Arjona (2012) considers branded web series as an advertisement resource especially interesting for the teenage public and among the reasons there is interactivity, an issue highly valued by younger Internet users, as the case of the web series *Celia & Chlöe* (Clear & Clear), released in the start of 2009. The segmentation and implication towards participation of users in the storyline of the series (determining its end and offering the possibility of being part of the artistic team) is another one of the advantages advertisers can use with this innovative format.

We are facing an audiovisual platform used by professionals who want to make a space for themselves in the audiovisual market, with their own style, especially in times of crisis and unemployment. Sometimes, there has been such a repercussion of their creations that they have received the sponsorship of brands such as Movistar, like *Niña repelente* which was released through the *Tuenti* channel of the advertiser.

Arjona (2012) highlights the viral capacity of these audiovisual formats, online, with a short duration and especially targeted to young population segments, which results in a higher reach of the brand stories.

Del Pino, Castelló and Ramos-Soler (2013) mention the case of the *web series The Next Big Thing* by Audi. As if it were a sequel of *The Hire*, the actor Justin Timberlake is the protagonist of this fiction action and suspense film where he shares the screen with the Audi A1 model. This branded web series is comprised by short chapters, of two minutes long, where the car works as fundamental element to solve the storyline.

Hernández mentions different examples of web series linked to companies. The electronic magazines Eljueves.es, NegroClarito.com, Rockzone as well as Alsa bus company, Telepizza and a firm of language courses abroad are included as advertisers promoted through web series (Hernández, 2011). Besides, he mentions another case of Ikea. But, different from *Easy to Assemble*, because initially *Ikea Heights* is a result of the creative freedom of users and the lack of a normative control system that regulates these kinds of contents in the network, becoming an opportunity for transgression:

Ikea Heights (EEUU, 2009) [1] (...) made inside Ikea Burbank store, California, but without the permission of the stores responsables. The storylines develop making the most of the scenarios created by the different sections of the store (...). The web series (...) knows how to yield the spaces the great store offers as well as the absence of a regulatory framework of Internet contents (Hernández, 2013a: 354).

1.4. Branded web series in Spain

Branded web series appear in Spain in the year 2009 hand by hand with *Moncloa Palace* (*El Jueves* magazine, 2009-2012). As an advertisement format, it is used to convey corporate and intangible values of a brand to a more and more disperse, fragmented and segmented audience (Tur-Viñes and Segarra-Saavedra, 2014; Segarra-Saavedra and Hidalgo-Marí, 2016).

Hernández (2013b) mentions the cases of the web series Mango (*Qué me pongo by Mango*) and BBVA have created, as well as other online series which have received external collaboration. This way, the “possibilities of convergence between companies and fiction in Internet” multiply (Hernández, 2013b: 111).

One of the pioneer directors in the format object of study is Álex Rodrigo who started his career in the industry in 2008 when a reprography company ordered his team to create a corporate video that derived in the first web series under the name *Pendiente de título* [2]. Since then, he still works under the same line as director, among others the web series *Libres* (2013) [3].

Aware of the huge impact of online series, especially among the youngest population segments, Atresmedia launches *Webseries&Co.* to the market in the beginning of 2014, the group’s business line for branded contents projects which budgets are not enough to be broadcasted on television. The requirement demanded for their contents is a narrative continuity. The strategy responds to the study of Grupo Consultores which detected that 82% of branded content is digital, 60% comes from small or medium-sized companies and their budget does not exceed 50.000€. This kind of initiatives reveal that web series have been from their beginnings, a resource for alternative communication inspired in low cost.

In 2015 the entrepreneurs of the Valencian start-ups sector sponsored *Growing Geeks*, the web series produced by GeeksHubs which also has the collaboration of Mywigo and Wiquiot. There young entrepreneurs have a place, as well as business boosters and incubators, co-working, investors and public institutions. It is a web series that tells the stories of entrepreneurs using geek humor.

In the doctoral dissertation of Segarra-Saavedra (2016:17) numerous collaboration cases between brands based in online fiction are analysed and, derived from the study, the following definition of branded web series is suggested:

Cultural, audiovisual, serial, fictional and easily accessible products through Internet that are created by the own advertisers as special and original contents, therefore they use to include the presence of brands, products and/or services. Hence, they allow advertisers to approach their brand stories as well as their corporate values to a large number of individuals through its diverse channels, both online and offline. In such a way, and in a parallel manner, they generate conversational and interactive spaces where recipients and possible clients can get in contact with the corporate universe, generating brand experiences highly valued by users.

This is a complex phenomenon, which study is multifactorial and multidimensional: subjects, creators, audiovisual contents and audience, which with its respective actions promote the expansion of contents. The complexity of the phenomenon to be studied that has just been defined, demands the triangulation as methodological approach to know the distinctive characteristics of this format, the perception of agents involved and its impact.

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2. Methodology

To satisfy the proposed object and deeply investigate the three dimensions involved in the branded web series, we performed a case study of exploratory nature that allowed to validate an analysis model for future researches focused on web series.

In front of the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative methods, both Gómez-Diago (2010) as well as Navarro, Pasadas and Ruiz (2004) demonstrate the usefulness of the methodological triangulation or multimethod strategies in social applied research, especially for multidimensional and complex objects of study, adopting a holistic perspective that enables to delve in the nature of the phenomenon.

From the main objective mentioned, the following secondary objectives (SO) are derived:

SO1: Analyse the creation and diffusion of the web series *#EncuentraTuLugar*

SO2: Contrast points of view of creators and advertiser.

SO3: Know the reach and impact of the corporate web series and the interactions of the public from the quantitative study of its visualizations and actions in *YouTube*.

The combination of techniques chosen consider in-depth interview, contents analysis and quantitative analysis of reach and impact metrics.

In-depth interviews were done to the creators of the web series –David Velduque and Víctor Martín León– and to the marketing responsible of the Real Estate advertiser Jones Lang Salle (JLL) –Roy Wasercier– to whom 12 open questions in the following aspects were formulated:

- Objectives and development of the agencies tender
- Motivations to choose Neurads
- Advertiser-agency collaboration agreement
- Web series creation process
- Assessment of results achieved
- Web series strategy step by step
- Personal and prospective conception of the format
- Advantages and disadvantages perceived between *YouTube* and *Vimeo*

Moreover, a contents analysis of the web series was performed considering the following 22 variables:

- Title of the web series
- Technical and creative team
- Audiovisual genre
- Agency
- Advertiser
- Economic sector
- Advertiser responsible
- Creative agency
- Main channel used for its diffusion
- Owner of the channel
- Presence of additional contents in the channel

- Complementary channels
- Number and title of chapters
- Date of release
- Day of the week
- Duration
- Synopsis
- Diffusion strategy and participation of users
- Hashtag use
- Scenarios and locations used
- Narrative structure
- Brand presence and corporate elements

Lastly, for the study of audiences and its interactions in YouTube, the number of subscribers to the channel has been quantified, as well as visualizations, likes, unlikes, comments and shares. To compare the evolution of these results and identify trends, the present analysis was performed in two moments. The first one occurred on 7.10.2015 and its results are identified on table 3 below column “I”. While the second one was registered on 15.04.2016, which numerical data are included in the same table in column “II”.

To make the study process simple, on table 1 we show the relation of dimensions identified and the techniques used for their analysis.

Table 1. Dimensions of the phenomenon and research techniques

Dimension	Technique used
Subjects	In-depth interviews with creators and advertiser
Contents	In-depth analysis of formal characteristics
Audience	Quantitative analysis of audience and interactions in YouTube

Source: author’s own creation

3. Results

3.1. Perspective contrast between creators and advertiser

This study starts with the conception of contents marketing by Velduque, as a way to “turn your brand in a (...) relevant, fun, entertained content that informs about something” (D. Velduque, personal communication, dated June 6, 2015). Besides, he says that *#EncuentraTuLugar* “is a web series where the brand values are present, it is co-produced by the brand and offers something to you” (*ibidem*).

The reasons for choosing the format are indicated by Wasercier, the marketing responsible of JLL. Even though the Real Estate firm has been a quite conservative brand, the same as its economic sector, to promote its brand JLL and its new browsers:

We couldn't continue with the same steps (...). Our public is changing, it is more demanding, consumes another kind of contents, more dynamic, interactive and fresher. The so-called generations X and Y are consuming videos daily and this public is the one that will be starting business in a few years and looking for an office. It is time to begin (R. Wascier, personal communication, dated July 22, 2015).

Anticipation, prevision and prospective seem to be the reasons leading to the creation of the web series #EncuentraTuLugar which results in visualizations make both parties happy because for Wascier #EncuentraTuLugar was “spectacular! We never thought we would be that successful” despite “this was a kind of experiment” (*ibidem*). A experiment leading us to know the Neurads agency and work with them, as well as to sign a collaboration agreement of a longer duration, making that connection extensible beyond the web series. Therefore – among other reasons- Velduque provides the impact data we gather in table 2.

Sometimes, the results of a web series are so positive for both parties that the story told around a brand turns into the preface, additionally, of future projects. This is confirmed by Wascier, who referring to the agreement with the Neurads agency, he indicates that “we were so happy with the service that we decided to sign an annual collaboration agreement”, when the usual practice is signing by campaigns with specific start and ending times.

The use of different social networks and especially YouTube has contributed to reach the visualization results since “these platforms are the Google of the future because more and more contents are more audiovisual and less written” (R. Wascier, personal communication, dated July 22, 2015). Everything seems to indicate that YouTube is and will be the video platform par excellence.

Table 2: Results of #EncuentraTuLugar

Publications in Press	General	<i>El Mundo</i> [4]
	Sector	<i>El Observatorio Inmobiliario</i> [5]
	Marketing	<i>Marketing Directo</i> [6] <i>La Criatura Creativa</i> [7]
Total views of the Project		>200.000
New followers on <i>Twitter</i>		1.057
Impressions of the campaign on <i>Twitter</i>		>2.656.000
Interactions of the campaign on <i>Twitter</i>		>19.700
Single users on <i>Twitter</i>		>600
Generated <i>Tweets</i>		>1.000

Source: author's own creation from the interview with Velduque (2015).

Lastly, in the interview Roy delves deeper in the suitable contents for a broad range web series such as #EncuentraTuLugar:

The first thing is having a good script with an interesting, natural and non-intrusive story, that is liked and hooking. And secondly, a coherent diffusion plan in media investing money in advertisement in the different available channels, social networks, specialized media and a little bit of general press.

Roy believes that the web series “will keep performing well, although it will evolve to a more interactive format, making the user part of the story”. The balance and the fact of making place for public in the creation of contents seems to be the suitable combination with a more promising future.

3.2. Characteristics of *#EncuentraTuLugar* (JLL, 2015)

The web series conducted by David Velduque and produced by Víctor Martín León was created for JLL, which was released in its YouTube corporate profile in the occasion of the launching of its new browsers based on usability and design. It is about a branded content project of the audiovisual agency specialized in branded contents Neurads –creator of *Hipsteria*, the first online series of MTV, as well as the online series *#Fusionistas*– in collaboration with Secuoyas, the company in charge of developing the browser sites.

#EncuentraTuLugar is constituted by three mini sections, one for each browser (offices, establishments and industrial units). Each one of them is comprised by three chapters. The set of three episodes was launched on Monday of three consecutive weeks, the last week of April and the two first weeks of May 2015.

#Enmarronada was the first one and tells the personal and professional story of Bea, from her initial job interview until the reencounter with a former boyfriend. It was followed by *#NosVenimosArriba* where Clara and Víctor lead their creative team who work on a briefing that change not only their job situation but also their personal situation as well. And *#AmorDeHijo* was the third mini web series. There, the brand tells us stories based on the new technologies of Juan and his father Francisco, as well as his love story with Paloma.

All those are collected in a microsite [8] where besides containing stories, there is accountability for the contest published on Twitter by the brand so that users use the *#OídoEnElTrabajo* hashtag and quote the advertiser *@JLLSpain* therefore participating in the raffle of an iPad.

The web series is filmed in the brand’s facilities. The duration of the chapters is short, ranging from 2’07’’ to 3’33’’. And besides, of letting know the new browsers of the firm, David Velduque indicates in the press notice issued due to the release of the online series that one of the objectives was to “humanize the Real Estate sector (...). All brands have a story to tell (...). [And in these web series] we talk about the dreams and how these can materialize in a specific place” [9].

Structurally speaking, in the initial sequence of each chapter, there is an overprint in the left superior angle with the brand logo. It is the sequence which contextualizes viewers in the storyline that will develop after the frame with the visual image of the web series. After the story ends, the chapter ends with a sequence of three windows: a main window linking to the next chapter and two secondary ones that redirect the viewer to every micro web series. The other elements that appear in the final frame are the visual image of the series, its URL, as well as the one of the advertiser and the Twitter user of JLL.

In short, it is about a fiction series released solely and exclusively through Internet, created by a team of professionals with a broad experience in the format’s use. This was the main reasons that allowed them to win the tender called by the advertiser, which didn’t doubt in investing in an innovative and differential manner compared to competitors in an emergent format that not only enables telling brand stories with corporate values impregnated therein, but also keep the image of the company alive using audiovisual platforms and social networks.

3.3. Audiences and Interactions

The results demonstrate a slight variation of 425 subscribers to the channel in a time frame of 191 days, mainly motivated by *#EseLugarEspecial*, an audiovisual project in documental format started by a brand with the same producer and agency.

The variability of the duration of videos is worth mentioning, which relative average in the JLL web series is about 2'42". From the nine chapters that comprise the online series "Your dream office" is the longest chapter (2'56") while "Summer of '76" is the shortest episode (2'07").

Table 3. Audiences and comparative interactions of #EncuentraTuLugar

Title of the chapter	Release	Time	Visualizations			Likes			Unlikes			Comments			Shares			
			I	II	Dif.	I	II	Dif.	I	II	Dif.	I	II	Dif.	I	II	Dif.	
How to overtake a job interview	27-4-15	2:51	24.278	25.702	1.424	18	19	1	0	1	1	0	-1	1	2	0	3	13
Every boss has a secret	27-4-15	2:45	15.574	16.546	972	10	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	3
How to stop being an intern	27-4-15	2:45	16.380	16.870	490	12	13	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	1
Your dream office	4-5-15	2:56	20.036	20.276	240	8	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Issues at work	4-5-15	3:33	11.077	11.198	121	5	5	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
If you tell me to come...	4-5-15	2:42	12.023	12.148	125	4	4	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	1
Papa, you are so tiresome	11-5-15	2:13	14.466	14.720	254	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	5
Summer of '76	11-5-15	2:07	11.034	11.136	102	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
You are becoming a hipster	11-5-15	2:32	8.824	8.924	100	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0
Total			133.692	137.520	3828	66	68	2	3	4	1	1	0	-1	8	1	0	23
Average			2:45	14.855	15.280	425	7	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	7	0	3

Source: author's own creation from the YouTube channel of JLL Spain. <https://goo.gl/u5GwVu>

The average of the reach (audience) of chapters is on April 2016 with 152.280 visualizations, 425 more than October 2015. Thus, the chapter catching more attention by the YouTube audience has been the first one entitled "How to overtake a job interview" with 25.702 visualizations, that is, 1.424 more than in the first count. However, "You are becoming a hipster", the last episode of the series, has been the one with less audience (8.924), with only 100 more than the previous date.

From the study of the interactions related to the use of buttons Like, Unlike and comments, there is a minimal participation from YouTube users because the average of Likes on April is 8 while there are barely interactions with the Unlike button and neither user leave comments.

On the other hand, video shares increase slightly because in October 2015, the average of shares was 4 while on April it was 7. Nevertheless, these results evidence the reduced participation of users when it comes to socializing and interacting with brand contents (see table 3).

4. Conclusions

From the previous analysis it is deduced that despite the complexity of the object of study the combination of different techniques allows to know a multidimensional and relatively recent phenomenon in the commercial and advertisement field, contributing with a theoretical approach and a practical application that can be implemented with other research techniques such as contents analysis of formal elements.

It is confirmed that innovation and creativity are essential substances in the transmission of the corporate values of a brand. The advertisers invest in differentiating from competitors, for example, using videomarketing they create and maintain close bonds with their audiences, conveying intangibles of a brand and the business philosophy to an audience that tends to reject the presence of traditional and conventional advertisement.

The oversaturation of advertisement spaces, the informative excess and the multiplication of media and informative-advertising platforms evidence the suitability of using the audiovisual industry, mainly online, to convey useful contents to the audience with subtle and minimalist commercial presence.

The trajectory of the television advertisement industry is still inclined towards innovation of advertisement forms that try to blur the limits that intended to separate the informative contents from merely commercial ones, with formats such as placement, television sponsoring or bartering.

Democratization of Internet and the changes done in communicative and advertisement practices, have enabled its expansion to the online universe, social networks and interactive platforms, and a noticeable cheapening of costs, which favours the progressive increase in the number of advertisers that use branded web series in their communicative and commercial strategy.

The study of audiences and interactions has confirmed that the YouTube channel of JLL Spain – as well as the communicative strategy created by the Neurads agency- has been successful in granting visibility to stories told as well as the brand. On the contrary, it doesn't seem to have achieved the creation of a community of users around fiction considering the nonexistence of social interactions beyond the YouTube viewings. However, it has been the precursor of another audiovisual and innovative project, released in a documental format of great conceptual and stylistic quality: *#EseLugarEspecial*. This second campaign created by Neurads for JLL Spain was released half a year after launching the analysed web series and has achieved an increase of its audience and reach.

It can be concluded that in the case of the web series studied, it has been successful in positioning in a creative, singular and distinctive manner, both advertiser and the creative agency involved, before the audience and the industry, confirming that audiovisual contents with innovative formats allow to generate links and beneficial positioning for the brand image as well as for the image projected by the creative agency.

5. Notes

- [1] Official site of Ikea Heights <https://www.youtube.com/user/IKEAHeights>
[2] Cfr. <https://www.youtube.com/user/ArtticaHumor/videos>
[3] Cfr. <https://www.youtube.com/user/libreslaserie>
[4] Cfr. <https://goo.gl/0hWO8d>
[5] Cfr. <http://goo.gl/Tj9gs2>
[6] Cfr. <http://goo.gl/z2oZEc>
[7] Cfr. <http://goo.gl/HkvcS7>
[8] Cfr. www.encuentratulugar.es
[9] Cfr. <https://goo.gl/6mM8LP>

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