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Social media brand perceptions of millennials

Abstract

Purpose – A phenomenon that has revolutionized society is the technological millennial approach to communication. Social media has matured into a prime channel for regular interactions and development of brand–customer relationships that enrich a social identity. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how this affects business communications.

Design/methodology/approach – The study utilized a social constructivist perspective, adopting an inductive and embedded case study strategy.

Findings – Drawing on the social identity theory, this paper examines how evolving social media platforms have impacted on brand perceptions in the fashion apparel and accessories industries. Fashion brands' online presence provide a platform for customers to supplement social identity based on associations with brands, and ultimately this can shape brand perceptions among customers through promised functional and symbolic benefits.

Research limitations/implications – The paper investigates a specialized marketing activity in the UK. A broader internationally based study would add strength to these findings.

Practical implications – The paper focuses on theoretical and managerial implications and proffers significant roles that social media and identity may play in keeping up with the design and development of marketing communications programs.

Social implications – Multinational corporations have embraced internet technologies and social media in adopting platforms that their brands can use to contribute content to followers.

Originality/value – In total, 30 potential participants, drawn from diverse backgrounds, were contacted via social networking sites, e-mails and telephone. In total, 22 agreed to participate and their mean age was 26. An open-ended questionnaire allowed for elaboration, providing appropriate responses for a second interviewing phase. Four industry professionals were recruited through the researchers' personal networks to participate in in-depth interviews that sought to investigate the significance of social media as a marketing tool from an industry perspective.

Keywords Online community, Brand perceptions, Social media, Fashion, International markets, Psychological influences

Introduction

Logistical developments have evolved to accommodate a whirlwind of evolving innovations that belong to the fashion industry. The dynamic nature of marketing means fashion companies are relentlessly on guard for the next ground-breaking development (Jayachandran *et al.*, 1999; Lusch, 2007; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Webster, 1992). A sought-after phenomenon that has dramatically revolutionized society is the technological millennial approach to communication. Multinational corporations have embraced internet technologies and social media in adopting platforms that their brands can use to contribute content to followers (Evans, 2012; Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Zarrella, 2009). This has sparked literature on the progression of social media and the potential it has in leveraging various aspects of daily life (Fischer and Reuber, 2011; Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Hoffman and Fodor, 2016; Huy and Shipilov, 2012; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011; Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011; Whiting and Williams, 2013). Other studies have examined the premises of employing social media as part of a brand's marketing scheme (Luo *et al.*, 2013; Naylor *et al.*, 2012; Simmons, 2008; Tuten and Solomon, 2014).

Kim and Ko (2012) addressed the success of social media marketing activities in enhancing customer equity for luxury fashion brands, and revealed the degree to which luxury fashion brands have prevailed by employing social media marketing activities including entertainment and word-of-mouth. Their findings demonstrated a positive correlation between the application of social media marketing, subsequent purchase intentions and customer equity within the luxury fashion industry. However, the study paid limited attention to a demographic age that is familiar with social media and able to produce pertinent feedback that enhances the accuracy of research results. An annual demographic analysis of social media usage compiled by PewResearch revealed that the highest rate of usage in 2014 was exhibited by those aged between 18 and 29

years (Duggan *et al.*, 2015). In spite of extensive literature dedicated to expanding the knowledge of social media, few studies have examined how social media has impacted on the fashion industry, particularly on the millennial generation.

A study conducted by Statista (2016a, b, c, d, e) further affirms the significance social media has gained across the fashion industry. This study emphasizes the sheer “clout” that virtual channels have when it comes to the fashion domain through the integration of social media during the London Fashion Week. The show is a highly anticipated bi-annual fashion trading week-long event, and in 2014, it generated over half a million mentions on social media. The majority of these mentions emerged over Instagram. Reports show that user access to fashion brands online is set to reach over 1bn users by the year 2020 (Statista, 2016a, b, c, d, e). These figures demonstrate the ongoing unification social media has brought about within the fashion world, as more brands race toward social networking sites to attain followers. By moving to online channels, fashion brands have a greater prospect of being portrayed as an original brand, based on their online presence, and it facilitates a widespread connection with millennials on a personal level. Brand–customer relationships develop at a fast pace as brands endeavor to elicit customer loyalty, and customers, in turn, attempt to associate with such brands to acquire the promised relationship equity they are perceived to offer (Lemon *et al.*, 2001; Kim and Ko, 2012; Vogel *et al.*, 2008).

Drawing on social identity, this study examines how social media creates an online brand community and consequent relationship equity that customers pursue in enhancing social identity. The social identity theory holds that individuals seek to allocate themselves or others according to social categories (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). It demonstrates the importance of group linkage. Individuals trail the groups that guarantee positive recognition and ultimately enhance the self through association (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry, 2000). Studies have explored the tendency of customers to identify with particular brands in forming a desired social identity (Arnett *et al.*, 2003; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Lam *et al.*, 2010). Consumption can be a significant attribute within an individual’s journey to build an identity for his/her own self, as well as for others (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Kleine *et al.*, 1993). The consumption of popular culture has been recognized as a paramount contributor to the attainment of social status or social placement for individuals. Fashion, a major segment of present pop culture, has manifested into a prominent facilitator of social enhancement (Barron, 2012). Fashion brands are pursued by consumers with the intention of embracing individuality that, in fact, complies with a universal standard of social classification. People seek to individually speak, behave or dress in a manner that is perceptible and significant, but that simultaneously resides within putative group norms. A consumer is placed amid two forces, the individual/psychological influence of personal opinions and preferences, and the public/social weight of uniform beliefs and attitudes (Burke, 2006; Carlson *et al.*, 2008; Nowak *et al.*, 1990). One might argue that the focus on brand identity as an internal and aspirational construct that emanates from inside-out brand management fails to appreciate the influence of customers in shaping the dynamic context in which identity is a relational construct formed and shaped with interaction with others (Da Silveira *et al.*, 2013; Fournier, 1998; Cova, 1997). The advent of internet technology and its subsequent commercialization has redefined and shaped how consumers interact with brand relationship and co-create experiences (Kapferer, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2006; Payne *et al.*, 2009). Researchers have recognized a need for a more relational and social identity perspective in conceptualizing the emerging computer-mediated marketing environments (Ozuem *et al.*, 2008; Moon and Sprott, 2016; Ko and Megehee, 2012).

The fashion industry ranges from apparel and accessories, perfumes and cosmetics to watches and jewelry. This vast industry has been globally valued at US\$3 trillion (£2.4 trillion) with a compound annual growth rate of 2 percent. Positive market figures are anticipated with industry growth projected across major regions such as China, Europe, USA and India, to name a few (Statista, 2016a, b, c, d, e). As part of ongoing research looking at the changing relationship between brand identity and emerging online brand communities, our conceptual interests focus on how social media are increasingly becoming avenues for consumer realities, particularly the use of social media among the millennial generation exclusively within the apparel and accessories sector (Bolton *et al.*, 2013).

In 2016, the apparel and accessories sector accounted for more than 80 percent of revenues recorded in the industry for years 2014 and 2015. Market trends for 2016 demonstrated a 59 percent increase in the apparel and accessories sector worldwide (Deloitte, 2016). These figures can be expected to materialize among top billionaire players such as Zara (Inditex), LVMH and H&M, among others (Statista, 2016a, b, c, d, e). The Swedish brand, H&M, was ranked one of the world’s most valuable brands with annual revenues of over US\$20bn (£16bn pounds) as of mid-2016, while boasting a 6 percent revenue growth (Forbes, 2015). A major

competitor, Zara, demonstrated similar success with annual revenues of over US\$15bn (£12bn) and a 13 percent revenue growth (Forbes, 2015). Zara redefined the fast fashion industry with its two-week turnover of trends and products infiltrating its worldwide 2,000+ brick-and-mortar and online stores. Zara's online presence has peaked over the years as its social media pages amass global chatter among millions of followers (Statista, 2016a, b, c, d, e; Economic Times, 2016). Parent luxury fashion company LVMH (2016) (Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton) has likewise asserted its place in the fashion industry with frontrunners Louis Vuitton and Christian Dior dominating the market in fashion apparel and leather accessories among the luxury sector. In a study exploring the role of social media in the apparel sector, customers accessed social networking sites such as Facebook for the accessibility, volume and perceived usefulness of information provided by comparable users (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016). Apparel brands are encouraged to stimulate content circulation in sustaining relationships and ensuing brand communities. Visual social networking sites have similarly demonstrated influential outcomes in engrossing consumers. Wang and Jones (2017) revealed positive correlations between visually engaging content and consequent emotional impressions among consumers on Instagram. In this paper, we focus on the challenge to see and understand these more nuanced forms of dynamic marketing environments and the rising role and participation of consumers in the interactive marketplace.

Context

Social media has empowered the fashion industry with the free flow of content shared between brands and consumers worldwide. Brands are able to penetrate international markets through the likes of Facebook, Instagram and fashion blogs that document the latest runways, campaigns and trends to an active audience. Brand followers likewise share their own content among brands and consumers. This two-way interchange and freedom in exchanging content has allowed brands and customers to connect, customers to express affiliation to brands and online fashion communities to develop. Such a platform of communication enables vast brand exposure and awareness among worldwide social media users. H&M was recorded to have an average of over 8m engagements of likes, retweets and comments across its social media pages over a one-month period, demonstrating the scope of market saturation social media can achieve (Forbes, 2015). Luxury brands Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Christian Dior were placed in the top most influential luxury brands on social media worldwide as of October 2016 (Statista, 2016a, b, c, d, e). The implementation of social media as a promotional technique has served as a gateway to market prominence as brands are given the opportunity to reach global customers at an intimate level.

The millennial generation is defined as a demographic cohort born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s. This generation differs remarkably from previous groups as the millennial perception of communication is that it is conveniently available and instant; therefore, obstacles such as time or geography do not impinge upon the presence of technology (Strauss and Howe, 1991; Lingelbach *et al.*, 2012; Rainer and Rainer, 2011). Global boundaries are diminishing as use of the internet empowers the millennial age as a consumer group defined by homogeneous behavior (Moore, 2012). Millennials worldwide are able to relate through identical behavior and consumption patterns due to the network of mass media. The relevance of social media is only expected to grow with continuing consumer dependence on the network to which it caters, and new found proficiency amongst brands in delivering a unified message worldwide is also set to evolve (Stokinger and Ozuem, 2016; Stephen and Galak, 2010; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Prensky, 2001). Such characteristics justify the worth of social media as a phenomenon that merits exploration. In the present research, we examine the potential impact of social media brand perceptions of millennials in the fashion apparel and accessories industries. Building on the observation in the literature, the current paper focuses on the social identity theory, and how this influences the identification and performance within the social or group context.

Theoretical context

Social media has shrewdly maneuvered its way into people's lives over the past decade. While it may have commenced with the prime intention of socially linking people together, it later developed and was described using broader definitions spanning from connecting individuals to connecting industries. The extensive exploration of this communication portal through numerous studies has generated multiple definitions, all of which tend to highlight a parallel overview: social media comprises of internet-centered platforms that enable and promote a free flow of user-generated information (Safko, 2012; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011; Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Luo *et al.*, 2013).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define social media as: “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content.” This definition has prevailed in acknowledging the key role of social media in facilitating the movement of content across a shared floor. Safko (2012) outlines a comparable explanation whilst emphasizing the efficiency social media facilitates in allowing human interactions and relationships to develop. Social media has cultivated an environment driven by an open exchange between networks of users. Ngai *et al.* (2015) recognize the capacity of social media networks to form relationships, but they also discuss the potential of networks to influence career prospects. Building on this progression of explanations, social media can be defined as an evolving phenomenon that continues to mature across society.

Mayfield (2008) describes five characteristics of social media which are:

- 1) participation that stimulates sharing;
- 2) openness which eliminates barriers and enables free flow of information;
- 3) conversation generated from the public stream of content shared;
- 4) community that develops from open interactions; and
- 5) connectedness which describes the network created between users.

Kietzmann *et al.* (2011) likewise categorize social media into seven similar functional blocks and these are:

- 1) identity considers the degree to which a user is willing to reveal his/her identity;
- 2) conversation considers the level of communication between users;
- 3) sharing is the degree of content circulating between users;
- 4) presence refers to the access given to display available users;
- 5) relationships reflect the extent of users relating to one another;
- 6) reputation considers the degree to which users can identify their stance within settings; and
- 7) groups refer to the ability to form or belong to a community.

The functional blocks social media are built on create its flexibility in producing an open environment that consolidates worldwide users and progresses relationships.

While social media and networking sites are frequently used interchangeably, the two terms hold separate meanings. Social media generally concerns collective construction and circulation of media on a large scale, which can include countless applications and services such as social networking sites, wikis or podcasts, to name a few (Dewing, 2010; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011). Social networking sites are web-based services, which are a part of social media and are crafted for sharing media between networks of users (Collin *et al.*, 2011). Boyd and Ellison (2008, p. 211) define social network sites as: “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” Social networking sites comprise of websites such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter that characteristically require users to primarily register on the website and create a network, after which the content can be shared with networks of connections. The virtually interactive platforms that social media create have induced a shift in the web towards a more people-driven community, whereby regular users influence the content produced (Berthon *et al.*, 2012; Smith, 2009). Account holders now have the liberty of broadcasting (receiving) any message on a global scale with the click of a button. This self-expression encourages a dynamic and democratic setting through which users feel more inclined to engage and share their own opinions (Susarla *et al.*, 2012). Consumers are empowered to be a part of building and circulating of a brand’s delivery via expansive networks of connections, ultimately redefining value creation as co-creation between brand and customer (He *et al.*, 2017; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2013; VanMeter *et al.*, 2018). As affirmed by Van Dijck (2013, p. 4) upon the initial development of social media: “participatory culture was the buzzword that connoted the Web’s potential to nurture connections, build communities, and advance democracy.” Such universal engagement has propelled the immense growth of social media into worldwide cultures. A study conducted by Statista (2016a, b, c, d, e) demonstrates the magnitude of social media as a defining phenomenon of the present time, with a global penetration rate of 31 percent. Instagram, a photo-based application and social networking site, has solely yielded a 21 percent global reach as of 2013, merely one year after its launch. This figure measures considerably well when paralleled with the 45 percent reach Facebook (introduced in 2004) generated over a nine-year span. Social media has infiltrated a generation of

devoted users comprising of the millennial age, as more than 80 percent of users consist of ages between 18 and 29 years old. Fashion leaders Zara and H&M have prevailed among the millennial age group (Forbes, 2012), a technological age that has grown to embody social media as a key communication portal.

Modern brands continue to exert their presence through engaging social media derivatives that offer both brands and customers an equal platform of expression. Wang and Kim (2017) consider the shift in brand–customer interaction within two-way dynamic landscapes and the consequent power consumers have gained in being “co-authors” in the creation of value. Wakefield and Wakefield (2018) and Labrecque *et al.* (2013) demonstrate the evolution of consumers in social media through different sources including the ability to freely consume and produce content and the presence of wide network connections to showcase personal identity to. Macer and Wilson (2017) provide an evidence-based paper that reports how the market research industry interacts with the technology that supports it, and debate how practice has changed and been transformed over a 12-year period. They highlight current and ongoing changes and provide recommendations.

Social identity theory and social media

Social media has granted individuals a large platform in relaying identities (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Erz and Christensen, 2018; Pentina *et al.*, 2008; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Kane *et al.*, 2014; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016; Veletsianos, 2013; Yankova and Ozuem, 2015). By social media and online brand presence, existing and aspirational customers are encouraged to uphold affiliation with a brand in enhancing the self. Customer engagement is consequently heightened, and relationships are formed within brand communities as such interchanges promise customers the symbolic benefit of social placement (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Ma and Agarwal, 2007; Ren *et al.*, 2012; Zhu and Chen, 2015). Individuals are more compelled to associate with a brand that empowers them to climb the ladder of social enhancement.

Social identification of the self is comprised of two identities: personal and social. Personal identity refers to an identification of personal characteristics, whereas social identity considers a collective identification of the group that the individual belongs to (Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992; Nowak *et al.*, 1990; Onorato and Turner, 2004). Individuals seek to enhance both identities by embracing behavior that accentuates their individuality; however, individualism that is socially commended. Consumers feel inclined to alter behavior according to societal standards, especially within circumstances involving high salience (Onorato and Turner, 2004). Social media is a crucial example of a conspicuous environment that may exert such social influence. The consolidated global network of users, under a common platform of user-generated content, encourages individuals to express personal opinions and preferences. However, personal identity is shared under the premise that it parallels the salient identity held by the public (Clement and Krueger, 2002; Haslam *et al.*, 1999; Hogg and Turner, 1987; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Individuals adopt social media as a platform to enforce social inclusion by expressing identical behavior among the desired social group.

Turner *et al.* (1994) describe social identity theory as: “self-categories that define the individual in terms of his or her shared similarities with members of certain social categories in contrast to other social categories” (Turner *et al.*, 1994, p. 454). Social categories are used as a means of social classification or identification. Individuals form definitions of themselves based on the characteristics of the groups they follow (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Hogg *et al.*, 1995). The self-definition formed by an individual arises from the social categories he/she pursues. Individuals identify themselves with groups of similar social categories that grant them a sense of social consensus from being affiliated with that group (Jenkins, 2008; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Trepte, 2008). Such social consensus ensures a sense of belonging, and reinforces self-identity. Individuals chase social identification within groups to establish prominent inclusion that is socially recognized (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry, 2000). Social identification foments value among individuals as affiliation with the desired group stimulates public perception, and inflates an individual’s identity. Brands are built on foundations of an image and personality that is communicated to the public through brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2012). The image of a brand is associated with the brand community it has manifested, and with particular consumers that fit into specific social collectives. Customers seeking to identify with certain groups or consequent statuses may resort to brands and brand communities to advance personal image based on brand equity (Argo *et al.*, 2005; Gurau, 2012; O’Cass and McEwen, 2004; Bearden and Etzel, 1982). The desire to establish social consensus among a particular social group drives individuals to exploit brand association across social media.

Methodology and methods

This study utilized social constructivist perspective, adopting an inductive and embedded case study strategy. Our backgrounds have inevitably shaped the approaches that we took to develop the current work, both philosophically and methodologically. The constructivist perspective holds the underlying assumption that individuals subjectively form realities based on social and experiential constructions (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998). As Sampson (1993) noted: “Because we have become so intent on searching deeply within the individual’s psyche for the answers to all our questions about human nature, we usually fail to see what sits right before us, a dominating feature of our lives with others’ conversations. It is time now to take conversations seriously” (1993, p. 97).

Constructivists embody a relativist nature engaging multiple realities as opposed to the contrasting positivist paradigm of naïve realism (Schwandt, 1998; Ozuem *et al.*, 2017). In accordance with constructivism, this paper studies participants’ perception of brand presence on social media, particularly how consumers engage with brands through social media while advancing social identity. The interaction between the researcher and participants allows constructivists to interpret varying social realities using hermeneutical techniques, a technique that assumes investigator-participant interaction necessary in revealing deeper meanings (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 2000; Sciarra, 1999). In keeping with this paradigm, dialogue interchange with participants allowed us to gain richer insight into variable human understandings on the role identity plays within this context. The ontological position in constructivism considers various social realities, while the epistemological position holds a transactional notion of meaning being created within researcher-participant interactions (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Social constructivist epistemological positions are geared toward understanding the lives and experiences of “others.” Rather than accepting a neutral, value-free context, our ontological perspective is positioned to address how millennials view the imperatives of social media, the dynamics of the evolving technologies in constructing their identities. The current study adopted an embedded case study to explore the increasingly dynamic marketplace. This approach is well suited to research that explores new and emerging process of behavior and would allow detailed investigation of how the participants co-create knowledge in online brand communities (Keeling *et al.*, 2013; Hartley, 2004). Roulston (2010) underlined the significance of recruiting appropriately experienced participants in attaining valuable knowledge. Potential participants act as a representation of a population that benefits researchers by delivering relevant contributions (van Kaam, 1969). Participants for this study were gathered using purposeful sampling to allow for accumulation of substantial input. Le Compte and Preissle (1993) identified purposeful or criterion-based sampling strategies applied during varied phases of a research. Among the strategies identified is network sampling, which involves a researcher primarily recruiting participants who consequently refer other participants. Participants were sampled through subsequent criteria:

- 1) age group ranging between 18 and 35 years;
- 2) active users on social media;
- 3) are influenced to an extent by brand presence and fashion brands on social media; and
- 4) are able to offer relevant and suitable input regarding the topic in question.

The recruitment procedure was carried out through social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Pinterest. A total of 30 potential participants were contacted via social networking sites, e-mails and telephone, of which 22 participants agreed to participate. Participants were drawn from diverse backgrounds and the mean age was 26. An open-ended questionnaire was carried out via surveymonkey.com over three weeks. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions that initially covered the degree of social media participation usage before proceeding to questions to uncover the pattern of behavior adopted on social media. The open-ended nature of the questionnaire allowed for substantial elaboration from respondents, providing certain responses interesting enough to arrange for a second interviewing phase.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews support the researchers’ aim to explore multiple realities by allowing interviewees to contribute greater input (Silverman, 2013). A total of four industry professionals, working or having previously worked in the field of marketing and brand management in the fashion industry, were recruited through the researchers’ personal networks to participate in an in-depth interview that sought to investigate the significance of social media as a marketing tool from an industry perspective. Following Colaizzi’s (1978) seven stage process of thematic analytic approach, certain themes and questions were assigned prior to the interviews:

Seven stage process by Colaizzi (1978) are as follows:

- 1) read the transcripts of 20 millennial participants and four industry professional participants;
- 2) extract noteworthy statements from each transcript that relate to the research at hand;
- 3) perform the process of explication – making sense of the statements – on each statement;
- 4) formulate the resultant meanings, from the statements, into themes;
- 5) parallel constituent themes with original participant transcripts to verify consistency;
- 6) formulate a comprehensive definition that offers a description of the fundamentals of the phenomenon; and
- 7) re-visit participants to validate findings with participant experiences.

The resultant codes were developed into pertinent themes. Following an inductive approach that considers multiple subjective realities, analyzing different behaviors and views of respondents was challenging. Investigating respondents’ comments was especially important in understanding perceptions held towards brands using social media, and thus in advancing the underlying themes that aim to interpret research results and draw conclusions to the subject in question. As a result, data were derived to form four major themes (Table I)

Major themes	Description	Keywords
Content	Content is key to attracting social media users. Appealing posts that are also consistent to the brand image	Consistency Offline vs Online Engaging Innovative Exclusivity vs Ubiquity Insightful Brand-customer exchange Brand image Community
Relevant	Users rely on Instagram for immediate interchange that keeps them in the loop with latest updates and relevant in their social circle	Checking feed updates Staying up-to-date on latest trends Staying connected “In the know” Real-time Informed Immediacy
Exposure	Exposure knows no boundaries, as one post is distributed to users worldwide	Reach widespread consumers Global exposure Tagging friends Reposts Followers/networks Unrestricted Brand promotion Influence
Brand Ambassadors	Companies liaising with third parties (bloggers) to promote brands indirectly	Link back to brand Represent consumers Indirect marketing Endorsers Association Idolization Aspiration Natural setting Reliable/trust Belonging

Table 1
Themes, descriptions and keywords

Relevant

Gaining relevant information has been identified as a motivation for the use of social media (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). Maintaining relevance was a highly recurring matter in the data as the central notion behind the consumer usage of Instagram. All answers given by respondents focused on Instagram as a noteworthy source in acquiring any instant and relevant news that was circulating the internet. One respondent said:

Most of my time on Instagram is spent checking the feeds of the people I follow, be it brands, family or friends, and getting the updates on the latest trends or releases.

According to this respondent, maintaining relevance and remaining “in the know” on daily occurrences is the main purpose behind using social media. Among the results, Instagram was identified as the main source in terms of becoming informed about the latest news, whether this meant being updated about an individual’s personal social group, or being informed on national and international information such as politics, health or pop culture. Brands have progressed along the same path in striving to remain relevant within a fast-paced world. The immediacy of Instagram, and similar social networking sites, especially applies to the dynamic fashion industry. Fashion brands have found a means of communication that satisfies the short-lived fads incessantly diffusing the market. Consumers are given the opportunity to accompany brands on a journey through the various trends to become part of an informed community. This may aid consumers in social/professional circles among other aspects, one respondent said:

I mainly use Instagram to follow up on new trends like fashion, lifestyle, or interior design for my professional work. Usually they tag the brands in their photos, so it makes it easier to discover to new brands, especially new start-ups. It’s very important that I am able to catch on to a trend before the majority does since I’m known in my line of work (as an interior architect) to offer originality so I need to keep up that part, and look that part.

In this response, the respondent places weight on remaining relevant for persona purposes. The relevancy Instagram offers on popular culture allows this respondent to maintain the image clientele have come to identify her by within her career, be it in her personal aesthetic appearance or in the innovative work she offers. Another respondent commented:

I like to follow fashion brands to see more of what is happening with fashion shows and who is attending them, especially when brands upload live stories of those shows. I learn from these accounts because I get to see fashion experts wearing the very latest trends. I’m known for always being the first among my friends to wear a new style before everybody else catches on, so Instagram helps me with that.

This response demonstrates the relevancy social media or Instagram holds in delivering real-time news. The immediacy in circulating a new story allows consumers to follow up on new trends worldwide. In the case of this respondent, it allows her to play the part of the fashion forward consumer among her social group.

An in-depth interview conducted with a 30-year-old former London-based employee of luxury brands Burberry, Alexander McQueen and Vivienne Westwood, to name a few, commented the following on the transition of the fashion industry to online communication:

Social media has completely changed the face of fashion and how brand identity is communicated to the general public. Social media means that the viewer and audience is now part of the journey. It is probably the most effective marketing promotional technique with the ability to reach a huge global audience, in real time.

The respondent acknowledged the shift in the brand–customer relationship powered by the wide coverage of social media. The ability of consumers to follow brands so closely further fortifies the sense of a community that the brand and customers belong to. Consumers have gained a more prominent role within a brand’s selling process as the ease of interchange allows for customers to become more involved, in real time.

Exposure

Social media is built on a foundation that facilitates wide exposure (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011), enabling messages to travel across a worldwide network. The development of communication to embody a realm in which users are globally linked indicates the broad exposure that any one social media user is potentially capable of relaying. Undoubtedly, brand presence on social media demonstrates substantial exposure and insinuates brand awareness. One respondent commented:

I think it (social media) is a very good way for brands to advertise their products, especially with the new generation. For new brands, social media is the most efficient way to get noticed in this generation. Without it, the brand will not exist. In fact social media is linked to everything. Also, people are more open to international brands now. My friends across the world know brands in Australia that they follow because of Instagram.

According to this respondent, exposure has reached a global scale and, as such, consumers are discovering brands from opposite ends of the world. Instagram users share and re-share posts of products and brands

communicate information on a larger scale, and a faster rate than ever before. Furthermore, Instagram has elicited exposure through a simple tag/share option that sees users able to multiply the spread of a post within seconds. Another respondent noted:

I think it (social media) is a good way to send the message across. By sharing information, one can make a statement to attract a specific target market. Companies can benefit with using online measures to reach a large number of consumers.

This example demonstrates the degree to which brands are capable of attracting users through social media. The respondent who had previously been employed in Burberry and Alexander McQueen commented as follows:

The demographic of viewers' social media is capable of reaching is something that before social media was restricted to brands with financial backing to advertise in magazines, television, billboards. Now any brand of any size or financial strength can promote themselves on social media. It also means that all can create a successful image regardless of the realities of economic stability.

Also major announcements and projects are beginning to be promoted in the first instance through Instagram which is interesting. For example Burberry announcing Cara Delevigne and Kate Moss as the face of Burberry fragrance; what's most interesting about this is that within the first four hours the image had been liked approximately 35.2K times. And this shows the incredible power of Instagram to reach a huge audience.

This example illuminates the influence social media is capable of exerting through the exposure it offers to brands. Consumers are also allowed clearer brand perception due to such exposure. One respondent commented:

I believe Instagram is a way of communication that makes us aware of a brand, but also helps us understand what this brand represents. I understand brands better through social media because I see who likes them and what sort of following they have and if I relate to that sort of group.

This example highlights the importance social media has in offering brand exposure, but also a brand depth for consumers to identify with. This respondent uses a brand's following to ascertain whether that brand fits with his social persona. The type of exposure a brand may gain over social media allows for further insight into a brand's personality.

Content

Brand perceptions are significantly shaped by the image that brands portray on social media (Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011). Offline content is generally expressed through traditional advertisements and campaigns as well as through packaging and store esthetics. However, the presence of social media has provided brands with an additional outlet to conveying brand identity via the content of their posts. The London-based Burberry employee reflected:

Social media allows the brand to think outside the box and get creative. It is crucial to be innovative and offer new content from one campaign to another. Burberry creates social media strategies parallel to their complete marketing strategy that feeds relevant content to their large young millennial consumer base. Burberry is using Instagram to show new collections immediately available to shop online. Previously they would show the collection five to six months after the fashion show. They now link Instagram to their different social media platforms, offering consistent content across all platforms. Instagram seems to be the fashion world's platform of choice.

For this respondent, content generated on Instagram is crucial in voicing brand presence, but it is also a substantial complement to the inclusive strategic marketing strategy intended for the brand. Brands like Burberry produce content on Instagram and utilize that platform to connect to other platforms. This creates an overall message transmitted through both online and offline channels alike.

Similarly, a 24-year-old male respondent employee of the Chalhoub Group, Dubai, a luxury partner in the Middle East for leading luxury brands such as Celine, Christian Dior, Christian Louboutin, Fendi, Louis Vuitton, Marc Jacobs and others, shared some insight into the content they produce for their many brands in Dubai:

Even through social media, fashion brands (luxury fashion brands) must inform consumers of what to expect and to build an image so that consumers perceive this product a certain way or as a luxury item, by placing standards in the eyes of consumers by choosing the right tags and specific timings (events, trends, and occasions) and the right content.

This respondent acknowledges the significance of producing content that supports a brand image and crafts a fantasy, whether luxury or not. A lifestyle image can be created through the visual power of Instagram. Brands share posts about seasons and campaigns in-the- making, or fashion shows and celebrities. These attract viewers but also elicit a feeling of belonging amongst followers. One respondent added:

I think we are all constantly on social media to check for something to buy from posts that we see. The posts and the visuals that are used, and the way I can just comment on a brand's photo and even have them sometimes reply to me make it (the brand) feel more accessible and more realistic. It works for brands I already know because I see a different side to them and it really works with new brands because I get to know their style from their posts.

This example demonstrates that content brands promoting via Instagram and other social networking sites are continually influencing brand perceptions and creating a closer connection to consumers. Customers feel closer to a brand through the instant exchange social media offers (Bergman *et al.*, 2011).

Brand ambassadors

Research was conducted into the effect that bloggers on social media have on influencing brand perceptions. While countless fashion brands have liaised with bloggers in landing further promotions, bloggers can still be considered neutral endorsers of a brand. The mentions of fashion and lifestyle bloggers were recurring patterns in the data collected, as Instagram users appeared to trust and depend upon such brand representatives. One respondent remarked:

I get fashion info from bloggers. It's a good place to check out the latest trends because they don't just post about one brand, but many different brands and how you can match different outfits. Plus the bloggers I follow usually have a certain style that is similar to my style or the kind of clothes I want to wear.

This response is especially interesting as it demonstrates the extent to which users of social media value blogs. More importantly, it indicates the influence bloggers can exert over an audience, as users aspire to adopt a lifestyle or brand that is represented by a blogger.

Another respondent similarly reflected:

I usually refer to magazines and websites, but of course social media for fashion information, because it is always interesting to know what people, who are from the same "generation", with a "similar style" know about fashion, their opinion, and what they recommend. It seems more realistic and more natural from blogs.

This respondent refers to bloggers by personally relating to them as sources of reliable guidance for trending products and brands. Individuals may tend to idolize reference groups that represent the model brand or lifestyle that that individual strives to be associated with (Childers and Rao, 1992). The realistic feel of blogs creates a more accessible quality to the brand being promoted as consumers exhibit greater interest in a brand portrayed in a more natural setting. Undeniably, the perks that may come from being allied with bloggers have not gone unnoticed by brands. Rather, a network between the two has developed to further secure consumers. A 24-year-old respondent based in Dubai asserts:

Depending on the latest campaign, there may be an appropriate blog running alongside the promotion. Our company works with bloggers to reach a larger scope and target various consumers, but bloggers are also used to scrutinize the inner market and what trends are catching on. Bloggers are "the voice of consumers" and social media posts monitored by them.

According to this respondent, bloggers are once more placed in a more relatable light among consumers. Fashion brands will thus liaise with bloggers to extend their reach; yet, crucially this occurs when testing new products on the market, or establishing a profound understanding of consumer responses. However, consumers are not entirely oblivious to this union. One respondent noted:

I know that most of them (bloggers) are paid to show branded items, but I think that they are also making use of their accounts in a very good way that will benefit them financially. It helps them get free items from brands and become famous through Instagram. It's a win-win situation, for brands for bloggers, but for customers as well; we are able to see more of brands.

While the above respondent is aware of the role bloggers subtly embody in being employed by brands to push products, this is outweighed by the warmer insight consumers are given of the brand through such bloggers. Fashion blogger accounts have evolved into lifestyle accounts permitting brand ambassadors to publicly live

larger than life experiences that are further enriched by the brands they consume:

I have a few bloggers I follow. It doesn't just have to be the clothes they wear, I even go to the same restaurants or outings they go to because I like their overall style. I only really follow the ones that I relate to.

This respondent is captivated by the full fantasy a brand ambassador experiences with the support of particular brands. The rooted illusions a brand delivers through such third parties, conveys profound value as consumers trail a brand that potentially bears more than mere functionality. Consumers begin to view brands by a higher standard as brand consumption contributes to personal and social gains.

Managerial implications and future research

It is imperative to recognize the presence social media is now instituted as a routine medium for interaction among millennials. As demonstrated by respondents, social media is habitually exercised for numerous motivations. Intriguingly, millennials rely on social media as an outlet to trending worldwide topics. Social networking sites, such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, have today become the go-to platforms social media users turn to for real-time updates on any political, economic or social matter (Fischer and Reuber, 2011; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Susarla *et al.*, 2012). Through the course of social media administering swift interplay, a demand for relevance has surfaced among users whereby current information is sought with the intent of remaining in the “know” and belonging within modern society. It is crucial to note that complementary to relevance is another key finding of this study, which is the global exposure social media grants. Social media's reach has allowed worldwide millennials to overcome geographic limitations, as a sense of homogeneity is developed through boundless virtual communities.

Social media's accessibility has not been lost on global corporations (Hinz *et al.*, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Fashion brands' strong online presence has been established as one component of a compiled aggregate that comprises brands' marketing strategies. Interestingly, as industry respondents indicated, content produced on a brand's social media page is meticulously co-aligned with offline brand deliveries to convey one notable message. Whilst the overall brand message is thoroughly designed, the improvisation of direct and spontaneous interchange that unfolds between a brand and customer forms an unparalleled brand community (De Valck *et al.*, 2009; Miller *et al.*, 2009). The brand–customer exchange has evolved from the restricted one-way scene of a brand solely relaying messages to a two-way dynamic interchange that devises brand–customer intimacy (Ozuem *et al.*, 2008). Social media's accessibility factor has bridged consumers' urgency for relevance and brands' commitment to content distribution into a link that ultimately hoists the modern-day brand–customer relationship. Within a contemporary era of impartial communication among multinational brands and consumers, brands are granted the opportunity to be perceived under a more familiar and approachable context.

Social media has contributed to online brand presence beyond providing brands a podium for directly operated accounts; rather, the online phenomenon serves as a gateway to broader exposure through third-party promoters (Kim and Ko, 2012). As indicated by respondents, online bloggers that have grown into influential millennial figures become indirect brand representatives. Ordinary individuals sharing routine activities through such blogs convey a “natural” theme that targets customers through a more genuine setting. Bloggers and audiences together stem communities that foster potential for brands as communities evolve into user references and bloggers into idolized mentors. The symbolic value a brand is believed to deliver weighs on consumer brand judgments, as customers are encouraged to voice affiliation with a brand that augments self-presentation and builds social identity (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Ren *et al.*, 2012; Ozuem *et al.*, 2016).

As communication continues to evolve, marketers are faced with the challenge of perpetually tackling untouched grounds of contemporary brand–customer interchange whereby consumers lead the dialogue. The findings of this research highlight the intentions behind consumers accessing social media and informing marketers of how such a medium may influence brand perceptions held by customers. Millennials regard social media as a channel to worldwide news and a platform for free exchange of information. While brands should view engagement with millennials on social media as, theoretically, an informal environment, marketers should maintain that such impulsive exchange adheres to a brand's overall image. Marketers should approach social media as an additional presence that is harmonized with a brand's offline portrayal. Social media should be handled as an integral resource in delivering marketing strategies to millennials across a flexible setting.

It is important for brands to recognize that social media defines what millennials perceive communication to be. Intriguingly, one of the findings of this study indicates that millennial brand consumption surpasses

functional use as millennials seek greater value. Through the use of social media, millennials and brands form symbolic relationships that reside with customers long after a commodity has been consumed.

This study demonstrates the prominence of social media brand presence in reaching millennial consumers, commencing from the lower end of a spectrum of initially establishing exposure until the further end of developing brand–customer relationships. This research aims to demonstrate an underlying motivation that may incite millennials’ response to brands on social media platforms by engaging a social identity perspective. Consumption aids in the articulation of a desired social identity. However, the presence of social media has allowed for social identities to be relayed through lifestyle and brand consumption on a vast public scale. This instigates a deeper understanding to the influence brands retain over social media, and the motivation behind the public relationships millennial customers seek to enforce with brands. Brands and social media users have implicitly manifested a win-win arrangement that sees brands enveloped in followers and consumers allowed the platform to build social identities through brand associations. The fashion industry has especially excelled in implementing social media as a key channel for brand delivery. This research provides a foundation for future studies to investigate the profundity of social media use in fashion marketing and the importance of social identity in establishing and maintaining online brand–customer interaction.

This study is not without its shortcomings. It is a generalization to standardize the entire millennial group. It is essential that the millennial generation is further dissected to consider heterogeneous factors within the cohort. As this research first employed self-reported behavior data, it is important to note that results depend on the extent and reliability of the information provided in participants’ responses (Tourangeau and Smith, 1996). However, this postulated valuable insight into millennial behavior was further investigated in the research. Moreover, this study considered millennial behavior within particularly the fashion industry, which utilizes creative and aesthetic social media platforms. As social media is the prime communication method for millennials, it may be beneficial for future research to examine the various social media platforms and in what way millennials have assigned different types of social media platforms in sharing different topics of knowledge. Future research may also consider the long-run outcome of industry and consumer adaptation to social media.

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