Chapter 6
Social Media:
The Issues, Benefits, and Strategies for Brands

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of qualitative research conducted in two different case contexts, this chapter explores attitudes and approaches to the use of social media in relationship and community building. Two contrasting study contexts are addressed: the UK football sector and UK pure-play Small/Medium-Sized (SME) fashion retailers. After an introduction, the chapter summarises discussion and research on brands and their management in social media. This is followed by an outline of the two contexts for study. From this, the aims, objectives, and research methodology are drawn. The findings are then presented, and the ensuing discussion proposes a summary of the approaches to social media strategy adopted in the two case contexts. Four important foci are established, namely strategic marketing, marketing communication, brand and community, plus monitoring and evaluation. This results in a useful strategic framework empirically drawn from the in-depth data. Finally, suggestions for future research precede a conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Social media sites have become an important digital meeting place for friends and acquaintances, and their reach has grown significantly in the last few years (Halliday and Vrusias, 2011; Harrigan, 2011). Social media is a broad term often used to encapsulate the applications that enable increasingly popular social cyber-activities, such as blogging, micro-blogging, social networking, photo-sharing and video-sharing (Centeno *et al*., 2009). Almost 1.9 billion global consumers are currently engaged with social media (Kemp, 2014); and Facebook itself hosts around 1.19

Figure 1. Active global users by social media platform (Drawn from statistics in Kemp, 2014)
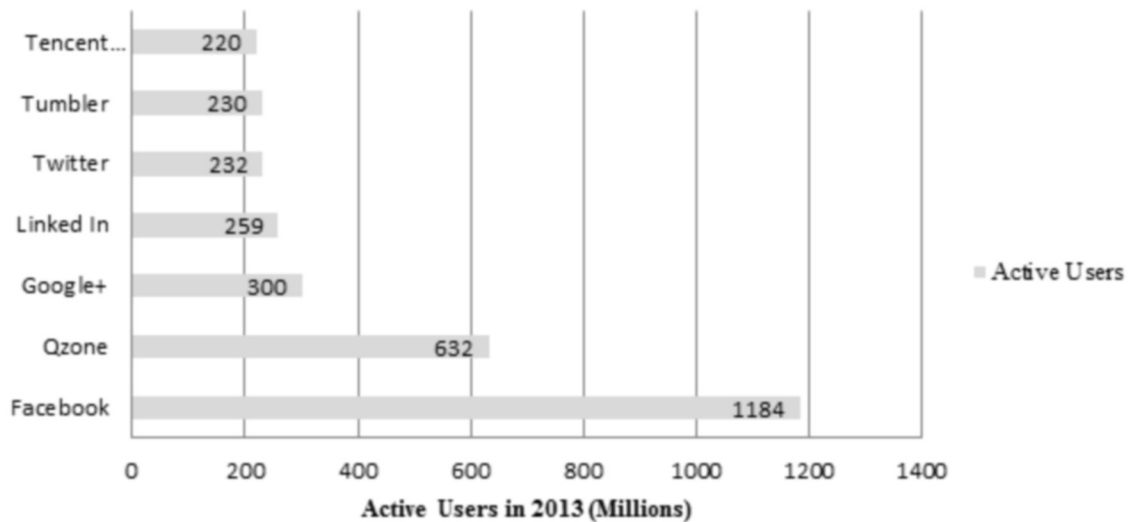
billion active users each month for commercial, leisure and social purposes (Facebook.com, 2014). Currently, Facebook is the main platform globally for active social media users (Kemp, 2014) and this can be seen in Figure 1. With average users spending over six hours per month on Facebook, this presents a highly receptive target audience in the social media domain.

The UK has the highest internet penetration of all countries with 87% of the national population connected (Kemp, 2014). This is high compared to the USA (80%), Western Europe (78%) and Eastern/Central Europe (54%). The UK is also an international leader in terms of social media penetration, with 76%, closely followed by Germany (74%), with France (68%) and Italy (54%) both lagging behind in the technology race. Around one-third of European online adults participate in Facebook conversations. UK consumer Facebook penetration is even higher – with over 50% of the population engaged (Social Bakers, 2014) - emphasising the potential of social media in the context of brand communication innovation. With the average user connected to over 80 community pages, Facebook represents a key avenue for tri-adic communication on a consumer-to-consumer

(C2C), consumer-to-business (C2B) and business to-consumer (B2C) basis (Ashworth, 2013). However, academics have typically focused on the consumer-business social media dyad (Larson and Watson, 2011), rather than offering any wider understanding. Twitter, on the other hand, which amassed around 232 million users in just seven years is now struggling to widen its audience as quickly (Evening Herald, 2014); and growth is only significant in developing markets such as Saudi Arabia. Presently, 77% of monthly active users of Twitter are outside the US. The number of daily active Twitter users is about 100 million and the average daily tweets stands at 500 million (Inforrms, 2013) – thus still making this an interesting platform for global brand communications. In the UK there are around 13 million active Twitter users each month, with 2.5 million of these tweeting daily. However, the Twitter figures should be considered carefully, as reliable statistics are hard to come by (Inforrms, 2013).

On account of the large and rapidly increasing audiences associated with social media sites, marketers have become increasingly interested in the potential that computer-mediated communication offers for interacting and communicating with

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