

Chapter 57

The Strategic Use of Social Media in the Fashion Industry

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ABSTRACT

The importance of social media is evident as millions of people use it to connect with others, share content, and discuss different topics (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kim & Ko, 2010). Although it is clear that social media is powerful and ubiquitous, many fashion brands have been reluctant or unable to develop strategies and allocate resources to effectively engage with the new media. The goal of this chapter is to critically review the literature that explicitly addresses the adoption, application, and impact of social media by fashion brands. In particular, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a critical assessment of the adoption of social media amongst three well-established fashion brands in order to identify the importance of social media as a strategic marketing tool and to propose a number of alternative social media strategies for fashion brands. Such a critical assessment is necessary since, as demonstrated by the research findings, implementing these strategies will allow brands not only to survive, but also to create new competitive advantages and thrive in the new global fashion business environment.

INTRODUCTION

Fashion can be related to any object or phenomenon that changes over time and is based upon individuals' collective preferences (Barnard, 1996). In our work, the word "fashion" mostly refers to the production and the fruition of garment and accessories, or as Luigi Maramotti, CEO of Max Mara Fashion Group describes, "I must emphasize that I consider a designed garment "fashion" only when it is marketed and worn by someone" (Maramotti, 2000, p. 96).

As a business sector, these distinctive features of changeability, likeability, and wearability signify the presence of major challenges in the integration of fashion within social media and the broader digital environment and the requirement of complex strategies to overcome them. However, the question of the

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state of fashion in the digital context remains largely unexplored, particularly with regards to the particularities of fashion management, which have posed a challenge in adopting digital technologies in the sector over the past two decades (Okonkwo, 2010; Tungate, 2009; Vecchi & Kontu, 2012). Until recently, the fashion industry has shown low commitment towards integrating advanced Internet technologies and its associated interactive and digital tools in the sector's marketing and overall business strategies (Okonkwo, 2010). The fashion industry seems to be present and conduct business on the Internet as a result of ever evolving consumer needs and expectations. For instance, notable international fashion brands such as Versace and Prada did not have corporate websites until 2005 and 2007, respectively. The slowness of the fashion industry in establishing an online presence in comparison to other sectors visibly clashes with the common idea of an industry that is known for innovation, avant-gardism and creativity (Michault, 2009).

Coupled by the growing demand for a stronger online presence, the rise of social media in recent years brings forth new challenges to fashion brands. The importance of social media is evident as millions of people utilize it to connect with others, share content and discuss different topics (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, 2011; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). Although it is clear that social media is powerful and ubiquitous, many fashion brands have been reluctant or unable to develop strategies and allocate resources to effectively engage with social media (Michault, 2009; Okonkwo, 2010; Tungate, 2009). This attitude has changed in the last few years; social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, Vimeo, and Vine have become an integral part of how fashion brands connect with their consumers, providing immense opportunities for innovative marketing communication (Arthur, 2013; Bautista, 2013a; Kim & Ko, 2010; Nguyen, 2011; Wasserman, 2012). Furthermore, it has been suggested that the digital and social media are changing the entire "fashion system" as it was previously understood; the new media often includes the consumer in the creation, delivery, and dissemination of the brand message (Bautista, 2013a; Kim & Ko, 2010). As a result, social media are exacerbating the on-going process of democratization of fashion – today, consumers can view collections live on the Internet, make buying decisions and subsequently give instant feedback on various social media outlets. These recent changes have only been a glimpse of what the old elitist fashion world could quickly become: a business in which designers take their collections directly to customers, no longer filtered through editors at the major fashion magazines and buyers at the leading fashion stores (Michault, 2009; Okonkwo, 2009, 2010). These developments and consumer demands situate fashion brands at crossroads. As suggested by fashion editor Suzy Menkes (2010), "fashion brands have to decide which way to go: back to the comfort zone of craftsmanship and quality, as Gucci has done; fast forward into the world of live screening and e-commerce; or a delicate balance between the two?"

Our chapter provides a critical assessment of the adoption of social media amongst three well established fashion brands in order to identify the importance of social media as a strategic marketing tool, and to propose a number of alternative social media strategies for fashion brands. As demonstrated by our findings, implementing such strategies will allow fashion brands not only to survive, but also create new competitive advantages and thrive in the new global business environment.

The chapter is divided into eight sections. After the Introduction, the second section provides an overview of the existing social media literature highlighting the gap in the current knowledge and presenting the rationale of the study. The three subsequent sections broaden the theoretical discussion across three key areas: the evolution of the social media environment (section three), the changing nature of brand relationships (section four), and the role of social media in marketing (section five). After the theoretic-

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