

Social media marketing in Italian luxury fashion

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Abstract

Industries nowadays have been comfortable with the incorporation of social media to their marketing strategy. Italy has been known as a major center of the European fashion industry, a sector that is also following the social media marketing trends. This paper provides empirical findings on Italian luxury fashion brands' social media marketing activities. We present and analyze two case studies of Italian luxury fashion brands: Gucci and The Bridge (Il Ponte Pelletteria). Gucci is one of worldwide leading Italian fashion companies and The Bridge is a SME fashion brand that focuses on leather products. This study is based on a conceptual framework on social media marketing strategy synthesized from extensive social media marketing literature. The research methodology includes content analysis of Gucci's and The Bridge's public posts on their Facebook brand pages and Twitter. Our findings suggest that social media actions implemented by both brands are directed toward promotion and sales marketing activities. However, there are differences on the specific actions carried out by both brands, and the use the companies make of the two social media platforms. This paper provides valuable insight for framing social media marketing strategic actions and set the basis for social media performance measurements, especially among luxury fashion brands.

Keywords: Social media marketing; Marketing strategy; Social media actions; Fashion brand; Luxury fashion; RENL

1. Introduction

Marketers and companies are currently comfortable with using social media as part of their marketing strategy. Fashion industry is not an exception to this. Just like fashion, where style inherently is shared as a representation of one's self-image, social media allows the reflection of people's personality and emotions. The adoption and use of social media marketing among fashion companies or brands have therefore become ubiquitous.

Despite the generalized use of social media and its fast catching up, little is known at an academic level about the specificities of fashion industry when approaching *social media marketing* (SMM) strategies, with some exceptions of studies on SMM adoption and strategy on internationalized large luxury fashion brands –e.g. Phan et al. (2011), Kontu and Vecchi, (2014), or Ng (2014). These studies investigate SMM among big worldwide fashion houses such as Burberry, Calvin Klein, DKNY, or Coach. Nevertheless, the lack of scholarly works on the assessment of SMM strategic activities or actions of the fashion brands is alarming, especially among European brands, even within the luxury fashion sector.

Italy has been known as a major center of the European fashion industry and it has many worldwide leading brands in luxury fashion, such as Gucci, Prada, or Dolce & Gabbana, to mention some. The European fashion industry is a vibrant one, and also an important contributor to the European Union (EU) economy (EU, 2012). Within the luxury sector, Italy is the third largest market in the world (Deloitte, 2014). The Italian luxury goods industry orbits around local craftsmanship and artisans. Many of the vertically integrated brands or companies started from the traditional small-business structure with the support of local artisans, with global players developing a strategy known as “global and local” (Lennon, 2010; Zanni, 2014). Hence, it is interesting to observe how both type of fashion companies –big global brands and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)– are conducting their social media marketing.

Adopting an exploratory approach, we present cases of two Italian luxury fashion brands with different company sizes: Gucci and The Bridge (Il Ponte Pelletteria). The two cases are used as representative examples in order to investigate how luxury fashion brands use social media as a marketing tool, and how they connect with their target market, by assessing their activities in different social media platforms. Our aim is to deepen our understanding on how luxury fashion brands translate their SMM strategy to actions. This study focuses on these actions in two of the best known social media platforms: Facebook and Twitter. For the purpose of our research, it is important to note that the concept of the *fashion industry* used in this study covers apparel and clothing fashion, as well as associated accessories.

The two companies included in this study are fashion brands that target the luxury segment, but they are very different in terms of size and sales, and offer slightly different types of fashion products. Gucci is one Italian fashion “giant” that actively uses social media marketing. It is among the top 10 firms in the Fashionbi index, as of September 2014 (Fashionbi, 2014). Fashionbi measures digital presence (e.g. buzz generated in social media, influencers, trends, brand impact) as well as business results. Moreover, Gucci was listed as the third world's most valuable fashion brand in 2011 (Tokatli, 2013). On the other side, The Bridge is a Florence-based SME company that manufactures and markets premium and high-end luxurious leather bags and accessories. The Bridge also has an active presence in social media platforms with marketing purposes (e.g., Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram). One thing both companies have in common is that they state that they highly value the “Made in Italy” craftsmanship.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 offers a review of the literature covering SMM strategy, the current state of the art of the use and adoption of SMM in

the fashion industry, and the conceptual framework for this research. Section 3 explains the research methodology conducted in this paper. Section 4 presents the results of the empirical study. Section 5 discusses the findings from the research. Section 6 presents some concluding remarks on the findings. Finally, Section 7, describes the main implications for academics and managers, as well as the limitations of the research, and suggests avenues of future research.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Social Media Marketing Strategy

Despite the increasing use among industries and the high number of articles from practitioners, there are still limited sources of scholarly works on corporate SMM in general, and SMM strategy in particular. Some prominent examples of such existing literature are Weinberg and Pehlivan, (2011) or Kenneway and Rapple (2012). *Social media marketing strategy* (SMMS) emerges as a core concept for this research. Summarizing the literature on general marketing strategy, digital or internet-enabled marketing and social media/web 2.0 marketing, SMMS is an integrated means and set of actions by which a company or organization expects to achieve its marketing objectives and meet the requirements of its target market through the use of social media tools and capabilities. Basically, SMMS deals with plans and decisions around the firms' target market, marketing mix, and social media mix. In this sense, *social media marketing strategic actions* (SMMA) comprise the marketing actions, activities, behaviors or tactics within the social media mix for a given SMMS. Despite social media being used as marketing is a common thing nowadays, effectively integrating social media into the marketing mix is still an issue for most companies and brands (Niessing, 2014).

Among the limited available studies related with SMMS, Mergel (2013) classifies social media tactics based on observed social media adoption in the public service sector. Constantinides (2009) also proposes a classification of the role of social media applications, based on how corporations use social media as part of their portfolio of marketing strategy tools. Constantinides's approach builds on the types of social media applications and their relation to marketing objectives. In the specific area of SMMS among SMEs, Pentina and Koh (2012) explore the emerging patterns and develop a taxonomy of SMMS in SMEs based on a cluster analysis that includes SMM tools and usage (reason or objective, employed tactic, and benefit). However, these studies fall short on the analysis of the different social media strategic actions implemented by companies.

2.2. Social Media Marketing of Luxury Fashion Brands

In the past, the fashion industry was commonly defined as a small subsection of the clothing industry; it was formerly simply associated to *haute couture* or the elite design elements of fashion (Pratt et al., 2012). *Haute couture* literally translates to "upper class seam", which translates to very high-quality, custom made clothing (Solomon and Rabolt, 2009).

A slightly wider definition of *luxury* has often been used to indicate a common concern of the horizontal marketing of goods having design as the premium factor, while still focusing on goods that have very high selling price-to-manufacturing cost ratio. Nueno and Quelch (1998) highlight that the idea of *luxury* does not merely apply to premium priced products; it encompasses a set of distinctive characteristics, namely consistent delivery of premium quality, heritage of craftsmanship, recognizable style and design, exclusivity, emotional appeal, global brand reputation, association with a country of origin, presence of elements of uniqueness and lifestyle of the creator. Newer

conceptualization of luxury define the category from the point of view of the consumer, focusing on the experience of luxury embodied in the goods and services they buy, not in ownership or possession itself (Brun et al., 2008).

The increasing use of social media as a marketing tool has affected the fashion and luxury goods industries as well. At first, luxury brands hesitated to use social media. Core features of the Internet include classless mass media, which seems to contradict the exclusivity and uniqueness of luxury brands (Ng, 2014). Today, it seems that the desired brand image cannot be achieved by relying on one-way communication only, but that it requires engaging in social media and incorporating consumers (Phan et al., 2011). The luxury industry has gradually recognized the importance of using the Internet and social media. Social media can enhance a brand's reputation, increase interactions with customers and stimulate their desire for luxury (Ng, 2014). As an example, social media has helped Burberry to revitalize the brand and reposition it to a new younger market (Phan et al., 2011).

However, there is still a dearth of scholarly sources from a marketing strategy perspective within the luxury fashion sector. Kim and Ko (2012) present a study on the impact of luxury brands' social media marketing on customer relationship and purchase intention. Phan et al. (2011), on the other hand, conduct a case study on social media and luxury brand management focused on Burberry –one the first luxury brands that embraced social media– to investigate social media adoption by luxury companies. However, there is little to no available research exploring the strategic use of SMM among SME fashion brands, in particular within the luxury SMEs, with the existing studies focusing on large global luxury fashion brands –e.g., Kontu and Vecchi (2014), Ng (2014).

2.3. Conceptual Framework

This paper follows our previously built conceptual RENL framework (Ananda et al., 2014). The framework synthesizes theories, concepts and best practices on SMM and SMM strategy literature. This framework enables the classification and mapping of actions to the different SMMS (strategic plans, decisions, objectives) in which they are subsumed. The framework also classifies strategic actions according to what they are directed to: target market (e.g. public relations, customer support and market research), customer engagement, marketing mix (e.g. promotion, product development), influencer engagement, competitors, and social media mix.

The framework is supported by Constantinides' (2009 and 2014) and Mergel's (2013) classifications, and contributions by Andzulis (2012), Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi (2012), Pentina and Koh (2012), and Lorenzo-Romero et al. (2013).

There are ten categories of SMM activities proposed, which are:

1. Public relations (PR).
2. Promotion process.
3. Engaging online opinion leaders, key influencers, and personalities as means of customer influence.
4. Personalizing customer experience and customization of products.
5. Engaging the customer as creator of product reviews, advertising concepts and co-producer or as source of innovation.
6. Engaging customers to participate in call to action for participatory promotion.
7. Engaging with competitors in social media.
8. Customer Support.
9. Social media mix: social media platform feature selection.
10. Market intelligence.

This study investigates the application of this general SMMS framework to the fashion industry. In particular, this work aims to observe its applicability to luxury fashion. Building on the RENL framework, we conduct a literature review on the strategic actions taken by companies relating to their SMM use and implementation –with a general, cross-sectorial perspective. The review includes conceptual and empirical research, as well as reports of best practices. Table 1 lists the SMM actions included on each category.

Table 1 – Social Media Marketing Strategy Activities

SMM Activities		Source	
Categories	Examples of Strategic Actions		
Representation	Public Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Providing or sharing corporate website or content links in social media ▪ Publishing company's contents on results/innovation/news/success stories ▪ Posting contents on customer appreciation (e.g. thanking and greeting) ▪ Casual socialization and greeting contents ▪ Integrating application or posting content that is not directly related to the brands field of expertise but is associated with brand's value ▪ Promoting or inviting customers to offline events 	Ascend2 (2013); Andzulis et al. (2012); Page (2014); Phan et al. (2011); He et al. (2013); Ahn et al. (2013)
	Promotion & sales process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social shopping: Product promotion or providing electronic product catalog ▪ Exclusive preview to product promotional campaign ▪ Offer location-specific deals ▪ Live-streaming and reporting ▪ Rewarding fans by providing upcoming product sneak-peeks or discounts 	Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi (2012); Curran et al. (2011); Phan et al. (2011)
Engagement / Added-value proposition	Engaging online opinion leaders and influencers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Seeding to influencers by giving them free products or engaging them into participation in product customization campaigns, and then encouraging them to share their experiences ▪ Celebrity endorsements as advertisement 	Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi (2012); Kumar et al. (2013) Sterling et al. (2013)
	Using social media to customize experience and products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encourage customer's brand-experience ▪ Employing embedded configuration or applications to allow mass customization ▪ Engaging customers to share their experiences or employing customizable application (e.g. electronic greeting cards) related with a special event 	Blazek et al. (2012); Phan et al. (2011); Parent et al. (2011)
	Engaging the customer as source of product reviews and development, innovation, or co-producer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Crowdsourced idea collection for product design, or about company's profile ▪ Encourage regular customers to participate in the review process and to share positive opinions 	Parent et al. (2011); Mangold and Smith (2012);

	Engaging customers to participate in call to action for participatory promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Seeding through employing a contest whereby the firms give the products or free trial ▪ Inviting positive reviewers to become brand advocates ▪ Engaging customers to participate in a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) campaign via contests 	Dou et al. (2013); Parent et al. (2011); Mangold and Smith (2012); Cristache et al. (2013)
	Engaging with competitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sharing competitors' contents ▪ Follow/join competitor's account 	Vullo (2013)
	Customer Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide Q&A (e.g. through website or by providing a special social media account) ▪ Publishing contents to address issues raised by customers about products or services. 	Lorenzo-Romero et al. (2013)
Networking	Social media mix: administering social media account(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Language setup ▪ Creating a group or community of people of similar interest in social network 	Pentina and Koh (2012); Hsu (2012)
Listening-In (passive way actions)	Market Intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monitoring customer voices ▪ Mining customers' followers/fans/friends/network for future prospects 	Pentina and Koh (2012); Andzulis et al. (2012)

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Company overview of Gucci and The Bridge/Il Ponte Pelletteria

Both Gucci and The Bridge were founded in Florence, a city in the Tuscany region (Italy). Tuscany has had a long history of many fashion ventures starting from small artisanal shops. It is a residence of not only major global fashion brands, but also fashion houses that serve niche markets. The local fashion houses in Tuscany gain their success through the capacity of combining entrepreneurial attitude, creativity and craftsmanship, and this is made possible by local actors and institutions. Its fashion industry shares a strong connection with the local craft districts, mainly with that of leather processing. In fact, Tuscany has shares of 20% of textile exports, 12% of clothing exports, and as much as 40% of Italy leather good exports (Pratt et al., 2012).

Gucci was founded in 1921 by Guccio Gucci in Florence. Gucci's revenue was €3.5 billion in 2014 (Financial Times, 2015). Gucci claims representing contemporary glamour and traditional "Made in Italy" craftsmanship. Gucci designs and produces women's and men's ready-to-wear handbags, leather goods, children's clothing, fragrances and cosmetics, as well accessories such as travel accessories, footwear, fine jewelry, watches, and eyewear. "Made in Italy" has been an integral part of the essence of Gucci. Since the opening of its original workshop in Florence, Gucci remains very much linked to Italy's Tuscany region even after the headquarters moved to Casellina, outside of Florence. Gucci today remains mainly backed up by its local networks of Florence workshops, employing over 45,000 people in Italy alone, in addition to its own employees. Gucci's story with local networks is a good example of an Italian leading firm that was able to overcome family succession problems and to develop "a global and local strategy" (Zanni, 2014).

The Bridge is a medium size company that produces leather bags and accessories based in the city of Florence, Italy. Their current distribution channel focuses mainly on Italy, but they also distribute their products to other countries such as the United States and

Asia. Apart from their offline, brick and mortar stores, they also operate online. For corporate image and positioning of the brand to buyers, retailers, and consumers, The Bridge commits to tell the story of the "Tuscany way of life", in a casual but sophisticated way, and is attentive to even the smallest of details of craftsmanship. The same as Gucci, The Bridge emphasize the value of "Made in Italy" and it also values the "hand-crafted" tag typical of Florentine workmanships.

3.2. Research Design

This research relies on primary sources of SMM activities on social media platform databases, as well as Gucci's and The Bridge's corporate websites. Gathering of data about SMM activities included public posting data of Gucci and The Bridge on their respective Facebook and Twitter accounts, provided by Fashionbi using each platform's Application Programming Interface (API). Fashionbi is a Milan-based company focusing on fashion and luxury brands worldwide, and that provides social media services to professionals.

Facebook is a social networking platform that is a flagship of SMM. Facebook use by fashion brands is widespread. For Facebook, we chose to analyze both companies' Facebook brand-pages (sometimes referred to as "fan page" because users join the page by "liking" or becoming a "follower" of the page). Twitter is a type of microblogging social media platform, and the choice for data selection was each companies' official Twitter account. Facebook and Twitter are two of the most used social platforms by Gucci and The Bridge for social media marketing purposes. The collection of data covered posts and tweets of both companies between January and March 2015. That period covers the new spring/summer season and the next autumn/winter season preview, which usually run on January and February annually.

3.3. Data Analysis

Our research includes a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches (content analysis, followed by quantification and classification of strategic actions). To perform the content analysis, Fashionbi collects the Twitter actions of a brand (*tweets*) and the brand's responses to others (replies and retweets) via their own Twitter's account; Fashionbi also provides data from brands' posts in Facebook, as well as their actions or responses to other Facebook accounts (such as commenting or liking). On Facebook, user-responses on other accounts' public posts are visible for the brand and brand-page's followers. In this study, we analyze brand posts on its own brand-page.

The analysis limits the scope of the RENL framework because "social media mix" or networking SMM activity, such as creation or administration of social media platform accounts, is considered as higher level planning –or strategic decisions–, and it is not directly observable from the posts' contents. Furthermore, our research focuses on active types of SMM actions; therefore, and given that actions that relate to "market intelligence" are mainly passive –they aim at monitoring the voices of customers or audiences– most of these type of actions might not be observable from the posts' contents, either.

Following the content analysis, we gathered Gucci's and The Bridge's key SMM activities. Content classification followed two steps:

- Activities and actions inherent from the posts' contents –text, picture, and videos– were classified and coded qualitatively according to the RENL conceptual framework (Table 1). The list of actions stemming from our framework was used as a basis to identify Gucci's and The Bridge's SMM activities. Some posts could be mapped to more than one type of actions.

- In some cases, the actions could not be mapped to the RENL framework. Unmapped actions were re-classified into the appropriate type of the activity, and then the coding scheme was adjusted.

4. Results

4.1. Overview of SMM activities

Tables 2 and 3 summarize the list of SMM strategic actions observed from Gucci and The Bridge on their Facebook brand-page and Twitter accounts, respectively.

4.1.1. Marketing activities on Facebook

The total number of “likes” –number of fans of Gucci’s Facebook page– was 14,353,135 (as of March 31, 2015). There was a total of 336 posts by Gucci on its Facebook brand-page over the period covered by this research. After classification, 385 actions were identified. Most actions are oriented toward promotion and sales (90.91 % of the total number of actions), with a much lower representation of public relations, engaging online opinion leaders, key influencers, personalities, celebrities or public figures, and customer support. The total number of “likes” of The Bridge’s Facebook brand-page was 21,685 (as of March 31, 2015). There were 124 posts analyzed within the period of observation, for a total of 160 actions. Most actions from The Bridge’s Facebook brand-page are oriented toward promotion and sales (64.38 % of the total number of actions). However, the number of posts concerning public relations activities was much higher than the case of Gucci (24.38% vs. 3.12%).

Table 2 – Social media marketing activities of Gucci (G) and The Bridge (TB) on Facebook brand-page

Social media marketing activities	Detailed actions	Number of actions		Percentage of total actions (%)			
		G	TB	G	TB	G	TB
Public relations	Posting contents on value and culture of the brand	11	24	2.86	15.00	3.12	24.38
	General information about company/corporate	1	3	0.26	1.88		
	Posting casual contents on celebrities/public figure		3		1.88		
	Posting contents that are not directly related to the brand’s field of expertise but are associated with brand’s culture and value		4		2.50		
	Inviting customers to offline events		1		0.63		
	Sharing contents on news/stories about the brand		4		2.50		
Promotion and sales process	Exclusive preview to product promotional campaign	14	1	3.64	0.63	90.91	64.38
	Social shopping: providing product catalog/link to e-commerce site	64	59	16.62	36.88		
	Social shopping: product awareness and promotion	63	13	16.36	8.13		
	Upcoming product sneak-peeks	152	1	39.48	0.63		
	Fashion show live-streaming and reporting for new collection launch	57		14.81			
	Sharing offline stores/promotion events		29		18.13		

Engaging online opinion leaders, key influencers, and personalities	Engaging or sharing contents on personalities/celebrities/key influencers as brand ambassadors or promotion	21	12	5.45	7.50	5.45	9.38
	Sharing personalities or influencer's postings or endorsements about the brand		3		1.88		
Customer Support	Responding to customers' complaints	2	1	0.52	0.63	0.52	1.88
	Answering customers' inquiries		2		1.25		

Among the actions related to promotion and sales, The Bridge emphasizes action of social shopping by deriving to their product catalog or linking to their online shop (36.88% of the total), while Gucci emphasizes action of posting contents about the new or upcoming product sneak-peeks (39.48%). The Bridge also frequently shares offline promotion events (18.13%), whereas Gucci does not perform this type of actions in their Facebook brand-page, instead Gucci shares offline events through the live-streaming of their fashion shows. The Bridge also produces abundant content about brand culture and values (a combined 17.50%). In fact, many of The Bridge contents on their offline store or promotion events are also promoting their brand culture and values –for example, by showcasing their artisans or conducting workshops on making bags or leather accessories. Although both companies connect some of their actions with product catalogs and links their online store (similar number of posts, but higher percentage in the case of The Bridge), The Bridge frequently associates social shopping to special events or seasons – e.g., holidays– while Gucci’s approach to social shopping points at product awareness and promotion, with live-streaming and reporting of fashion shows. These actions showcase Gucci’s upcoming sneak-peeks of their next season’s collections. Other than those actions, The Bridge and Gucci use their Facebook brand-page as a means of customer support only marginally.

Table 3 – Social media marketing activities of Gucci (G) and The Bridge (TB) on Twitter

Social media marketing Activities	Detailed actions	Number of actions		Percentage of total actions (%)			
		G	TB	G	TB	G	TB
Public relations	Posting contents on value and culture of the brand	1	5	1.52	13.16	9.09	39.47
	General information about company/corporate		2		5.26		
	Posting contents that are not directly related to the brands field of expertise but are associated with brand’s culture and value		1		2.63		
	Inviting customers to offline events		3		7.8		
	Sharing contents on news/stories about the brand	4	2	6.06	5.26		
	Casual socialization and greeting contents	1		1.52			
	Customer appreciation contents		2		5.26		
Promotion and sales process	Exclusive preview to product promotional campaign	5		7.58		80.30	50.00
	Social shopping: providing product catalog/link to e-commerce site	8	12	12.12	31.58		
	Social shopping: product awareness and promotion	15	2	22.73	5.26		
	Upcoming product sneak-peeks	9		13.64			

	Fashion show live-streaming and reporting for new collection launch			24.24			
	Sharing offline stores/promotion events		5		13.16		
Engaging online opinion leaders, key influencers, and personalities	Engaging or sharing contents on personalities/celebrities/key influencers as brand ambassador or as means of promotion	7	3	10.61	7.89	10.61	7.89
Engaging customers to participate in call to action for participatory promotion	Seeding through employing a contest; then encouraging customers to share their experiences in social media		1		2.63		2.63

4.1.2. Marketing activities on Twitter

The total number of Gucci and The Bridge “followers” in Twitter was 1,534,725 and 184, respectively (as of March 31, 2015; note that proportionately, and when compared to Facebook, The Bridge has a very low number of followers). The number of tweets was 57 and 35, corresponding to 66 and 38 different actions, respectively. From table 3, most of Gucci’s actions employed are oriented toward promotion and sales (80.30 %), but only half of The Bridge’s actions have this objective (near 40% of the actions focus on public relations). Both companies have similar intensity on engaging online opinion leaders, key influencers, personalities, celebrities or public figures.

Gucci emphasizes actions of fashion show live-streaming and reporting, and product awareness and promotion, whereas The Bridge’s actions aim to provide product catalog content and/or link to their online store. As in the case of Facebook, The Bridge also posts a considerable number of content about brand’s values and culture.

4.2. User Responses to the SMMA

As a follow-up to the content analysis, we performed an analysis of users’ responses and engagement with Gucci’s and The Bridge’s actions. Figures 1 and 2 summarizes the user-responses in terms of average number of responses per type of action on Facebook and Twitter Gucci and The Bridge, respectively,

Most fans or customers on Gucci’s Facebook brand-page respond by “liking” the post. The number of *shares* and *comments* is much lower than the number of *likes*. The actions with the most average number of *likes* refer to contents on social shopping, both on actions of providing product catalog and link to the online store, and product promotion. On The Bridge’s Facebook brand-page, the actions with the most average number of *likes* refers to contents on social shopping, both on actions related to product catalog and online store, as well as product promotion; providing catalog content is the most *shared* content, followed by sharing offline promotion events and stores in terms of number of *likes*.

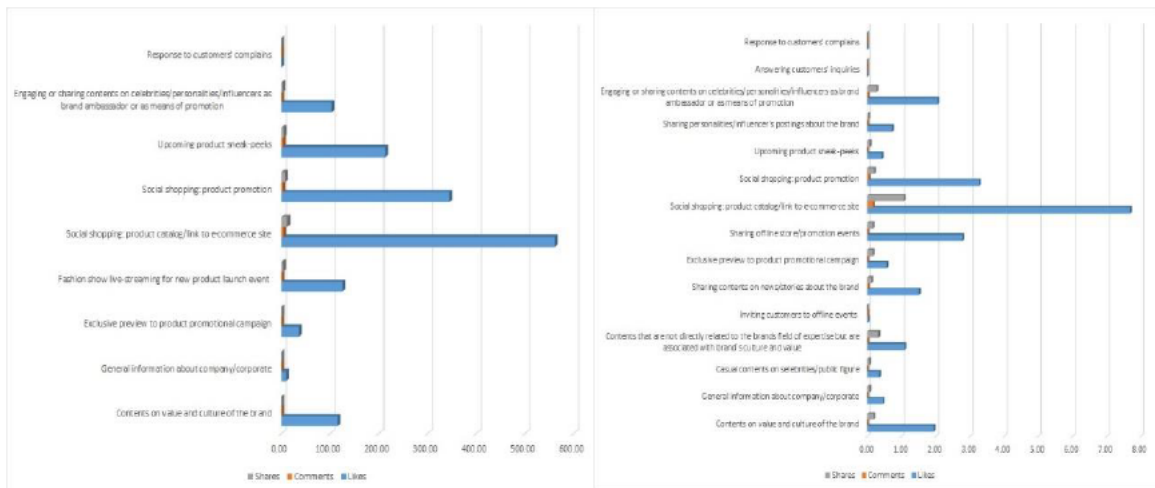


Figure 1 – User responses, in average responses per post for each type of actions, to SMM actions on Facebook (Gucci on the left and The Bridge on the right)

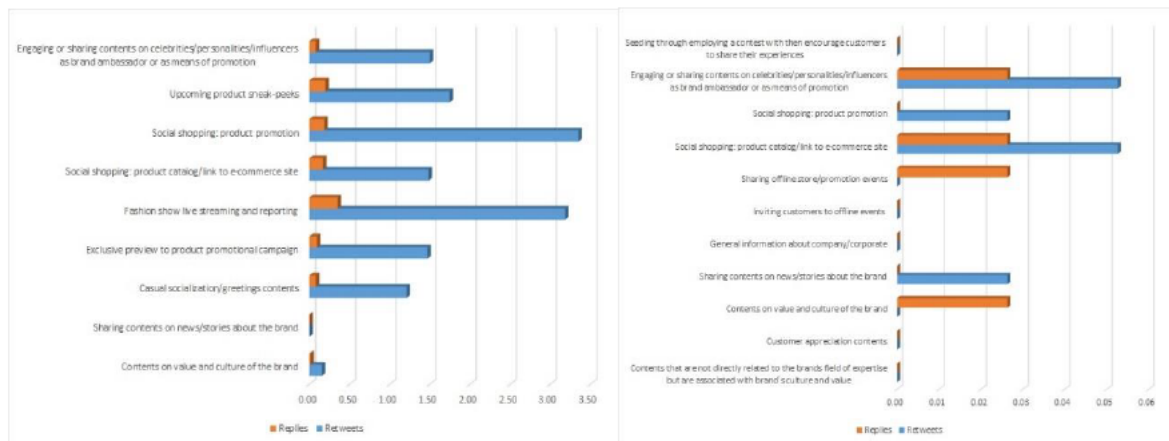


Figure 2 – User responses, in average responses per post for each type of actions, to SMM chaactions on Twitter (Gucci on the left and The Bridge on the right)

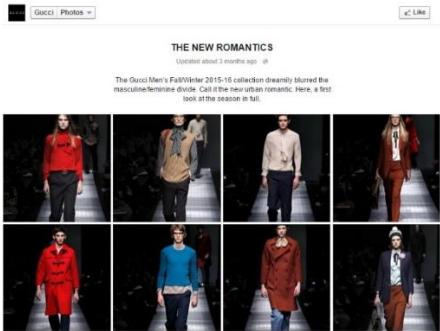

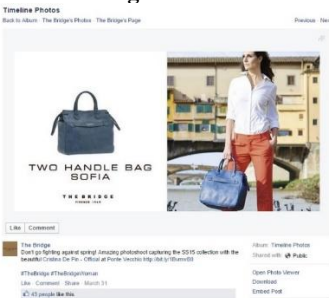

In Twitter, users may respond by *retweets* and *replies*. A *retweet* in Twitter is analogue to Facebook *shares* and a *reply* is equivalent to a *comment*. On Gucci's Twitter actions, the tweets that trigger a higher number of *retweets* are devoted to product promotion. Other actions with high number of *retweets* are those related to fashion show live-streaming, which also receive the highest number of *replies*. As expected, from their low fan base in Twitter, the average number of *replies* and *retweets* in The Bridge's Twitter account is low –less than one per action. Users are mostly *retweeting* rather than *replying*. In average per action, the tweets that trigger a highest number of *retweets* are devoted to providing product catalog or link to the online store, and those about sharing contents on personalities or celebrities for promotional purposes.

5. Discussion

Our findings suggest that there are some common aspects in the implementation of Gucci and The Bridge in their SMM strategy –in terms of social media content strategies– across Facebook and Twitter. Among the commonalities, the main use social media platforms by both brands focuses on promotion and sales process marketing activities.

However, interesting differences arise when observing in detail the specific actions undertaken by both brands. To give a clearer descriptions on the social media actions of the two brands, Table 4 next illustrates some examples of actions by both brands on Facebook and Twitter.

Table 4 – Illustrative examples of social media marketing actions of Gucci and The Bridge

Activity category	Description of the action	Post examples
Representation: Promotion and sales process	Posting contents of upcoming product sneak-peeks	<p style="text-align: center;">Gucci on Facebook:</p> 
Representation: Promotion and sales process	Posting contents on fashion show live-streaming and reporting	<p style="text-align: center;">Gucci on Twitter:</p> 
Representation: Promotion and sales process & Engagement: Engaging personalities as a mean of customer influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social shopping: product catalog/link to e-commerce site - Engaging or sharing contents on celebrities/personalities/influencers as brand ambassadors and promotion 	<p style="text-align: center;">The Bridge on Facebook:</p> 
Representation: Public relations & Representation: Promotion and sales process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Posting contents on brand's values and culture - Sharing offline store/promotion events 	<p style="text-align: center;">The Bridge on Twitter:</p> 

Gucci capitalizes mostly by funneling contents of upcoming product sneak-peeks in Facebook, but uses Twitter more for contents of fashion show live-streaming and reporting, which have in general a major sense of immediacy. However, in general, Gucci uses both channels for its top frequently employed actions such as: posting contents on upcoming product sneak-peeks, social shopping contents (product awareness, and product catalog or links to online shop) and fashion show live-streaming. The fashion shows joined by Gucci are usually the global fashion weeks held in major fashion cities such as Milan, Paris, London, or New York, where their competitors –other major fashion brands and designers– show their upcoming collection for the next season as well. This is the reason why many of the actions of this type are also part of the action of posting contents on upcoming product sneak-peeks.

The Bridge capitalizes mostly by provisioning of social shopping in the form of product catalog or links to their online shops on both Facebook and Twitter. In fact, The Bridge has a more homogenous and equally distributed type of actions on both Facebook and Twitter, especially among its top employed actions, compared to Gucci. As seen earlier, the top three employed actions are providing product catalog/links to e-commerce site, sharing offline store or promotion events, and contents on value and culture of the brand. Interesting to note that, instead of fashion weeks that are usually joined by large global luxury brands, The Bridge holds offline promotion events that showcase their expertise.

Other common aspect is that both Gucci and The Bridge use both social media channels to post contents on value and culture of the brand. In particular, The Bridge structures this type of contents not only around its culture and values, but also as its expertise and themes like leather, luxury, artisanal, handcrafted and high skilled craftsmanship, and messages such as “Made in Italy” and the “Tuscany way of life”. In fact, The Bridge also delivers contents that are not directly related with their products but that are a reflection of those values. On the other side, Gucci often posts the images of its worldwide recognizable brand logo, symbols, or colors. The logo with its double Gs, for example, is served as a reminder of the heritage of its founder, Guccio Gucci (Banks, 2014). This is a smart move by both of the brands since luxury consumers tend to appreciate the significance and history of what they are buying, and hence brands must deliver impactful content that reflects their history to stay relevant in the social sphere (eValue, 2015).

Additionally, current literature suggests that users’ social media responses may serve as indicators for specific marketing outcomes of consumer behavior (e.g. Hoffman and Fodor, 2010). Given the amount of customers’ positive reactions as indicated by the social media responses, we suggest that Gucci continues to provide contents on social shopping –such as providing the online catalog and shopping or merely as product promotion–, fashion show live-streaming, and upcoming product sneak-peeks. Based on our assessment on user responses on The Bridge’s actions on social media platforms, we suggest that The Bridge continues to highlight their actions of social shopping –whether to provide online catalog and shopping or product promotion– and invite customers to offline promotion events. Furthermore, Gucci and The Bridge may put more efforts on showcasing their brand values and culture, and also to foster engagement with key influencers or public figures.

These recommendations should, however, be taken with a grain of salt, as further empirical research is need to confirm whether these responses and reactions may serve as indicators or proxies of both Gucci’s and The Bridge’s intended marketing objectives.

6. Conclusions

This research is an effort to contribute to the study of SMM strategy implementation in the fashion industry, especially among Italian fashion brands and the specific segment of luxury. This research also served as a basis of further research on SMM performance measurement within the perspective of SMM strategic actions developed by fashion brands.

From a practical standpoint, our findings are expected to serve as an initial insight for luxury fashion brands to assess their SMM actions or activities, as part of the implementations of their SMM strategies, in order to measure their effectiveness in terms of the achievement of the expected marketing outcomes. This information would allow luxury fashion managers and marketers to better design and deploy their SMM strategies –including the content strategies in various social media platforms– so as to capitalize on the opportunities offered by social media to effectively achieve the company’s marketing goals.

Gucci and The Bridge are clearly still focusing on a more traditional approach of marketing –such as promotion and sales, and public relations to some extent. The Bridge is clearly emphasizing on e-commerce, while Gucci does on product promotion and awareness. It could be argued that both brands are profiting from engagement-related SMMAs. In the social media world, luxury brands can opt to join in the conversation with their audience and, even further, have a significant influence on the conversation. The behavior of the large luxury brands that focus more on product awareness and promotion may be explained from their understanding of their customers’ behavior. Luxury customers usually want that one-on-one intimate service instead of brand online engagement (eValue, 2015). Hence, many luxury fashion brands likely will not see revenue driven from social media. As an example, eValue (2015) notes that large global fashion brands such as Kenzo, Rebecca Minkoff, Burberry, and Calvin Klein have zero responsiveness rate, including interaction with users.

The above issues are challenges for luxury fashion brands. In particular, luxury brands –both large and SMEs– must maintain a fine balance between brand’s desirability and accessibility (Phan et al., 2011), including their social media marketing exposure. The best way to protect brand equity when implementing social media marketing is to carefully control the way social media is used and the content strategies deployed across the different social media platforms. This is important considering the “user-generated content” nature of social media that ultimately results in an environment massively controlled by consumers, not marketers. Hence, in social media brand image is not only created by marketers, but is increasingly influenced by customers. Marketers or brands who fail to understand that, do so at their peril (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010).

Just as luxury brands aim to maintain their high craftsmanship skills and artisanal works, they should have the skill to improve the way they craft their social media contents and actions, in order to deliver the right message and to communicate with their target audience. In particular, from our study cases, Italian fashion luxury brands should also maintain their worldwide powerful branding around prolific design talent, reputation for tradition, heritage, and quality (Deloitte, 2014) in their presence in the social media ecosystem.

7. Challenges and Future Steps

We expect that this study will foster further research on whether the SMM strategy and actions implemented by luxury fashion brands –and, on larger scale, the European fashion brands– are living up to their expected marketing outcomes. Despite this paper

successfully showcasing how to frame the social media marketing strategic actions, the study still presents some limitations.

First, there is no measure of the effectiveness of the social media actions implemented. Further research should address how SMM strategies and strategic actions by fashion brands may affect customer behavior and marketing outcomes. Regarding the latter, an open research area is how users' responses and reactions in (and to) social media platforms may relate to, or serve as indicator of, marketing outcomes.

Second, this empirical study is limited in terms of the social media platforms observed –the research only covers Facebook and Twitter. The applicability of our proposed framework should be validated in broader social media ecosystems. Moreover, further longitudinal analysis among different types of social media platforms will give a clearer indication about the variety and intensity of SMM actions employed by each type of luxury fashion brands in each of the social media platforms.

Finally, the analysis focuses solely on Italian luxury brands. Although the consideration of this work is that Italy has significant importance among the European fashion and luxury industry, a comparison with other fashion brands based in other European countries might be extremely useful for the development of research and practice on this topic.

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