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SOCIAL NETWORKING AS TOOL FOR GLOBAL COMMUNICATION FOR FASHION BRANDS

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of new information technologies, development and exploration of the digital platforms and social networks in recent decades, have caused major changes in lives of individuals, as well as in the business sphere, opening up new opportunities and challenges, and changing consumption behaviours on a global scale. This paper presents a research of customer participation to the footwear brands community network, depending on the brands involvement level, since footwear sector places its importance to the Portuguese economy, through significant and stable growth within this recent decade. With the increasing use of digital platforms, such as social networks and website, as communication channels used in marketing strategies for fashion brands, it became necessary to empirically analyse the impact of these digital platforms to the brands. The major findings of this longitudinal research showed that brands, that are new to market, have a better performance in social media, with rapid growth of its communities and already surpassing the established companies.

Keywords: social network, fashion, footwear brand, communication, digital marketing

1. INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry is highly competitive and fragmented, and the increased competitive pressure from the fashion sector is a consequence of the phenomenon of globalization, where the economic changes led towards the reduction of production costs, demand for lower prices of raw material suppliers and more favourable conditions in the local market. In addition, there are also cultural and social changes that were accelerated through communication infrastructures and more efficient transport [1].

Nowadays, in a society driven by the image, fashion has a highlight, importance and democratic presence [2]. However, it can be said that fashion today is transformed into an image. These new communication infrastructures strengthen this visual communication, and as a result, Bruzzi *et al* [2] affirms that digital and web-based fashion have been developing with an appearance of fashion films, fashion blogging and online fashion publishing since the very beginning of 21st century. Fashion is a form of nonverbal communication of expression of an individual and it's one of the most visible changes in means of communication. This form of communication can be transmitted through globally comprehensible images, and since the image became more dominant in the last decades, aesthetics arises to be a critical point [1]. According to Angela Jiyoung Kim and Eunju Ko [3], luxury brands moved to the communication marketing using digital platforms to survive the recent unanticipated challenges, with increasing competition within the market, arguing that the usage of digital platforms has expanded to almost every luxury fashion brands, and has been assessed as business tool for take-off.

The rapidly expanding area in the last decades is social networking, surpassing other media, e.g. television, radio, newspapers and magazines that had been used before for advertisement and communication of fashion brands. The Internet brought new opportunities to the brands and also particular struggles, as Blythe [4] stated, that the “new communication media has made previous marketing communications strategies almost obsolete”.

The main focus of marketing strategies is under change for interactivity and connectivity, as well as for continuous relationship between the brand and the consumer. In recent years, social networks have been adopted and used by various brands, because they have been recognized as sources of information, establishing brand presence and creating relationships between brand and their potential customers, thus influencing a large number of individuals acceptance and the usage of products and services, with minimal effort attempts required to influence [5]. Therefore, brands and consumers communicate with each other without any restriction in time and place, as a result, the old process of one-way communication is changed, to interaction through two-way communication, correspondingly, brands can benefit exposure and fortify relationships with their customers [6]. Schau *et al* [7] debates that brands, which interacts daily or several times a week with its community through social networking, maintaining it during years, can expand its boundaries. Besides two-way communication between brands and customers, the emergence of digital platforms and its applications opened up new possibilities as mutual transfer of information both between brands and customers, as well in relationship with suppliers, distributors, etc. The information flow can define and influence the relationships between the various stakeholders in the value chain, as well as in most businesses, furthermore can also create a basis for competitive advantage [8].

A significant growth of the footwear sector in Portugal perceived in recent decades, places its importance to the Portuguese economy [9]. Maintaining a growth of the sector requires academics and companies to develop investigations in this particular area, these investigations can lead to a greater understanding of the necessary conditions for the establishment of new potential brands and growth of existing ones.

2. EXPERIMENTAL

The appearance of new information technologies has disrupted traditional communication strategies existing between fashion brands and consumers. According to DEI Worldwide study [10] on the impact of social media on purchase decision, it showed that 70% of surveyed consumers visited social media platforms to get information on a company, brand or product, following with 60% of consumers visiting company's websites and 57% checking online news for the same matter. With the increasing usage of digital platforms, such as social networks and website as communication channels, in marketing strategies for fashion brands, creating a relationship with the brand and place to trace information for the consumers, it became necessary to empirically analyse the effect of social networks and website, when it comes to competitive advantage of the brands social networks and website. This study investigates consumer participation on footwear brands community network, depending on the brands involvement level. To address the research issues, it was conducted a longitudinal study of the social networks of the following four well-known Portuguese footwear brands: Josefinas, Lemon Jelly, Fly London and Dkode.

Table 1. General information of brands

Brand	Founded	Online Retail market ¹	Market segment	Target
Dkode	2002	General Fashion Retailer	Women, Men	Mass market
Fly London	1994	General Fashion Retailer	Women, Men	Mass market
Josefinas	2013	Product specialists Fashion retailer	Women	Luxury/Niche market
Lemon Jelly	2013	Product specialists Fashion retailer	Women, Men, Children	Niche market

¹ See Ruth Marciniak and Margaret Bruce [11] for an explanation of classification of fashion retailers, description and examples.

Table 1 shows the general information of brands in focus, with the objective to understand and compare their market segment, target and online retail market, and when they were established.

This longitudinal research method was used with two main purposes to be achieved: first, focuses on the description of the change patterns; second, to set the direction and magnitude of underlying relationships [12]. The aim of this research is to identify communication patterns throughout the analysis of brands communities, taking records periodically with pre-established variables of brands and consumer reaction to the published content. It was defined that measurements will be taken weakly for two months. As a comprehensive study, it attempts to explain the observed relationships between present variables. According to Menard Scott [12], in the longitudinal analysis, the variables are evaluated repeatedly over different periods, thus allowing the measurement differences or changes in each variable. The author outlines various types of longitudinal analysis, but more appropriate to the type of study, is a prospective panel in which data can be collected on two or more different periods with the same set of cases and variables in each period.

It has been identified, that market segment differ in the measured brands (table 1), therefore it was decided to make the evaluation among women market segment, because all brands have it, and most of them are the strongest in this particular market segment.

Table 2: Digital presence of the selected brands

Brand	Website	Facebook	Google+	Instagram	Twitter	Pinterest	Tumblr
Fly London	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
Lemon Jelly	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Josefinas	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dkode	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Brand	Active in Facebook since	Active in Instagram since
Dkode	May of 2010	July of 2014
Fly London	July of 2010	September of 2015
Josefinas	May of 2013	June of 2013
Lemon Jelly	March of 2013	July of 2013

Furthermore, the longitudinal study will be conducted observing chosen brands Websites, Facebook and Instagram, since all brands have presence in these digital platforms (table 2).

3. RESULTS

Fly London targets a mass market, the same as Dkode, however, according to the data collected during two months (table 3), shows different patterns when it comes to the product renewal. Fly London tends to launch new products every week, yet, Dkode, has not released any new products during the longitudinal study period, it is possible that brand production cycles and designers plans their collections and launch them twice a year, if not, the renewal of products on the brand's website is very distanced. It appears that the influence of renewing products also affects on global ranking of the brand bounce rate and daily page visitors according to the total average (table 3). Fashion brands, which have a broad target market, might accomplish a successful retailing, by incorporating accelerated product variation by constantly renewing their product ranges, their ability to deliver newness and the mass diffusion of designer fashions [13] that attract their customers into their physical and e-stores frequently. Observing Josefinas and Lemon Jelly brands that are new to the market, research shows that they are exceeding Dkode brand in terms of almost every pre-established variable.

Table 3: Website average metrics of studied brands

Average January

Brand	Women product renewal	Content update	Global ranking	Daily Page views per Visitor	Daily Time on Site	Bounce rate %
Dkode	0	0	3.315,321	5,00	1:18	19,10
Fly London	6,33	0	714,740	4,53	2:36	27,70
Josefinas	0,33	1	2.866,960	1,88	5:57	52,10
Lemon Jelly	0	0,33	1.483,320	3,25	3:24	33,05

Average February

Brand	Women product renewal	Content update	Global ranking	Daily Page views per Visitor	Daily Time on Site	Bounce rate %
Dkode	0	0,25	3.134,825	3,8	0:53	60,00
Fly London	14,75	0,50	753,044	4,65	2:26	30,63
Josefinas	0,25	1	2.160,284	2,18	4:25	38,28
Lemon Jelly	2	0,50	1.601,136	3,68	2:37	20,65

Total average

Brand	Women product renewal	Content update	Global ranking	Daily Page views per Visitor	Daily Time on Site	Bounce rate %
Dkode	0	0,13	3.225,073	4,40	1:05	39,55
Fly London	10,54	0,25	733,892	4,59	2:31	29,16
Josefinas	0,29	1	2.513,622	2,03	5:11	45,19
Lemon Jelly	1	0,42	1.542,228	3,46	3:00	26,85

When observing table 4, it can be perceived that the leaders are obviously the brands Josefinas and Lemon Jelly, managing to have a community with the highest growth within the same observed period of the other brands. One clear evidence, is that Josefinas brand demonstrates greater involvement in social network adding more content on both social networks in focus, and due to the large response to content also demonstrates that has a good targeting of the brand followers. Furthermore, the brand also has a greater response to comments and questions enlisted by their followers.

Fly London had a smaller amount of the content update in social networks, as well website, yet, the brand has potential to grow in social networks, according to the data obtained on the longitudinal research. However, it was noticed that individuals whom placed their questions and doubts about products within social network community, did not received feedback from the brand, which can bring some negativity to the brands image.

The weaker performance noted was Dkode brand, with high content update, but insignificant response on content, which can lead to some conclusions that can be related with products, content and information in messages, which the brand wants to transmit, leading to an obligation to reconsider the marketing strategy or reorganization of brands target and strategy chosen to get in touch with their targeted market.

Table 4: Facebook metrics; total sum of studied brands

January (total)

Brand	Page likes	Content update	Engagement	Shares	Post likes	Comments	Visitor posts	Responses to comments
Dkode	259	26	1017	40	991	9	1	3
Fly London	285	12	1865	50	1172	32	0	1
Josefinas	985	42	12400	368	10848	195	4	82
Lemon Jelly	2187	26	628	15	568	17	2	14

February (total)

Brand	Page likes	Content update	Engagement	Shares	Post likes	Comments	Visitor posts	Responses to comments
Dkode	387	29	694	37	584	13	1	3
Fly London	516	8	876	52	811	15	0	0
Josefinas	2742	29	5000	160	4554	71	8	40
Lemon Jelly	634	27	822	92	600	29	1	21

Aggregate (two months)

Brand	Page likes	Content update	Engagement	Shares	Post likes	Comments	Visitor posts	Responses to comments
Dkode	646	55	1711	77	1575	22	2	6
Fly London	801	20	2741	102	1983	47	0	1
Josefinas	3727	71	17400	528	15402	266	12	122
Lemon Jelly	2821	53	1450	107	1168	46	3	35

As data shows in table 5, which represents the average metrics of Instagram during two months, it is clear, that Josefinas brand have a significant difference in performance when comparing to other brands observed. Furthermore, the statistics shows that the brand also updates content more frequently than other brands. However, it seems that other brands like Dkode, Fly London and Lemon Jelly, which have a similar content update, do not have similar increase on followers, likes and comments, which indicates that placing content is not sufficient, it should happen due to some problems in global or social networks marketing strategy or even hidden as product, service or branding barriers.

Table 5: Instagram total sum metrics of studied brands

January (total)

Brand	Followers	Content update	Likes	Comments
Dkode	35	23	368	9
Fly London	263	13	886	16
Josefinas	2200	44	9265	253
Lemon Jelly	573	14	2173	34

February (total)

Brand	Followers	Content update	Likes	Comments
Dkode	287	20	393	6
Fly London	344	7	550	2
Josefinas	3000	43	12376	376
Lemon Jelly	618	16	1793	39

Aggregate (two months)

Brand	Followers	Content update	Likes	Comments
Dkode	322	43	761	15
Fly London	607	20	1436	18
Josefinas	5200	87	21641	629
Lemon Jelly	1191	30	3966	73

All of the brands showed constant growth of their community in the channels observed, either Facebook or Instagram, however, there is a major difference, while some grows faster than others, might be due to the superior proficiencies on targeted groups which brands want to connect with. Based on statistics gathered throughout two months, results show the varying levels of participation of the brands community. The level of participation of individuals in brands community also depends

on brands activity. Statistics show, that the higher the brands activity, the higher is the response from its community members. Nevertheless, some issues have been detected in some of the brands social networks, it seems that they have some difficulties communicating with their community members when they post content with their products or information, and not considering customer feedback. By observing the brands that do consider it, shows a better two-way communication and also participation levels.

4. DISCUSSION

The longitudinal study has shown some interesting patterns during two months of weekly observation of selected brands. It seems that brands which are new to market, such as Josefinas and Lemon Jelly, which both established its presence in the market in 2013, have a better performance in social media, with the rapid grown of its communities and already surpassing the established companies such as Fly London or Dkode. Furthermore, also achieving its way in global presence through their websites, getting upright statistics in daily time on site and bounce rate.

According to Mark Knickrehm *et al* [14], until now, companies that were born entirely in digital platforms ended up taking the advantage of the digital shift, realizing the capabilities of the new technology and development of new business models through it, creating domination in terms of growth, profit and high market capitalizations, where gains were invested back into new digital ecosystem. The author ensures that, nowadays, there is an opportunity for established companies to proceed with digital business models optimizing their digital investment, business leaders can be more competitive and productive and moreover, he predicts that within the next five years, the competitive landscape could be transformed and redefined with new market leaders, multidimensional industries and value of market capitalization, all driven by digital.

Brands should have a marketing strategy developed for social networks, which should be incorporated with brands global marketing strategy to maximize their efficiency and moreover to obtain more benefit generated through the digital platforms, such as insights of the market characteristics, getting important information like feedback on their products, suggestions for the improvements in products and services, and also proximity, relationship, loyalty to the brand and participation in brand's community. As Philip Evans and Thomas S. Wurther [8] suggest, every business is a business of information and through the differential usage of information or knowledge of other members of the service chain, that the company is able to make value propositions for consumers and furthermore achieve competitive advantage. Similarly, Jim Blythe [4] ensures that companies can incorporate the relationship marketing strategy in digital platforms, suggesting that companies should try to develop proximity with the customers, and the companies that make the most of their client's interests, are those who are able to maintain their competitive advantage.

Observing gathered statistics which are presented in tables 3, 4 and 5, and comparing well-established offline mass-market Fly London brand with luxury niche market as a target brand Josefinas, these two brands presented very distinct patterns of marketing strategy online, while Fly London chose to create new products frequently to the market and did not represent a lot of involvement in updating website itself or in social networks, Josefinas did brought less new products to the market in the same period of time, but with the new product placed to the market, they focused website and social media to the new product, attempting to connect the consumers and get them to know the new product, so it can be determined that mass market brands seem to bring the same marketing strategy to online market by selling the product, and niche market brands continue trying to sell experience and meaning beyond the product itself.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it seems that not every brand has the same response to what is expected, this happens because every communication approach needs its own strategy, and there is a need for a built-in strategy for social networking or digital marketing at the company's management. Since the

brand goes to digital platforms, it gets exposed globally, so its virtual image is as much important as physical one. Brands should take advantage of digital platforms, so then building communication between them and consumers are easier, faster and broader, than previous methods.

When observing website and social network content in general of the Portuguese footwear brands, it has been noticed that not all the brands understand the impact of their digital presence. As a result of this statement, it is necessary to continue investigations of fashion brands and their digital presence for the academics. Furthermore, in the future, it is necessary conducting a longer longitudinal study, as well as case studies with interviews inside analysed brands in this paper. This would help to improve understanding if these brands do have a communication and digital marketing strategies in their organization, having a department or sub-contracted outsourcing organizations to deal with its social network communication and website updates.

Afterwards, the study showed that brands new in the market have a bigger concern in developing digital marketing strategies and are trying to get proximity with their customers through digital platforms, than established companies.

Subsequently, observation and practice with the Internet offered analytics tools for content publishing, either at website, social media or gathering raw information through social network community pages, do provide a big amount of information, and most of them do not involve additional costs to the company, with daily, weekly or monthly statistics, of all published content and its performance. So, brands can get essential information without additional costs to the company, which can definitely help them understand its targeted market, building it and investing in development of the digital business models.

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