

MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVES TO BRAND STORYTELLING THROUGH VISUAL SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Social media has radically altered marketing's ecology of influence. Moreover, through the rise of visual social media platforms in recent years, marketers are facing new challenges. Adopting an exploratory approach, our study combines interviews and content analysis to explore the managerial perspectives to brand storytelling through visual content site Pinterest and to assess its potential as a strategic marketing communications tool.

INTRODUCTION

Digital and social media have changed the way fashion brands communicate with consumers and market their products (Kim and Ko, 2010, 2012; Chu, Kamal and Kim, 2013; Dhaoui, 2014; Kontu & Vecchi, 2014). Additionally, the rise of visual social media in recent years has helped to make this dialogue more appealing, inviting millions of new consumers to engage with branded content (Pew Research Center, 2012). Today, visual social media such as Pinterest, Instagram, Vimeo and Vine are extensively used by fashion companies and amongst consumers within the fashion industry (e.g. Wasserman, 2012; Arthur, 2013).

In parallel with this trend toward the visual, Pinterest is growing faster than any other website (Pew Research Center, 2012; Reuters, 2013). While Facebook still reigns supreme in the social media landscape engaging the majority of all users, research shows that consumers today are pinning just as much as they are tweeting (Pew Research Center, 2013). For marketers, Pinterest offers a prominent platform for visual brand storytelling, yet it requires a strong content strategy and integration not only across the different social media platforms, but also with the brands' overall marketing strategy.

The branding literature has long recognized the power of storytelling to provide meaning to the brand and practitioners have used storytelling to enhance consumers' connections with brands (e.g. Holt, 2002, 2004; Brown, Kozinets & Sherry, 2003; Escalas, 2004). Moreover, the emergence of social media has transformed consumers' role in storytelling from being passive listeners to being active creators and influencers (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnnicki & Wilne, 2010;

Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Yet the implications of brand storytelling through social media are largely unknown and there is a lack of applied research in this field. Adopting an exploratory approach, the study combines interviews and content analysis to explore the managerial perspectives to brand storytelling through visual content site Pinterest and assess its potential as a strategic marketing communications tool.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Fashion as such as visual art, lends itself well to visual social media. However as Fournier and Avery (2011) note, brands are facing new challenges, as they struggle to break through the clutter in social media to be heard, or in this case seen. While creative content is key, it is crucial that brand messages have the right balance between storytelling and commerce. As a visual content sharing site Pinterest offers a powerful tool for brand storytelling, yet its strong product focus presents a unique opportunity to push product and consequently drive sales.

The study aims to give initial academic understanding of the potential of this visually driven platform as a strategic marketing domain and calls for further academic research into the changing practices in digital fashion marketing. The findings demonstrate both practically and strategically how visual social media such as Pinterest can be used in brand storytelling, and presents specific critical success factors for sustainable consumer engagement in the new image driven environment.

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