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## **Determinants of the characteristics of online brand communities and millennials: Towards a re-conceptualisation**

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Key words: online brand community, millennials, qualitative research, social influence theory, fashion industry

Description: This paper provides a conceptual framework that links a holistic set of online brand characteristics to millennial consumers' perceptions in the fashion sector and how millennial consumers involvement and participation in online brand communities impacts the development of customer engagement strategies in the fashion industry.

### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

#### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The popularity of online brand communities, and why they are so prominent today, can be attributed to the active role of the millennial generation. Online communities have evolved to allow larger numbers of individuals to interact with other users to form a collective virtual environment influenced by members within the community. Unlike other competing epistemologies, the authors developed a conceptual framework that links a holistic set of online brand characteristics (brand sentiment, identification with source, affirmative experience, conspicuous effect) to consumer perceptions in the fashion sector. The theoretical framework contributes to online brand community literature by advancing knowledge about levels of customer involvement and participation in social media platforms. We empirically demonstrate that customer engagement in social media platforms is not merely a stable individual construct, but is a dynamic driven process based on individual levels of involvement. Further, our study

extends online brand community theory by incorporating the often-overlooked perspective of social influence. Specifically, we demonstrate the importance of the level of individual involvement and participation that could potentially have an impact on the development of customer engagement strategies in the fashion industry.

## **METHOD AND DATA**

A constructivist research paradigm combined with inductive and embedded case study strategy is applied. In contrast to the positivist idea of a single reality, constructivist ontology considers that multiple realities exist in relation to subjective conceptualisations of epistemological interactions (Ozuem, Patel, Howell, & Lancaster, 2017). In this paper, the key factor linked to online brand communities is social influence. Of particular interest is how this attracts participants to the online domains within the fashion industry, and what motivates them to remain. Individuals develop varying understandings after experiencing diverse situations. Social constructivist studies are expected to generate different social realities as specific research questions require investigators to find specific answers. The authors ensured that participants were selected whose experiences and knowledge could be closely linked to the topic. Indeed, this study draws on theoretical and purposeful sampling to guide data collection. Participants within the sample had to be individuals from the millennial generation with the highest social media usage. Their ages ranged between 18 and 39 years, and individuals who were active users of social media who had been influenced by social media on brands linked to the fashion industry were selected. A total of 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process of thematic analysis for psychology, from which codes were allocated themes based on emergent meanings, supported with the participants' own words and other theoretical literature.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Observers perceived consumer publishing information to be either speculative or to be justified by motives based on positive or negative brand sentiment influences. These were categorised as: judgmentalists, bias situators, rationalisers and sugar-coaters. The types of conversations online users encounter and their perceptions towards those conversations were used to identify these distinct types of influencers who shape different brand sentiments. The manner in which they link online conversations to their own final decisions was also seen as relevant. Judgmentalists and sugar-coater influencers are more aligned with the speculative-thinking category. These individuals are often associated with a more passive experience with a brand as they often publish information that is perceived too vague to justify. Judgmentalists may appear to be too critical of the brand, whereas sugar-coaters may highly praise a brand, making these two groups contradictory. Regardless of positive or negative active experience, these types of millennial influencers follow their own 'feelings' and identify with others that appear similar. Rationalisers and bias situators associate more with active experience as they often identify a real-time event or outcome related to the brand, which makes them appear more justified in their information and thinking. Bias situators, with either a positive or negative experience base their judgement on such experiences in identifying with source and brand sentiments. Rationalisers with low experience are open to discussions linked to brand sentiment to rationalise their decisions. Regardless of whether these groups individually are involved in the community, conversations tend not to emerge if they do not exist without the other.

## **STATEMENT OF KEY CONTRIBUTIONS**

We believe that our findings contribute to our understanding of millennials' characteristics and participation in online brand communities. Our results reveal a set of practical insights that brand managers and companies can employ to take maximum advantage of consumer participation and interactions in online brand communities. The paper conveys an important set of four key customer types: judgmentalists, sugar-coaters, bias situators and rationalisers. In examining the link between millennial participation and online brand communities, we add to a theoretical understanding of social influence by viewing millennials from a theoretical perspective that integrates constructivist and social influence theories. The task of managing social influence involves identifying the amount of community involvement individuals will contribute or accept in their decision making; and determining the level of conspicuous conversation in terms of how online conversations impact on consumer perceptions and involvement in online communities (Shim & Koh, 1997). Individuals who are self-focused are more likely to be resistant to persuasion and standard norms. These individuals behave according to their central values. High self-focus is likely to be associated with judgmentalists and sugar-coaters who are expected to implement a feeling based strategy, which is more automatic (Zajonc, 1980), as well as more interpersonal and intrapersonal between members (Lee, Amir, & Ariely, 2009). High self-focus is less on numerical approach.

**References are available on request**