This paper is from the BAM2013 Conference Proceedings

About BAM

The British Academy of Management (BAM) is a learned society dedicated to developing the community of management academics. To find out more about BAM, please visit our website at http://www.bam.ac.uk/
Motives towards mixed and integrated use of social media - An exploratory case study of ASOS “Marketplace”.

Summary
The need for integration across social media platforms is driven by a need for consistency of brand identity and tone of voice and the concept that a singular message is more likely to be interpreted effectively and efficiently than multiple messages. However, recent research suggests that content should not be duplicated across platforms as this can potentially alienate customers. The development of an integrated strategy across social media channels is open for debate as a result of this dichotomy and this forms the rationale for study. The research involved a single exploratory case study of ASOS collaborative selling platform (the Marketplace). The research was conducted through observational netnography, document analysis and semi-structure interviews with the aim to explore the motives towards a mixed and integrated use of social media from an industry and practitioners perspective.

Submission type: developmental (discussion) paper

Proposed track: marketing and retail

Keywords: social media, fashion e-tailing, netnography, online fashion

Word count: 2005
**Introduction: motives towards mixed and integrated use of social media**

In order to discuss the motives towards the need for an integrated use of social media it is first necessary to outline six key general reasons that fashion brands engage with social media. The primary reason is *reach*, social media has the ability to connect a large number of people instantly with no geographical barriers (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The second is related to *cost*, social media is due to its viral and digital nature free to send, however the investment required in content creation, strategy and training can be underestimated (Keynote Report, 2012; WGSN, 2013). The third is *engagement* and *dialogue*, social media offers a two way platform to listen and converse with stakeholders, this differentiates it from traditional marketing communication tools and provides added value for brands to react to feedback (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011). Fourthly social media has the capacity to generate sales through creating awareness and building sentiment and relationships. The fifth reason is that social media can be used for *market research* as competitor analysis and segmentation and targeting can be undertaken relatively quickly and cheaply (Mashable, 2010; Keynote Report, 2012). Lastly, social media is an important tool for fashion brands because of the flexibility of content it offers from text, to image and video (Wasserman, 2012). This has become particularly pertinent as market research and trend forecasters state that consumers do not read anymore and that the future of marketing and branding is through moving image (WGSN, 2013). A fact that is also evident in the huge growth of visual social media platforms like Instagram, Pinterest and Vimeo.

It can be stated that it is accepted that social media can perform many functions for fashion brands and the next aspect of motivation is in respect to the use of multiple platforms and the need for integration across them. Research shows that consumers engage with a variety of social networks for different purposes, and that each platform has a unique user profile and characteristics (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Furthermore each platform has its own strengths and weaknesses and trends in terms of usage. To this end it is useful for fashion brands to have a presence across a variety of platforms in order to maximise the strengths and minimise the weaknesses and to account for peaks and troughs of usage.

The need for integration across platforms is driven by a need for consistency of brand identity and tone of voice and the concept that a singular message is more likely to be interpreted effectively and efficiently then multiple messages. That being said recent commentary from Drapers (2013) suggests that content should not be duplicated across platforms as this can detract consumers and send a message not to return as there is no reason to find different or exclusive content. The development of an integrated strategy across social media channels is open for debate as a result of this dichotomy and this forms the rationale for research. In particular, this study aims to assess whether an integrated social media strategy is needed by exploring the views of brand managers, marketing managers and social media strategists and by reviewing multiple documentary sources.
The Social Media Landscape

The importance of social media is evident as millions of people utilise it to connect with others, share content and discuss different topics (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011). Moreover, consumers today are intensely engaged with brands, publicly promoting or assailing the products, thus collaborating in brands’ development and challenging and shaping their meanings (Edelman, 2010). These developments and customer indifference to traditional marketing tools force firms across industries to seek new opportunities; the desire is that marketing messages not only capture customers’ attention, but also engage them with the company (Singh et al., 2008).

Social media is arguably an effective channel to achieve this aim, yet it requires careful management and integration across the platforms. There currently exists a rich and diverse ecology of social media sites, which vary in scope and functionality (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Despite the increasing interest in and usage of social media, the establishment of systematic categorisation schemes for different social media applications is in its infancy. Furthermore, as new sites appear every day and are replacing some of the existing platforms, it is important that any classification or framework is flexible and takes growth into account, such as new applications that may be forthcoming.

This paper defines social media as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and sharing of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010 and 2011; Kietzmann et al., 2011). Moreover, the focus is on integration across the distinct social media channels. Within this general definition, there are various types of social media that need further differentiation. One of the only existing classification schemes of social media is by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). To create a classification scheme, and to do so in a systematic manner, they rely on a set of theories within the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure), and present six different types of social media: collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (e.g., Twitter), content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life). Technologies within these platforms include blogs, picture sharing, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music sharing, crowdsourcing and others (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

The present study uses a subset of the classification scheme derived from the categories introduced by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), focusing on three major groups: social networking sites (Facebook and Google+), blogs and microblogs (Twitter) and content sharing sites. The last group is particularly focusing on the social photo and video sharing sites such as Youtube, Instagram, Pinterest, Vimeo and Vine, which are extensively used by fashion companies and amongst consumers within the fashion industry (Wasserman, 2013; Arthur, 2013). Within these categories, ASOS has a strong social media presence that involves over 2.3 million likes on Facebook, 1.4 million followers on Google+, 450,000 followers on Twitter, 27,000 followers on Pinterest and 550,000 followers on Instagram.
ASOS Marketplace

Established in June 2000, ASOS.com is the UK’s largest independent online only global fashion retailer that is aimed at the fashion forward twenty-something consumer. As a pioneer of online fashion retail they attract over 17.5 million unique visitors a month and as of March 2012 had active customers from over 160 countries (ASOS Annual Report, 2012).

Described as “the poster child of UK online retailing” (Retail Week 2011), ASOS has an all encompassing social media presence.

As a market leader based on levels of engagement and social volume, ASOS has been voted in the top ten for the Top Twenty Social Brands of 2012 (Keynote Report, 2012).

Responsible for the launch of the first fully integrated Facebook store in Europe, ASOS takes advantage of social media platforms to build brand awareness, engage with consumers and drive traffic to their e-commerce site. Building on their target demographic as technologically capable but time-poor, ASOS emphasise a community feel through their varied platforms and campaigns. With a presence that involves over 2.3 million likes on Facebook, 450,000 followers on Twitter, 27,000 followers on Pinterest and just under 550,000 followers on Instagram, ASOS has established itself as a social media powerhouse.

The virtual Marketplace - marketplace.asos.com - launched in 2010 based on the premise that it was: “The place where anyone, anywhere in the world, can sell fashion, to anyone, anywhere in the world” (ASOS.com). Designed to function as a “fashion democracy” (PR Newswire UK, 2011), the Marketplace is a digital platform that enables boutiques, established or new to the market, to set up a virtual store with their own customisable identity. The site showcases the contemporary vintage industry, along with start-ups and individual designers. The site is heavily image driven, as sellers are encouraged to create their virtual market stall to showcase their own brand personality. The site encourages ‘real’ photography and street style editing of looks. Unlike platforms such eBay, the Marketplace is not an online auction, prices are set for the items. Operating on a feedback system where sellers are rated, consumers can follow individual sellers and boutiques so that they are notified when new items are listed.

By the end of 2011 it was reported that Marketplace sales had grown by 690% (econsultancy.com 2011). The virtual Marketplace has grown exponentially with just under 600 sellers in late 2012 (Drapers Online 2012). The original business model featured UK based boutiques and individual sellers only however after the first six months of trading and due to the success of international sales and interest, this was opened up to international sellers as well.

The strong brand association from the main ASOS site has been important for the Marketplace’s success but from the start the site has utilised social media as an important tool. With a strong integrated communications strategy, the platform combines a dedicated space for blogs for the boutiques, a People's Runway style archive and a Twitter fashion feed to update consumers. As a collaborative venture, rather than promoting one single store, the Marketplace content has an editorial feel placed within a user generated content environment.
Methodology

Research Design: single exploratory case study
In this research study, a single exploratory case study approach comprising multiple data collection methods was adopted as the primary strategy of enquiry. This approach was considered the most appropriate in light of the unique business model operated by the ASOS Marketplace. The combination of “multiple sources of evidence”, which characterises the case study design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2004), allowed for an in-depth investigation of the ASOS collaborative selling platform (the Marketplace) from multiple perspectives. A similar approach was adopted by Cova and Pace (2006) in their investigation of the “my Nutella” brand community. The authors selected the Ferrero group’s experience with the successful “my Nutella” community with the aim of contributing towards the Customer Empowerment Theory (Wathieu et al., 2002). In line with the approach proposed by Dubois and Gadde (2002), Cova and Pace introduced a series of heterogeneous data collection methods. These were used to identify the overall brand strategy for Nutella developed by Ferrero, the characteristics of the “my Nutella” community website and the characteristics, behaviour and reactions of Nutella consumers.

Data collection procedures
In this research study data was collected simultaneously using multiple methods following a “concurrent-embedded strategy” (Creswell, 2009). These methods comprised observational netnography and document analysis (Kozinets, 2002; Cova and Pace, 2006; Ertimur and Gilly, 2012) and semi-structured interviews. Creswell (2009) recommends this approach instead of the more classical triangulation when one method is embedded in the other with the intent of answering a partially different research question (i.e. a secondary question). In the concurrent-embedded strategy, all of the data collected simultaneously reside in the single case study as “separate pictures that provide an overall composite assessment of the problem” (Creswell, 2009). This approach is advisable when a study addresses a complex and partially unexplored issue and when researchers aim to “gain perspectives from different types of data and different levels of analysis within a single study” (Creswell, 2009).

Unlike conventional netnography (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets et. Al., 2011) this study used a purely observational approach without any participation to the social networks and communities being investigated (Cova and Pace, 2006; Ertimur and Gilly, 2011). Documents in the form of virtual text and images were collected from ASOS Marketplace accounts on three popular social media platforms - Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest. This approach was particularly useful in analysing how the ASOS Marketplace communicated through diverse social media platforms and to assess the similarities and differences of the content published on such platforms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ASOS Marketplace managers to assess the effectiveness of diverse social media as communication channels. The interview approach was also crucial in exploring the integration of the various platforms.

By using these combined procedures within a single case study design it was possible to gain an in-depth understanding of the motives and methods of a mixed and integrated approach to social media communication.
References


