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How to communicate a new fashion brand through social media and public relations' perspective.

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Abstract. Fashion communication has been undergoing a transformation and there is a drop in traditional marketing investments which indicates new modalities of brand's communication. The purpose of this study is to discuss the branding strategy relevance through social media and public relations' perspective, aiming to understand how digital marketing platforms have been used and integrated by new fashion brands. This paper presents an ongoing Master's research including data collection method through a qualitative content analysis, aiming to find some features can contributed to improve their market position.

1. Introduction

The fashion industry is highly competitive and there is a retail tendency of mergers and acquisitions by large companies. In recent years, the transition from a mass market to a niche-segmented market forced companies to know their target audiences, track their behaviours, understand their tastes and desires, and also seek for the best way to deliver customized services and products [1].

Nowadays, brands are facing serious challenges and it is even more difficult to consolidate a new brand in the market. Fashion communication has been undergoing a transformation, there is a decrease in traditional marketing investments which indicates new modalities of brand's communication [1]. There is no doubt that the digital methods need to be incorporated into the marketing strategy of a fashion brand to achieve both sales and recognition results. Unlimited internet access, fast transmission, content flexibility and low-cost consumer mobility point toward a new era for companies that want to increase their brand and drive sales. [2]

In addition to the new investments in interactivity and connectivity, we can also observe an increasing search for strategies that value the continuous relationship between brands and consumers. According to Cietta [3], Italian fast fashion companies are innovating in communication, putting the brand in evidence and giving more visibility through unusual ways of approaching consumers. Instead of publishing campaigns in magazines and newspapers, they choose to invest in public relations and do some events in fashion spots and nightclubs, for example. Therefore, brands and consumers can communicate with each other without any restriction of time and place. As a result, the traditional process of one-way communication changes to a two-way communication in a scenario where brands can benefit their exposure to fortify relationships with their customers and, consequently, increase their sales [4].

This research discusses the branding strategy relevance through social media and public relations' perspective in order to understand how new digital marketing platforms have been used and integrated by fashion industry professionals. These practices have already been adopted and used by many companies as sources for gathering relevant information, establishing brand awareness and creating



relationships with their prospective customers. On top of that, influencing a huge number of individual acceptance and the usage of products and services, with minimal effort attempts required to influence them [5]. Kim A. and Ko E. [6] said that even luxury brands have resorted to using digital platforms to survive, increasing competition within the market.

Carvalho [7] believes that consumers like brands for what they represent. The more meaningful is a brand, stronger and more inspiring it will be. Building a fashion brand is similar than building a meaning. Hence, to create a new fashion brand, it is necessary first to create its identity. Brands with a stronger meaning are more easily differentiated in the market, consequently, it will result in a greater growth potential than brands which differ only by the products characteristics. Brand identity is what brands transmit to the consumers, which provide them to understand the essence and expression of a brand. [8].

Talking about public relations investments, Tungate [9] pointed out that celebrity sells and gives brands a well-defined personality for a minimum of effort. Golshorkhi, mentioned at Tungate [9], believes that the connection between fashion brands and the media is based on relationships where fashion PR professionals are always working to stimulate friendships with journalists.

2. Research Methodology

For this investigation, a qualitative methodology was chosen more appropriate as the researchers are investigating a small sample. Mark Saunders *et al* [9] stated that the classification of the types of study that are most used in research methods are exploratory, descriptive and explanatory, however each of the embodiments may have more than one purpose.

Qualitative data include texts as well as images, movies, audio-recordings, cultural artefacts, and more. It is an analysis more interpretive instead of statistical. The goal of qualitative research is to find correlations and create casual models that can be generalized [10]. A case study is an important research strategy when the researcher wants to comprehend the complex social phenomenon and allows him to focus on a case and maintain a holistic perspective [11].

In the scope of this study, the question to be analysed is the attempt to understand the factors of differentiation in the launch of new fashion brands. Then, the focus of the research is to collect data and observe the branding and communication strategies that were relevant to positioning of three fashion brands recently launched in the Portuguese market.

The participant observation, where the researcher interacts with the study object, causes the same to be identified with the brand culture, making the research process highly valued, due to the permanence and an in-depth knowledge of it [12].

The expected results in these case studies include some answers to relevant questions: which is the best way to position a new brand in the market, how is the impact of branding on consumer behaviour, how social networks could be used as a fashion communication channel, how social media guidelines can be used to increase global recognition of the brands, how the public relations strategy, bloggers and celebrities can influence consumers, among others. The non-probability sample technique selected as most appropriate for this study was the purposive sampling. According to Saunders *et al* [10], the purposive or judgemental sampling enables us to use our judgement to select cases that will best enable to answer the research questions and to meet the objectives. This form of sample is often used when working with very small samples such as in case study research.

In order to achieve this purpose, we first will do a literature review, second a case study with data collection method, qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews, and finally cross the information about the three brands aiming to find some features that contributed to their brand position. The semi-structured interview commences with a set of interview themes but is prepared to vary the order in which questions are asked and to ask new questions in the context of the research situation [9].

3. Case Studies and Discussion

This research focused on data collecting from available information on brand's websites and their social networks. The remaining information will subsequently be obtained throughout the research process over interviews with brand's Marketing Managers.

Considering the topic and objectives proposed, a search for new Portuguese fashion brands was made in digital press such as magazines, newspapers, online blogs, social networks and fashion & lifestyle bloggers. After a brief observation of thirty new fashion brands, eight brands were chosen for sample analysis (Table 1).

Table 1: Brands General Information for Sample Analysis (update on August 15th 2018)

<i>Brand Name</i>	<i>Founded</i>	<i>Brand Concept</i>	<i>Facebook Followers</i>	<i>Instagram Followers</i>	<i>Press Interest</i>	<i>Blogger Interest</i>	<i>Relevance Research</i>
<i>Cinco Store</i>	2014	Independent design, minimalist	18.758	66.100	Low	High	Poor
<i>Isto</i>	2017	Independence, transparency, organic, ethical	2.613	4.780	High	Moderate	Excelent
<i>Kaoa Shop</i>	2013	Well designed products, finest clothing	113.399	257.000	Low	Moderate	Poor
<i>Misci</i>	2017	Luxury in tradition, handmade details, ethical	12.488	1.604	High	Low	Somewhat
<i>Naz</i>	2017	Sustainable, minimalist, conscious, democratic	5.699	4.313	High	Low	Somewhat
<i>Perff Studio</i>	2017	Seasonless, inovation, functional fashion, confident	2.292	2.612	High	Moderate	Excelent
<i>Sienna</i>	2016	Passion, proudly made in Portugal, clothes to live	8.490	14.700	Moderate	High	Excelent
<i>Imauve</i>	2016	Practical, sophisticated minimalism, essential pieces	2.778	2.430	High	Low	Somewhat

These brands went through a direct observation analysis regarding the relevance of the brand concept, website and online store, social networks, press interest in the brand and endorsement by bloggers.

Therefore, the choice of this small sample was based on the purposive sampling using the self-judgment and also the criteria mentioned above. After this analysis, three brands were evaluated as excellent by the researchers, so Isto, Perff Studio and Sienna were selected to be the case studies of this research. It was decided to choose brands from different segments, with a high press and bloggers interested, founded after 2016, with a different brand concept, concerned about the digital brand communication (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Brand’s Visual Communication – Instagram Data Collection
 Source: <https://www.instagram.com/siennainspo>, <https://www.instagram.com/isto.pt>,
<https://www.instagram.com/perffstudio>

3.1. Sienna

Sienna was born and raised between two dressmakers and it is proudly made in Portugal. The brand segment is casual women wear with a design minimalist and very feminine.

Sienna has online store and it is present in the social networks Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest, but the last one will not be collected in this research. On Instagram, they usually share inspire and lifestyle content, as show in figure 1. The brand is only 2 years old, however is always be mentioned in the most important Portuguese websites and blogs about fashion and lifestyle. In addition, a lot of Portuguese bloggers love the brand and they are addict on their products. We can frequently find inspire pictures on the fashionists Instagram’s account. According with some of these bloggers, Sienna is one of the most fashionable Portuguese casual brand.

As mentioned in websites and Portuguese digital magazines, the success of Sienna comes from the acceptance of the bloggers, so this type of investments in public relations was extremely important to its grown.

3.2. Isto.

Isto is an organic men’s brand which was born to prove that premium menswear can be awesome, affordable and timeless. It is also a platform for communication through its own digital magazine aiming to be a community of consumers whose feedback is the ultimate reward and driving force.

The naming Isto means “this” in Portuguese and stands for the brand concept: independent, superb, transparent and organic. Actually is a new way of looking at fashion. And it is exactly this point of view which probably fascinated the press. Because nowadays the brands which are ethical, concerned about people, industry transparency and mainly who wants to make the difference in the world are really important to the media.

Isto has an online store and social networks Facebook e Instagram. The brand is freshly launched, but we can already see relationships with bloggers and digital influencers. Its content is more transparent and simple, where can be find bloggers wearing the brand, lookbook and also pictures inside the office and industry.

3.3. *Perff Studio*

Perff Studio was born from high fashion and technical innovation. The brand position is athleisure wear, which represents a new movement in the sports and fashion sector that benefits people's lives from mental wellbeing to everyday living in stylish comfort. Perff is a contemporary fusion of hybrid performance fashion which enables people who enjoy working out and love the comfort and benefits of sportswear.

The differentiated brand concept and the high investments in communication allowed them to conquer the press interest. In the last one and a half year, they got digital reports in great Portuguese websites. The brand has some connections with influencers and sometimes send special gifts for bloggers, in order to increase the brand awareness and the followers. In the recent months, they started a relationship with a press agency aiming to contribute to better impact the press. They did a press day where fashion opinion makers attended and got to know this new Portuguese brand.

Perff has online store and it is present in the social networks Facebook and Instagram where they perfectly show the brand concept through creative images and great content, how can be seen on the figure 1.

3.4. *Discussion*

Due to the small sample and by reason of the investigation is still in progress, no final conclusions can be drawn by now. Besides, it was possible to perceive that findings point to a possible influence from social media networks and public relations investments to enhance the brand equity and brand awareness.

As previous literature discussed, new marketing strategies offer can establish loyal customer relationships with a new brand and affect consumers' individual perceptions of the product, pictures, videos, etc. Furthermore, as seen in the data collection, activity in social media increases brand exposure and brand awareness, and therefore influences brand equity. Additionally, investing in public relations strategies can also contribute to increase the level of brand awareness and improve the communication with customers, ensuring more reliability through the digital influencers. This discussion section will further discuss the results found in the course of the case studies investigation.

4. **Preliminary Conclusions**

New fashion brands have to deal with mature markets, strong competitors, high market share, established and notorious brands and to generate brand awareness in potential markets. On the other hand, there are always market opportunities in some niche markets, further to innovative and differentiated products or quality services, even if the brand is new.

Keeping in mind that the transition from a mass market to a segmented market contributed to change the consumer's habits, it is important to emphasize that we – as fashion communication researchers – need to constantly study how to achieve an effective brand strategy to surprise this consumer, if we want to build a successful and valuable brand.

This paper describes part of an ongoing Master's Thesis research study aiming to contribute to the subject of Branding and Fashion Consumers. What we can conclude by now is that the consumers are using even more new digital channels to interact with their love brands, so the social networks and digital public relations are quite important to a new fashion brand.

Although there were certain limitations considering it is still an ongoing research, what it is intend to achieve at the end of this investigation:

- To identify the newest trends in fashion communication;
- To comprehend the strategies used by brands to impact the consumer in the digital environment, especially on social networks Facebook and Instagram;
- To analyse the impact of bloggers and influencers on accepting a new brand;
- To realize if a differentiated brand concept has a competitive advantage in market positioning;
- To understand if there is a link between the information gathered in different brands in order to identify similarities in the strategies used that contribute to the brand success.

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