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**ETHICAL BRAND BUILDING AND THE COLLABORATIVE FASHION BRAND: FLYING THE FLAG FOR SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP- TOMS A CASE STUDY**

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**ABSTRACT**

***‘Giving is good business’* Blake Mycoskie, Founder and Chief Shoe Giver TOMS, 2012.**

Using a qualitative case study of TOMS the One-for-One fashion brand, this paper asks how companies and brands communicate ethical and socially responsible values in order to add value for themselves, and also towards consumers and society. This case study traces the development of the TOMS brand and analyses its key strategies of social entrepreneurship and storytelling. The case study is situated within a wider exploration of the current fashion retail landscape, focusing on CSR and sustainability. Whilst the reporting of ethical product consumption demonstrates that consumers are acting positively towards ethical products, little research has been conducted about the different levels of commitment that fashion retailers or producers take to sustainability and ethical aspects of their business.

The modern consumer mediates brand identities through personal experience and beliefs (Randall, 2000; Solomon and Rabolt, 2004). New demands and concerns about how fashion is produced and its impact on society and the environment have begun to lead a shift in the industry. Research evidence shows that a majority of UK consumers positively select or reject products and services on the basis of a company’s reputation for social responsibility. This focus on ethical values and corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a key strategic challenge for companies’ business and reputation (Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006). The emergence of the ethically conscious consumer means consumers increasingly expect retailers to behave in a socially responsible manner, undertaking societally beneficial activities and acting above and beyond their legal obligations (Varley & Rafiz, 2014). Brands understand that being socially responsible can improve their image among consumers and partners (Easey, 2009; Pine II and Gilmore, 2011) and this can be an added value to the brand. In adopting socially responsible practices brands deliberately seek to influence consumers’ purchasing decisions and encourage them to engage with the value co-creation process (Ranchhod and Gurau, 2007).

The increase in awareness of the ethical and environmental impact of the fashion industry has influenced the fashion business model and fostered a new brand category- that of the collaborative brand, one which builds a community of consumers and invites them to support its participation in social entrepreneurship; bringing societal issues in from the periphery to the core and harnessing ‘the power of business to bring about social and environmental change’ (Social Enterprise UK, 2012). Developments in social media make it easier for consumers to evidence traceability and transparency in fashion business operations and to spread the story- good or bad.

Consumers are increasingly interested in brand stories (Canon, 2010), and the dynamic relationship between brands and consumers is of growing importance to the analysis of the brand experience, with consumers increasingly seeking full immersion in unique contexts and experiences which confirm the meanings, cultures, symbols and identities behind their chosen brands. The symbolic associations formed through positive association with a brand facilitate fashion consumer group membership as brand loyalty acts as a way of identification (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011). Digital media has also facilitated the formation of brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001); the 21st century fashion landscape is populated by remotely situated consumer groups linked through common interests and beliefs (De Valck et al., 2009).

Founded in 2006, TOMS has positioned itself as a socially responsible company with giving at its core. Charitable collaborations are fundamental to its business model and brand storytelling is fundamental to its marketing operations. TOMS initiated its One-for-One giving model initially through its footwear offer; donating one pair of shoes for each pair bought, and has added other product categories to further expand this model. In the absence of high profile advertising campaigns TOMS relies on its community of consumers and ‘fans’ to spread the word of its fashion philanthropy through its in-store community message-boards, at creative charitable events and via its website. Thus TOMS is differentiated and derives brand value through its ethical and sustainable practices, collaborations and co-creations- community-building both with its global network of giving partners and those who receive its charity, but also with its brand community who engage with the brand by driving the brand storytelling and sharing this through social media.

In carrying out the research for this paper, a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals from the TOMS brand that facilitated a deep understanding of the values TOMS intends to promote and share with their community of consumers. In addition to the interviews content analysis of the brand’s website and other promotional materials was also undertaken. Primary field research visits were carried out at both the US flagship TOMS store and the UK pop-up store.

**Keywords**: Brand communities, brand value, collaboration, Consumer behaviour, CSR, ethics, Marketing strategy,Social entrepreneurship, Sustainability