

Title	Domains of Influence: Exploring Negative Sentiment in Social Media
Type	Article
URL	https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/14628/
Date	2019
Citation	Cooper, Tony and Stavros, Constantino and Dobeles, Angela (2019) Domains of Influence: Exploring Negative Sentiment in Social Media. Journal of Product and Brand Management. ISSN 1061-0421
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Accepted 21-10-18

Domains of Influence: Exploring negative sentiment in social media

Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this research was to empirically examine the manner in which companies mitigate negative sentiment in social media and to map the forces that may lead to pre-emptive strategies.

Design/methodology/approach: Case studies were drawn from the retail fashion industry using data collected from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with practitioners and a netnographic examination of company artefacts and social media conversations.

Findings: The findings identify five principal domains of influence upon which the firms based their approach to social media negativity. We suggest that these domains can be fundamentally categorised as either relational domains built on human exchanges, or transformational domains rooted in less tangible elements of corporate culture and operational practices that can have a significant impact upon a brand's socially mediated exchanges.

Practical implications: The research provides guidance based on empirical observation of effective strategies utilised by firms, emphasising robust systems integration, a holistic management ethos and leveraging of third-party alliances.

Originality/value: Bringing together disparate cross-disciplinary elements, the research contributes to knowledge by highlighting opportunities for the development of a proactive rather than reactive approach to online brand negativity and deepens understanding of applied brand management techniques adopted to address negative social media encounters. We provide a series of contemporary and empirically grounded recommendations for practitioners that offer substantive insights.

Keywords: Negative brand sentiment, Social media, Brand communication

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

Consumers are increasingly turning to social media to express their opinions of brands (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). As consumer–brand interaction is no longer defined purely by purchase or consumption (Quinton, 2013), companies are now vulnerable to negative sentiment delivered via these channels, regardless of whether or not they choose to participate in these platforms. Such networks provide consumers with the capacity to elevate issues of discontent, often with profound consequences for consumer–brand relationships and, by extension, brand management. Consumer reactions range in their manifestation from benign complaining or brand switching behaviour through to extreme forms such as organised anti-brand communities and collaborative attack (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010; Rauschnabel et al., 2016).

The realignment of the conceptualisation of consumer engagement generated by the advent of social media reflects a loss of control for firms and the greater empowerment of consumers (Quinton, 2013). These media offer aggrieved customers speed, convenience, visibility, permanence, reach and influence in expressing their admonishment of firms; and companies ignore this feedback at their peril (Wolny and Mueller, 2013). Understanding how firms cope with this complex and dynamic network is increasingly important as greater proportions of marketing communications budgets are being shifted from mass media channels to networked-based social media platforms (Morrison, 2015). Further, some consumer facing industries that were previously unable to access broadcast media due to cost, scale or reach are adopting social media as a principal conduit to meaningful consumer–brand relationships based on interactive bidirectional engagement (Burton and Espiner, 2017).

In opening their channels to consumer interaction, organisations seeking deeper engagement via the infiltration of their customers’ social networks must weigh the risks and rewards associated with such a strategy. Disputes are inevitable in a context of increased

interconnection between consumers and brands (Aaker et al., 2004), as negative brand sentiment expressed through social media has become part of the implicit contract of networked cyber communications. However, because one negative comment on social media can have devastating consequences for brands, it is necessary that firms develop and implement effective pre-emptive management strategies – accepting that prevention is better than cure. Brands in retail fashion – the context of this study – are particularly vulnerable as the sector is fast paced and highly susceptible to social influence, such that product lifecycles are short and product acceptance is inseparable from brand success.

An examination of the extant literature on socially mediated exchange reveals deficiencies requiring researcher attention. First, little research relates specifically to *company* approaches to addressing negative social media sentiment. What we know has been improvised from disparate concepts originating in multiple disciplines which frequently rely on seminal theory that predates social media. We argue that such an approach lacks nuance and is ill fitting for a fast-moving retail context, such as fashion. Second, the extant research largely approaches negative brand sentiment ‘post eventum’; in other words, predominantly from the point of view that backlash is a reaction to a crisis or failure of some type. For example, the public relations literature frequently outlines how to use social media when dealing with a crisis or combatting activism (Coombs, 2014; Rauschnabel et al., 2016) as opposed to focusing on how to pre-empt such events, and often borrows paradigms developed for the offline environment. Little attention has been paid to how firms mitigate negative brand sentiment, where mitigation is defined as the alleviation of the impact of such sentiment; and seldom is this the central focus of investigation. Third, with few exceptions, the current literature examines negative brand behaviours from the consumer perspective, demonstrating little understanding of how firms should respond. Hence, advice for practitioners regarding pre-emptive strategies that support the management of brand

negativity is largely limited to speculative and adapted recommendations drawn from offline environments published in industry-orientated publications. One exception is the recent examination by Stevens et al. (2018) of the management of online consumer complaints, which, while valuable, only explores one manifestation on a spectrum of consumer negativity.

The aim of this research is to examine, from a corporate perspective, the various ways that companies mitigate negative sentiment in social media to understand appropriate strategies for dealing with potentially brand damaging situations in these contexts. Drawing on disparate cross-disciplinary concepts, the research contributes to our knowledge by highlighting opportunities for the development of a proactive rather than reactive approach to online brand negativity. This study deepens our understanding of brand management techniques applied in response to negative social media encounters, about which few empirical insights currently exist, thus representing an important step towards theory building.

Data is drawn from interviews with leading social media practitioners from the retail fashion industry, a rich practice environment at the forefront of digital marketing, to understand existing managerial systems. We combine the insights captured from the interviews with a netnographic examination of corporate artefacts to elicit a set of themes. The outcomes are then compared against managerial recommendations contained in the key extant literature to develop a number of empirically grounded recommendations for practitioners based on substantive insights.

The article proceeds as follows: next we explore important concepts relating to consumer negativity towards brands with a review of the key literature from a range of disciplines to provide the conceptual context for the current study. The research design is then outlined, including sample selection, data collection and analysis methods. We then

present the findings from the research, including our empirically based classification of management behaviours and a path to practice for brand managers. We conclude the paper by considering opportunities for future research to extend the exploration of this nascent field.

Background and Literature Review

Research into negative brand sentiment

The construct used to describe the phenomenon of negativity towards brands has been conceptualised within multiple disciplines and from diverse perspectives, reflecting its pervasive impact on multiple stakeholders including consumers, employees and society more broadly. Table 1 summarises the primary orientations explored in the extant literature.

Noteworthy here is the substantial overlap in some areas of investigation and the pre-social media age of theory in some disciplines. The marketing literature relating to brand negativity has a strong consumer focus and may be summarised as generally taking a services perspective examining complaining (Davidow, 2003; Stevens et al., 2018); a consumer behaviour focus exploring customer rage, deviance and retaliation (Champoux et al., 2012); or a brand management view looking at anti-branding and brand hate (Zarantonello et al., 2016). Research from the public relations domain is largely dedicated to reputation management, crisis management, issues management and corporate communications (Coombs, 2014). Academic researchers from the fields of organisational behaviour, business ethics, sociology and social psychology also offer important contributions to our understanding of the issues around negative brand sentiment (Fullerton and Punj, 2004).

INSERT TABLE 1. Summary of Select Studies on Brand Negativity

Corporate transgressions that lead to negative brand sentiment cover a spectrum of improprieties and manifest in an assortment of consumer behaviours which vary in their severity. The services marketing literature is prominent in this research domain as the quality of service is inherently variable and sees firms in this sector becoming frequent targets of

brand attack (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2009; Rokka et al., 2014). Hence, much of the brand negativity research is approached from a recovery (service, reputation, brand image) and issues management perspective. The causes of such negativity vary as widely as the types. Zarantonello et al. (2016) identify several antecedents of brand hate (a severe manifestation of brand negativity), including corporate wrongdoings, product failure, brand self-image incongruence and violations of moral codes or individual rights. Others identify breaches of increasingly higher consumer expectations (Grainer et al., 2014) and inauthentic claims (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010). While many issues that trigger extreme backlash are deemed beyond the control of firms (Aula, 2010), it would appear that the broad range of such factors makes their predictability problematic (Rauschnabel et al., 2016), thereby contributing to poor firm recovery responses (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2009).

These many and varied origins of negative sentiment mean that not all brands are susceptible to the same degree. Those that can control communication with close customers through strong (social media) networks are more capable of resisting backlash. Using the theory of social distance, Fullerton and Punj (2004) found that smaller businesses are less likely to be victimised than larger enterprises. Furthermore, transgressions by brands with whom customers have strong relationships will be dealt with harshly (Beverland et al., 2010; Grégoire and Fisher, 2008) as will brands that advance themselves as warm and caring; exciting brands less so (Aaker et al., 2004).

So how should brands manage negative sentiment online? The extant literature has suggested that solutions be tailored to the problem (Claeys and Opgenhaffen, 2016; Stevens et al., 2018) and that situations involving unhappy customers cannot be allowed to go unchecked as feelings of neglect can fuel rage (Grove et al., 2004). Several studies note that some negative sentiment can be beneficial for brands by fuelling important discussions (Chmiel et al., 2014). In this regard, Stevens et al. (2018) claim that diversity in online

reviews can aid trust and lend credibility to online forums. In examining the lifecycle of brand communities, Paltoglou (2014) determined that disagreement and discontent are crucial in keeping communities together and alive, while Mitrovic et al. (2011) found that the capacity to express a negative emotional state is a key driver of thriving online communities. Research also shows that the publicity arising from a good recovery can have positive effects (Rauschnabel et al., 2016), sometimes leading to more favourable brand ratings (Harrison-Walker, 2001). Dekay (2012) suggests that some firms encourage diversity of opinion in order to enliven debate and increase fan participation, a view shared by Chen and Berger (2013), who note that controversy increases interest which in turn increases the likelihood of discussion. It is in this context that we suggest that brand negativity at the benign end of the continuum – characterised, for example, by unfavourable user reviews, product or service complaints, criticism of firms and negative C2C comments – does not constitute a crisis. Mitigating its risk, however, is no less important.

Social media risk

Social media brings with it specific issues and risks for companies given its immediacy, visibility and interactive nature. The speed with which brands can be harmed necessitates an understanding of the potential dangers for firms. Mennie (2015) outlines five types of social media risk that corporate users may encounter: financial, information security, regulatory compliance, reputational and operational.

Our investigation is concerned only with the final two categories of risk – reputational and operational – in a context in which negative sentiment posted online has a propensity to travel further and faster (Hegner et al., 2017). Reputational damage has its origins in a range of issues, such as mischievous or accidental posts, poor strategy formulation or execution and hashtag hijack. Operational risk relates to matters such as product or service failure and the firm's moderation policies regarding social media posts.

Early research established that specific crises are often unique to individual industries and can, therefore, be anticipated in advance (e.g. airlines and crashes; restaurants and food poisoning) (Benoit, 1997). Some clear hot-button issues that attract negative comments in social media environments include the deletion of user comments (Stevens et al., 2018), ignoring consumer concerns (Funches et al., 2009), denying mistakes and unfair use of brand power (Rauschnabel et al., 2016), intimidation and bullying (Coombs, 2014), and failure to resolve complaints at the first point of contact (Grainer et al., 2014). Adverse sentiment can spread quickly through social networks, with negative comments highly visible to other users (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015). In addition, social media's anonymity, absence of social cues and the deindividuation of some audiences remove the fear of being punished or judged and can elevate the shrillness of negative discourse (Champoux et al., 2012; Denegri-Knott, 2006; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Despite these myriad perils, firms are racing to engage consumers via a burgeoning array of platforms.

Social media is fundamentally about affiliation and the maintenance of relationships via consumer-to-consumer conversations with some researchers suggesting brands are unwelcome in this space (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Hatch and Schultz, 2010). Brands that overly participate in user forums risk diminishing engagement returns and censure from users (Homburg et al., 2015). Sometimes seen as interlopers (Fournier and Avery, 2011), brands that seek to exploit the opportunity to engage with their customers online risk community backlash if consumers decide that they do not want their personal investment in the brand turned into competitive advantage (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). Embracing social media, therefore, entails an implicit risk for firms, whose control over events pertaining to their brand is fundamentally diminished relative to offline communication channels.

Social media in the fashion industry context

The fashion industry has been relatively quick to adopt social media on a large scale. Retail fashion brands are among the most connected, with 86% of firms using all four of the most popular social media channels: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram (Morrison, 2015) though it is noted that consumer support for platforms changes rapidly. This extensive adoption is attributable to a range of factors, including the pressure on fashion-forward firms to display their cutting edge credentials by being first in a range of industry metrics. While the market rewards firms that adopt high-risk strategies, the relatively short product lifecycle, speed to market and low capital intensity are also catalysts for such behaviours. According to the fashion industry journal *Women's Wear Daily*, more than 71% of fashion consumers consult social media prior to purchase (Leabon, 2017), with content widely shared by users and their friends. This network effect is important to the diffusion of fashion which requires high visibility and the collaborative evaluation of value to facilitate overt consumption behaviours in the presence of others (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). Fashion's symbolism generates social capital for its consumers which, together with the constant demand for newness, makes social media and fashion ideal bedfellows.

For firms, this provides a pool of willing consumers who may be seconded to perform productive marketing activities that blur the line between production and consumption (Cova et al., 2015; Humphreys and Grayson, 2008). However, the embrace of social media platforms and the co-opting of consumers as active participants in the development of the brand narrative expose fashion firms to potential negative sentiment delivered via these channels.

Consumer empowerment and a new relational paradigm

Reputational or operational deficiencies that lead to negative branding episodes such as brand hate, rage, retaliation and the like are rooted in the archetypal relationships that

brands have with their stakeholders. Two key coincidental events in 2004 conspired to change the dynamics of these relationships and explain the tension that contributes to consumer discontent. The first – the launch of Facebook – meant that key future marketing interactions would be mediated digitally via social networks, ultimately shifting the locus of relationship control from firms to their customers. The second – the documentation by Vargo and Lusch (2004) of a new dominant logic in marketing – redefined value exchanges based around a service-centred model. Thus, a new relational paradigm was born.

The empowerment of consumers in social media-based relationships with firms rejects the old-world view of autonomous firms acting unilaterally and consumers becoming involved only at the point of exchange (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). In this neo-pluralist landscape, customers are no longer viewed as exogenous entities and passive recipients of the firm's value-creating efforts (Schau et al., 2009), and branding is highly participative rather than firm centric (Ind, 2014). Payne et al. (2008) posit that the co-creation of value implicit in the service-dominant logic model means that the line between consumption and production has become increasingly blurred. In the digital economy, consumption becomes an increasingly public creative process (Taillard et al., 2014) facilitated by brands supplying platforms where consumers can create their own value through the curation of consumption experiences, leading to active consumer agency (Cova and Dalli, 2009). Through this process, consumers are influenced by interactions with a firm's touchpoints which may include communication encounters, usage encounters, and service encounters (Payne et al., 2008). While the affective, cognitive and behavioural elements of these online encounters are important enablers of brand loyalty (Dessart et al., 2015), they are also frequent sources of consumer dissatisfaction, generating brand negativity. Such empowerment of consumers decreases a firm's control and increases the

complexity of managing diverse and at times conflicting stakeholder interests (Hoyer et al., 2010).

Good governance and brand authenticity lie at the centre of the community-centric paradigm and provide a degree of equilibrium in the management of stakeholder tension (Cooper et al., 2018). Communication with consumers in this context is ‘non-linear and takes the form of exchange and debate’ (Quinton, 2013 p.923). This includes the expression of dissent in symbiotic relationships that permit the co-creation of value and negotiation of brand meaning. There is a gap, however, in the multi-disciplinary literature about the role such governance may play in managing the occurrence and intensity of negative brand sentiment. While understanding the behavioural antecedents, contextual factors and consumer–brand relationships may go some way towards defining best practice in the management of such sentiment, we propose that detailed scrutiny of current management practices will fill this gap. The current study, therefore, focuses on what we call the benign end of the dissatisfaction continuum – rather than activist communities which perhaps fall more into the realm of public relations than consumer relations – to examine the firm, its consumers and key intermediaries. In considering whether an optimal operating procedure exists that brand managers can apply in relation to online brand backlash, we pose the question: how do firms manage negative brand sentiment in social media?

Methodology

The retail fashion industry was chosen as the context for the study as it provides an empirically appealing eco-system in which ongoing daily interactions with customers can be readily observed (Yin, 2014). In most jurisdictions, retail fashion is characterised by a diverse mix of small to large firms with a low concentration of ownership. Intense competition arising from such fragmentation leads firms to explore opportunities through new technology

to enhance their competitive advantage (Magner, 2017). Consequently, the sector has been quick to adopt social media, with broad acceptance by consumers of these platforms providing fertile ground for the study of negative interactions between brands and consumers. Loose approximations of brand communities form around some of the ‘faster’ fashion-oriented brands. Many of these consumer–brand relationships exhibit a propensity for bilateral engagement of a type approximating Fournier and Avery’s (2011) open-source branding; that is, characterised by a collaborative approach to brand management via social networks.

Data Collection

To understand how retail fashion firms manage negative sentiment in social media environments we utilised a qualitative methodology aimed at identifying the practices of managers in a range of small, medium and large retail fashion companies, resulting in six contextually embedded case studies that enabled the unobtrusive study of the phenomena (Yin, 2014). We conducted a series of face-to-face, semi-structured, open-ended interviews, each averaging approximately 50 minutes, over an eight-month period, the details of which are presented in Table 2. The interviews sought to identify both explicit and implicit actions taken by firms in negotiating social media interactions to provide the researchers with a composite picture of the range of actual and symbolic behaviours that shape the management of negative sentiment (Kassarjian, 1977). A broad range of issues was explored with (and through) informants, including company goals, strategy formulation and documentation, philosophical approaches to customer relationships, governance issues, operational procedures, training and education of company staff. Informants were also asked to reflect on instances of consumer backlash against the company manifested through social media. Informant quotes are used to illustrate the range of management practices, the justification for

them and the context in which they took place. The interview quotes are presented as central to the research aims, with such statements explained in the light of extant theory.

INSERT Table 2. Interview and Informant Summary

A detailed netnographic examination was then undertaken using methods prescribed by Kozinets (2014). Facebook comments for each company were monitored for a three-month period to explore the extent to which company actions were reflected in user comments and to get a strong sense of what was going on at the cultural level in these social spaces. Our investigation also included on-site observations of staff and their operating environments as well as an examination (where possible) of artefacts including social media policies, reports and computer software interfaces. The insights gained from the interrogation of such objects aided the researchers' understanding of the history of each firm, its business model and modus operandi as indicators of its ideological approach to retail and consumer-brand relationships. These complementary techniques were intended to enhance validity through the triangulation of the reality revealed in the firm's online customer conversations with the thick informant descriptions of practice and the researchers' interpretation of implicit company discourse management behaviours derived from artefacts. The chronological relationship between data collection methods is illustrated in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1. Relationship between interview data and netnographic artefacts

The researchers acknowledge that a broad diversity of practices is likely used in retail fashion firms to manage negative social media sentiment. We emphasise, therefore, the exploratory nature of the study, the goal of which was not to generalise findings but to document a typology of practice. Thus, the cases were chosen largely on the basis of a purposive snowball method. Care was taken to ensure a degree of diversity in terms of the size of firms included in the study, as well as their market level, business model, product mix

and intended target audience, as we believe that these variables may influence the manner in which negative sentiment in social media is managed. Informants from within the firms were chosen on the basis of their expertise in social media management or their input into the management of discourse in these channels, or both. Such expertise in the domain of enquiry, known as cultural competence, can serve as a countervailing force against data saturation in small samples (Romney et al., 1986). To ensure the confidentiality of both informants and firms, pseudonyms are used throughout the discussion that follows.

Data Analysis

A manual system of analysis was employed in relation to the netnographic artefacts and interview data collected. An initial codebook was developed based on a first reading of interview transcripts and researcher fieldnotes, acknowledging the interconnectedness of concepts and themes identified. As such, a simultaneous coding technique was used whereby two or more codes were assigned within a single datum. These first cycle descriptive codes were later applied on a wider scale to the full interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2015). In line with Rubin and Rubin (2005), the initial codes represented key concepts derived from the interviews, which were informed by the literature, and deemed as important to the research question. Concepts were then codified (regrouped) into themes representing statements linking the abstract constructs found in the transcripts (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). An inductive process of cross-case analysis using aggregated data was used to review the themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994), which were then again refined with reference to the literature. Likewise, Facebook comments were saved, sorted and classified using open coding as either benign or militant, in line with our interpretation of the extant literature, as a cultural baseline for the examination of negative behaviours (Kozinets et al., 2014). Finally, the main themes indicative of the practices of firms in relation to the management of negative online sentiment

were compared against theory presented in the literature. These are discussed in the following section.

Findings

This section outlines five interconnected dominant themes revealed by our analysis which pertain to the mitigation and management of negative brand sentiment expressed through the companies' social media platforms. Some are overt and are easily symbolised by the informant quotes contained in Table 3 (adapted from Stein and Ramaseshan, 2016). Others are less apparent and require interpretation via the complementary data collection methods employed in this study. The themes comprise five domains of influence; company philosophies, company operations, customer relationships, internal relationships and other stakeholder relationships. These domains may be defined as a nominal classification of the spheres of activity within which companies manage negative social media sentiment. We categorise the themes as either relational domains, which reflect an extension of extant relationship management knowledge that is frequently drawn from offline environments; or the more recently conceptualised transformational domains of influence, which demand a reorientation in the attitudes and policies underpinning company operations to acknowledge their importance in influencing the valence of socially mediated customer discourse.

INSERT TABLE 3. Thematic Analysis

Transformational domains of influence

The transformational domains of influence consist of two principal interrelated themes – company philosophy and company operations – with the latter reflected in the firm's expertise and practices. These domains are more abstract in their conceptualisation than the relational domains and centre on the orientation of an organisation's mindset in

relation to shaping its systems and processes that govern customer–brand relationships. The domains of influence are depicted in Figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2. Domains of influence

Company Philosophy

The way a company sees itself plays an important role in shaping its narratives and, in turn, its management of customer relationships, particularly in times of trouble. The theme of corporate philosophy emerged from both the interviews and netnographic data. It has broad resonance throughout the study such that the culture of a firm sets the tone of consumer conversations and plays a role in shaping the propensity for collaboration or conflict. The theme encompasses, among other things, issues of corporate introspection such as the organisation’s culture, goals, ambitions and risk appetite, approach to campaign planning and strategy development, and how social media platforms are used by both the firm and its customers.

The cases show that the deployment of social media by firms is based on a two-tiered approach containing both a paid and an organic element. Increasingly, firms pay to have their content promoted by the owners of social media channels who seek to monetise their platforms through a broad range of products. Typically, these paid campaigns are built around transactionally based communications, planned two to three months in advance, which support new product drops and are aimed at increasing store or online traffic. Organic content, on the other hand, is strategically aimed at relationship building and emphasises conversational engagement. In our sample it accounts for a diminishing proportion of social media activity, particularly in the firms with heavily diversified product mixes. While further research is required on this, we suggest that such contraction in organic social media content

weakens affiliative links and thus the consumer–brand bond, leading to increased brand negativity.

The nature of platform use varies by case. One informant (Company F) has a strong brand community and received the second-highest number of user comments, which were substantially positive, reflecting robust community values. Another firm (Company E), an e-commerce start-up, received relatively few comments, while another (Company C) reported that its young audience was increasingly less inclined to comment on posts unless specifically rewarded, for example, with a competition:

‘We think it's a bit of a generational thing ... she's [target audience] much more willing to like something, then to comment, then to share.’ Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

In each of the other cases, informants acknowledged the different roles played by each platform. For example, Instagram was used by Company E as a brand positioning tool and the primary conduit to customers and by Company D to contemporise the brand. In another firm (Company A), Facebook served as an adjunct to in-store service and a key customer service channel that frequently fielded complaints:

‘If they've emailed a company and haven't heard anything, the place they'll go to is Facebook 'cause they know generally that businesses will get back to them because they won't want it to stay [on the wall] without an answer.’ Company A: [mid-sized | mid-market | mixed gender]

‘It's become a moaning platform these days; Facebook does seem to be the place where you go to vent these days.’ Company A: [mid-sized | mid-market | mixed gender]

Two firms (Company B and Company C) used social media as a key component in the repositioning of their brands, though in markedly different ways, with different implications for the management of negative brand engagement. The first (Company B) viewed social media as a component of a broader marketing communications strategy. This firm fielded more customer comments through its Facebook page than any of the other case study companies and in our measurement period the majority of its user comments received a

company reply. Though, on average, one negative comment appears per day on the page, they are quickly and personally dealt with through an effective zero-tolerance strategy and are then frequently taken offline. Under its previous ownership the second firm (Company C) had a poor brand image which was reflected in, and reinforced by, its poor social media practices:

'When we first took over the business ... from day one we were really honest about the fact that everyone has the right to their opinion if it's about product.' Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

Subsequent to its brand relaunch, the firm attributes its highly collegial social media moderation culture to its success in re-establishing control over a negative environment using channels to instil brand values among its young female customer base:

'We have some really clear things about what we will and won't allow happen on our accounts, we have a lot of moderation, social rules, social values that we live by.' Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

'I think it's important for us to educate her because she probably doesn't know that she's just said something that could be considered bullying.' Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

Company Operations

Informants all reported that a firm's success will in part be determined by its ability to manage the complexity and sophistication of its operations. The operations theme emerged from both the informant interviews and netnographic artefacts, as well as from our analysis of each firm's business activities based on observations and reflective fieldnotes. The theme pertains to a firm's level of expertise and resultant operational practices, and covers issues of professionalism and the confidence with which organisations manage their social media operations, as well as organisational complexity as it relates to indicators such as agility, coordination, role definition, empowerment and structure. While aptitude in this regard is no

indication of the effectiveness of strategy formulation or implementation, it does serve as a useful marker of ability to deal effectively with the challenges of social media dissonance.

Company B and Company D had the most complex business operations in our dataset – the former due to its large number of stores and the latter because of its high level of product diversity. Both are supported by extensive marketing and communications infrastructures comprising support teams, systems, software and external resources. Our informants held senior marketing roles in these firms, were well educated and experienced, and possessed a comprehensive understanding of the nuances of social media engagement.

The data collected from Company D revealed two particularly interesting findings relating to corporate complexity which point to possible organisational impediments to the firm's ability to manage negative brand sentiment. The informant spoke confidently regarding issues of paid social media and digital advertising, but with noticeably less confidence, greater hesitation, shorter answers and longer pauses when discussing social media as a relationship management tool. Furthermore, it became apparent following examination of conversations on the firm's Facebook page that frequently the informant's interview responses regarding social media relationships reflected a desired state rather than the reality as reflected by customer comments. This is consistent with the firm's reported focus on paid social media at the expense of organic engagement, and indicative of a possible tension in respect to strategic imperatives:

'a source of fierce debate between myself and members of the team.' Company D: [large | mid-market | families]

The second finding concerned the degree of coordination between departments within this retailer's operations. In this instance, the informant identified store-based conflict as a source of negative online posts but appeared hamstrung by organisational complexity and consequently was unable to resolve the situation:

'I think the risks are around people who have ... an in-store experience with the brand, a negative experience. Then they take to social media channels to talk about that. Those things then escalate for whatever reason. That's one big social media risk.' Company D: [large | mid-market | families]

The firm's Facebook page does indeed carry a substantial volume of negative comments relating to the brand that emanate from store encounters and is indicative of an operational disconnection that fails to coordinate departments.

The operational theme also relates to company practices and processes, and spans issues such as cyber security measures, environment monitoring, the development of social media policies that set parameters for staff and users, crisis management and the evaluation of response options. Implicit in this theme is the firm's ability and expertise in identifying the most appropriate operational settings for managing social media conversations with its constituents.

Security protocols established in our case study firms were built primarily around password management, restriction of administrator rights, and conventions governing the use of equipment aimed at avoiding social media mishaps. All of the companies had established such protocols, though applied them with varying degrees of rigour. In formulating internal controls, the respondents concurred that company deletion of negative comments can cause social media backlash, and appeared to recognise that the source of negative sentiment in their channels is all too frequently traceable to poor instore customer experiences:

'We wouldn't ever delete anything because someone's had a bad experience in store ... we're just really transparent and we'll respond and hope that we can turn them around.' Company A: [mid-sized | mid-market | mixed gender]

Paradoxically, one retailer (Company D) failed to see the connection between negative instore experiences and negative sentiment in expressed online, in turn suggesting an inability to understand or define the processes at play:

'We've never had a social media crisis ... most of the things that have happened have been an in-store issue that's manifested on social.' Company D: [large | mid-market | families]

Investigating this further, the researcher's examination of comments on the Facebook page of this firm revealed the highest proportion of negative comments of the six case studies. The majority related to poor instore customer experiences.

Monitoring also emerged as an element of the operational theme. Informants acknowledged its importance both as a source of market research and to guard against potential social media hostility. Again, all informants reported that their firms had implemented environment scans of one type or another. Multiple tools were used for this purpose, which ranged in their level of integration and complexity. At a minimum, all companies used their social media channels as a listening post to gather user intelligence and customer sentiment, with varying levels of value placed on such data. Some cast a wider net to include the broader macro environments such as the media and competitors to function as an early warning system:

'If we see articles go up, if Buzzfeed does a piece or if there's PR about us generally we'll get prepared for the fact that stuff could happen on our social media channels.' Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

Knowing what constitutes a hot-button issue for their users allowed several of the firms to anticipate a crisis and use scenario planning to mitigate negative comments and shape the firm's responses to such:

'We come up with the worst stuff that you could possibly think of that someone might say that might then cause a groundswell.' Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

Both the large and mid-sized firms integrated customer relationship management (CRM) systems into their social media channels, based on an understanding of the complexity of juggling multiple conversations and of social media as a potential source of consumer discontent:

'Twitter, Facebook, blogs, forums ... are all fed into our CRM so we can keep track of the conversations we're having with customers.' Company B: [large | low-market | families]

However, the ability of such systems to keep track of social media conversations was also found to have downsides. First, the practitioners who employed a CRM system acknowledged that this created a perceived distance between the firm and its customers. While admitting that this impacted their affinity for customer needs, informants felt that the scale of their operations necessitated such processes. Second, in suggesting that customers increasingly seek redress directly from head office staff, one informant conceded that their customer service teams may not be in the best position to respond to situations of discord and in some instances may delay the resolution of customer dissatisfaction, adding further frustration:

'The customer service team are just the messengers a lot of the time ... they're not armed with the right information to handle a potentially risky situation ... who do they escalate that to at [store name]?' Company D: [large | mid-market | families]

'The customer service centre jumped on it straight away; they did a fairly standard job, which isn't great; thanks for your feedback, we'll definitely pass it on to the store.' Company D: [large | mid-market | families]

The lack of intimacy between staff and customer evident in the larger firms in our study was also apparent when we examined the tenor of the Facebook interactions for these companies, where we observed a somewhat clinical tone. The researchers also noted that the language used by these informants during interviews was heavily weighted towards discussion of key performance indicators, metrics and accountabilities. In contrast, small

firms were relatively more relationship focused, confirmed by the respondents' frequency of references to the customer.

Relational Domains of Influence

The relational domains of influence pertain to the practices used by firms in dealing with their stakeholders including customers, staff and external intermediaries and interest groups. The basic concepts that define the themes contained within this domain have their genesis in research into offline management systems, and are well documented in a variety of academic disciplines and commonly applied to the analysis of the post-eventum management of negative customer backlash.

Customer Relationships

Understanding the abstraction of customer relationships is central to online conversation management. The findings obtained from the interviews revealed that this theme – customer relationships – comprised issues relating to the nature of brand access, the firm's ability to identify and deal with customer problems as they occur, and the manner in which consumer dialogue is conducted, including tone, tenor, type and timing.

Informants consistently acknowledged three axioms about channel access as fundamental to maintaining accord in social media channels. First, social media networks are places where users talk primarily to their friends, not to brands. Elaborating on this, the Company C informant stated that the firm takes care to ensure that customers know that a conversation is available through social media 'if she wants to', attesting to the need for engagement on the customer's terms. Second, social media policy violations should be the only reason for the deletion of customer comments. Third, the blocking of users is strictly taboo:

'Shutting down a conversation generally brings an aggressive fireball of more conversation ... it'll be like, what are you trying to hide?' Company E: [small-sized | up-market | online | women]

As noted previously, Facebook, while principally a peer-to-peer networking tool, is now being used by customers as a surrogate for instore service and a platform for voicing complaints. One firm (Company A) leveraged this position by providing vocal complainers with access to its product development advisory panel – allowing them to ‘feel invested’. Several respondents saw the positive aspects of negative feedback, perceiving complaints as opportunities for firms to identify and repair problems. To this effect, one firm (Company B) derived particular value from such feedback as an input into its brand repositioning. Furthermore, informants broadly acknowledged that ‘being heard’ is important to customers who pursue the opportunity of liaising directly with head office, knowing that their views will be acted upon:

'if they had that conversation at store level it might not get through; on Facebook ... customers feel that they are getting to talk to the leaders ... if the organisation's willing to let them in.' Company A: [mid-sized | mid-market | mixed gender]

The intention of one firm (Company C) to post more user-generated content (UGC) was compelled by changes to Facebook’s algorithms that reward more authentic connections. The company accepted that such heightened user access draws customers closer to the brand and, therefore, demands vigilant moderation. For other firms, customer proximity is problematic for different reasons:

'It's something we would like to do more of. Getting people to share what they're buying, interacting with our brand. It's certainly something we talk about a lot ... getting people to share that and us being able to create conversations around that – but our business model doesn't permit us to accept a UGC post unless the whole outfit is from our store.' Company D: [large | mid-market | families]

The customer relationships theme also included dialogue disposition. The impact of this element emerged from our interviews, in which delays in acknowledging consumers online were described as a source of customer irritation – symptomatic of social media’s immediacy. One firm (Company A) reported that it had diminished the potential for this problem to occur by educating consumers:

‘if you set the expectations, then they’re quite happy to wait.’ Company A: [mid-sized | mid-market | mixed gender]

Some informants felt that quickly moving issues offline was important. One suggested that this was not so much about de-escalating a situation than about addressing customer queries without public disclosure of the details of the issue. In addition, several firms acknowledged the importance of establishing an appropriate and consistent tone of voice in dialogue, with one (Company A) revealing that this was the chief reason for retaining control of social media rather than outsourcing. Similarly, authenticity was seen as a central tenet in online conversation management:

‘I think we just try and remain as genuine to the conversation as we can ... an authentic conversation; making sure at all times you’re telling the truth.’ Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

Transparency was also rewarded. Several organisations (Companies A, C and F) reported that their Facebook communities had, to some extent, become self-moderating; absorbing and reflecting the brand values. This was consistent with our observations of Facebook comments for these firms, in which users were found to be coming to the defence of the brand. Such community spirit was a source of pride for some firms:

‘There’s a general vibe in our community that this is a safe place. A place to look after each other, have great commentary, have a great chat, but don’t come in and dis.’ Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

Internal Relationships

Thematic analysis of our cases also determined that internal organisational relationships may influence the management of negative brand comments. This theme captures issues associated with the role played by management and its support of social media, the autonomy entrusted to retail store staff to negotiate conflict with consumers, and the influence of other internal departments within the firm, particularly customer service.

As previously outlined, customer service departments in the large and mid-sized firms are linked to social media channels and charged with responding to customer comments. The volume of user comments and how they are managed vary widely, with one firm (Company B) responding to almost all, while others focus only on complaints or e-commerce related issues, and some company responses are either more discriminating or more arbitrary:

'Our customer service team are literally every day closing off posts going, I've seen it, I've seen it, I've seen it.' Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

Company B's highly integrated system appears to afford its customer service team greater scope in managing its customer relations. By identifying which posts represent risk and determining whether issues require elevation, and if so to whom, the system ensures that multiple others can be involved (in the background) of online discussions. We note, however, that most of the negative comments managed by this team relate to product or service complaints, suggesting that Company B's system simply transfers problems from stores and delays their resolution.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for retail firms, the analysis suggests that much of the negative social media commentary has its genesis in store servicescapes. In this regard, both the empowerment and lack of empowerment of store staff appeared to be problematic in several of our cases. One informant (from Company B) described how poor decision-making by an empowered store staff member had led to customer backlash which migrated to social media

and then to the mainstream media. In another firm (Company D), we identified the reverse, where poor service by too few personnel is a recurrent theme in its social media posts – a problem that the informant readily acknowledged.

Management's support for, and of, social media was a source of angst for the large firms, in contrast to the experiences of the mid-size and smaller organisations, who generally described a more positive laissez-faire dynamic:

'In social media you can't be the handbrake to happiness, you have to have people that you have implicit trust in that they will do the right thing by your brand.' Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

Management's endorsement of social media marketing is closely associated with the philosophical stance of the company and its culture, which we identified as characteristic of the transformational domain. We suggest that this philosophical approach has a profound impact on internal relationships and may reflect a generationally based understanding of the role of social media. For example, one older executive proposed a definition of social media as encompassing anything digital. In this context, resourcing and training were both raised as issues by some informants, who lamented the pace of change and the need for continuous experimentation:

'The evolution is just astounding. I think every few months we have to take a new leap of faith or a new risk into a new area because we know that's where the future lies.' Company E: [small-sized | up-market | online | women]

Other Stakeholder Relationships

External publics impacted by the firm's operations also represent a potential source of negative brand sentiment. This theme emerged from our interviews when the broad range of relationships with external micro intermediaries that influence firms became apparent, including those with social media creative and buying agencies, media outlets, brand advocates, brand communities, platform providers, charities and interest groups.

During the interviews, none of the respondents reported episodes relating to politically or socially motivated activist groups as having impacted customer sentiment. Our review of Facebook comments, however, found that one firm (Company B) came under what appeared to be a premediated attack from a group using the Oxfam hashtag #whatshemakes, five months after our initial interview with this firm. More than 100 comments were posted on the companies' Facebook page over five days relating to the payment of a living wage for garment factory workers. The firm responded courteously to the first three user comments on the first thread, posting its ethical sourcing policy – yet ignored all subsequent comments. In this regard, the remark made by this company's informant five months earlier seemed prescient:

'I think brands involvement in every conversation that's happening risks escalating the debate further than what it needs to be. Sometimes you have to weather the storm a little bit on those things.' Company B: [large | low-market | families]

In a follow-up conversation, a company informant advised that this attack has become an annual event coinciding with the release of its 'Back-to-School' catalogue. The company anticipates and prepares for such occasions, providing scripted responses drafted by corporate affairs.

The theme of external stakeholder relationships incorporates collaborations between fashion brands and social media 'influencers', an increasingly common strategy in retail fashion as firms look to extend their reach through affiliate networks. Several informants noted that the practice of provoking customer conversations through third-party engagements is not without risk:

'We are a brand that will not hand a channel over to anyone outside the brand.' Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

One firm (Company C) flagged consumer suspicion of influencer endorsements and a growing awareness of ties to commercial relationships as potential causes of consumer

resentment. Another (Company F) noted that correct alignment of contracted influencers with the brand's values is significantly more important than reach to ensure that the 'right things' are said about the brand.

The larger retailers reported examples of operational practices impacting external relationships via the increasingly common practice of contracting third-party agencies to assist in a range of social media functions, typically data management and analytics, buying, reporting, strategy formulation and implementation. While there is minimal risk of negative sentiment emanating directly from these relationships, informants were aware of the barriers that such associations place between themselves and their publics. One organisation (Company F), at the time of the interview, was about to commence trials with an external enterprise to measure sentiment analysis, expressed concern about filtered customer relationship data diluting the customer-brand affinity:

'The potential to free the team up to get on with other tasks is appealing, but hopefully without losing that customer connection.' Company F: [mid-sized | mid-market | accessories | women]

Finally, cause-related marketing efforts were also reported to play a role in the management of negative brand sentiment and emanated from operational decision-making. One case study firm (Company C) aligned its brand with a non-profit organisation that promotes female empowerment and anti-bullying – themes that resonate strongly with the firm's young female target market. Leveraging the values of the relationship partner, the company's informant reported having re-established acceptable boundaries of normative behaviour with its Facebook users as part of a wider brand repositioning. The brand transformation that has occurred since this relationship was established has led to a more positively valenced discourse stemming from the firm's social media page:

'It's definitely a lot less scary than it has been in terms of the commentary that we get from our audience ... what we were seeing about 18 months ago is different to what we see today and that is about brand perception.' Company C: [mid-sized | mid-market | young women]

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine how firms manage negative comments in their social media feeds, as a step towards understanding the optimal ways to mitigate and circumvent such commentary. We designed an exploratory study aimed at unearthing deep insights into the management of such phenomena, in particular contemporary methods for its mitigation and remedy, to contribute towards theory building and the development of an empirically based decision-making framework for practitioners. The findings identify five principal domains of influence around which the firms based their approach to addressing social media backlash. We suggest that these domains can be categorised as either relational domains built on human exchange or transformational domains grounded in the less tangible elements of corporate culture and operational practices.

The relational domains identified in the study can largely be explained by extant cross-disciplinary research and the methods adopted within these domains by the firms in our research are generally consistent with a standardised approach to the implementation of prescriptive remedies and procedures pertaining to relationship management, crisis management and organisational management theory (cf Norton, 2013). For example, the data shows firms endeavouring to mitigate negativity before the event by managing consumer expectations (Grégoire and Fisher, 2008), facilitating a customer voice via access to channels (Funches et al., 2009) and implementing monitoring processes and early warning systems (Hart, 2011; Hegner et al., 2017). The findings also expose company efforts to manage the phenomena post-eventum, including by respectful interactions with customers (Coombs, 2014), taking ownership of problems (Champoux et al., 2012), and offering apologies and

remedies for transgressions (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2013). The results indicate that the majority of negative comments relate to consumer complaints, typically originating in store. Where Grainer (2014) finds that failure to resolve complaints at the point of first contact leads to customer frustration, our data shows that the corollary in contemporary retail settings sees consumers opting for direct social media dialogue with firms. Consistent with previous studies we find that outsourcing responses to social media-based complaints to agencies or customer service departments represents an apparent attempt to expedite issues efficiently (Stevens et al., 2018). However, our analysis determines that this may diminish the intimacy between customers and marketing practitioners and thereby negatively impact the customer-brand dynamic and thus relationship strength. In this respect, the current research complements existing knowledge by helping to refine our understanding of some of the fundamental pragmatic forces at play when companies respond to online consumer backlash.

The contribution of the current research lies in the identification of less tangible forces that influence organisational approaches to the management of negative social media, which we classify as transformational domains of influence, and extends the extant literature in two important ways. First, the data from our study reveals that these forces – comprised of company philosophies and operational expertise – appear to play an important role in shaping the manner in which the relational domains are managed. The results suggest that the strategy a firm adopts in responding to negative online sentiment post-eventum seems inextricably linked to matters of company ethos, brand culture, personal empowerment, coordination, agility and the like – in other words, the constituent elements of the transformational domains of influence. The constitution of these domains, therefore, is fundamentally more primal than simple company practices or strategies and tactics. The data further suggests that such an approach can generate a virtuous cycle. For example, the positive brand values evident in several of our cases facilitated a disposition of open access to the firm via social media, which resulted in users

defending the brand when it was attacked by others, serving to reinforce the brand's core values.

Second, the evidence obtained from this study suggests that, in helping to shape relationally based strategies, company philosophies and operational expertise also play an important pre-emptive role in circumventing online conflict. For example, proactive companies that have a positive culture will implement *operational practices* such as the formulation of user-centred social media policies and the anticipation of hot-button issues to avert crises before they occur. Confident and agile firms will implement *customer relationship practices* that permit consumer access to the firm through user-generated content to draw fans nearer and mitigate user backlash. The attitudes and ideals inherent to a corporate culture will shape *external relationship practices*, which can be used to seek out and leverage other stakeholders to assist in managing consumer expectations and normative group behaviours. On this basis, we suggest that a firm's ethos, which shapes its operational systems and procedures, may help a firm to avoid the initial tension that leads to backlash, thereby reducing the reliance on relational domains for its management.

The current research complements existing studies into negativity towards brands by examining the firm's operations to articulate the scope of practices used to manage such negativity when it migrates to social media platforms. The study draws together disparate multi-disciplinary streams of research to understand the impact of such practices. The findings enrich knowledge in this field by identifying transformational domains of influence not previously considered in social media management theory which we separate from the pragmatic relational domains, exploring the interplay between the two domains in the development of effective strategies to address customer backlash. Based on our findings, we argue for the importance of synergy and the need for an all-of-company approach to its mitigation and management of customer feedback. The paper explores a theoretical

perspective from which to understand the various forces at play in social media, taking a holistic view of online relationship management. Our research extends Quinton's (2013) conception of a pluralistic view of digitally mediated brand management, which we contend should be applied to social media contexts with a view to enhancing the quality of discourse.

Implications

There are a number of implications derived from this study's findings, of both a theoretical and managerial nature. We acknowledge that some of these implications are universally applicable across the retail fashion sector while others are specific to a particular size, reach, audience or type of firm. In identifying five inter-related domains of influence relevant to this context and their constituent components which are classified as transformational or relational in character, we determine that, in online settings, a blend of intangible behaviours and pragmatic actions can lead to more harmonious relationships.

We would urge retail firms that are unwilling or unable to address the underlying store-based issues fuelling customer discontent to adopt a proactive approach to engagement in social media channels. For retailers, brand stewardship relies on a broad range of relational outcomes (Walsh et al., 2017), and social media conversations concerning customer service represent a rare touch-point at which a firm may seek to influence brand reputation through service recovery. Further, we accept the precept that negative feedback will occur, and that for retailers it will frequently originate in stores. However, customer satisfaction through service encounters is a core competency for retail businesses and a fundamental relationally based issue necessitating the alignment of employees with the core values, policies and practices of the firm (Rokka et al., 2014). Practitioners who direct their discourse management solutions at these relational domains traditionally rely on a suite of strategies and tactics that, for the most part, have their theoretical origins in offline brand management. Our case studies, supported

by the literature, demonstrate that strategies directed at these elements can be effective in the management of social media backlash post-eventum. Yet our findings also indicate that success in managing negative sentiment in social media environments is dependent upon a balanced approach that, as well as calling on a relationally based aptitude, also demands a level of strategic digital efficacy in order to pre-empt backlash before it occurs.

We propose a two-pronged framework for practitioners in the management of these phenomena. On the one hand, this framework calls for a capacity to select the most effective blend of social media platforms and determine what to post and when to post it, as well as an appropriate number of suitably skilled and qualified staff. On the other hand, and more importantly, in addition to a contemporary skillset appropriate for managing socially mediated relationships, the successful mitigation of social media backlash requires a nuanced mindset that is not easily explained by current theory on (offline) customer relationship management. To pre-empt negative online discourse, managers should seek a transformational approach to reorient the philosophies that underpin corporate culture and better respond to the nature and scope of contemporary social media relationships.

We argue that company leaders can impact negative sentiment through a holistic approach that incorporates both the transformational and relational domains. Such a contract demands: 1) the education, empowerment and recognition of frontline employees to ensure their commitment to the brand (Fullerton and Punj, 2004; Grainer et al., 2014); 2) a company-wide understanding of, and pledge to, the brand's core values (Rokka et al., 2014); 3) consistent modelling by senior management of the brand culture (Schein, 2010); and 4) an embrace of the social aspects of social media as an investment in customer relationships (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Managers must look beyond temporary solutions that address the symptoms of backlash only rather than the cause. The current research posits that the optimal solutions can be found

through corporate introspection and ought to be shaped by the firm's cultural orientation, which has the capacity to dictate positive operational and relational outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study shines a light on the practices of firms in relation to the management of negative sentiment in social media. The findings identify a range of factors of both a relational and transformational nature that influence the character of a firm's discourse with its publics. Some practices appear more effective than others in the governance of these conversations and require further investigation. While many of the relational elements are documented in the services marketing, customer relationship and public relations literature, we believe that scope exists to better understand how some of the transformational elements identified in this study can be combined with the relational elements in an all-of-company approach to mitigate the negative effects of unfavourable brand sentiment expressed through social media. Corporate culture, ethics, human relations and operational management all play a vital role in the consumer-brand relationship, yet little is known about the optimisation of their functional integration for the purposes of influencing online brand sentiment. In this regard, a more detailed examination of the application of constructs developed for the offline context in online settings will aid in the integration of multidisciplinary theory and will be of particular value to retailers whose operations are wholly online. Future research might also examine the antecedent role of abstract forces in shaping relationally based responses to negative social media sentiment. In addition, as social media is playing a greater role in brand management and the communication of brand values, it is important to understand how it can be integrated as more than a mere communications adjunct, to influence brand culture and thus reduce backlash. This imperative is accentuated by the fast-moving nature of social media platforms, Facebook specifically. We therefore encourage researchers to explore the

scope of company reactions to anti-brand behaviours through the longitudinal ethnographic examination of online communities.

Some of the more explicit aspects of the transactional elements identified in this study also warrant greater scrutiny. For example, research is required to answer the following questions: how can frontline staff be better trained and/or supported to minimise conflict? What role does corporate social responsibility play in minimising brand backlash and self-moderation of online communities? What influence do negative brand comments in social media have on other users? And while this research was not intended to identify causal relationships, it is apparent from our findings that the scale and complexity of large firms increase their social distance with their publics which are a source of customer angst. We therefore suggest that future researchers examine these variables from a positivist approach to quantitatively measure their impact on sentiment.

We acknowledge that the results of the current study are limited in their generalisability by virtue of the methodological paradigm underpinning the research design and the context of case studies which focused on one specific industry segment. Nonetheless, we encourage researchers to audit customer complaints by topic in retail fashion firms to determine whether specific elements of the servicescape generate online complaints more than others. In particular, greater understanding of the relationship between staff training and the inculcation of brand values in the context of an increasingly casual and part-time workforce may generate useful insights relating to negative brand sentiment. Similarly, given the increasing role of e-commerce in this sector, understanding the phenomena in the context of purely online stores, whose reliance on social media networks is greater than that of bricks-and-mortar retailers, will be of benefit to practitioners. Finally, we also recommend an examination of the character and impact of negative branding in low-involvement products,

recognising that the hedonic nature of the fashion context of the current study appears to influence behaviour in some cohorts.

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