

Social Media Strategy in the Italian Fashion Industry: A New Model of Analysis

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Abstract Research regarding social-media strategy is a rapidly growing field of interest as social media (SM hereinafter) become vital tools for marketing managers to communicate with the consumer who is increasingly eager to share opinions and to be involved in the “brand life”. Customer involvement through interaction with a brand is deeply related to the effectiveness of the SM strategy. As a consequence, companies need to carefully define the key elements of their SM strategy and make decisions about goals, the target audience, channel choice, content-planning activities, resource allocation, internal policies, monitoring, and controlling the online activity in order to increase consumer brand awareness and make their SM strategy more effective. The literature provides some models of analysis, but further investigations are still necessary. In particular, it is not clear how certain variables such as the level of brand social engagement or, the company size and the company market segment, can affect the level of importance of the SM strategic dimensions. We hypothesized that the key elements of SM strategy can have variable weights in relation to these variables, and we test our assumptions on fashion industry companies. Analysis was conducted on a total sample of 42 companies, and the results show that there is a significantly different perception about the weight that the single strategic dimension can have. Companies with a high level of social engagement, for example, have a higher perception of the strategic role of the resource allocation, internal policies, and the content definition compared with the perception of lower socially engaged companies; small companies generally do not perceived the importance of monitoring and controlling SM activity highly as compared to large and medium companies, while luxury-brand companies rely more on the strategic role of the target audience dimension, the policy, and the

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content-planning activity. Managerial implications about the way the marketing manager can plan a SM strategy are then derived from these results.

Keywords Social media strategy • Fashion brands • Strategic dimensions • Social engagement

1 Social Media Strategy in the Fashion Industry: An Introduction

Social media (SM) has become vital for marketing managers to communicate with consumers, who are increasingly eager to share their opinions and engage with brands. A number of studies have found that, when used effectively, SM can be a valuable communication instrument to enhance the consumer brand engagement (Sashi 2012), which in turn leads to a significant positive impact on long-term customer relationships (Hofmann and Fodor 2010) and brand loyalty (Erdogmus and Cicek 2012). Today's consumer is more powerful than ever. The degree of consumer involvement in brands is closely related to the effectiveness of a company's SM strategy. Specifically, companies need to carefully define the key elements of their SM strategies, including number and types of SM to use, the purposes of the interactions, communication contents, expected results, budget allocations, etc., in order to achieve customer engagement in all facets (Effing 2013). In using SM, managers need to shift the marketing strategic focus from "trying to sell" to "making connections" with consumers (Gordhamer 2009), which implies new definitions of strategic dimensions.

This is especially true for fashion brands that can no longer base their success on secure, regular customers as they could in the past (Kim and Ko 2012). Today, expanding brand image and customer engagement have become critical for positioning in the fashion market (Brun et al. 2008). Consumers of fashion actively interact by means of digital platforms (Boyd Thomas et al. 2007; Rickman and Cosenza 2007), such as online communities of fashion bloggers that are important for creating consumer engagement.

In this context, one of the most effective and nearly cost-free ways to increase companies' appeal is SM (Kim and Ko 2010). Its effectiveness is demonstrated by its growing use among fashion brands (Kim and Ko 2012). Initially, fashion brands showed low commitment in integrating advanced Internet technologies (Okonkwo 2009), as they were not fully convinced of the potential of these channels to attract customers (Kim and Ko 2010); this was especially true for luxury-fashion brands. One of the core features of the Internet is the classless mass media aspect, which seems to contradict the exclusivity and uniqueness of luxury brands (Ng 2014). Today, the luxury industry has gradually recognized the importance of using the internet and SM to enhance a brand's reputation, increase interactions with customers, and stimulate their desire for luxury (Ng 2014). As an example, SM has

helped Burberry to revitalize its brand and reposition it to a new, younger market (Phan et al. 2011). Despite this significant attention from the industry, there is still a dearth of scholarly sources from a SM strategy perspective. Structured research is still lacking, and an empirical analysis of these aspects could produce interesting findings.

The present research aims to define and measure the key elements of SM strategy and SM's role for fashion companies.

It represents the first phase of a wider investigation aimed at measuring the relationship between the SM strategic elements used by companies in the fashion industry and the performance marketing KPI's (like the brand reputation index, the level of brand awareness, the brand equity online, etc.) that will be investigated in the second phase of the research.

Consequently, it is intended that the contribution derived from this work will be expanded, once these results have been compared with the marketing performance indexes. From the analysis of the key elements used by companies related to their online marketing results, we will derive important strategic insights both from a theoretical point of view and from a managerial one. Marketing theory can benefit from this contribution because the study will highlight the differences with the communication strategies used in the traditional economy and because it will make possible to build high-performance SM communication models. The measurement of the key elements is a first, very important step of the research that bridges the gap in the literature and enable further progress in marketing theory and practice.

Managers can find important insights for their SM marketing planning activity.

2 Definition of Social Media Strategy

SM is a broad term for online applications, platforms, and media that aim to facilitate interactions, collaboration, and sharing of content. It takes a variety of forms, including weblogs, social blogs, microblogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures, videos, and social networks. SM is defined as "activities, practices and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinion using conversational media" (Safko and Brake 2009). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) expand on this definition by underlining the role of customer content: "SM is a group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content."

SM is a powerful phenomenon that has changed social interactions globally. Therefore, it is crucial for companies today to engage and use social networks in order to be competitive in the market (Burkhalter et al. 2014; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Larson and Watson 2011; Othman et al. 2013). SM is changing the way business is conducted by providing low-cost platforms for personal branding (Dutta 2010) and corporate and brand reputation, and, regardless of company size or industry, SM has become a mandatory element of companies' marketing strategies

(Hanna et al. 2011). To operate in this new context, companies need to define their strategies so as to plan and organize activities to create unique and valuable market positions. Given the particular nature of these SM instruments, the concept of strategy should specifically focus on “digital business strategy,” defined by Bharadwaj et al. (2013) as “an organizational strategy formulated and executed by leveraging digital resources to create differential value.” SM is an important part of a company’s digital resources, and researchers consider SM strategy “a goal-directed planning process for creating user generated content, driven by a group of internet applications, to create a unique and valuable competitive position” (Effing and Spil 2016).

Based on a survey of the literature, SM strategy is a rapidly growing field of interest. Contributions underline SM usage for investigating consumer behaviour and monitoring ongoing activities for market research (as in the netnography approach of Kozinets (2002)), and for companies marketing and advertising their offerings to wide online audiences (Curran et al. 2011; Constantinides et al. 2008; Munar 2012; Wilson et al. 2011). Other research focuses on step-by-step strategies for implementing SM in order to determine the best plan for how to introduce and effectively use SM instruments (Hayes et al. 2013; Othman et al. 2013; Rodriguez-Donaire 2012; See-Pui Ng and Chung Wang 2013). Some authors propose specific SM strategies; for example, Wilson et al. (2011) suggest different types of strategies in relation to a company’s intention to use SM tools for a specific area such as customer service or for large-scale interactions. Constantinides et al. (2008) distinguish between “active” and “passive” utilization of SM as a marketing tool in the first case or only for monitoring users in the second case.

In a deep analysis of the SM-strategy literature, Effing and Spil (2016) arrives at a list of seven key elements that are often included in authors’ contributions on this topic. These elements generally comprise companies’ SM strategies, and their correct consideration when approaching SM as a fundamental ingredient in high-quality SM planning. In particular, the SM strategy elements to consider are: setting SM strategy goals in terms of specific expected results; defining the target audience; defining “channel choice” by setting a multichannel versus single-platform policy; deciding on the content planning activities by scheduling posts, including determining the style, content, and types of posts; establishing the levels of resource allocation, both financial and in terms of human working time; setting policies and the best practices for employee to minimize risks; and monitoring and controlling the online customer, brand awareness generated by SM activity. In analyzing the presence of these items in SM strategies in nine cases, Effing and Spil (2016) distinguishes three stages of maturity for SM strategy development: initiation, when the focus is on channel choice and target; diffusion, when policies, goals, and resources are crucial elements; and maturity, when the focus is on monitoring and content. The author introduces the concept of the “social strategy cone” as a framework for companies’ SM strategies. Effing and Spil (2016) study is an important contribution to better understanding SM-strategy development because it clarifies the components of SM-strategy plans by assessing their quality.

Following the Effing model, this paper takes into consideration the seven key elements of SM strategy proposed by Effing and goes further in trying to measure the weights of these elements in SM strategies. In other words, while the Eiffel model contribution is that to identify and define the key elements of SM strategy, in our work we measure the importance of these elements for fashion companies. Moreover we also identify another value that they can have when considering some clusters of fashion companies classified by size, segment target, and level of online engagement.

The measurement of the key elements is a contribution to marketing theory and practice as it gives important insight about the strategic priority and, once compared with marketing performance, it makes clear the directions that SM strategy must have for each fashion company.

3 Conceptual Model and Hypothesis Development

In building a conceptual model, as mentioned before, this paper extends the Effing approach by measuring the weight of the seven key elements in specific company clusters of the fashion industry classified using three variables: level of online customer engagement, company size, and company market position. The reason for this analysis is that companies may have different approaches to SM strategy in relation to their online brand reputations, levels of engagement, sizes, and market positions (luxury, accessible luxury, or mass market).

Specifically, the present paper aims to investigate four research questions (RQs), as detailed in the following paragraphs.

RQ1. What is the relevance of the key elements in fashion companies' SM strategies? This question aims to identify fashion companies' perceptions about the key SM elements. Ineffective perceptions can lead to poorly planned SM activity, which could heavily affect online performance.

Perceptions can differ when companies have a great number of followers and the brand has a high level of online awareness and/or customer engagement. Customer engagement is defined as "the level of a customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment in specific brand interactions" (Hollenbeck 2011: p. 565). The relationship between SM and customer engagement is analyzed in the literature in terms of benefits (Brodie et al. 2013; Ramaswamy 2009; Sawhney et al. 2005) or valuable communication (Sashi 2012). Parent et al. (2011) propose a framework they call the six C model that explains how to engage customers through SM; the six key elements are very similar to those of the Effing and Spil (2016) model. The authors consider "companies" in terms of defining the platforms a company wants to utilize for its online presence (similar to channel choice in the Effing model); "content" in terms of accurately selecting subjects to post about; "control" in terms of monitoring; and "communities" in terms of the people who help to spread the word of mouth and thus create online buzz. The final two elements of the framework are the target "customer" and "conversations;" engaging in conversations is key to a successful

SM presence. The relationships that the authors discuss, regarding key elements of company SM behaviour and customer engagement, led to the next research question:

RQ2. Do key elements have different weights in SM strategies for companies with different levels of online, brand customer engagement?

This paper analyzes company size as a discriminant variable in SM strategy. Small businesses can benefit from SM because they can present their products and services to extremely large audiences and still maintain close relationships with them (Lacho and Marinello 2010). Moreover, SM tools are often relatively inexpensive (Kahle and Valette-Florence 2012), which can be a great advantage for small companies with tight marketing budgets. The research question for this aspect is:

RQ3. Does company size matter in SM strategies?

The paper then considers the fashion brand's market position (mass market, accessible luxury, or luxury) as an indicator of a company's SM-strategy behavior. Existing studies on the fashion industry focus mainly on large global luxury fashion brands (e.g. Kontu and Vecchi 2014; Ng 2014) and do not consider small to medium-sized enterprise (SME) brands, including SME luxury brands. The relevant research question here is:

RQ4. Does company market position matter in strategic SM behavior?

4 Empirical Settings and Methodology

The research process is based on an explorative approach that aims to understand the different weights of the key elements of SM strategy used by fashion companies. It is articulated through several phases, as detailed below.

4.1 Sample Definition and the Questionnaire

To investigate the research questions, a self-administrated questionnaire was developed. The online survey was distributed to fashion companies that use SM for their marketing activities, and 42 completed surveys were returned. The questionnaire was structured in five sections: Sect. 1 collected general company information (e.g., dimension); Sect. 2 analyzed companies' SM strategies in both qualitative and quantitative ways, investigating most-used SM tools; Sect. 3 focused on implemented SM activities, their monetary, and time investments and their effectiveness in terms of achieving cognitive, emotional, or behavioral engagement; Sect. 4 investigated the monitoring of SM activities; and Sect. 5 analyzed companies' future SM directions. The sample for this study was particularly comfortable with SM: in addition to their corporate websites, 84% of companies used both a SM institutional page and an e-commerce site; only 11% had a unique presence on

SM. A total of 95% of the surveyed companies used social networks in some way, 81% were present in a content community such as YouTube, 51% had blogs, 3% were present on social news websites, and 5% participated in collaborative projects. Simulation environments such as virtual worlds (Second Life, for example) were not used by any of the companies, showing that these tools are not yet perceived as strategically important, given the limited availability of resources. Moreover, in terms of resource allocation, the data showed that 87% of fashion companies spent up to 25% of their marketing budgets on SM.

4.2 *The Definition of Variables*

RQ1 was tested using questions on the key elements of an effective SM strategy. In particular, for the “Goals” element, this section of the questionnaire divided customer engagement into its components (cognitive, emotional, behavioral) and measured each using specific questions, such as the importance of informing consumers about brand and company events (cognitive engagement), consolidating and strengthening brand attachment (emotional engagement), and sharing opinions on the brand and generating consumer content, website traffic, etc. (behavioral engagement). All these questions formed a specific construct, called D1. D2 considered companies’ channel choices by measuring their awareness that different SM channels address different target groups (Dutta 2010). Because each SM channel has its own richness and appropriateness (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Smith et al. 2012), this study also measured perceptions of the relationships between SM channels and communication goals on one side and customer engagement on the other. D3 assessed the perceptions of target audiences in the context of SM strategy. Companies need to identify which groups to address with SM, including knowing how different groups use it (Thackeray et al. 2008). D4 considered SM policies and best practices. Organizations need to have basic rules in place to protect their corporate reputations (Mortleman 2011), because SM blurs the boundaries between organizations and the environment. D5 focused on content planning in terms of the timing of campaigns, product promotions, conversational themes, and the arguments that are generally used in SM activity (Klang and Nolin 2011).

D6 measured resource allocation in terms of SM budget and working time. The success of SM strategy depends primarily on the level of resources allocated to it (Dutta 2010). Finally, D7 measured the perceived importance of monitoring and controlling activity by observing what was happening on company SM sites. Standard software tools, together with simple measurement metrics, can help in evaluating online SM activity (Klang and Nolin 2011); examples of such tools include Google Alert, Buzzient, Klout, and Twitalizer (Woodcock et al. 2011) (Fig. 1).

RQ2 was tested using metrics extracted from the Talkwalker platform, which is one of the main social-data, intelligence tools. It processes 500 million posts from 150 million websites every day, monitoring and analyzing all conversations on

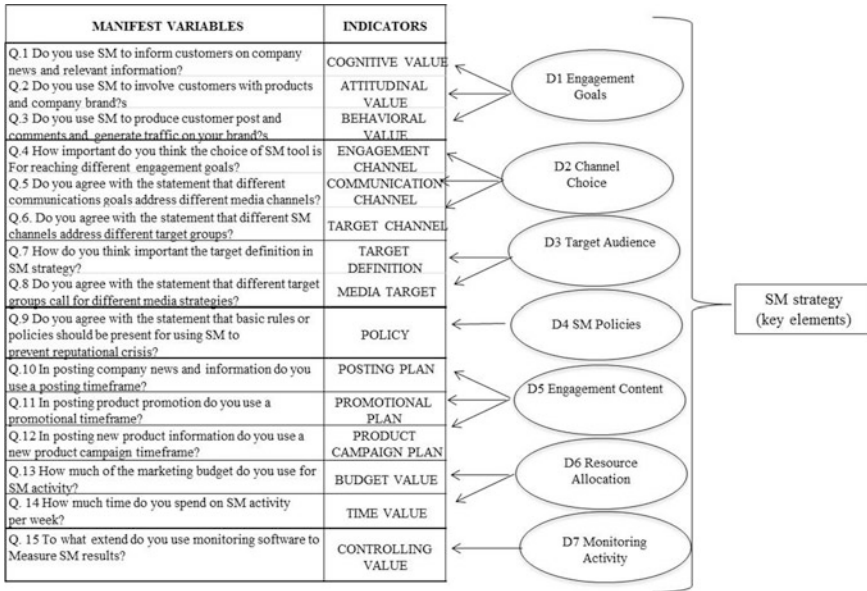


Fig. 1 Manifest variables, indicators and key elements

social networks, news websites, blogs, forums, and other sources in 187 different languages. Talkwalker is used by more than 500 large global brands, including Benetton, KPMG, Merck, and BASF. The research results are aggregated in performance indicators such as the number of “mentions,” which measures the number of online mentions and reflects the buzz around a brand—that is, how many people are talking about it in a specific period; “Engagement”, which looks at how people interact with brands through posts on SM (likes, shares, favorites) and gives an idea of how viral SM activity is; and “Potential Reach”, which measures how many users a company could reach with its activities. Table 1 shows these metrics for each company in the sample.

RQ3 was tested using company size (small, medium, or large) as a discriminant variable measured by the number of employees according to the European Commission’s definition of SMEs.

From a descriptive point of view, some evidence emerged initially regarding social networks, blogs, and community presence: whereas large and medium-size companies were present on all SM channels, small businesses did not manage social networks institutionally. This diversity could be related not to different strategic perceptions, but to smaller companies’ more limited budgets in terms of both resources and time. This assumption is confirmed by two different results from the survey. First, marketing managers expressed positive opinions regarding the use of these instruments on every dimension, and second, companies invested different levels of dedicated SM resources (up to 25% of the marketing budget for small companies versus more than 25% for larger firms). The same results emerged in the

Table 1 Customer engagement metrics (talkwalker and social mentions)

Company dataset	Mentions	Engagement	Potential reach	Negative	Sentiment neutral	Positive
PEUTEREY	749	1970	233.3	355	281	112
A S. WATSON	8062	180600	68.5 g	3869	2813	1380
CRIMSON	6	9	15.1 m	0	4	2
ROBERTO CAVALLI	4038	32200	24.9 g	211	3144	683
KOCCA srl	238	1400	263.1 m	17	179	42
CONTE OF FLORENCE	24	7	47.8 m	0	17	7
NOMINATION ITALY	59	99	2.8 m	33	21	5
TESSILFORM (PATRIZIA PEPE)	573	4.156	1.2 G	28	428	117
EMILIO PUCCI	1300	188	992.6 M	19	1161	122
MODAE SRL-BRAINTROPHY	51	159	726,20 K	1	28	22
BRACCIALINI	52	1400	1.6 M	1	44	7
PIQUADRO	384	444	685.7 M	11	173	200
LA PERLA	988	1800	863.9 M	125	646	217
MARINA RINALDI—MMFG	85	17	5.6 M	3	0	82
LIU JO	298	1700	403.8 M	15	234	49
DSQUARED2	1717	14400	13.2 G	121	1389	207
CALZEDONIA	5029	72200	2.9 g	358	3352	1319
ANTICA OFFICINA DEL FARM	14	0	286.3 M	0	10	4
SALVATORE FERRAGAMO	1339	2100	2.8 G	82	1105	160
ELISABETH SRL (WALK SAFARI)	3	1	140.1 K	0	0	1
OBERALP	83	39	11.5 M	4	68	11
MABRUN	2	0	22.3 M		1	1
GRISPORT	4	0	0	0	0	4
CELEGHIN	0	0	0	0	0	0
SPIDI SPORT	152	70	55 M	6	99	77
VALENTINO	5175	18800	13.9 G	413	3965	797
OVS Spa	1407	4300	1.5 G	155	744	548
ANTICO SETIFICIO FIORENTINO	0	0	0	0	0	0
LUXOTTICA	1600	30900	4.2 g	231	908	448
LUISAVIAROMACOM	1795	2900	3.2 g	88	1043	664
MANTERO SETA SPA	4	42	20300	0	2	2
PARAH	88.100	773.800	12.6 g	25580	51420	11039
LUISA SPAGNOLI	92	5200	226.9 m	1	62	29
VIONNET	525	4700	3.5 g	28	436	61

analysis of the time dedicated to SM activity (10 h per week for small companies as compared to 20 h for larger firms). These results were the basis for answering RQ3, which considered company size a discriminant variable in the key elements of SM strategy.

RQ4 was tested using company market position, and the sample was divided into two groups (accessible luxury/luxury and mass market) as derived from Saviolo and Testa (2005).

5 Results

Table 2 shows the results of the analysis. Column 1 shows the means for each indicator (I) and each key element (KE) for the full sample in order to answer RQ1. The other columns distinguish companies by the level of customer engagement (RQ2), size (RQ3), and market position (RQ4). For each company classification, the study measured the mean value for each indicator, the aggregated mean value for each KE, and the differences in the key elements per group (Δ KE) within the company class.

For RQ1, the companies reported clear engagement goals (D1), cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral (aggregated mean KE = 4.58), but the other SM key elements had less weight in strategy formulations.

The “channel choice” (D2), “target audience” (D3), and “content planning” (D5) were rated as relatively equally important (3.53, 3.15, 3.24, respectively), and “monitoring” weighed less (2.51). The “policies and best practices” were not rated as especially important (2.02), and neither was the “resource allocation” (2.00).

For RQ2, the main differences in the key element ratings between companies with high versus low or moderate levels of customer engagement were in “policies” (Δ KE 2.36), “resource allocations” (Δ KE 2.27), and “content planning” (Δ KE 1.65).

Answering RQ3 showed that the main differences in the key SM elements between small and medium–large companies related to “monitoring” (Δ KE 2.62) and “engagement goals” (Δ KE—1.03).

Finally, answering RQ4 revealed consistent differences among luxury and accessible luxury market companies compared with mass-market companies; these differences mainly related to “policies” (Δ KE 1.96) and “content planning” (Δ KE 1.92), whereas the weights were quite different for “target audience” (Δ KE 1.70), “channel choice” (Δ KE 1.15), and “monitoring” (Δ KE 1.18).

Table 2 Indicators and key elements for the full sample (RQ1) and for the sample divided by level of customer engagement (RQ2), company size (RQ3), and market position (RQ4)

MV	Customer engagement			Company size						Company market position							
	I	KE	I (HCE)	KE (HCE)	I (LMCE)	KE (LMCE)	ΔKE	I (SC)	KE (SC)	I (MLC)	KE (MLC)	ΔKE	I (LC)	KE (LC)	I (MMC)	KE (MMC)	ΔKE
Q1	4.51		4.83		4.20			4.10		4.93			4.61		4.42		
Q2	4.74	D1	4.58	4.62	4.87	4.38	0.41	4.70	4.43	4.79	4.73	-0.30	4.90	4.80	4.59	4.36	0.44
Q3	4.49		4.91		4.06			4.50		4.47			4.90		4.07		
Q4	3.82		4.22		3.42			3.20		4.44			4.10		3.54		
Q5	3.56	D2	3.53	3.98	3.14	2.98	1.09	3.15	3.15	3.97	3.91	-0.76	4.20	4.10	2.92	2.95	1.15
Q6	3.20		4.01		2.39			3.09		3.31			4.00		2.40		
Q7	3.45	D3	3.15	3.80	3.10	2.80	0.70	3.15	2.83	3.75	3.48	-0.65	4.05	4.00	2.85	2.30	1.70
Q8	2.85		3.20		2.50			2.50		3.20			3.95		1.75		
Q9	2.02	D4	2.02	3.20	0.84	0.84	2.36	1.80	1.80	2.24	2.24	-0.44	3.00	3.00	1.04	1.04	1.96
Q10	3.52		4.12		2.92			3.22		3.82			3.85		3.19		
Q11	3.21	D5	3.24	4.10	2.32	2.42	1.65	3.14	3.09	3.28	3.40	-0.31	5.56	4.20	0.86	2.28	1.92
Q12	3.00		3.99		2.01			2.90		3.10			3.20		2.80		
Q13	2.00	D6	2.00	3.15	0.85	0.87	2.27	1.80	1.65	2.20	2.35	-0.70	2.10	2.30	1.90	1.70	0.60
Q14	2.00		3.12		0.88			1.50		2.50			2.50		1.50		
Q15	2.51	D7	3.15	3.15	1.87	1.87	1.28	1.20	1.20	3.82	3.82	-2.62	3.10	3.10	1.92	1.92	1.18

Legenda

- MV Manifest variables
- M Media
- I Indicators
- KE Key elements of SM strategy
- I (HCE) Indicators for companies with a high level of customer engagement
- KE (HCE) Key elements of SM strategy of companies with a high level of customer engagement
- I (LMCE) Indicators for companies with a low-medium level of customer engagement
- KE (LMCE) Key elements of SM strategy of companies with a low-medium level of customer engagement
- I (SC) Indicators for small companies
- KE (SC) Key elements of SM strategy of small companies
- I (LMC) Indicators for medium-large companies
- KE (LMC) Key elements of SM strategy of medium-large companies
- I (LC) Indicators for companies of luxury market
- KE (LC) Key elements of SM strategy of companies of luxury market
- I (ALC) Indicators for companies of accessible luxury market
- KE (ALC) Key elements of SM strategy of companies of accessible luxury market
- I (MMC) Indicators for companies of mass market
- KE (MMC) Key elements of SM strategy of companies of mass market

6 Discussion and Conclusions

The results identified various different patterns of fashion companies' behaviors related to SM strategy formulation. The key elements of SM strategy have different weights for the fashion companies in relation to their online customer engagement, size, and market position. Engagement (D1) in all facets (cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral) is a fundamental aspect of SM strategy for each company, regardless of company online engagement, size, or market position. Setting objectives determines target outcomes, and this should preferably be done before entry into SM; it makes SM strategies more successful because various techniques can be easily evaluated and constantly adapted if necessary. Defining SM goals requires alignment with overall business goals (Keitzmann et al. 2011) in order to ensure full employee commitment on one side and clear definitions of brand identity and brand image on the other (Ranfagni et al. 2016). One specific SM goal is obviously to engage customers in the brand to increase brand reputation and, consequently, brand equity and firm performance. Customer engagement can be pursued from a cognitive direction when companies have the goal of widespread product and corporate news; from an attitudinal direction when company/consumer interaction aims to build positive brand-related effect; and from the behavioral direction when companies aim to stimulate online reactions such as shares, comments, posts, and website searches. Each goal can be better achieved if it is specifically defined at the beginning of SM-strategy formulation, and fashion companies appear to be aware of this need for planning, given the high values for KE indicators in this study.

In terms of channel choice (D2), fashion companies with high online consumer engagement and luxury companies appear to be more aware of the fact that the choice of an appropriate SM platform (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were the most frequently named sites) can affect overall communication. Selecting a SM platform should be based not only on companies' goals (advertisement, product promotion, building brand reputation) but also on target audience, platform preference, and SM usage. Researchers (Lehmkuhl et al. 2013) argue that it is crucial to have a proper Web presence on various SM platforms and to integrate the various platforms to form an entire SM-communication infrastructure. Further, Hanna et al. (2011) suggest that, as companies develop SM strategies, platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are too often treated as stand-alone elements rather than as parts of integrated systems. Companies need to treat SM as an ecosystem of related elements that involve both digital and traditional media. The attention to SM channels by fashion companies with high online engagement and by luxury fashion companies can be explained by the fact that, because brands are followed by users across a variety of online platforms, brand reputations are very vulnerable. This is also why the D3 variable (the target audience) was weighted more heavily by luxury companies than by the others; luxury companies need to pay attention to gain significant reach and attract their target audiences. Determining the right target audience can result from either internal considerations about which group is most likely to purchase certain products or services (segmentation) or by consumer

research (Thackeray et al. 2012). Luxury companies reach out to and address key opinion leaders, and these influencers are often the only way to gain and/or maintain brand awareness and lead other users to talk about the brands. Targeting the active participants (Kang et al. 2014) on SM helps to improve brand reputation and popularity because consumers who engage could become brand advocates and create buzz online.

Fashion companies with high levels of customer engagement and luxury companies both rated policies (D4), content planning (D5), and monitoring more highly than other key elements. These companies are more concerned about the risks related to SM (See-Pui Ng and Chung Wang 2013; Vaast and Kaganer 2013), and they attempt to minimize risk by fostering employer attention to SM policies. These policies should ensure the appropriate use of SM (Thackeray et al. 2012) and provide guidelines for employees' usage (Constantinides et al. 2008), directing what they can and cannot post on company websites; this can prevent misguided situations. SM policies are also useful in determining a company's degree of information disclosure (Burkhalter et al. 2014). In this sense, employee training on SM policies can avoid reputational crises and the disclosure of sensitive data. A SM content plan implies creating a schedule for corporate posts (Barnes 2014) that includes the type of content, frequency, and subjects of posts. The regularity of posting (Shen and Bissell 2013) and content variety (Barnes 2014) are important in attracting followers. Moreover, the posts' style, language, and attitudes are crucial for companies that base their strength on their online reputations. In order to foster engagement, posting activity needs to be oriented more towards interactions than promoting products to create a sense of membership among users (Shen and Bissell 2013); this feeling of membership is the basis of brand reputation and brand engagement.

Attention to SM monitoring is higher for fashion companies and larger companies because of their concerns for their brand reputations. Monitoring data is fundamental for marketing research (Malthouse et al. 2013), specifically for minimizing the potential impact of negative posts or user conversations. Moreover, the number of likes, posts, or retweets on companies' SM sites can provide an overview of the value of their communication activities. Comparing these numbers with those of competitors might provide a measure of overall SM performance. Monitoring can be accomplished with available monitoring tools (Constantinides et al. 2008; Jansen et al. 2009). These tools can help firms better understand their acceptance among users and the effectiveness of their actions. Finally, in terms of resource allocation, only fashion companies with high customer engagement appeared to be aware of the need to allocate sufficient financial and time resources to SM activity; employees need to be trained and specifically allocated to this task. In general, there was a tendency to use existing marketing staff members to play this role without specific division of labor. The low attention paid to this variable by the companies in the sample appears to confirm that companies are not completely ready to operate within SM.

7 Managerial Implications and Research Limitations

The present study examines the relevance of the key elements in SM strategy formulation. The study findings support the following conclusions.

First, SM managers of fashion companies need to carefully define SM plans before initiating social website activity in terms of clearly defined engagement goals, in addition to precise identification of company target audiences and the appropriate media platforms in which to operate. Engagement content must be scheduled, not improvised. Employees must be properly trained in order to avoid any reputational damage. The budget allocation has to be determined as a part of the total marketing budget, and monitoring will give accurate information on SM results. All fashion companies appeared to be aware of this, although they weighed various elements (budget allocation and policies, for example) differently.

Second, fashion companies with high levels of online brand awareness and/or customer engagement and luxury fashion companies had higher perceptions of the importance of the key elements of SM strategy that were analyzed in this study. This result can be explained by the different levels of attention marketing managers pay to fashion brand value. On one side, managers perceive greater risks in SM because online reputational crises could lead to uncontrollable brand value damage; this risk encourages SM managers to more carefully plan their companies' SM activities. From the other side, however, marketing managers are aware that SM activity facilitates brand management by providing a type of open window into their customers that traditional marketing media do not usually provide. SM platforms offer venues for customers to engage in sincere and friendly communication with brands, and fashion companies can orient customer preferences, strengthen relationships, build brand reputations, and create purchase intentions. Proper SM planning, aimed at the right target audience and using the right media platform, may enable the achievement of multiple brand management objectives without high resource allocation.

Finally, company size appeared to be nearly irrelevant for the perceptions of the key elements of SM strategy. Large companies' perceptions were slightly higher than those of SMEs; the only important difference was that mainly larger companies engaged in monitoring activity.

In conclusion, the main contribution of this study is that it provides a conceptual framework by analyzing the key elements of SM strategy as used by fashion companies. This information can be helpful for marketing managers who are developing SM strategies because they can identify the elements they need to focus on.

The primary limitation of the study is its small sample size; it would be appropriate to validate the results obtained with a larger sample. In addition, studies on companies in other sectors would be valuable.

The second phase of this research will investigate the relationships between the key elements of SM strategy and SM performance, such as brand reputation and

customer engagement. It would be of great interest to learn, for example, whether customer engagement is affected more by multichannel or single-channel SM strategies, by the level of budget allocation, or by a particular target definition.

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