

A Study on the Online Branding Strategies of Indian Fashion Retail Stores

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The presence of Internet for business has created a large amount of scholarly literature on Internet marketing and consumer behavior. But relatively little empirical work has been undertaken on branding strategies over Internet. In recent years, customers are giving more value to brand and online experience. Also, the shift of power from companies to customer has pushed businesses to redefine their marketing and branding strategies. The paper contributes to the knowledge on online branding through exploratory research and identifies the ways in which the online channel is being used to support brands. The focus of this research is the online fashion store and multichannel retailers in India. The findings of the research confirm a consistency in multichannel brand visibility approaches over online and other channels, but their strategy for online brand relationship is still underdeveloped.

Introduction

Many companies have incorporated Internet into their business practices. The comparative advantages of using the Internet appear compelling in providing cost, time, reach and interactivity benefits to consumers as well as for businesses. Internet shopping is also showing a steady rise in the marketplace. A recent report on online shopping released by Indian industry chamber Assocham (2013) showed that India's e-commerce market rose from about \$2.5 bn in 2009 to \$6.3 bn in 2011, \$8.5 bn in 2012 and further to \$16 bn in 2013. The survey shows that small companies have also facilitated group buying through online stores, which means that customer can avail discounted goods when specified people make online purchase. Most of these purchases include gift articles (58%), railway tickets (39%), electronic gadgets (41%), and apparel (36%). Internet is also becoming a compelling channel for fashion goods. Even though this Internet sales account for a small percentage in total retail sales, it is the fastest growing sector of retailing. Retailing fashion online was seen as unlikely to be successful in the early days of e-commerce, because of people's need to touch and try on clothes and the social experience associated with clothes shopping (Goswami and Mathur, 2011). The volumes and revenue from clothes and footwear sales online have grown progressively between 25-30% each year since 2000 (IMRG, 2006).

A big share of online fashion spending is spent by the 60 million Indian women who are reportedly online. While convenience may be one of the reasons for women in Tier II and Tier III cities, availability of sheer variety of products, desire to have something unique and discounts are other reasons of shopping online. It not only provides an

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excellent means for fashion retailers to display most updated fashion lines via photographs and audio-video interfaces, but also the use of websites enables them to sell direct to customers (Hines and Bruce, 2012). In traditional online retailing, web presence and low prices were believed to be key drivers of success, but presently brand proposition has become essential for creating customer loyalty and improving customer satisfaction (Yang, 2001). While developing a multichannel strategy, retailers are required to extend their service offering and online brand to give customer a tailored and flexible brand experience. In line with the increase of consumer involvement and spending on fashion goods, there is an increasing academic interest and industry requirement in studying fashion electronic retailing. Most of the prior research on fashion e-tailing is related to website design, consumer behavior and shopping style, but there is almost less focus on retailer online branding strategies.

Value of Brand

Traditionally, branding is associated with creating value through persuasive offers and customer experience that keep satisfied customers coming back. This explains its dominant influence as a source of company-wide benefits, including enhanced competitiveness, differentiated corporate image, enhanced products or services' profile, increased equity and greater customer loyalty (Aaker, 1991). Companies that surpass in creating favorable emotional associations with their customers through effective branding typically gain a strong market share and sustainable competitive advantage for future growth. The growing respect for the value of brand in retail industry (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004) has made this topic one of the most discussed issues in fashion discussion forum (Thomas *et al.*, 2007). In addition, brand knowledge and familiarity has a positive effect on intention to purchase from online retailer (Chen and He, 2003; and Park and Stoel, 2005).

Internet has upended how consumers engage with brands. It is transforming the economics of marketing and making obsolete many of the traditional branding strategies. That means traditional branding strategies must be redesigned to accord with the changing relationship of customer with brand. Even after a purchase, consumers may engage with brand by publicly promoting their experience, collaborating in the brands' development (Edelman, 2010). The spread of Internet is accelerating companies to create their own online brand community as a marketing communication tool because of the advantages in terms of cost-saving and raising their brand loyalty (Choi, 2013). It has also been argued that in the present digitized world with effects of information overload, brands are becoming ever more important because they save the customer time by reducing their search costs and helping them to make decision in a world that is full with choice and riddled with change (Ward and Lee, 2000; and Rubenstein and Griffiths, 2001).

Despite the heavy investments in online advertising and e-brand building, opinions of researchers and practitioners remain polarized regarding the value of e-branding. Advances in Internet technology have increased company efficiencies but also intensified

competition with low barrier of entry; enhanced customer power by information but also overstretched customer cognitive capacities (Doyle, 1998). This has raised new queries regarding online communication strategies. The study objectives arise from the fact that online branding requires a review of established branding principles coupled with an understanding of the specific opportunities offered by the online channel (Rowley, 2009). In the absence of sufficient evidence from existing literature, the present paper seeks to report on exploratory research that aims to contribute to knowledge on online branding and the way in which the online channel is being used to support brands. The focus of this research is on popular online fashion retailer's websites and multichannel fashion retailers, also having online presence as websites, in India. Content analysis was performed on the websites of a number of top fashion clothing retailers. An analysis of the extent to which the retailers were using their websites to provide online services and information gives a context for a more detailed analysis of online branding strategies, including communicating brand identity and presence, and building brand relationships.

Literature Review

The majority of research in online fashion retailing is concentrated on understanding consumer behavior and website design issue but seldom discusses the importance of branding. Kim and Stoel (2004) identified the importance of transaction cost factors over webpage design issue in predicting online clothing shopping attributes. A study on consumer decision-making style among US students with respect to online apparel consumption confirms that shoppers are brand and quality-conscious. These customers shop fashion products impulsively, but also reflect brand loyalty (Cowart and Goldsmith, 2007). Jang and Burns (2004) in their study investigated the components of apparel websites and found significant differences among the four types of web retailers as to the components (product description, product price information, advertising, catalog service promotion, placing order, and returns policy) included on the websites. The study concludes that competition among websites is not based on what information is available, but how information is provided. Siddiqui *et al.* (2003) in a study of online fashion retailers found that consumers are disappointed by the lack of service and product provision provided by fashion websites. A qualitative research conducted by Ruane and Wallace (2013) understands the relationships Generation-Y females have with fashion brands online and suggests that social networks have a significant influence on the dynamics of brand consumption. Kim and Martinez (2013) examined the role of fashion leadership in the context of shopping at private sale sites. Results complement and confirm that fashion leadership is a key variable in the fashion market research. Fashion opinion leaders and innovative communicators exhibited a significantly higher level of hedonic shopping than fashion followers.

A demographic-oriented research by Kim and Kim (2004) suggested variables like gender and income were important predictors of online purchase intention. Marchiniak and Bruce (2004) conducted an extensive content analysis of 780 UK fashion retailer websites, with a view to examining retailer characteristics and also establishing the

relationship between levels of online involvement and fashion retailer type. The study found that fashion retailer uses websites as an information tool and also a majority of them have transactional websites. Different categories of retailers (e.g., multichannel retailers, store e-tailers, and pure e-tailers) provide different kinds of information which can help in providing more value to online shoppers (Kim *et al.*, 2007). Siddiqui *et al.* (2003) identified consumers' interests in the images of the online products, including opportunities to view from various angles, and displays with compatible items. Kim *et al.* (2007) categorized Web retailers as catalog e-tailers followed by multichannel retailers and pure e-tailers. The catalog e-tailers provide more product information compared to other types. Marciniak and Bruce (2004) also classified online fashion retailers based on their product focus and market positioning. It has been found from the survey of product specialists, fashion designers and general fashion retailers that e-tailing attracts various fashion retailers regardless of their product and market position. The present study categorizes fashion retailers into two broad classes as pure online retailers and multichannel retailers to study their online branding strategies.

Online Branding

Traditionally, a brand is thought to evoke a certain personality, presence and product or service performance in the customer's mind (Aaker, 1991). In addition, a brand can represent a substitute for information for simplifying the time-consuming process of search and comparison before deciding what to buy (Rowley, 2004a). The advent of the Internet technology made branding more complex and dynamic (Bergstrom, 2000). According to Chaffey (2007), online branding can be explained as the capability of online channels to support brands. Online branding is different from offline branding on dimension like 'interactivity' of Internet medium and 'convergence dynamics' as Internet can be used both as sales channel and marketing medium (Ratnasingham, 1998). e-Branding extends beyond traditional forces of promotion, catchy logos, slogans to deliver complete satisfying experiences (Dayal *et al.*, 2001; and Ibeh *et al.*, 2005). Different businesses have different objectives for their online channel with different online branding objectives. Many businesses are, thus, searching for new e-brand building strategies that may assist them in creating some distinctiveness (Kenney and Curry, 1999). Dayal *et al.* (2000) suggest that: "on the World Wide Web, the brand is the experience and the experience is the brand". Research further suggests that online companies will have to create full-fledged Internet businesses, or digital brands, that can provide familiarity, reassurance and intimacy. Customers with limited cognitive resources and time availability attempt to minimize information overload by applying mental shortcuts, a particularly effective one of which is e-branding (Ward and Lee, 2000). Branding helps to reduce complexity and information processing time, as well as enhances the trust between customers and companies. Brand is at the top of the list of six marketplace fundamentals for building and maintaining trust on the Internet along with navigability, fulfilment, presentation, technology and seals of approval (Cheskin Research, 1999).

Present literature on online branding is limited and is in a shaping stage (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005; and Simmons, 2007). Online branding may start with creating and registering logos, brand marks, and brand strap lines, and creating brand awareness and presence (Rowley, 2004b). Many organizations use a corporate brand website to attach their online branding strategy and provide opportunity to extend the brand over a wide range of products and services and are therefore more efficient (Ward and Lee, 2000). In addition, companies use their websites not only for customers and retailers as potential audiences, but also for employees, shareholders, government agencies, suppliers and other stakeholders (Hatch and Schultz, 2001). The selection of the best URL is also important for widespread recognition but the issue is consistency between domain name and brand name that can increase the likelihood of locating the brand website, as well as reinforce the brand (Ifield and Winter, 2000; and Keller, 2003). Strategies relating to loyalty include communication and two-way dialog, effective customer service and loyalty schemes, and online brand communities are an important aspect of brand building (Cuthbertson and Bridson, 2006).

Whilst many academics focus on one or a number of branding design elements, none has yet designed a holistic framework to demonstrate the variety of alternatives (Magrath and McCormick, 2013; and Miller and Moultrie, 2013). Gaining long-term sustainability with branding is the process of creating value through consistent compelling offers and positive customer experience that will satisfy customers and encourage them to return (Chen, 2001). Companies are concentrating on building strong relationship through targeting customers with unique messages, unique functionality and unique personalization technologies for enhancing brand experience (Doyle, 1998), which is a key source of added value in Internet economy (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005).

Objective

This study makes an attempt to contribute to the under-researched area of online branding by studying online activities of popular pure online and multichannel fashion retailers in India. An exploratory analysis has been performed to see the extent to which retailers were using their websites for communicating brand identity, presence and other brand building activities. Research questions inspired by the above review of existing studies are:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between information components of different fashion retailer types (pure and multichannel retailers) in India.

RQ2: How do Indian fashion retailers communicate their brand identity in online?

RQ3: What facilities do Indian fashion retailers provide to create brand experience and brand loyalty online?

Methodology

In order to investigate whether there is any relationship between fashion retailer types (pure and multichannel) and online branding objectives, retailers were grouped on the basis of whether they were pure online fashion stores or multichannel retailers. The

research is exploratory in nature and contributes to the knowledge of online branding strategies by studying online fashion stores and multichannel retailers. The author assumes websites as a channel of brand communication and seeks to identify range of attributes using content analysis. Content analysis is a methodology in social sciences for studying the content of communication. Berelson (1952) defined it as “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication”. Kolbe and Burnett (1991) defined content analysis as an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communication. These communications can also be analyzed at many levels like images, words etc. therefore creating a realm of research opportunities. Content analysis is relatively new in consumer research as formal methodology, but an established method in political science and communication research (Kassarjian, 1977). There are various techniques that make up the methodology of content analysis and have been growing in usage and variety. In the field of mass communication research, content analysis has been the fastest-growing technique (Lombard *et al.*, 2002; and Neuendorf, 2002). Frey *et al.* (2000) defined this ‘textual analysis’ as a continuum of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Common units of measurements of information can be physical, i.e., text, syntactical like symbols, words, and thematic like specific theme. A content analysis of websites associated with chosen sample of retailers and fashion stores was conducted by using a checklist that covers themes and attributes to support data collection for answering the research questions. Each criteria of categorizing content are mutually exclusive.

The content of checklist has been primarily adopted from research work by Rowley (2009) including other dimensions identified by content analysis of pilot survey of a few websites. Validity of categories selected is tested using face validity by a panel of experts constituting researchers in online marketing domain. Since there is no predetermined category to support this research type, the precision of checklist has been taken care of by piloting the initial checklist with five websites of different brands and retailer types. The revised checklist was then used for remaining sample websites. The data was collected during January 2014 to February 2014. Because the research is exploratory in nature, accuracy of data has been tested by revisits to sites for information updates.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of company's disclosure of online branding objectives, branding issues associated with brand identity, and the use of approaches for building brand relationships is as follows:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between information components of different fashion retailer types (pure and multichannel retailers) in India.

There is considerable variation between the extents of information provided on different websites. All retailers view websites as an arena for providing information about their

companies and their products to a range of audiences. A transactional website offers greater opportunity for interaction with brand image. Companies that do not offer transaction facility use online channel for increasing brand awareness and establishing brand presence online. Table 1 summarizes this relationship and shows that all the pure online fashion retailers have a transactional website, and two out of four of the multichannel retailers have a transactional website. Even the multichannel retailers, who have transactional websites i.e., Shoppers' Stop and Wills Lifestyle, cannot meet the standard of the websites of pure online fashion retailers. This has consequences for the depth of brand engagement and experience.

There is a substantial disparity in the extent of product information provided. For example, Myntra offers style note along with extensive product information; FashionandYou offers style-fix with detailed information. Inkfruit and Jabong also offer quite detailed product information. The other type of information that is often offered relates to fashion and style, and fitting and sizing, respectively. Shoppers' Stop and Wills Lifestyle provide very limited product information while no product information was available on the websites of Pantaloons and Westside. Regarding information relating to the latest fashion and style trends, Myntra offers look good blogs, style videos, celeb chats and Myntra makeovers. FashionandYou has its own style-fix and fashion show videos. Jabong and Inkfruit offer their respective blogs but nothing especially on fashion. Shoppers' Stop and Wills Lifestyle provide very limited information on latest fashion while no such information was available on Pantaloons and Westside websites.

Information about career and current opening are presented by most retailers. Features like store locators are common for multichannel retailers which provide link between online and offline channels.

RQ2: How do Indian fashion retailers communicate their brand identity online?

This question demands an exploration of whether brand identities are consistent across channels. Logo, color palettes, and statements of brand values show a high level of consistency throughout the industry. Only half of the retailers offered a brand strap line or brand statement on their home page. In the case of pure online fashion retailers, only FashionandYou's strapline "indulge" is on the home page, while in the case of multichannel retailers, Shoppers' Stop's "start something new" and Westside's "endless possibilities" are on the home page. Very few retailers have produced their mission statements on the home page. Most of the pure online fashion retailers have brand ambassadors (except Inkfruit).

All sites have brand logos on every page, and all use brand colors in text, menus and page backgrounds. The font size is not consistent on all the pages in cases of some websites which include multichannel retailers as well as pure online fashion retailers.

Table 2 also summarizes the retailers' domain names and any links with .com variations on their domain name. It is evident that almost all retailers use their brand in their

Table 1: Information Component								
Categories	Pure Online Fashion Stores				Multichannel Retailers			
	Jabong	Fashion andYou	Myntra	Inkfruit	Wills Lifestyle	Westside	Pantaloon	Shoppers Stop
Company Information	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Store Locator	NA	NA	NA	NA	Y	Y	Y	Y
New Arrivals	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Carrer Information	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y
Filters: Brand/Size/Color/Price	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Transactions	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Note: NA = Not Applicable.								

Table 2: Brand Identity								
Categories	Pure Online Fashion Stores				Multichannel Retailers			
	Jabong	Fashion andYou	Myntra	Inkfruit	Wills Lifestyle	Westside	Pantaloon	Shoppers Stop
Brand Promise								
Mission Statement	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Brand Statement/ Strapline	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Strapline on Home Page	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Brand Ambassador	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y
Logo/Color/Text								
Logo Consistent at Every Page	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Brand Color in Text, Menu and Page Background	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Text Font Consistent at Every Page	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Domain Name Protection								
Brand Name = Domain Name	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Extended Domain Name Registration	.com	.com	.com	.com	.com	.com	.com	.com

domain name, but Westside has the domain name mywestside.com which is different from their brand name. In the case of Wills Lifestyle, if the customer wants to avail online shopping facility, he/she has to go to a different website with URL: shopwillslifestyle.com. All the retailers have the extended domain name registration under .com extension.

RQ3: What facilities do Indian fashion retailers provide to create brand experience and brand loyalty online?

The delivery of a consistent brand experience is dependent on operational integration.

Contact and communication options are the first step towards a relationship. Table 3 shows that almost all fashion retailers offer FAQs or help pages or notes for customers; often these relate to the purchase process and are therefore more common for transactional websites. E-mail, telephone, and postal contact details are given for customer service. Surprisingly, live chat is not available in any of the website. In today's world, the

Table 3: Brand Experience and Loyalty								
Categories	Pure Online Fashion Stores				Multichannel Retailers			
	Jabong	Fashion andYou	Myntra	Inkfruit	Wills Lifestyle	Westside	Pantaloons	Shoppers Stop
Brand Experience/ Relationship								
Customer Advice								
FAQ	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Live Chat	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Return Policy Available	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Contact to Company								
E-mail	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Phone Number	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Postal Address	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Community								
Brand Community	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y
Buying Guide	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y
Forums	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N
Connect to Others								
Connection to Social Media	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Share to Friends	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Online Reviews	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N

Table 3 (Cont.)

Categories	Pure Online Fashion Stores				Multichannel Retailers			
	Jabong	Fashion and you	Myntra	Inkfruit	Wills Lifestyle	Westside	Pantaloon	Shoppers Stop
New Trend Information								
E-mails	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Newsletter	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Blogs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Online Magazine	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Brand Loyalty								
Purchase Coupons	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Discount on Recommendations	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Monthly Prize Draws/Rewards	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Personalization of Site	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y

lack of this feature is a major drawback. The option of 'return policy' is also available on all the transaction-based websites. Many of multichannel retailers allow 'return to store'. Around half of the multichannel retailers and all of pure online fashion retailers offer an e-newsletter. Registration for an e-newsletter with most of the retailers earns a significant discount on next purchase. Today, all the retailers provide an option that invites the customer to recommend a product to friends. Loyalty schemes are operated very aggressively by pure online retailers. Purchase coupons, discount on recommendations, monthly prizes and affiliate programs all motivate customers to think positively about the brand. Most retailers provide a virtual shopping cart to all the customers and a 'wishlist' where products can be saved. Further, online product reviews by the product users are trusted by customers while making a purchase decision. All of these features contribute to the sense of community around the brand. Furthermore, pure fashion retailers have also started offering affiliate programs where customers can earn commissions by placing product banners or links on their website to refer users to the retailers' websites. Almost all retailers with transactional website personalize the site for each and every customer differently so that appropriate recommendations can be made to the customer by following his pattern of buying. In India, the option of 'cash on delivery' is revolutionary. In summary, fashion retailers have access to numerous tools to explicitly build brand relationships or brand communities. Almost all retailers use friendly recommendations, loyalty schemes, customer surveys, pod casts, blogs, forums, social media and online reviews. With so many tools at hand, retailers are able to create brand loyalty and positive brand experience for the customers.

Conclusion

Retailers should communicate their brand values more explicitly and prominently through their websites to improve positioning and develop two-way communication between customers. It was found that a few multichannel retailers have transactional websites, but their interfaces are not as efficient as those of pure fashion retailers. Transactional website can be used to leverage brand engagement activities, hence multichannel fashion retailers should also provide transactional websites that meet the standards of other pure fashion sites. Multichannel fashion retailers also lack in providing detailed product information, including style notes and fitting information. These websites also lag behind in communicating latest fashion trends. Therefore, more focus on information regarding the latest fashion and trends should be provided. These findings are in line with earlier studies (Jang and Burn, 2004; and Marciniak and Bruce, 2004). Communication of brand identity in online channel seems to be consistent across the industry. Websites display their logo on every page and use brand color in text and background. But very few retailers present their mission statement on their home page. Communication regarding brand statements should not be on 'about us' or 'careers' sections which no customer visits. Similar to past studies, it is also evident that almost all brands use their name as domain name which further helps in reinforcing the brand (Ifield and Winter, 2000; and Keller, 2003).

Loyalty program is an important dimension of brand building activities (Cuthbertson and Bridson, 2006). Almost all retailers use loyalty schemes like purchase coupons, discounts on recommendations and personalization of site interface. All fashion retailers have uniformity in brand visibility across online and physical channels. But their strategies for promoting brand relationships are still underdeveloped. Indian online fashion retailers lack live chat and online reviews facility. These new age features can also improve brand relationship (Rowley, 2009). Multichannel fashion retailers also lag behind in features, including brand community, forums, blogs, newsletters, sharing of reviews, as these features are important to create a sense of community around the brand. Information that supports customers like store finders and telephone, postal, and e-mail contact details are common for both fashion retailer formats.

All top Indian fashion retailers have a website which they use for communication and to establish an online brand presence. They employ some innovative practices but there is still scope for improvements. As the extant literature on online branding is in a shaping stage, the present exploratory study has contributed to the extant of literature and the under-researched areas of online branding practices of Indian fashion retailers. It provides insights regarding the existing difference in information components including product attributes, knowledge about latest fashion and style, and website transactional components. It also highlights the disparity in brand communication tactics between pure and multichannel retailers. The study further analyzes the facilities provided by both retailer types for creating brand experience and loyalty. The findings of the study will help retailers in using their websites to provide online services and product information. It further

provides guidance for improving the company's online branding strategies, including communicating brand identity and building brand relationships. There is considerable scope of further research on online in both formats of fashion retailing. More in-depth investigation can be carried out on domain name protection, developing two-way communications, building brand community and effectiveness of loyalty schemes. Further, studies can investigate other industry sectors like banking, travel and hotel.

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