

Learning process in fashion design students: link with industry and social media

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Abstract. Portugal is today an important player in the European fashion industry. The Portuguese footwear industry, “low-tech”, mature and traditional, dominated by SMEs, is also a success case in the Portuguese economy. With own brands, own collections and own products, the quality, innovation and international image of the Portuguese clothes, accessories and shoes is increasing year by year in the most sophisticated markets worldwide. The new information economy and social media presents a new set of opportunities and threats to established companies, new challenges and new markets, and demanding to all the companies to rethink their strategy and to prepare new business plans. Portuguese companies in the fashion industry are starting to perceive that the brand’s transition to social media means a transformation of the customer relationship, wherein social media and the community members is an ally of the brand and not an “audience”. Also the universities are preparing new professionals to the fashion industry and the learning process has to be managed according these new challenges. And the University of Minho has the Bachelor in Fashion Design and Marketing, an excellent course to prepare new skills to these fashion companies: textile, clothing and footwear industries.

1. Introduction

The Portuguese fashion industry (textile, clothing, accessories and footwear) shows an excellent economic performance in the last years [1],[2]. With own brands, own collections and own products, the quality, innovation and international image of the Portuguese clothes, accessories and shoes is increasing year by year in the most sophisticated markets worldwide.

University of Minho has the Bachelor in Fashion Design and Marketing (BFDM). The young students came from different schools and places, with different social backgrounds and links with fashion issues. The fashion industry needs good professionals to the design and marketing functions, but these skills have to be worked and be improved in the university.

Frequently fashion is referred as being a form of non-verbal expression of communication and, many times, even of seduction. Clothing, jewellery, accessories and shoes, as fashion items, may be considered as an expression as how people wish themselves to be seen by other individuals, as well as a way of belonging to a particular group or as a representation of a particular lifestyle, or a culture, or a social category [3]. Harriet Posner [4] defines “style tribes” as groups of people known to each other or not, with the same ideas and values, styles, tastes and behaviours, and it can describe also a group of people who dresses with a common distinctive style.

The new information economy presents a new set of opportunities and threats to established companies, new challenges and new markets, and demanding to all the companies to rethink their strategy and to prepare new business plans. Firms are starting to perceive that the brand’s transition to social media means a transformation of the customer relationship, wherein social media and the community members is an ally of the brand and not an “audience” [5]. The BFDM students of the Minho University combine several important features that can help the fashion industry to reply more efficiently to their millennial consumers.



2. Methodology

The methodological approach to the research was defined considering the specificities of the sector, the characteristics of the BFDM students and the proposed research objectives. The research methodology can be quantitative or qualitative: the qualitative analysis is presented as the most recommended when the researcher wants to study a small sample of entities and the study is focused on a theme, subject or sector [6],[7].

It was followed two different strategies, – *focus group* and longitudinal analysis –, with the three footwear brands selected, - Fly London, Lemon Jelly and Josefinas -, and required an intensive follow up of the several steps and phases by the researchers.

According to David Carson *et al* [8] focus group is used as research methodology and can be justified with regard to data collection, with the depth of understanding, flexibility and interaction with a group, as well as for generation of knowledge about the sources of complex behaviours and motivations of each individual of the focus group. 10 bachelor students (BFDM) were selected to the focus group and the work with them will be closed in June 2017.

The longitudinal research of investigation serves two main purposes. First one is focus on a description of the changing patterns and the second is to establish a direction and magnitude of the causal relationships [9]. In this work, it is intended to develop a longitudinal analysis of the same brands of the case studies, observing their websites and social network account pages. To do it, were taken the data with pre-established criteria of the action's brand, and linked with the consumer responsiveness to the published content in periods of every week, during three months (Table 1).

Table 1: Longitudinal research data collection of brands with predefined variables

Website variables	Facebook variables	Istagram variables
Women product renewal	Page likes	Followers
Content update	Content update	Content update
Website global ranking	Engagement	Likes
Daily pageviews per visitor	Shares	Comments
Daily time on site	Post likes	
Bounce rate %	Comments	
	Visitor posts	
	Brand responsiveness to comments	

3. Results and discussion

The focus group made a discussion about three footwear brands/companies. Josefinas is a luxury brand, which is steadily building brands recognition nationally and internationally through trendsetters, well known fashion bloggers and fashion press, with appearance in such magazines as Vogue and Vanity Fair. Lemon Jelly is one of the emerging brands of the footwear sector in Portugal, which already received several innovation awards, since 2013. Fly London is the oldest brand considered in the research, and, simultaneously, the brand with more sales. Has own shops in London, Dublin, New York, Lisbon and we can find their collections in multibrand shops all around the world (Table 2).

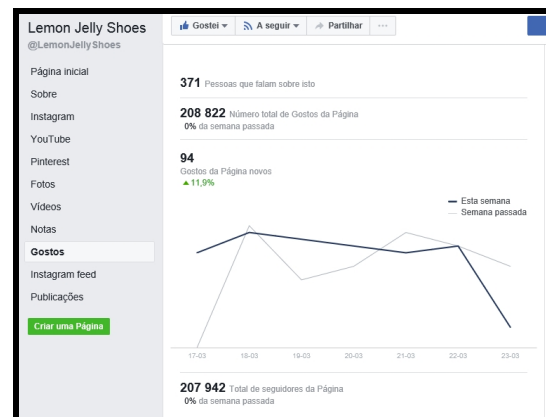
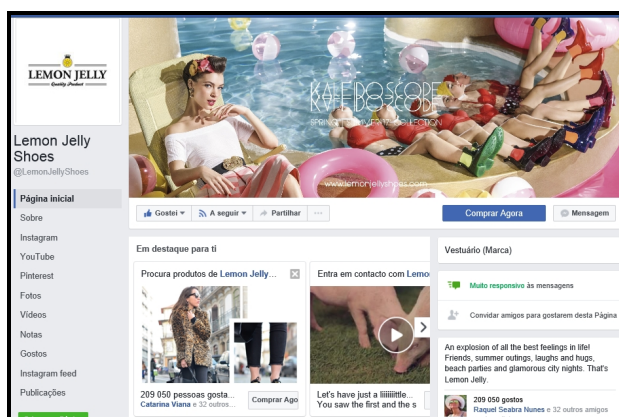
Table 2: General information of brands

Brand	Founded	Company	Online Retail market	Market segment	Target
Lemon Jelly	2013	Procalçado	Product specialists Fashion retailer	Women, Men, Children	Niche market
Fly London	1994	Kyaia	General Fashion Retailer	Women, Men	Mass market
Josefinas	2013	Josefinas	Product specialists Fashion retailer	Women	Luxury/Niche market

The three brands considered do not have presence in all existing social networks (Table 3). So, the longitudinal research will be conducted observing the chosen brands through Websites, Facebook (FB) and Instagram, since they have presence in these digital platforms. In figures (1a),(1b) are presented the Facebook profile of Lemon Jelly and general performance in FB (followers, likes, views, etc). Figures (2a), (2b) present the Facebook profile of Josefinas and general performance in FB (followers, likes views, etc). Finally, figures (3a), (3b) present the Facebook profile of Fly London and general performance in FB (followers, likes, views, etc).

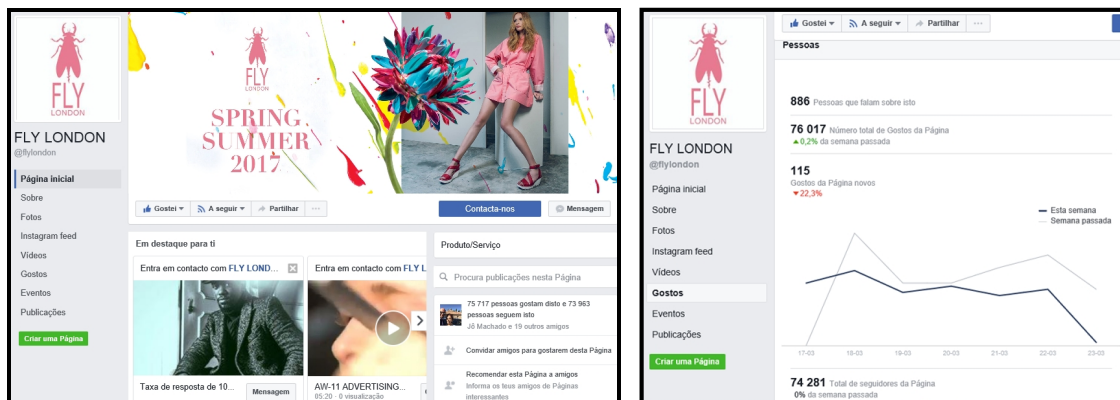
Table 3: Digital presence of the selected brands

Brand	Website	Facebook	Google+	Instagram	Twitter	Pinterest	Tumblr
Fly London	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
Lemon Jelly	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Josefinas	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

**Figures (1a), (1b) – Lemon Jelly Facebook profile and followers.**



Figures (2a), (2b) – Josefinas Facebook profile and followers.



Figures (3a), (3b) – Fly London Facebook profile and followers.

4. Conclusions

Companies in the fashion value chain have to continue investing into new information technologies, using the digital platforms and social media, as a way to be present in global markets and to be able to communicate with its customers.

The discussion in the focus group shows that developing a web site or being in the social media for the fashion brands, involves more than choosing colours or header images. Aesthetic design isn't the more important factor in the websites. Usability is the one of the most important factor that has to be considered when developing a website. Navigation, Language and Content, or Architectural and Visual Clarity are critical elements in the usability analysis and these parameters were valued positively by the students. The longitudinal analysis done provides also important data linked with the social media performance of the three footwear fashion brands. This work, as exploratory research, will continue in the future working with the same focus group and following up the performance in social media of these brands. Until now, only the general approach to evaluating the social media performance of the footwear brands by the fashion students is clearly defined.

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