Entifying your brand among Twitter-using millennials

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Abstract   Members of the Millennial Generation ('millennials') are strongly attached to their smartphones and engrossed in social media. They frequently post pictures and tweet about the products they like and buy. Consequently, established consumer brands unable to master the use of Twitter and other social media are likely to lose their ability to communicate with this generation. This article reports findings from a study of millennials' Twitter usage and presents the concept of brand entification as the next evolutionary stage of brand personality made possible by this social media. Brand entification refers to a distinct emotional and cognitive attachment between heavy-Twitter-using millennials and the brands they like, and to a unique set of attributions they make toward the brand. Herein, we explain the nature of brand entification, describe how it emerges, and distill some key lessons for brand managers interested in reaching Twitter-using millennials.
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1. Why should Twitter matter to brand managers?

Celebrities, news organizations, marketers, and ordinary users are finding creative ways of expressing themselves in 140 characters or less and connecting with a community of followers on Twitter. Since its 2006 launch, the social media platform has attracted—as of February 2015—288 million monthly active users who send, on average, 500 million tweets per day

(Twitter, 2015a). Many ordinary tweeters are trying to communicate with friends or appreciative interest groups with intelligence and wit, in addition to sharing opinions and knowledge (Thelwall, Buckley, & Paltoglou, 2011). Celebrities have succeeded the most: Katy Perry and Justin Bieber have more than 64 million and 60 million followers, respectively (Friendorfollow, 2015).[1] The most followed physical product brands include Samsung Mobile, with 10.5 million followers; Starbucks, with 7.19 million; and Whole Foods, with 3.9 million (Socialbakers, 2015). Other high-equity brands have attracted relatively less interest in the

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[1] All follower figures are as of February 2015.

Twitterverse: IBM, with 163,000 followers; McDonald's, with 2.85 million; Microsoft, with 6.13 million; Coca-Cola, with 2.85 million (Socialbakers, 2015); and P&G, with 106,000 (Twitter, 2015b). This is ironic; a fifth of the 400 million tweets sent today mention a product or brand name, yet none of the top physical product brands are valued participants in Twitter conversations (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdhury, 2009).

The evidence remains mixed regarding whether managers of leading brands are learning to interact effectively with Twitter users. An example of successful Twitter usage is Dell computers (Miller, 2009). However, many brands have had dissatisfying experiences. Tide, a $2.8 billion detergent brand with 38% market share, tweeted on March 17, 2014: *It's #PoisonPreventionWeek. Keep children safe by securing all laundry detergents & household cleaners out of reach* (Pew Research, 2014). This potentially meaningful tweet was retweeted a disappointing nine times by the brand's 132,000 followers. This is somewhat of an improvement over the brand's March 13, 2013 tweet containing a link to the company's Facebook page: *So many to love, but my favorite P&G brand is __. Cast your vote here.* From its 113,857 Facebook fans, Tide garnered 145 interactions based on this tweet; it received 10 replies from an audience of 45,797 followers, nine of which were other P&G accounts such as Charmin and Pampers. Similarly, Coca-Cola maintains a disappointing Twitter presence. On March 28, 2013, Coca-Cola tweeted: *Having a Coke in a bottle is the same as having a genie in a bottle that grants Coke.* The use of Twitter as a billboard motivated five replies and 65 retweets from a potential audience of 241 million active users of Twitter. Nearly a year later, on February 20, 2014, Coca-Cola tweeted: *It's time for a splash of refreshment. Who all are in?* This, too, garnered a disappointing two retweets and four favorites.

Why should brand managers be concerned by failure to produce interactions on Twitter, particularly when they have demonstrated mastery over traditional media and achieved enviable market share? Is it acceptable for managers of consumer brands, like the ones sold in grocery stores and malls, to argue: ''Tide is not Katy Perry'' or ''Brands are not celebrities with short shelf lives, so why should we care about Twitter?'' Our recent study of college-going millennials reporting heavy usage of Twitter suggests that managers of established consumer brands *should* care. First, Twitter is inordinately intrusive among the 77-million-strong segment of American millennials (aged 18–29). Members of this generation are inseparable from smartphones, fully immersed in social media, skeptical about established brands, and unresponsive to mass media. Twitter enjoys broad appeal, with 18% of all adults online currently using the platform (Pew Research, 2014). Tomorrow's marketplace for today's brands will likely include many people from this younger generation. Heavy-Twitter-using millennials speak a new language and value a new currency: social media speak and social media savvy. Many established brands with high brand equity are trading in the old currency of print, broadcast, and outdoor media, and displaying a disappointing failure to adapt. Scholars observe that they are merely replicating on social media the strategies that helped them build brands using traditional mass media— and largely failing (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010).

Second, carefully calibrated use of Twitter as a medium for communication has the potential to produce tantalizing brand-related outcomes among Twitter users. Smart engagement of Twitter users has helped managers of brands such as Intel, Starbucks, and Whole Foods in *entifying* their brands; that is, transcending their brand's status from physical object to exalted celebrity in the Twitterverse (see Larsen, 2010; Sashittal, Hodis, & Sriramchandramurthy, 2014). Entified brands enjoy unique benefits: users censor their negative comments, focus on spreading positive tweets, and defend the brand if it is attacked.

2. How we learned about brand entification: The study

Initial interest was driven by our observation that students frequently checked their Twitter feeds in class while we were teaching. Yet despite Twitter's intrusiveness, the extant literature offered limited insight regarding the platform's brand-building potential. In search of actionable insights that could speak to managers about the branding power of Twitter, we conducted three focus groups. Participants were self-described heavy users of Twitter (i.e., constantly engaged in checking Twitter feeds on their smartphones regardless of what else was occurring around them) pursuing undergraduate marketing majors or minors at a business school. They had all completed the introductory course in marketing, enrolled in one or more advanced marketing courses, and were more fluent on issues related to branding and media than those pursuing other majors (ages 20–24). All were informed that our purpose was to gain insights into branding via Twitter, and asked to participate; no incentive was provided for participation.