

## **Fashion weeks - Engagement concentration or spill over?**

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### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

This paper aims to explore the interplay between social media, fashion weeks and the degree to which participating and non-participating brands enjoy engagement of social media users.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

A material of 4424 user-generated content published before, during and after Fashion Week Stockholm in February 2016 were collected and analysed.

#### **Findings**

The presented results show that the studied fashion week both concentrates engagement for participating brands but also creates spill over engagement to non-participating brands.

#### **Research limitations/implications**

Because of the specific characteristics of the Swedish fashion industry and the Swedish media landscape, empirical illustrations from fashion weeks in other fashion cities would be valuable to verify the presented findings.

#### **Practical implications**

As participating brands enjoy an increased level of engagement during the fashion week, but that engagement for non-participating brands simultaneously increase, these findings question whether individual brands should be official participants of fashion weeks.

#### **Social implications**

Since the fashion week seems to have transformed from a marketing platform to a brand of its own, this shift can enable closer collaborations with the tourism and hospitality industry as well as efforts related to the promotion of place brands.

#### **Originality/value**

This paper contributes to the field of fashion marketing and management by illustrating the dynamic interplay between engagement created in social media and fashion weeks while also pointing out the conceptual and managerial implications this development generates for participating and non-participating brands.

**Keywords**

Fashion, fashion week, social media, digitisation, engagement concentration, engagement spill over

**Article classification**

Research paper

**1. Introduction**

One of the characterising marketing practices of the fashion sector is fashion weeks (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006). From traditionally having been exclusive for fashion professionals, they are in their contemporary manifestation increasingly transparent and open (McQuarrie et al., 2013). One of the reasons for why this has become the case is related to digitisation and the rise of social media (Mohr, 2013).

As social media has become widespread and increasingly integrated in the fashion industry (Pihl, 2013; 2014), this development has affected the role of fashion consumers vis-à-vis fashion professionals. Because fashion consumers have become enabled to take part in fashion weeks in real time, physically or digitally, the potential for them to contribute to the associations ascribed to fashion brands and their positioning has vastly increased. This means that fashion consumers exposed to new collections cannot be expected to be passive observers but rather active creators of meaning and value (McQuarrie et al., 2013; Pihl, 2014).

With regards to the evolution of fashion weeks and the increased integration of fashion in the social media landscape (Laurell, 2014), the general development of professional marketers being subjected to rivalry by digitally savvy consumers (Berthon et al., 2008; Muñoz and Schau, 2007; Schau et al., 2009), now seems to increasingly apply in the fashion sector as well. This is deemed to have consequences for how the interplay between fashion weeks and their participating brands manifest, as the ways in which engagement materialises among consumers evolve. Because this development is also relatively recent, more knowledge is needed in regards to how social media users express engagement in the context of fashion weeks and what conceptual and managerial consequences this imply.

In view of this discussion, the present paper aims to explore the interplay between social media, fashion weeks and the degree to which participating and non-participating brands enjoy engagement of social media users. Based on a study of Fashion Week Stockholm in February 2016, that covers a material of 4424 user-generated content, this paper will illustrate how the fashion week both concentrates engagement for participating brands but also creates spill over engagement to non-participating brands.

While these results show that fashion weeks create increased engagement concerning fashion in general, they also question the link between fashion weeks and participating brands that traditionally has been understood to be strong.

This paper is organised as follows. First, a theoretical framework is provided that discusses fashion, the rise of social media and its associated consequences for brand engagement. The next section describes how data collection and analysis has been carried out by applying Social Media Analytics. Next, the results are presented and analysed. Eventually, managerial implications are drawn and a concluding remark is provided together with directions for future research.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

With the rise of digital media, the ways in which consumers interact with, communicate and consume fashion has evolved. Contemporary contributions of how the concepts of fashion and style materialises through sets of consumer objects show that constant struggles between and among professionals and consumers take places (cf. Arsel and Thompson, 2011; Englis and Solomon, 1994; Kjeldgaard, 2009; Solomon and Englis, 1996, see also Solomon and Assael, 1987) and that the scene for these struggles increasingly seems to have become the social media landscape (Pihl, 2014).

Per se, fashion is closely related to the notion of style that by definition implies that sets of consumer objects are necessary in its creation (Hebdige, 1979). The most prominent characterising trait of style is the intrinsic feature of combining, assembling and modifying consumer objects (Ostberg, 2007). In social settings, this feature functions as a differentiating factor for different groups through the creation of different styles associated to different meanings (Clarke, 1976; Hebdige, 1979). As the fashion industry exhibits a seemingly ever-increasing amount of available, and yet distinctively different, objects, this enables a plethora of stylistic variety (Crane, 2000; Kawamura, 2005).

The stylistic diversity that can be found in contemporary consumer fashion stems greatly from incorporating trends and fashion styles risen within youth cultures due to their seemingly inherent need for differential expression from the status quo. As cool-hunting endeavours by fashion industry actors result in products that instantaneously become available in the mainstream marketplace, this process causes struggles related to individual expression (Kjeldgaard, 2009). Put differently, this process constantly endangers the significance of identity creation projects for individuals, and because of this reason, strategies of counter-narratives or demythologisation have become increasingly present as a mechanism for creating symbolic borders between fields of consumption and identity creation (Arsel and Thompson, 2011; Kjeldgaard, 2009).

In recent times, the place for consumers' need for communicating, negotiating and expressing their identity through sets of consumption objects has gradually shifted to the digital sphere and particularly into social media. By participating in social media activities and generating user-generated content, users take part in social forms of engagement expressions (cf. Geissinger and Laurell, 2016; Hollebeek, 2011).

In general, the concept of consumer engagement is based on the interactive relationship between consumers, a focal object and the resulting perceived value experience of this interaction (Brodie et al., 2013; Mollen and Wilson, 2010). Engagement also includes the level of physical, cognitive and/or emotional state of consumers' relationship with organisations (Patterson et al., 2006). Vivek et al. (2012) explicitly argued how particular brand activities and offers towards consumers foster a sense of engagement. In a digital setting, this form of engagement can be spotted as the active relationship with a brand's website or other digitally communicated brand messages (Brodie et al., 2013; Mollen and Wilson, 2010).

Particularly characterizing for engagement manifesting digitally is that it portray users' personal interests (Hollebeek, 2011). Digitally active consumers in social media tend to interact with organisations, brands and products they relate to based on the consumption object's alignment with consumers' individual interests, values, goals and self-concept. Due to the pervasiveness of social media, the novel expressions of digital brand engagement and the need to combine and align different consumption objects to distinguishable trends, style and one's identity (Hollebeek, 2011; Kjeldgaard, 2009), consumers actively join in and shape the discussion of brand image, brand associations and brand combinations. Defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allows the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenli, 2010, p. 61), social media has given all sorts of fashion-related topics a platform for consumers to engage in.

Consumers who take part in such expressions not only present combinations of brands they find attractive, but by doing so also act as filters which become consumed by often reactive and dedicated readers on masse (Kretz and de Valck, 2010). As consumers express their preferences regarding the abundance of available consumption objects and create combinations of products and brands in social media, this provides opportunities to extract trends as well as to forecast trends (Rickman and Cosenza, 2007). While these expressions initially took place on blogs where consumers combined text and images such as personal photographs, professional photographs from fashion shows, fashion magazine photos and images of products (Chittenden, 2010), contemporary expressions have come to be increasingly centred around vlogging on platforms such as Youtube (McQuarrie et al., 2013). The current manifestations, however, seem to revolve around a similar dynamic found among the general practices

of fashion blogging, as sub-practices encompass both implicit and explicit self-brand associations, the presentation of fashion brands as objects of desire and the usage of brands as identity-construction partners (Kretz and de Valck, 2010; Laurell, 2014).

This shift from product-centric to consumer-centric organisations (Verhoef et al., 2010; Webster, 1992) suggests that consumers who create, read, and join discussions in social media can potentially affect the fashion industry's dynamic by changing how activities—which previously were exclusive to professionals—are manifested. With the rise of social media, contemporary fashion weeks are yet another outlet for consumers to influentially engage with fashion brands' managerial ambitions. This can for example materialise in new and unexpected ways of how brands are portrayed, combined and discussed. Fashion weeks only recently shifted from traditionally being exclusive industry-events to inclusive consumer oriented events with a high digital integration (cf. McQuarrie et al., 2013; Mohr, 2013). Because of these reasons, fashion weeks can be understood as the next frontier for digital savvy consumers to take part where central processes include the negotiation of the participating fashion brands' image based on the circumscription of association, combination and/or dissociation vis-à-vis participating and non-participating brands.

In light of the discussed literature that aims to explain the characteristics of fashion as a combination practice of various consumption objects and the emerging engagement practices found in social media (cf. Chittenden, 2010; Geissinger and Laurell, 2016; Hollebeek, 2011; Kretz and de Valck, 2010; Laurell, 2014; McQuarrie, Miller and Philips, 2013), more knowledge is needed about the ways in which consumers express engagement in the setting of the fashion industry's most institutionalised marketing practice—fashion weeks. This is particularly the case since both consumers and professionals now can be expected to take part in the creation, negotiation and diffusion of meaning and value throughout periods when engagement arguably should peak. In this study, particular focus is therefore directed to the question of how the interplay between social media, fashion weeks and the degree to which brands enjoy engagement of social media users can be conceptually and managerially explained.

### **3. Method**

In order to study the interplay between of fashion weeks and engagement of users in social media, an empirical setting was needed in which users actively interact and discuss among one another as well as direct their attention to the fashion sector. One example of such as setting can be found in Sweden as it is one of the countries that frequently tops the global rankings of digital technology usage and high speed Internet access, which makes its social media landscape particularly vibrant (e.g. Findahl and Davidsson, 2015). Furthermore, one of the characteristic traits of the Swedish fashion industry is arguably consumers' generally high interest in fashion trends and style. One example of how this interest manifests itself relates to the usage of fashion oriented social media that has become widely

popular (Lee and Ostberg, 2013). Among social media users, the practice of taking part in fashion blogging became the first widespread expression of social media usage in the Swedish social media landscape as it started to emerge in the mid 00's (cf. Pihl, 2011; Findahl, 2010). The reason for why the early blogosphere focused a considerable amount of its attention to fashion relates to that the largest segment of the Swedish blogosphere in its infancy was fashion blogs where discussions often revolved around fashion brands, fashion products and fashion e-commerce. As other forms of social media has become popular since then, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube, bloggers who early on established themselves as fashion authorities among their peers have adopted what could be explained as a multichannel strategy, as individual users now tend to utilise wide sets of social media channels to communicate their preferences.

In parallel to the developments among Swedish fashion consumers, an intensive development is also currently taking place in the Swedish capital Stockholm as two previously separated business sectors—the technology sector with companies like Spotify, Klarna and iSettle and the fashion sector with international success stories such as H&M—increasingly have started to explore how collaborations and cooperation can be carried out. One illustration of this cross-fertilisation is the initiative *Democratic Front Row* organised by Tele2 and Fashion Week in Stockholm. This initiative meant that celebrities gave up front row seats at a fashion show and instead, a unique robot with virtual reality cameras streaming the show live was installed which was meant to symbolise young and digitally savvy consumers (Fashion Week Stockholm, 2016).

When taken together, the digitisation of the Swedish fashion sector has come a long way over the last decade. As the Swedish social media landscape also fulfils Kozinets' (2010) criteria for suitable empirical fields for digital research approaches, the Swedish fashion industry and its associated fashion week in Stockholm was chosen as the case for the present study.

### *3.1 Data collection*

As digitisation has changed the fashion industry as well as the behaviours of fashion consumers, the methodological approaches for data collection and analysis have also come to evolve. One of the recent results of this development is Social Media Analytics (SMA), which is an interdisciplinary approach that combines, extends and adapts methods for the analysis of social media data (Stieglitz et al., 2014). One of the main challenges that researchers face when applying SMA for the purpose of data collection is that the social media landscape is fragmented in its nature and that a standardised way of gaining access to user-generated content across social media platforms is currently lacking. The increased interest among researchers to utilise social media data has, however, created a plethora of services offering structured access across platforms.

In the present study, one of these services called Notified was used to track user-generated content published on a diverse set of social media platforms. When using the tool, the researcher starts by entering a keyword or a set of keywords. When the keyword or the set of keywords have been entered, publically posted user-generated content from Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, blogs, forums and YouTube are collected in a database in real-time. The generated database therefore enables the researcher to capture data from a broad set of social media platforms in a structured manner that also means that the researcher does not need to use data collection methods such as scraping techniques (e.g. Stieglitz et al., 2014) as these tend to be inaccurate. On the 22<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, the name of the fashion week was entered into the service, and data was thereafter collected until the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 2016. Over the total data collection period of 23 days, which included the days in which the fashion week occurred as well as 10 days before and 10 days after the event, a data material amounting to 4424 user-generated content was collected.

### 3.2 Data analysis

Following the data collection period, the collected data was first divided into three periods. Period 1 was delimited to 10 days prior to the fashion week. Period 2 was delimited to the three days during which the fashion week took place. Period 3 was delimited to 10 days following the end of fashion week. When this had been carried out, content analysis (Silverman, 2006) was applied to the material in four sequential steps. First, the material was reviewed to identify content that did not concern the phenomena in question. This review identified 1452 user-generated content that referred to other phenomenon and these were subsequently excluded from the dataset. After this procedure had been carried out, a material amounting to 2972 user-generated content remained. Table 1 presents the distribution of the remaining data material per social media platforms.

**Table 1.** Publicly posted user-generated content per social media platform.

<b>Social media</b>	<b>Number of content</b>	<b>Share</b>
Blog	406	13,7%
Facebook	211	7,1%
Forum	21	0,7%
Instagram	797	26,8%
Twitter	1491	50,2%
Video	46	1,5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2972</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

In the second step, the material was reviewed with the purpose of identifying whether individual social media entries contain references to only fashion week or if also fashion brands were present in individual entries. When this review had been carried out, the third step was to analyse content which

contained references to fashion brands in order to identify the number of unique brands included in the material as well as how many times these brands were referred to in each user-generated content. After this review had been completed, the identified brands present in the material were sorted based on whether or not they were official participants of the fashion week. After the dataset has been coded following these steps, the fourth and final step was to analyse the proportions between (1) content containing brand references and content not containing brand references, and (2) participating brands and non-participating brands over the three periods by studying each period as well as each individual day included in the periods separately.

#### 4. Results

The results are presented in two steps. First, results related to the degree to which fashion week engagement in social media integrates brands are illustrated. Second, results related to the interplay between participating and non-participating brands in social media in the setting of the fashion week are presented.

##### 4.1 Fashion week engagement and brand content

Figure 1 presents the number of identified user-generated content that contain and do not contain brand references over the individual days that are included in the periods before, under and after fashion week. As the figure illustrates, the frequency of content that includes and not includes brand references exhibits a considerable increase in the period under which fashion week took place. It also illustrates that the period after the fashion week took place exhibits a higher degree of engagement compared to the period before the fashion week.

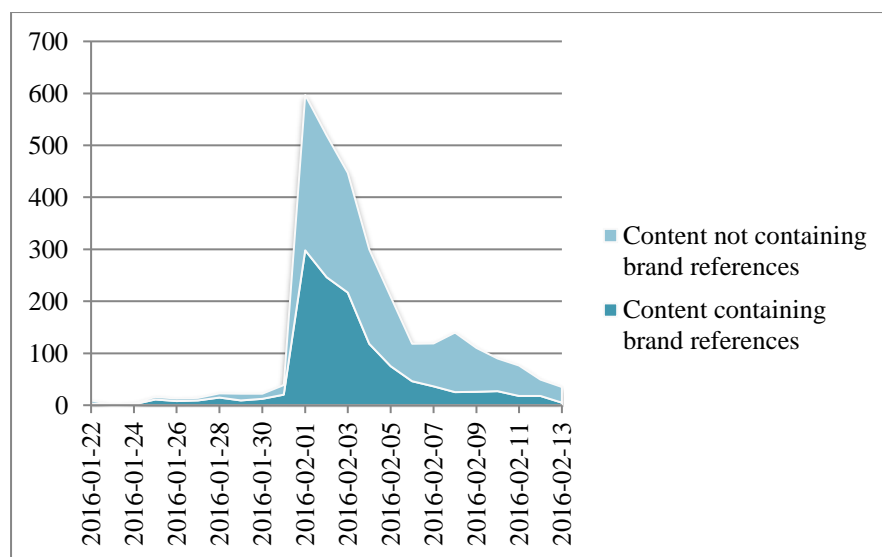


Figure 1. Frequency of content containing and not containing brand references per day.



Figure 2 presents the proportion between identified user-generated content that includes brand references and identified user-generated content that do not over the individual days included in the periods before, under and after fashion week. As illustrated, the proportion between content that includes and does not include brand references decreases continuously over the three studied periods.

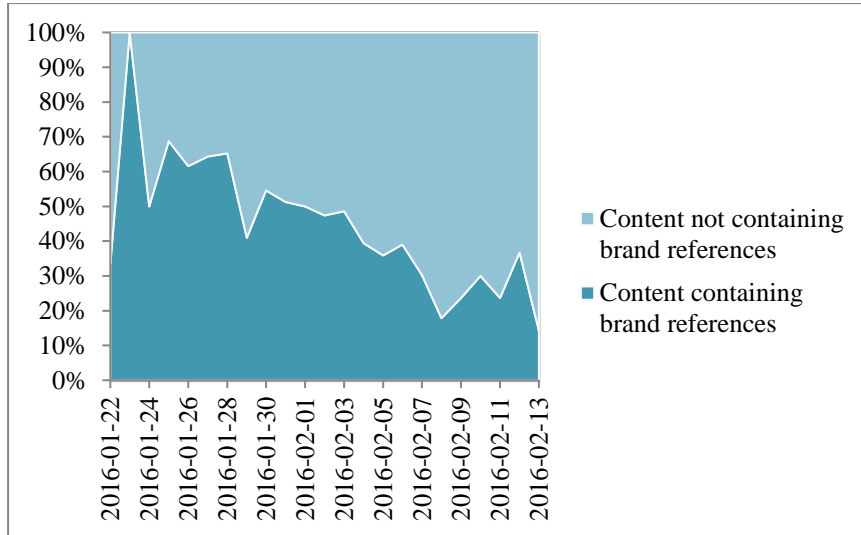


Figure 2. Proportion of content containing and not containing brand references per day.

#### 4.2 The interplay between participating and non-participating brands

Figure 3 presents the number of unique participating and non-participating brands over the periods before, under and after fashion week. As the figure shows, the number of participating brands increase between the period before and during the fashion week and remains stable throughout the after period. In contrast to participating brands, the number of unique non-participating brands increases throughout all three periods.

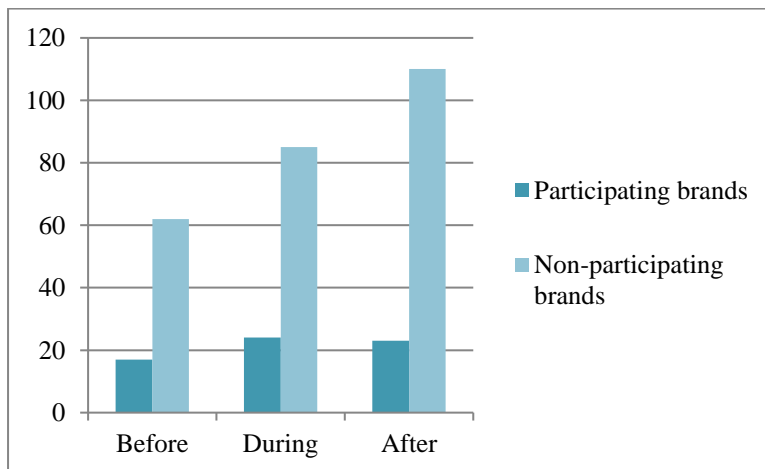


Figure 3. Number of unique participating and non-participating brands over the three studied periods.

Figure 4 presents the frequency of brand references to participating and non-participating brands over the three periods. As it illustrates in relation to Figure 3, not only the number of unique non-participating brands increases but also the frequency to which they are referred to in social media. With regards to participating brands, a similar pattern as for the number of unique participating brands can be observed, as the number of references increases considerably between the before and under periods while exhibiting a decline in the after period.

Figure 5 presents the frequency of brand references to participating and non-participating brands over the individual days included in the periods before, under and after fashion week. As it illustrates, the frequency increases considerably during the first day of fashion week and thereafter decreases throughout the after period. Figure 6 presents the proportion between participating and non-participating brands throughout the studied period in terms of their frequency. As it depicts, the period before fashion week is characterised by a considerable advantage for non-participating brands. In the period under fashion week, however, the relative proportion shifts to the participating brands' advantage.

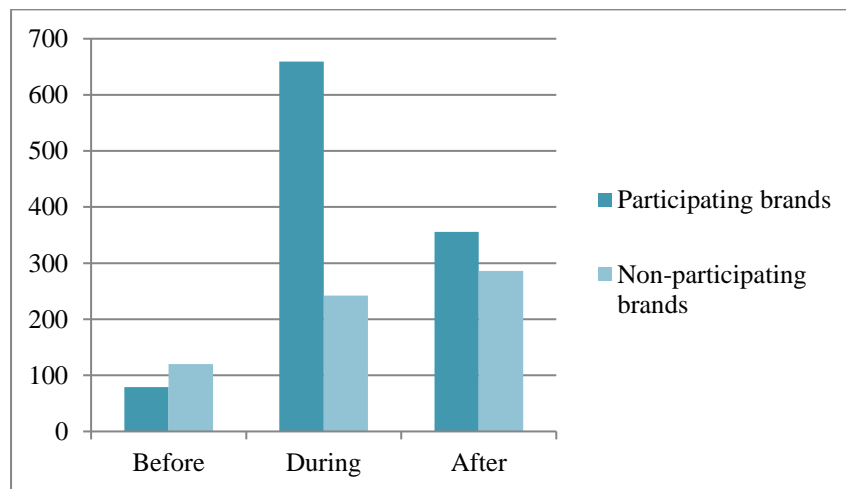


Figure 4. Frequency of brand references of participating and non-participating brands over the three studied periods.

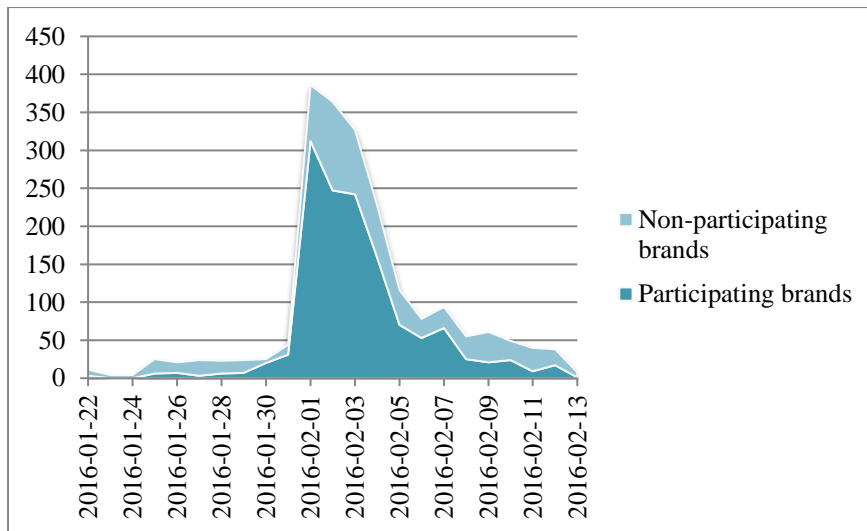


Figure 5. Frequency of participating and frequency of non-participating brand references per day.

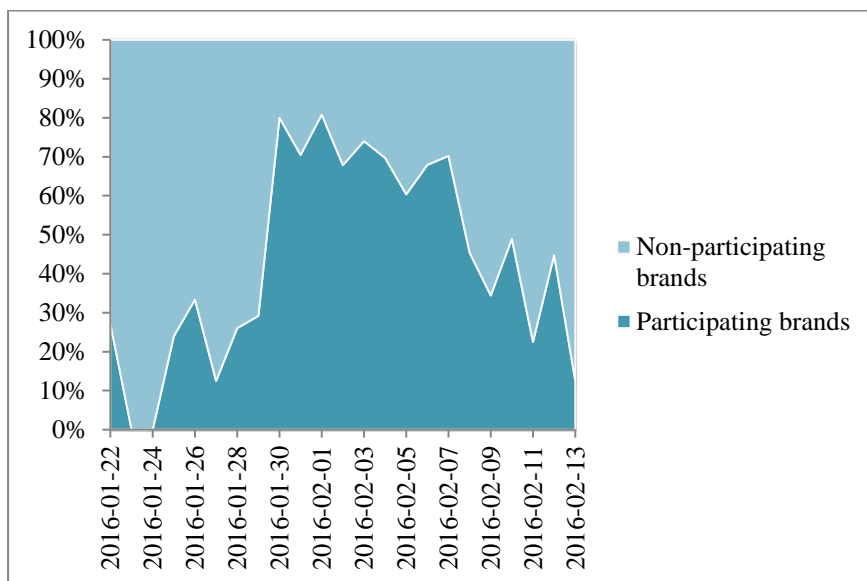


Figure 6. Proportion of participating and non-participating brand references per day.

## 5. Analysis and discussion

In the following sections, the interplay between the fashion week and social media engagement is analysed and discussed. The proportion between content containing and content not containing brand references is first analysed, followed by the varying ratio between participating and non-participating brands. Thereafter, the conceptual consequences of the presented findings are analysed and managerial implications are drawn.

### *5.1 The dynamic between branded and non-branded content*

In view of the proportion between content containing brand references and content not containing brand references, the results illustrate that fashion week and its participating brands are integrated with each other. However, this integration is only to a partial extent as 41,9% of the user-generated content does not contain references to the participating brands. As Figure 2 shows, the degree to which the fashion week and its participating brands are integrated with each other varies considerably over the studied period. Even though the frequency of content containing brand references are increasing during fashion week, the proportion between branded and non-branded content continuously decreases throughout the three periods.

When taken together, these results question the extent to which users perceive the fashion week and its associated brands as being integrated with one another. Instead, it seems that users are regarding fashion weeks as being a distinguishable and partly independent entity in relation to the participating fashion brands. So, while users in some extent recognise fashion week as a joint effort between the fashion week and its participating fashion brands, users still treat fashion week as a more engaging entity during a majority of the individual days included in the three periods than the brands that together form the week.

### *5.2 The interplay between participating and non-participating brands*

Figure 4 shows that the frequencies to which non-participating brands are referenced in social media increase over the three periods. For participating brands, the frequency increases between the before and during period, but decreases between the during and after periods. Because of these reasons, the fashion week—in terms of the proportion between non-participating and participating brands—seems to be a matter of both engagement concentrations, especially in terms of participating brand frequency (see Figure 4), but also engagement spill over effects, particularly in terms of number of unique non-participating brands (see Figure 3).

Under the three-day period when the fashion week took place, the frequency of participating and non-participating brands peaks. The proportion between participating and non-participating brands indicates that the participating brands are mentioned considerably more during the period when fashion week took place (Figure 6). From this perspective, the fashion week consequently has a considerable influence on participating brands in terms of engagement concentration of social media users.

However, not all of the participating brands are acknowledged in social media before, during or after fashion week. For some of the in total 29 participating brands, no reference could be identified at all in the collected dataset (see Figure 3).

### *5.3 The evolving character of fashion weeks and the role played by social media engagement*

In view of the presented findings, the fashion week in question seems to be transforming. More specifically, fashion weeks have traditionally been an industry centred marketing practice exclusive for fashion professionals (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006). What the portion between content containing brand references and content not containing brand references indicate, however, is that the fashion week in question—through the eyes of social media users—seems to have developed into a separate and distinct brand in itself.

As engagement in digital settings has been described as an active relationship with a brand's website or other digitally communicated brand messages (Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Brodie et al., 2013), the main brand in question based on this approach to engagement is arguably the fashion week itself rather than its associated brands. As such, the principal competitor for participating brands could paradoxically be the fashion week. Perhaps more paradoxically, social media engagement in the case studied also creates considerable spill over effects for non-participating brands. Overall, this suggests that fashion weeks have a positive influence on the engagement of social media users for seemingly the whole fashion sector and for fashion in general.

Arguably, this development can be explained as yet another manifestation of the institutional pressures brought forth by the rise of digitisation and social media. As digital media has become an integral part of the fashion industry (Pihl, 2013; 2014), the presented findings suggest that the shift away from product-centric organisations towards customer-centric organisations (Verhoef et al., 2010) continues to take place. More specifically, the argument put forth by Webster, who stated that “the business will be defined by its customers, not its products or factories or offices” (1992, p. 14), seems to apply increasingly to the contemporary expressions of the fashion industry. One of the results of the industry's customer centric efforts, for fashion weeks' evolution from customarily having been exclusive for fashion professionals to their contemporary manifestation of being increasingly transparent and open (McQuarrie et al., 2013), has come to be that the event in setting of the digital realm transforms into what resembles to be an already strong, yet still continuously evolving, consumer brand.

### *5.4 Managerial implications*

Based on the presented findings, fashion weeks can—through the eye of social media users—be understood as events, which increase the overall engagement for fashion and the fashion sector. As such, both participating and non-participating brands enjoy an engagement increase, even though their investments likely differ. These findings question how, and potentially why, fashion brands should participate in fashion weeks and how investments in these events should be considered.

Simultaneously, the present findings indicate that professionals can be instrumental for social media engagement because of the observed increase in engagement under the fashion week in question. As engagement both can be the precedent and antecedent of vital marketing efforts relating to brands' associated constellations and brands' position vis-à-vis competitors, engagement becomes fundamental to manage for both fashion brands and fashion weeks. In order to foster concentrated engagement effects, which is favourable from both the perspective of participating brands and fashion weeks, the formulation of common objectives and goals related to all involved parties' ambitions is an essential first steps to utilise the potentially substantial engagement effects which digital media has to offer.

As the character of fashion weeks potentially shifts from being an industry centred marketing practice for the fashion sector to becoming brands of their own, the question of how this shift can be leveraged also becomes essential. One way of managing fashion weeks' transformation towards becoming brands of their own, is a set-up in which fashion weeks become a umbrella brand for other consumer brands, both participating and non-participating brands. This allow for collaborations with actors outside of the fashion industry, such as for instance the tourism and hospitality industry as well as actors promoting and developing place brands. From such a perspective, fashion weeks should perhaps better be understood as a phenomena which is increasingly becoming embedded in a wider cultural and societal context due to how digital consumer participation is allowing outside actors to become integrated.

## **6. Conclusions**

This paper has explored the interplay between social media, fashion weeks and the degree to which participating and non-participating brands enjoy engagement of social media users. This study illustrate that the fashion week in question both concentrates user engagement for participating brands but also creates spill over engagement effects for non-participating brands. While these results indicate that fashion weeks generates an increase in generic engagement concerning fashion and the fashion sector in social media, they also question the link between fashion weeks and participating brands that traditionally has been understood as a highly effective marketing practice. The studied fashion week instead seems to have developed from being a marketing platform to becoming a potent brand of its own.

In view of these finding, this paper adds to the fashion marketing and management literature by pointing out several conceptual implications related to how this dynamic interplay can be explained and managerially approached as the character of fashion weeks are evolving into becoming increasingly consumer oriented. One of the central principles for how joint efforts between strong consumer brands both in terms of fashion brands and fashion weeks should be managed relates to the search for synergies to collectively strengthen and concentrate engagement for all participating brands in question.

Much remains in assessing how the digitisation of the media landscape affects the fashion industry as well as its associated marketing practices. We welcome further research on the topic, especially relating to how the interplay between implicit and explicit brand associations by social media users contributes to the position of fashion brands.

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