

JUST MARRIED!

A LOVE STORY BETWEEN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND SOCIAL LISTENING

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INTRODUCTION

This paper uses a case study to shed light on the methodological possibilities that open up with the combination of social media listening and more traditional qualitative interviewing techniques. It demonstrates on an applied level how the confluence of research approaches work.

THE CLIENT, THE OBJECTIVES, THE QUESTIONS

G+J, a subsidiary of the Bertelsmann Group, is on its own Europe's largest publishing house with titles in over 20 markets and millions of readers and users across its media properties. Iconic magazine titles the client owns include *Stern*, *Gala*, *Brigitte*, or *GEO* - to mention a few of its widely known German language publications. A key strength of the client's media portfolio is the range of publications targeting women. Traditionally they have played an important role in the communication and formation of fashion trends. The internet, i.e. a wide spectrum of new media offerings, mobile applications, self-announced opinion leaders, has changed how consumers learn about, and are influenced by, fashion trends.

Additional pertinent media trends are related to changes in the monetization of professional journalistic content. Revenue sources are less and less connected directly with the sale of a printed copy, but stem from inroad into native content and tight integration of reporting and merchandizing. Merchandizing in regards to fashion content means the dovetailing of reporting of fashion trends and stories with the ability to seamlessly purchase fashion items discussed.

This dovetailing of the two trends: increasing choice and complexity in the fashion media landscape, and the evolution of the media business model, necessitated G+J to explore new ways of delivering fashion content to its audiences. It was this business need that required consumer insight to innovate the client's media proposition by identifying unmet needs of its core fashion target group of young millennial women between 18 and 35 years.

IKM and Bakamo.Social collaborated to provide the client with a new way of accessing consumer opinions: a combination between social media listening and qualitative interviewing to uncover the issues, topics, influences and unmet needs the target audience experiences in relation to fashion. The research project's objective was to provide data and inspiration to the client's team to move their media product's proposition forward and build their business.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Combining market research methodologies is not new. Methodologies are combined to broaden consumer understanding, fill methodological blind spots and overall make the delivered insights more robust. Hybrid research designs are increasingly successful for qualitative researchers and social media listening adds to this. The promise of combining social listening with traditional qualitative approaches is especially attractive, as social listening can find, sort and interpret what people say online and use qualitative interviewing to pick up that knowledge and deepen it. It was this opportunity of a hybrid study - to see the broadness provided by social listening and the depth granted by qualitative interviewing - that convinced G+J to commission the study.

The proposed research design encompassed a two-step process: a social media discovery of consumer conversations on fashion, followed by a small world qualitative community to build on the insights. While this paper will focus on the interfacing of the two methodologies, both approaches are discussed.

SOCIAL MEDIA LISTENING

Bakamo.Social utilized its Deep.Scape methodology to uncover the authentic consumer conversations. Deep.Scape is a combination of social media scraping technology to identify and harvest social media data and human analyst interpretation to understand the meaning behind the found discussions. The conversations at focus of the listening were those of young German females conversing about fashion.

Finding authentic conversations

The first step of the social media listening research is the triangulation of consumer conversations on fashion. Using social media scraping tools, in this case Talkwalker's historic archive of social media conversations, necessitates the development of a semantic keyword grid. The grid needs to entail the words and phrases that reflect everyday consumer language to capture relevant conversations. The study used over 700 individual words and phrases in different groupings, such as fashion styles (Vintage, street style, casual, etc.), clothing pieces (shoes, dresses, tops, etc.), materials (leather, silk, wool, etc.), colours (black, golden, red, etc.), adjectives often related to clothing (hand-made, warm, cool, etc.), brands (retailers, clothing lines, famous designers) and a broad set of international and German celebrities. The different groups of keywords were used in different combinations, to ensure captured data is about fashion.

The retrieved data was cleaned manually from marketing messages and spam to attain a random selection of 500 authentic voices sharing individual opinions. Based on the user name, profile picture or shared content the Bakamo.Social team ensured the isolated opinions were authored by members of the target group, young women between approximately 18 and 35 years of age. It was this data set that was used by Bakamo.Social to analyze the fashion conversation.

Social listening findings

The qualitative analysis of the cleansed public social media data on fashion yielded a mapping of the conversation topics and themes; as well as permitted the identification of distinct consumer segments engaged in the discussion.

CONVERSATION THEMES

Analysis of the fashion conversation delivered a ground-up built, contextual thematic mapping of the conversation; and identified four distinct fields of discussion. Themes include:

- Fashion vs. Mainstream
- Self-Expression
- Addiction
- Sustainable Fashion

In the theme of Fashion vs. Mainstream, consumers explore the distinction between genuine high fashion and everyday normal looks. Fashion is seen as a form of high art, which has an aspect of magic to it, and invokes much more than just clothing. Conversations in the Self Expression theme explore how one's unique identity can be expressed in context of the fashion trends and their broader social implications. Addiction, on the other hand, indicates the oscillation between irresistible urges to purchase and the confessions of guilt about that behavior. Finally, Sustainable Fashion entails consumer discussions on ethical, ecological and global economic dimensions of the fashion industry. Neither the Addiction nor the Sustainable Fashion themes were pertinent to the research objectives and were not explored further. The Fashion vs. Mainstream and Self-Expression were selected by researchers and the client to be analyzed further.

The social media listening brought to light the topics and conversation triggers making up the two selected themes. In the Fashion vs. Mainstream theme, the analysis shed light on how consumers draw the line between fashion and everyday clothing. Users engage in two related conversation topics in this theme. On the one hand, they monitor and discuss the styles and looks of high fashion - which is out of reach for them. On the other hand, they scan the retail space for high fashion products to be made available. The latter happens usually when designers or fashion celebrities make their products available via mainstream retailers. For the theme of Self-Expression the analysis uncovered a complex consumer behavior whereby the consumption behavior is interlaced with the social media behaviour of social media conversation participants. The conversation consists of young women reporting on their attempts to create a look reflecting their own individual personality and style. Social media plays an important part in this process as it serves both to provide inspiration for the community, and seek confirmation and admiration by peers. The analysis revealed an underlying dichotomy between 'belonging - my fashion is trendy' and 'singularity - my fashion is my own'. It is between these two poles that individual behaviours can be mapped. The reporting on these findings provided ample examples of consumer verbatim to be used during subsequent phases of the project.

FIGURE 1. SELF-EXPRESSION THEME WITH IDENTIFIED USER PERSONAL SEGMENTATION



CONSUMER SEGMENTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media users are engaged in a natural conversation that entails much more than simple information sharing. In addition, social media users are peers of communities of interest and share explicitly and implicitly a wealth of information about themselves. It is not personally identifiable information that is meant here; rather, users share problems and solutions to sooth their needs. It is through the understanding of the underlying needs, which allows the analysis to map the range of different consumer personalities who are engaged in the conversation. The analysis yielded the following discernible segments from authentic real consumer voices in public social media:

- Pragmatics - accept mainstream trends and share ideas on how to achieve the most fashion within their budget
- Fashionistas - are the self-proclaimed fashion gurus of social media. Many have a significant fan-base.
- Dreamers - wish to be able to buy everything if they had the money. Venting frustration on not having the funds is also part of their conversation.
- Creators - use social media to proudly portray their own creations. They distance themselves from mainstream trends and see their fashion as a source of confidence.
- Rejecters - claim to hate and reject fashion. For them fashion is a reason why they do not fit in, and often venting frustration on their low-self esteem.

Reporting on segments highlighted their conversation topics and triggers, their language and conversational tone, as well as typical visual artifacts collected from their content.

In summary, the qualitative social listening has found four distinct thematic contextual spaces in the fashion conversation of young females in Germany. Moreover, the analysis revealed a need-based segmentation of social media users. The second phase of the study continued building on these insights.

SMALL WORLD COMMUNITY

The second phase of the study was designed to utilize the findings of the social media listening, and use them to deliver relevant and deep understanding of the target group's behaviour, needs and mostly unmet needs. A collaborative discussion among the two research teams and the client identified the segment(s) of highest interest of the client. Additionally, topics that saw elevated interest in the social media discussions required deeper exploration.

The qualitative interviewing was conducted via an online asynchronous focus group platform, FocusGroupIt. The community was open for two weeks and was populated by 15 participants recruited via a commercial recruitment agency, divided into two major blocks: moderated discussion and diary keeping. The following will discuss the different ways the interfacing between the two methodologies worked on a practical level.

Recruitment

Leveraging the segmentation insights from social media listening, the client and research teams decided that the segment of the Creators is the most relevant to be explored deeper by the study. Creators were selected because they are actively engaged in the creation of fashion, but at the same time retained a self-aware differentiation towards the dominant fashion

trends. In other words, this segment of consumers is most likely to be able to articulate unmet needs towards the fashion media.

Screening

Selection of Creators segment participants took place in two ways. The recruitment requirements specified participants needed to be females between the age of 20 and 30 with an interest in fashion. They also had to have an openness towards luxury brands, and be interested in creative self-expression. The second screening was conducted at the beginning of the moderated online focus group discussion. Participants were asked to self-identify with the presented segment typologies. The stimuli consisted of social media posts attributed to identified segments. Participants first discussed the segments and provided their own interpretations - providing additional depth and validation to the segmentation - and were asked to select the segment they feel is most like them. All participants perceived the closest proximity with the Creator segment.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The design of the discussion guide made use of the social media analysis insights in multiple ways, all of which were rooted in possessing a framework and full awareness of the topics and issues that make up the organic consumer conversations. The focus was on deepening the understanding of the segment's consumer behavior and unmet media needs.

Social listening uncovered that individual fashion is created by combining elements from high fashion with everyday wear, and an awareness - and willingness to borrow from across different dominant trends. While social media was able to pick up on this behavior from across hundreds of social media posts, the qualitative discussions were able to provide an individual perspective on the behavior and probe deeper into underlying motivations. The discussions shed light on the participant's routines and rules when creating a personal fashion congruent with their self-identity; and explored how this takes place. The insights allowed to situate the Creator behavior within the participants' overall life outlook, and contextualize and connect the behavior with their fashion-related purchases.

Next the small world community pivoted towards gaining deeper understanding of the sources of influence, a fashion influencer touch point landscape, participants perceive in their everyday life. The mapping covered all aspects participants mentioned and focused in on the media sources. Subsequently, participants were tasked to keep a diary for a week and record moments that related to fashion. Their brief was to track and report on the moments they sensed an influence on their fashion understanding. The discussion and the results of the diary task revealed an interwoven network of interpersonal and media (encompassing traditional and social media) influences.

The final objective of the small world community was to deepen the understanding of consumer perceptions of the media landscape - with the goal to illuminate unmet needs, media market gaps: both regarding content and technology. For example, fashionista blogs are popular, but discussions revealed many shortcomings, such as that they tend not to be mobile-optimized, are often too text-heavy and lack the ability to offer information on where to purchase the fashion products covered. Moreover, participants expressed the need to have instant trade-down options presented; i.e. to see a list of cheap, but similar looking fashion products.

Fashion apps are an important influence on the target group. These apps tend to be used during breaks or while waiting, for example, in the doctor's office. Surprisingly, participants thought fashion apps are suited to learn about a specific style, but not to broaden their horizon. The frustration participants shared appears to be connected to the selective zooming resulting from the personalized content delivered to users via fashion apps. Regarding video, participants reported to use YouTube to watch fashion content, but indicated that they would like to have access to similar video content via their TV channels. Not connected to any specific media channel, participants agreed on their shared desire to have access to quasi-personalized online fashion consulting service to help them find their own style.

The findings of the small world community yielded a wealth of granular insight. The qualitative interpretation of the data allowed the study to draw a spectrum of roles the client's mainstream assets can play to resonate with the target audience. In sum, the two-step methodology of social listening and traditional qualitative interviewing delivered on its promise to be more than the sum of its parts.

MARRIED LIFE

The methodological combination of qualitative social media analysis and traditional qualitative research appears to be a marriage built on healthy overlap and clear differences. Qualitative listening provides an unprecedented breadth of opinions, reporting on the virtual reality consumers are immersed in. Qualitative conversation leverages the interaction among participants to deliver deeper understanding and allowing to probe areas and contexts not discussed in organic social media conversations.

The case study introduced in this paper highlighted some of the methodological overlaps and differences. A good example of the synergy between the two research approaches is mutually-complementary findings around the consumer segments: social media demarcated distinct need-based persona-profiles from the analysis of the communicative interaction playing out in social media; qualitative interviewing provided a deeper understanding “who” those people are by shedding light on the things they don’t talk about by themselves.

Several methodological benefits are unlocked by the combination of the two research methodologies. First, the hybrid approach grants a genuinely bottom up understanding, by reducing the risk of false assumptions to misdirect the research project. For example, the recruitment of the small world community participants was based on the grounded understanding of the different consumer segments that emerged from social media. The screening parameters were not based on the client’s or researcher’s perspective of the audience. The same social media insight allowed for a lean execution of the research project. Based on the exploratory epistemology of social media listening, the qualitative interview phase of a study can focus on the right consumer segment and ask the right questions. Another benefit is the ability to utilize user generated social media content as stimuli for projective techniques, making exercises for participants more realistic and fun. Finally, we found the combination of the two approaches increased the acceptance of the findings.

The fact that the insights were interwoven and mutually reinforced each other appeared to cancel out often-held criticism/limitations of both methodologies: ‘social media is just full of meaningless chatter’, or, ‘focus groups don’t have the sample size to be reliable’. The combination of the methodologies allows researchers to base their interpretations on hundreds or thousands of individual, unsolicited, unbiased opinions and the depth vision facilitated by interactive and guided discussions.

LOVE IS HERE TO STAY

We the authors of this paper believe that the combination of the new qualitative social listening methodology with existing broadly used qualitative research approaches is an innovation in the market research industry toolkit and will continue to grow in significance. We think the presented case study is a good indication of the ways the two approaches can be beneficially interfaced. To be sure, we do not believe we have identified all potential ways to reap the combination’s benefits. We will continue to experiment and invite others help explore the full potential of the hybrid approach’s benefits.

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