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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 (Friendorff, 2015).¹ The most followed physical product brands include Samsung Mobile, with

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¹ All follower figures are as of February 2015.

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 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.

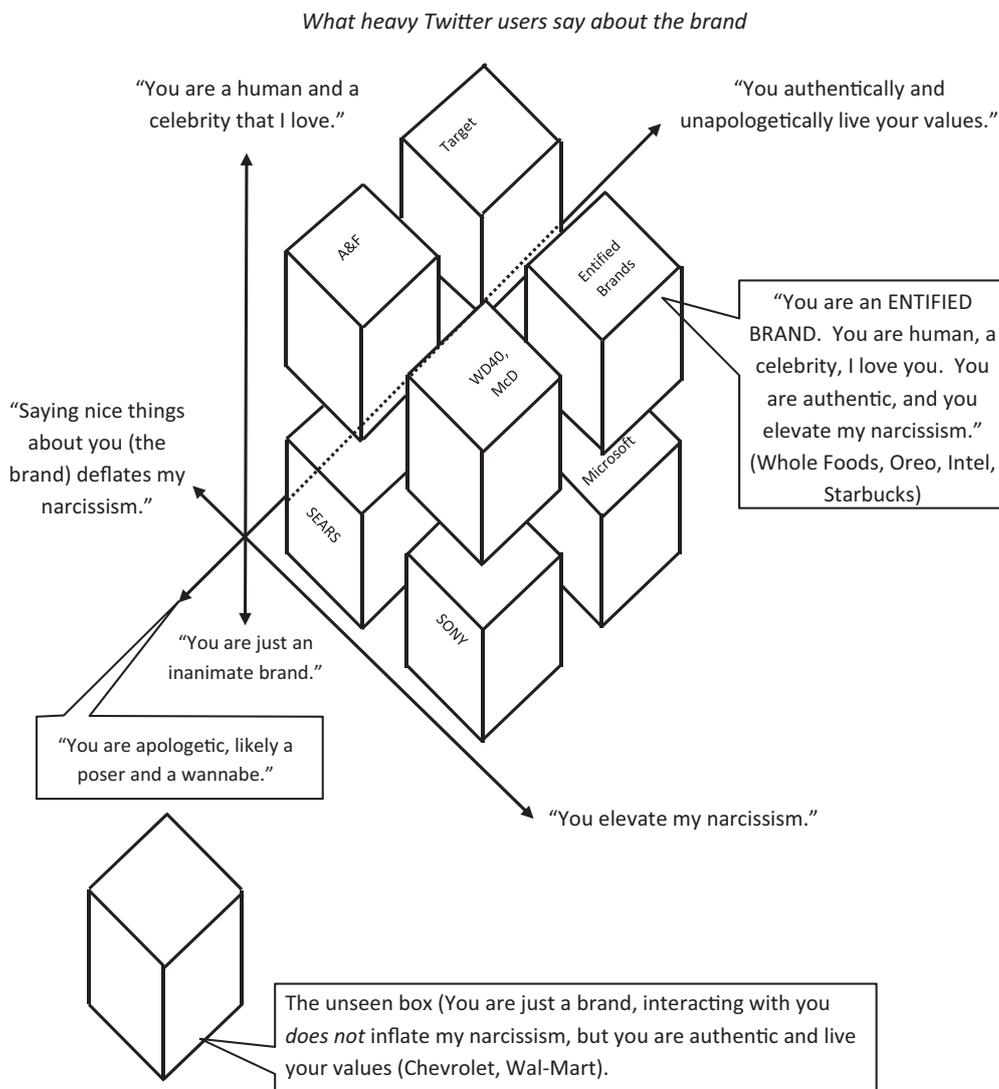
Each focus group included eight participants and lasted between 50 and 70 minutes; all were videotaped by student volunteers. The focus group discussions were structured to the extent that participants were asked to describe how they interacted with brands via Twitter. In the first round of data analysis, the video recordings were viewed independently by researchers. Excerpts were transcribed, and themes in the data were identified by each co-author. Later, the co-authors jointly viewed the tapes to verify evidence of the insights drawn from the data. The findings about brand entification presented here resulted from an iterative process of reviewing videos and constructing arguments based on actual quotes. They apply mostly to Twitter-using millennials currently enrolled in college. Considerable confirmatory evidence from future studies and

multiple samples are needed to establish external validity of our findings.

3. What is brand entification?

We define brand entification as an outcome of interactions among brands and heavy users of Twitter, which produce the following attributions toward the brand: The brand is (1) not just a human who speaks and responds, but a lovable celebrity with an elevated social status (2) that helps the user elevate his/her own social status by affording him/her bragging rights in the Twitter community and feeding his/her narcissism, and (3) authenticates and lives the user's values unapologetically (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Three characteristics of entified brands on Twitter



A&F: Abercrombie & Fitch Apparel
 McD: McDonald's Fast Food Chain

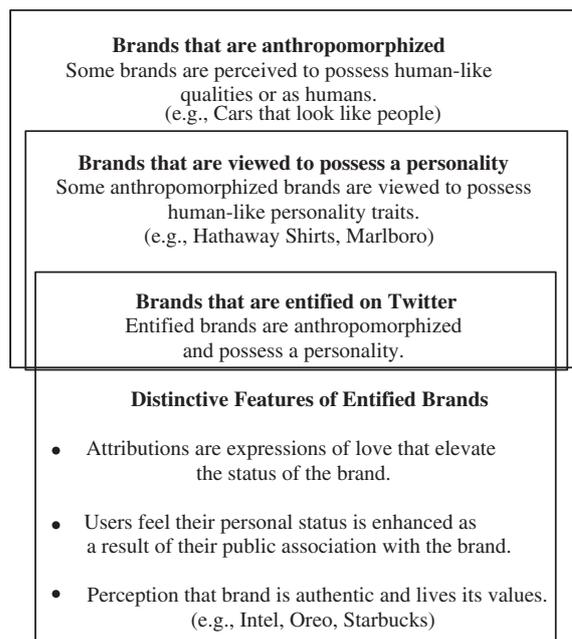
3.1. “You are human and a celebrity that I love”

If all participants spoke in one voice about the brands they have entified, they would say: “You (the brand) don’t just have human qualities, you *are* human. You don’t have a personality like I have a personality; you are a celebrity that I love, like Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber are celebrities that I love.” Twitter users express deep love for the brand, in words often reserved for celebrities. Consider the following tweet sent on March 10, 2013: *@Starbucks Thank you for being so hip and cool and edgy and independent and non-corporate and young* (Sashittal et al., 2014, p. 95). The expression of love is unabashed. On March 16, 2014, a follower of Oreo tweeted: *I just want to say a great BIG happy birthday to the love of my life, @Oreo. You’re looking good for 102, baby!* A follower of Whole Foods tweeted on March 17, 2014: *Why must you be so far away?* In 2011, a follower of Intel tweeted: *Thank you for being in my life micro-processor I can’t live without you, I love you and wish you a happy 40th birthday.* Nearly 2 years later, on March 10, 2013, another fan tweeted: *@Intel congratulations on your 10^6 followers that should bring u mega happiness. Wishing u all the best for giga happiness:-)* (Sashittal et al., 2014). The proclamation of love persists for entified brands. Consider the following tweets sent to Starbucks by its followers over the course of a year:

- *Dear @Starbucks, I just had hazelnut macchiato and. . .I think I’m in love.* (March 15, 2013)
- *True love is when your husband walks to the grocery store in 8 degrees and brings you back a #Starbucks. . .I love.* (January 14, 2014)
- *I have to come clean. I’m having a love affair. It’s getting pretty serious. I think I’m in love.* (February 14, 2014)
- *It knows my name, and I love it. . .And it loves me back.* (March 19, 2014)

How is entification different from anthropomorphism (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007, 2012; Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007; Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2009) or the notion that brands can have personalities (Aaker, 1997; Freling, Crosno, & Henard, 2011)? While clear overlaps exist, entification is a distinct creature of heavy-Twitter-using millennials (see Figure 2). Three of the clearest distinctions are as follows. First, the interactive communication necessary for entification is quite unique: the brand must speak, respond, and interact with Twitter users

Figure 2. Conceptual domains of brand anthropomorphism, brand personality, brand entification

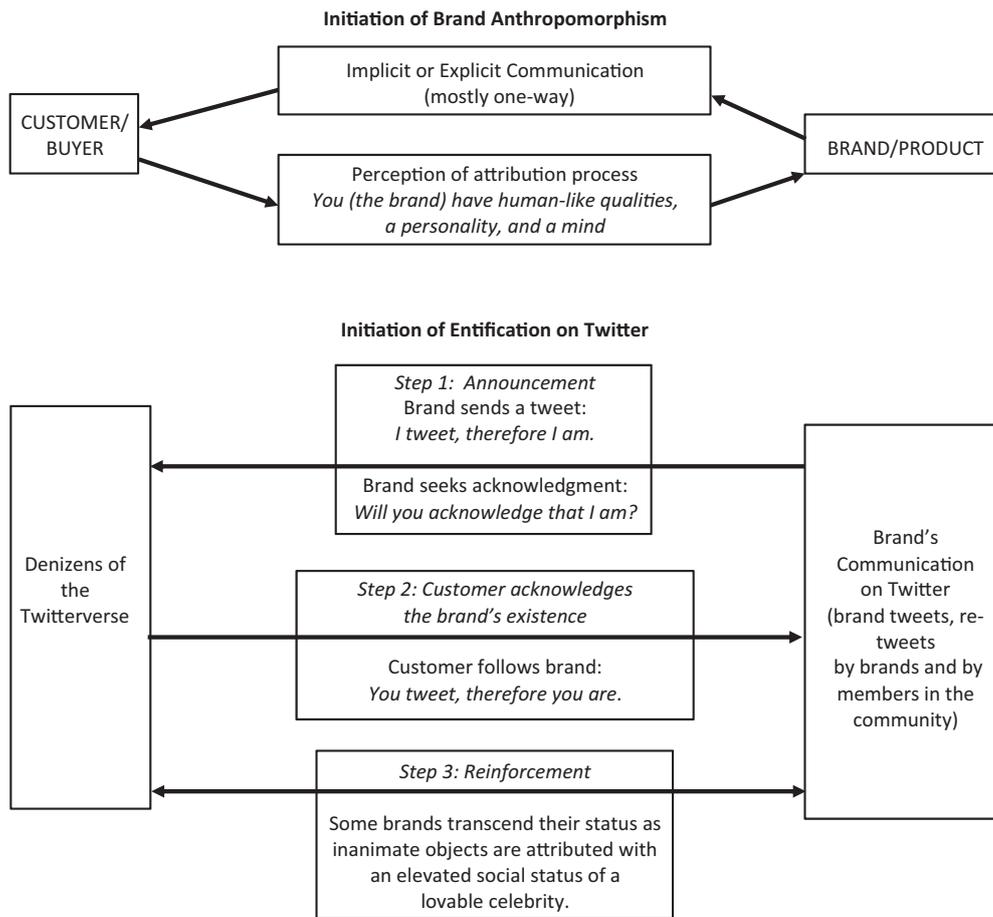


within 140 characters. Second, although consumers may love human-like brands with personalities, entification on Twitter extends this toward making the love explicit, often in words reserved to describe celebrities of high social status. Third, a process of mutual acknowledgment occurs on Twitter, differentiating entification from anthropomorphism (see Figure 3). As Figure 3 shows, the brand begins by announcing its presence as a human: “I tweet, therefore I am.” The brand communication then asks for acknowledgment from Twitter users: “Will you (Twitter user) acknowledge that I exist?” The entification process cannot begin unless the Twitter user acknowledges the brand by (1) replying to the brand’s tweet, and/or (2) following the brand, and/or (3) retweeting the brand message to followers, and/or (4) ‘favoriting’ the brand tweet. Increased frequency of interactions and increased expressions of love toward the brand in the Twitterverse help some brands transcend their status from inanimate objects to not just humans who speak, but lovable celebrities of elevated social status.

3.2. “You elevate my narcissism”

Twitter users entify a brand to the extent it helps them feed their narcissism. Consider the distinctions between brands that are entified and those that are not. Coca-Cola is a popular brand, but not entified on Twitter. On the other hand, Starbucks—followed by almost 6 million Twitter users—is entified. Focus group participants say that tweeting

Figure 3. Processes of brand anthropomorphism versus brand entification



a photograph of a soda can is “cheesy and lame,” but tweeting a photo of a Starbucks coffee cup is “cool” and widely accepted. The \$5 spent on a cup of coffee buys caffeine and bragging rights in the Twitterverse.

What affords bragging rights? In general, the more the brand is followed and the more tweets it attracts. However, brands with close-knit yet comparatively smaller communities can still afford bragging rights to their followers, too. For instance, WD40 has only 6,482 followers, but its community has much in common. An acknowledgment from WD40 can prompt the excited response: “Look who acknowledged me! Look who thinks I am cool!” The brand’s response or retweet packs a punch mostly when the brand is recognized as cool within the user’s community, even if it is not widely followed; that is, what the brand does within and outside the Twitterverse to gain credibility matters inordinately. Focus group participants noted:

Some people tweet at a brand to get a response back. If out of the 400,000 people that follow them, you get a response back, that’s pretty awesome.

And it’s cool, too, because I feel like you would go and tell your friends about that brand. You’d be like, “Hey, (name of brand) just tweeted me.”

Virtually any validation received from a brand has the potential to feed a Twitter user’s narcissism; however, not all responses are equal in terms of their impact. A user has nothing to brag about if the brand is unknown or regarded as uncool in her/his community. For instance, validation received from brands such as Sony, Microsoft, and McDonald’s creates opportunities for bragging within the user’s Twitter community (“I am cooler than you”). On the other hand, while Sears, Chevrolet, and Wal-Mart are fine brands, the bragging rights afforded by their responses to a user may seem insufficiently validating to the average 21–24-year-old’s sense of self.

3.3. “You authentically and unapologetically live your values”

Some brands are viewed as authentic—honest, true to themselves, fully reflective of their culture and heritage, and unapologetic—by their followers in

the Twitterverse: a necessary condition for entification. Whole Foods, Starbucks, Intel, Chevrolet, and Wal-Mart are considered authentic because they demonstrably live their core values—although we do not find evidence to suggest Chevrolet and Wal-Mart are also entified. How can brands help? First, tweets that demonstrate cleverness and intelligence seem to go a long way; the Twitterverse appreciates intelligent musings, wry observations, thought-provoking presentation of data, and self-deprecating humor. Consider the tweets from entified brands. On February 28, 2013, Intel tweeted: *#DidYouKnow 4 billion use a mobile phone but only 3.5 billion people actually use a toothbrush!* While clearly narrowly directed, it earned 1,656 retweets and 221 favorites. Starbucks tweeted: *Sometimes a good cappuccino and a good book are all you need.* This garnered 6,296 retweets and 2,473 favorites. The tweet was clever; it resonated with millennials because, despite popular concerns, this generation is reading and is more likely than their parents to check books out of the library (Haq, 2012).

Second, the brand must live its core values, outside and in—including inside the Twitterverse. For instance, when—after supporting the gay marriage bill—Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz responded to a complaining shareholder in clear terms by saying, “Sell your shares if you want; we stand for diversity,” it was a statement of living the brand (Stuart, 2013). McDonald’s is cool and people love the brand, but because it is likely the most successful purveyor of deeply satisfying junk food, its attempt to portray young families eating salads and non-dripping burgers is viewed as inauthentic on Twitter. Although McDonald’s is a popular brand, it remains unentified on Twitter.

Attributions of authenticity (with ‘fakeness’ as an antonym) should not be confused with the grounded-versus-pretentious dichotomy. Brands can be authentically grounded or authentically pretentious, as long as they live their core values without apology. For instance, Whole Foods is entified and authentically pretentious, or cosmopolitan. It unabashedly embraces its identity: more city than country; more European import than F150; more hemp and pastels than polyester; more ‘I eat exotic tofu’ than greasy spoon; more ‘I am not really a victim of famine, I just look like one’; and less Hostess cupcakes and XXL. No real person may fit this caricature, but among other things, Whole Foods’ refusal to disguise or mislabel genetically modified foods suggests the company lives its values, and unapologetically so (e.g., “Whole Foods,” 2013). Conversely, Sony’s appeal, “Please take me seriously; I can also do what Apple does” is viewed mostly as an apology.

4. Why do some Twitter users entify brands?

Not all Twitter users are equally prone to entificatory attributions; some are more indifferent than others. While many causes may underlie this motivation, we can identify two characteristics that are innate to users likely to entify brands. First, Twitter users more afflicted with the fear of missing out, or FOMO, seem likelier to interact with and entify brands.² The dreadful fear that something interesting is going on in the Twitterverse—that someone else may have something critically important to share, which may hold tantalizing potential for entertainment or connectedness to others—is a factor that drives relentless Twitter usage. Among some of our students, Twitter does not interfere with life, life interrupts Twitter usage. Second, Twitter users more afflicted with the fear of being ignored, or FOBI, seem likelier to interact with and entify brands. Some Twitter users fear they will not matter to anyone if they have nothing to say on Twitter: “If I do not tweet, I am not.” Marantz-Henig and Henig (2013) write about a person active on social networks, who upon discovering something smart to say immediately wishes for access to Twitter so that her intelligence can be shared. Tweeting expressions of love toward a brand already popular on Twitter in words often reserved for celebrities emerges as a convenient, easy way of alleviating the FOMO and FOBI that heavy Twitter users likely feel.

5. Consequences of entification

We can identify two consequences of entification that are likely to interest brand managers. First, users seem to censor their negative comments about entified brands; they don’t want a celebrity with whom they have a personal relationship to think poorly of them. Users may mock buyers of Starbucks coffee, but rarely Starbucks itself. Users mock Whole Foods, but with mild rather than vicious critique. For instance, on March 19, 2014, a follower tweeted: *Whole Foods should sell a lifestyle magazine called “Congratulations, You Can Afford This.”* In a similar vein, on March 18, 2013, a follower tweeted: *Sometimes I’m scared a lady in a nice pant suit will beat me up in the Whole Foods parking lot.* Another follower, on March 19, 2013, tweeted: *There are some great deals to be had at Whole Foods. This week only you can finance an avocado with no money down.* This type of Twitter chatter is

² See Grohol (2014) for more on the FOMO construct.

characteristic of an entified brand. Users are bound to the community of people following the brand in ways that they collude, if implicitly, to say positive things: “Because you are entified, we are reluctant to lash out against you.” Speaking ill of an entified brand produces the same anxiety as speaking ill of a person of exalted status: it produces embarrassment. Our focus group participants noted:

I definitely wouldn't want them [the brand] to see it if I said something bad about them; I'd be embarrassed.

If I said something bad about them [referring to an entified brand], I would be embarrassed.

Users do not want the brands to know they do not like them:

If I wanted to complain, I definitely would not put their Twitter name in it or hashtag them.

I would not use the brand's handle unless there was a special reason I wanted them to see it or it was super awesome.

I didn't hashtag them. I didn't hit that @ symbol, like actually tweeted their account. I just mentioned them. I guess I wasn't really expecting them to answer. I was venting. I wish they hadn't read it, because it was kind of embarrassing.

Second, entified brands enhance customers' consumption experience. Oreo cookies, Starbucks coffee, and Intel chips are likely intrinsically satisfying, but the consumption experience is significantly enhanced when one's association is announced, acknowledgment is received, and bragging rights are accrued. Twitter offers the potential to transcend space: you can be here (consuming privately) and there (consuming publicly). Twitter offers a tether to the larger world, not just for consumption of physical products, but also for entertainment. The Oscars and the Super Bowl are now watched on TV and Twitter. According to Nielsen (2014), 15.3 million unique viewers sent 25.3 million tweets during the 2014 Super Bowl, an average of 87,200 tweets per minute. During the 2014 broadcast of the Oscars, 37 million people viewed Oscar-related tweets, comparable to the 43 million viewers that tuned into the show on their televisions (Bercovici, 2014). A focus group participant explained:

That's what you almost use Twitter for. So, like if you are watching the game, you're going to be tweeting while watching. If you're doing your homework, you're going to say: “I'm struggling with this paper, anybody feel free to help.”

6. Are all brands entifiable on Twitter?

How can managers of the brand's presence on Twitter render the brand more or less entifiable? Some brands use Twitter to communicate the message: “We're not worthy.” These brands use Twitter primarily to circulate notices about discounts (e.g., Domino's Pizza), to reproduce billboards (e.g., Coca-Cola), or to hear customer complaints (e.g., Jet Blue, Time Warner Cable). Rather than elevating, such behavior depresses the brand's social status in the Twitterverse. On March 19, 2014, a follower of Domino's Pizza tweeted: *Dominos Pizza got their name by watching their customers try to stand in a line while blackout drunk.*

Some brands act in ways that make status-elevating attributions all but impossible: they take themselves too seriously and already portray an elevated sense of self that is easy to mock. For instance, Abercrombie & Fitch, a popular clothing brand among millennials, lives its core value of “You are not worthy and you can't afford this.” Whether the retailer intends it or not, core buyers respond with “No, no—I really AM worthy. I'm willing to pay astronomical prices for products designed for unreal people and to deal with your indifferent sales clerks because I really do belong. Let me show you how cool I am.” Whether this brand strategy is effective or not, it renders Abercrombie & Fitch difficult to entify. The brand does not help by using Twitter to reproduce its photo catalog of unrealistically, impossibly chiseled models. There is not much scope left for elevating its status; the brand takes itself too seriously on a medium that values irreverence. Abercrombie & Fitch is viewed as unreal and mock-worthy, and attracts snarky tweets. Consider the following tweet sent on March 19, 2014: *Welcome to Abercrombie & Fitch. Our sizes are Small, X-small & anorexic. Our prices are large, extra-large & holy s*** you're in debt.* Or another tweet, sent the same day: *Abercrombie & Fitch is so dark and loud I don't know if they're selling clothing or the girls from Taken.*

7. How to entify your brand on Twitter

If a brand is not active in the Twitterverse, it is not a real person and no longer entified. Conversely, if the brand tweets too much, it is viewed as unworthy of respect. If it were possible to draw a generalization in this regard, a followed brand must tweet at least once a day and up to five times a day. Consider the focus group responses:

I think it's all about currency; you look at the page and see how often they tweet. . . . If they [brand Twitter accounts] don't even like to

update their Twitter account, I feel like they don't even have a Twitter account, really.

It's really not interesting; they're just there to have a presence. That was disappointing to me. You [brand] should really be on top of it.

If the objective is to entify a brand, there is no real way of avoiding thorough monitoring of the Twitterverse and sending carefully calibrated tweets. The most effective strategy is to monitor all tweets in the Twitterverse mentioning the brand. An undirected tweet—that is, one not addressed to anybody in particular—sent by a user should be carefully identified and retweeted by the brand to the entire Twitterverse. This gives the person who sent the tweet the greatest bragging rights: “Look how cool I am, the brand found me in all this noise even when I made no attempt to alert them (I did not hashtag them). They acknowledged my tweet (I am cooler and more interesting than you are).” Randomly responding to a directed tweet—that is, one that alerts the brand via the use of hashtags—by retweeting it in the Twitterverse also packs a punch. The key here is randomness in responding: If the tweeter receives a retweet as expected, the tweeter loses respect for the brand. However, if the tweeter was unsure whether anyone, let alone the brand, would respond, a retweet from a cool brand is heard as: “Yes, Margaret, this is God; I am listening.” Responding to every tweet is not only expensive, but also makes the brand seem too predictable or eager. A participant notes:

If someone tweets too much, I will unfollow. I once followed a rapper who tweeted every 5 minutes.

Too many brands, however, use Twitter to circulate content produced for traditional media or as a mechanism for hearing complaints. For instance, 37% of tweets that mention retailers are customer service-related (PR Web, 2014). Time Warner Cable is active on Twitter, but its strategy seems mostly limited to its use as a complaint-gathering mechanism—a strategy that makes millennials cringe, regardless of its intent. A participant notes:

The way that (a regional supermarket chain) came off was pretty cool, and smaller companies when they say funny things back it's pretty cool, whereas Time Warner was like, “How can we help you.” It was too generic.

8. Summary

Consider the old riddle: “If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a

sound?” If the tree is a brand, it does not matter to heavy users of Twitter. It matters even less if tweeting about the brand did not alleviate the Twitter user's FOMO and FOBI or did not feed their narcissism. Managers wedded to traditional media and one-way communication are likely to respond with skepticism: “Twitter, schmitter!” This skepticism may explain their reluctance to adapt; or the proclivity for using Twitter as a billboard, a catalog for one-way communication, or a customer service tool. Traditional ways of branding via print, broadcast, and/or outdoor media are not redundant; interactive media have opened up opportunities for producing new brand-related outcomes among heavy users of Twitter that are too tempting to ignore.

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