The nature of relationship between consumers and brands through the medium of Instagram: An exploratory study of the millennial's perspective.

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Abstract

Social Networking Sites are used by individuals and brands alike. They offer new ways of communicating as well as finding, sharing and promoting products. Within this setting, customers have gained power as they use these new communication channels not only to connect with friends and family but also voice their opinion about offerings whilst engaging with branded content. The overall aim of this study is to explore the nature of millennial consumers' use of the photo and video-sharing platform Instagram to engage and interact with brands. As the study of this particular network is relatively new there is very literature academic literature relating to its use in this regard and therefore this paper aims to help to fill this research gap.

The study employed a mixed methods approach to explore this emerging research area, with a qualitative data gathered through a semi structured focus group interview followed by a survey of 141 Instragram users. All the participants were aged between 18 and 36. The findings of this investigation suggest that brands are perceived positively on Instagram. However, in order to reach a millennial audience, brands need to publish inspirational or information and entertainment-related content to attract and retain millennial attention whilst driving engagement.

Key Words: Social Networking, Marketing Communication, Brand Engagement, Millennials, Instagram

Introduction

The growing popularity of Social Networking Sites (SNS) has resulted in new possibilities for end customers to distribute and engage with branded content (Mutinga et al., 2011). Customers can easily share product related information with their network, like or follow brands while directly communicating, as well as, co-creating ideas with them (Bruhn et al. 2012). These new possibilities not only have provided customers with the power to influence the way brands communicate them but they also have had an effect on how brands handle the competitive marketplace affecting their overall profitability (Kumar *et al.*, 2010; Dennhardt, 2014). .

Within the online setting of multi-way and multi-channel conversations, brand managers have realised the potential to cultivate and deepen customer relationships (Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010) and Instagram has become increasingly important (Parker, 2016). It is a SNS specialising in photo/video sharing, which is either accessible on the Internet website (www.instagram.com) or through the free mobile application (Instagram, 2017a). The platform first became popular because users could alter/edit visual content by applying different filters. Adding different hashtags, uploaded images were categorised and could be found within the network (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2013). Comparable to other SNS, Instagram users can like and comment on posts. However, since its launch in 2010, Instagram has evolved and incorporated new features, such as Instagram Stories (content disappears after 24 hours) as well as Live Videos (Instagram, 2016b; 2016c). These developments allow the 600 million monthly and 400 million daily active users to share not only special but also small moments of life, either in a private setting or within the global network (Instagram, 2016a). Since 2016, the platform has incorporated sponsored content into news feeds, increasing brand exposure for its 1 million business partners (Instagram, 2017b). Regardless of whether content is paid for or not, an internal Instagram statistic reveals that businesses are followed by 80 % of users, who are mainly in their thirties or younger (Instagram, 2017a; Smith, 2016).

Millennials are a generation that has been of growing interest within the academic literature because their cohort outnumbers previous cohorts, such as Generation X and Baby Boomers (Bergh & Behrer, 2013). Furthermore, they are considered the first

cohort with traits connected to technology and social platforms (Williams & Page, 2011; Bolton *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, Millennials are an appropriate group to focus upon when investigating topics related to SNSs. In recent years, scholars have put a particular focus on examining this generation and its use of Facebook or Twitter, leaving Instagram (almost) unnoticed. Bearing in mind that six in ten Millennials are active on Instagram (Young, 2016), the authors have identified it as important but under researched area.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the linkage between millennial Instagram users and brands. This paper aims to promote a better understanding of how and why millennials use this platform to interact with branded content.

Literature review

Definition of Millennials

The cohort of Millennials are the children of the Baby Boomer generation (Williams & Page, 2011). In the literature, there are various names for the millennial generation, or short millennials. These names include, Digital Generation, digital natives, dot.com generation, DotNet, Echo Boomers, Gen Wired, Generation 2000, Generation Y, Generation Search, Generation www, iGeneration, iPod Generation, Ne(x)t Generation, Net Generation, Nexters, We Generation as well as Why Generation (Tulan & Martin, 2001; Jorgensen, 2003; Martin, 2005; lobel et al., 2009; Bergh & Behrer, 2013; Bolton et al., 2013; Valentine & Powers, 2013; Latif 2015). It is obvious that almost all of the aforementioned appellations are somehow linked to the Internet and digital technologies. This indicates how strong the impact has been on this generation.

Just as researchers have used different names to describe millennials, there are also various time spans that have been used to define who could be considered part of this generation. Some authors state a period of time starting in the late seventies (1977/1978) and ending in 1988 (Tulgan & Martin, 2001; Martin, 2005), as well as, from 1977 to 1994/1996 (Noble et al., 2009; Williams & Page, 2011; Valentine & Powers, 2013), whereas other authors (Bergh & Behrer, 2013; Bolton et al., 2013; Viswanathan & Jain, 2013) state that millennials are individuals born in between the

eighties and the mid-nighties/new millennium; Howe and Strauss (2007) extend this time span even beyond 2000, namely 2004. Periods of time ranging from one up to two decades demonstrates how difficult it has been for researchers to properly differentiate between millennials and past/future generations.

With regard to population size, millennials might be considered a larger cohort than their parents (Williams & Page, 2011; Valentine & Powers, 2013) even though exact numbers cannot be given because definitions vary strongly. However, the authors in this study have chosen to take Bolton et al.s (2013) definition, that is , millennials are individuals born between 1981 and 1999, making them individuals aged 18 to 35. In the most recent data available from the UK Office of National Statistics (2015; 2016), these millennials are approximately 16.2 million individuals (8.18 million males and 8.02 million females). Those numbers underline the importance of this generation as they make up almost a quarter (24.88 %) of the UK population.

Millennial Characteristics

Millennials distinguish themselves from previous generations, like generation X and the Baby Boomers (Bergh & Behrer, 2013). Their values are different and other aspects of life are regarded as important (Valentine & Powers, 2013). Due to globalisation and technical advancements, this generation was introduced to technology as well as brands at an early age (Howe & Strauss, 2007; William & Page, 2011).

Millennials could be considered more self-assured, optimistic and tolerant than earlier generations (Valentine & Powers, 7013). Based on their technological abilities, millennials tend to look for information on a constant basis (Tulgan & Martin, 2001). Furthermore, some authors state that they could be characterised as demanding, individualistic, technology-driven and 'wanting it all' available exactly when they demand it; making immediacy an important aspect of their life (Ng et al., 2010). However, members of the cohort in question are also described as willing to take on their own responsibilities regarding work/life while being less worried about change (Tulgan & Martin, 2001; Jorgensen, 2003; Twenge, 2010). Also, they tend to work harder to achieve their goals, even in the short-term (Martin, 2005; Viswanathan & Jain, 2013).

These characteristics demonstrate that millennials is a cohort that tends to concentrate on themselves, as well as, appreciating an open mind, change in general and the internet and associated new technologies.

Millennials and Brands on Instagram

Millennials are 'technology-savvy', they enjoy using new ways of communicating. According to Young (2016), 60 % of millennials are registered on Instagram. Jang et al. (2015) state that around 90 % of Instagram users are aged 35 or less. Young (2016) points out that 33 % of millennial Instagram users have followed (at least) one branded profile in the past month. This insight is significant as it demonstrates that millennials are willing to be exposed to branded content within their Instagram news feed. Erdogmus and Cicek, (2012) found that consumers use this kind of engagement in order to obtain more information about products. They go on to speculate that Instagram offers organisations the possibility of a low-cost marketing tool that could be employed to raise levels of brand awareness and recognition as well as customer loyalty in the long run).

On Instagram there are different types of brands (Iconosquare Index, 2016): Categories range from personal brands (examples: Beyonce and Cristiano Ronaldo), consumer good brands (examples: Samsung and Coca Cola's), media (example: Time Magazine), destinations (example: Disneyland) as well as service brands (example: Google). The most popular non-personal brand is National Geographic with more than 64 million followers (National Geographic on Instagram, 2016; Iconosquare, 2016).

Of the global top 100 brands, 90 % use the photo and video-sharing site (Smith, 2016). Outside that particular ranking, almost half of all brands have already explored the platform as a marketing tool. As it is the social networking site with the highest brand engagement rates in comparison to Facebook (10 x more) or Twitter (84 x more), Smith (2016) speculated that by the end of 2016 the number of brands on Instagram could be as high as 70 % as businesses and brands started to realise the potential of this platform.

Commercial promotions were allowed on Instagram at the start of 2016 by th end of that year more than 500 million advertisements had been actively placed on Instagram

(Young, 2016). This statistical data underlines the growing importance of the platform as organisation explore new opportunities outside of Facebook to promote, build and sustain brands.

There is a relatively small body of literature that has investigated Instagram users, either separately, or in relation to other platforms. Sheldon and Bryant's (2016) study suggested that Millennials use Instagram for several reasons: to connect and engage with friends; look at the lives of virtual acquaintances or celebrities; chronicle their own lives and record events/moments that were important to them; self-expression (using photographs and videos as a vehicle to express their personality and talents and shape others' perceptions of them). Lee et al.'s (2015) study found similar results to Sheldon and Bryant (2016) but also found that Instagram was being used by individuals to relax and escape from their daily lives. However, although the majority of individuals in these studys' samples were Millennials neither study was solely focused on Millennial users but on wider population spreads.

Research Gap

The majority of journal articles and published reports on the topic of SNSs concentrate on the most popular network Facebook with its 1.79 billion active monthly users (Facebook, 2016). However, although smaller Instagram has 500 million active monthly users and is a growing significantly (Instagram, 2016b), however, little research has been undertaken to examine the photo and video-sharing platform. Furthermore, no study has investigated the ways millennial consumers use this particular site for engaging in branded conversations. Therefore, it is the aim of this study to explore this under-researched area and in particular explore the nature of the consumer- brand relationships on Instagram.

Research approach

This study was undertaken from the perspective of a pragmatic research philosophy combined with an inductive and mixed methods approach to investigate the relationship between Millennials and brands (Bryman, 2016; Tashakkaori & Teddlie, 2003). Employing mixed methods was considered an appropriate approach for

exploring this emerging research area of Millennials and brands on Instagram (Harrison & Reilly, 2011). By combining both quantitative and qualitative methods in this study, the authors aimed for triangulation to verify data and possible outcomes (Rothbauer, 2008). However, with a cross-sectional time horizon selected, the authors are aware that all the opinions expressed and insights gained in this study are only 'snapshots' (Saunders et al., 2012) and that these may change over time, just as Instagram as a platform has and continues to evolved since its launch.

The data collection was divided into two stages: First, a focus group (FG) interview was conducted to explore the millennial point of view with regard to brands before an online questionnaire (OQ) was designed. The qualitative data gathered was transcribed and analysed employing content analysis whereas the ensuing quantitative data set was analysed employing both *SPSS* and *Excel* (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Sample

Every particpant involved in this study was familiar with Instagram and had an account on this particular SNS. Apart from basic demographic information, like gender or birth year, the researchers asked about which Instagram version was mostly used (app or desktop), how many profiles were followed and how many users followed the subject as well as if the account was set to private or public.

In total, 141 Instagram users filled in the questionnaire (50 males (35.5%) and 91 females (64.5 %) respectively). As there are no recent statistics available on gender distribution, those numbers are best considered in comparison to a US Internet user statistic from 2015, indicating that more US females were registered on Instagram than their male counterparts (Duggan, 2015).

Although participants could choose their birth year, the authors decided to group various years together to make comparison easier (see figure 1). More than half of the OQ participants belong to the age group 24 to 29; also, all focus group participants were part of this group.

Age groups	Percentage
18 – 23	20.6 %
24 – 29	55.2 %

30 – 33	17.1 %
34 – 36	7.1 %
	100 %

Figure 1: On-line questionnaire sample by age group

Using the application, either on mobile phone or tablet was the most popular way of accessing the SNS. Only 3 Instagram users logged onto their account via the desktop version (2.1 %). That might be because they do not use the network very often. One respondent stated:

> 'I rarely log in […] and the last time has been a while ago, as I don't have it [the app] on my phone.' P3
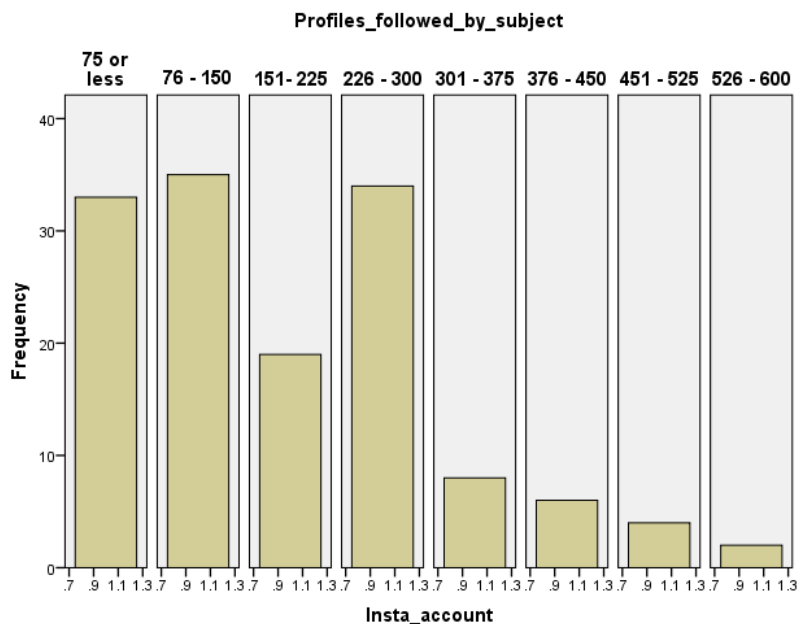
Figure 2: Instagram account – profiles followed.

Just under 50% of respondents follow 150 profiles or less. Around 15% have over 300 (see figure 2). The number of followers of the average user, however, is slightly lower: with 24% having 75 or less and 51% having less than *150* (see figure 3). Some participants share Fournier and Avey's (2011) viewpoint expressing that brands should not be present on SNS as they are artificial constructs rather than human beings. Having this opinion might have effected the way subjects perceive the platform and their behaviour (see later section : Millennial's perceptions of Brands**).**

4.2.1). A OQ participant commented that:

'For me, [Instagram] is about real people that I know.' male, 20
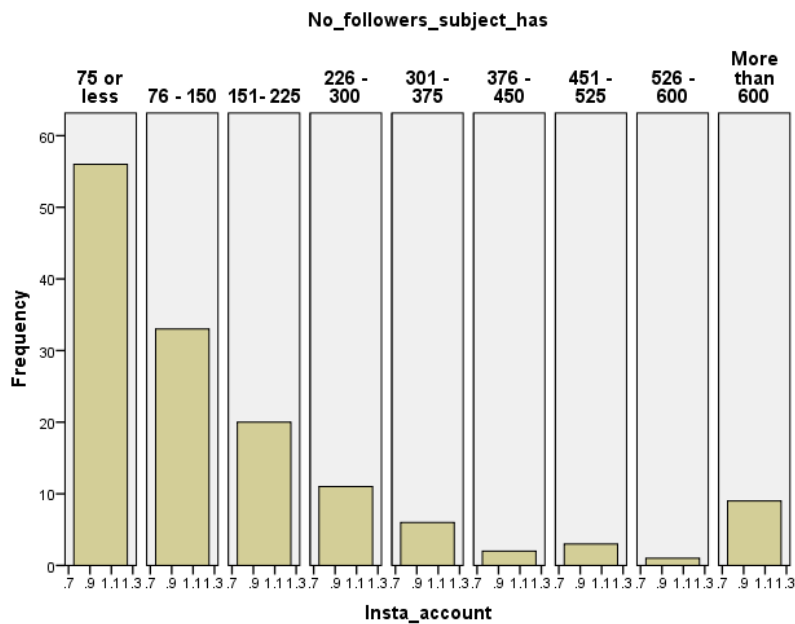
Figure 3: Instagram account – Number of followers a subject has.

Millennials are conscious about what they do in an online setting. Therefore, content might be restricted for strangers or acquaintances. So it is no surprise that almost 3/5 of participants have a private account. One respondent shared her view on privacy on Instagram, which is indicative of the wider feelings of the individuals interviewed.

'I only allow people to follow me if I really know them. Sometime I don't allow people to follow me. Just because I've seen them once doesn't

> mean I want to share everything with them. If you ever decide to let people see your content, it's very hard to get rid of them.' P1

Subjects were also asked if they had ever engaged with brands on Instagram, if they followed any favourite brands and if so how many (ranging from *less than 10* to *more than 100* as well as an opt-out answer for those Millennials who do not follow brands). 68.1 % have engaged[1] with brands on Instagram and 75.2 % follow the profile(s) of their favourite brand(s); on average *26 to 50* branded profiles are followed (see figure 4). These findings demonstrate that Millennials do seek being exposed to branded content in their news feed, confirming Young's (2016) data that states that 33 % of Millennials had followed at least one brand profile on Instagram during the month of August in 2016. The finding from this research also suggests that 75% of participants use the virtual touch-point for either active or passive engagement with brands.
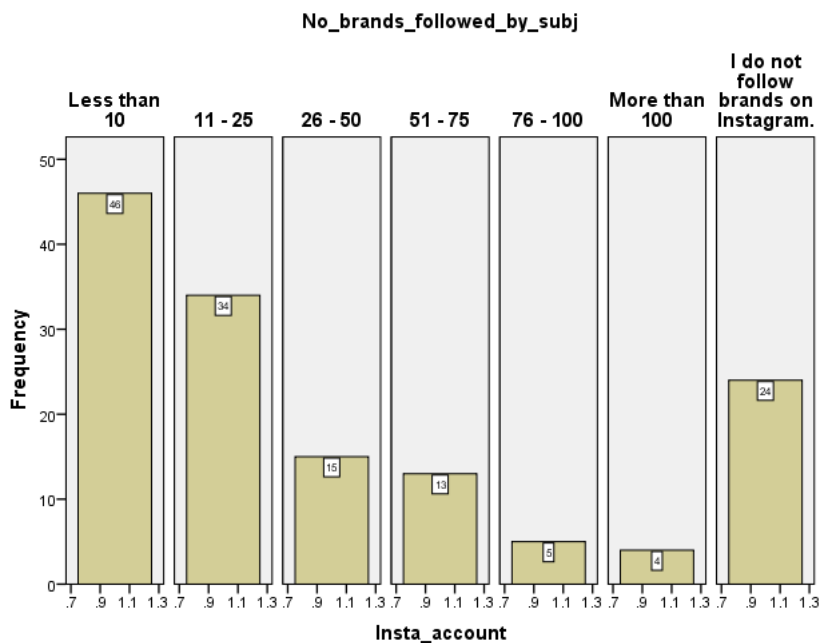
Figure 4: Instagram account – no brands followed.

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[1] Engaging means in this context commenting on a branded post, liking it, forwarding it or watching a branded video.

The authors established that approximately 20% of the profiles followed belonged to brands. Therefore, the two variables were tested for independence using a Chi-Square test this suggested that there is significant association between variables (p=0.001). Therefore, it can be concluded that the more profiles an individual follows then the number of brands followed will also grow.

User Habits of the average millennial Instagram user

Participants of this study logged onto Instagram on a daily basis (75 %). Distinguishing between active and passive usage, numbers differ significantly: While being 'passive' on Instagram is part of participants' lives at least once a day (almost 50% log on *multiple times a day*), it is however, only used 'actively' to a much smaller degree participants indicating this only happens *multiple times in a month* (see figures 5 & 6).
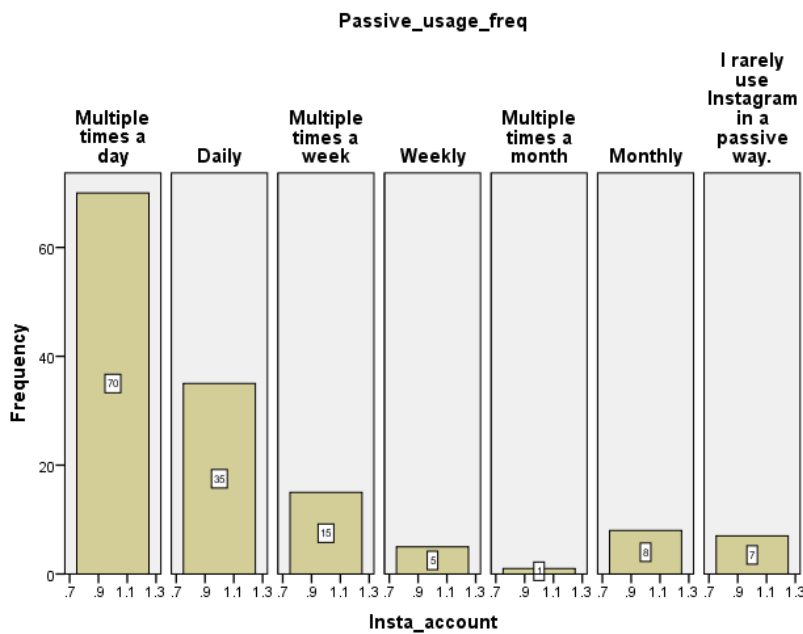
Figure 5: Frequency of Passive usage.
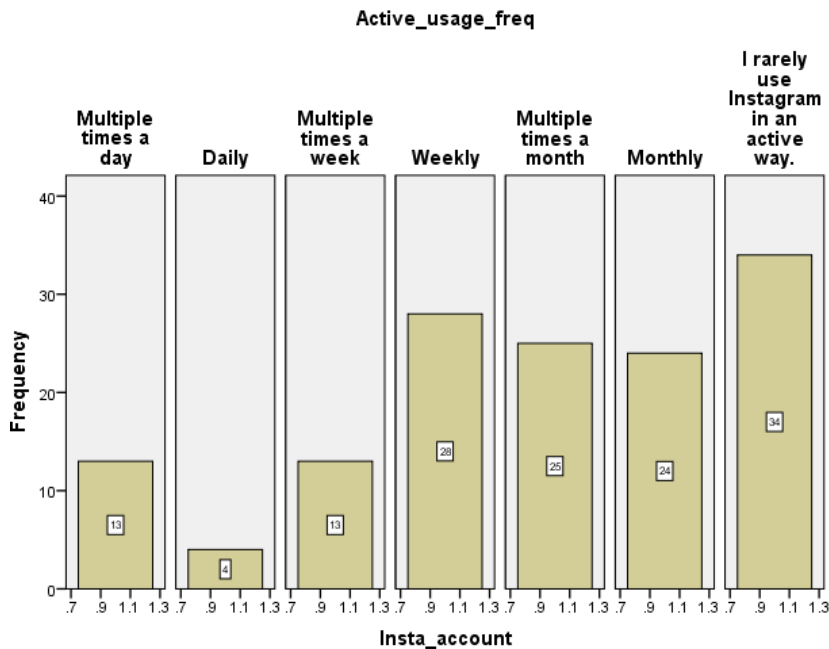
Figure 6: Frequency of Active usage.

Respondents mentioned *special occasions* (like the festive season/birthdays and receiving corresponding presents) and *holidays* as events that trigger active usage. Interestingly, another popular reason was to publish *something worth sharing,* which could indicate users are adjusting to Instagram's new vision, which is to encourage users to share moments 'as they happen' (Instagram, 2017b) through new built-in features, like Instagram Live Videos (Instagram, 2016c) as well as Instagram Stories (Instagram, 2016b). As one participant commented:

> 'I post whenever I've seen something nice or funny, like a beautiful view, food, art or buildings.' (female, 33)

Passive usage, however, differs and has a place in the daily routine of participants: Using Instagram *during the commute* was mentioned the most, followed by *while in bed/on the sofa*, *being bored* and lastly *waiting*. The FG responses offered similar insights as follows:

> 'I use Instagram in the morning. But throughout the day, I open [the app] several times. What is quite interesting is the time difference, especially if you follow some people/friends from the States: They

> post during the night and it is fluent; for me, it will be the morning when seeing those pictures and I'm always up to date.' P1

The expressed user habits show Millennials consume much more content than they share with their private network. Theoretically, this should lead to more exposure to branded content, especially taking into account that Instagram is opened at least on a daily basis. However, as the SNS is mainly used passively to relax and fill in time, like on public transport or waiting for something, this supports previous research that suggests there is only a short time span to catch the attention of multi-tasking Millennials (Martin, 2005; Freifield, 2007).

Nature of Millennial-Brand Interactions

The study focuses on three elements of brand interaction: Perception of brands, causes that make Millennials want to follow brands, and reasons for opting for an Instagram feed with minimal brand exposure. Respondent's perceptions differed between brands they actively followed, namely favourite brands, and the content of those brands they do not follow but to which they are exposed (sponsored ads).

Millennial's perceptions of Brands

Participants were asked about how they perceive brands in general and those active on Instagram. Both questions generated similar results. Grouping together the responses *very positive*, *positive* and *somewhat positive* shows that 90% of participants have a positive attitude towards brands in general, however only 80% regard brands active on Instagram as positive. 95% of the respondents had a positive perception of their favourite brands active on Instagram. Also 68% of them had a negative perception of sponsored advertisements. This might be connected to the fact that 75 % of participants of this study opt for branded content in their news feed while a quarter consider Instagram should be a personal, rather than a commercial, platform which should be used to keep in touch with real people (see earlier section: Characteristics of the average millennial Instagram user).
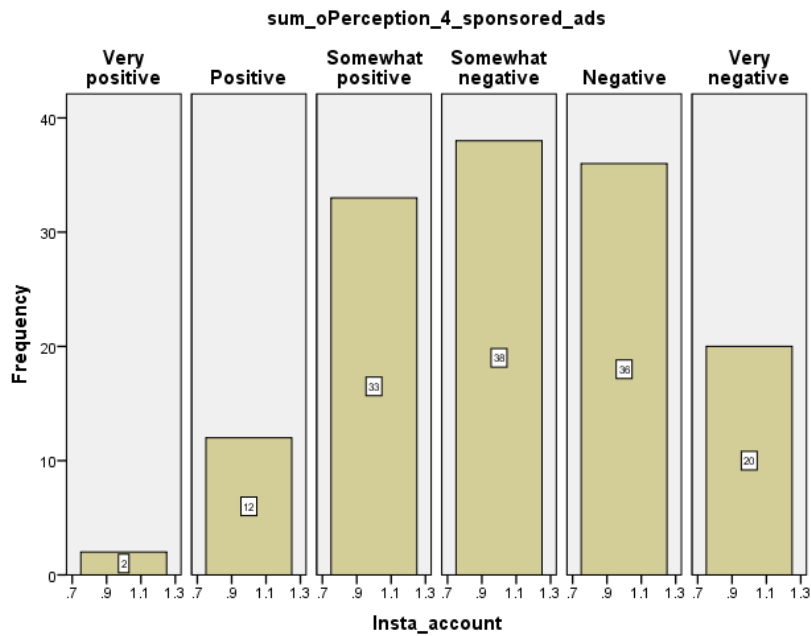
Figure 7: Perception of sponsored ads.

When asked how likely respondents were to engage with sponsored ads in their feed, more than half of respondents signify that they are unlikely to engage with the brands involved.
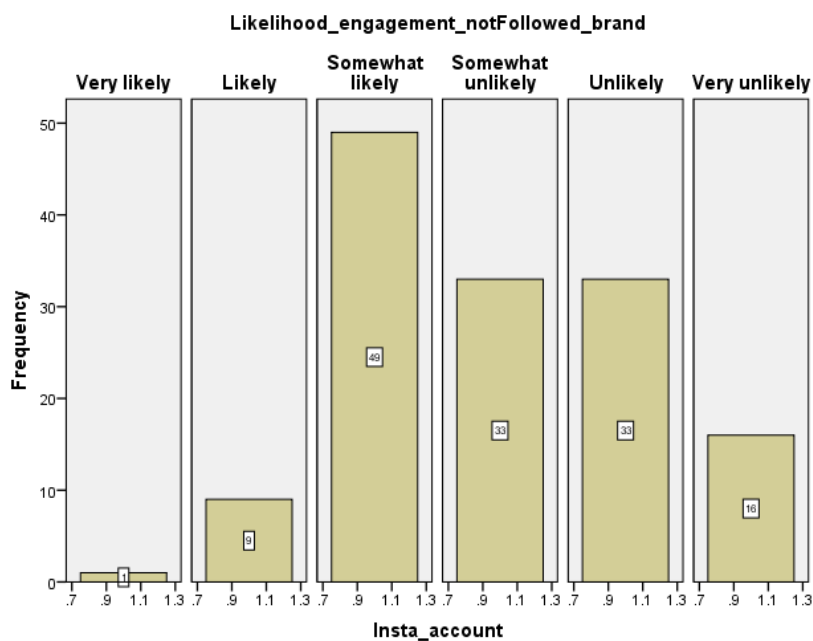

Figure 8: Likelihood engagement with unknown brand.

However, after the brand interacts with the subject by liking or commenting on a previous post, the likelihood of individuals responding is then *somewhat likely* (see figure 9).
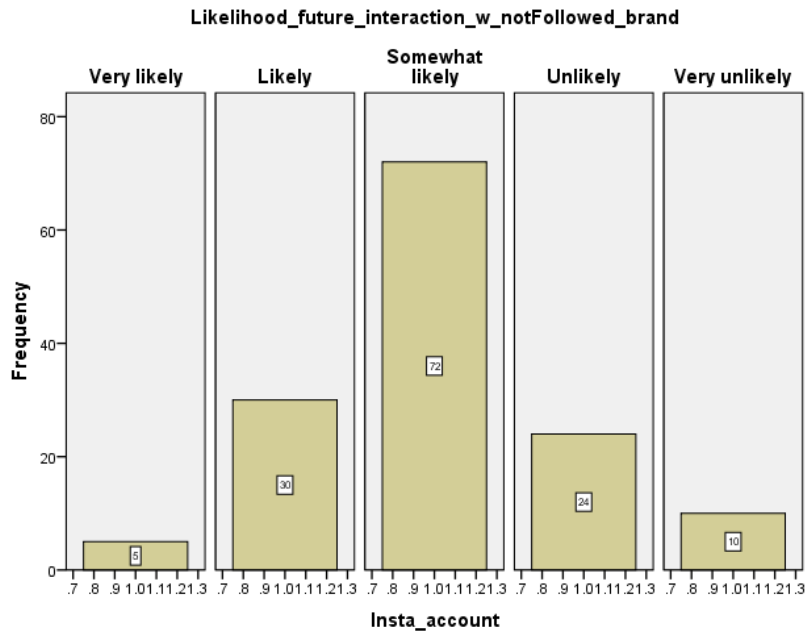
Figure 9: Likelihood future engagement with unknown brand after it has interacted with subject.

Along with an elevated millennial likelihood of future engagement, the perception after interacting becomes more positive. Millennials then perceive the previously unknown brand as *somewhat positive* (see figure 10). As the real motive has not been detected, it could be speculated that this change may be the result of gaining new followers. Ideally, sponsored ads are somewhat related to topics, posts and locations already followed by the subject. By displaying an ad with relevant content, the respondent may become interested in the brand, ending up following it in order to receive more information about the products.
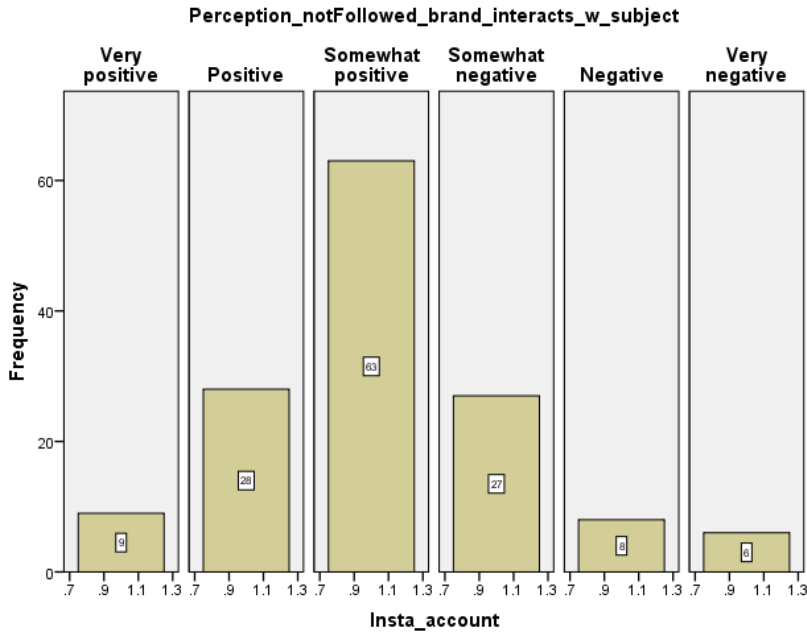
Figure 10: Perception sponsored ads after (previously unknown) brand has interacted with subject.

It should be noted that only 72 % of respondents had noticed sponsored ads in their news feed and increasing this number offers some potential for brands. While this is a relativity high figure, one could argue that when subjects exclusively follow family and friends, brand exposure might be close to zero. However, Instagram's principal revenue is generated by displaying ads on the platform (Kuchler, 2017). In March, the company announced that there are more than 1 million advertisers on the platform (Instagram, 2017b). Combing this fact with its algorithm which saw a change in the display order of posts (from *chronological* to *most important first;* Instagram, 2016c), it seems unlikely that there can be many advert free accounts, even though a multiple times a day Instagram user commented:

> 'How often [is there] an ad posted on Instagram?! It's barely there at the moment.' P1,

She also admits not paying to much attention to all posts waiting in her feed:

> 'When you follow 120 profiles and there are brands constantly posting (10 posts a day), that [is] when you just lose sight. So, I check [my feed] more browsing through [it].'

This comment indicates that it should be a priority for brands to create engaging content for its followers, otherwise they will not be noticed. The study went on to explore which factors Millennials consider important for branded posts, regardless of whether it is published by a favourite or sponsored brand.

Reasons for starting to follow Brands

Participants were questioned for the reason(s) they start(ed) following brands on Instagram (see figure 11). The most popular reasons in order of importance are:

1. *Ideas and inspiration*
2. *Product and brand information*
3. *Entertaining content*
4. *Identifying with the brand* (This was seen as much less important than any of the other three).
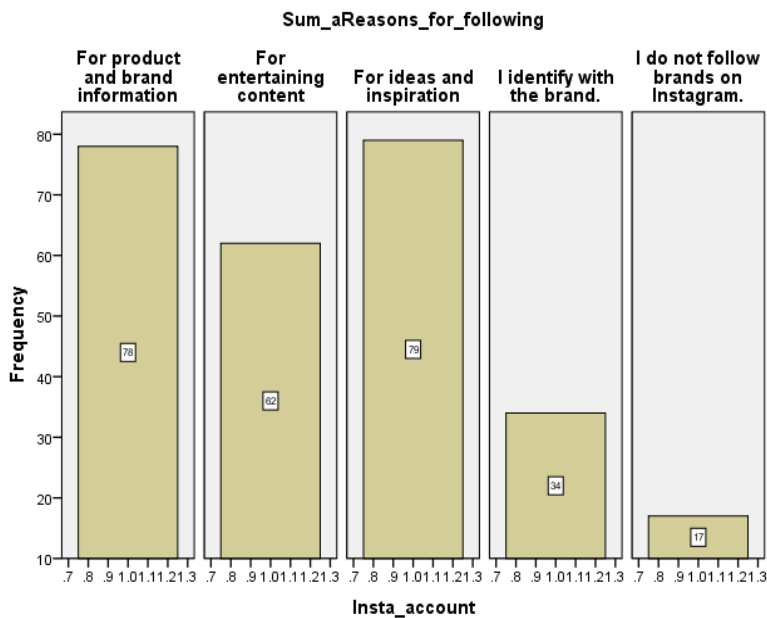
Figure 11: Reasons for following brands

These findings are consistent with the millennial characteristics presented earlier. Millennials use new technologies to look for information and entertainment; a behaviour that was acquired during their childhood and (apparently) is retained (Tulan & Martin, 2001; Oblinger, 2003; Immordino-Yang *et al.*, 2012).

17 respondents indicated that they did not follow brands on Instagram. However, this result is somewhat at odds with the results of other questions which offered participants to chance to express their dislike of following brands on Instagram (see next section).

Reasons for not following Brands

Participants were also asked for reasons that would make them not follow brands on Instagram. The responses suggest there is some inconsistency between these results and the previous question where 17 individuals indicted they did not follow brands where now 63 individuals responded indicting why they do not follow brands on Instagram. This may be that in the previous responses the participants indicated that they did not follow any brands whereas on this question they are indicating reasons why they would not follow an individual brand (see figure 12). The questionnaire also provided an opportunity to comment on this question which was used by five participants.
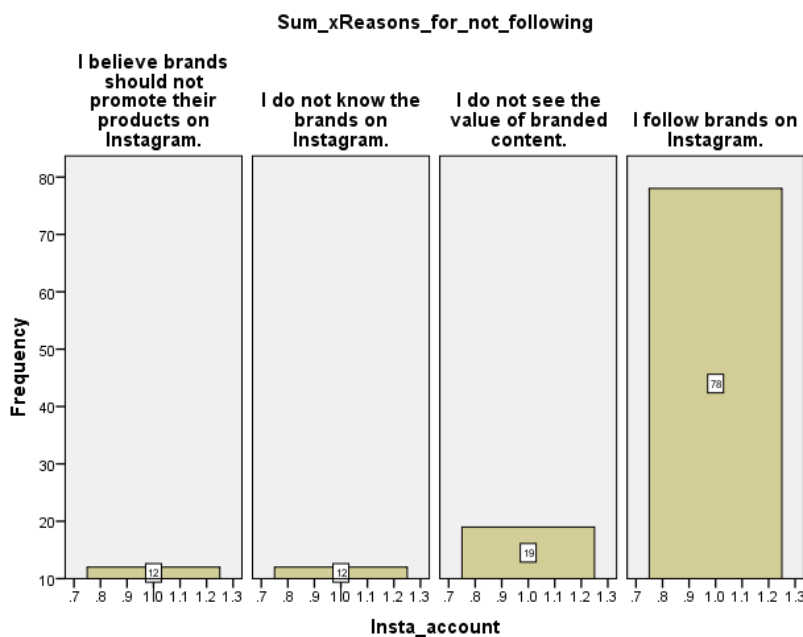

Figure 12: Reasons for not following brands.

A relatively high number (63 individuals = 44.7 %) provided reasons for not following brands on Instagram. Mainly, those individuals *do not see the value originating from following a brand* and have the opinion that *brands should not promote their products on the SNS*. This neutral to negative attitude towards brands is also reflected in the following comments:

> 'I don't care about brands on Instagram.' (male, 20)

> 'There are so many platforms for brands. Instagram is a private platform for me to follow real people.' (female, 33)

> 'I don't use [Instagram] to interact with brands, I want to keep in touch with my actual friends.' (female, 28)

Although it is not possible to clearly define the percentage of people who do not want to follow brands on the platform, their opinion is important and those individuals have the power over which profile they want see in their feed. However, with Instagram's business model focusing on generating revenue by displaying ads, this power is limited in regards to sponsored ads. Brands might want to consider factors liked or disliked by Millennials to encourage engagement (see next section).

Important Factors for engaging with Brands

When asked about what drove the respondents to watch a branded video or like, forward and comment on a branded post, the results in general were no different between respondent's favourite brands and unknown or sponsored in their news feed so the results have been combined.

The most important factors for Millennials triggering engagement with any type of branded content are (in order of importance):

1. *Relevant information*
2. *Beautiful looking photos/videos*
3. *Up-to-date information*

4. *Popularity*
5. *Friends have engaged with it* (there was a slight difference on factors 4 and 5 between favourite brands and sponsored adverts were their position could have been reversed)
6. *Reposted* This is the least important factor for the respondents

Ranking	Important factor for engagement
1	Relevant information
2	Beautiful
3	Up-to-date information
4	Popularity(5 if just looking at for Fav Brands)
5	Friends have engaged with it (4 if just looking at for Fav Brands)
6	Re-post

Figure 13: Factors and importance for Millennials when engaging with brands.

This particular order of importance can be seen to align with the millennial characteristics outlined in earlier. The factors 'relevant information' and 'up-to-date information' are consistent with the millennial ego and its technology-driven information search habits. These results also support previous research (Dye, 2007; Bellmann *et al.*, 2009) that Millennials tend to use new technologies to gather information about brands and their offering.

Millennials also seem to place less importance on those factors related to social belonging, factors 4 and 5, when engaging with brands. It could be assumed that it is important for Millennials to be part of the online community, but it appears maintaining a certain image about themselves is at least as important. Having seen a friend engage with a branded video prompts one respondent to watch it too.

> 'I will definitely watch it. I will be like "Oh, this person has liked it, let's watch it. What is it all about?". So, I'll watch it and judge (the video and the friend).' P2

However, her comment indicates that participants might be less prone to spontaneous or rash engagement, as this could have negative effects on their personal image. One respondent openly admits about having second thoughts:

> 'For me, it depends on the person. If a video is liked by somebody with a different lifestyle or they have a certain opinion about me, then I'm going to think about [engaging with] it twice.' P4

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study confirm the way Millennials use and consume media and information: This cohort enjoys using technology and SNSs to connect with friends, family and brands alike. However, it has to be acknowledged that there are some individuals that try to suppress the number of commercial profiles in their news feed, as they do not value branded content. In addition, this investigation strengthens findings about the user motives, explored by Lee et al. (2015) as well as Sheldon and Bryant (2016). In addition to them, the researcher could establish a context in which the platform is used habitually. With Instagram being part of the daily routine of users, brands are theoretically given more exposure. However, as the app is almost exclusively used to access the platform with corresponding content, posts have to achieve certain levels of attention, otherwise, Millennials might be distracted by their surroundings and not notice. Furthermore, the authors have explored the nature underpinning millennial interactions on Instagram. In general, brands are positively perceived. However, this is only the case when they are actively followed by Instagram users. Sponsored ads, on the other side, have a negative connotation for Millennials, even though more than a quarter have not seen them in their news feed. Especially brands that (up to that point) have not been not followed and are considered ads by the millennial user. These brands benefited from initiating interactions with the respondents leading to more positive perceptions. However, if brands want to attract attention with their aesthetically appealing content, they have to take into consideration that Millennials are self-centred, even on platforms that encourage social engagement. Inspirational, information and entertainment- related content should satisfy the millennial need for more information and, contradictory as Millennials themselves, material to relax mentally.

The theoretical contribution of this investigation could be considered valuable, as its subject has been the millennial point of view for consumer-brand interactions on Instagram. Previous studies investigated the motives for using Instagram (Lee et al., 2015, Sheldon & Bryant, 2016); however, they did not concentrate on Millennials as an exclusive cohort nor did they explore brands within this context. Therefore, this study contributes to previous literature by exploring millennials interactions and engagement with branded content (paid and non-paid) on the photo-sharing platform.

For practitioners, the findings might influence their marketing communications strategy concerning Instagram. With a particular emphasis on visual content, aesthetic posts are essential for this SNS. However, what might be surprising is that Millennials actively follow brands not only for entertainment reasons but also to receive more and detailed information about offerings. Therefore, brands should incorporate availability updates for physical products in the post's caption/text box while pointing out current or future events and promotions. Links should be used as well, directing Instagram users to the brands' website with even more information.

Of special interest to brands with a less extensive followings could be brand-initiated interactions. According to the findings, they improve perception and make Millennials more likely to engage with the brand in the future, making a real corresponding notifications and an interaction started by a brand might be important for obtaining millennial attention in the first place.

Research Limitations and further Research

This study employed a mixed methods approach. Future research by concentrating solely on qualitative approaches, such as, netnography (Brodie et al., 2011) may allow researchers to monitor and analyse comments in more depth to detect positive or negative feelings expressed in the comment section of branded posts. Understanding Millennial's behaviours and emotions at a richer level may help establish the underlying deeper connections between Millennials and brands. Moreover, this study was exclusively directed at Instagram users. To further increase

the understanding about why Millennials use this particular platform, future research might want to explore Instagram within a setting of various other SNS. Furthermore, the researcher did not distinguish between female and male platform users. However, by focusing on a particular gender within the age bracket, researchers might discover further insights.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, this study indicates the potential of Instagram for brands. Even though further research is needed to explore, clarify and develop corresponding concepts concerning Millennial-brand interactions on Instagram, this investigation provides an initial step, in establishing a cohort's specific use of the platform concerning engagement with branded content.

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