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THE LIFESTYLE MEDIA, THE EMERGING SOPHISTICATED CONSUMERS AND QUESTIONS OF CONTROL.

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Abstract

It is fashionable to state that the audience is increasingly driving the direction of the lifestyle media - yet this is no straightforward transaction. This paper will question how much control is held by lifestyle media brands and what power lies in the hands of the consumers. During this argument it is important to consider the continued connectivity of the PR sector, retail and editorial. In what way does their increasingly symbiotic relationship affect the evolution of the lifestyle media? Is this development to the benefit or detriment of the consumer? The paper will question if media audiences are experiencing new perspectives on how they receive and digest diffusion of ideas and trends or if the difference simply lies in how the information is disseminated.

Key words: *Lifestyle media, consumers, control.*

INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this paper, the lifestyle media is to be defined as printed magazines and digital channels, which deliver fashion and lifestyle content related to how a person lives. The paper will first take an overview of the landscape of the lifestyle media now. It will then progress to consider the position the consumer is in now. There will then be a consideration of the direction in which the lifestyle media is progressing. The paper will focus on Net-a-Porter and MR PORTER as publications, as well as shoppable magazines otherwise known as shopping destinations, which are leading the way in the market. The question will then be raised to see if this direction is to the benefit or detriment of the consumer. Finally the paper will tentatively discuss and answer if media audiences are experiencing new information and entertainment from the media – or if the difference in the way people are experiencing the media simply lies in the way the information is delivered. This final section will open with consideration of the effect that internet usage is having on the human brain.

THE LIFESTYLE MEDIA

The lifestyle media is facing a series of very interesting challenges. There is a change in the nature of how the consumer responds to both editorial and the advertising that supports it. There is a move by the consumer to demand content by digital rather than printed channels. There is also a move towards the consumer having a closer relationship with brands. There is also the emergence of a consumer who is increasingly global in their outlook and consumption habits. This section aims to look at some of these issues and weigh up perspectives to consider where the lifestyle media now is. It will be a challenge for the lifestyle media to keep up with digital media because it is steeped in a history of print. Figure 1 illustrates a decline in the print market since 2007 it also projects a decline in the print market to 2017.

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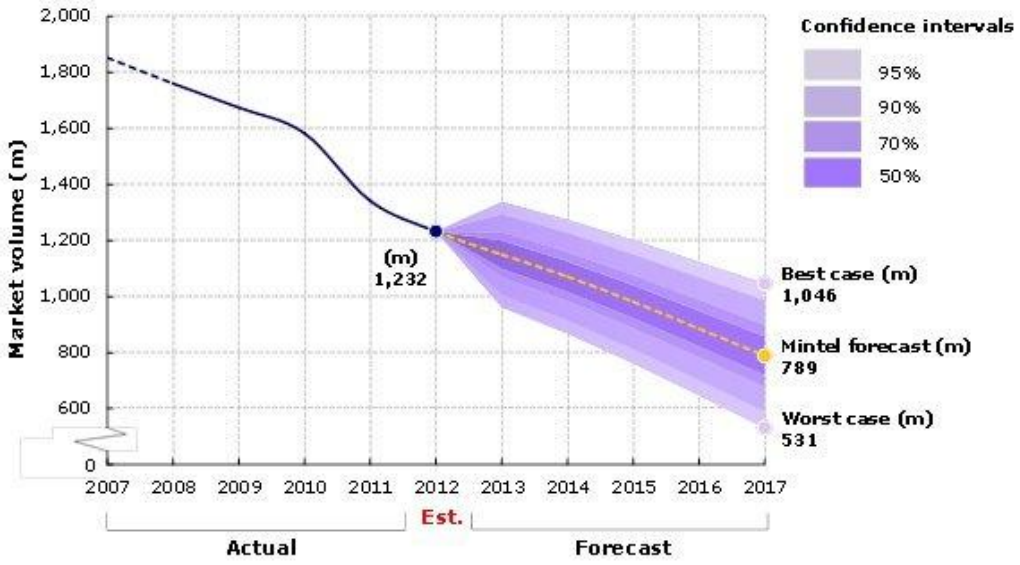


Figure 1: Volume forecast of UK magazines distributed, 2007-17.

Source: (Mintel 2013)

Contraction in the print magazine market continued in 2012, as print circulation declined 8.1% from 1.3 billion in 2011 to 1.2 billion in 2012. This represents a 33.5% decline since 2007. This may be as the consumer, due to their use of digital channels, has adopted a different way of relating to brands. It has been argued that marketing is no longer about interrupting the consumer. Prior to the influx of digital marketing, a television or magazine advert would interrupt the consumer, however now "…marketing on the Web…is centered on interaction, information, education, and choice." (Scott 2007, p.7)

For the lifestyle media to keep up with consumer demand changes may have to be made to the delivery of content. "Meeting this challenge will require a more complicated response, involving restructuring the content offering, migrating paying users online and maintaining their inclination to spend as they encounter a sea of free alternatives." (Mintel 2012)

It is stated in credible press that, "…simple blogging tools and social media platforms have fundamentally democratised mass media, ending the monopoly once enjoyed by large publishers and broadcasters." (Kansara 2012) However, it is important to counter this statement in light of Adobe's research findings into consumer's attitude towards, and usage of digital content. In a study commissioned by Adobe, consumers rated credibility of 'traditional media' above digital as a source of information about products and brands. The study "…*Click Here: The State of Online Advertising*, is a new study commissioned by Adobe and carried out by Edelman Berland, which draws on responses from 8,750 consumers and 1,750 professional marketers from across the globe." (PPA Communications, 2013).

There is also the consideration that users value print in a unique way. Figure 2 demonstrates that a significant number of consumers value print as a positive escape from technology.

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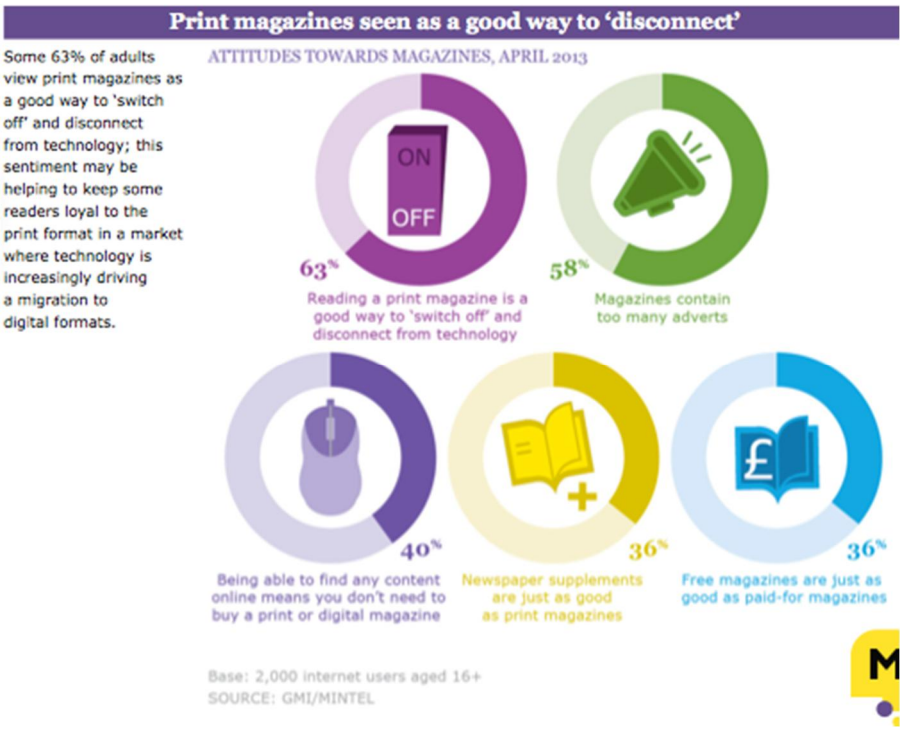


Figure 2: Print magazines seen as a good way to 'disconnect'.

Source: (Mintel 2012)

The idea presented by Vikram Alexei Kansara in The Business of Fashion (Kansara 2012) that the monopoly has ended also ignores the potential offered to media companies by the internet. The Mintel report (Mintel 2013) on magazines published June 2013 suggests ways through which magazines can evolve with the internet using targeted advertising tailored to a reader's internet activity. The integration of music and video content and one click ordering also offer ways forward not possible in the print market.

The idea that the consumer is fully engaged in the democratisation of media also ignores the authority and role played by key tastemakers and communicators in the industry. For example Mario Testino, arguably one of the most influential fashion photographers, describes his role in interview with The New York Times (Rousselle 2011) as a communicator for fashion houses, he analyses who they are and what they represent. As such Testino's vision dictates to an extent the public perception of the fashion industry.

The lifestyle media is progressing in a direction where the content it delivers is increasingly global. This adaptation to the changing landscape illuminates the fact that magazine companies within the lifestyle media are able to adapt to challenging consumer trends. This globalisation could enable lifestyle media to gain capital strength as well as a strengthening of its brand image through increased access to a larger demographic.

An illustration of the globalisation of the lifestyle media is the appointment in 2012 of Carine Roitfeld as global style director for Harper's Bazaar. In March 2013 her work was revealed simultaneously across 26 global editions of Harper's Bazaar. This example illustrates how consumers are increasingly becoming globally homogenised in terms of their acceptance of visual content.

THE EMERGING SOPHISTICATED CONSUMER

Before analysing the complex relationship that digital consumers engage in with the media, it is important to first observe evidence that the audience is increasingly driving the direction of the lifestyle media.

When it comes to twenty-first Century marketing "…consumers are more clued in than the professionals." (Wipperfürth 2005, p.4)

An idea that has been gaining credibility is that the consumer is in control, that the consumer is less brand-loyal, more demanding, has more knowledge of brands and has higher expectations of them. As Scott points out this often goes unnoticed by brands.

"Every day, on blogs, podcasts, video, and Twitter, people promote and pan products. Consumers tell good and bad tales in which products and services play a starring role. Sadly, most companies are clueless about what's going on in the blogosphere." (Scott 2007, p.95)

"Everyone *can* be a publisher. Whether you consider updating your Facebook status to be publishing is almost a matter of semantics." (Kansara 2012)

The argument that consumers are increasingly in control relies on the assumption that they can gain a lot of information and engagement with brands from their usage of the internet. However, it is worth bearing in mind that not all consumers engage with or trust internet channels to the same extent.

To be specific, there is an opportunity for further research into the segmentation of the readership of lifestyle media. An outstanding example of this is the over 55s. This is a segment with money and influence, which responds differently to communication through digital channels. It is to be noted that the over 55s are more scepitcal about the content of Facebook as reported in PRWeek.com (Chapman 2013).

It is also to be considered that it is much easier for the lifestyle media to have access to consumers than before the digital revolution. A monthly magazine such as Elle would have delivered new content to a magazine approximately every month. However, now through channels such as Twitter they are able to deliver new content several times a day. This allows the brand to build a much stronger controlling relationship with the consumer. Mike Wolfsohn (Wolfsohn 2011) in an article in AdAge makes a compelling case for brands still being in control of their consumers.

'In fact, consider how much control consumers have actually lost in recent years. From behavioral targeting and re-marketing practices that result in ads that follow internet users from site to site to the use of personal information and photos in ads on social networks, consumers are increasingly finding themselves members of an involuntarily submissive, even ad-abused audience.' (Wolfsohn 2011)

Wolfsohn goes on to suggest that brands are now practically omnipotent compared to the days when a brand's only option was launch expensive print and television campaigns and wait several months to see sales data.

THE NEW INCREASED CONNECTIVITY

The increased popularity of channels such as Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram means that consumers are exposed to content from PR, retail and editorial in a way not previously possible. In the click of a button the consumer can move from content generated by PR, editorial and other consumers. This has an advantage from a brand perspective. The brand benefits from increased touch points with the consumer. However, this movement, which results in the PR industry having direct contact with the public may not be so beneficial for the lifestyle media. The PR industry traditionally relies on the

lifestyle media to gain coverage for its clients. As the PR industry develops a better relationship, and it's own channels of communication with the public it may need the lifestyle media less than before. From the perspective of the lifestyle industry, a worst-case scenario would be that the PR industry may take control of and deliver content that would have been beneficial for the lifestyle industry to have broken.

Now let's take a look at lifestyle and retail. Magazines and commerce are increasingly enjoying a fruitful symbiotic relationship. Jeremy Langmead, editor in chief of MR PORTER, argues that "…it's time to dispense with the pretense of 'church and state' divisions between the commercial and editorial sides of a fashion media business." (Langmead 2013).

Lifestyle magazines have always promoted products. Yet Jeremy Langsmead describes how a number of years ago the lifestyle media would not be answerable to brands in the way it has been since the digital revolution.

'Twenty years ago, when I was first editing the Sunday Times Style magazine, I got summoned to the editor-in-chief's office. He grumpily showed me a letter from a member of Giorgio Armani's press team complaining that they hadn't been included in the magazine's fashion show coverage. He asked me to write back and tell them firmly to get lost. We couldn't believe that a designer — whether they advertised or not — had the audacity to try and interfere with the newspaper's editorial.' (Langmead 2013).

He goes on to state how times have changed and how a decade later he was "…editing magazines whose revenues were almost entirely ad-based." (Langmead 2013). He states that maintaining a good relationship with advertisers was just as much a priority as commissioning informative and engaging features. He also says that "…the division between 'church and state' has been almost imperceptible for years." (Langmead 2013).

Jeremy argues that the 'church and state' debate has become more heated due to the advent of shoppable magazines. However he is of the opinion that the industry is still in growth. All that has changed, in his opinion, is the platforms and proprietors. (Langmead 2013)

There is a plethora of magazine pop-up stores, which further indicates that the divide between church and State has fallen. It is worth questioning if this fall between church and state will give the consumer greater control. As the consumer expresses its demands through retail, which is now more closely linked to lifestyle media, will lifestyle media have to answer more to the consumer in its editorial content?

ARE THESE DEVELOPMENTS ADVANTAGEOUS TO THE CONSUMER?

It has been argued above that the digital revolution has spurred developments in the lifestyle media but we are now going to ask, are these developments beneficial to the consumer?

It can be seen by looking at Net-a-Porter that the increased input by the digital consumer can both work to the benefit of the consumer and the media/retail company. In Business of Fashion (Kansara 2013), Lucy Yeomans, Net-a-Porter's editor in Chief, discusses how Net-a-Porter has access to a research panel of 7,000 women. She states that this is beneficial compared to the information you have access to on a traditional magazine. This information will allow Net-a-Porter to deliver better what the consumer wants. This can be seen as beneficial, however in the long run it is questionable that this could lead to a dumming-down of fashion wherein the consumer is just fed what it demands. Avant garde fashion designer, Rei Kawakubo has already been recorded as saying that the media allows uninteresting fashion to survive (Sanchez 2013).

It could be argued that the lifestyle media is at a critical point in its history given mounting pressure from the PR industry and it's merge with the retail sector. Is this a moment for the lifestyle industry to flourish or fall?

Perhaps it could be that consumers reach a stage where people are sick of the digital saturation, on the other hand - could it be that consumers are getting to grips with digital communication in a way that may render the lifestyle media obsolete?

At this juncture it is worth considering Matthew Chapman's assertion; "The YouGov SixthSense report, which surveyed 1,995 adults in March, found the proportion of people who had stopped using social media sites after becoming fed up with marketing messages had risen by 18 percentage points from April 2012." (Chapman May 2013).

It is interesting to question whether the digital revolution is progressing in such a way that brands and consumers can communicate without the medium of the lifestyle media. An example of this has been reported by IAB (Internet Advertising Bureau 2012) in a discussion surrounding the Bodyform campaign, *Bodyform 'The Truth' – Facebook Response*. The campaign was a video response to a Facebook user message that gained over 100,000 likes on Facebook within which a member of the public posted a disparaging message on Bodyform's Facebook page. According to IAB (Internet Advertising Bureau 2012) the member of the public complained that Bodyform "…always portrayed 'the time of month' as a happy time…" (Internet Advertising Bureau 2012). The Facebook user claimed that at the time of the month his girlfriend turned demonic. The conceptual video response from Bodyform was humorous, in which a fictitious CEO apologized for any untruths in previous Bodyform advertising. According to IAB "The ad soon went viral with over 3 million views in less than a week, as well as over 82,000 engagements on Facebook and 6000 tweets." (Internet Advertising Bureau 2012).

NEW PERSPECTIVES?

The digital revolution could be contributing to more than the development of the lifestyle media. In his book '*What the Internet is doing to our Brains. The Shallows.'* Nicholas Carr (Carr 2010) argues that the printed book focuses our attention allowing deep and creative thought. In contrast he argues that the internet encourages rapid distracted sampling from many sources. This leads one to consider if the lifestyle media will respond to this trend by becoming increasingly fragmented through different channels and focused on capturing consumer attention for small segments of time. The increasing popularity of channels such as instagram and twitter seems to support this argument.

Rather than suggesting that the lifestyle media is leading the consumer or vice versa, we could reframe Carr's argument in relation to this paper by suggesting that the *medium* is driving both the consumer *and* the lifestyle media.

It appears that the publishing industry is in a state of evolution. It is also clear that consumers are more involved in educating themselves and participating in the lifestyle media. An example is consumer interest in recent fashion shows. The Topshop Fashion show in early 2013 collaborated with Google+ and was reported by the press as a game changer that addressed consumer interest in fashion shows. According to Melanie Rickey (Rickey 2013) reporting for the Guardian website, live material was "…delivered across Topshop's own website, YouTube and Google+. The access offered to online viewers [was] unparalleled. [Models wore] outfits fitted with HD micro-cameras, giving home viewers a model's-eye view of everything from their first steps out on to the catwalk to the quick-change backstage. Google Hang Out events [allowed] people to speak directly with designers and fashion editors to discuss the show, and a Be the Buyer App [enabled] users to curate the collection and get tips from the buyers on how to put looks together." (Rickey 2013)

This also allowed Topshop to get consumer feedback on the show as it happened. The show, although much hyped, has not revolutionized the way consumers interact with fashion. Most consumers will still be waiting for their information and opinions about the show to be presented through the lifestyle media. One way to see the impact or lack of impact this show had is to apply the concept of critique by omission. This is the idea that the lifestyle media does not cover something if it is not fashionable, relevant or newsworthy. There was no available coverage that clearly stated how the show definitely changed the fashion or lifestyle media landscape in so far as buying behaviour or consumption of the lifestyle media.

In an article in Business of Fashion from 2011, Amed argues that;

"In recent years, the main fashion weeks in New York, London, Milan and Paris have attracted unprecedented interest from end consumers, with brands live streaming their shows and bloggers reporting from the runway in realtime on their sites and social channels like Twitter and Instagram." (Amed 2011)

However in most cases, the actual clothes showcased during fashion week are not available to consumers until many months after the shows have finished. So although the consumer has the privilege of immediate access to images of runway products they cannot buy the product immediately. The practical impact of this is that consumers cannot buy a product before it has been selected by buyers and endorsed by editorial journalists.

As the lifestyle media has become shoppable on the internet, the visual appearance of clothing chosen to be featured in these magazine stores has been shaped to influence and to attempt to reflect the eye of the internet viewer. It is worth noting that clothing in these magazine stores needs to be brighter and have a more arresting form of construction. When you consider that stores such as Net-a-Porter have considerable ability to affect a young designers career, it is clear that media audiences are experiencing not only new perspectives but a new type of product.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued that the lifestyle media landscape is in a period when it faces significant questions about how to develop to meet the demands of its audience. This demand is fuelled by the development of digital channels of communication. It is also fuelled by the fashion industry's response to the developing digital environment. It has been raised that developments in the digital arena are allowing PR industry opportunites that could threaten the future of the lifestyle media. It has been argued that there is significant opportunity for the lifestyle media to flourish by harnessing the opportunities the digital arena allows for it to work more closely with the retail environment. However, it is clear this is not a straightforward series of questions given that further work on how different segments of consumer groupings may respond to these developments and how that could be beneficial to he lifestyle media.

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