Rules of Engagement: Millennial Expectations of Brand Interaction on Social Media

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Abstract

In today’s society, technology has changed the way that businesses interact with consumers. The purpose of this project is to research the level of interaction that traditional-aged college students prefer when communicating with businesses online. This paper explored what young consumers expect to see from brands on social media, specifically Twitter. Should the voice be scripted or unscripted? Does the younger generation prefer companies to be authentic or filtered? The investigative methods utilized to help understand how businesses should be targeting young consumers online included primary and secondary research. The research study began with a literature review by reviewing a collection of articles from scholarly journals on similar topics already explored and researched. As for primary research, a content analysis of four major companies was conducted on Twitter from January 23, 2017 to February 20, 2017 by comparing how each brand develops a voice on social media and if consumers react positively or negatively. Through conducting two focus groups with select college students from Florida Gulf Coast University, data was collected and explored to test the research questions. The intent of this study is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge of expectations by young consumers of a brand’s voice on social media, and assist businesses in effectively targeting and engaging younger consumers online.

*Keywords:* social media, businesses, brands, authenticity, interaction, engagement, millennials, relationship building.
Rules of Engagement: Millennial Expectations of Brand Interaction on Social Media

Businesses have the unique opportunity to decide how to develop its brand’s voice when communicating interactively on social media with its followers. With today’s technology, social media provides the potential for businesses and their followers to engage in dialogue and two-way communication. This study aims to address some of the most common trends when communicating with millennials on social media and recognize the strategies that are most beneficial. According to Howe and Strauss (2000), millennials are the largest population and most impactful of consumers. For this study, millennials are important to recognize because of their ability to drive change and their impact on consumer behavior and brand reputation.

The purpose of this study is to further examine how businesses can successfully develop their social media strategy and voice online by cultivating relationships with millennials. Specifically, this study will seek to expand whether or not business communicate in a more structured or authentic manner on social media, particularly on Twitter. In order to add to the existing body of research that already exists, this study recognizes that public relations practitioners can use this knowledge to further develop dialogue and two-way communication with publics and identify which strategies will help businesses develop a voice online.

RQ1: How does a brand’s online voice affect social media engagement with young millennials? RQ2: How is brand content evolving on social media to meet the expectations of a younger audience?
Literature Review

Social Media

Social media is described as a platform for interaction and information exchange, which provides the opportunity for users to generate and share content (Park & Rever, 2008, Wright & Hinson, 2009). Specifically, social media is capable of facilitating interaction and dialogue between organizations and their publics (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Connolly-Ahern & Broadwar, 2007; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Wright & Hinson, 2009). Unlike traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television, social media creates opportunities for two-way communication where users can modify, share and reuse content, regardless of the creators’ original meaning or purpose (Fraustino, 2015; Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). Botree and Seltzer (2009) explained that social media fosters an environment where organizations can “interact with key publics and allow users to engage with one another on topics of mutual interests” (p.317). Social media has created a new business model where value is mutually beneficial for users contributing and exploring content and organizations who develop social media platforms (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016).

Engagement

Engagement on social media networks can be defined as a development of user experience, influenced by “encompassing both the social interaction among users and the technical features of the social media platform” (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). Clearly, the rise of social media is largely influenced by the evolution of technology to provide a unique user experience that enables users to connect in ways that were never possible before (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). Social media allows users to form symbolic relations and engage with one another through responses, impressions and following brands online (Himelboim, 2014). New
interactive media like social media has great potential to make communication more strategic, two-way, interactive, symmetrical, and dialogic (J.E Grunig, 2009; Kelleher, 2006; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). Kent & Taylor (1998) suggested that a relationship developed online between an organization and its publics should encourage both conversation and interaction. Consequently, social media platforms are recognized as an effective relationship-building tool and provide opportunities for engagement between brands and users.

Millennials

Millennials, the generation born between 1980 and 2000, are considered avid gamers, Web-page builders and bloggers (Spectra, 2006). According to Howe and Strauss (2000), millennials are a “powerhouse generation, full of technology planners, community shapers, institution builders, and world leaders, perhaps destined to dominate the twenty-first century.” For the purpose of this study, millennials are to be considered the traditional college-aged students approximately eighteen to twenty-five. In regards to social media, young adults ages eighteen to twenty-nine are among the earliest social media adopters and continue to use these sites at high levels.

RQ1: How does a brand’s online voice affect social media engagement with young millennials?

Businesses have the capability of creating bilateral or unilateral relationships with consumers online. Social media provides the unique opportunity to further engage in two-way communication with users, including millennials. Similarly, Waters and Jamal (2011) found that, despite its capability for two-way communication, many organizations are using social media in a one-way communication manner as an information-sharing platform, rather than one for relationship-building and consumer engagement. Brands have the ability to create a voice and
two-way communication on social media, which can encourage interaction and authenticity or could be more scripted and informational. Furthermore, media scholars have argued that social media relationship-building can enhance an organization’s overall brand, which, in turn, may provide organizations with positive outcomes (Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). When developing a voice on social media, Searls and Weinberger (2000) mentioned that one of the most important characteristics of communicating online is the human voice. Kelleger and Miller (2006) further explored this idea and found that a conversational human voice means that the business “invited people to conversation, uses conversation-style communication, and tries to be interesting” (p. 413). Searls and Weinberger (2000) also suggested that by allowing a brand to showcase its developed personality online, businesses can communicate more effectively and encourage more engagement from followers.

Rybolke and Seltzer (2010) analyzed Twitter’s potential for fostering bilateral relationships between Fortune 500 companies and various publics. The result of their analysis indicates that most organizations underutilize the platform and its capability for two-way communication. As the leading micro-blogging platform, Twitter has been recognized by public relations professionals as an effective relationship building tool (Evans, Twomey, & Talan, 2011). Companies using social media can engage in a “strategic and well-executed social presence, which leads to increase revenue, new business development opportunities and other ROI-worthy outcomes; research also shows that executives who use social media are viewed as more trustworthy” (Kramer, 2012). However, some scholars found that many brands still fail to effectively utilize the interaction capabilities offered by social media sites (Botree & Seltzer, 2009). This might be because there is little understanding of the unique ability to engage in two-
way communication on social media sites and considering the unique ability for user-generated content, rather than simply producing information (Finin et al., 2008; Gilpin, 2010).

RQ2: How is brand content evolving on social media to meet the expectations of a younger audience?

The average millennial spends around 490 minutes a day with some sort of media and this number is expected to increase to 506 minutes in 2017 (Pulido, 2017). With the advancement of hand-held technology, this recognizes a change in how content is consumed and demands that communicators be increasingly creative in their approach to reaching younger target audiences and fully utilizing social media as the most effective way to target millennials. Brand content is evolving as social media supports engagement with users. Wieland (2015) recognizes social media as a powerful tool that can help build trust but when done poorly, social media can focus on the wrath and disappointment of customers. The idea that trust takes years to build has been challenged, because on social media “trust can be built in a manner of minutes by solving a customer’s problem” (Wieland, 2015). However, unresponsive behavior on social media can break trust with one mishandled situation. Wieland (2015) suggests a way social media can avoid mishandled situations by actively listening, responding quickly and meeting customers where they are now. Younger audiences seek these responsive behaviors on social media by brands.
Methods

Content Analysis

A social media content analysis was conducted utilizing the Twitter accounts of two American fast food restaurants and two sportswear retail companies. Wendy’s and Chipotle Mexican Grill are both restaurants in the fast-food industry. Wendy’s has been around for a longer period of time and has developed its brand over almost fifty years. Chipotle is a more recent arrival to the fast-food scene and was built on the idea of providing a better experience than the typical fast-food operation. Both have similar goals and strive to provide customers with fresh ingredients and a quality experience. Although they sell different types of food, Wendy’s and Chipotle have similar branding strategies but execute it in different ways. Nike and Adidas are the two largest sportswear manufacturers in the world. Both companies sell sports apparel, utilize sponsorships, and advocate for fitness and health. These four brands were selected due to their popularity with the millennial generation. All four brands actively engage on social media, specifically in regards to responding to followers’ tweets. Within the analysis, Wendy’s, Chipotle, Nike and Adidas were examined on Twitter to see how these companies develop messages and share content online, which will help to discover their overall voice.

Wendy’s is a fast food restaurant founded by Dave Thomas in 1969. It is primarily known for its hamburgers, chicken sandwiches, french fries, and the signature Frosty, which is a soft-served dessert. In 2008, Wendy’s announced a merger with Triarc Companies Inc. which was eventually renamed The Wendy’s Company. The company’s headquarters are in Dublin, Ohio. Wendy’s has more than 6,500 locations, including 427 company owned locations within the U.S. and 29 other countries worldwide (Wendys.com). Wendy’s has a long-standing partnership with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption by supporting and raising awareness
for foster care and adoption. In 2012, Wendy’s launched its brand transformation by contemporizing the brand and improving customer experience. Most recently, Wendy’s debuted its first ever Super Bowl commercial in effort to stop the common misconception that Wendy’s serves frozen beef. Wendy’s has developed an app to explore menu options and mobile pay. Wendy’s is also present on multiple social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube and Google Plus.

Chipotle Mexican Grill, also a chain of fast food restaurants, separates itself from the competition with a goal of offering Food with Integrity, its commitment to using all natural ingredients. Unlike many fast-food restaurants, Chipotle stands for the idea that food served fast doesn’t have to be a “fast-food” experience. Chipotle is known for its specialized tacos, burritos, bowls and salads. Founded by Chairman and CEO Steve Ells in 1993, Chipotle has opened more than 2,000 locations in the last 23 years. Though Chipotle is one of the newer chain restaurants, it has expanded rapidly within the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, and France. The company’s headquarters is located in Denver, Colorado (Chipotle.com). Chipotle has faced many issues and incidents in food safety scares after discovering contaminated food and experiencing an E. coli breakout in 2016. Since then, Chipotle has developed campaigns to express its determination in providing fresh and safe food, while introducing new food-safety standards. Chipotle also relies on the use of promotions by offering free burritos on social media, specially Twitter. These strategies have helped Chipotle create a very loyal customer base. Chipotle also developed an app for mobile ordering, making it easier for pick up at the store without any wait. An app called Chipotle Scarecrow was produced by Chipotle Mexican Grill as a game where users can help the scarecrow bring wholesome food back to the people in his
world. Chipotle is also active on many social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, and Google Plus.

Nike is an American multinational corporation that is known for designing and developing footwear, apparel, equipment, accessories and services for retail purposes. Nike’s mission is to bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world. However, Nike is mostly known for its slogan of “Just Do It” and the swoosh logo. Founded in 1964 as Blue Ribbon Sports by Bill Bowerman and Phil Knight, the company officially became Nike in 1971 (nike.com). Within the past 53 years, Nike has become one of the world’s largest suppliers of athletic shoes and apparel. Nike also has a long history of sponsorship with high-profile athletes and sports teams around the world. Nike has developed a following worldwide, with retail locations throughout North America, South America, Europe, Asia Pacific, Middle East and Africa. Nike’s headquarters is located in Washington County, Oregon. Nike has also developed many different mobile apps compatible with the Apple Watch including Nike +, Nike + Run Club, Nike + Training Club, Nike + Fuel and Nike + Move which provides consumers with fitness guidance, gear information, and event information. Nike has developed a strong presence on social media with multiple accounts on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.

Adidas is a German multinational corporation that designs and manufactures shoes, clothing and accessories. Adidas is the largest sportswear manufacturer in Europe and the second largest in the world behind Nike. Founded in 1924 by Adolf Dassler, Adidas is headquartered in Herzogenaurach, Germany. In the 1990s, the Adidas brand was divided into three main groups; Adidas Performance, Adidas Originals, and Style Essentials. Adidas’s current campaign is “Here to Create” which aims to show consumers how powerful it is to release your own creativity by sharing the stories of athletes (Adidas.com). Like Nike, Adidas utilizes sponsorships with
numerous athletes and sports teams as well as celebrity endorsements including Kanye West and Pharrell Williams. Adidas has developed a couple different apps including Adidas Confirmed, Adidas smart ball, Adidas Mobile Solution, and more. It also has a blog and uses social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn.

Between January 23 and February 20, 2017, Wendy’s, Chipotle, Nike, and Adidas Twitter accounts were explored based on the following content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>Wendy's</th>
<th>Chipotle</th>
<th>Nike</th>
<th>Adidas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan 23 - Feb 20 (4 weeks)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page &quot;Likes&quot; on Jan 23</td>
<td>1.4 M</td>
<td>836.5 K</td>
<td>6.76M</td>
<td>3M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page &quot;Likes&quot; on Feb 20</td>
<td>1.5 M</td>
<td>838 K</td>
<td>6.79M</td>
<td>3.02M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Number of Orginal Posts</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Responses a Day (Feb 20th)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Posts with Photos</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Posts with Videos</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Posts with Hashtags</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Promotional Posts</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Posts that Include Links</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post with the Largest Number of Likes</td>
<td>11K</td>
<td>29K</td>
<td>36K</td>
<td>1.6K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Posts with Endorsers*</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Posts with Humor</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes celebrities, athletes, and people who are paid to promote the brand.
Since joining Twitter in 2009, Wendy’s has cultivated a following of 1.5 million as of February 20, 2017, compared to the 1.4 million followers on January 30, 2017. Wendy’s utilizes a three-point strategy to engage followers on Twitter by 1) Posting original content, 2) Boosting posts, and 3) Encouraging two-way communication. Wendy’s Twitter presence has bright colors corresponding with the cover photo as well as the photos and videos within its tweets, which helps illustrate the freshness of its product. Like Chipotle, Wendy’s is aware that images drive engagement and utilizes images to showcase the product, e.g. food.
Wendy’s bio on Twitter speaks to its use of engagement on social media; “We like our tweets the same way we like to make hamburgers; better than anyone expects from a fast food joint.” Wendy’s has developed a reputation as a risk-taker on Twitter by taking advantage of retweeting and interacting with followers. A small portion of Wendy’s interactions with followers includes customer service complaints. However, Wendy’s will reply to both complaints and compliments. Wendy’s also responds to other businesses or tweets regarding brands including McDonalds, Burger King, Carl’s Jr. and many more. Some businesses including Jimmy John’s and AMC’s The Walking Dead have also engaged with Wendy’s on Twitter. While looking through the interactions between the brand and its followers, it becomes apparent that Wendy’s communicates the same way millennials communicate with each other; through memes, abbreviations and with an entertaining and humorous voice. Often, Wendy’s response to followers is very brief but humorous and sometimes sassy. Occasionally, Wendy’s utilizes photos, popular gifs and emojis to engage with followers. This form of communication specifically resonates with millennials. Wendy’s doesn’t shy away from a challenge or tweet from its followers. Wendy’s could choose to disregard the slew of messages that ridicule or provoke them, but the brand
chooses to defuse these situations with clever humor and playful responses.

Overall, Wendy’s voice on Twitter is very original, bold and humorous within its interactions and shared content. The conversational yet sassy tone Wendy’s assumes on Twitter helps it increase engagement, even if the tweets are beyond the expected code of conduct as we know it on social media. After analyzing Wendy’s social media strategy, it was found that Wendy’s main priority is to share content that helps promote its product and engage followers in two-way communication.

Chipotle (January 23 to February 20)

Chipotle joined Twitter in 2010 and has accumulated over 838,000 followers as of February 20, 2017, compared to 836,500 on January 23, 2017. Chipotle posts on Twitter daily and these tweets are typically more creative and shareable, versus promotional. Much of
Chipotle’s content includes unusual but alluring tweets, promotions and pictures. Much of Chipotle’s tweets are considered shareable content because they are unique, short and overall entertaining for followers to easily retweet. Like Wendy’s, Chipotle photos include bright colors and pictures of food and ingredients in hopes to show users its dedication to fresh ingredients. Its use of photos and videos is very appealing to the eye (more specifically the stomach). The company could benefit from using more images to promote its brand and catch followers’ attention. Also, Chipotle’s simplistic approach shows a lack of utilizing links and hashtags within tweets. Something interesting to point out is the timing of many Chipotle’s messages. Although Chipotle is posting throughout the day, it is specifically posting photos of food during meal times, which is a reminder to the hungry customer that will find themselves at a nearby store after checking Twitter.

Above all else, Chipotle’s customer service responses are spot on. Chipotle does an excellent job of responding to followers and creating playful tweets to engage with its audience on Twitter. With 478 replies in one day on February 20, Chipotle is leading in response rates compared to the four other brands and appears to have a designated person responding to tweets each day in an authentic, helpful and personal way. By including names at the end of each tweet to
followers, Chipotle is allowing its followers to get to know the different individuals on the Chipotle social media team.

Chipotle embraces a strong two-way communication model and this helps create a personal relationship with its customers. Using a 70/30 content model, Chipotle does a good job at making seventy percent of its content shareable and thirty percent information directly regarding the brand. All in all, Chipotle has found a creative way to explore its quick-witted and concerning voice on social media and stand out from the three other brands explored in this analysis on Twitter.

**Nike (January 23 to February 20)**
Joining Twitter in 2011, Nike has the strongest following of the four brands with 6.79 million followers of its corporate Twitter account as of February 20, 2017, compared to the 6.76 million on January 23, 2017. Surprisingly, Nike is the less active participant of the four on Twitter; however, Nike has multiple different Twitter profiles including @NikeFootball, @NikeRunning, @NikeStore and more which may influence the corporate profile. Nike’s main corporate account creates posts with consistent messaging and imagery. As a well-established brand, Nike understands its audience and knows how to use its messaging efficiently. Most recently, Nike’s Twitter profile has focused on the theme of equality by changing its profile picture and cover photo, while maintaining the black and white color scheme throughout. Typical content includes posts that feature pictures and videos of sponsored athletes and celebrities. Nike’s content also contains many motivational statements while utilizing the hashtag #JustDoIt. Unlike Wendy’s and Chipotle, Nike lacks a distinct personality and uses more of a traditional and structured voice.

Nike focuses a lot more on responding to customers in need of assistance and those who have questions about the brand or products, rather than pushing out original content. In regards to customer satisfaction, Nike does a good job at providing its consumers with answers and utilizing links within responses to help them even further. Also, Nike often engages with fitness enthusiasts by responding with training advice and words of encouragement. Sometimes Nike
uses the occasional gifs and short commentary remarks to keep things interesting, maintain customer engagement and partake in two-way communication.

**Adidas (January 23 to February 20)**

Joining Twitter in 2011, Adidas has a following of 3 million as of February 20, 2017, and had 3 million on January 23, 2017, indicating it didn’t experience a significant increase in followers during the time analyzed. Being such a large company, Adidas utilizes more than one Twitter profile, comparable to Nike, including @adidasorginals, @adidasfootball and @adidasUS. At first glance, Adidas exhibits a very clean and consistent brand through its images, cover photo and profile picture. Similar to Nike, Adidas follows a more structured and professional strategy when posting on Twitter and tends to focus more on responses than generating original content. Adidas very much sticks to its company culture and values, which offers more of a specific standard script when creating messages and content. Upon analyzing,
most of Adidas’s original content would typically incorporate visual content and use of hashtags. Adidas’s hashtag #HeretoCreate campaign was the main focus of its tweets during the time analyzed and typically shared athletes’ motivational stories on how they have used creativity to make a difference in athletics or in the world. These tweets would direct followers to a provided link to learn more and would utilize the #HereToCreate on each post.

Adidas is also active in responding to followers on Twitter. Unlike Wendy’s and Chipotle, Adidas doesn’t appear to take many risks with its posts, but instead they seem to engage with followers on a respectable and professional level. For example, on February 20, Adidas responded less than any of the three brands analyzed, but its content was more meaningful and interactive than most brands’ responses. Unlike Nike, Adidas responds to followers’ tweets with questions to further engage the conversation, which shows a strong interest in developing relationships. Similar to Nike, Adidas also responds with motivational replies and includes the occasional emoji and gifs. Adidas and Nike appear to embrace similar tactics when sharing original content based on the brand and industry. However, Adidas is able to develop a voice through its own strategies involving motivating the consumer and responding in meaningful ways to develop relationships.

**Summary**

The Twitter accounts of Wendy’s, Chipotle, Nike and Adidas were analyzed using a collection of major data points including quantitative metrics, photos, videos, hashtags,
responses, and identifying an overall voice on social media. Many differences and similarities were observed between the four brands by analyzing their respective Twitter profiles and response strategies during a four-week period. A key observation was how the brands actively engaged with audiences through shared content and responses on Twitter.

In terms of number of followers, Nike dominates the platform but perhaps it would be beneficial for Nike and Adidas to maintain one Twitter platform in order to create consistency and dismiss any forms of confusion from followers. In terms of engagement, Chipotle responds to the vast majority of its followers and provides an informal yet informative experience. In terms of developing relationships, Adidas encourages its audience and asks questions to further develop the relationship. In terms of awareness, Wendy’s sets the bar high in surprising people and giving customers something to talk about. All four of these brands have different approaches to their respective social media strategies on Twitter. They all use similar content including photos and videos to attract followers, but each respond and communicate with their audience with their own distinctive voice. With Adidas, the relationship is more personal and interactive; with Nike, the relationship is more professional and customer service oriented; with Wendy’s, the relationship is more humorous and playful; and with Chipotle, the relationship is more approachable and engaging. Most secondary research previously explored encourages businesses to create a distinct voice and engage with consumers in creative ways. Similar to Botree and Seltzer (2009) thoughts on businesses not utilizing all of social media’s potential, Nike and Adidas seems to be missing out on a lot of potential that social media can offer in terms of developing a voice and engaging in a dialogic with followers. However, all brands have shown the importance of developing a voice on social media and creating relationships with its audience within today’s society because its presence online can help determine its overall success.
**Focus Groups**

**Introduction**

The purpose of the two focus groups conducted was to research the level of interaction that millennials, specifically Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) public relations students, prefer when communicating with businesses online. Additionally, the focus groups explored young consumers’ expectations of brands and their reactions to conversations on Twitter. To explore additional voices on Twitter, these new businesses were selected for this portion of the study, along with Wendy’s which was included in both the content analysis and focus groups. Example of tweets from Sephora, Pepsi, Wendy’s and Target were used to measure the focus group’s preference in regards to a brands’ voice whether scripted, unscripted, authentic or filtered. In conducting this research, the focus groups are expected to provide sufficient feedback to help determine successful social media strategies to target traditional-aged college students.

In an effort to research the level of interaction that millennials, specifically FGCU public relations students, prefer when communicating with businesses online, I conducted a total of two focus groups were held to better understand student’s perceptions. The first focus group (A) consisted of four participants and was conducted on February 24, 2017 at 10:30 a.m. It took place in a public relations research classroom on the FGCU campus. The four participants were selected based upon class enrollment as FGCU students studying communication with a concentration in public relations. A second focus group (B) was conducted consisting of six participants on March 15, 2017 at 8:10 p.m. It took place in a classroom on the FGCU campus. The six participants volunteered for the focus group following a FGCU FPRA, Florida Public Relations Association, meeting. While there is a population of approximately 15,000 college students at Florida Gulf Coast University, the sample size of ten between the two focus groups consisted of primarily undergraduate public relations students who attend FGCU.
Focusing specifically on Twitter as the social media platform analyzed, I asked questions in regards to what style of engagement is preferred, personal experience with brands on social media, and included screenshots of tweets from a variety of popular brands with a focus on their direct engagement with followers. The brands chosen were a combination of professional and structured responses as well as personal and unstructured. I included these examples to receive as much feedback as possible on the preference amongst two focus groups.

**Analysis of Focus Group A**

During the first focus group, I discovered that there is a wide range of expectations from college students when interacting with a brand on Twitter. Most of the instances were situational by which our participants voiced that they would desire a different type of engagement. When asked if they followed brands on Twitter, they all responded that they do to varying degrees. However, when asked if they engaged with these brands on Twitter, only two participants said that they have engaged and it was because they had a complaint toward the brand or service.

When shown examples from brands with a more structured and professional response such as Sephora and Pepsi, their initial reaction was positive and the group felt as though it is how they would like a brand to respond if they were to engage with them. When we brought out the less structured brand, Target and Wendy’s, the conversation seemed to shift. Once they saw these more playful and personal tweets, the majority said that they would appreciate such an authentic response. This caused participants to look back at the previous examples and reexamine their opinion on a brand’s voice. One of our participants called the Pepsi and Sephora voice “robotic” compared to Target and Wendy’s. At the same time, one participant expressed that they don’t feel the personal playful responses are appropriate in all situations. They gave an
example that if they were to have a complaint, they might appreciate the more structured template response of Pepsi and Sephora.

Kelleher (2009) mentioned the importance of creating positive two-way communication on social media because it is crucial to developing trust with the consumer. Throughout the first focus group, I also observed that once a brand interacts with followers, participants tend to value positivity and openness. Also, when conducting our focus group, the term “impersonal” was used by participants when describing their opinions on the scripted tweet examples. Kolowich (2009) explained the pros and cons to responding in a more scripted way, which provides valuable information to followers asking questions or having concerns and one of our participants seemed to agree with this concept as well.

In conclusion, this focus group appeared to support the theory that millennials tend to appreciate the lighter and more personal voice from brands on Twitter. However, there are some exceptions when desiring a more professional approach to respond to customer-service questions, complaints or perhaps if there was a crisis to address.

**Analysis of Focus Group B**

During the second focus group, the most important themes that emerged included the reasons why the participants engage with brands, their opinions of conversations on Twitter, and what type of voice they prefer to engage with on social media. Many of the participants followed an assortment of retailers and sport teams on Twitter because they like to receive up-to-date information, sales and promotions, and keep up with current trends. The participants seemed to agree overwhelmingly that they are more inclined to engage with brands online that develop a voice that is more personable, helpful, and entertaining. The five participants would like to see more brands use emojis, gifs, memes, and more visuals to catch their attention and engage with
followers. In regards to responding, none of the participants were very fond of the generic and scripted responses similar to Pepsi and Sephora on Twitter. They thought that a detachment, vague, and automatic response wouldn’t be helpful for a brand and instead brands should find a way to create a personality different from others. At the very least, the participants thought brands should be friendly and personable to make followers feel special, which is key to relationship building. Two participants felt that they may not engage with some brands depending on their needs and the brand’s voice. For example, two of the participants mentioned that Wendy’s sarcastic and humorous voice would intimidate them and they are unlikely to engage, similar to the first focus group I conducted. When asked about how other social media platforms would affect their expectations, the participants seemed to agree that a brand’s voice should be different on platforms because social media platforms are used for different reasons. One participant mentioned that Instagram seems to be more of the “face” of the brand and Twitter is the voice. As for Twitter, both focus group participants shared that they are far more likely to engage with brands if they have problems or questions in regards to the brand and expect a timely response that is personable, helpful, and entertaining.

Limitations

Size of focus group

The size of a focus group matters because it contributes to the accuracy and span of information and results the focus group will find. Since a non-traditional focus group was conducted in class, there was a limitation in size and number of participants. A typical focus group should have eight to twelve people participating, while the two focus groups conducted had a total of ten. By adding more people to the group or conducting a third or more focus groups, the study could generate more conversations and find additional support for the topic.
Time given to conduct focus group/complete study

Since the first focus group was given half the class time (20 minutes) to complete the focus group, compared to the standard time of 90 minutes, time was certainly a limitation. As a result, fewer questions were asked, less time was spent on each question and conversations were cut short limiting the information gathered and emotions reached. After conducting a second focus group, it was apparent that having a short period of time is a limitation to the research being conducted.

Similarities amongst participants

The first focus group consisted of students who were in the same class, this is a major limitation to the study because it can cause participants to not be as open or honest with their answers. Because participants are fellow classmates and could be friends or acquaintances, this can cause complications. Also, with all participants being public relations students, they could have similar views, especially on the subject of social media. If we had a selection of students from different majors, there would be more diversity amongst participants and responses. The second focus group focused largely around the same limitation in participants, which was six FGCU students who willingly volunteered. Most of the participants were socially familiar with one another and the researcher, which could have resulted in bias in the study as well. Also, most of the participants were members of FGCU FPRA on campus so their knowledge of brands on social media could be more developed than the average college student.

Recommendations

To build on this study, further qualitative research should be conducted including in-depth interviews to learn how millennials are engaging with brands, which brands and why. Also, conducting more focus groups with additional participants would be beneficial as well as
ensuring that there is diversity among all participants in regards to gender and majors. Online surveys or polls should also be conducted, asking millennial followers their opinions directly and whether scripted or unscripted is preferred. Another variable to explore would be different social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) to further understand if platforms change followers’ opinions on social media strategy and voice.

Conclusion

Overall, the study recognized that millennials have specific expectations when interacting with brands on social media. The social media content analysis allowed the study to gain insights on how businesses utilize Twitter to engage with their followers with multiple different elements. The focus groups allowed the study to learn about the specifics that millennials expect when communicating and engaging with the brands on social media. All of the students who participated in the focus groups had social media platforms, including Twitter, as well as spend many hours daily on social media. Participants also acknowledged that they have interacted with businesses on social media before whether to address a customer complaint or engage in the conversation.

RQ1: How does a brand’s online voice affect social media engagement with young millennials?

After conducting the social media content analysis and two focus groups, evidence has shown that millennial engagement can be affected by a brand’s voice on social media. The responses analyzed from Chipotle and Wendy’s differed from responses analyzed from Nike and Adidas on Twitter. Upon conducting the focus groups, research found that businesses should develop a voice that resonates with millennials when engaging in a conversation. Specifically, both focus groups appeared to support the theory that millennials tend to appreciate the authentic and friendly voice from brands on Twitter. However, depending on the situation, some expectations
change and participants tend to prefer the professional approach when responding to customer-service questions, complaints or perhaps if there is some sort of crisis to address. Overall, the study showed that a brand’s online voice does affect the social media engagement of young millennials.

**RQ2: How is brand content evolving on social media to meet the expectations of a younger audience?**

Millennials are known as the first generation to grow up with technology and spend most of their time on social media. During this study, all the participants involved in the focus groups expressed that they spend ample amount of time on social media on a daily basis. Since millennials are vital users of social media, they tend to have a say in how brand content evolves over time because it’s important to meet their expectations. Recently, brand content has evolved on social media to meet the expectations of a younger audiences that seeks to see more imagery, contemporary, and interactive content. As revealed in the focus group, respondents expect to see more images, videos, memes, gifs and hashtags. Brands are evolving to meet these expectations as can be seen in the social media content analysis of certain businesses on social media. Overall, the study builds support for the theory that a brand’s online voice and social media strategies need to evolve to meet the expectations of millennials.
References


https://twitter.com/chipotletweets


Appendix A: Facilitator's Guide for Focus Group A

Introduction:

Good morning everyone!

- Caroline will start by introducing herself and the other researchers.

Our purpose today is to determine the amount of engagement preferred from businesses on social media by college students. Within the following questions, we will focus on your personal experience of engaging with businesses and show you examples of conversations on Twitter to measure your preference. At this time, let’s go around and introduce ourselves and mention the social media platforms you have.

Perfect, thank you again for participating today! Before we begin, I want to ensure you that you are all aware that your participation today and everything you say will be completely confidential. We hope this will encourage you to be open and honest when answering our questions and providing feedback for the study...

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Questions:

1. Do you follow any brands on social media? If so, what brands and why?
2. Do you believe it’s important for businesses to engage with consumers online? Why?
3. How you ever engaged with a brand on social media? What was the reason for this engagement?
4. Question on Example #1 - (Sephora)
   a. How would you describe Sephora’s voice? (style of interaction)
   b. What do you think about the way Sephora communicates with consumers on social media?
5. Question on Example #2 - (Target)
   a. How would you describe Target’s voice? (Pick different person to answer)
   b. Opinions?
6. Question on Example #3 - (Pepsi)
   a. How would you describe Pepsi’s voice? (Pick different person to answer)
   b. Opinions?
7. Question on Example #4 - (Wendy’s)
   a. How would you describe Wendy’s voice? (Pick different person to answer)
   b. Opinions?
8. Which type of voice/engagement style do you prefer on social media? Why are you more inclined to engage with this brand? And why not the others?

Closing Statement:

Are there any final thoughts/comments you would like to add? Again, we would like to thank you for your time and participation. As we mentioned in the opening statement, we are conducting research in order to measure the amount of engagement preferred by businesses on social media by college students. Your participation and feedback will be very beneficial to our study and findings. Again, all information will remain confidential and you will remain anonymous in all final reports. Thank you!
Facilitator's Guide for Focus Group B

Introduction:

Good evening everyone!

- Caroline will start by introducing herself.

Our purpose today is to determine the amount of engagement preferred from businesses on social media by college students. Within the following questions, we will focus on your personal experience of engaging with businesses and show you examples of conversations on Twitter to measure your preference. At this time, let’s go around and introduce ourselves.

- Caroline provides name tags.

Perfect, thank you again for participating today everyone! Before we begin, I want to ensure that you are all aware that your participation today and everything you say will be completely confidential. I hope this will encourage you to be open and honest when answering questions and providing feedback for the study. Also, I will be recording the focus group to provide me with notes on what we discuss today. At this time, I ask that you sign the audio tape consent form so that I have your permission to record this focus group. Please take a moment to read over the form and sign if you feel comfortable with being recorded.

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

- Caroline will start recording

Questions:

1. What social media platforms do you have?
2. How many hours would you say you spend on social media in a day?
3. Do you follow any brands on social media? If so, what brands and why?
4. What is your preferred type of content that will catch your attention? (photos, videos, etc.)
5. How you ever engaged with a brand on social media? What was the reason for this engagement?
6. Do you believe it’s important for businesses to engage with followers online? Why?
7. Do you ever think about the voice or personality of a brand? What does that mean to you?
8. Question on Example #1 - (Sephora)
   a. How would you describe Sephora’s voice? (style of interaction)
   b. What do you think about the way Sephora communicates with consumers on social media?
9. Question on Example #2 - (Target)
   a. How would you describe Target’s voice?
   b. Opinions?
10. Question on Example #3 - (Pepsi)
    a. How would you describe Pepsi’s voice?
    b. Opinions?
11. Question on Example #4 - (Wendy’s)
    a. How would you describe Wendy’s voice?
    b. Opinions?
12. Has your opinion changed at all since seeing these examples? (look back at question 6 or 7)
13. Does the brand’s voice drive your level of engagement?
14. Would different platforms, opposed to Twitter, change your expectations of voice from brands?
15. Which type of voice/engagement style do you prefer on social media? Why are you more inclined to engage with this brand? And why not the others?
16. What type of voice would you like to see more of or less of?

Closing Statement:
Are there any final thoughts/comments you would like to add? Again, we would like to thank you for your time and participation. As we mentioned in the opening statement, we are conducting research in order to measure the amount of engagement preferred by businesses on social media by college students. Your participation and feedback will be very beneficial to our study and findings. Again, all information will remain confidential and you will remain anonymous in all final reports. Thank you!

Example of Tweets Used in the Focus Groups: