

Social Media Communication - *the ASOS way*

Master Thesis



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Abstract

There has been paradigm shift in how companies are able to communicate with their stakeholders because of an increasingly digitalized world. The major goal of this case study thesis is to approach how the British online web shop ASOS uses social media to influence the relations and perceptions of the customer stakeholder group. This case study is based on the social constructivist theory of science and it applies an inductive method and a critical perspective to create knowledge of how ASOS' uses their social media platforms. In order to better structure the approach of answering the primary problem statement, this case study dissects the problem statement into three subordinate problem statements. These subordinate problem statements question whether there is a beneficial correlation between social media usage and ASOS' main customer segment, how ASOS utilizes social media regarding their communication overall and also how ASOS' social media communication complements their corporate branding.

This thesis applies two primary data sources and also secondary sources in the form of empirical observation from ASOS' social media websites. The two primary data sources are a quantitative online survey (95 respondents) and a qualitative in-depth interview of ASOS customers. In order to better approach the answering of the subordinate problem statements, this thesis applies framing theories that concern social media in general, branding and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Through analyses, it is uncovered that there is a beneficial correlation between ASOS' prime customer segment (Gen Z members) and the use of social media for corporate communication. Furthermore, several social media strategies are identified within ASOS' social media communication, such as engagement strategies and how to incite User Generated Content (UGC). Also, it is identified how ASOS' effective way of incorporating CSR in their online communication also benefits the company. It is also discovered that ASOS does face issues pertaining to a lack of control of user participation on their social media websites. Additionally, it is observed that ASOS' method of branding themselves on social media complements covering the customer needs that drives purchases. This is also done by incorporating CSR in their branding efforts, and it is illustrated how ASOS' avoids misalignments

between who they are, who they say they are and what the customers believe to be true. Finally, it is identified how ASOS' utilizes celebrities in their branding strategy, and how this furthers the covering of customer needs.

Conclusively, it was found that ASOS successfully incorporates several efficient strategies to effectuate their social media communication and interaction with customers. This case study was conducted with the prospect of creating knowledge about how to effectively conduct corporate social media communication. By means of analysis, this thesis argues that ASOS' approach to corporate social media communication is exemplary, and companies who wish to engage with consumers online should aspire to utilize social media strategies the ASOS way.

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1. Introductory part

1.1 Introduction

The appearance of Web 2.0 and social media platforms have become an integral part of the modern world. It not only changed the personal interactions between people, but also businesses operating within virtually all markets faced a paradigm shift in stakeholder interaction as brought about by globalizing digitalization. The most prominent social media websites include Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and many companies also have interactive features on their websites which might qualify them as being a social media platform.

This upheaval of communications has presented a variety of new parameters within business strategy that has given companies new tools to alter the way potential customers perceive them. These parameters have dictated a need for change and adaptation in existing companies, but it has also paved way for the emergence of organizations with a focal culture of inclusion and public relations (Brown 2009, p. 4). Web 2.0 has essentially armed consumers and given them the power to publicly criticize and praise the companies on the internet which necessitates new framework conditions in public relations. “Social Media is no longer an option or debatable. It is critically important to all businesses, without prejudice. It represents a powerful, and additional, channel to first listen to customers, stakeholders, media, bloggers, peers, and other influencers, and in turn, build two-way paths of conversations to them. Yes, conversations are taking place about your company, product, and service, right now, with or without you” (Sheldrake 2008, p. 6).

Businesses with online presence now have a great opportunity of reaching a much larger number of potential customers in comparison with previous times. Back then, the main concern regarding company visibility and appraisal was to influence journalists among others who was the main conveyers of communication. In modern times however, companies can autonomously direct their communication efforts, and new challenges present themselves regarding how to maximize the benefits of Web 2.0, specifically social media platforms (Brown 2009, p. 21). Arguably, the most vital part of this paradigm shift is that public relations efforts should no longer consider the customer segment as an audience who are one-way recipients of branding efforts. Rather, the consumers are now also

respondents who can (and does) participate in a dialogue with organizations. The views of the stakeholders and how communication proceeds should command great respect because this communication is public and will permanently remain visible on the different online forums.

1.2 Problem Field

The way that companies should utilize social media platforms in their communication strategy is arguably dependent on the demography of the identified customer segment. In this thesis, the focus will be on how the British online web shop ASOS uses social media to streamline their public relations with customers. The paradigm shift described in the introduction is very interesting to analyze in relation to ASOS, as the main customer segment of this company are digitally literate and primarily composed of individuals belonging to the so-called Generation Z (Gen Z) (ASOS Annual Report 2018). Gen Z is defined as being the first generation which as a cohort has had Web 2.0 availability and access since a very young age (Prensky 2001).

The case study of ASOS in this thesis will aim to map how the company uses social media platforms to cater to their Gen Z main customer segment in order to achieve growing positioning on the online fashion market. It is conceivable that ASOS implements very specialized communication strategies on their social media platforms which are rooted in identified motives and rationale within the Gen Z customer segment.

A preliminary assumption which will be either falsified or verified in this thesis is that ASOS utilizes their social media platforms for tripartite purposes. One purpose might be social media usage with intention to strengthen the ASOS image. It can be argued that most companies who use social media in their communication efforts have this as their main purpose of their communication strategy. However, it is also interesting to analyze if ASOS' social media usage serves to strengthen the personal brand or image of the individual customer, and if this benefits the company by it being a value proposition for the customer. Lastly, it is possible that ASOS also use social media in order to project corporate social responsibility (CSR), furthering the incentives for Gen Z customers to align themselves with ASOS through product purchases and personal involvement on ASOS' social media platforms.

1.3 Delimitations

Moving on from the introduction and problem field description, several interesting branches of further analysis can be deduced from social media communication strategy overall. However, for the purpose of conciseness and the wish for in-depth analysis of the particular case of ASOS within this thesis, several delimitations must be introduced. Following this is a sum-up of the most notable omissions that have been selected in order to ensure a relatively narrow anchor from which further analysis can be conducted.

Firstly, it is worth mentioning that several stakeholders all throughout the value chain of ASOS are influenced by their communication strategies – this also goes for social media. The nature of the content produced by companies on their social media websites also impact internal stakeholders. In the matter of this thesis however, the focus will exclusively be on the customer segment. This is due to customers being largely viewed as the most important stakeholder group and it is oftentimes the customers who are the directive force that dictates the overall strategy implementation and execution within a company. Because the customer stakeholder segment wields such large influence, they will be the target of interest regarding analysis in this thesis.

Another significant delimitation in this thesis is that the online web shop ASOS will be the sole focus. Granted, it would yield interesting results to introduce several companies operating on the same market with a similar customer target segment and comparatively analyze their methods of strategizing and executing their communication on social media. The choice of singular focus on ASOS was made to ensure more thorough insight into the circumstances than would otherwise have been possible if multiple companies were incorporated in the analysis.

It is also worth mentioning that there is an abundance of social media websites available for companies through which to gain exposure. All these different channels do contain niche functions and purposes, and although it would also be interesting to delve deeper into these separate differences and opportunities of each and every major available social media website, this thesis will focus on the four major social media websites Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube which ASOS uses as well as ASOS' own website (www.asos.com) for the purpose of more narrow, in-depth analysis.

It would also have been interesting to gather data from the ASOS employee stakeholder group in connection with the company social media communication. Assumedly, the employees view of the organization image and culture may also be influenced by how ASOS execute their communication strategies on social media. Albeit this could produce some interesting data for further internal stakeholder analysis, only the customer segment will be object of research and analysis for the purpose of this thesis.

An additional delimitation is that it would also carry relevance to conduct a more detailed textual analysis of the communication observable on the social media websites associated with ASOS. Linguistic research of the communication of both ASOS and their targeted customer recipients could potentially contribute with valuable insights pertaining to the focus of this thesis, however it seemed a more obvious choice to place focus on the more general application of social media communication efforts and strategy.

1.4 Problem Statement

Founded on the described problem field and identified delimitations as mentioned above, the following problem statement (PS) was chosen:

(PS) How does the British online web shop ASOS' use of social media communication influence customer relations and perceptions?

This problem statement formulation is the product of a yearning for knowledge about how the mechanics of social media communication influences and dictates the way modern companies can gain an advantage by essentially controlling customer perceptions through optimized communication strategies. The problem statement serves to declare the prime focus of this thesis.

Three subordinate statements (SS) are included below in order to more effectively approach answering the main problem statement. These statements are designed with the intention of contributing to the way the analysis approaches the answering of the above problem statement. These subordinate statements are:

(SS1) Is there beneficial correlation between the focus customer segment and social media usage?

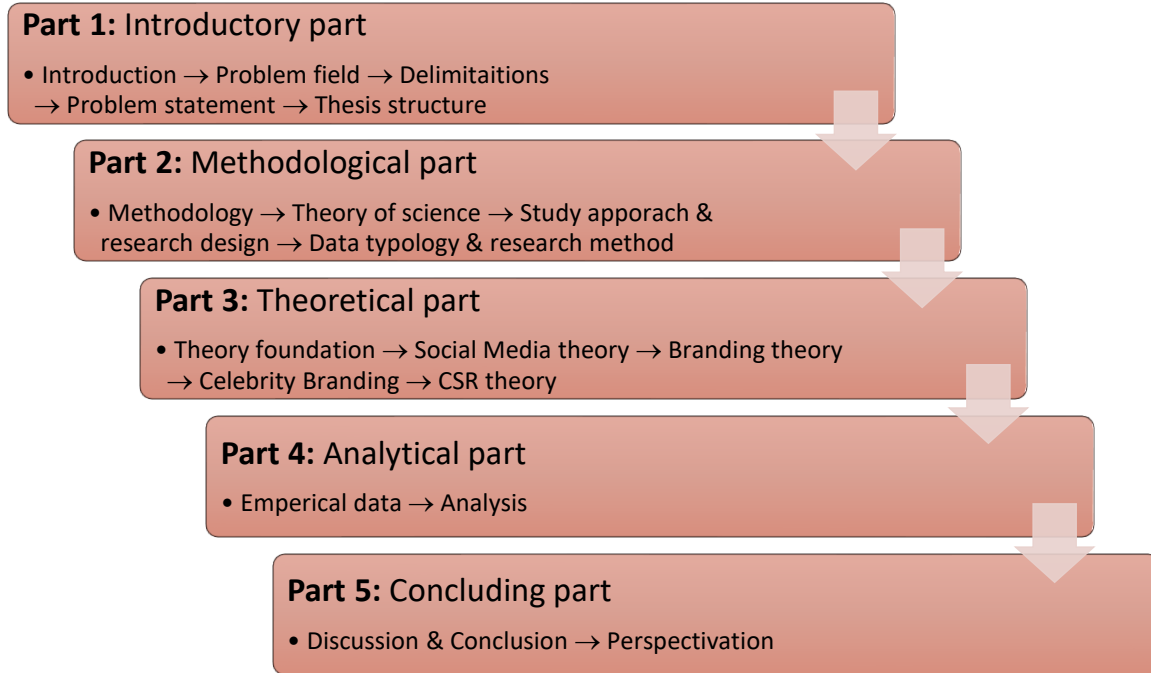
(SS2) How does ASOS utilize social media platforms in their communication efforts?

(SS3) How does ASOS' social media communication complement corporate and user image building?

These subordinate statements have been a decisive reason for which framing theories are introduced and utilized, as well as what kind of data was gathered. The relevance of the theory and data as they pertain to the subordinate statements will be clarified in the presentation of the chosen theory and in the empirical section respectively.

1.5 Thesis Structure

This section is included in order to map the structure of the thesis for reader's convenience. The visual model below explains how the different sections are chronologically presented.



As is already apparent, the first part of this thesis has introduced the reader to the theme and described the context from which this thesis has been authored. It contains a problem field which serves to explain the subject boundaries and what particular knowledge this thesis seeks. This first introductory part also contains the delimitations section in order to show the conscious omissions within the subject of social media communication. It also features the chosen problem statement and subordinate statements that are designed to guide the process of knowledge creation.

The second part concerns the methodological elements of this thesis. The methodology consists of elaborations on the chosen theory of science, the relevant study approach and research design, the various types of data and the chosen research method.

The third part will describe the theoretical applications that are included to frame the later analysis. This part will map the theory foundation and subsequently introduce the various theories within social media, branding and CSR.

The fourth part is analytical and is the product of the various observations that will be used to approach the problem statement and subordinate statements. This part will feature descriptions of the two primary data sources and the secondary data source that have been collected. It will then present three sub-analyses that concretely approach the subordinate statements.

The fifth and final part of this thesis will present a discussion and conclusion of the findings produced by the analyses before presenting a perspectivation of the content.

2 Methodological part

2.1 Methodology

This section will first and foremost describe the choice of theory of science and explain the chosen study approach in terms of research design as well as the means of, and reasons for, the chosen empirical data collection methods.

The first part of this section will describe the chosen theory of science which serves as the foundation for how science and the creation of knowledge is perceived with regards to this thesis. Additionally, this part will also disclose the reasons for the choice of theory of science as point of departure. The second part of this section will detail the research design used in this thesis and the underlying reasons for this choice. Following this is a clarification of the research method used and the data types produced from this method which will conclude the methodology section.

2.2 Theory of science – social constructivism

The main emphasis of social constructivism as a theory of science is that reality is constructed by means of human activity, and that the creation of knowledge about reality is occurring through human interaction. Knowledge and reality are as such not objective but rather depends on the subjectivity derived from the creation of meaning which occurs through social processes (Kim 2014, p. 3). Social constructivism has the potential to both deconstruct previous ideological

assumptions of knowledge but also to construct a new understanding of how to perceive science. It challenges an older positivistic perspective of science by stating that knowledge is not final and objective by any means but rather a continuous strive to create and attain new knowledge infinitively. In the eyes of a social constructivist, objective knowledge is unobtainable however it is the ongoing search for knowledge that gives sense to this theory of science (Wenneberg 2002).

Social constructivism is convoluted with several facets that can make distinguishing the various perspectives of it difficult. Namely, knowing exactly what knowledge is being constructed through social interaction can be difficult to agree upon, as this is also subject to the social or cultural perspective from which it is being observed (Fuglsang and Olsen 2004, p. 350). The social constructivist perspective observes reality as being a solely social phenomenon whose form depend on the recognition of it. Because it is a social phenomenon, reality can shift depending on which social group observes it and how it subsequently constructs it. It is through people's actions and thoughts that reality exists, and therefore reality is never in a uniform shape or objective to all people (Burr 1995, p. 4).

V. Burr also argues that language is the driving force of the creation of knowledge through social processes. Without communication through language, there would be no consensus from which reality could be constructed and recognized by multiple individuals. Being able to communicate is the bedrock of our social life and subsequent construction of reality and meaning. It should also be noted that language and form of communication is also intrinsically based in culture. As such, culture will influence the form of communication through language and thus also how reality is constructed. Through social interactions, people constantly influence each other's image of themselves and in some ways create a singlemindedness of what reality is. This process of constructing reality is in constant reproduction by the means of interaction, culture and language (Burr 1995, p. 5).

The reason for the choice of a social constructivist approach in this thesis is largely due to V. Burr's arguments as described above. Arguably, the perspective of people proactively shaping reality through social interaction by means of language and communication is highly applicable to

this thesis. When people use language and communication in connection with companies, they are, in the perspective of a social constructivist, shaping the reality of what that company is. In reference to V. Burr, these socially constructed realities differ between people and social groupings. For this reason, it is not possible to generalize the social constructions of how social media communication is perceived among stakeholders and particularly customers in general. The social constructivist perspective adopted for this thesis thus calls for new data and analysis in order to approach the chosen problem statement. Because there is no objective description of reality, with knowledge and meaning being different to each individual depending on their subjective social constructions, it is interesting to observe how individuals perceive an online web shop like ASOS. The communicative interaction between ASOS and their customers through social media inadvertently shapes the reality of the company. For ASOS, social media thus becomes a tool which can change the social constructs and perceptions of customers, which can be subject to analysis in order to create new understanding of this phenomenon, and knowledge of how social media communication can influence customer relations and perceptions.

It is important to note that social constructivism does not refer to one singular perspective of how knowledge and reality are created. There are several different steps which each represent an increasingly more radical social constructivist view. Following this is a short explanation of the most relevant typologies within social constructivism which are presented in order to understand how this thesis can apply these escalating perspectives.

The most commonplace type of social constructivism is referred to as the critical perspective. This perspective entails adopting a critical stance on naturalities and knowledge of the world which many would take for granted (Wenneberg 2002). Wenneberg argues that this type of social constructivism is generally enticing to academics because it prescribes not taking the immediately observable facets of reality for granted, but rather to infer a truer knowledge of things by searching for underlying and more factual mechanisms and correlations. This type of social constructivism is aimed at challenging established knowledge in order to create new meaning (Wenneberg 2002). In reference to this thesis, that might be challenging general preexisting assumptions of how social media communication benefit companies, or how it can also complicate

customer relations. The knowledge that is created may also reinforce pre-existing ideas of how social media communication should be conducted. One way to critically approach knowledge of topics that are seemingly fixed could be to apply doubt and curiosity of potential underlying social structures. Doing so is to implement the type of social constructivism which has to do with social theory. Depending of which social constructivist you refer to, the social construction of knowledge may either be determined by how a preexisting, materialistic reality guides the creation of the social constructions (Berger & Luckmann cf. Wenneberg 2002), or by how social constructions reproduce new social constructions themselves (Foucault cf. Wenneberg 2002).

Expanding on the social theory perspective, social constructivism can also be approached as being epistemological. Although theorists such as Berger & Luckmann differentiate their ideas of social constructivism from the epistemological discussion, Wenneberg argues that this discussion only comes naturally. The epistemological type of approach to social constructivism dictates that knowledge about reality is created solely through social interactions and should therefore be subject to sociological explanations (Wenneberg 2002). This plays well into the subject of this thesis and it is interesting to observe how the social interactions between ASOS and their customer segment through social media channels may indeed define the meaningful reality of how ASOS is perceived. Additionally, with an epistemological approach, it may also be possible that the reality of the customers themselves, their image and self-perception, is constructed through the social interaction with ASOS. It is also worth mentioning a more radical typology of social constructivism, namely the ontological approach. The ontological position idealistically points to how social constructivism is not only concerned with the social constructs of theoretical knowledge, but that social perspective encompasses all parts of reality, including that of the physical world (Wenneberg 2002).

For the purpose of this thesis, the ontological, and arguably more philosophical, perspective of social constructivism will not be included as it would conflict with the intended conciseness of answering the chosen problem statement. The more general critical perspective inherent in social constructivism will be applied in order to challenge the gathered knowledge pertaining to the chosen subject from previous, separate sources. Several secondary data exist which are descriptive

of how companies' use of social media communication influences customer perceptions, however it is possible that this thesis will uncover new findings through new data set analysis. In addition to the critical perspective, the research will also apply a social theory perspective when analyzing the collected data. This is done by regarding the social phenomena described in the data as being constructed from a net of social interactions and by regarding the difference in how certain constructs may be interpreted differently from person to person which will also result in variations of the individual and socially constructed reality. It is for this reason that the theories of this thesis are mostly having to do with social theory such as perceptions of image and branding. This also carries epistemological significance as creating knowledge of how ASOS' communication through social media affects the perceptions of customers requires preliminary knowledge of customer experience and response which is supplied by the collected data.

2.3 Study approach

The research type pertaining to this thesis can be classified as social research and is also linked to social constructivism. Using social research means drawing upon social sciences for conceptualizing the research project mostly in regard to developments and changes in society. The social scientific ideas are thus implemented in order to gain a deeper understanding of such developments and changes (Bryman 2004, p. 5). The increasing demand for, and general use of, companies' social media communication resembles a recent societal development and enables the use of research designs and methods within social sciences.

2.4 Research design

The chosen research design in this thesis is a case study design. Bryman describes the case study as follows: "the basic case study entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case" (Bryman 2004, p. 66). Concisely, it is concerned with the complex nature of a particular case. Within the case study design, a case is a location like an organization or a community linked to an organization. The case study is also usually preferred when doing research on contemporary events without the possibility of behavior manipulation. "The case study relies on many of the

same techniques as a history, but it adds two sources of evidence not usually included in the historian's repertoire: **direct observation and systematic interviewing.**” (Yin, 2009 p. 8). These two sources of evidence which Yin mentions will both be used in the data collection in this thesis, which will be further explained in a later section.

It is also relevant to distinguish between the different varieties of case studies. Yin (2009) portrays five different types of case studies which are the **critical case, the extreme/unique case, the exemplifying case, the revelatory case** and lastly **the longitudinal case**. In a critical case, the researcher has established a theory and subsequently chooses a specific case which will allow for deeper understanding of whether or not there is truth to the established theory in a deductive manner. The extreme/unique case is simply descriptive of cases that are unique and out of the ordinary. The exemplifying case is used in order to observe circumstances in a commonplace situation for the purpose of exemplifying circumstances inherent to a broad category in which the particular case belongs as a member. Contrary to the extreme/unique case, this variation of a case study is chosen exactly because it is not unique, but instead more descriptive of general phenomena which it can epitomize. The revelatory case is when researchers have access to new, untapped knowledge which may have been previously inaccessible by means of scientific investigation. The longitudinal case refers to a case study conducted over a longer period of time. (Yin 2009, p. 38-51).

For the purpose of this thesis, the exemplifying case study (also often referred to as the representative/typical case study) was chosen. This choice was made for two reasons. Firstly, this variety of case study will enable insight into the workings of a particular case company with emphasis on the details of how a major online web shop uses social media communication in their PR efforts. Secondly, the exemplifying case study will hopefully produce observations that are more broadly applicable. Although the focus of this thesis is first and foremost to examine ASOS and the constituent variables pertaining to their use of social media communication, the collected data and analysis may prove useful in producing more general assumptions or hypotheses concerning companies' usage of social media communication, and the effects hereof, in general.

Several points of criticism exist in which the usefulness of case studies is questioned. In “*The Dictionary of Sociology*”, one description of a case study is that it cannot derive meaning in a general and broader sense and is best used in order to create hypotheses which can then be subject to a subsequent larger examination with multiple cases (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1984, p. 34). Flyvbjerg presents this criticism, along with others, in his academic article “Fem misforståelser om casestudiet (2010)”, in order to subsequently debunk them. Without delving further into the nature of the points of criticism and Flyvbjerg’s response to these, it can be argued that much of this criticism dates back to an older, conventional and more simplified perception of the usefulness of case studies. In modern times however, case studies are more generally perceived as a necessary and comprehensive method within social sciences (Flyvbjerg 2019) and the case study in this thesis should provide valuable data that can be used for subsequent analysis and answering of the chosen problem statement.

2.5 Data typology and research method

In association with the choice of research design as described above, it is also necessary to understand the two major data types and research methods, namely the quantitative and the qualitative methods. Additionally, this section will also provide further insight into the knowledge creation process in this thesis.

The quantitative research method involves gathering quantitative data which is distinguishable by being numerical and countable for use in calculations in statistics. When using a quantitative research method, it is easier to create and manage a statistical overview which can describe a specific problem. The quantitative methods often take shape of questionnaires and surveys or other methods of data collection in which the quantity of respondents are used to illustrate general phenomena and to produce observations that can subject phenomena to generalizations. Usually, quantitative data has a larger group of respondents compared to the qualitative data type. In such surveys or questionnaires, the respondent is usually presented with various predetermined options from which he/she can choose from. This allows for a quicker data collection with a large number

of respondents, however there is no deeper elaboration which can give reason to how and why the respondents answered the way they did (Harboe 2011, p. 45-47).

Separate from the quantitative research method is the qualitative one. The qualitative research method seeks to gather data where the focus is on the quality of a lesser number of respondents. For this reason, qualitative data is not used in order to generalize, as much as it is used for deeper, more detailed insight into what circumstances surround the responses of the individual. One way of conducting qualitative research and collect data is through dialogical and personal interviews. This also enables a degree of elaboration from the respondents and presents an opportunity for the interviewer to gather additional information which is not connected to predefined questions, as would be the case of the quantitative research method (Harboe 2011, p. 47-48). In this thesis, the qualitative research is primarily based on the hands-on theory of qualitative research practice by Richie & Lewis (2003).

Regarding empirical data collection, this thesis will place focus on the perceptions and thoughts from relatively few customers about ASOS' social media communication while also having part quantitative survey data. Having a mostly qualitative approach but also a more general quantitative data set will conceivably produce more in-depth insights into the workings of customer perception. It can be argued that having a larger quantitative respondent base and data sets would also produce interesting findings, but the center of interest and priority of this thesis remains to gather concise data from a select number of customers through interviews. In short, analysis in this thesis will originate firstly from interview data from a small number of ASOS customers but also from a more general survey questionnaire. In addition to this, the thesis will also include secondary data collected from the various platforms in which ASOS conduct their communication which are their official website, social media platforms and also their most recent annual report.

Bryman argues that within a case study, an emphasis is oftentimes put on qualitative data but that the association of purely qualitative data and case studies is inappropriate. Although exponents of case study design often play well into the use of qualitative data because it can generate more

detailed insights into particular cases, Bryman argues that quantitative data is also employable regarding case studies. Instead, he proclaims that both data types are often present in case studies as research designs that utilize only quantitative data are often more cross-sectional in nature, as are those with exclusive use of qualitative data (Bryman 2004, p. 68). Yin also argues that the case study has the unique strength of being able to deal with a larger repertoire of data, which can derive from both qualitative and quantitative sources (Yin 2009, p. 8).

For the purpose of this thesis, both qualitative and quantitative data has been collected in order to benefit from the attributes of both research methods and data types. Three different data sets are included in this thesis for the purpose of a well-rounded analysis based on both qualitative and quantitative insights. Firstly, a quantitative survey was conducted with the intention to observe the behavior of social media users in connection with fashion brands like ASOS on social media websites, and also to disclose ASOS' customer segment. This survey was shared on Facebook, and for this reason it does not take into account possible respondents that do not have an active social media account. A total of 95 respondents participated in the shared survey. This is arguably indicative of the general perception that social media users have towards fashion brands online in general and should also provide knowledge of the customer segment most relevant to a company like ASOS. Secondly, additional qualitative interviews were conducted with respondents that are established customers of ASOS and users of their social media website. This was done with the intent of keeping the focus on ASOS in particular, with the supplementary data being indicative of more general tendencies. The final data collected for the purpose of this thesis are qualitative observations of ASOS' social media communication in general. This data is comprised purely of observations made directly on the social media platforms administered by ASOS and their own website. Together with the previously mentioned qualitative and quantitative data sets, the total data pool can, in connection with chosen framing theory, contribute to an in-depth analysis which may assist in answering the chosen subordinate problem statements as well as the main problem statement.

In continuation of the above description of the collected data, it is also relevant to distinguish between the deductive and inductive methods of knowledge creation. As a researcher wanting to

produce knowledge within the social sciences, two methods of knowledge creation can be utilized – deduction and induction. The deductive method has impetus in general principles and established theories from which you can draw conclusions. The main purpose of deductive reasoning is to test established theories to assert whether they are applicable to real life circumstances. Oppositely, the inductive method of knowledge creation is baselined in concrete incidents and cases from which you attach principles and generalities. As such, the knowledge creation process is initially grounded in the empirical data. This method of creating knowledge is also coined as being explorative, in which a limited amount of collected data is observed as being indicative of a more general picture (Andersen 2014, p. 31-32).

As mentioned previously, this thesis has adopted the inductive method of knowledge creation. The choice of inductive reasoning in this thesis is mainly based in the assumption that there are not many established theories and hypotheses that would warrant a deductive approach through a case study. This is arguably due to social media marketing and communication being a relatively new paradigm. The data collected is intended to clarify the mechanics of customer perception of ASOS, with different data sets highlighting the various components of the customer segment and ASOS' use of social media communication in order to answer the posed problem statement and subordinate statements. For the purpose of putting the collected empirical data into perspective, a set of established theory will be introduced in order to effectively frame the data for use in analysis.

3 Theoretical part

3.1 Theory foundation

In this section of the thesis, the framing theories used will be detailed. The impetus for this section is to clarify the applicability of the selected theories and how they are connected in order to most effectively address the chosen problem statement and subordinate statements. Arguably, there are several interesting and different mechanics at work in this case study. Initially, it is relevant to disclose how ASOS use social media in their communication efforts. For this reason, the following section will first include social media theory. Following this is theory concerning branding as this is also important in relation to the problem statement and subordinate problem statements and it can be argued that it is intrinsically connected to customer perception. Lastly, this section will also include theories of CSR and how it can be used to create a competitive advantage. These theories are mainly chosen because of their inherent relevance to the chosen problem statement and sub-questions but also because of their social nature which connects well with social constructivism and the social sciences. As stated previously, the research of this thesis is conducted inductively. This entails that the thesis is explorative and seeks to define new theories and baseline assumptions of the mechanics of social media in corporations, specifically ASOS. The theories described below should be considered as framing theories through which empirical data can give rise to new knowledge concerning customer perception on social media.

3.1.1 Social media theory

In order to gain an optimal insight into the context of how ASOS uses social media communication to interact with customers, the initial theory that will be considered in this section is social media theory. The inclusion of social media theory is intended to be descriptive of how the reciprocity and general communication function on social media between ASOS and their main customer segment (Gen Z). It can be considered that the workings of social media and how the diverse array of various channels on which companies and customers interact is helpful in order to effectively illuminate the possibilities of making practical and effective use of the benefits

presented by social media platforms. Presumably, social media also dictate the communication strategies of companies and allow them to interact with customers at any point in time, which also calls for the inclusion of social media theory. The social media theory applied in this thesis is founded on the works of author Lon Safko by means of his book “The Social Media Bible” and also Joel Postman’s book “SocialCorp: Social Media goes Corporate”. These theorists were mainly chosen because their works within social media theory complements the answering of the chosen problem statement and sub-questions. Additionally, they also synergize well with the social constructivist theory of science.

3.1.2 Branding theory

In connection with marketing communication theory it is also pertinent to include theory of branding in general and particularly online branding. Much of established branding theory is concerned with customer needs, as the most important reasons for customers to purchase specific products or hire specific services is to cover or satisfy needs that the consumer might have. Such needs are conspicuously related to the wants that the actual physical products can satisfy, but through effective branding efforts a company can also portray values that customers, through their endorsement and support of a particular brand, can identify with and as such cover needs that are more psychological in nature. It can be argued that companies can now signal values through online branding efforts on social media to a much greater effect, and it is interesting to evaluate how the mechanics of online branding can be used to beneficially alter the customers’ perception of ASOS. The branding theory in this thesis will be sourced from author Heidi Hansen and her works in “Branding – teori, modeller, analyse”, but will also include observations from Abraham Maslow (Hierarchy of Needs) and C. S. Peirce (triadic model of semiotics) along with a few others. It is also worth mentioning Herzberg’s two-factor theory of motivation, however it is maintained that Herzberg’s theories are more befitting internal stakeholder analysis, and for this reason the theory of needs will rely on those supplied by Maslow. In addition to being relevant in approaching the subordinate problem statements, the chosen branding theory also plays well into a social constructivist perspective.

3.1.3 CSR Theory

The section of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) theory is also included in this thesis as it holds relevance for the purpose of addressing the problem statement. Although CSR transcends various communication channels of companies, it can be argued that it is even more faceted on social media due to the interactive form of communication between companies and users. CSR has become more dominant with regards to business reporting and it can be argued that social media usage in the corporate world is, at least partly, connected to why CSR has seen such increased prominence. Most companies in modern times have a CSR policy and produce details of their CSR in their annual reports. Concisely, CSR is concerned with the relationship between corporations, governments and, most importantly, individual people. As such, CSR is also intertwined with theory of branding and marketing, and the importance of how companies engage questions of morals and responsibility in their business is arguably of utmost importance to especially the customer segment of stakeholders. The concept and thoughts of CSR were initially conceived by theoreticians Porter and Kramer et al., and the theories of CSR and its applications are continuously evolving. The considerations of CSR theory in this assignment are primarily sourced from the book “Corporate Social Responsibility”, authored by David Crowther and Güler Aras and also Heidi Hansen’s “Branding – teori, modeller, analyse”. Much of the content of these books is summary of separate theoreticians’ observations, and it was chosen because of its relevance in relation to approaching the subordinate problem statements.

3.2 Theory

It is in this section of the thesis that the theories applied will be thoroughly accounted for and described. The ordering will be identical to what can be seen in the above theory foundation section. First off, the social media theory used in this thesis will be detailed in order to specify the context of ASOS, their social media usage and customer perception. Subsequently, the chosen theory of marketing communication will be described for the purpose of understanding how ASOS use social media as part of their marketing efforts. After this, the chosen theory of branding will also be thoroughly detailed for later use in the analysis of the ASOS case study. Lastly, this

section will also provide a description of the chosen CSR theory as this also holds significant relevance to the case of ASOS and their use of social media. A preliminary assumption of this thesis is that the collected data can be effectively analyzed using the selected theories as a frame.

3.2.1 Social media

This section includes descriptions and observations of the chosen social media theory. This theory covers social media usage of companies, and it has a relatively wide perspective. It is however conceived that the chosen theory is highly applicable to the case of ASOS and their marketing communication on social media. Additionally, the overall congruency of the concepts authored by both Safko and Postman arguably speaks to the validity of their observations.

As was briefly given mention to in the introduction, the development and spread of internet access globally has in many ways changed the way of which people interact with one another and how they access information along with many other things. People's everyday lives have been increasingly influenced by the internet as it has evolved throughout recent years, and it has brought with it both benefits and consequences for private persons but also businesses. The advancements of the internet and digitalizing technology have in recent times delivered a wide array of different social media channels. These channels allow users to instantaneously interact with one another from all over the world while not being limited by their geographical location either. In his book, Safko interestingly dissects the wording "social media". "Social" of course relates to interpersonal interaction, and it arguably has positive connotations connected to it. "Media" on the other hand is often thought of in a traditional sense, and it often refers to newspapers and television. In modern times, the term media also covers many aspects of the internet, but the internet version of media has the capacity to allow for much greater content sharing volume. Conclusively, Safko argues that for business marketeers, social media is about making conversation happen and how this conversation can be prompted, promoted and monetized (Safko 2009, p. 4).

As also mentioned, the traditional forms of media tools such as newspapers, television and advertisements in general have been in the form of one-way communication. With the appearance of Web 2.0 and social media websites, this paradigm shift has effectively made communication between companies and customers much more interactive and this can be both beneficial and dangerous for companies seeking to market themselves within these platforms. People are not only able to congregate and share thoughts about companies' products and/or brands, but they can also contact companies directly on their social media websites and forums. This lack of control is a dangerous prospect for companies, but the pitfalls can arguably be circumvented by the means of effective communication strategizing.

What should be fundamental when companies use social media to communicate is the question of engagement. Engagement strategies are vital when companies seek to use social media to communicate to all kinds of stakeholders (see Appendix 7.3 for samples of engagement communication from ASOS' social media websites). Safko argues that companies should facilitate communication, collaboration, education or entertainment when seeking stakeholder engagement (optimally more than one) (Safko 2009, p. 7). The engagement strategy of communication refers to the basic means of simply communicating a relevant message to the audience. Inciting collaboration is also an important mean of producing engagement on social media websites. In reference to this case study, collaboration on social media could be customers reviewing products on Facebook or Twitter or contributing with their own content on the social media platforms. Engagement can also be created by educating the audience by, for example, providing a behind-the-scenes perspective of the organization. Lastly, a strong means of engaging an audience on social media platforms is simply to entertain them. In order to optimize the marketing and branding potential of communication on social media, companies should strive for fulfilling as many of the engagement strategy factors as possible in their marketing efforts (Safko 2009, p. 8). It is important for companies who use social media to be fully aware of the audience of the posted content. Audience can either be internal (intracompany stakeholders) or external (customers and other stakeholders), but the focus will remain on customers and therefore the external audience. The audience can be seen as consumers of the company's content and this process can be regarded

as an opportunity for an interactive relationship. It is through this relationship that a company is able to apply the engagement strategies as detailed previously (Safko 2009, p. 718).

On top of the importance of efficient engagement strategies and knowing their audience, one way that companies can utilize their social media platforms effectively is by focusing on User Generated Content (UGC). The method of inciting users to contribute with content of their own to companies' social media websites is coherent with stakeholder engagement as described previously. To put this into perspective, Safko describes some possibilities of how social media content can make user exhibit different actions. For businesses, the most attractive behavior that user can exhibit in response to companies' communication strategies on social media is the aforementioned UGC contributions. Inciting people to become co-producers of content is the best way to create awareness through engagement, effectively giving users a strong notion of being stakeholders themselves. (Safko 2009, p. 79-80). Another attractive response is for users to simply comment on the content found on the social media websites. However, this is only attractive as long as the comments are endorsing in nature which furtherly promotes the brand of the company, albeit user commentators can also serve as detractors which brings us back to the duality of social media usage. Users may also be inclined to refer the content of companies' social media websites to others if the content has strong engagement parameters which may cause content to be shared virally. Of course, this can be either positive or negative as well. Lastly, users may simply read the comments but take no further action, or they may simply ignore the content. It is arguably within the control of companies to affect the nature of user engagement through well-designed marketing communication, and this should be done with the goal of positive engagement in mind. Inciting UGC, the contribution of comments and the sharing of content to others should be the prime objective of effective social media content for companies (Safko 2009, p. 80).

In relation to the dangers of the interactive nature of communication as brought about by social media, it is relevant to include the lack of control inherent when companies use social media platforms. Secondary data samples from various ASOS social media channels are included in Appendix 7.8 in order to showcase this. Traditionally, control is observed to be of paramount importance when conducting business. Specifically, control of the company supply chain,

operations management, the culture of the organization, human resource performance and, finally, customer interaction is arguably at the core of successful companies. Conclusively, integrated market communication should be carefully planned, executed and controlled as to not tarnish the company brand and thus causally compromise profits (Safko 2009, p. 681). With the popularity and conceivable necessity of social media usage however, companies may need to challenge some practices related to control in the process of embracing social media, mainly due to the previously mentioned lack of control of the two-way customer interaction birthed by corporate social media. The most prominent practice that companies should now partly abandon is control of the company brand. Before the arrival of social media, companies could wield much more control of people's perceptions of the brands. Pertaining to corporate social media usage however, this control needs to be abandoned to be able to enable conversation among the audience and particularly the customer segment. The consequence of enabling conversation in order to market companies on social media is that it is impossible to control this conversation (Safko 2009, p. 681-682). From a social constructivist point of view, this lack of control arguably makes the conversation makers the owners and definers of a company brand. Although a company still has a certain capacity to influence this conversation, the stakeholders who make conversation on social media through social interaction define what a company's brand means to them.

In addition to Safko's observations within social media theory, it is also relevant to mention how corporate communication on social media results in increased authenticity, transparency, immediacy, connectedness and participation (Postman 2009, p. 9) as compared to more traditionalist modes of marketing communication. The level of authenticity of the communication due to social media is much higher than it was in the past. This is mainly due to the sheer volume of communicative interaction on social media which is largely unfiltered and spontaneous in nature which also commemorates Safko's arguments of the lack of control. Additionally, through the use of social media, companies can now obtain a much larger degree of transparency in their business activities. This is by virtue of companies now being able to disclose information about their business operations through their communication such as their value chain and CSR initiatives. As was the case with increased authenticity, this transparency is arguably also gained through the price of a decreased level of control over the exposed content. As such, companies

with a high level of transparency in their marketing communication risk having an unintended exposure of sensitive information which can damage their brand. It can be argued that the rewards of transparency outweigh the risk, as strong transparency can reward a closer relationship with stakeholders. The concept of immediacy is descriptive of how the communication between companies and stakeholders are now instantaneous. Because of the immediate nature of social media communication, the information conveyed is usually more current and relevant for the recipients. Related to the concept of immediacy is the degree of connectedness that stakeholders perceive due to social media. In addition to being affected by immediacy, the increased level of connectedness supported by social media is also due to the communication being more broadly distributed. As such, people across geographical distances can experience much greater connection both to the relevant company but also to other engaging users (Postman 2009 p. 9-11). Postman also mentions the concept of participation, but this will not be elaborated further due to the similarities it shares with the concept of engagement as described previously.

Conclusively, companies' actions and communication efforts on social media influences both the audience and the company itself. By paying attention to the audience of the social media websites, the engagement strategies necessary for successful marketing on social media and the pitfalls inherent to the decreased amount of control, companies have strong opportunities to market themselves efficiently. By doing this they can alter the perception of customers in order to create a competitive advantage.

3.2.2 Branding

This section of theory will go into detail about the branding theory that was chosen. This theory was chosen because it can provide important tools regarding approaching the problem statement and subordinate statements, but also because much of this theory interplays with the additionally included theories of social media and CSR. This theory will display the means by which companies such as ASOS can effectively present their brand to their audiences. Branding affects several stakeholder groups, but the interpretation of the chosen branding theory will have the customer segment as the prime focus.

Branding is a concept that implies differentiation, and the meaning of it has changed in recent times, especially in connection with increased use of social media websites for corporate purposes. Branding as a discipline has evolved to not only be a mean of differentiation, but to also imply immaterial surplus value. Concisely, this means that branding no longer solely functions to help identify specific products through recognizable symbols, but instead now also offers emotional and/or self-expressive benefits by which the customers can stage themselves. Additionally, branding strategies are no longer solely concerned with the branding of products, but also of branding entire companies (Hansen 2014, p. 13).

Fundamental for branding theory is the notion that customers purchase goods and interact with companies in order to cover their needs. An effective tool in relation to illustrating this is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:

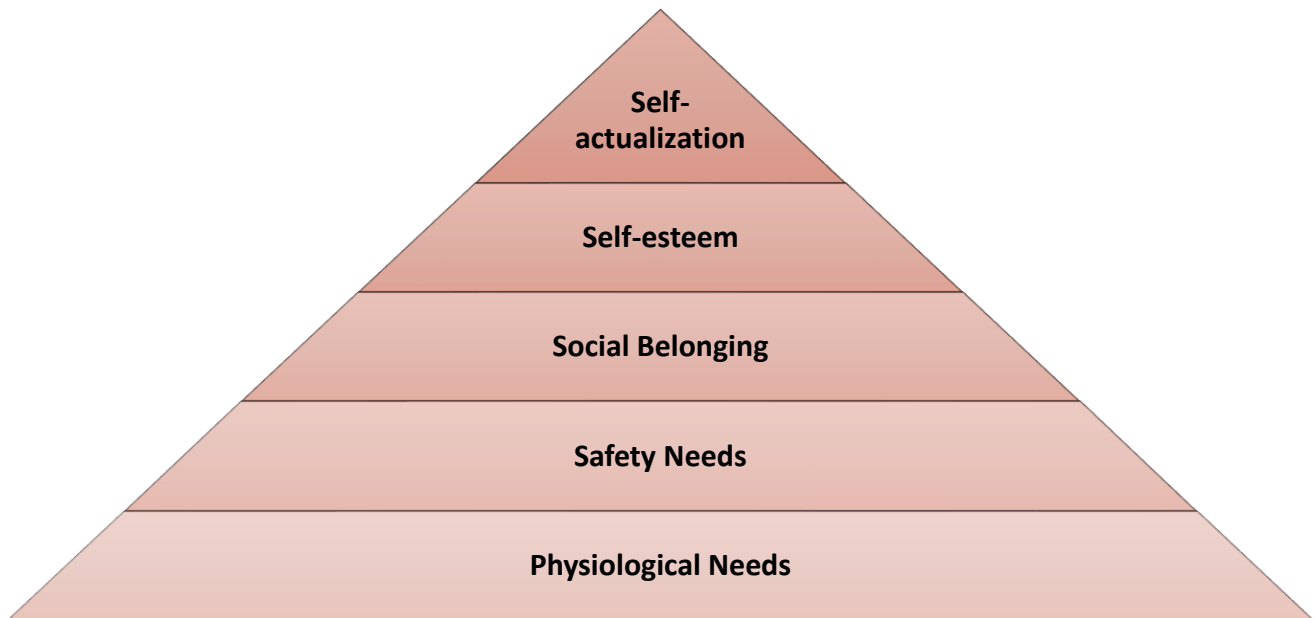


Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – translated from Hansen 2014, p. 21

Maslow's model (Fig. 1) depicts the hierarchical nature of our needs and how the lower levels of needs must be covered for us to start tending to the needs illustrated in the upper part of the model. The basic physiological needs for sustenance, protection from exposure and general safety need no further explanation. The interesting parts, and the parts pertaining to the problem statement of this thesis, are the needs placed in the upper section of the model. The reason for this is that, in the modern world, customer purchases are no longer as necessitated by the more basic needs that concern physiology and safety.

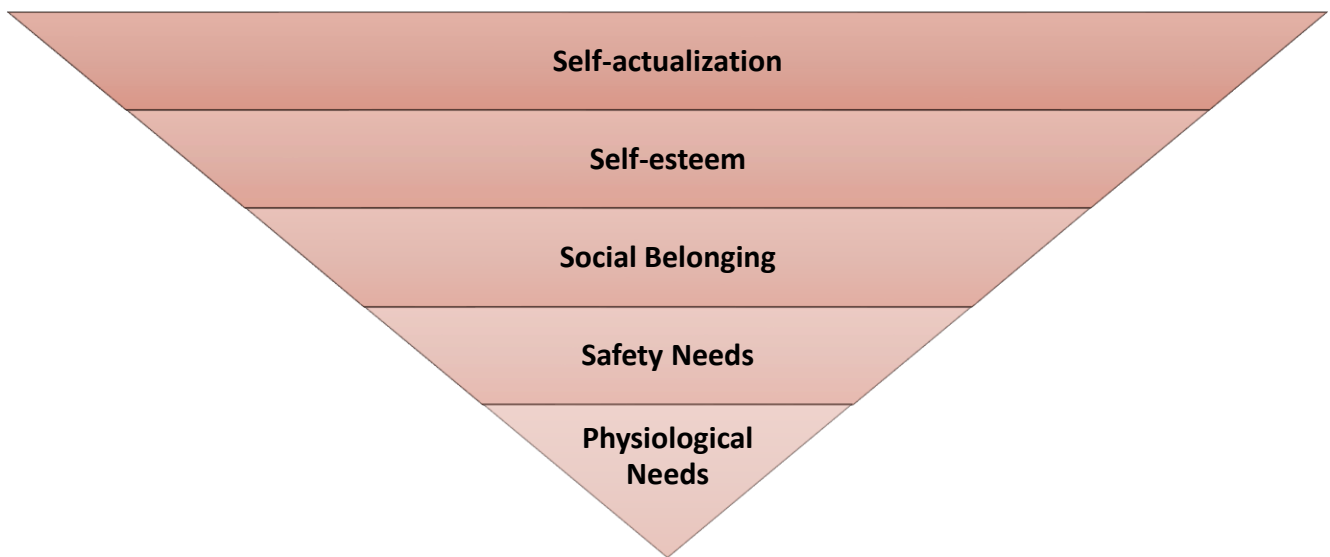


Figure 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (flipped) – translated from Hansen 2014 p. 22

The reasons for many modern-day consumer purchases lie instead in how well they cover needs of social, egotistical and self-realizing nature. Because of this, it can be argued that the pyramid model should be flipped to better reflect a modern reality (Fig. 2). Modern consumers are more concerned with their psychological well-being and strive to attain prosperity through their product purchases and company endorsements. Consumers utilize brands as symbolic values of self-representation, and they signal their identity and values through their endorsement of products or even entire organizations (Hansen 2014, p. 22).

A separate need, that is not depicted in figure 1 & 2 but which is arguably also very relevant for this thesis, is the altruistic need. An observable tendency is that consumers are not only concerned with covering their own needs of self-esteem and self-actualization, but also put emphasis on the morals of the production process of products and how the company signals virtues that are beneficial to the broader community (Hansen 2014, p. 22-23). This altruistic need is strongly connected with CSR which will be further elaborated upon in the following CSR theory section.

When consumers purchase products, they often do it because of the added value the products represent, and not because of the inherent functionality of said product. It can be argued, that that this phenomenon is the essence of branding. In other words, it is about creating coveted social constructs surrounding your product or organization which represent uniqueness that can positively differentiate the products or organization from that of competitors. A brand can contain a form of personality which is represented by the means of symbols and imagery, and through these a brand can provide emotional benefits that covers consumer needs (social belonging, self-esteem, self-actualization and altruism) (Hansen 2014, p. 24).

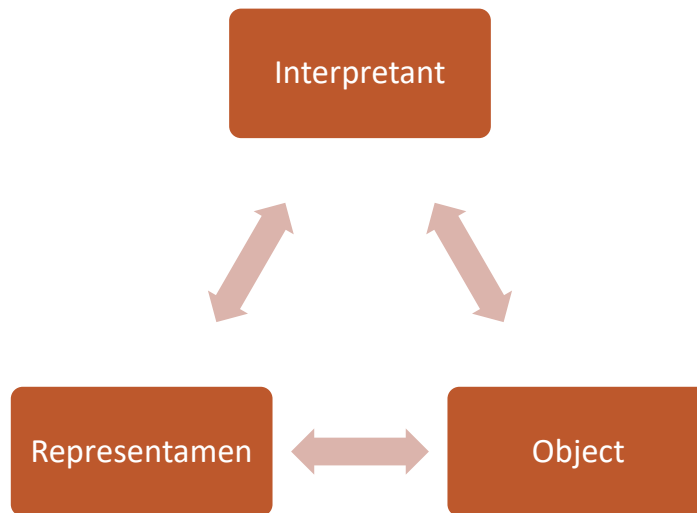


Figure 3: C. S. Peirce's triadic model of semiotics – translated from Hansen 2014, p. 27

In order to better perceive a brand and the dynamics of a brand, it is helpful to regard it as a sign. To conceptualize this, it is relevant to include the thoughts of theoretician/semiotician C. S. Peirce portrayed in his triadic model of semiotics. He viewed the sign of brands as a process in which the sign is in dynamic relation between the sign itself (representamen), the object and the interpretant (Fig. 3). The object is what is being communicated about, usually a product. The representamen is the sign that represents the object, which could be a logo. The interpretant is the mental image created in the mind of the recipient when introduced to the representamen. Figure 3 depicts how the interpretant is not solely a product of either the object nor the representamen, but rather how the relation between the representamen and the object defines the interpretant. Concisely, the decoding happens through a dynamic interplay between the object, representamen and interpretant. As mentioned, the interpretant is produced in the relation between the representamen and the object. The decoding of this relation is widely dependent upon who observes it. Factors such as the knowledge of a company or product which the observer already possess and other preliminary assumptions, dictate that every individual form their own unique interpretant (Hansen 2014, p. 27-32). Alternatively, this can be translated into how individuals create different meanings of signs through different social constructs. The interplay between the object, representamen and interpretant are thus components that shape the reality of the product or organization.

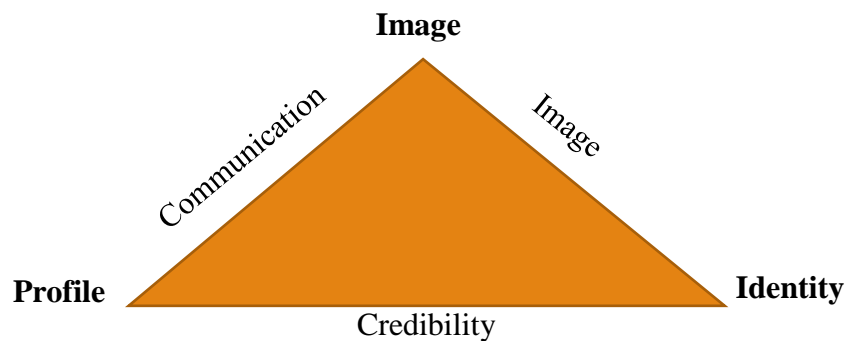


Figure 4: The Image Triangle – translated from Bordum & Hansen 2005, p. 360

For the purpose of this thesis, it is relevant that the theory of semiotics as described above be translated in order to observe an organization like ASOS as a semiotic sign. Bordum & Hansen

(2005) discerns the triadic elements of semiotics in order to apply it to an organization (Fig 4). In their translation, the object becomes the organization which is translated as the identity. The identity is the organization as it is in “objective reality”. It includes the products, services and the behavior of internal stakeholders and is therefore descriptive of the organizational culture and values. The representamen is what represents the organization and is translated as the profile. The profile represents the way the organization projects itself to the public, mainly through external communication. The interpretant is the publicly adopted view of the organization and how the organization’s communication affects stakeholders. In the Image Triangle, this is translated into the image of the organization (Bordum & Hansen 2005, p. 360).

As was the case with the triadic model of semiotics (Fig. 3), both the profile and identity produce and affect the image of the organization. The public view is not only dependent on the organization’s conscious external communication efforts, but also on concrete experiences that individuals have in terms of products, services and interaction with employees. For an organization to have an effective branding strategy, there must be a certain degree of compliance between the organization’s profile, identity and image. Concisely, the company profile must truthfully depict the company identity. Additionally, the external communication (profile) must be decoded as it was intended, and the image that is created through the company profile must be confirmed when stakeholders are faced with the identity of the organization (Bordum & Hansen 2005, p. 360). A failure to create this compliance between the semiotic elements will result in what Bordum & Hansen (2005) define as “gaps” (see Fig. 4). For example, if there are inconsistencies between an organization’s profile and image, a communicative gap will form. In such a case, the organization has failed in designing the external communication in a way that speaks to the recipient, or the recipient is unable to decipher the communication as intended. Likewise, an image gap will form if there are inconsistencies between the organization’s image and identity. In such cases, the public experiences of the organization do not meet the standards that were expected (standards that might have been created by the organization’s profile). Lastly, there must also be consistencies between the profile and identity of the organization. If there isn’t, a credibility gap will form. An example of this could be when an organization states something

about itself that is inconsistent as compared what it is or does. This will lead to stakeholders regarding the organization as untrustworthy (Bordum & Hansen 2005, p. 361).

3.2.2.1 *Celebrity branding*

An interesting part of branding initiatives that has become more prevalent in modern times is in incorporating celebrities in company branding efforts. When companies use celebrities in their marketing communication, they often do it because celebrities arguably have a propensity to create awareness and can also permeate the “noise” of competitive media advertisement. Communication efforts which utilize celebrities effectively incorporate the business of which the given celebrity has stardom. Additionally, it also borrows the ethos of the celebrity, and he/she becomes a stamp of quality. It can also be argued that many individuals, either consciously or subconsciously, aspire to become like specific celebrities. A way that many individuals believe they can get closer to becoming like their adorned celebrity is by purchasing products from an organization which feature the celebrity in their marketing communication. Although this may seem illogical to some, it is a generally observable phenomenon that celebrities add value to the brand they endorse (Hansen 2014, p. 171-172). Celebrity branding in relation to this thesis is further elaborated upon in the empirical data section.

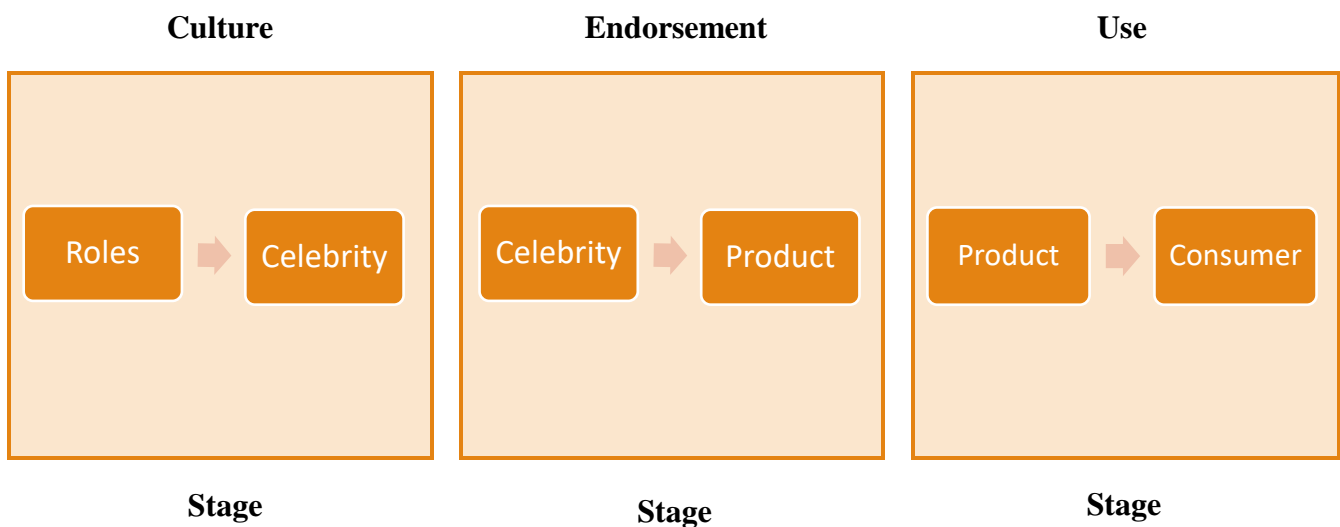


Figure 5: The Meaning-Transfer Model – translated from McCracken 1989, p. 315

A good way to conceptualize how a celebrity can transfer a part of their brand value to an organization is to observe McCracken's Meaning-Transfer Model (Fig. 5). In this model, McCracken shows three stages describing how celebrity endorsement can influence consumer decisions.

In the first stage, you look at the celebrity and the popular culture of which the celebrity can be considered a member. This is important, as a celebrity rarely has intrinsic value in him- or herself, but rather, the value stems from the role of which the celebrity is famous for. The consumer doesn't know the celebrity privately, but it is the roles that the celebrity plays in society that is definitive for what values are constructed around that celebrity and, as such, also the ethos of the celebrity. "When the celebrity brings these meanings into an ad, they are, in a sense, merely passing along meanings with which they have been charged by another meaning transfer process" (McCracken 1989, p. 315). Companies that wish to use celebrity endorsement in their marketing efforts should be cautious of the roles that the consumer segment attaches to a given celebrity. Casting a celebrity with connected roles that are not applicable or otherwise undesirable may leave the recipient confused, and if the connected roles of a given celebrity are unlikable, the value transmitted in the endorsement process will also be unlikable (Hansen 2014, p. 172-173).

The second stage depicts the next step in meaning transfer, and it is concerned with the transmission of the celebrity values, as identified in the first stage, into the organization. This link is created through communication efforts in which the celebrity is presented in connection with the organization itself or their products. These mostly take shape of advertisements, sponsorships or testimonials. When using a celebrity for commercial and/or branding purposes, it is important that there is a natural connection between the two. Otherwise, it is more likely that a credibility gap will occur (see Fig. 4). Concisely, it is through the communication, which should believably and relevantly link the celebrity and his/her affiliated popular culture, that an organization can receive greater brand value (Hansen 2014, p. 177).

The third and final stage of the transfer completes the process and it is when the consumer makes claim to the values and meanings conveyed by use of the celebrity through product/service purchase. For this to occur, it is important that the consumer identifies the values and meanings conveyed as being positive or that the consumer would want to aspire to be like the celebrity. If this is the case, then the consumer would align themselves for the purpose of specifically covering the needs of self-esteem and self-actualization (see Fig. 2) (Hansen 2014, p. 177).

3.2.3 CSR

There are multiple definitions of CSR, but broadly it can be perceived as the relationship between corporations, government and individuals. This most often includes elements such as environmental responsibility and social responsibilities such as inclusiveness and diversity. For the purpose of constancy, presented CSR theory in this section is based on the definition of CSR as stated by the EU Commission: “CSR is the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society.” The need for CSR in modern times can be viewed as a contested topic, but it is observable how many companies now focus on CSR in their communication. CSR has also become a legislative matter in some countries (including Denmark) wherein larger companies must include a mandatory CSR section in their annual reports.

Crowther & Aras (2008) argue that in order to be able to identify CSR activities it is necessary to take the view that there are three principles of CSR which together encompasses CSR activity. The three principles of CSR are sustainability, accountability and transparency (Crowther & Aras 2008, p. 14). These three principles will be the focal point in the following elaborations of the CSR concept as all three principles are relevant in regard to approaching the problem statement and, partly, the subordinate statements of this thesis.

The actions undertaken by companies will in many cases not only affect the company itself and the stakeholders, but also affect the external environment in the geographical area of business operations. “In considering the effect of the organization upon its external environment it must be recognized that this environment includes both the business environment in which the firm is

operating, the local societal environment in which the organization is located and the wider global environment” (Crowther & Aras 2008, p. 13). The causal effects of a company’s business operations can be in the use of natural resources in a production process, the effects of competition, the creation of employment opportunities, the personal wealth creation and welfare through wages and dividends and also in climate change. Summarized, the effects of companies’ operations can influence both the environment but also sociological parameters.

Several aspects of CSR have seen increased prominence because it has become an increasing concern that companies have poor business behavior towards customers, unfair treatment of employees and are ignoring potential environmental consequences (Crowther & Aras 2008, p. 19). One of the most pronounced issues is pertaining to climate change and global warming. It is not uncommon for customers to raise questions of greenhouse gas emissions and carbon footprints in company operations, putting emphasis on the necessity for companies to address and disclose this to stakeholders. Crowther & Aras (2008) argue that the principle of sustainability is at its most prominent in present times. It has become important for businesses, and many businesses either have, or claim to have, a sustainability plan. Sustainability has had different definitions over time, but these all have impetus in the Brundtland Report (Our Common Future). The core concept of this report is the premise that “if resources are utilized in the present then they are no longer available for use in the future” (Crowther & Aras 2008, p. 41). As mentioned previously, an increasing number of companies use CSR reporting in their business strategy, particularly sustainability. This is arguably because sustainability, for many companies, has been redefined as simply implying continuity of the existence of a company. For this reason, companies are more compelled to showcase sustainability in their value chain because it insinuates long term survivability of these companies. This in turn makes it more financially approachable in terms of investment opportunities. This has indicated a shift from sustainability being an altruistic concept, to instead becoming a tool to secure investments because it reflects company longevity (Crowther & Aras 2008, p. 43-46). It is arguably difficult to discern whether a company reports on sustainability for the reason of gratifying potential investors, gratifying customers or for a sincere altruistic reason.

Another important issue which is also highly pronounced is the concern with the supply chain of companies and this has to do with the accountability and transparency of companies. Consumers are paying more attention to the transparency of supply chains spanning numerous countries, with particular interest in whether or not there is social exploitation in developing countries – for example child labor and “sweat shops”. Most consumers will not accept companies stating that the conditions under which their suppliers operate is not within their control, and consumers generally expect a greater level of accountability. An interesting aspect of this is that companies that have admitted problems of either their carbon footprint or social exploitation often experience a following rise in popularity as they take steps to correct these problems. By doing this, the company showcases their honesty and infer that the consumers are reasonable in their demands for correction (Crowther & Aras 2008, p. 19-20).

It is relevant to connect the concept of CSR to branding regarding customer perceptions of companies. In present times, the societal responsibility of companies is often being challenged by consumers, as is the eligibility of companies’ conduct across the value chain. Company responses of the use of their products and the creating of job positions is no longer adequate in terms of communicating CSR (Hansen 2014, p. 105). Companies can now be held ethically responsible to a greater extent because stakeholders increasingly see actions and conduct throughout the value chain as being transferrable to the company. Concisely, the brand of a company is now expected to cover the whole value chain, which includes the conduct of collaborators and subcontractors. Following this, it can be argued that there is no longer an asymmetrical relationship between the company and the stakeholders in which the company. Rather, the relationship has become symmetrical in the sense that the relation between the parties is in focus, and stakeholders now expect companies to be able to defend their legitimacy (Hansen 2014, p. 105).

An interesting observation related to branding through CSR is presented by Junge (2004). He describes the CSR development as a transition from the functional paradigm, in which consumers were rational and had major focus on the functionality of products, to an emotional paradigm, in which products are no longer purchased for the functionality but also because of the emotional benefits they entail. In order to relate this to the previous branding section, it can be argued that

these emotional benefits are related to the concept of altruism and are also part of the needs of self-esteem and self-actualization as described in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (see Fig. 2). It can be argued that CSR is highly relevant in connection with corporate branding as it can create unison for stakeholders (Hansen 2014, p. 106-107). In other words, defining a company brand through CSR conduct creates a common goal for stakeholders to agree upon.

It should also be noted that there is a paradoxical risk connected with communicating CSR to stakeholders. This has to do with a tendency in which the companies who communicate the most about their CSR and societal responsibilities are also the companies who receive the most critical attention. An observable view of consumers is that if a company exerts a strong need to communicate their positive initiatives, they may also have a need of concealing different aspects of their organization (Hansen 2014, p. 107). Concisely, the paradox is that increased CSR communication efforts denotes that the company is hiding something. Junge (2004) also points to a separate challenging issue concerning CSR communication which is that reality is too complicated for companies to effectively communicate. An example of this is that the arguably privileged West consider child labor as being exclusively bad, whereas in especially developing countries, labor can be seen as an attractive alternative to prostitution. Companies should therefore identify which parts of the CSR efforts are suitable for communication. By doing this differentiation and simplifying CSR communication, companies will be able to better combine marketing, branding and corporate communication by means of CSR (Hansen 2014, p. 107).

4 Analytical part

4.1 Empirical Data



This section of the thesis will firstly present a company profile of ASOS. Subsequently, this section will account for the empirical data that was collected for the purpose of analysis. In order to most effectively approach the chosen problem statement and subordinate statements, the empirical data collection included gathering two sources of primary data as well as empirical observations as a secondary data set. The gathered secondary and primary data was chosen because of the reasoning of **direct observation and systematic interviewing** as described previously (Yin, 2009 p. 8). As mentioned, these different sources of data will be accounted for and, importantly, this section will also describe the reasons for the legitimacy of this data in relation to the chosen problem statement and subordinate statements. The primary data consists of in-depth qualitative interviews with six users who have frequented various ASOS social media channels and website and who have previously purchased products online through the ASOS online web shop. Furthermore, a separate set of primary data consists of a large-scale quantitative survey (95 respondents) shared on Facebook through Survey-Xact, in which respondents answer predefined questions pertaining to the general usage of corporate social media websites. Lastly, a separate secondary data source consists of empirical observations from ASOS social media websites, ASOS' own website as well as the ASOS annual report from 2018.

4.1.1 Company Profile

This section will briefly describe the company profile of ASOS in order to provide the reader with information about the case company to better understand the framework from which the problem statements, theory and empirical data were chosen.

ASOS plc is a British online fashion retailer founded on June 3rd, 2000 in London. As mentioned in the introduction, ASOS' marketing and products are mostly aimed at young adults (particularly members of the Gen Z segment). Currently, the online web shop sells over 850 independent brands and also sells from their own range of clothing and accessories. From their fulfillment centers location in the UK, US and Europe, ASOS ships their products to over 200 countries globally (www.asos.com). In total, ASOS sells over 85,000 branded and own-label products through their online stores. ASOS offers a wide array of clothing lines spanning woman's wear, men's wear, footwear, accessories, jewelry and beauty collections. Their own-label collection includes the women's collections ASOS Curve, ASOS Maternity, ASOS Tall and ASOS Petite. ASOS caters a broad range of customer segments and sizes, across all categories and price points. Additionally, ASOS operates country-specific websites in Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Russia and the US (www.reuters.com). In 2018 the number of active customers in the EU market outpaced the number in ASOS' home UK market for the first time (ASOS Annual Report 2018, p. 2). They currently have 18.4 million active customers and over 22 million social media followers spread across their social media websites (ASOS Annual Report 2018, p. 7).

4.1.2 Customer segment

A relevant part of the empirical data is observing and mapping the customer segment of ASOS. As mentioned in the Problem Field section, ASOS' main customer segment is the youthful Gen Z members. By means of data reports from retail analysts (www.stylus.com, cassandra.co, www.accenture.com), ASOS has included statistics in their Annual Report 2018 concerning Gen Z customer behavior. In these statistics it is described how:

- 60% of Gen Z would prefer to buy a product over an experience – but only if it aligns with their values and has positive civic impact.
- 46% of Gen Z said they would spend more on a sustainable product, and 31% have boycotted a brand for unsustainable practices.
- 85% of Gen Z would have more trust in a brand that supported a social cause.
- 86% of UK Gen Zs believe tech makes their life better.
- 40% of Gen Z shoppers (versus 35% Millennials) regularly provide feedback online, most popular method being on retail websites.
- 67% of global Gen Zs claim that being true to their beliefs is what makes a person ultimately cool.

(ASOS Annual Report 2018, p. 3)

It can be argued, that it is due to the “internet literacy” of the Gen Z customer segment of ASOS, that the company has been able to procure an enormous internet following on their social media websites. As per September 2018, their social media following is 5.9m on Facebook, 1.3m on Twitter, and a convincing 10.4m on Instagram (ASOS Annual Report 2018, p. 15). ASOS has arguably done well in terms of identifying the traits of their Gen Z customer segment. Traits that identify the Gen Z customer segment are a strong focus on responsibility, inclusivity and diversity. It is probably due to these traits identified in their main customer segment that ASOS has implemented initiatives that speaks directly to such customer focus. A further elaboration of the most prominent ASOS initiatives within the secondary data pertaining to responsibility, inclusivity and diversity along with CSR will be presented in a later part of this section.

4.1.3 Primary Data

In this part of the empirical data section, the gathered primary data will be accounted for. The primary data consist of two sources, namely a quantitative Facebook survey and also qualitative in-depth interviews with ASOS users/customers. In reference to Yin 2009, these two data sources can be classified as being **direct observation and systematic interviewing**. The knowledge supplied by the primary data sets will assist in approaching the chosen problem statement and

subordinate statements. Following this is a presentation of the two data sets with elaborations on how they will be utilized in this thesis.

4.1.4 Facebook Survey

This section will detail the Facebook survey (see Appendix 7.1). The survey was included primarily in order to map the customer segment relevant to online fashion retailers such as ASOS, but also to observe their online fashion shopping habits. This data will assist in approaching the third subordinate problem statement (SS3), which concerns beneficial correlations between social media usage and the relevant customer segment. This survey is presumed to have a majority of Danish respondents. For this reason, it is only descriptive of the stances of Danes. Despite this, it can be argued that the data is still indicative of an international behavioral trend which is grounded in the values of the Western world. The questionnaire survey was distributed in Survey-Xact through Facebook. It consists of 95 respondents, in which the largest part (70 respondents) belong to the age group 16-35 years old.

Since this survey was shared exclusively on the social media website Facebook, this does indicate that it is primarily the younger segments (including Gen Z) who spend most time online on social media. This is also congruent with what secondary data from Digital Information World suggests (Salim, S. 2019 - How much time to you spend on social media? Research says 142 minutes per day). The remaining respondents are spread over the age categories 36-65 years old with two respondents being below 16 years old. In the survey there is slightly more female respondents than males, with 62% of respondents being female (38% male) (see Appendix 7.1.1).

4.1.5 Survey findings

The majority of the respondents in age category 16-25 years old are currently students. Around 50% of the respondents in the age category 26-35 years old are also students with the remaining 50% being employed. The final respondents in the age group 36-65 years old are almost all employed (see Appendix 7.1.2).

The largest segment of respondents (38%) claim to spend around two hours a day on various social media websites. Around 35% spend around 1 hour or less. Around 27% claim to spend 3 hours or above on social media websites each day (see Appendix 7.1.3).

The largest part of the respondents in the age category 46-65 years old claim to spend 1 hour or less on social media websites each day. In the younger age categories 16-45 years old the results are much more varied, but there is a clear tendency which suggests that the younger segment spend far more time online, especially in the age category 16-35 years old (see Appendix 7.1.4). Although it may seem like many hours spent, it can be argued that the number of hours spent daily on social media websites are higher than what this survey, and secondary surveys, suggest. We use our smartphones more and more and many individuals may not even come close to realizing how much time they actually spend online. A British study showcased in The Telegraph (Hymas, C. 2018 - A decade of smartphones: We now spend an entire day every week online) shows that people in England are so addicted to using their smartphones for online activity that they check it once every 12th minute. The same study also shows that the average brit spends 24 hours a week online, whereas the 16-24-year-olds spend the most time online, approximately 34,3 hours a week online. This translates to 3.5 and 5 hours a day, respectively.

According to the survey, the most important part for the respondents when following fashion brands on social media is online shopping, fashion inspiration and sales, specials and coupons. Following this is endorsing responsible initiatives, information search and rating of products/service. Communication/discussion with other users was the least important factor (see Appendix 7.1.5).

From the age categories 36-65 years old, the majority of respondents have claimed that they “sometimes” or “not so often” shop from fashion brands that they follow on social media websites. Around a third of the respondents in the age group 16-35 years old claim that they often shop from fashion brands which they follow on social media websites. Around half of the respondents in this age group do it “sometimes” or “not so often”. The remainder either never shops from fashion brands online or doesn’t actually follow any fashion brand on social media

(see Appendix 7.1.6). However, there is a clear tendency in the survey where people who follow fashion brands on social media have a much greater tendency to actually shop from the fashion brand(s) that they follow. This is particularly true for respondents in the younger age categories (see Appendix 7.1.7).

Furthermore, the majority have answered that they “sometimes” or “often” receive information concerning sales, specials or coupons from fashion brands they follow online. The majority also claim that they “sometimes” make use of the sales, specials or coupons that they receive from those fashion brands. In the survey there is a visible correlation between how often individuals receive information concerning sales, specials or coupons and how often individuals utilize these (see Appendix 7.1.8).

More than half of the respondents have answered that they are more likely to endorse a fashion brand which expresses social responsibility (sustainability, social accountability, supply chain transparency) (see Appendix 7.1.9).

4.1.6 In-depth interviews

This section will describe the in-depth, qualitative interviews that were conducted with six respondents who are past ASOS customers and who currently follow ASOS on various social media channels. The respondent base consists of fellow students from Copenhagen Business School and people known privately, who have all declared being customers of ASOS and who are following ASOS on social media channels. The respondents are almost all native Danes, but also include one international student from Italy. For this reason, most of the interviews were conducted in Danish, and then transcribed to English for the purpose of the consistency of this thesis. The transcribed interviews can be found in the appendix section (Appendix 7.2).

Additionally, the respondents are all between 21-27 years old and can therefore be placed in the Gen Z age category. The respondents are mostly female, with only one respondent being male. These interviews are primarily included for the purpose of approaching the problem statement and subordinate statements and also to procure knowledge of how ASOS’ social media

communication actually affects its subjects. These qualitative interviews were conducted based on guidelines adopted from the works by Ritchie & Lewis (2003).

The form of these interviews can be classified as being semi-structured. The reason that the questions posed in the interviews are not fully structured is that this case study is arguably explorative in nature. Slightly allowing the respondents to move beyond a set interview structure may provide observations that are relevant to the study despite not being directly related to one or more structured interview questions (Ritchie & Lewis 2003, p. 111). This way of conducting a qualitative interview is arguably also relevant in the scope of social constructivism. By having the form of a conversation with a purpose, a semi-structured interview will reproduce the process through which knowledge about the social world is constructed in normal human interaction (Ritchie & Lewis, p. 138). Practically, this means that the interviewer may pick up on relevant topics that are not part of the preestablished interview structure and allow conversation to diverge if deemed relevant to the case study.

4.1.7 Interview findings

The respondents have been customers with ASOS between three to ten years, most of which have been customers between three and five years. Most of the respondents claim that they primarily follow ASOS on Instagram and Facebook. A couple of the respondents also mention the social media channel Twitter, with one respondent claiming that he is not very active on Twitter and another claiming that she has deleted her Twitter account. A number of the respondents detailed how they follow ASOS for fashion inspiration, and several described how they like observing what other users comment on ASOS' social media posts. One respondent mentioned how she appreciates seeing ASOS sharing authentic pictures of ordinary people wearing the clothes, as she can then get a more realistic view of how the clothes fit in reality. Another respondent stated: “but I like when ASOS and other brands shares outfits that other users have shared. Because it gives me a better idea of how the clothing fits in real life, rather than when they share some edited model picture” (Respondent #4). The same respondent also mentioned ASOS' recent photo

editing blunder, in which clamps that made the clothes fit perfectly were still visible in the photo and had not been edited out.

Several respondents claim that they previously have been engaging on ASOS' social media channels by use of the hashtag #AsSeenOnMe among others. Some respondents are more passive in terms of engagement. One respondent tells how she may be passive on Instagram but would not hesitate to pose questions to ASOS about products and delivery. One respondent mentions that she has used the hashtag #AsSeenOnMe and have subsequently been featured on the ASOS Instagram page. Most respondents were positive in terms of CSR initiatives in general, however it was observable in the interviews how many respondents agree that companies on social media overuse their CSR exposure. "I think many companies do it. It's funny because I think a few started doing it more than others to differentiate themselves. Then, everyone caught on and now it's nothing special anymore" (Respondent #6). The respondents were also mostly appreciative of ASOS' use of celebrity endorsement in their social media communication, to which one respondent states: "I think it's a great idea for any company to use celebrities like actors and musicians. I know that many of my friends would seriously buy a product just because they have seen some kind of commercial with a celebrity who uses that product" (Respondent #2), and another stating that: "I'm really into keeping up with various celebrities, and many of my friends feel the same way" (Respondent #4).

4.1.8 Secondary data – empirical observations

Following the description of ASOS and the relevant customer segment is a selection of relevant secondary data in the form of empirical observations concerning ASOS' initiatives. These initiatives are #AsSeenOnMe, ASOS Meets and the ASOS sustainable sourcing program. The legitimacy of the ASOS initiatives with regard to this thesis lie in their strong connection with user engagement, branding and celebrity endorsement and also CSR. Additionally, an interesting article from McKinsey & Company (Francis, T. & Hoefel, F. 2018. "True Gen": Generation Z and its implications for companies) describe the importance of communicating altruistic initiatives to the Gen Z segment. This importance is also reflected in the statistics of ASOS' customer segment

from their annual report as shown above. Understanding ASOS' concrete use of these tools in their marketing communication will allow approaching the problem statement and subordinate statements of this thesis. Much of the following observations concerning ASOS' initiatives are sourced from their websites (www.asosplc.com & www.asos.com). These observations display a focus on user engagement, celebrity endorsement, sustainability, social accountability and transparency. These portrayed values are also highly visible on ASOS' various social media channels and there is a strong congruency between what values they portray on their websites and the posts on the social media websites.

4.1.9 ASOS #AsSeenOnMe

It can be argued, that one of the ways that enabled ASOS to gain such a massive following is through User Generated Content (UGC), which encompassed engagement strategies as described in the social media theory section of this thesis. The hashtag “#AsSeenOnMe is an initiative by ASOS which utilizes customer engagement on the social media websites Instagram and Twitter. ASOS has declared Instagram as their most important social media website for engaging with their customers because it has around 400 million users with 90% of them being under the age of 35. By means of introducing #AsSeenOnMe, ASOS combines peer-to-peer styling advice and street style in order to convey fashion inspiration to their customers. “Customers use the tag to show off their ASOS buys on Instagram or can go further by uploading a picture to our site, linking to the actual products they're wearing so other customers can get the look. It's a way for people to show off their creativity and styling nous while helping other customers edit the site and shop for themselves.” (www.asosplc.com). #AsSeenOnMe has amassed a large following on Instagram with a large customer engagement. Notable empirical observations of the hashtag in use on Instagram are included in the appendix section (Appendix 7.6).

4.1.10 ASOS Meets

ASOS Meets is a category of videos uploaded to ASOS' YouTube channels. ASOS uploads videos regularly on their YouTube channels “ASOS”, “ASOSOfficial” and the country specific YouTube channels ASOS France, and ASOS Deutschland. Combined, these YouTube channels

have 59,855,941 views (number of times the videos were watched) and 356,413 subscribers (number of individuals who receive notifications when new videos are uploaded). Many of these videos are featuring styling tips of various sorts, statements about inclusivity and CSR and some uploaded videos are part of the ASOS Meets initiative. In the ASOS Meets videos, ASOS conducts short interviews with many different celebrities. These videos often concern styling and fashion and incorporates cover shoots with the celebrities for the ASOS magazine. The ASOS Meets videos on YouTube and the use of celebrities on the cover of the ASOS magazine, plays well into the framing theory of branding and, more specifically, celebrity endorsement as accounted for in the previous theory section. Links to a sample of celebrity endorsing YouTube videos are provided in the appendix section. The videos in the appendix are a relatively small sample, as ASOS has compiled their ASOS Meets videos in a playlist with 117 different videos featuring celebrities (ASOS channel on YouTube – see Appendix 7.7.2).

4.1.11 CSR – Sustainability

A focus area of ASOS' communication is their approach to environmental responsibility and waste compliance. "By making a commitment to 'closing the loop', we are acknowledging the importance of decoupling carbon emissions from business growth, and also reducing waste by reusing materials instead of relying on virgin materials" (Nick Beighton, ASOS CEO on www.asosplc.com). Through an environmental policy, ASOS states that they pay strong attention to managing the waste generated from their business operations. Much of their content on their website specifically concerns their positive stance on environmental responsibility in addition to their content on their social media channels. As such, they report widely on their efforts to reduce the amount of packaging produced as well as how much of their packaging materials are recycled (www.asos.com).

As mentioned in the previous CSR theory section, companies in many countries are legally obligated to include CSR in their annual reports. However, based on the empirical observations of ASOS' online communication, they have a very strong focus on conveying massive amounts of information concerning their approach to environmental sustainability which strongly surpasses

their legal obligations. This is both visible on their own websites and on their social media websites. Samples of social media communication focusing on environmental sustainability can be found in the appendix section (see Appendix 7.4). Arguably, the main reason for this strong emphasis on communication their efforts within environmental sustainability and other CSR parameters is to brand themselves effectively with regard to their Gen Z customer segment.

4.1.12 CSR – Accountability

A separate parameter of CSR arguably concerns ASOS' social accountability, particularly their communicated stance on inclusion and diversity. A strong focus of their online communication concerns how ASOS are committed to establishing a culture of inclusivity. Many of these communication efforts are strictly aimed at signaling virtues of acceptance and tolerance of disabled people, people of color, and people within the LGBTQ+ community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer and more) and others. Their efforts to signal accountability through inclusion and diversity is also apparent in their partnerships with the British Paralympic Association, the Leonard Cheshire's Change 100 program (work placement and mentoring for students with disabilities), GLAAD (LGBTQ+ media advocacy organization) and Diversity Champions program (Europe's largest LGBTQ+ charity). Additionally, ASOS also signals their support for the empowerment of women by signing the UN Women's Empowerment Principles as well as contributing to the UN Women's #drawaline campaign to end violence against women and girls (www.asosplc.com). This strong involvement in social inclusion is arguably very enticing to the Gen Z customer segment, and ASOS likely benefits greatly from communicating this involvement with regard to their company branding. ASOS produces many posts having to do with social accountability on their various social media websites. A sample of some of these posts can be found in the appendix section (see Appendix 7.5).

4.1.13 CSR – Transparency

Another interesting aspect of ASOS' communication has to do with their supply chain transparency. As was the case with sustainability and accountability, ASOS has a strong online communication about their supply chain through their stated commitment to ethical trade. In their

online communication they adopt the responsibility of the well-being of every worker in their supply chain. “Our ethical trade strategy sets out our vision for empowering workers to protect their rights and improve their working conditions. Our ambition is to find long-term solutions to address the key human rights challenges in the garment supply chain through meaningful collaboration” (Alice Strevens, ASOS Head of Ethical Trade on www.asosplc.com). In their online communication they stress the importance of addressing issues such as supply chain visibility, customer transparency, worker empowerment and access to remedy, worker wages, modern slavery and child labor. Their supply chain’s visibility and transparency are also the theme of a numerous amount of ASOS posts on their social media channels. A selection of some of these can be found in the appendix section (see Appendix 7.4). Stressing the importance of a transparent supply chain with focus on ethical trade in their communication, ASOS arguably caters well to the Gen Z customer segment.

4.2 Analysis

This section contains the analysis of ASOS’ social media communication. In order to support the previously described theory of social media, branding and CSR, the empirical data will be applied in congruence with the relevant presented theory to address the subordinate statements presented in the Problem Statement section of this thesis. In order to do this, the analysis section will be divided into three sub-analyses pertaining to each of the chosen subordinate problem statements.

4.2.1 Data and Theory implementation

The first sub-analysis will concern the correlation between the identified focus customer segment and corporate social media usage in order to approach the first subordinate problem statement (SS1). This will mainly be done by incorporating the data from the quantitative Facebook survey (Appendix 7.1). It can be argued, that the survey data conveys important knowledge of how ASOS’ targeted social media communication aligns with the Gen Z customer segment and their traits. In addition to the application of Facebook survey data, parts of the social media theory will also be applied when approaching the first subordinate statement.

The second sub-analysis involves delving into how ASOS uses social media communication efforts in a more general perspective. Concisely, the second sub-analysis will approach the second subordinate problem statement (SS2). This will be done by using the collected secondary data in the form of empirical observations retrieved from the various social media channels through which ASOS distribute their content (see Appendix 7.3-7.8). Additionally, the second sub-analysis will also make use of the qualitative semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 7.2) in order to provide a more in-depth view of some of the aspects of ASOS' usage of social media platforms. The second sub-analysis will also depart from the social media theory and CSR theory.

The third and final sub-analysis concerns specifically how the branding efforts of ASOS are linked to what content they include on their social media channels and how they communicate it. Concretely, this sub-analysis will cover the third subordinate problem statement (SS3) and approach answering how ASOS' various initiatives on social media are beneficial in the scope of branding and image-building. The data used to approach SS3 will encompass both primary data sources as well as the secondary data of empirical observations as these are all inextricably connected in regard to how ASOS' social media usage is used to promote their brand. The described branding theory and CSR theory will be implemented in this sub-analysis.

Subsequently, after having accounted for the subordinate problem statements, the collective knowledge created through this initial analytical process will be applied to approach the chosen primary problem statement in the concluding part of this thesis.

4.2.2 SS1 Sub-analysis

The first sub-analysis will approach the subordinate problem statement **“Is there beneficial correlation between the focus customer segment and social media usage”** (SS1). This subordinate problem statement seeks to disclose whether or not young people are extraordinarily relevant in terms of social media usage in general, and it will also be used to understand why this is. As previously stated, ASOS primarily focusses on potential customers belonging to the Gen Z

customer segment. As also mentioned in the customer segment part of the empirical data section, ASOS has presented percentile statistics which expresses how their identified Gen Z customer segment place great importance of values and positive civic impacts, sustainability and benefits to social causes. These statistics also convey how the Gen Z customer segment is comparably more likely than the Millennials segment to actually provide online feedback. Lastly, the statistic also shows that “being true to their beliefs is what makes a person ultimately cool”.

These insights presented by ASOS in their Annual Report of 2018 are arguably highly dictating in their online social media communication and arguably also in the actual use of social media platforms. Concisely, ASOS would probably not bother putting such excessive resources to use on their social media communication if it wasn't for the behavioral traits identifiable within the Gen Z customer segment. These behavioral traits are also showcased in the empirical data of the Facebook Survey (see Appendix 7.1). From analyzing the data set provided by the respondents, it can be deduced that there are indeed more young people (Gen Z segment) who use social media in general compared to the older age segments. This is apparent in the fact that the survey was shared exclusively through social media and had an obvious majority of respondents belonging to the Gen Z segment. It can be asserted that there is little doubt that the younger segments engage in social media more frequently. Additionally, the data from the survey also shows the daily number of hours spent on social media (see Appendix 7.1.3 & 7.1.4), which also speaks to the beneficial correlation between the relevant customer segment and ASOS' propensity to market themselves through social media platforms. It can be observed how 65% of all respondents spend 2 hours or more on social media. When crossed with the data concerning respondent's age and omitting the data from respondents belonging to an older age segment, it shows that young people in the age category “below 16 years” to 25 years have an exorbitant number of daily hours spent on social media compared to that of respondents above the age of 25. The primary data concerning age and daily hours spent on social media thus speaks for ASOS' focus customer segment in their social media usage and shows this beneficial correlation.

Additionally, it is relevant to understand how Gen Z segment members' tendency to more often supply online feedback and to generally be more participatory on the social media websites plays

into why ASOS would be furtherly incentivized to focus on their social media communication efforts. Data from the retail analysts, shown as percentile statistics in the ASOS Annual report 2018, showcased this tendency of participation and supplying of feedback. It can be observed how this is in accordance with Safko's argument of the corporate importance of making conversation happen on social media. This stands in strong connection to the fundamental need for audience engagement for successful social media content. If there is a higher propensity for engagement on social media in the form of feedback and participation, it is also sensible to assume that this indicates a beneficial correlation between the young Gen Z customer segment and ASOS' choice to have a strong focus on their social media efforts. Additionally, the fact that Gen Z members have a higher rate of online participation is also beneficial in relation to the concept of User Generated Content (UGC). As mentioned previously, Safko describes how inviting users to become co-contributors of online social media content can create greater awareness of the content. Having the Gen Z members be your primary customer focus segment, it is conceivably easier to reach beneficial levels of UGC from which the audience can come to feel like important stakeholders, thus simplifying the goal of inciting engagement through effective social media communication. Arguably, having considerable part young customers will allow ASOS to implement their engagement and UGC strategies as described in the social media theory section. Many of the observations having to do with ASOS' engagement strategies and UGC, and a further analysis of these, will be reserved for approaching the second subordinate statement in the follow part of this section.

By once again referring to the customer segment statistics, it is also relevant to observe another beneficial correlation achieved by focusing on the Gen Z members as your primary customer segment which is connected to CSR. It is stated how 60% of Gen Z members would prefer to buy a product if it aligns with their values and if it has a positive civic impact. It also states how 46% of them would spend more money if the product was sustainable, and 31% have even boycotted brands because they exhibited unsustainable practices. Lastly, 85% of Gen Z members would put more trust in a brand if it supported a social cause. This data is arguably the reason for ASOS' strong emphasis on CSR in their online communication. In order to approach the first subordinate statement, it can be conceived that there are also strong beneficial correlations between the Gen Z

customer segment and social media usage in this regard, because ASOS can easily express their CSR initiatives interactively on their social media websites, instead of having it statically expressed on their own website or through more traditional offline means. This is also enforced by the observations produced in the online survey. When respondents in the survey were asked if they were more likely to endorse a fashion brand which expresses CSR, a 64% majority voted yes. By coupling CSR content with a participating and engaging audience who places great importance on CSR, it can be argued that the effect hereof is furtherly enhanced.

Another part of the empirical data from the online survey also supports the notion that there is a beneficial correlation between the focus customer segment and ASOS' social media usage. On social media, audience members are able to subscribe to the content of various channels. This works slightly differently depending on which social media website is observed. On Facebook, this is done by "liking" content, on Instagram it is called "following", and on YouTube it is "subscribing". They all refer to the mechanic where content from channels which a user has subscribed to, receives greater priority on the user's feed and may also be recommended. Gaining a large following based on audience members subscribing to well-liked content is important to keep those members engaged and up to date on uploaded posts. The online survey also showed how the younger respondents belonging to Gen Z have a greater tendency to purchase products online from brands which they have subscribed to (see Appendix 7.1.7). This is arguably another parameter describing how ASOS' production and distribution of social media content synergizes well with the Gen Z customer focus.

Based on the considerations and observations of the general behavior of Gen Z members, on the percentile statistics from the ASOS annual report of 2018 and the online survey data, it can be concluded that there are several beneficial correlations between ASOS' focus customer segment and the corporate usage of social media platforms.

4.2.3 SS2 Sub-analysis

The second sub-analysis will seek to answer the subordinate problem statement “**How does ASOS utilize social media platforms in their communication efforts?**” (SS2). This analysis will seek to determine how ASOS utilizes social media communication on select various platforms in a more general perspective. For this purpose, this sub-analysis will include various data including examples from the secondary data sources of empirical observations from ASOS’ social media channels (see Appendix 7.3 – 7.8). These observations are indicative of how ASOS concretely uses different strategies in their social media communication. Furthermore, it is also relevant to include the knowledge created from the qualitative semi-structured interviews of the six respondents who are active customers of ASOS and who subscribe to ASOS’ social media content. Using these two data sources will assist in approaching the second subordinate statement effectively and provide useful insights. In relation to these two data sources, this sub-analysis will include the elements of social media theory and CSR theory to fully understand how ASOS utilizes the different possibilities and options presented by social media platforms. Although this particular subordinate statement also welcomes considerations of branding theory, these deliberations will be reserved for the final sub-analysis.

In hindsight of the first sub-analysis of the correlation between the Gen Z customer segment and social media usage, it can be observed that ASOS’ presence and efforts on the social media channels provide a wide array of benefits. These benefits are arguably achieved best through optimized levels of authenticity, transparency, immediacy and connectedness (Postman 2009), but also by incorporating engagement strategies in the social media communication (Safko 2009). In connection with this, it can also be argued that the specificities of the Gen Z customer segment demand much greater focus on the interactive relationship between ASOS and their customers through their participation by means of UGC. Furthermore, it is also pertinent to cover ASOS’ use of CSR communication when addressing the subordinate statement (SS2). It is interesting to observe exactly how ASOS communicates parameters such as sustainability, accountability and transparency through social media, and to discuss whether ASOS participates in CSR for the reason of gratifying the customers or if the company is sincerely altruistic. As was also described

in the social media theory section, engagement strategies, UGC and exposure of CSR activities do not come without risk. This part of the analysis section will therefore also include analytic perspectives on how the lack of control introduced by ASOS' utilizations of engagement strategies, UGC, CSR and the immediate nature of interactivity on their social media platforms may threaten their customer relationship.

Initially, it is relevant to analyze how the social media parameters of authenticity, transparency, immediacy and connectedness as presented by Postman (2009) can be specifically evidenced in ASOS' social media usage. The level of authenticity is much higher in the primarily interactive form of communication found on social media platforms, and also specifically in ASOS' online communication. This is evident in a great amount of the content that ASOS uploads, in which they specifically ask for users to participate (see Appendix 7.3). Allowing customers to contribute with content that is largely unfiltered and spontaneous will make the communication more authentic. Arguably, users are more inclined to perceive that ASOS is not concealing parts of the business in their communication when users are fully enabled to participate. Put in perspective, when companies would advertise their product or services on television, in newspapers and generally through all modes of linear communication, the audience would only be exposed to what the company had specifically designed. It can be argued that it is still in ASOS' best interest to only expose their audience on social media to content that is specifically designed, while still being interactive and authentic in nature. Arguably, this can be achieved through intelligent framing of the content, so that no unwanted topics are raised. Conceivably, ASOS achieves this framing by expressing a witty/playful and friendly attitude in their social media posts, which is evident both in empirical observations of ASOS' posts having to do with audience engagement, but also on a vast majority of their collective posts on their social media websites.

In addition to increased authenticity, ASOS' utilization of social media also allows for a greater degree of transparency. ASOS vividly communicates their supply chain transparency on their own website (www.asosplc.com), but also brings attention to it in their social media communication. Specifically, the Instagram "stories" effectively depicts this (see Appendix 7.4.2). As was mentioned in the first sub-analysis, the Gen Z customer segment place great importance on

elements such as transparency, among others. Transparency also concern a separate parameter of CSR, namely environmental sustainability. ASOS' willingness to increase transparency by communicating their efforts to curb the load on the environment is also widely evident on their website but also in their Instagram stories (see Appendix 7.4.2). As was the case with communicating authenticity, increased transparency also invites harmful criticism. Similarly, ASOS arguably avoids this by adopting specific moods when communicating specific content. The example of the Instagram story where ASOS mentions the ancient trees that are felled, and the species that suffer causally (see Appendix 7.4.2.1), showcases how ASOS adopts a much more sincere, heartwarming stance. Arguably, adopting different moods effectively when communicating different content assists ASOS in deflecting negative user participation while still retaining a large degree of positive transparency.

It is also relevant to include the perks of immediacy and increased connectedness achievable by use of social media platforms. As described in the theory section, immediacy concerns how social media is instantaneous. When ASOS use social media to upload content, the immediacy allows them to communicate content that is timely and relevant to occurrences that are currently happening. An example of this is the large amount of content ASOS posted in connection with Great Britain's Paralympics or the Pride parade back in the end of 2018. The empirical observations, such as Twitter posts (See Appendix 7.5.1), showcases how ASOS make use of the immediacy of social media communication in order to effectively post content that is timely and relevant. Incorporating time relevant content that plays well into ASOS' proclaimed stances on homosexuality for example, arguably also helps them engage the audience more effectively. When companies such as ASOS use social media for corporate communication, it also benefits them regarding the connectedness as they can communicate to a much greater audience on a global scale in comparison to old-fashioned, linear corporate communication.

When observing the way ASOS communicates through the various social media channels, it arguably becomes apparent that they pay great attention to facilitating audience engagement. By using effective engagement strategies, ASOS can draw much more benefit from using social media. As mentioned in the social media theory section, Safko (2009) describes how companies

can utilize four different parameters of engagement in order to draw benefits from it, namely communication, collaboration, education and entertainment. The first parameter of communication concerns simply communicating a relevant message. It can be argued that this engagement parameter is inherent throughout most of ASOS' social media content because it is interrelated to Postman's (2009) concept of immediacy. As mentioned, the immediate nature of online communication promotes timeliness and relevancy in the content which increases the probability of audience engagement because the content is more contemporary.

The parameter of collaboration is arguably the most avidly used engagement strategy observable in ASOS social media communication. The concept of collaboration refers to when companies incite users on social media to supply their own content. This is apparent in throughout the various social media channels that ASOS use. Specifically, it can be observed in numerous Facebook posts how ASOS directly encourage audience collaboration. An example of this is in their Facebook posts where they write "your opinions please", "fave (favorite) ASOS look you've ever worn?" or "tag someone who'd would look cute in this" (see Appendix 7.3.1.1 & 7.3.2.5). In addition to the collaboration parameter being visible on ASOS' Facebook posts, it is also the pivotal component of the widely popular #AsSeenOnMe hashtag. Examples of the hashtag #AsSeenOnMe are included in the appendix section (see Appendix 7.6). This initiative is conceivably one of ASOS' most popularized ways of creating audience/customer participation. Although Safko's (2009) thoughts on engagement strategies are applicable to all corporate social media communication, the fulfillment of the collaboration parameter through the use of #AsSeenOnMe is arguably particularly beneficial for fashion brands like ASOS. This is due to the visual nature of Instagram in particular, the hashtag #AsSeenOnMe and also fashion in general. Being able to use social media in this way is feasibly a priceless benefit for ASOS. Before proceeding with the additional engagement parameters, it is relevant to include thoughts on User Generated Content (UGC) as an extension of the collaboration parameter. By effectively inciting collaboration across a wide array of social media websites, ASOS has consistently made the end-users both share their thoughts in the various comment sections and upload their own photographs or video files to social media. In addition to making the social media websites more interesting, it can be argued that the UGC also relieves ASOS' human resource expenditure on social media. If

the users are able to sustain positive content uploads without the interference of ASOS employees, this arguable translates directly to money saved.

Another engagement parameter worth mentioning is the educational parameter. Although this parameter is not as explicit in ASOS' social media communication as the collaboration parameter, there are examples hereof throughout the various social media channels. Examples of this are the Instagram stories (see Appendix 7.3.3). These Instagram stories serves a dual purpose by both communicating CSR, but also for example by being informative about how trees are used in the clothing fabrication. "Materials like tencel, rayon, viscose and modal are these (trees)", is one example of how ASOS also use the educational engagement parameter in their social media communication. Being informative and educational on social media arguably also contribute to making the communication interesting and engaging, which explains why it is also a common theme in many of ASOS' social media posts.

Finally, it is also relevant to review the engagement parameter of entertainment in ASOS' social media communication. As with the other three parameters, entertainment is arguably also widely used in the content that ASOS uploads. Entertainment does not necessarily constitute directly uploading jokes but could instead be perceived as being witty and jovial. Entertainment and humor are naturally highly subjective, but in reference to the Gen Z customer segment it can be argued that ASOS does include entertaining elements that are probably better suited for the humor of this group of people. An example of this is what can be considered a lavish use of emojis (Smileys/Icons) that is observable in most of ASOS' social media posts. It can be conceived that for a Gen Z member, this makes for captivating and entertaining reading. Also, ASOS' more general use of abbreviations can be considered a part of their entertaining way of communicating content. In appendix 7.3.1.1 for example, they use "fave" instead of favorite. This use of abbreviations is consistent throughout much of their uploaded content. It was also observed how ASOS is sometimes more explicitly humorous in their uploads. For example, in appendix 7.3.3.1, a picture illustrates a woman looking over her shoulder with the caption reading "When you hear someone open a pack of donuts in the office". In this case, it did not go unappreciated as a respondent commented "Lmao (laughing my %!& off). Did not expect that caption!" Worth

mentioning is that the appreciation of entertainment on social media is also observable in the qualitative interview. Respondent #1 tells us that she likes ASOS on Instagram better than on Facebook because “I basically think it’s more fun (...) on Instagram there is a different kind of humor that I really like” (see Appendix 7.2). Interestingly, ASOS significant focus on engagement strategies also resonates in the responses observed in the semi-structured interviews. When asked if they feel like ASOS engages with them on their social media channels, a convincing five out of six (with one saying “probably”) mention that they feel like ASOS engages with them (see Appendix 7.2). Respondent #2 says “Yes, definitely. I think it’s great how many of their posts seek your involvement”, and respondent #3 says “Yeah, I think it’s all over their Facebook at least”.

Collectively, these engagement strategies of communication, collaboration (UGC), education and entertainment are all observable in ASOS’ social media content. In accordance with Safko’s theory of stakeholder engagement, ASOS’ continual and frequent use of all four engagement parameters in their social media communication is arguably a part reason for their great online popularity. Not only does it engage the recipients directly, but it also raises the chance of them deciding to share the content with friends and family. Having content go viral (spread like a virus) is arguably the most beneficial event that can occur with regards to online corporate communication, and it is conceivably through effective use of the engagement strategies that virality can occur.

As explained in the social media theory section, utilizing social media for corporate purposes are not without risk, and ASOS also often face issues pertaining to a lack of control of the content contributed by heckling audience participants. As previously mentioned, this lack of control is directly associated with social media platforms being interactive. This interactivity is of course necessary as it allows for ASOS’ use of engagement strategies as mentioned above, but not everything the participants contribute with is beneficial for ASOS. An example of how ASOS experiences these issues are found in appendix 7.8.1.1, in which a post with pictures of fashion items received some inexpedient replies such as “I’m still waiting for the one hero at ASOS who still has a sense of style to take a photo of those trousers in the bin” and also “it’s awful, all of it.

The people who work there that think this looks good need a bollocking. All the trousers are too short, and all the clothes look too big. Its dreadful”. A separate post which can be observed in appendix 7.8.1.2, shows a picture of a man in a tracksuit, to which a commentator states: “perfect for the job center!”. The empirical observations in the appendix relation to companies’ lack of control on social media (see Appendix 7.8) were very easy to locate and include, as examples of negative comments were plentiful throughout ASOS’ social media websites. ASOS’ strategy of dealing with these undesirable participations seemed to be simply disregarding them altogether. Through the process of retrieving relevant secondary data on ASOS’ social media websites, it was not possible to find examples of ASOS responding to blatantly negative comments at all, even though these comments often were encountered. According to Safko (2009), these uncontrollable, negative contributions are dangerous as they have the potential to change the general perception of ASOS if sufficiently abundant and severe. Clearly, the lack of control is an integral part of the interactive communication between ASOS and their audience. ASOS does not have many options in regard to control this, however they arguably lessen the incentives for negative contributions by being friendly and good-natured in their social media communication in general. The conversation on social media which includes both the content that ASOS uploads, as well as the contributions from user participants, defines the company itself. Ultimately, it can be argued that ASOS most likely has weighed the benefits and disadvantages and found that the lack of control over user contributions is worth the wide range of benefits it generates.

When analyzing how ASOS utilizes social media platforms, considerations of CSR are also apposite. As mentioned previously, ASOS strongly emphasizes CSR in their communication efforts, both on their website but also all throughout their social media channels. As Crowther and Aras (2008) mention, the concept of CSR has never been more prominent in corporate communication than it is in present times, and this is also true for ASOS. Throughout their communication efforts, ASOS are highly prominent in illustrating how they address CSR in their business conducts. The CSR activities that ASOS communicates encompasses both environmental sustainability, social accountability and business transparency. This strong emphasis on communicating their CSR activities is arguably grounded in their perception of their most important customers – the Gen Z segment. ASOS’ own presented data of the Gen Z segment

suggests a strong need for an insistence on laying bare their business conducts. Congruently, both the qualitative interview data and quantitative survey data display the same necessity of CSR communication. In the online survey, when asked if they were more likely to endorse a fashion brand which expresses social responsibility, a convincing 64% agreed to this premise (see Appendix 7.1.9). Additionally, as can be observed in the qualitative interviews, when reviewing the respondent's answers to the question of whether or not they are positive towards ASOS communication their CSR initiatives on social media, four respondents agreed that they are positive towards ASOS communicating CSR, with one respondent expressing that concrete action to address such issues are important (see Appendix 7.2). As Crowther & Aras (2008) argue, CSR has become more prominent mostly because it is observable how customers in present times perceive issues such as climate change, global warming and fair treatment of workers. Interestingly, much corporate communication in recent times are not solely concerned with CSR issues that can be directly attributed to a given company. Other sets of issues, which more broadly concern society overall, have also found a place within the communicative efforts of companies, ASOS included. These issues are things such as women's empowerment, gay rights, supporting the disabled and encouraging body positivity. Conceivably, many of these issues are being communicated in a large part of companies, but it can be argued that communicating the support of the causes mentioned above is not enough. The communication must arguably also be supported by concrete action for it to be perceived as authentic for the stakeholders. This is also reflected in one of respondent #1's answers in the qualitative interviews, when asked if she was positive towards ASOS communicating CSR (see Appendix 7.2). She elaborates: "I know some of the companies would say that they support inclusivity and so on without actually having anything to show for it. I know ASOS participates in all kinds of stuff to support social causes. If you ask me, it only matters if companies put action behind their words". ASOS arguably put much effort into communicating their initiatives concerning social causes. In one example (see Appendix 7.5.1.3), ASOS has posted a photo collection of overweight women as to present their "curve collection" in support of body positivity, to which a person comments: "ASOS are really doing an amazing job with showing a range of bodies on their curve section. I'm so happy that a new generation of women and girls get to experience this because it has such an amazing impact". In another example (see Appendix 7.5.1.4), ASOS posts: "We're proud to be supporting Stonewall's

#comeoutforequality campaign. Together, we want everyone to have the confidence to be whoever they want to be”. Many of these social causes are however politically contested. Some people within ASOS’ customer segment may not agree on supporting body positivity or transsexuality. As was the case with engagement described above, expressing concern for such social causes also contain risks as ASOS cannot control the interactive communication. An example of this is found on an Instagram post (see Appendix 7.8.2), where ASOS has posted a picture of overweight women in relation to one of their fashion lines to show support of body positivism. One participant writes: “Just awful. Women choking their hearts. Killing themselves and bragging about it”. Examples such as these are commonplace on ASOS’ social media websites, and it is arguably the cost of engaging an audience in your corporate communication online. Presumably, ASOS has weighed the present political landscape and decided that it achieves more stakeholder endorsement to communicate their support of such social causes than not doing so.

Although politically infused social causes such as body positivism and support of transsexuals is a contested topic, this is arguably not as much the case with the CSR element of environmental sustainability and supply chain transparency. When observing the CSR communication on ASOS’ social media websites, it is apparent that ASOS does not face the same backlash related to lack of control when they communicate their efforts of reducing greenhouse gas emissions or to care for workers’ conditions throughout their supply chain. Additionally, ASOS’ communication concerning sustainability and transparency appear to be well-received across the online community. Examples of ASOS’ CSR communication of these topics are included in the appendix (see Appendix 7.4). One of these is relating to ASOS’ sustainable sourcing program in which ASOS state that they want traceability of the raw materials used and lowered environmental impact among other things. This includes approaching issues in industrial cotton production. The post reads: “Industrial cotton production can rely on chemical use, unsustainable amounts of water and unfair labor”. A separate post also related to ASOS’ CSR communication is a video of an electric supply truck with a caption stating: “We’re now using 100% electric vehicles in congestion zones to help make London’s air cleaner”. Although there are not as much risk connected to communicating CSR of this nature, it is relevant to include Hansen’s (2014) argument of CSR communication that has to do with the paradoxical risk of communicating CSR.

This concerns how companies who put a large amount of effort into communicating CSR are also the ones who becomes subject to most scrutiny. Although it was not possible to locate and include concrete examples of this on ASOS' social media websites, it is conceivable how ASOS' CSR efforts are at risk of being more thoroughly investigated by stakeholders due to the volume and endeavor of their CSR communication. As with the previously mentioned communicative risks, ASOS must weigh the benefits of their CSR communication against the potential disadvantages of hyperbolized communication. If ASOS are convinced that they have nothing to hide in regard to environmental sustainability and in their supply chain, they should not fear the repercussions of emphasized CSR communication.

Conclusively, ASOS utilizes all four parameters of Safko's (2009) engagement strategies in their social media communication – communication, collaboration, education and entertainment – in order to facilitate beneficial audience participation (UGC) and to popularize the social media content. Additionally, ASOS also vividly uses CSR in their social media content, and the empirical observations and collected data suggests that this provides great benefit. Through this utilization of social media, it can be argued that ASOS caters well to their Gen Z customer section. Even though ASOS' online communication comes with proven and illustrated risks pertaining to a lack of control, ASOS arguably benefits greatly from their social media communication overall by inviting users to participate with their own content, actively engaging the users and through emphasizing CSR.

4.2.4 SS3 Sub-analysis

The third and final sub-analysis will concern the last subordinate problem statement (SS3), namely **“How does ASOS' social media communication complement corporate and user image building?”**. In this analysis section, the aspects of image and branding will be analyzed with reference to ASOS and their social media communication. This sub-analysis will make use of the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews, in which the respondent's answers to the question of celebrity endorsement will be included in this analysis. Additionally, this sub-analysis will also include secondary data in the form of empirical observations that are related to how

branding and image building correlates to ASOS' social media usage. It is observable how branding and image-building elements are abundant all throughout ASOS' communication, and also in their corporate social media communication. This abundance of branding and image elements would allow for the inclusion of a large number of data examples, but for the purpose of conciseness, this sub-analysis will only include select data samples that are most appropriate in relation to approaching the subordinate statement (SS3) by means of analysis. In addition to including these data sources, this sub-analysis will have a strong emphasis on the presented branding theory but will also include CSR theory as these are often reciprocal in their relation to each other.

Before proceeding into the concrete analysis of branding in ASOS' social media usage, it is relevant to include an observation relating the nature of fashion, since ASOS is a fashion brand, and why branding and image is even more important in this regard as compared to other markets. This observation is an argument that relates to how fashion, more so than many other markets, are deeply rooted in branding. Many other companies that are not in the fashion market sell products that people may have in their home, in their pocket or backpack and so forth. However, fashion, and clothing in particular, is something that people wear on their person. Because of this, it can be argued that the mechanics of branding as described previously are in much greater effect when it concerns fashion and clothing. Conceivably, this is connected to social constructivism. Just like how ASOS' communication and general branding efforts on social media is contributive in defining the subjective reality of the company, so is the clothes a person wears also contributive in defining the reality of who that person is.

As previously described, branding equals differentiation in many respects, and this is also true for how ASOS brands themselves and alters their image through social media communication. Concisely, when a customer purchases a product through ASOS' online web shop, they do it for particular reasons and ASOS use branding strategies to influence these reasons and increase the purchase likelihood. The reasons for customers to purchase items from ASOS are mostly reflected in how these purchases cover the customers' needs as depicted in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Fig. 2). Arguably, many people are inclined to purchase products from ASOS simply for covering

physiological needs. This could for example be a person who buys a winter jacket because of increasingly cold temperatures. It is however not the physiological needs that are important to how ASOS brands itself, but it is rather the more social and egotistical needs that ASOS can approach through effective branding of not only their products, but of the company itself. The goal of ASOS' branding efforts on social media is to represent meaning that is appealing to the user for the purpose of individual self-representation either through wearing specific clothes that signals particular values, but importantly also through adopting the values of ASOS as an organization by purchases and using their products. One empirical observation that arguably displays an example ASOS' explicit communication related to their values is through a Facebook post (see Appendix 7.3.2.1) where they communicate that they are looking for new ASOS models. The Facebook post states: "Think you're ASOS model material? We're looking for people who already wear our clothes and share our values – there's no restriction on height, size or anything else that makes you, you!" The keywords in this Facebook post in relation to branding is "share our values". This example is included because it concretizes ASOS' awareness of how the customers adaptation of their values through both the clothes that they wear, but also the personal values that they hold, is what constitutes whether or not they are "ASOS material". It is through the product purchases and general endorsement of the ASOS company that the customer can achieve value alignment. Concisely, this infers that for ASOS to achieve strong branding in their communication, they must signal values, both in their product and organization, that are appealing to their main customer segment, and which makes the customer want to be a part of the ASOS identity.

Arguably, in modern times, the thing that primarily drives product or organizational affinity in customers is their pursuit of achieving "the real me". When people express their endorsement on ASOS by "liking" it on Facebook or subscribing to their YouTube channel, customers essentially signal their own identity. It is their use and endorsement of ASOS' products and the ASOS organization that makes them unique. Through observing what ASOS choose to communicate on their social media platforms, it becomes clear which values ASOS deems customers would want to adopt and use to cover psychological needs of self-esteem and self-actualization and to signal their own identity to the outside world. As also described in the previous sub-analyses, ASOS has a strong emphasis on communicating CSR because it includes values that the Gen Z

customer segment are proven to wish to incorporate in their own identity. Through their CSR communication, ASOS can make their Gen Z customers perceive that if they purchase ASOS products and endorse the ASOS organization, they will have their needs of self-esteem, self-actualization and also a need of altruism covered.

An example of how ASOS can signal to customers that purchasing their products and endorsing their organization to cover their need of self-esteem is in their Instagram story (see Appendix 7.4.2.1). In this example, ASOS signals likeable, altruistic values by stating that “We’re working with @CanopyPlanet to eliminate clothing made with these ancient trees and only use sustainable, renewable materials”. Communication such as this essentially makes the customer believe that they can attain a higher level of self-esteem by incorporating the wish to sustain the environment by purchasing clothes that are sustainable and made with renewable materials. The customer makes the importance of, and wish for, caring for the planet and environment a part of their own identity, which raises their self-esteem and, for some individuals, also an altruistic need. This is also the case when ASOS communicate social accountability on their social media channels which signals their support of women empowerment, LGBTQ, the abolishment of unfair working conditions etc. In addition to covering the customers’ needs of self-esteem and altruism, efficient branding also concerns covering the need of self-actualization. Although much of their static, predominantly one-way value communication also impacts customer self-actualization, it can be argued that it is particularly through the engagement and UGC that the customers need for self-actualization can be covered most effectively.

As was also mentioned in the branding theory section, the customers need for self-actualization is strongly connected with a need for the customers to stage themselves. It can be conceived, that ASOS cleverly and directly invites the users to not only engage in the comment sections, but also to upload their own “model content” through the hashtag #AsSeenOnMe on Instagram. In the appendix section there are several examples included that shows customers who are not corporately affiliated with ASOS but who still uploads staged pictures of themselves wearing outfits purchased through ASOS’ online web shop (see Appendix 7.6). Because these customers do not receive any monetary compensation from ASOS for doing so, this phenomenon arguably

speaks to the power of the need of self-actualization through customers staging themselves. As is also observable from the #AsSeenOnMe UGC, the photographs on Instagram receive a large quantity of endorsement in the form of “likes”, with around 11,000 people “liking” these select examples.

In order to provide a supplementary showcasing of how ASOS’ CSR communication functions in regard to their brand and image building, ASOS CSR communication can be translated into Peirce’s Triadic Model of Semiotics (Fig. 3, p. 27). When interpreting ASOS’ branding by means of CSR communication on social media, the object is the actual objective CSR actions that ASOS performs (not necessarily what they say they do, but what they truly do). The representamen can be translated into ASOS’ communication concerning their CSR action (which is not necessarily a truthful depiction of reality). The interpretant in this example is the mental image that is created in the mind of the recipient. When addressing ASOS’ CSR communication through the lens of Peirce’s Triadic Model of Semiotics, it reveals how the mental image of ASOS’ CSR within the recipient is not created by what actions ASOS actually performs that relates to CSR in the real world. It is also not created through the communicative efforts of ASOS. Rather, Peirce’s model dictates that it is within the relation between the representamen and the object. Concisely, the mental image of ASOS and their CSR efforts in the mind of the recipient is dependent on whether or not there is congruency between what ASOS does in objective reality, and what they say they do. The recipients of ASOS’ CSR communication are prone to decode the interpretant (create thoughts) differently from one another, and it is widely dependent on factors such as the level of knowledge about the “true” nature of ASOS’ CSR commitments and other preliminary assumptions. Additionally, the representamen (the CSR communication) may also be decoded in various ways, furthering the differences in the creation of the interpretant and of how the recipients perceive ASOS’ CSR efforts.

As mentioned in the branding section, it is this process of meaning creation that can be put in relation to how social constructs define reality. ASOS’ prime objective in order to achieve efficient branding in their social media CSR communication is therefore to both perform the CSR work in real life and also to communicate it in a way to the recipients/potential customers that is

unambiguous. When judging from the great amount of positive feedback from the audience on social media, it can be argued that ASOS' CSR communication more or less truthfully reflects their efforts in real life. In other words, in relation to beneficial branding, ASOS' CSR communication is a strong tool which complements their image.

It is also relevant to include a mention of conditions that reflect what could happen if there were inconsistencies in this branding process. To do this, it is pertinent to incorporate Bordum & Hansen's Image Triangle (Fig 4, p. 28), as their discernment is well-suited for showcasing the creation of "gaps" as described in the previous branding theory section. In the Image Triangle, the objective reality of what ASOS does is coined the organizational identity. The way ASOS projects itself through their branding communication is the company profile. Lastly, the image of ASOS is the public view. As was also described above by means of The Triadic Model of Semiotics, ASOS' true identity and their communicated profile is what produces their outward image. Arguably, there seems to be little or no inconsistency in ASOS' branding communication. Their profiling communication is arguably reflecting the reality of their identity, because they consistently supply evidence of their real-life CSR efforts. It is however interesting to include examples of what poor branding efforts could look like. If it was to be uncovered that ASOS did not perform the CSR of which they claim to do, it would result in a credibility gap, and the public would then lose trust in ASOS. It is also possible for a communication gap to occur through inconsistency between ASOS' profile and image if ASOS' external communication is not decoded as intended by the recipient. This could be the case if ASOS communicates facets of their CSR that does not correspond with what the stakeholders believe to be true. Lastly, an image gap can arise if the general public view of ASOS does not reflect how ASOS is in objective reality. Through observing ASOS' branding efforts in terms of CSR on their social media websites, it is apparent that there is good consistency between their identity, profile and image.

ASOS' branding and image building is not limited to their messages of social accountability of inclusion and CSR, but also largely depend on their efforts to incorporate celebrities. As was mentioned in the branding theory section, using celebrity endorsement can make ASOS' communication more unique and provide them with a unique selling proposition (USP). Through many

counts of celebrity endorsement, ASOS effectively incorporates both the ethos of the various celebrities, and also the characteristics of whatever sector these celebrities operate within. Conceivably, an example of this is when ASOS' featured the widely famous American pop-singer Taylor Swift in their magazine and also communicated it through social media (see Appendix 7.7.1.1). By featuring Taylor Swift in their branding efforts, ASOS is adopting the values that are subjectively inherent to the American pop music stage. Additionally, the ethos of Taylor Swift is also copied into ASOS' brand through their endorsement of her. This arguably infuses ASOS' products with a USP that cannot be copied without competitors also endorsing Taylor Swift. It can also be conceived that members of the Gen Z customer segment in many cases aspire to become like their idols by mimicking them. Potential customers who aspire to be like Taylor Swift can indirectly adopt her values through products she endorses and are connected to. In the interviews (see Appendix 7.2), respondent #2 states: "I think it's a great idea for any company to use celebrities like actors and musicians. I know that many of my friends would seriously buy a product just because they have seen some kind of commercial with a celebrity who uses that product. I admit that I have also done that myself". When asked how celebrities make people buy products, she said that "I think perhaps it's because a lot of people look up to some celebrities and want to imitate them. It's for the same reason that fashion lines are very eager for the celebrities to wear their clothes on the red carpet". There are many examples of ASOS' use of celebrity endorsement in their branding efforts. One reason for the choice of the exemplary post in appendix 7.7.1.1, is that it is a throwback to 2015, where Taylor Swift featured in the ASOS magazine and on their social media for the first time. In connection with her birthday on 13/12/2018, ASOS decided to mention her again. Arguably, ASOS strongly appreciated the values she supplied the ASOS brand and products, and they essentially sought to revitalize these benefits by mentioning her again on their Twitter channel.

To furtherly conceptualize how the example of the celebrity endorsement of Taylor Swift transfers her values to ASOS, it is beneficial to observe it via the Meaning-Transfer Model (Fig. 5, p. 30), which can showcase how endorsing Taylor Swift can influence customer decision. As previously stated, this process begins with inherent values of Taylor Swift and her persona as a popstar. In the second stage, these values are transferred to the ASOS' brand by means of communication. In this case, ASOS has depicted photo shoots with Taylor Swift in the ASOS magazine in which she wears clothes offered by

ASOS through their online web shop. In this case, ASOS creates a connection between the pop music culture and the fashion culture reflected through their products. If the customer aspires to be like Taylor Swift, or otherwise likes her inherent set of values, the customer can claim the projected values through product purchase. Concisely, the product purchase will occur if the customer perceives that this particular purchase and value adaptation can cover their needs of self-esteem and/or self-actualization as mentioned in the Hierarchy of Needs (Fig. 2, p. 26).

In many of ASOS' celebrity endorsements in the ASOS magazine, posts on social media and through their ASOSMeets YouTube videos (see Appendix 7.7.2), ASOS adopts the values of these various celebrities. Through observing and considering the inherent values in many of these featured celebrities, it can be argued that ASOS do not endorse celebrities who cannot effectively permit a positive meaning-transfer. It would be suboptimal for ASOS to endorse a celebrity whose values are incompatible with either fashion as a whole, or with ASOS' value set. This would constitute a conflict between their profile and image resulting in communication gap, which is harmful to the ASOS brand.

Conclusively, it can be asserted that ASOS' branding communication on their social media channels consists of large amounts of CSR and celebrity endorsement, and that they effectively fulfill the needs of their Gen Z customer segment through social media communication that complements their image building and branding.

5. Concluding part

5.1 Discussion & Conclusion

Through the process of conducting the three sub-analyses, it is possible to approach the primary problem statement which is **“How does the British online web shop ASOS' use of social media communication influence customer relations and perceptions?”**. This social scientific exemplifying case study has inductively applied select framing theories, relevant data and a social constructivist perspective in order to create knowledge of how a company like ASOS can increase the efficiency of their communication on social media in order to create a positive perception of the company within the stakeholder group of customers. This thesis adopts a critical perspective and was authored with the intention of potentially challenging pre-existing knowledge or

assumptions of how social media communication can affect customer perceptions. Arguably, the research design, method and data typologies of direct observation and systematic interviewing have allowed for an in-depth knowledge creation process.

After having processed the two primary data sources (the quantitative online survey and the qualitative in-depth interviews) and the secondary data sources (concrete observations from ASOS social media channels), it was revealed how ASOS' communication beneficially matches the Gen Z customer segment. The Gen Z customer segment was identified as being the most prominent by both analyzing the survey data and observing and referencing the secondary data from ASOS. In conjunction with appropriate framing theories, this data was also used to map how ASOS specifically uses the communication channel of social media websites to effectuate their communication and to influence customer relations and perceptions in a positive way. It was also revealed that ASOS are using social media in concomitance with well-designed branding communication to establish themselves as a company with attractive values that entail USPs.

More than anything, this case study has shown that the interactive and engaging communicative channels that constitute social media are an outstanding method from which companies like ASOS, and arguably most other web shops with social media presence, can substantially increase their relationship with customers in a positive way. It illustrates that a company, who has a clear notion of what people their main customer segment consists of, can use social media to engage with their relevant recipients and transfer meaning to their products in a way that significantly benefits their business.

This thesis was authored with the intention of illustrating facets of social media communication that companies should adhere to in order to effectuate their communicative efforts. This could be achieved by either creating knowledge that showcases how ASOS does not utilize social media platforms optimally, or by providing knowledge of how ASOS' social media utilization is exemplary and that companies that use social media for corporate communication should strive to adopt similar social media strategies. Conclusively, it can be argued that the latter is the case for this thesis.

The analyses of the subordinate problem statements collectively answer the main problem statement, and the collected empirical data used by means of relevant theories suggest that ASOS' approach to social media is commendable. It will be interesting to observe if their strong effort to gratify a large array of stakeholders through social media communication can be sustained in a future perspective.

5.2 Perspectivation

With an increasing number of corporations that enters the stage of social media, knowing how corporate communication can be effectuated within the social media format is conceivably going to stay relevant for businesses within the foreseeable future. The permanence in the paradigm shift of the interaction between companies and their stakeholders through corporate digitalization precipitates a necessity for knowledge of how companies should use social media for corporate success. Relevant knowledge of how companies can beneficially influence customer relations and perceptions has been established through analysis in this thesis, and this knowledge will arguably be applicable for as long as companies are active on social media or what will resemble social media in the future.

Stakeholder groups, particularly customers, have a new role in the corporate world, and they are by no means mere recipients of corporate communication. Companies must contend with the prospect that stakeholders are co-producers of organizational values. The question is no longer how companies can affect stakeholders with their communication, but rather how they can steer the conversation about their company. Whether they intend to be or not, companies are now far more visible because of the digitalized world and people will interact and communicate about companies through the internet, with or without the companies' own engagement. The new challenges have presented themselves, and companies with online presence must act accordingly and adopt effective online communication or become lost in translation.

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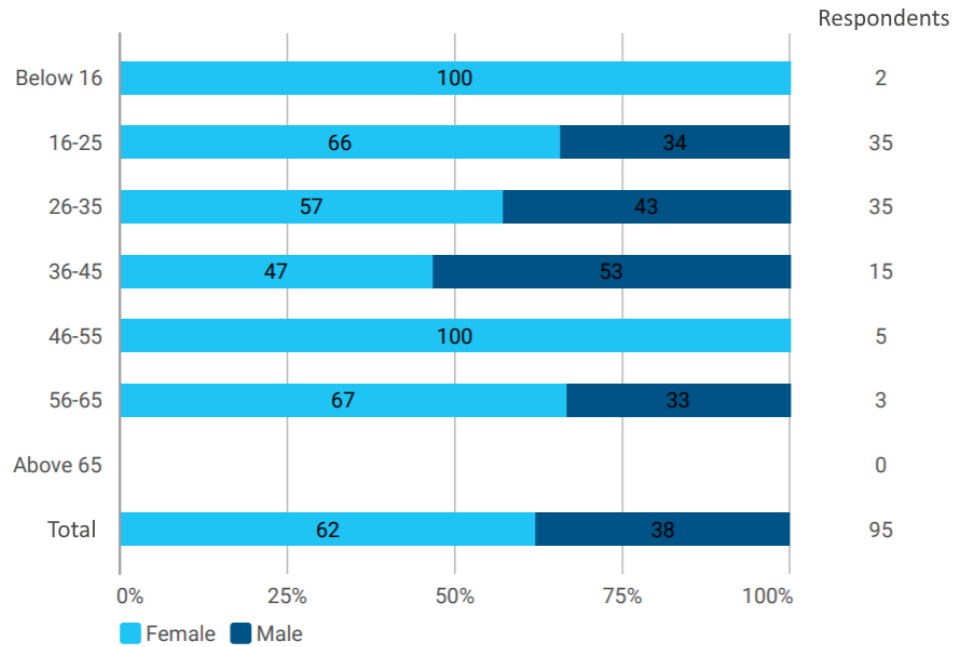
7. Appendix

7.1 Facebook Survey

Dataset 7.1.1: Gender crossed with age

Sex

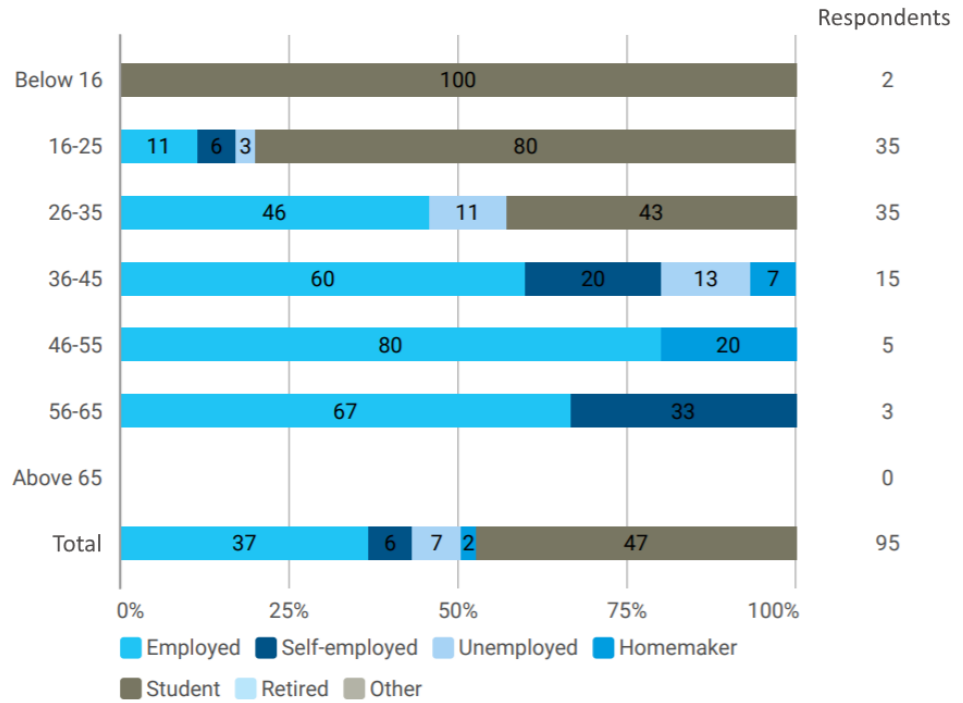
Crossed with: Age



Dataset 7.1.2: Occupation crossed with age

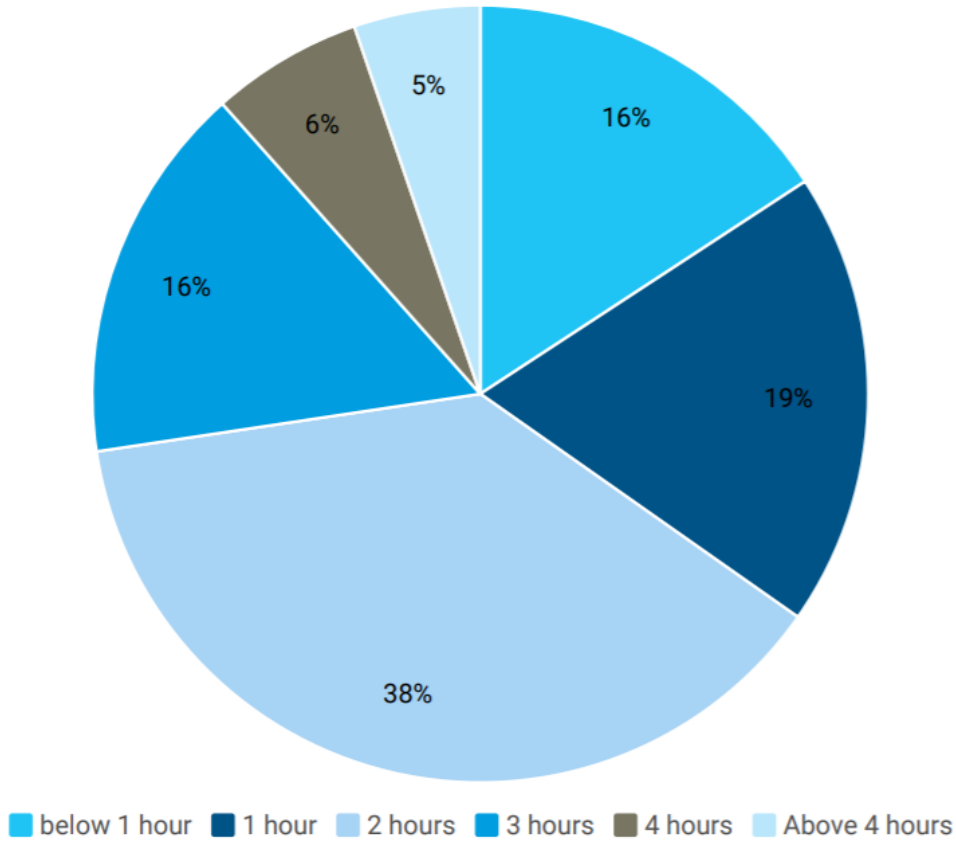
What is your occupation?

Crossed with: Age



Dataset 7.1.3: Hours online

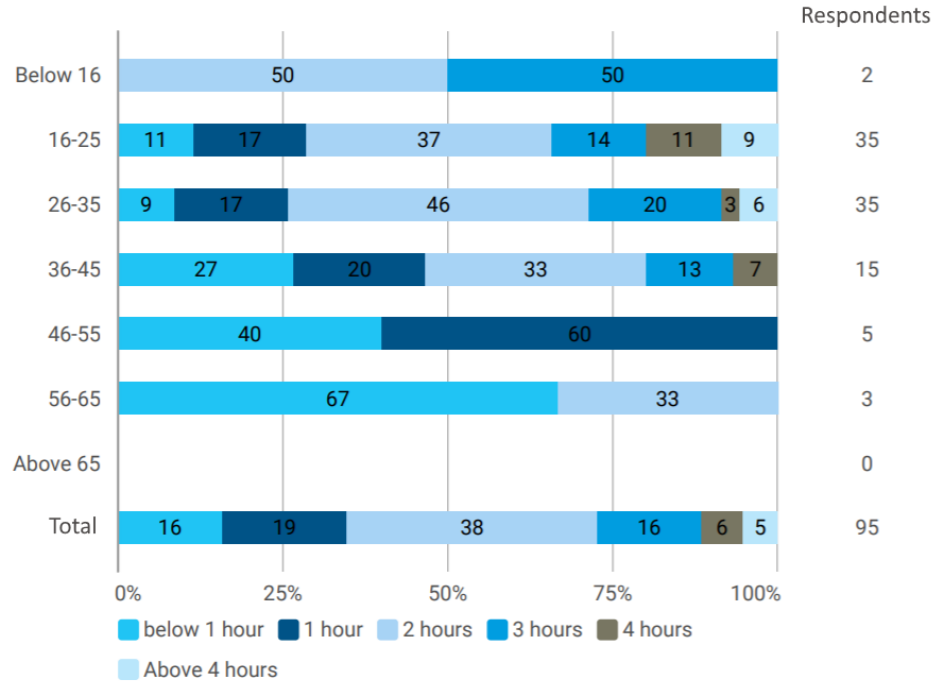
How many hours a day do you generally spend on social media?



Dataset 7.1.4: Hours online crossed with age

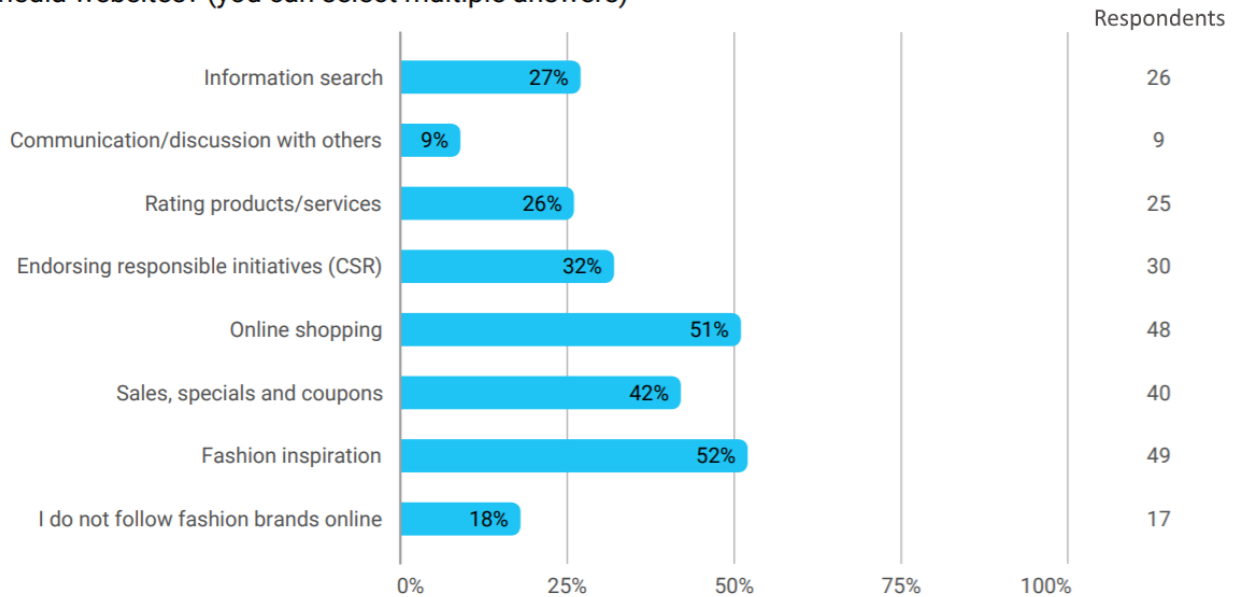
How many hours a day do you generally spend on social media?

Crossed with: Age



Dataset 7.1.5 Most important elements of fashion brands on social media

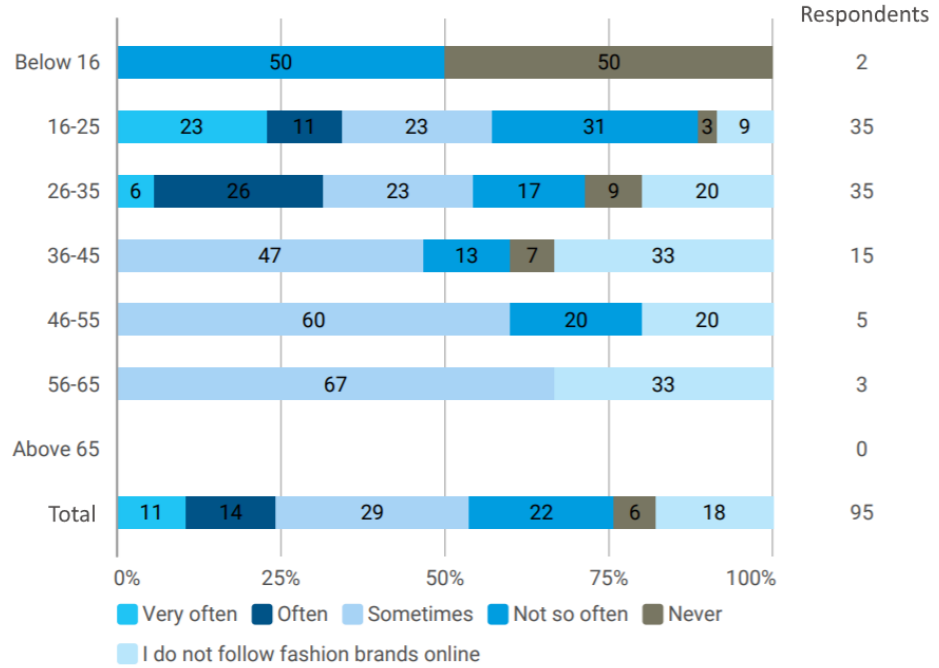
Which of the following are important/relevant for you when using fashion brand pages on social media websites? (you can select multiple answers)



Dataset 7.1.6 How often do you shop crossed with age

How often do you shop from fashion brands that you follow on a social media website?

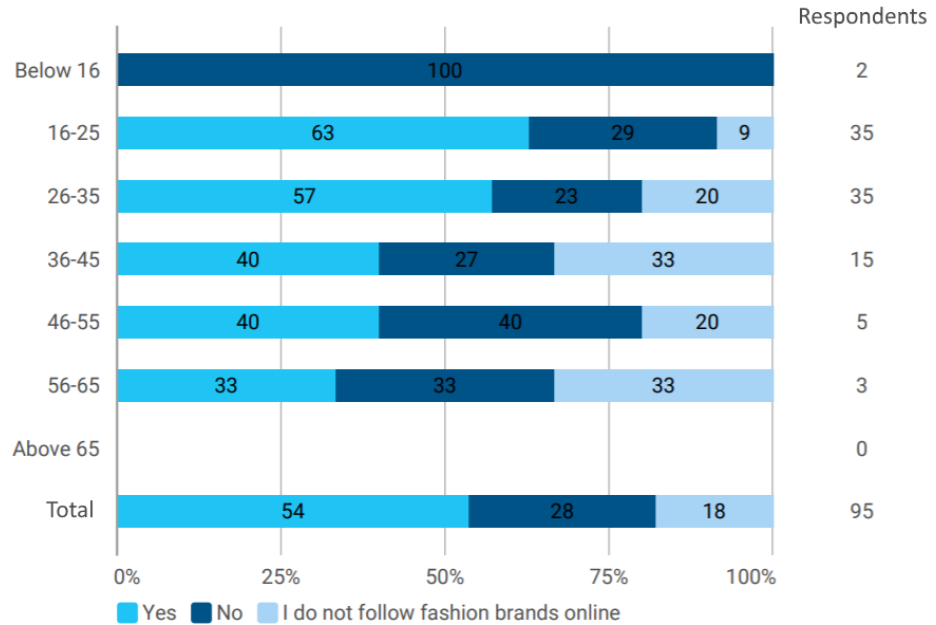
Crossed with: Age



Dataset 7.1.7 More likely to purchase online since becoming a fan crossed with age

Are you more likely to shop online since becoming a “fan” of a fashion brand on a social media website?

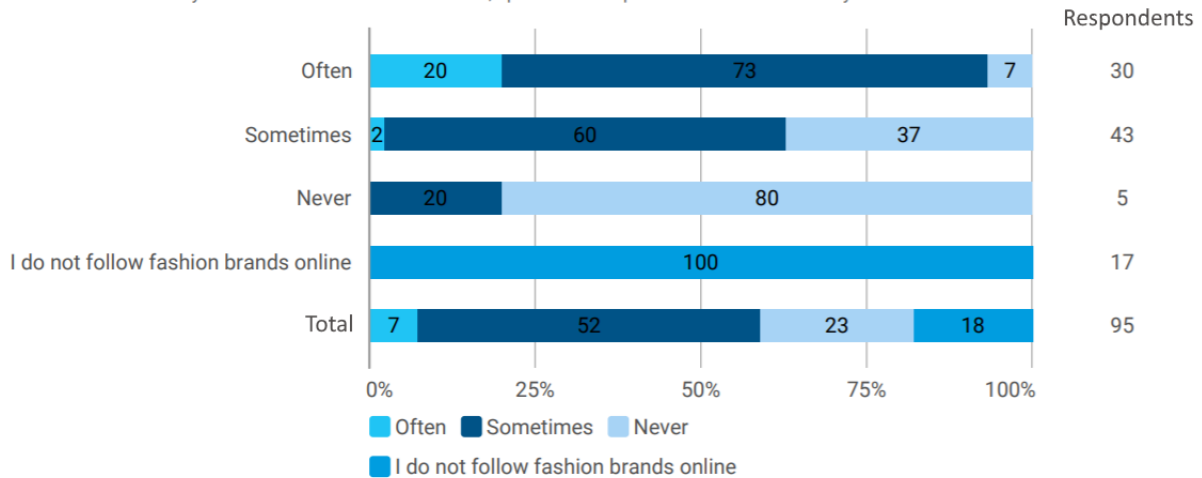
Crossed with: Age



Dataset 7.1.8 Do you make use of sales, specials or coupons

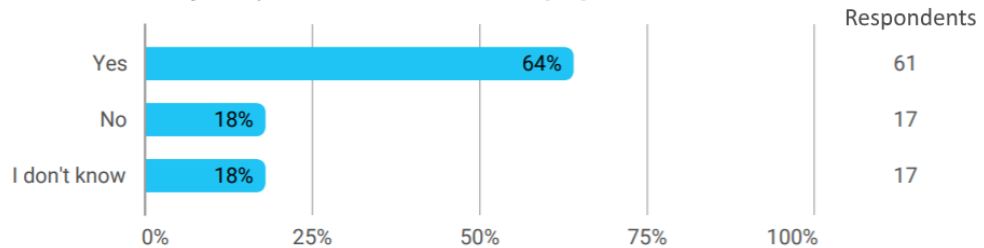
How often do you make use of the sales, specials or coupons from fashion brands you follow on social media?

Crossed with: How often do you receive information about sales, specials or coupons from fashion brands you follow on social media?



Dataset 7.1.9 Endorsing fashion brands which expresses CSR

Are you more likely to endorse a fashion brand which expresses social responsibility (environmental awareness, inclusivity etc.) on their social media page?



7.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews (6 respondents)

Transcribed from Danish to English

5 female, 1 male

Respondent #1: (female)

For how long have you been an ASOS customer?

“It’s hard to say, but it’s probably been awhile, maybe 3-4 years. But is really been on/off, because it depended a lot on how much money I had at different times.”

For how long have you followed ASOS on social media – and on which social media channels do you follow ASOS?

“I actually began following ASOS on Instagram. That was around one and a half year ago. I also started following them on Facebook, but I don’t really use Facebook that much. I think that the content that ASOS uploads to Instagram is much funnier than on Facebook. I also frequently watch ASOS’ videos on YouTube, because I think they make great content. Again, I think many of their videos are often funny, and they also cover a lot of fashion ideas”

Can you elaborate on why you like ASOS on Instagram better?

“I basically think it’s more fun. I got a feeling that on Facebook, it’s much more concerned with pushing their products and make me buy things. On Instagram there is a different kind of humor that I really like. And of course, I also like fashion a lot and Instagram is probably better suited for showing off fashion.”

How do you benefit from following ASOS on social media and purchasing their products?

Even though I don't actually buy that many ASOS products I think their social media sites are a great way to get fashion inspiration and also to see what others think. I also think there is some funny content sometimes, and it is mostly connected with fashion. So that's two of my favorite things in one.

Do you feel like ASOS engages with you on their social media channels? (inviting you to comment, upload you own content etc.)

Yeah, I actually think that is what a lot their posts do. I don't really participate much though, I'm more of an on-looker. I used to when I was younger. I do sometimes just get lost in some weird comment section on one of their posts and its actually pretty funny most of the times. But it's mostly just for killing time. I do see a lot of other users uploading different things to Instagram and Facebook. I remember engaging a lot a couple or three years ago, when I was 18-19.

Are you positive towards ASOS communicating their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiatives on social media?

I think it's absolutely great. It kind of makes you feel good about following them and also buying from them. Sometimes it can be a bit much when it feels like they're trying to please everyone just to market themselves, but this is only when they overdo it. In most cases though, I think stuff like sustainability and respect for minorities and other social causes is nice, and it probably makes me feel a bit righteous when I buy clothes from them. I know some of the companies would say that they support inclusivity and so on without actually having anything to show for it. I know ASOS participates in all kinds of stuff to support social causes. If you ask me, it only matter if companies put action behind their words. They should definitely keep posting that kind of stuff, and I also think their customers like it.

Do you think ASOS' frequent use of celebrities on social media is a good thing?

I have noticed that they use many stars on social media, especially on YouTube. Most of the time, I don't really know too many of the celebrities that they use because I think many of them are more famous in other countries than Denmark. I have come to know of a few new celebrities that I didn't know beforehand by watching the videos on YouTube, mostly.

Respondent #2 (female)

For how long have you been an ASOS customer?

I've probably been buying from ASOS for 4 years, but I don't remember exactly.

For how long have you followed ASOS on social media – and on which social media channels do you follow ASOS?

I have followed ASOS on Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook for around the same time (4 years). I used to also follow them on Twitter, but I have recently filtered out in my social media usage. It kind of got out of hand. I still browse their pages daily. It has become a habit, I guess. I also watch their Youtube-channel once in a while, but I don't know if that counts as a social media channel.

How do you benefit from following ASOS on social media and purchasing their products?

I think I mostly follow them online to kill time. I buy their products because it's usually great quality and also current in terms of fashion. When I think more about it, I think that it's also interesting to read what other fashion-minded people write on their social media channels. One thing is the stuff that ASOS write themselves, but I think I'm mostly interested in seeing what people like myself write about. I think there are many different ways I benefit from buying clothes from ASOS. It does also take up a lot of my budget, so much so that I have had to downgrade my spending on food and such things so I could afford more clothes. Silly, I know, but it is important to me.

Why is it important to you?

I think the clothes we wear is a part of our identity. That being said, I want to wear beautiful clothes that also define me as a person. I think a lot of people feel this way, whether or not they want to admit it.

Does buying from ASOS help you specifically in this regard?

Yes, in some ways it does make a difference where the clothes are from. I think it has something to do with whether or not you can align yourself with the brand. I would not buy the most beautiful and high-quality clothes if the company that made them was not likeable to me. I really like most of the clothes from ASOS, but I also really like the company itself.

Do you feel like ASOS engages with you on their social media channels? (inviting you to comment, upload you own content etc.)

Yes, definitely. I think it's great how many of their posts seek your involvement. It's a nice way of discovering fashion and somehow also be part of a community which has the same interests as yourself. I use Instagram a lot to post pictures of myself and others in various situations, and a lot of times the focus is on fashion items. I have also posted a lot of artsy pictures of myself in clothes that were shipped from ASOS and uploaded it on my Instagram. Sometimes, when I really like a picture, I add ASOS' hashtag #AsSeenOnMe and a bunch of other hashtags to get more likes. Mostly, I do it just to get some likes for my picture, but once ASOS actually featured one of my pictures on their Instagram page. That was really fun, and it got a lot of likes as well. For the rest of that day I was basically refreshing ASOS' post with me constantly and reading the comments and seeing how many likes it got.

Are you positive towards ASOS communicating their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiatives on social media?

I don't really think you can be a "fashionista" without these things also meaning a lot to you. I think a lot of large companies, whether or not they deal in fashion, should include CSR. I think perhaps it is especially important for fashion companies in particular because when you buy clothes and wear clothes you don't want to know that the clothes were being produced by poor people or children in China for example. It kind of stains your identity that you get from wearing specific clothes. Politically, I also think there should be much more awareness on the climate and global warming. I don't want clothes from a company that doesn't care about the environment and only want to make money. If a company cannot guarantee that there is no immoral labor or that the production doesn't come with a great cost to the environment, you can count me out.

Do you think ASOS' frequent use of celebrities on social media is a good thing?

I think it's a great idea for any company to use celebrities like actors and musicians. I know that many of my friends would seriously buy a product just because they have seen some kind of commercial with a celebrity who uses that product. I admit that I have also done that myself.

Why do you think people buy products because of celebrities?

I think perhaps it's because a lot of people look up to some celebrities and want to imitate them. It's for the same reason that fashion lines are very eager for the celebrities to wear their clothes on the red carpet for example.

Respondent #3 (female)

For how long have you been an ASOS customer?

Around 4 years I think, before that my girlfriend used to buy me clothes from ASOS sometimes though.

For how long have you followed ASOS on social media – and on which social media channels do you follow ASOS?

I actually began following ASOS on Facebook at the end of 2018 I think, so it hasn't been that long. I don't really use social media other than Facebook and also a bit of YouTube once in a while.

Do you follow ASOS on YouTube?

No, I didn't realize they were on YouTube as well. Makes sense though. I mostly watch political videos on YouTube. When I figure I need new clothes, it has become a habit to browse a bit through ASOS' Facebook. They often have some really cool pieces.

How do you benefit from following ASOS on social media and purchasing their products?

It makes it easier to decide on what new clothing items I should buy. That's mostly it, I think. Even though I browse their Facebook for inspiration, I don't always buy from them. Sometimes I do, and their products are mostly great. There were a few times where I shipped some items back because they were nothing like advertised. I think my girlfriend benefits much more from it than I to be honest. I only browse their Facebook and buy their clothes out of necessity I guess you can say. My girlfriend will hang around on their Instagram just to pass the time and shop clothes out of boredom. It's pretty annoying really.

Do you feel like ASOS engages with you on their social media channels? (inviting you to comment, upload you own content etc.)

Yeah, I think it's all over their Facebook at least. And I do see a lot of people actively commenting on a lot of the posts there. If I see a post featuring a clothing item I like, I may scroll through the comments because sometimes people who have bought the item provides feedback about it in the comment section. Sometimes people will criticize some of the clothes, so I know what not to buy.

Have you ever uploaded your own content to any of ASOS' social media channels?

I used to do it a lot, but I don't do it much anymore. I would plaster my Instagram pictures with every hashtag I could think of because it gave it more exposure and that was a lot of fun.

Have you ever used #AsSeenOnMe?

Most likely, can't recall for certain. Even if I might have added that hashtag on some uploads, I don't think ASOS ever featured any of them.

Are you positive towards ASOS communicating their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiatives on social media?

I definitely think big corporations have an effect on the environment and a responsibility because of this. Sometimes I do honestly get a little fed up if I see two or three posts in a row that all concern how supportive ASOS or other companies are of gay rights or empowering women and accepting obesity etc., even though I'm gay myself. I think this signals a shift from companies actually taking real steps to reduce their pollution and such things, to it being a point of advertisement. That is annoying to me and I usually scroll right past these things.

Do you think ASOS' frequent use of celebrities on social media is a good thing?

I think that it must probably boost sales somehow, else they wouldn't do it that much. I usually don't really recognize the people that ASOS portrays as celebrities, but then again, I don't really care too much about celebrities and reality shows. I would probably be tempted to buy something from ASOS if they featured one of the few celebrities that I like wearing something I could see myself in.

Respondent #4 (female)

For how long have you been an ASOS customer?

For a long time. I really can't remember for how long, but approximately 10 years or so. I think it was very new in Denmark at that point. I remember my friends and I were very excited about it.

For how long have you followed ASOS on social media – and on which social media channels do you follow ASOS?

I guess about three years and I follow them mainly on Instagram and also watch some of their YouTube videos. I know they also have a Facebook page.

Do you follow ASOS on Facebook?

I'm not sure, but I don't think so. Perhaps I have at one point, but I often follow and unfollow pages according to what I like to receive information about.

How do you benefit from following ASOS on social media and purchasing their products?

I scroll a lot through my Instagram, so I often overlook things that doesn't bother me. But I like when ASOS and other brands shares outfits that other users have shared. Because it gives me a better idea of how the clothing fits in real life, rather than when they share some edited model picture. I also recently came across ASOS' photo editing fail, where they forgot to edit out the clips, that were making the models dress fit better. I know this is something most fashion stores do to make the clothing look nicer in pictures, so therefore I like when I can see the clothes on a "real" person.

Do you feel like ASOS engages with you on their social media channels? (inviting you to comment, upload you own content etc.)

Probably, it isn't something I seek when I use social media. I usually don't comment or engages much with brands on social media. I mainly comment on my friend's posts. The times I have commented on brands' social media posts, it has often been because I had a question, for example about delivery, an order or a product. I often find you get a quick answer by contacting that way and I think it's great. So, if I ever have a question for ASOS about a product or the like, it might well be that I would try to contact them on Instagram.

Are you positive towards ASOS communicating their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiatives on social media?

I'm afraid it's an unpopular attitude - but it's not something I think that much about. I think many companies share things about how well they do this and that. But it can be difficult to look beyond that and know who is speaking true or false.

Do you think ASOS' frequent use of celebrities on social media is a good thing?

I think there is a reason that they keep doing it. I study economics and business administration, so I'm pretty well aware of how and why celebrities are often used for commercial purposes. I'm really into keeping up with various celebrities, and many of my friends feel the same way. We love watching shows like Paradise Hotel and Forsidefruere when it's on tv. I also read the ASOS magazine and watch their videos on YouTube a lot because they're often about celebrities and gossip in combination with fashion. It doesn't get better than that.

Respondent #5 (female)

For how long have you been an ASOS customer?

Perhaps the past five years.

For how long have you followed ASOS on social media – and on which social media channels do you follow ASOS?

I think for almost as long as I have been a customer - so five years. I follow ASOS on both Facebook and Instagram.

How do you benefit from following ASOS on social media and purchasing their products?

I like buying products on ASOS, there's really much to choose from and I love browsing sale items. The perfect thing about ASOS is that I can return products for free. I really like to try on clothes at home rather than in a small fitting room, where you often have to wait in line and I find it being very stressful.

Regarding their social media, I mainly follow them for fashion inspiration or if there are some great sales. I guess that's the way I benefit from it.

Do you feel like ASOS engages with you on their social media channels? (inviting you to comment, upload you own content etc.)

Yes, I know they do that a lot I'm kind of passive on social media, but I like to read their posts and I often read other people's comments.

Have you ever uploaded pictures of yourself on Instagram with ASOS hashtags?

No, I'm way too shy for that. I only like it when my friends see the pictures I upload. My friend does it sometimes, but I'm afraid to do it.

Are you positive towards ASOS communicating their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiatives on social media?

I love when brands draw attention to their CSR initiatives on Social Media, they often do it in a different, more fun and easier understandable way. I recently discovered ASOS recycled lingerie, which are made from recycled materials. I think that's a pretty cool way to make a difference.

Do you think ASOS' frequent use of celebrities on social media is a good thing?

Most of the celebrities that appear on social media I have no clue who they are. I guess it would make it more interesting for someone who were really into the life of celebrities, but I usually don't really look twice.

Respondent #6 (male)

For how long have you been an ASOS customer?

6-8 years I think

For how long have you followed ASOS on social media – and on which social media channels do you follow ASOS?

I watch some of their YouTube videos and follow them on Instagram and Twitter as well, but I don't really use my Twitter profile that much.

How do you benefit from following ASOS on social media and purchasing their products?

I don't know how I benefit from following them on social media. By buying their products - I benefit in the way that they have a broad selection of items.

Do you feel that you align yourself with the ASOS brand when you buy and wear their products?

I guess you can say that. I'm more product-oriented I like to believe, but I suppose that some of their branding and advertisement may make me align myself with them subconsciously, its hard to say.

Do you feel like ASOS engages with you on their social media channels? (inviting you to comment, upload you own content etc.)

Yes, sure. They make many posts asking for the user's opinion and such, and they are very active on Instagram.

Are you positive towards ASOS communicating their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiatives on social media?

I think many companies do it. It's funny because I think a few started doing it more than others to differentiate themselves. Then, everyone else caught on and now it's nothing special anymore. Now it has become a necessity because a lot of younger people don't want to support businesses that are not communicating CSR. I'm not an opponent of CSR I think it really important to have a focus on these things. I just can't help but think that companies do it only do it because of their image and profits. The challenges we face in regard to pollution and terrible working conditions has become a point of

advertisement, I think. The only thing I can respect are companies who performs a measurable effort to address these things.

Do you think ASOS’ frequent use of celebrities on social media is a good thing?

I believe it is always good publicity to make celebrities advertise for your products. I know ASOS does many interviews with celebrities in their videos. I watch Game of Thrones whenever a new episode comes out, and I think it was funny too see Alfie Allen in an ASOS interview. It was weird seeing those two things come together. I’m also a huge Star Wars nerd, so it was also surprising when ASOS uploaded a video with the Star Wars cast on their YouTube channel.

ASOS Social media communication samples

7.3 Audience engagement

7.3.1 Twitter

7.3.1.1: Twitter post, 24/03/2019



7.3.2 Facebook

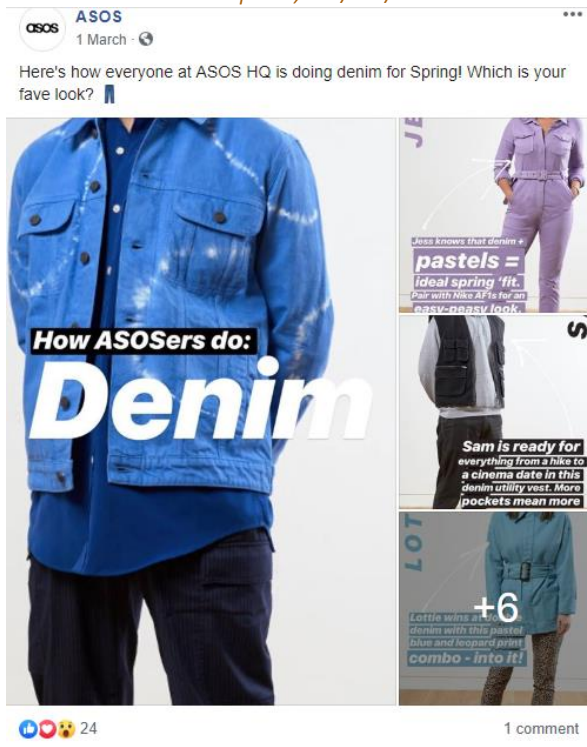
7.3.2.1: Facebook post, 12/03/2019



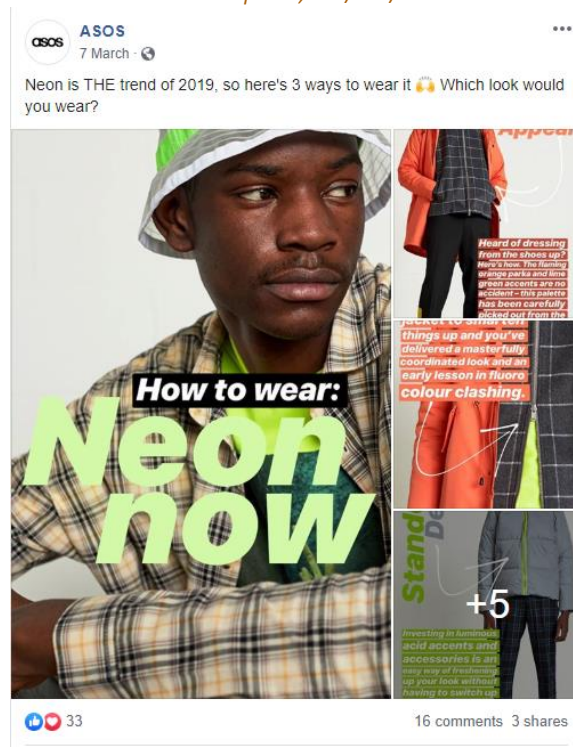
7.3.2.2: Facebook post, 27/02/2019



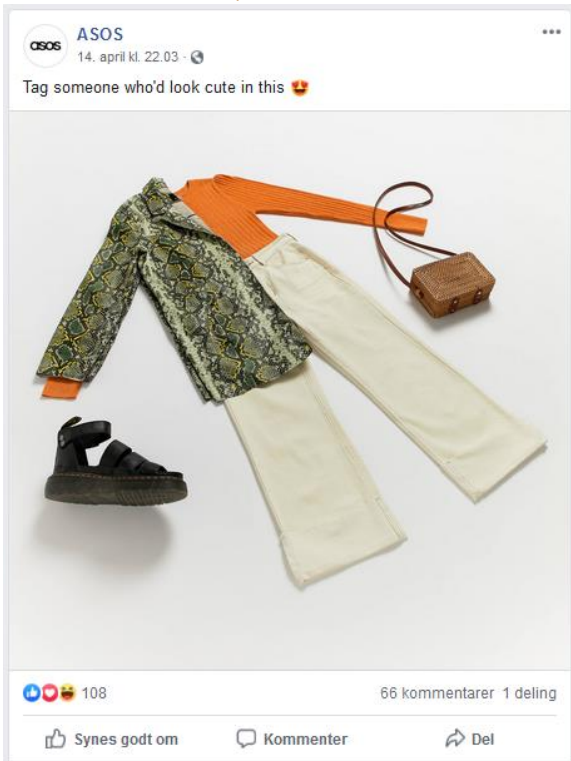
7.3.2.3: Facebook post, 01/03/2019



7.3.2.4: Facebook post, 07/03/2019



7.3.2.5: Facebook post, 14/04/2019



7.3.3 Instagram

7.3.3.1 Instagram post, 03/05/2019



The image shows a screenshot of an Instagram post from the account 'asos'. On the left is a photograph of a woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing black sunglasses and a bright green and black snake-print denim jacket. On the right is the post's interface, which includes the ASOS profile name, a caption, a search result for the jacket, and two comments from users 'meet_patel_9537' and 'mercedeslanore'. The post has 14,926 likes and was posted on May 3rd.

asos • Følger

asos When you hear someone open a pack of doughnuts in the office 😊

ASOS DESIGN snake-print denim jacket (1446090)

Image description: model wearing sunglasses and a snake-print jacket

1 u.

meet_patel_9537 Cool 🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌 🤔

1 u. 202 Synes godt om Svar

mercedeslanore Lmao. Did not expect that caption!

1 u. 2 Synes godt om Svar

14.926 Synes godt om

3. MAJ

Tilføj en kommentar ... Slå op

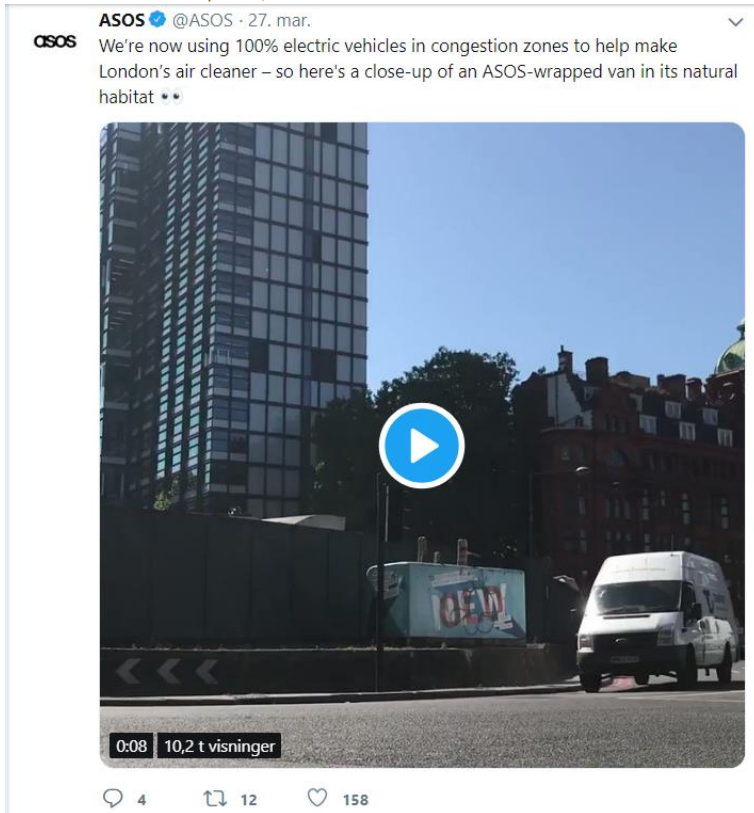
7.4 Sustainability and supply chain transparency

7.4.1 Twitter

7.4.1.1: Twitter post, 28/08/2018



7.4.1.2: Twitter post, 27/03/2019

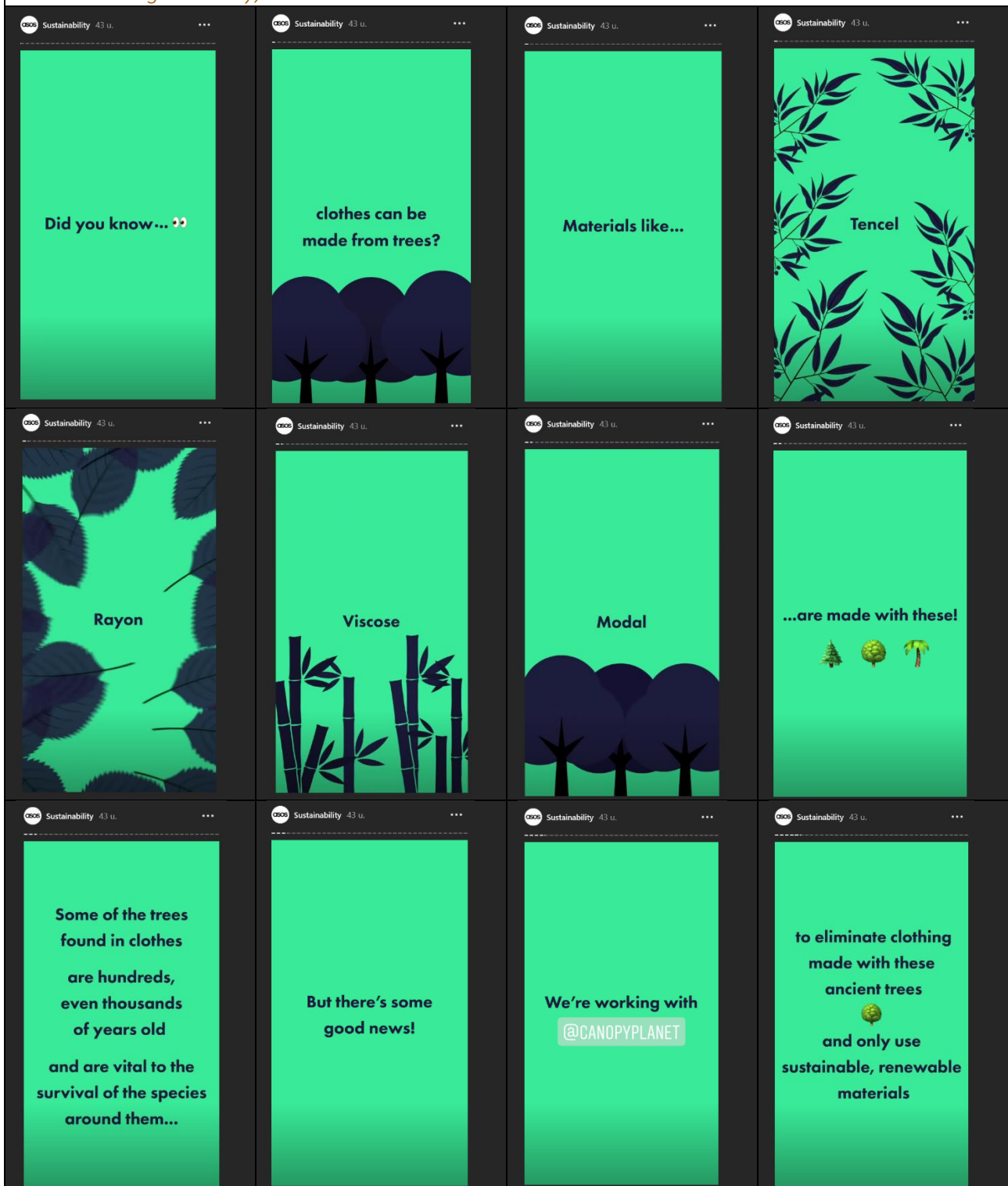


7.4.1.3: Twitter post, 20/06/2018

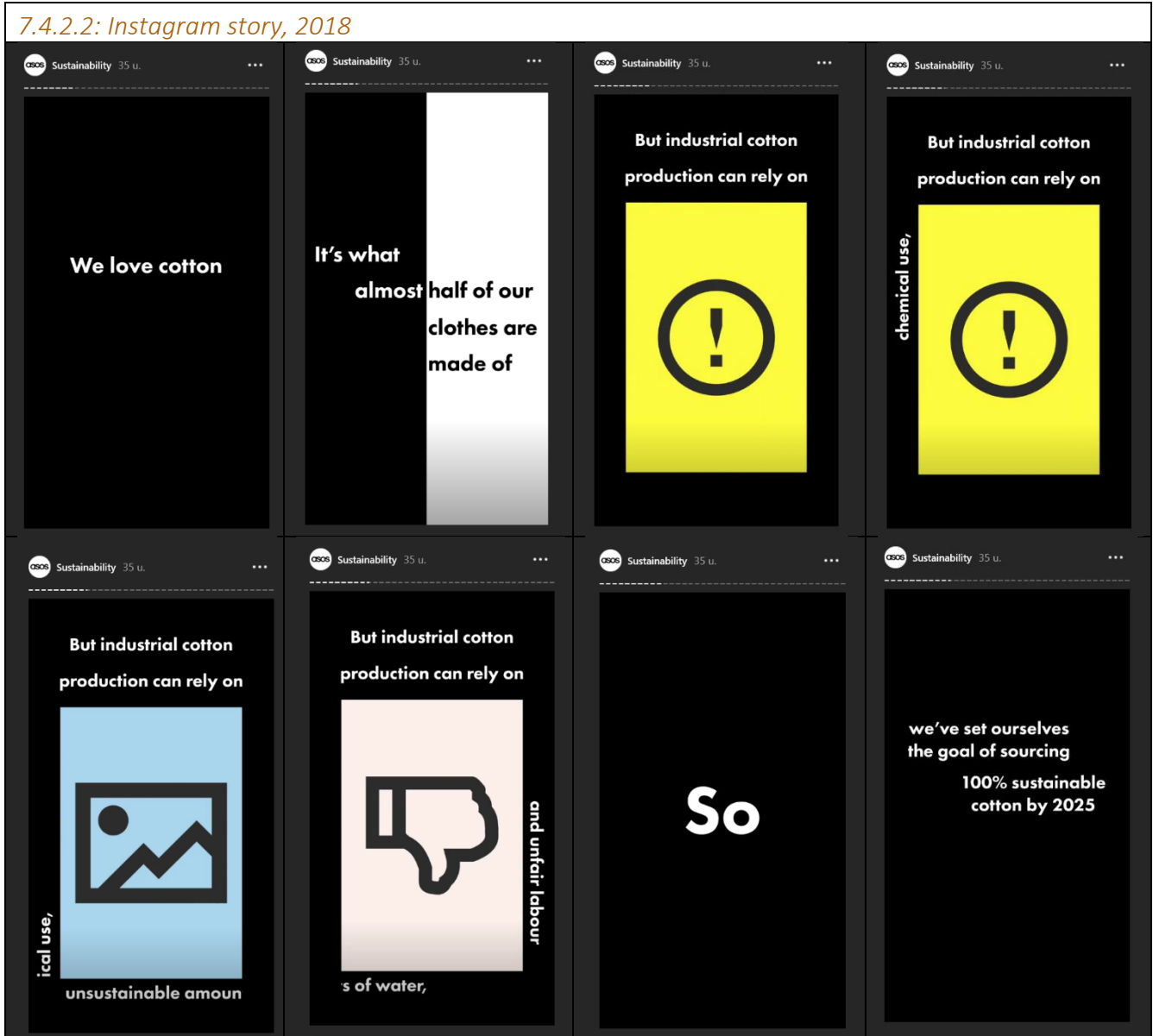


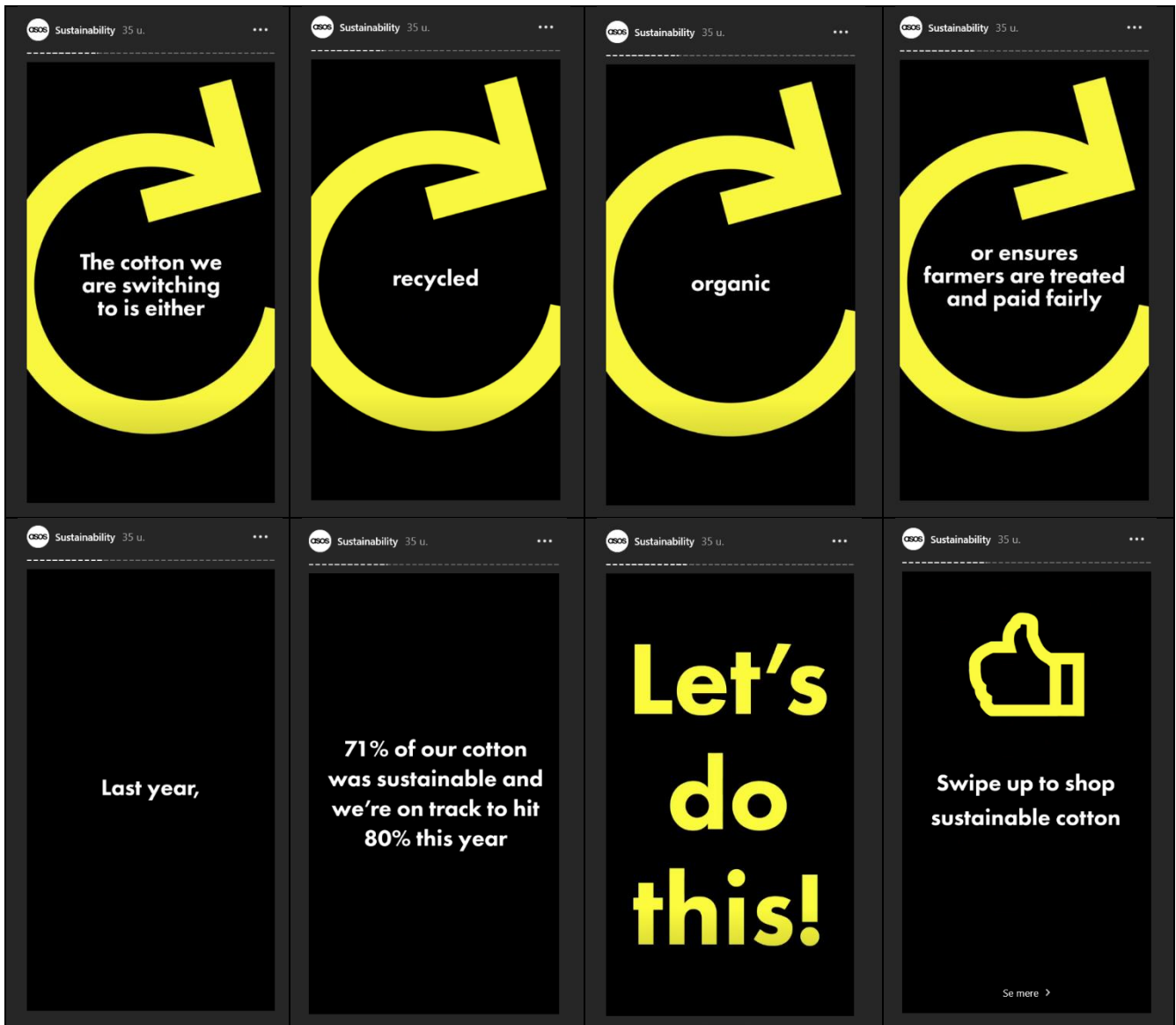
7.4.2 Instagram

7.4.2.1: Instagram story, 2018

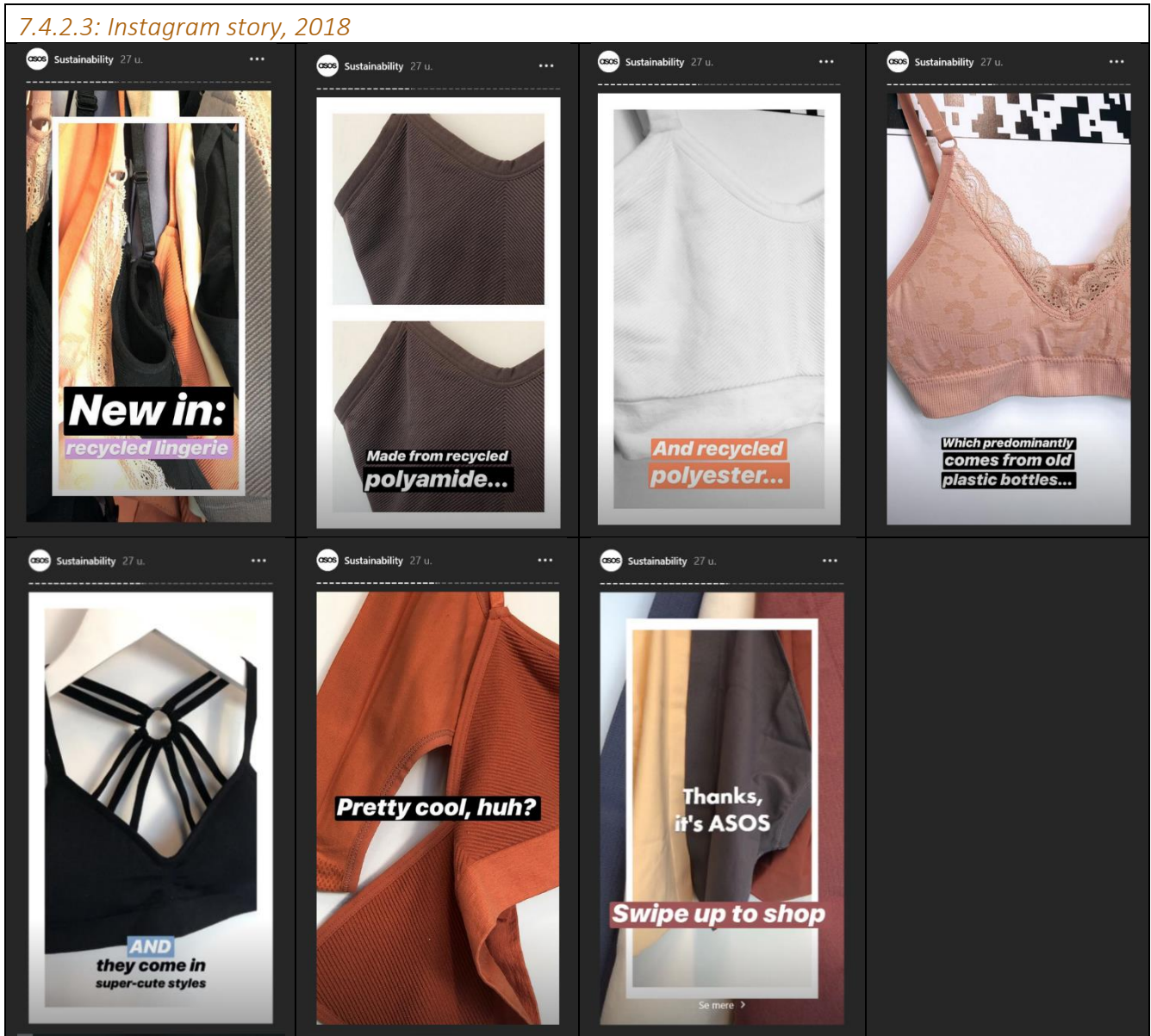


7.4.2.2: Instagram story, 2018





7.4.2.3: Instagram story, 2018



7.5 Social accountability

7.5.1 Twitter

7.5.1.1: Twitter post, 09/03/2018

ASOS @ASOS · 9. mar. 2018

Being (and looking) fearless! We loved seeing @ParalympicsGB in their ASOS kit at the Opening Ceremony ✨

ParalympicsGB @ParalympicsGB
📸 | Backstage, being fearless.



1 4 43

7.5.1.2: Twitter post

And here's the fabulous Team @ASOS with Rugby Legend Craig Chalmers @Chick_Chalmers and Golf Pro Kelly Tidy @kellylouise92 Thank you all for supporting @VarietyGB to transform the lives of disabled and disadvantaged children 🌟🌟

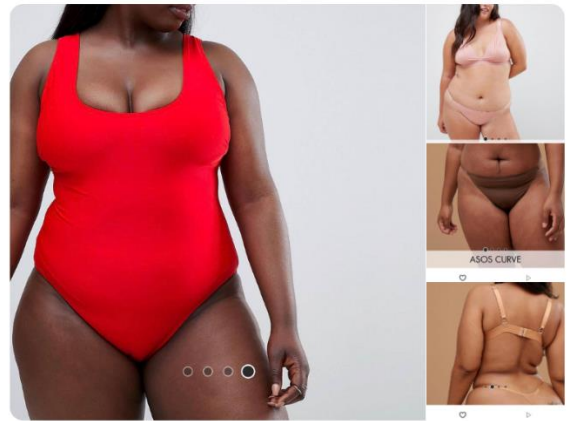


2 7 19

7.5.1.3: Twitter post, 11/09/2018

sophia @SophiaTassew · 11. sep. 2018

@ASOS are really doing an amazing job with showing a range of bodies on their curve section. I'm so happy that a new generation of women and girls get to experience this because it has such an amazing impact. Thank you x100.



2 156 899

7.5.1.4: Twitter post, 19/10/2018

ASOS @ASOS · 19. okt. 2018

We're proud to be supporting Stonewall's #ComeOutForTransEquality campaign. Together, we want everyone to have the confidence to be whoever they want to be.

jr trans family, ies, customers inds,

Stonewall @stonewalluk
Incredible 🌈 Over 100 organisations from business, charity & public sectors have come together today to show our unwavering support for trans equality. Want to help? Fill in the government's #GRA consultation today to ...

9 18 113

7.5.1.5: Twitter post, 07/08/2019

ASOS @ASOS · 7. aug. 2018

ASOSer Mike and his footy team crushed it at the @GayGames in Paris (wearing custom ASOS polo shirts, obv 🙌)



14

7.5.1.6: Twitter post, 28/07/2018

ASOS @ASOS · 28. jul. 2018

ALL LOVE 🌈❤️



2 29 285

7.5.1.7: Twitter post, 04/04/2018

ASOS @ASOS · 4. apr. 2018

♥♥♥♥♥

Help Refugees @HelpRefugees

The #chooselove movement continues to inspire us every day. All profits go straight to the front lines of the refugee crisis. We're so grateful to all of you who wear your @katharinehamnett t-shirt with pride , keep tagging...

3 29

7.5.1.8: Twitter post, 08/03/2019



7.5.1.9: Twitter post, 09/03/2018



7.5.1.10: Twitter post, 08/03/2019



7.5.1.11: Twitter post, 09/07/2018

ASOS @ASOS · 9. jul. 2018
Watch Joy unpack her ASOS order ahead of London Pride on our IGTV [instagram.com/asos/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/asos/?hl=en)



Joy Miessi @JoyMiessi
Wearing my Unity tshirt collab w @ASOS X @glaad and spending #pride with my fave people 🌞🌈

1 19

7.5.2 Facebook

7.5.2.1: Facebook post, 03/03/2019

ASOS
3 May at 08:59 · 🌐

The 2019 GLAAD collection just dropped and it involves a whole lotta neon
🌈
🔍 Search 'GLAAD' on ASOS



👍👍👍 227
148 comments 4 shares

7.5.2.2: Facebook post, 19/03/2019

ASOS
19 March · 🌐

Love, ASOS x



We want you to know that ASOS is a judgement-free zone.

It's a safe, supportive platform where people can experiment with their style and be themselves no matter what.

So let's keep anything offensive out of our community.

ASOS

👍👍👍 2.6K
206 comments 12 shares

7.5.3 Instagram

7.5.3.1: Instagram post



7.6 #AsSeenOnMe

7.6.1: Instagram post, may 2019



The image shows an Instagram post from the account 'asos'. The main visual is a man in a white t-shirt with a colorful graphic, holding a black smartphone. The text 'AS SEEN ON YOU' is overlaid on the image. The post includes the ASOS logo, a description of the 'As seen on you' feature, and user comments.

asos • Følger

asos As seen on you: the @glaad 2019 collection 🌈. Feat. a whole lot of neon!
🔍 Search 'GLAAD' on ASOS
📄 Image description: ASOS Insiders wearing the new ASOS DESIGN x glad& collection

2 d.

akumu When are gonna restock the ASOS Design Silver Padlock necklace? :(

2 d. 8 Synes godt om Svar

— Vis svar (1)

kattarias *Tap to view model*

11.126 Synes godt om
FOR 2 DAGE SIDEN

Tilføj en kommentar ... Slå op

7.6.2: Instagram post, may 2019



7.6.3: Instagram post, may 2019



7.6.4: Instagram post, may 2019



The image shows a woman standing on a paved street, wearing a white long-sleeved top and a black and white cow-print slip skirt. She is holding a small green object. The background shows a residential street with trees and houses under a clear blue sky. The text "AS SEEN" is written vertically in yellow on the left side of the image, and "ON YOU" is written vertically in yellow on the right side. The ASOS logo is visible in the bottom left corner of the image.

asos • Følger

asos As seen on you: THAT cow-print skirt

ASOS DESIGN cow-print slip skirt (1449569)

Image description: various people wearing the cow-print slip skirt

1 u.

queerritated So when are all ASOS designs going to be available in all sizes? Not just "variations" or "similar items" but literally the same thing, but bigger. Everything you design should be available to all bodies.

6 d. 13 Synes godt om Svar

— Vis svar (4)

10.751 Synes godt om

FOR 7 DAGE SIDEN

Tilføj en kommentar ... Slå op

7.7 Celebrity endorsement

7.7.1 Twitter

7.7.1.1: Twitter post, 13/13/2018



7.7.1.2: Twitter post, 08/04/2019



7.7.1.3: Twitter post, 08/04/2019



7.7.2 YouTube

Links to ASOS' Youtube videos featuring celebrity endorsement (ASOSMeets)

Nicola Peltz: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dti18ZuLbE>

Alfie Allen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNyO85rtA-c>

Zoe Kravitz: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuF4adjg3P4>

Will Poulter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fa8eHRXFu4>

Star Wars cast: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-gras6Eeg4>

7.8 Lack of control

7.8.1 Facebook

7.8.1.1: Facebook post, 29/03/2019

ASOS
29. marts · 🌐

Here's how everyone at ASOS HQ is re-styling pieces from the spring '19 issue of ASOS Magazine – which look is your fave?

How we do:
ASOS Mag SS19

ASOS DESIGN Trousers

Matt pairs these three items from the magazine with an overcoat in a formal colourway, matching boots from the magazine and a white tee. Serious 70s-inspired swag.

+10
ASOS DESIGN Blazer

22 likes · 10 kommentarer · 2 delinger

Synes godt om · Kommenter · Del

Most relevante

- Din kommentar ...
- Ben Rose I'm waiting for the one hero at ASOS who still has a sense of style to take a photo of those trousers in the bin.
Synes godt om · Svar · 5 u · 1 svar
- Ashley Charnley its awful, all of it, the people who work there that think this looks good need a bollocking. all the trousers are to short and all the clothes look to big , its dreadful. so many good clothes in your catalogue, such a shame
Synes godt om · Svar · 5 u

7.8.1.2: Facebook post, 2019

Plz respect the perimeter of the fresh white tracksuit 🙏
👟 Reebok tracksuit (coming soon)

56 likes · 12 comments



Like · Comment · Share



Most relevant





- Write a comment...
- Ben Freeman Perfect for the job centre!
Like · Reply · 3w · 5
- Ben Rose Please respect the perimeter of any bellend wearing something like this.
Like · Reply · 3w · 6

7.8.1.3: Various Facebook comments, 2019

- Paloma Benvenuto-Brine Save planet Earth, don't buy clothes 🍏
Like · Reply · 3w · 2
- Amandio Lemos 14 days so far!!!!!!!!!!!!
No items
No money
No answers
Like · Reply · 3w · 2

 **Amandio Lemos** 12 days later and nothing
Like · Reply · 3w   2

 **Amandio Lemos** Thieves!!!!
Like · Reply · 3w   2

 **Michael Dent** The sweater vest may be fine but what is going on with the pose for this? Photographer should be embarrassed to submit this.
Like · Reply · 1w    25

7.8.1.4: Facebook post, 2019



   420 38 comments 5 shares

Like Comment Share

Most relevant ▾

Write a comment...

 **Helene Krossvoll** Guess Asos is done with alot of Norwegian customers. I cant afford anything from there. Earlier I could buy a dress for 325NOK and just pay that. Earlier I could buy a dress for 325NOK and just pay that. Now the same dress would have costed me 720NOK because of toll and shipping..
Like · Reply · 7w   3

7.8.2 Instagram



 **asos** • Følger
Palm Springs, California

23 t. Svar

 **nick25276** they look good
23 t. Svar

 **tonysettliff** Just awfulwomen choking their hearts...killing themselves ...and bragging on it .
21 t. Svar

 **rac0361rac** Totally gross and 100% unhealthy. No one need s to be that lazy and stuff their face with MD's everyday.
21 t. 1 Synes godt om Svar

— Vis svar (1)

 Synes godt om fra christierpn og 79.725 andre
29. MARTS

Tilføj en kommentar ... Slå op

