

# Sharing personal experiences and online consumer engagement: A case study of Glossier

Ashley Paintsil<sup>a</sup> and Hye-Shin Kim<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Communication, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, USA

<sup>b</sup>Department of Fashion and Apparel Studies, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, USA

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## Abstract

Social media has become influential in the fashion and beauty marketplace where digital communication centers around consumer interests in products and brands. This case study examines how sharing of personal experiences on the digital communication platforms of the Glossier beauty brand influences consumer engagement in an online brand community. In-depth interviews of thirteen consumers of the Glossier brand and its social media channels were conducted. The qualitative method allows the researchers to capture the rich context of the consumer experience and the social reality of online community members through their own words. This case study offers insight into how social media communication, moving beyond simple product reviews, allows a direct-to-consumer brand to effectively leverage the personal experiences of their consumers as a catalyst for learning, advocating for the brand, co-developing the brand, and building consumer and brand relationships. A new perspective from Brodie et al.'s consumer engagement model highlights key interrelated processes that evolve from the sharing of consumer experiences and adding value to building a robust brand community.

## Introduction and background

*“Experience is a master teacher, even when it’s not our own.”* Greenlee (2008)

Social media has emerged as a prevalent form of digital communication in the fashion and beauty marketplace where consumers freely share their perceptions and feelings about a product or brand (Escobar-Rodríguez & Bonsón-Fernández, 2017). The personal experiences of consumers shared online are influential in how other shoppers perceive products and make decisions (Braverman, 2008). As consumer experiences are becoming highly valued, businesses are leveraging the interpersonal engagement of their customers on social media to strengthen their own brand relationships with the customer and increase profitability (Jaakkola et al., 2014; Kim & Ko, 2010). Within the past decade, scholars have called for more research on online brand communities that focus on communication within a social context among consumers (De Valck et al., 2009). Although studies have examined consumer engagement within a broader context of

consumer interactions that creates value to online brand communities (e.g. Blasco-Arcas et al., 2016; Connell et al., 2019; Cooper et al., 2019), there is little research that focuses on how personal experiences support the engagement process. Given the growing beauty industry's reliance on social media, this case study adds to the current body of knowledge of consumer engagement in social media by analyzing the pivotal role of shared consumer experiences of the Glossier beauty brand.

Glossier, a New York-based beauty brand first debuted online as a direct-to-consumer brand. Glossier offers consumers a specialized selection of beauty products at moderate price points and frequently releases small product collections to sustain consumer interest and meet their needs (Bhuiyan, 2018; Hassett, 2018). With direct-to-consumer brands such as Glossier, user interaction on Instagram and other social media channels such as Twitter and Facebook are important communication tools for engaging the consumer. Customers provide instantaneous feedback through social media regarding the brand's products and brands interact with consumers online and use consumer feedback to develop products that appeal to their consumers (Sherman, 2016). Social media, through word-of-mouth, has given direct-to-consumer brands the ability to build brand recognition without a physical store presence or a traditional marketing strategy (Grechko, 2017). Glossier focuses on aspirational realness, a strategy that uses "*real* women showing the products in *real* locations, supported by a mode of direct address that seems refreshingly *real* in another way, by the writing assuming the familiar tone of a girlfriend" (Findlay, 2019, p. 554). Modern luxury brands such as Glossier quietly rely on social clout and credibility to drive revenue instead of marketing campaigns more likely to be associated with status logos and celebrity endorsements (Munford, 2017). Glossier leverages authentic user generated content on social media to facilitate the creation and continuity of consumer-brand relationships (Bhuiyan, 2018; Rogers, 2018). Direct-to-consumer brands have special appeal to millennial consumers who integrate online shopping and social media into their lifestyle (Hays, 2018; Sherman, 2016). The majority (72%) of millennials buy fashion and beauty products based on Instagram posts (Arnold, 2017) and view product information from peers to be trustworthy (Smith, 2011). Using Brodie et al.'s (2013) consumer engagement model as the conceptual framework, this case study examines how the personal experiences of consumers is an important catalyst for engagement in Glossier's online community. The qualitative methods of the case study captures the first-hand responses of the beauty brand's consumers of how personal experiences contribute to their engagement in the online brand community.

### **1.1. Consumer engagement and conceptual framework**

Consumer engagement is key to the success of direct-to-consumer brands (Hays, 2018; Munford, 2017). Appelbaum (2001) defines consumer engagement as the ability of brands to create "emotionally attached consumers" (para. 11). Brodie et al. (2011) describe consumer engagement as a mental state that consumers assume when they interact with a brand, product or organization. Engaged consumers display their brand experiences and emotional attachments through word-of-mouth activities such as writing reviews or posting about the brand online through social media or blog posts (Brodie et al., 2013; Kim & Ko, 2010). Consumer engagement is foundational to brand loyalty

which influences consumers' overall brand satisfaction, intent to repurchase, and propensity to recommend products from a brand (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Hawkins & Prakash, 2013). Past studies have examined consumer engagement from various industry viewpoints (e.g. Luo et al., 2019; Roncha & Radcliffe-Thomas, 2016; Touni et al., 2019).

Brodie et al.'s (2013) consumer engagement model offers a strong conceptual framework for explaining the value of consumer-to-consumer interaction across brands' online platforms. Brodie et al. (2013) postulates that consumer engagement begins when consumers execute an online search for a needed product or service and find an associated online community. An interactive relationship is developed among consumers when consumers post comments on the brand's online and social media channels. This interaction leads to five engagement sub-processes of "learning," "sharing," "advocating," "socializing" and "co-developing" (Brodie et al., 2013). Learning refers to consumers' acquisition of brand knowledge which is used to inform their purchase decisions. Sharing takes place when consumers share personal information, knowledge and experiences with their online community. Brand knowledge is co-created when consumers participate in sharing (Brodie et al., 2013). Advocating ensues when consumers recommend products and services and how to use the brand's offerings. Socializing is the two-way interactions of consumers used to acquire and develop community norms, attitudes and language of the online community. Co-development arises when consumers in online communities contribute to brand activities, which in turn, helps brands develop new products, brands, services, brand identities or brand meanings (Brodie et al., 2013). These five sub-processes are linked to loyalty and satisfaction, empowerment, connection and emotional bonds, and trust and commitment that consumers experience in an online brand community (Brodie et al., 2013).

## ***1.2. Consumer interaction and sharing of personal experiences***

Humans are keen on developing interpersonal relationships and brand communities offer a space for these relationships to develop within the context of a consumption activity (e.g. Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chen et al., 2019; Luo et al., 2019). Baumeister and Leary (1995) theorize that human beings are driven to form and maintain interpersonal relationships. User generated content in fashion trigger relational, interactive and emotional experiences among consumers (Vazquez et al., 2020). Additionally, the concept of social proof in that "we determine what is correct by finding out what other people think is correct" (Cialdini, 2009, p. 97) pushes consumers to seek out the personal experiences of other users to determine the merits and usage of a particular brand.

From a fashion perspective, user generated content within online communities offers a way for users to visually present personal tastes and styles while offering an authentic portrayal of how products can be incorporated within a lifestyle. The relational experiences stem from the socialization with other users in the brand community where users feel a sense of belonging and receive affirmation of personal self (Pentina et al., 2011). As such, social interactions among users strengthen their bonds within the community. Dholakia et al. (2004) state that the extent to which consumers value social interactions and interpersonal connectivity determines consumers' engagement. These interpersonal bonds are also evidenced in online brand communities which provide an outlet for

individuals to socially interact with a broader range of users who share similar interests and discuss their experiences with the brand and products and beyond (Banerjee & Banerjee, 2015; Chen et al., 2019; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010).

The quality of customer interactions are essential to the engagement in online brand communities (Kang et al., 2014). When learning about brands, consumers favor knowledge gained from the personal experience of other users and consider it to be more trustworthy compared to mass-media generated messages (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). In addition, the knowledge consumers contribute through their own personal experiences with the brand can impact the purchase decisions of other consumers (Sloan et al., 2015). In fact, Jaakkola et al. (2014) note people tend to seek personal experiences related to a product more than actually contributing to the knowledge base.

Consumer engagement is important in an online brand community because of its ability to co-create value for the brand. Consumers have transformed the traditional business process by actively participating in the marketing process through interacting with other consumers (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In addition, Glossier's brand community is an example of where consumers go beyond advocating through their online contributions and progress on to participating in developing products. As noted by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), "consumers now seek to exercise their influence in every part of the business system". Indeed, consumers are unique contributors to the brand community as their respective brand experiences are an important part of creating value. Consumers and the creators of brands have become more collaborative as online brand communities offer an efficient and effective way for the two parties to communicate (Minkiewicz et al., 2014). Roncha and Radclyffe-Thomas (2016) note the need to derive "trust, commitment, and emotional responses" (p. 315) as part of the brand's strategy to engage consumers. The sharing of personal experiences with others in the brand community carry the aforementioned attributes of consumer engagement.

Through qualitative research, this case study allows the researcher to understand the rich context and sharing of personal experiences pivotal to consumer engagement on the Glossier brand's social media. Using this phenomenological approach, researchers are able to capture a fuller picture of the consumer experience and the social reality of online community members being studied through their own words and accounts of how they participate in the online community (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). As such, this study seeks to explain how sharing of personal experiences feeds into engagement. The following research question was examined: *How does sharing of personal experiences on social media influence consumer engagement in an online brand community?*

## **2. Methodology and data collection**

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted during a two month period in 2019. Study participation was solicited from consumers born between 1990 and 1999 who use Glossier's social media channels including Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. According to Verduyn et al. (2017), active usage on social media refers to "activities that facilitate direct exchanges with others" compared to passive observers that do not engage directly with others (p. 281). In order to identify active users of Glossier's social media and Glossier consumers, individuals who own at least one Glossier product and browse or post on Glossier's website and social media channels on average once a week for at

least six months were initially identified. Using purposive and snowball non-probability techniques (Blackstone, 2012), 22 users were contacted by the researcher through direct messaging on Glossier's social media channels and 13 participants who met the user requirements participated in the study. Interview findings confirmed participants were active users as defined by Verduyn et al. (2017). The interview protocol which incorporated components of Brodie et al.'s (2013) consumer engagement model was used to guide the interview and probe the participants. For example, in order to examine "learning" as defined in Brodie et al.'s model, the researcher asked *How do you learn about Glossier products on social media?* With follow up questions such as *Do you look for product information about Glossier products on their social media pages? Do you post questions about Glossier's products? And do you ask other Glossier users questions about the products?* Probing ensured the reliability of data and allowed for clarification of answers. Probing also allowed the researchers with opportunities to build rapport with the participants and reduce socially desirable answers (Barriball & While, 1994; Hutchinson & Skodol-Wilson, 1992; Patton, 1990). The length of each interview was 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and auto-transcribed via the Zoom video conferencing system. The automated transcriptions were reviewed to check for accuracy. A coding guide was jointly developed by the two researchers to identify and classify the sharing of personal experiences in relation to Brodie et al.'s (2013) conceptual framework. NVIVO 12.0 was used to code the 13 interview transcripts. Two researchers independently coded four (>25%) transcripts using the coding guide resulting in an inter-rater reliability (Kappa coefficient) of 98.75%.

### 3. Results and discussion

Charmaz's (2006) saturation principle was used to determine the sample size for the study. There is no specific guideline for the required number of interviews for qualitative studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The participant profile is summarized in Table 1. Most of the participants (76.92%) chose Glossier as one of their favourite beauty brands. Study participants spent 50 USD-\$1,000 on beauty products and 32 USD-\$300 on Glossier products within a six-month period. Participants followed Glossier on social media 6 months to 5 years and used Glossier products 7 months to 4 years.

Eleven participants identified as female and two as male. Glossier markets itself as a gender-neutral beauty brand that invites both male and female consumers to participate in the female-dominated beauty industry (What it's like to be a guy at Glossier, n.d.). Participants' ages were 19–28 years (mean = 23.8). Although millennials are born 1981–1996, two participants born in 1999 (Carter and Sandra) were included. A majority of participants were employed in professional occupations (69.23%) and obtained bachelor's degrees (61.54%). Most of the participants (61.54%) resided in the United States and the remainder resided in Canada, England, Singapore and France. Pseudonyms are used in the case study to ensure anonymity.

Glossier encourages consumer-to-consumer exchanges on its social media platforms through posts based on user generated content. Additionally, Glossier engages in brand relationships with its consumers by directly responding to consumer comments or concerns. Consumers feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences with Glossier directly on social media and the brand values their input when

Table 1. Participant profile.

Participant <sup>a</sup>	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Years GlossSM <sup>b</sup>	Years Gloss <sup>c</sup>	Favorite Beauty Brands
Angela	Female	23	Bachelors	Student	3	2	Glossier, Clinique
Stacy	Female	26	Bachelors	Family Advocate	2	2	Kate Somerville, Glossier, Sunday Riley, The Ordinary, Clinique
Kira	Female	25	Bachelors	Opera Singer	3	3	Kat Von D Beauty, Milk Makeup, Make Beauty, Glossier, Color Pop
Carter	Male	19	High Sch.	Student	1.5	2	Glossier, Morphe Cosmetics, Jeffree Star Cosmetics, NARS Cosmetics
William (Canada)	Male	25	Bachelors	Store Associate	2.5	4	Ole Henriksen, Glossier
Dana (England)	Female	22	Bachelors	Mental Health Associate	2.5	2	Fenty Beauty, Dior Beauty, Revolution Beauty, Morphe Cosmetics, Glossier, Body Shop, Clinique
Morgan	Female	22	Bachelors	Teacher	1.5	3	Glossier, Color Pop, The Ordinary
Rachel (France)	Female	22	High Sch.	Student	5	2	Glossier, La-Roche Posay, The Ordinary
Renee (England)	Female	28	Bachelors	Beauty Buyer	5	1	SkinCeuticals, Votary, Lumière, May Lindstrom
Esther	Female	27	Masters	Special Ed. Teacher	2	2	Bobbi Brown, Kiko, Chantecaille
Shandi	Female	22	Bachelors	Online Editor	5	1	Kat Von D Beauty, Glossier, Urban Decay
Sandra (Singapore)	Female	20	High Sch.	Student	6 mo.	7 mo.	Youth To The People, Sunday Riley, Glossier, Drunk Elephant, Dennis Gross, Krave Beauty
Laura	Female	28	Masters	Project Coordinator	1.5	1	Tatcha, SK-II, Drunk Elephant
							Dr. Jart +

<sup>a</sup>Participant pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity. Also, participants whose country affiliation are not indicated are from the USA. <sup>b</sup> Years GlossSM = Years using Glossier social media. <sup>c</sup> Years Gloss = Years using Glossier products.

developing and curating their products and services. Glossier's Instagram and Facebook served as the main platforms to share personal experiences, learn about products and further build Glossier's online community. Participants identified Instagram as the preferred platform to engage with the brand community. Instagram features such as the "Send to", "Comments", "Tagging", and "Stories" functionalities promote sharing and discussion, which in turn facilitate community building. In addition to Instagram, Glossier's branded beauty chat group, Into the Gloss hosted on Facebook, also served as a place to learn about Glossier products. The Into the Gloss Facebook group is an offshoot of the Into the Gloss blog where beauty enthusiasts can discuss their experiences with beauty products. Participants noted user posts to be important in learning about Glossier products and Instagram provided a space for consumers to ask questions. Participants used Instagram posts to keep up with new products and seek information for their purchases. Social media is used to learn about novel ways of using products or the appropriateness of products for different personal conditions.

I usually will watch reviews for their skin products [. . .] I follow people who use Glossier products, an influencer or a friend [. . .] because I like to research what I'm getting. (Carter)

I'll go look at their Instagram, or I'll type in hashtag Glossier and see if anybody else has tried the new shade of something and search through their posts. (Morgan)

### ***3.1. Sharing personal experiences in the online community***

Throughout the interviews, participants noted the importance of the personal experiences of users and their sense of obligation to share. Participants were excited to share their Glossier purchase on social media in various ways. Findings support past studies that note personal experiences are considered to be more reliable and trustworthy (e.g. Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Roncha & Radclyffe-Thomas, 2016). Also, evidenced is the emotional aspect of users' desire to help others by answering product and brand related questions which bonds users within a community bond beyond a transactional business relationship (Vazquez et al., 2020). For example, Dana shares unboxing videos on Instagram and Angela announces her new order of Glossier products on Twitter. Brand knowledge is co-created when consumers participate in sharing their personal experiences resulting in a culmination of brand and product information (Brodie et al., 2013). Sharing first-hand experiences, including sharing personal information was the main way participants engaged on Glossier's social media. Participants were more likely to share their brand and product experience when others needed help understanding the product's costs or benefits. Even participants who were not actively seeking opportunities to share their personal experiences with the product did contribute when they felt inclined to help others understand the brand's product.

If there's a question and I'll try to [answer] with my personal experience with the product [...] I would talk about how I use the product. (Carter)

It's not something that I actively seek out, but if people have questions, and I know the answer to them because I've dealt with those questions, I will respond to them. (Kira)

Participants shared personal information such as skin type, hair type, age and where they lived to help other users understand how a product might work for them.

I tried the Priming Moisturizer Rich and it dried my cheeks out super bad and then I left a review. (Angela)

Someone was talking about how they have rosacea. So they were nervous about using the foundation. I said that I have mild rosacea, and I'm fine using it. (Esther)

I'll definitely share my experiences with different products that I've tried on the Into The Gloss Facebook group. (Rachel)

Participants mentioned giving a balanced review of the product's performance but indicated reluctance in posting negative product experiences to preserve the positive and upbeat atmosphere of the social media community. For example, Angela, who always posts on social media whenever she receives a new Glossier order in the mail notes the following,

I'm pretty go with the flow, pretty laid back, so it would take a lot for me to want to send them a message and be like, hey, this is terrible. Please don't ever do this again. (Angela)

Overall, a responsive style of engagement was evidenced in participants' sharing behaviour that stems from a personal sense of obligation to help fellow community members in need. This level of commitment shows the loyalty and bond that community members have towards each other and the brand. Members appear to embrace community

membership at a more personal level when motivated by concern for the well-being of other users.

### **3.2. Learning through experiences of users**

Our findings corroborate research literature in that learning and advice seeking are important functions of an online community (e.g. Brodie et al., 2013; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Interviews show participants learned from and seek the personal experiences of other consumer users. Participants mention user posts help answer questions, find different ways of using a product, and help with decision making.

On the Glossier Instagram page, I would definitely read comments and also as well if I feel their comments will help my question. (Renee)

Seeing other people post about that makes me use makeup in different ways that I wouldn't have figured out on my own. [...] my ultimate goal by following them is making sure that I have all the information to use the products in the best way. (Morgan)

And for me the decision if I'm going to buy it. [...] I see what other people, other customers, have tried it on. Did they like it or not. (Rachel)

Furthermore, the interview supports previous findings that consumers prefer to learn from other users' product experience because it is considered to be more trustworthy and authentic than a brand-sponsored message (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). Consumer posts have a certain level of credibility and honesty that motivates other users to comment on or respond to questions within the context of their own experiences. Learning from users' personal experiences also informed participants' decision to purchase Glossier products which supports previous research that states consumers' personal experiences significantly influence purchase decisions (Sloan et al., 2015).

I will ask other people on their [Instagram] pages [...] I'll get an honest response. From somebody that's actually used as opposed to from the company themselves. [...] I will get a non-biased opinion. (Laura)

### **3.3. Strengthening the case to advocate with personal experiences**

As Glossier has limited physical presence and is mostly available online, participants believe they have a responsibility to advocate its products to other users. Participants actively tag their friends to alert them of new product releases and take on the role of a Glossier brand evangelist. Angela shared a story of how she travelled during spring break with a group of her girlfriends who happened to use her *milk jelly* product and liked it. So when Glossier released the travel size bottles, she posted it, tagged all her friends and wrote in the comments, "*hey guys like here it is. But now you can buy a bottle, it's half the size*". Morgan also talked about her motivation to share positive experiences with the product.

I think their blush is so easy to use and it gives you such a natural result that I almost felt obligated to tell all my friends about it so that they could go get it and have the same experience that I'm having. (Morgan)

Rachel shows how she can become a stronger defender against negative comments because of her own personal experiences.

I will always defend the one cleanser that Glossier has. [...] other people might say, 'oh, I don't like . . . because of this, it doesn't work because of this'. I'm very for some reason loyal so I say 'no, you're using it wrong'. (Rachel)

Engaged consumers become advocates for the brand, with their increased desire to repurchase products and use services, and overall satisfaction with the brand (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011). Consumers' time and effort spent on interacting with members of the brand community to understand Glossier products in addition to their own experiences with Glossier empowers them to become effective advocates for the brand. Consumers focus on sharing their positive experiences with Glossier products and service and helping others achieve an optimal product experience rather than participate in a contentious interaction. For example, William will not engage with users who "*bash the brand*". When users post inquiries about Glossier products and services, it is an opportunity for members to advocate for the brand supported by their own personal experiences. The interview findings are similar to the loyalty and commitment behaviors noted in the online community literature (e.g. Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2013; Roncha & Radclyffe-Thomas, 2016).

### **3.4. Co-developing with personal experiences**

The collaboration of consumers and brands shown in various studies (e.g. Brodie et al., 2013; Minkiewicz et al., 2014) are also evidenced in Glossier's reciprocal relationship with their consumers. The beauty brand's collaborative relationship with their users in developing and refining their product lines offers a prime example of an online brand community that leverages consumer feedback. Participants report helping Glossier improve products and services through direct messages, comments, and reviews via the brand's website and social media channels. Direct messaging in particular emerged as an important way for consumers to suggest edits to brand's offerings that are informed by their personal experiences. Participants' suggestions include product types, color options, and product formulations. Recommendations from consumers stem from their own need for specific products and ideas for improvement based on their own personal experiences.

They had a post asking what's your favorite cleanser and [...] I commented on they took those comments into account when creating the product. And that's true for a lot of the different products that they produce. (Rachel)

Esther commented on their Instagram photos and Facebook group for more colors in their foundation and concealer. Similarly, Stacy talks specifically about differences in skin tone.

I'm a Mexican [...] I did say something like, 'it would be great to have more ranges of color' because my undertone might be different than my white friends. [...] They're very approachable and friendly. I really like that. (Stacy)

Several participants mentioned that Glossier changed their boxes to be recyclable based on user feedback. Users have been complimentary about this change. Kira notes that

“They have been listening to their customers” and Morgan shares that “they care about what their customers are saying [...] they repackaged their lipsticks so they posted something like we listened to you guys and we changed the packaging.” Participants mention Glossier’s social media team to be responsive and accessible. Sandra observes that “Glossier responds to negative feedback [...] and they actually do reformulate products”. Users discuss feeling comfortable in sharing their ideas with Glossier because the brand creates a positive space through their social media and encourages continued engagement with the brand.

### **3.5. Sharing of personal experiences as part of social interaction**

Glossier’s social media platforms, such as the Into the Gloss chat threads offer a way for participants to share common interests and form bonds with community members. Results support past studies (e.g. Brodie et al., 2013; De Valck et al., 2009) and offer evidence that Glossier community members have bonded or developed an affinity with others based on their shared interest and experiences. Carter notes “Online I definitely will interact with other people because it’s like a shared thing that we enjoy.” William describes asking questions as an “open door for connection”. Users also recognize objects or symbols in which they identify with other Glossier users. For example, participants discussed that “The Pink Pouch,” Glossier’s pink plastic packaging, has become symbolic of community membership opening up opportunities for social interaction as consumers can instantly recognize the brand on social media and in offline interactions with Glossier followers. William describes pink pouch owners as a “sisterhood of people who have it and who use it in real life” and describes it as “an open door for that connection.” Carter also notes that the pink pouch is a way for him to connect to Glossier users offline. He met his best friend at school after starting a conversation with her about the pink pouch on her desk. Glossier users find common ground and form bonds based on their shared interests – an emotional benefit derived from engaging with members of Glossier’s community. The pink pouch offers an interesting example of how Glossier users can socially interact and bond over objects that symbolize the brand culture. Overall findings show that as consumers seek and share information about products and services, sharing of personal experiences feeds into a higher level of social interactions which in turn supports engagement in Glossier’s online brand community. Compared to the one-way communication of product reviews, interpersonal interaction enriched by personal experiences increases consumer engagement.

I post their [Glossier] stuff and try to engage with them, just like I would any other brand I like, yeah, and talk to people who messaged me, you make a lot of good online friends that way. (Laura)

### **3.6. Rethinking the engagement process**

This case study offers evidence that personal experiences serve as an important source of interaction in the Glossier online community that fosters learning, advocating, socializing, and co-development. This study shows sharing of personal experiences as being central to consumer engagement within an online context as it encourages support and

trust among members through its authentic content which is at the heart of any online community. This study restructures Brodie et al.'s (2013) consumer engagement process by positioning the sharing of the personal experiences as being central to the engagement model (see Figure 1). When consumers share their personal experiences with the products and services offered by a brand, a series of engagement activities occur around a shared interest that strengthens the social bonds of an online community and further strengthens the sub-processes of engagement. Personal experiences are impactful as it offers online community members authentic and personally meaningful ways to engage with the community and stimulate other users to participate with their own contribution or response. Contributing to the online community with a point-of-view or personal experiences with unique content can stem various personal motivations that include wanting to help others, reciprocating to the community, loyalty to the brand, commitment to the community, and enjoyment in socializing with others. The case study's restructured model shows the importance of sharing personal experiences about the brand or product that serve as a powerful authentic source that grows and sustains the online community which in turn benefits both stakeholders, the consumer and brand.

#### 4. Conclusion and implications

This case study contributes to the sparse research literature about the growing beauty sector of the fashion industry. The findings offer rich insight into the social mindset of consumers of a global direct-to-consumer beauty brand Glossier. This case study offers a different perspective of Brodie et al.'s (2013) model by focusing on the sharing of consumer experiences and offering insight into how personal experiences are instrumental in strengthening social bonds and sustaining engagement in an online brand community. Although user generated content such as product reviews that highlight personal experiences with brands can influence the purchase intention of consumers, it serves as a source of information, without encouraging social interaction or development of relationships. The hyperconnected nature of social media allows direct-to-consumer brands such as Glossier to establish strong brand communities with shared brand meanings, loyalty and engagement among community members (Swaminathan et al.,

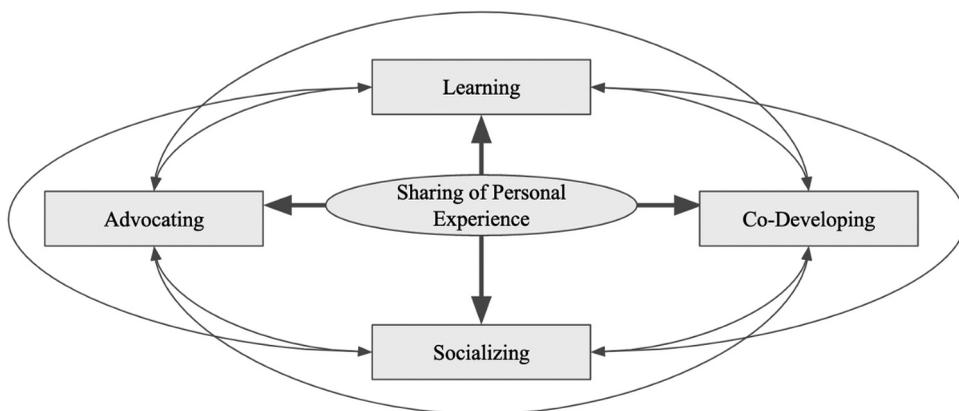


Figure 1. Central role of personal experiences in consumer engagement.

2020). Brands with strong digital presence, such as Glossier, can leverage interpersonal communication and create a virtual marketplace and community that span from simple learning to meaningful engagement.

From a managerial perspective, this case study offers evidence that sharing of consumer experiences with the product or brand enhances the quality of experience within an online community. Memorializing and sharing one's personal experience with a product or brand through social media offers a highly valued information type sought by both users and the brand. Millennial consumers appreciate the reciprocal nature of social media which in turn strengthens their loyalty towards direct-to-consumer brands (Hawkins & Prakash, 2013; Hays, 2018; Sherman, 2016). Rather than adhering to the traditional model of controlled distribution and marketing of products, direct-to-consumer beauty brands leverage the personal experiences of their consumers to create products and plan their distribution to suit the needs of the consumer which, in turn, puts the consumer at the forefront of brand decisions. This study offers evidence of the value of the collaborative partnership of consumers and brands where the line between the marketplace actors are blurred in the digital environment. Brands should offer digital space where consumers have stronger roles in cultivating and growing a consumer base by helping to create brand value. Shared consumer experiences in which the content is organically generated can serve as an authentic marketing tool. Brands should support and help build this type of online community space.

This case study focused on Glossier, a direct-to-consumer beauty brand. As with any case study specific to a single brand, generalizing findings across brands and fashion industry sectors can be limited. However, the case study offers valuable insight into how online commerce and social media works collaboratively in the contemporary digital marketplace. This study offers valuable insight into the invested role of consumers and their sharing of personal experiences that adds immense value in the online beauty industry sector. A quantitative study with a large sample size examining how the specific attributes of consumer generated content on social media would further progress the current study. Further studies on how brands use social media to create emotional bonds with and among consumers on social media may be considered. Also, research on how brand strategies can encourage consumer engagement in online brand communities is warranted. Finally, research on how brands can use social media to facilitate connection and engagement with consumers through offline experiences may be considered.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Ashley Paintsil <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5997-8172>

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