INFLUENCER AND NON-INFLUENCER WORD-OF-MOUTH ON SOCIAL MEDIA: ANALYSIS OF MILLENNIAL CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN MEXICO

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Abstract

Social media has become a significant attribute in consumer behavior dynamics. The data and information that social networking sites' users view on a daily basis are strong determinants in their purchase decision making; as, in a sense, they trust what they are reading and, furthermore, tend not to verify it. Then, the question is, do influencers have a greater impact on millennial consumer behavior than non-influencers when sharing word-of-mouth on social media? An empirical study was developed with millennial consumers in Mexico to determine whether their behavior is in fact swayed by social networking sites' communication; findings suggest that trust is a determinant in the influence of millennial consumers' purchase decision making in Mexico.
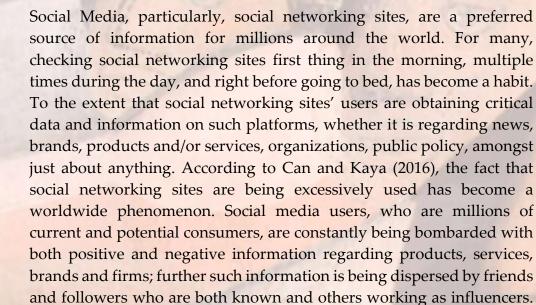
Key words. Influencer; social media; word-of-mouth; millennial consumer behavior; Mexico.

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Introduction

Social Media, particularly, social networking sites, are a preferred source of information for millions around the world. For many, checking social networking sites first thing in the morning, multiple times during the day, and right before going to bed, has become a habit. To the extent that social networking sites' users are obtaining critical data and information on such platforms, whether it is regarding news, brands, products and/or services, organizations, public policy, amongst just about anything. According to Can and Kaya (2016), the fact that social networking sites are being excessively used has become a worldwide phenomenon. Social media users, who are millions of current and potential consumers, are constantly being bombarded with both positive and negative information regarding products, services, brands and firms; further such information is being dispersed by friends and followers who are both known and others working as influencers. It is the constant access to positive and negative content that has a direct impact on consumer purchase decision making.

In Mexico, according to the Mexican Association of Internet, Facebook and Twitter are the two most utilized social networking sites; as a result, 79 percent have a Facebook page and 80 percent a Twitter account (AMIPCI, 2014). The association explains that Facebook users post on average seven times a week, and Tweet approximately twenty one times per week, this is during a minimum of 4.3 hours, an average of nine hours a day, and maximum of twenty four hours. Although these social networking sites' users range from ages eighteen to fifty five, the largest group ranges from ages twenty five to thirty four, and the second largest from eighteen to twenty four (AMIPCI, 2014). Therefore, millennials are responsible for the majority of people that are accessing both Facebook and Twitter on a daily basis in Mexico. Smartphones, laptops and tablets are the most used devices to access such platforms, followed by email and finally firms and organizations' official websites (AMIPCI, 2014).

The communication occurring via social media has a significant impact on consumer behavior, particularly purchase decision making; since the latter is a process which begins before the product has been bought and ends after consumption (Giese and Cote, 2000), communication on social media regarding a product, service, brand and/or firm may continuously be impacting consumers' decision making. The question

that arises is how is purchase decision making affected when those that are providing such information and data are non-influencers and influencers? In other words, are millennial consumers in Mexico significantly impacted by influencers on social media?
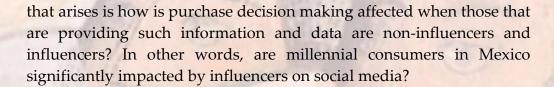
The general purpose of this study is to evaluate the type of communication occurring via social media that has a greater impact on millennials' consumer behavior; that said, the specific objectives of the study include to study are to assess the influence of positive and negative word-of-mouth on millennial consumer behavior; and, to determine whether acquaintances or influencers have a greater impact on millennial consumer behavior. The paper is sectioned as follows; section two includes a review of previous literature of the study's constructs; section three describes the study design, and includes the hypotheses framework; section four contains a discussion on the study's findings; section five includes concluding remarks and section six discusses limitations and future research directions.

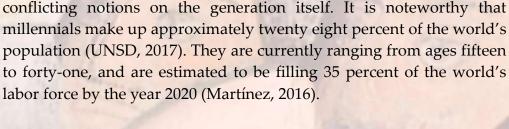## Literature Review

Millennial consumers

Millennials, also known as Generation Y (Strauss and Howe, 2000), have been placed at the center of multiple areas of research because there is not nearly sufficient information regarding this generation, and also much of it is contradictory. For instance, millennials have been considered to be indifferent whilst social (*Ordun, 2015*); without values, antifamily, etcetera, and also prefer to purchase from firms with which they perceive to share values (Gerzema and D'Antonio, 2011), and are family oriented (Holt, 2006); others consider them to be disloyal (Sebor, 2006), while others have stated that they are loyal consumers (Eastman et al., 2012; Goldgehn, 2004), and others that they are loyal for a period of time (i.e. up to eight months) (Reisenwitz and Iyer, 2009).

There are, furthermore, various sets of dates that have been established to determine the years in which millennials were born; for instance, Fernandez (2009) argued that the millennial generation was born between 1977 and 1994; Sandeen (2008) considered they were born between 1982 and 2003, and Oblinger (2003) after 1982. The difficulty to agree on a beginning and end of a generation is telling of the overall

conflicting notions on the generation itself. It is noteworthy that millennials make up approximately twenty eight percent of the world's population (UNSD, 2017). They are currently ranging from ages fifteen to forty-one, and are estimated to be filling 35 percent of the world's labor force by the year 2020 (Martínez, 2016).

Millennials are an important portion of the consumer population, in fact, according to Sullivan and Heitmeyer (2008), they are considered to be the generation that is more oriented towards consumption. Perhaps one of the biggest differences with previous generations, is that they have grown up in a digital world (Wesner and Miller, 2008), which means that their consumer behavior is significantly influenced by technology, the Internet, and the way they use them. Millennials utilize social media and social networking sites to generate content (Krishnamurthy and Dou, 2008), find information, stay current, communicate, sale and purchase products and/or services, amongst others. In addition, millennials are known for their shopping habits; they not only tend to spend their earnings quickly (Der Hovanesian, 1999), but also see consumption as a way to help define themselves (Ordun, 2015) or even shape their identity. Therefore, in order to understand their consumer behavior, it is important to appreciate the intricacies of social media as well as their perceptions of content witnessed.
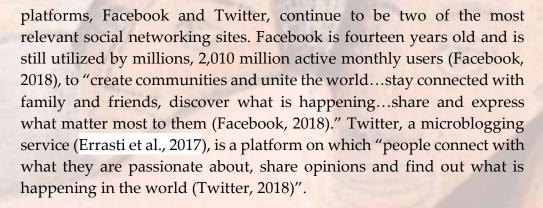
Social Media

Internet access has certainly increased around the world; on the one hand, this has occurred because of an increase in delegated resources for infrastructure, and, on the other hand, it has occurred because of the diversification of devices for such access. Today, various gadgets, such as mobile phones, laptops, tablets, watches, etcetera, provide people the comfort of accessing the Internet just about anywhere. As such, the process of sharing and obtaining data and information occurs in seconds (Choi and Berger, 2009). One of the most notable developments that emerged with the Internet is digital social media.

Social media changed the way that we communicate, do business, carry out research, produce and obtain news, offer and apply for jobs, amongst many other activities; and all of such activities are fulfilled by millions of other users simultaneously and in real time. The social media
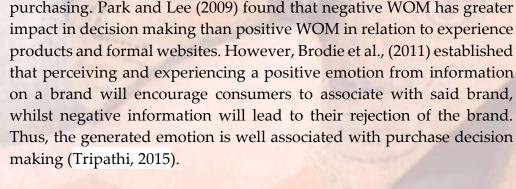
platforms, Facebook and Twitter, continue to be two of the most relevant social networking sites. Facebook is fourteen years old and is still utilized by millions, 2,010 million active monthly users (Facebook, 2018), to "create communities and unite the world…stay connected with family and friends, discover what is happening…share and express what matter most to them (Facebook, 2018)." Twitter, a microblogging service (Errasti et al., 2017), is a platform on which "people connect with what they are passionate about, share opinions and find out what is happening in the world (Twitter, 2018)".

The communication occurring on social networking sites, which is shared from user to user, may be positive or negative in content and tone. Such communication is also known as word-of-mouth (WOM) or eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) (Park and Lee, 2009; Erkan and Evans, 2016), which differs from the former in speed and volume dissemination (Wolny and Mueller, 2013) and in the fact that it is boundless. Thus, social media, specifically social networking sites, has primarily impacted in two manners, 1) improved the way information is shared, and 2) increased the speed of interaction (Peters et al., 2013) amongst users.

The differences between positive and negative WOM may significantly impact millennial consumer behavior, particularly in the intent to purchase. According to Van Dijck and Poell (2013), social media consumers utilize particular functions to express sentiment regarding a post or Tweet, as well as to describe how the latter have been evaluated. That is, "liking" a post or Tweet can mean more than a mere like, such as approval, acknowledgement, desire, love, and happiness, amongst others. The fact is that users' utilization of functions describes their perception of the content and tone of each post and tweet. Moreover, liking, sharing and retweeting are ways in which users convey a positive reaction; that said, the last two are more significant as they put forth what others think and consider important and valuable information (Heverin and Zach, 2010) which can also be considered as product, service, brand and/or firm recommendation or endorsement.

As shared WOM spreads across social networking sites, the potential influence of it on consumer behavior increases. Meaning that, the more likes, shares y retweets a comment has, the greater the impact. The positive influence on purchase decision making may lead to

repurchasing and, ultimately, brand loyalty; further, a negative influence would have an opposite effect, that is, deterring from purchasing. Park and Lee (2009) found that negative WOM has greater impact in decision making than positive WOM in relation to experience products and formal websites. However, Brodie et al., (2011) established that perceiving and experiencing a positive emotion from information on a brand will encourage consumers to associate with said brand, whilst negative information will lead to their rejection of the brand. Thus, the generated emotion is well associated with purchase decision making (Tripathi, 2015).

Recommendations are much more influential when provided by non-influencers on social media (Castellano and Dutot, 2017), making them a strong determinant in decision making. Therefore, reading positive information regarding a product, service, brand or firm's practices may positively influence their decision making; and, vice versa, negative content may have a negative effect (López-Fernández, 2015). Because the majority of ongoing communication is carried out by the user's friends, family, and acquaintances (hereinafter referred to as non-influencers), there is a degree of conferred trust; therefore, there may be little reason to question the data and information that is being shared. As such, non-influencers would have a significant impact on millennial consumers' response to positive and negative word-of-mouth witnessed via Facebook and Twitter, hence:

H1a: An increase in the perceived positive SNSs' WOM by non-influencers, positively influences millennial consumer purchase decision making.
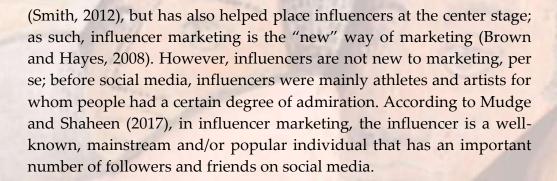
H1b: An increase in the perceived negative SNSs' WOM by non-influencers, negatively influences millennial consumer purchase decision making.

Influencer marketing

Millennials enjoy shopping (Ordun, 2015) whether online or not, yet, they resist traditional branding (Bush et al., 2004) practices, and are attracted to, and sometimes often prefer, digital marketing (Smith, 2012). In the digital era, marketing has shifted from traditional to virtual; digital marketing is not only more effective for millennial consumers
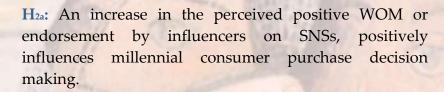
(Smith, 2012), but has also helped place influencers at the center stage; as such, influencer marketing is the "new" way of marketing (Brown and Hayes, 2008). However, influencers are not new to marketing, per se; before social media, influencers were mainly athletes and artists for whom people had a certain degree of admiration. According to Mudge and Shaheen (2017), in influencer marketing, the influencer is a well-known, mainstream and/or popular individual that has an important number of followers and friends on social media.

Many consider that influencers have a fairly easy job, in that they simply have to send messages to their friends and followers; however, it is actually quite a challenging activity since influencers need to make sure they are sending the right message to the right audience, that it contains pertinent information (Yoon et al., 2018), and that it is done in a timely fashion; meaning that, there is no sense in sending out a Tweet meant to influence consumers if the information is arriving after a trend has past. Each influencer has her/his own strengths, core competencies, skills and abilities; yet, an important factor is the seniority on social media; according to Petty (2000), the greater the influencer's seniority on social networking sites, the greater the perceived reliability of information quality. In the sense that, effective influencers are not those that have experience on social networking sites, rather those that have expertise in the management of social networking sites.

Influencers, then, ought to be able to generate appropriate content specifically targeted to the firm's consumers (both current and potential), and, they should believe it (Chatterjee, 2011), that is, believe what the influencer is endorsing, offering, selling or even discrediting. They, then, have a significant impact on brand perception (Booth and Matic, 2011); for instance, those that sponsor brands do so by spreading positive information by continuously recommending the brands, speaking highly of them, and posting and/or Tweeting about them in a positive way. Influencers not only have a vast amount of friends and followers on their social media pages and accounts, but also hold a special type of power. Their friends and followers tend to embrace what they say and do, including jumping in on new trends, and/or "oldies but goodies" in the split second it takes them to read the influencers' post and/or Tweet. They have the power to shape their friends and followers' attitudes and behavior (Freberg et al., 2011), by means of the content of the word-of-mouth they are generating; hence,
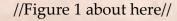
H₂ₐ: An increase in the perceived positive WOM or endorsement by influencers on SNSs, positively influences millennial consumer purchase decision making.

H₂ᵦ: An increase in the perceived negative WOM or discredit by influencers on SNSs, negatively influences millennial consumer purchase decision making.

Study design

The general objective of the study was to evaluate the type of communication occurring via social media that has a greater impact on millennial consumer behavior. In order to do so, four hypotheses were formulated and a framework was developed in order to clarify the association of each hypothesis with the corresponding constructs previously discussed Figure 1 contains the hypotheses framework. The model describes how the communication, or word-of-mouth, generated on social media can influence millennial consumer purchase decision making. It depicts how negative and positive content and tone may have varying results, as well as the source of the content (i.e. friends, family and acquaintances, versus influencers); invariably, all purchase decision making will have a direct impact on the firm, specifically on its business growth or lack thereof.
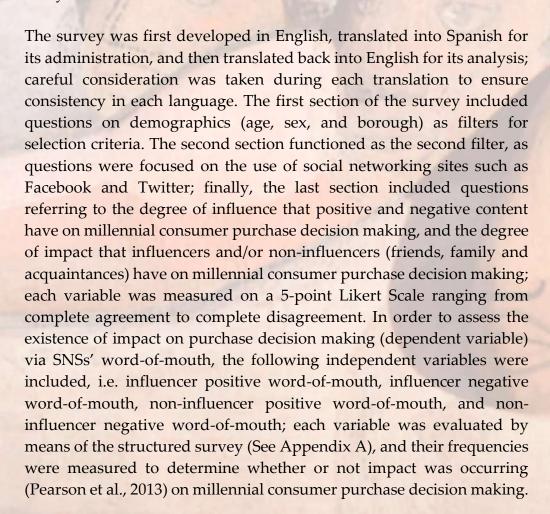
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The nature of this cross-sectional study is exploratory; the study's analysis was quantitative as a structured survey was developed and administered to a purposive sample of three hundred participants. The sample was selected on the basis of three main criteria, including: 1) respondents had to be residing in Greater Mexico City, 2) respondents needed to be part of the millennial generation, and 3) respondents had to be social media users, particularly Twitter and Facebook users. The survey was administered online (Wright, 2005); it was made available via social networking sites, including, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and also via email. The survey's response rate was a hundred percent; forty nine percent were successfully responded by men and fifty one percent by women, all ranging from ages fifteen to thirty eight. The data was collected during a period of two months with no significant

variations in responses during the beginning, middle or end of the study.

The survey was first developed in English, translated into Spanish for its administration, and then translated back into English for its analysis; careful consideration was taken during each translation to ensure consistency in each language. The first section of the survey included questions on demographics (age, sex, and borough) as filters for selection criteria. The second section functioned as the second filter, as questions were focused on the use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter; finally, the last section included questions referring to the degree of influence that positive and negative content have on millennial consumer purchase decision making, and the degree of impact that influencers and/or non-influencers (friends, family and acquaintances) have on millennial consumer purchase decision making; each variable was measured on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from complete agreement to complete disagreement. In order to assess the existence of impact on purchase decision making (dependent variable) via SNSs' word-of-mouth, the following independent variables were included, i.e. influencer positive word-of-mouth, influencer negative word-of-mouth, non-influencer positive word-of-mouth, and non-influencer negative word-of-mouth; each variable was evaluated by means of the structured survey (See Appendix A), and their frequencies were measured to determine whether or not impact was occurring (Pearson et al., 2013) on millennial consumer purchase decision making.

Findings and discussion

The first part of hypothesis one states that an increase in the perceived positive word-of-mouth, positively influences millennial consumer behavior; that is, the greater the positive communication shared by non-influencers via Facebook and Twitter, the greater the purchase and repurchase intent. Results showed that all respondents utilize both Facebook and Twitter in a fairly equal amount; meaning that, they tend to access these platforms with the same frequency. 21.1 percent of the participants completely agreed and 55.3 percent agreed that positive word-of-mouth witnessed via Facebook and Twitter positively influence their purchase decision making. About nineteen percent neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 3.8 percent disagreed and completely disagreed that positive word-of-mouth, positively

influences their behavior. This means that when one of their non-influencer friends and/or followers posts and/or Tweets positive content regarding, for example, a brand, product, service or firm, this, in turn, influences the user to purchase or repurchase (brand loyalty); hence H$_{1a}$ is accepted.

The second part of hypothesis one states that an increase in the perceived negative word-of-mouth, negatively influences millennial consumer behavior; that is, the greater the negative communication shared by non-influencers via Facebook and Twitter, the slighter the purchase and repurchase intent. Findings indicate that 20.5 percent of the respondents completely agreed and 51.2 percent agreed that negative word-of-mouth seen via Facebook and Twitter negatively influence their purchase decision making. The minority, again, disagreed (i.e. only 4.4 percent), and completely disagreed (i.e. .9 percent) that negative content and tone, when posted and/or Tweeted by friends, family and acquaintances, negatively influences their decision making to purchase or not. This means that negative communication does in fact sway consumer purchase decision making. Therefore, millennial consumers in Mexico are slightly more influenced by positive word-of-mouth than negative word-of-mouth when the source of the content is non-influencers (friends, family, and acquaintances); hence, H$_{1b}$ is accepted.

The first part of hypothesis two establishes that an increase in the perceived positive word-of-mouth generated by influencers on social media, positively drives millennial consumer behavior; meaning that, the greater the positive communication or endorsement, shared by influencers (i.e. regarding a product, service, brand) via Facebook and Twitter, the greater the purchase and repurchase intent. There were certain differences when respondents were asked to evaluate the effects of influencers versus non-influencers' word-of-mouth on their purchase decision making. Results showed that 11.2 percent of the respondents completely agreed and 38.5 percent agreed that positive word-of mouth witnessed via Facebook and Twitter, positively impacts their purchase decision making as it is offered by a bonafide influencer. Nearly 37 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 14 percent completely disagreed and disagreed that positive content communicated by influencers, positively impacted their decision making. That is, the latter are not persuaded to purchase or repurchase when the word-of-mouth

is generated by influencers, however the consumer behavior of the majority is impacted; hence, H_{2a} is accepted.

The second part of hypothesis two establishes that an increase in the perceived negative word-of-mouth generated by influencers on social media, negatively drives millennial consumer behavior; meaning that, the greater the negative communication or discredit shared by influencers (i.e. regarding a product, service, brand) via Facebook and Twitter, the slighter the purchase and repurchase intent. Findings revealed that 9.9 percent of the participants completely agreed and 37.6 percent agreed that negative word-of-mouth seen on Facebook and Twitter negatively drives their purchase decision making when carried out by an influencer. Thirty seven percent of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, and 9.9 percent disagreed and 5.6 percent of the participants completely disagreed that negative communication shared by influencers on Facebook and Twitter negatively impacts their purchase decision making. Therefore, although the difference is small, influencers are more impactful on millennial consumer purchase decision making when the content and tone of the information is positive; hence, H_{2b} is accepted.

Although millennial consumers are impacted by the content shared by influencers on social media, they stated to be less driven than by non-influencers. Table 1 includes a summary of the millennial consumers' perception of influence by positive and negative word-of-mouth. It is possible that millennial consumers are much more prone to be influenced by people they know or that have been suggested to them as friends and followers by their real friends and family; meaning that, there is a greater possibility to persuade them, and impact their purchase decision making when the information comes from non-influencers rather than influencers. Further, millennial consumers are more receptive to positive word-of-mouth, regardless of the source; however, findings showed that the content that has greater possibility to impact millennial consumer behavior is positive and is generated by non-influencers. What is interesting is that many may think that millennials are easy to persuade by means of influencer marketing, however, findings indicate that it is not the case; the latter may be due to the fact that there is a certain degree of trust that is granted to non-influencers over influencers.
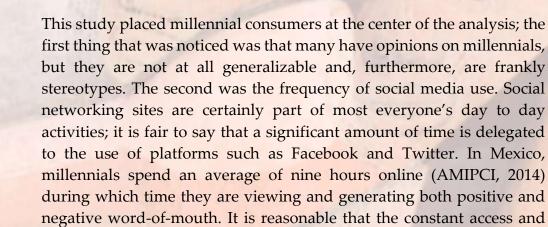
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Conclusion

This study placed millennial consumers at the center of the analysis; the first thing that was noticed was that many have opinions on millennials, but they are not at all generalizable and, furthermore, are frankly stereotypes. The second was the frequency of social media use. Social networking sites are certainly part of most everyone's day to day activities; it is fair to say that a significant amount of time is delegated to the use of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In Mexico, millennials spend an average of nine hours online (AMIPCI, 2014) during which time they are viewing and generating both positive and negative word-of-mouth. It is reasonable that the constant access and amount of shared information would impact their consumer behavior.

Millennial consumer behavior was evaluated on the basis of two main factors, these being: first, the effect of non-influencers' positive and negative WOM on purchase decision making, and second, the effect of influencers' positive and negative WOM on purchase decision making. The first interesting result is that these consumers are significantly impacted by both positive and negative content that they view on Facebook and Twitter. Although the difference is minor, negative communication is reported to have less of an impact (i.e. a difference of 5.6 percent with non-influencers, and a difference of 2.2 percent with influencers). Therefore, organizational leaders may consider engaging millennial consumers via the mentioned platforms.

Influencers certainly have a significant amount of power over their friends and followers' purchase decision making. This is quite clear by the amount of organizations around the world that are hiring influencers to engage in direct communication with their current and potential consumers to effectively sway them to either purchase or repurchase; further, they also intend to motivate friends and followers to, in turn, recommend products, services, brands and firms with each of their friends and followers. The second significant result is that influencers are not that influential. Of course, influencer marketing is highly effective; however, not necessarily with millennial consumers residing in Greater Mexico City, as findings revealed that said consumers are more hesitant to commit to influencers statements. Non-
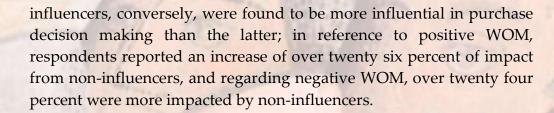
influencers, conversely, were found to be more influential in purchase decision making than the latter; in reference to positive WOM, respondents reported an increase of over twenty six percent of impact from non-influencers, and regarding negative WOM, over twenty four percent were more impacted by non-influencers.

In order for firms to effectively communicate with their consumers, they must utilize social media platforms as they are a constant in most millennials' day to day activities; however, results suggest that an effective strategy would be to establish direct dialogue with millennial consumers, rather than depending on influencers to effectually convey the brand's message. If the firm's message is shared and retweeted enough, the impact on purchase decision making would be greater. Finally, as results indicated, there is greater power in the trust granted to non-influencers than influencers; millennial consumers need to believe in and trust those posting and tweeting for them to have an effect on their overall purchase decision making. It is possible that these consumers assume that influencers are being paid by an organization to say and do as they are told and, therefore, are less trustworthy. And, it is also possible that there is a cultural aspect in play, meaning that, they are more inclined to distrust those outside their immediate social sphere, which includes those recommended by trusted individuals.

Limitations and further research

The main limitation of the study is the sample; although three hundred responses were analyzed, the data obtained in not generalizable as it is characteristic of the environment and a single generation. Future research could study if there is a determined volume of content that has a greater impact on consumer behavior. It could also carry out a cross-cultural study to assess potential differences amongst millennial consumers from different countries. And, future research could focus on determining if perceived influence of millennial consumers is sufficient for them to share and retweet positive and negative word-of-mouth witnessed via Facebook and Twitter, or if there are other variables that determine such behavior.

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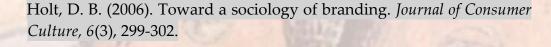
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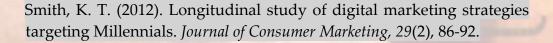
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