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Fashion Ecommerce and Content Marketing

The Convergence of Commerce and Publishing



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Fashion Ecommerce and Content Marketing



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1. Introduction

It's difficult to think of an ecommerce vertical that has a better fit with content marketing than fashion. In Business to Consumer marketing, brands can tap into entertainment and free time pursuits that gain leverage with online content. Given fashion is wedded to entertainment, and following trends and making purchases often a hobby in its own right, it's not surprising that a lot of fashion ecommerce websites have invested heavily in online content.

What was previously the domain of printed magazines fragmented rapidly during the 2000s; blogging, social media and the ease of digital photography enabled independent digital communities to flourish, while the social media followings of most of the largest online retailers soon surpassed those of the largest publishers by a considerable margin. Some of these retailers have created their own online magazines, social platforms and even launched lifestyle print magazines. This means that they can bypass the media to meet consumers, and some are even becoming an alternative media by selling advertising.

On the other hand, publishers are attempting to adapt to this new paradigm and examining new ways to monetise away from advertising revenue. Some websites have opted for an entirely shoppable approach to their content, illustrating how fashion ecommerce and content is so well suited.

1.1. Who is this report for?

Given the report is focused on fashion ecommerce, it is primarily useful for people working in that space. It is an industry audit and could be used as part of a competitive analysis to understand the different practices deployed. Anyone wanting to see how key players in the space are operating with regards to content marketing should find the report useful.

The fashion focus aside, almost anyone who is involved in digital content production or ecommerce should be able to take something from it.

1.2. About the author

James Carson is a content strategy consultant and trainer based in London. He has been involved with web content production and strategy since the start of his career, with roles at Holiday Extras, Greenlight Marketing and SEGA Games Europe.

He was later Head of Digital Marketing at Bauer Media, working on SEO and social media for international magazine brands like heat, Empire and FHM, before overseeing the digital content strategy for Grazia, which went on to win several industry editorial awards. He was also acting Head of Digital Content at Factory Media during 2013, overseeing the digital transformation and editorial training for over 20 action sports media brands.

James is a regular industry speaker and writer on digital media and content strategy, and has previously published Econsultancy's guide to Native Advertising.



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1.3. About Econsultancy

Econsultancy's mission is to help its customers achieve excellence in digital business, marketing and ecommerce through research, training and events.

Founded in 1999, Econsultancy has offices in New York, London and Singapore.

Econsultancy is used by over 600,000 professionals every month. Subscribers get access to research, market data, best practice guides, case studies and elearning – all focused on helping individuals and enterprises get better at digital.

The subscription is supported by digital transformation services including digital capability programmes, training courses, skills assessments and audits. We train and develop thousands of professionals each year as well as running events and networking that bring the Econsultancy community together around the world.

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2. Methodology

This research paper is an examination of the convergence between content marketing with ecommerce by looking specifically at online fashion. It also examines how true the mantra of 'brands as publishers' is in the sector through comparisons between publishing methods.

The report builds on James Gurd's earlier paper for Econsultancy [Where Content and Commerce Collide](#). In that paper, James examined many important aspects of running successful content marketing operations within ecommerce organisations. This paper acknowledges the main trends and outcomes of this report while putting a looking glass over the specific tactics and best practices deployed by leading fashion ecommerce websites.

In the course of this research, 20 leading websites in the fashion ecommerce sector were examined to gain an understanding of unifying trends and differences in their deployment of a content marketing operation. Fifteen of these were recognisable high street brands and, of those, 13 had an international presence. Five ecommerce pureplays were also included in the study.

Table 1: International High Street and Ecommerce

Brand	Website
Urban Outfitters	www.urbanoutfitters.com
Zara	www.zara.com
H&M	www.hm.com

Table 2: UK Based High Street and Ecommerce with International Presence

Brand	Website
Topshop	www.topshop.com
French Connection	www.frenchconnection.com
Marks and Spencer	www.marksandspencer.com
Monsoon	uk.monsoon.com
New Look	www.newlook.com
River Island	www.riverisland.com
Reiss	www.reiss.com
Debenhams	www.debenhams.com
Next	www.next.co.uk
Oasis	www.oasis-stores.com



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Table 3: UK Only High Street and Ecommerce

Brand	Website
Bank Fashion	www.bankfashion.co.uk
USC	www.usc.co.uk

Table 4: Ecommerce Pureplay

Brand	Website
ASOS	www.asos.com
Boohoo	www.boohoo.com
Net-a-Porter	www.net-a-porter.co.uk
Lipsy	www.lipsy.co.uk
Missguided	www.missguided.co.uk

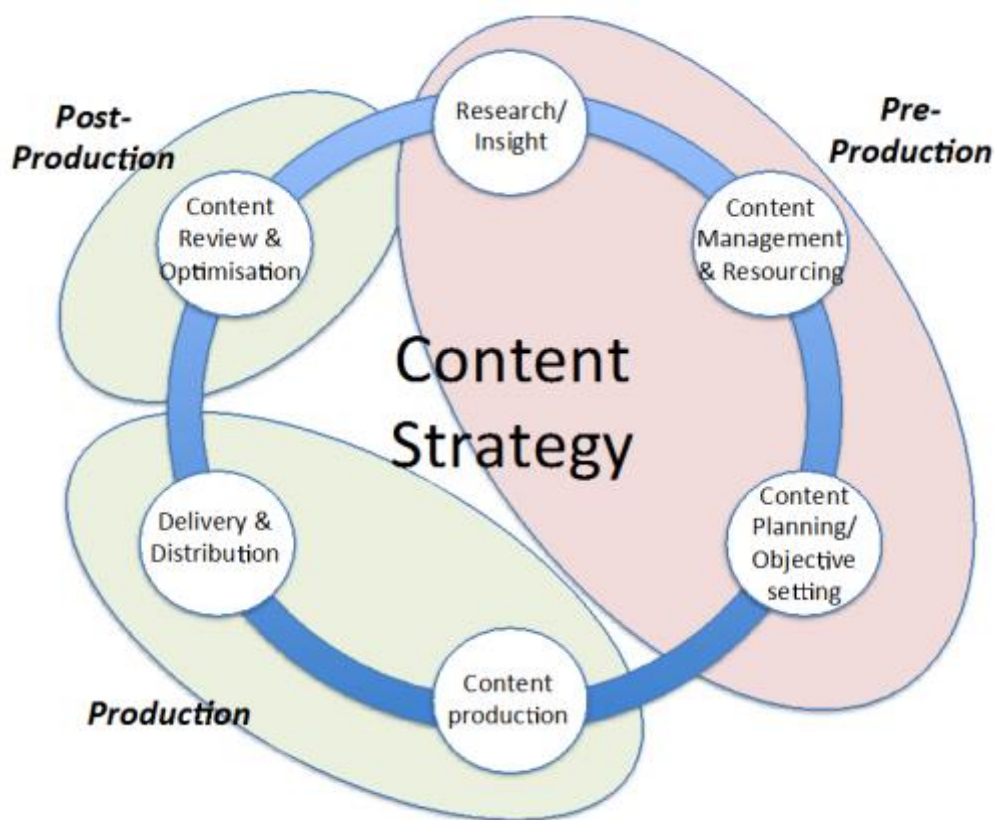
The study took place over two years with the key findings of this report being documented during the autumn of 2014. Due to the length of time between research dates, it was possible to examine long term trends and industry changes.



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2.1. Areas Examined

Both 'content marketing' and 'content strategy' are well known as broad and encompassing terms. In Econsultancy's [Digital Content Strategy Best Practice Guide](#), there are six main areas to cover, shown in the diagram below.



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Reviewing all of these areas in depth would be a significant undertaking in the industry, so for the purposes of this report, content strategy is bunched into four essential elements:

- Objectives
- Information Architecture and User Experience
- Content
- Distribution

For a more in-depth list of content-strategy elements, see: [The 24 ingredients for a delicious content strategy.](#)

The report loosely follows the following pattern in auditing and analysing the core websites:

- Content marketing objectives
- General user experience considerations
- Product pages
- Look-books and product collections
- Editorial
- Social media distribution
- Email
- Publisher ecommerce convergence

Some of these areas are clearly user experience focused and may not entirely be under the control of content marketing teams. However, the presentation of content is still crucial for overall content marketing success.

Additionally, some of these areas are potentially very broad. In the case of large areas for examination like social media, the method was to cherry pick best practices in how they deal with the promotion of content, rather than reviewing related aspects such as customer service.

2.2. Contributors

I also conducted phone and email interviews with industry experts to gain a further understanding of how companies use content in their marketing operation. Some of the companies and people who contributed to this report are:

- Steven Pavlovich, CEO, The Conversion Factory
- Siobhan Mallen, International Womenswear Editor, ASOS
- Alex Outlaw, CMO, The Idle Man
- Simon Hayes, Strategy Director, 8 Million Stories
- Matt Ridout, Head of SEO, Farfetch
- Claire Higgins, Head of Digital Marketing, Selfridges



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3. Content Marketing Objectives

Content marketing surveys regularly highlight that marketers primarily want to drive audience and engagement metrics, which ultimately link to customer acquisition and loyalty. In a recent survey of UK marketers by the Content Marketing Institute, such metrics were clearly indicated as the measurement for success:

Organizational Goals for Content Marketing in the UK



Metrics for Content Marketing Success in the UK



Charts from [Content Marketing in the UK: 2014 Benchmarks, Budgets & Trends](#) from Content Marketing Institute (2014).

Feedback from within the industry indicated similar organisational goals:

“<SAMPLE REPORT>”

...

Thus content marketing in the fashion ecommerce space really has five overall objectives:

1. Brand positioning in a crowded market
2. Traffic driving (particularly through natural search)
3. Customer product selection
4. Audience engagement through entertainment
5. Social media engagement

In this report, we will be examining how content meets these broad objectives, while occasionally reviewing the specific objectives of particular channels.



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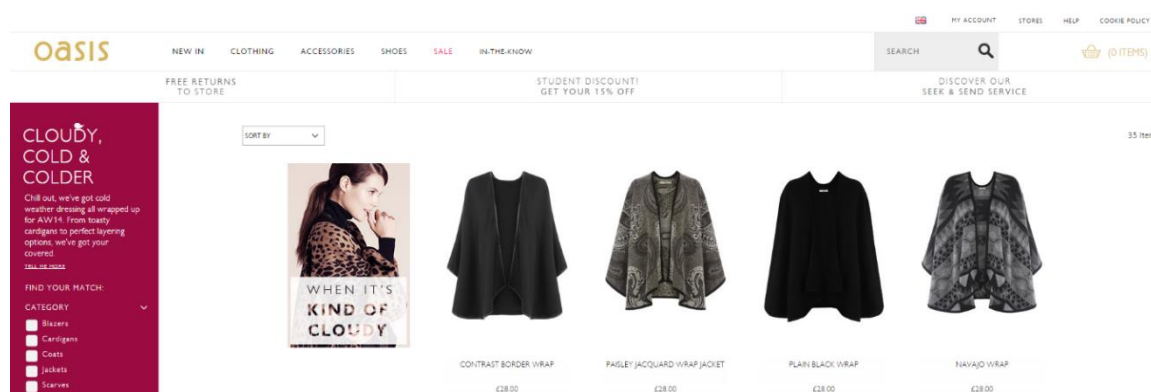
4. General User Experience Considerations

Creating great content is highly dependent on creating a great user experience, so exploring general considerations formed a key part of the review. Variations in colour palette, typography and the integration of content into the main template were all examined.

4.1. Colour palettes and promotional photography

All of the sampled sites use a monochrome (almost all white/black) colour scheme for the main features of the UX, such as navigation.

Oasis was the only website which used a secondary colour (violet) in its secondary navigation:



Previously some sites opted away from this...

...



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5. Product Pages

Product pages are another area examined that may not fall under the full control of a content marketing team. Nevertheless, product pages contain many content elements that are worth examining.

5.1. Standard product page elements

For the most part, product pages almost always contain a variation of the elements listed below:

- Product imagery and visualisation
- Price and product information
- Sizing options
- Adding to bag/basket and wishlist
- Related items/recommendations

Visualised, product pages will almost certainly be a variation of the below:

...

...

5.2. Variable content product page elements

Beyond the staples of the diagram above, there are variations between the deployment of certain content elements such as:

- Video
- Social share buttons
- Product reviews

[Net-a-Porter, Quilted Leather Biker Jacket](#), last accessed 1st November 2014



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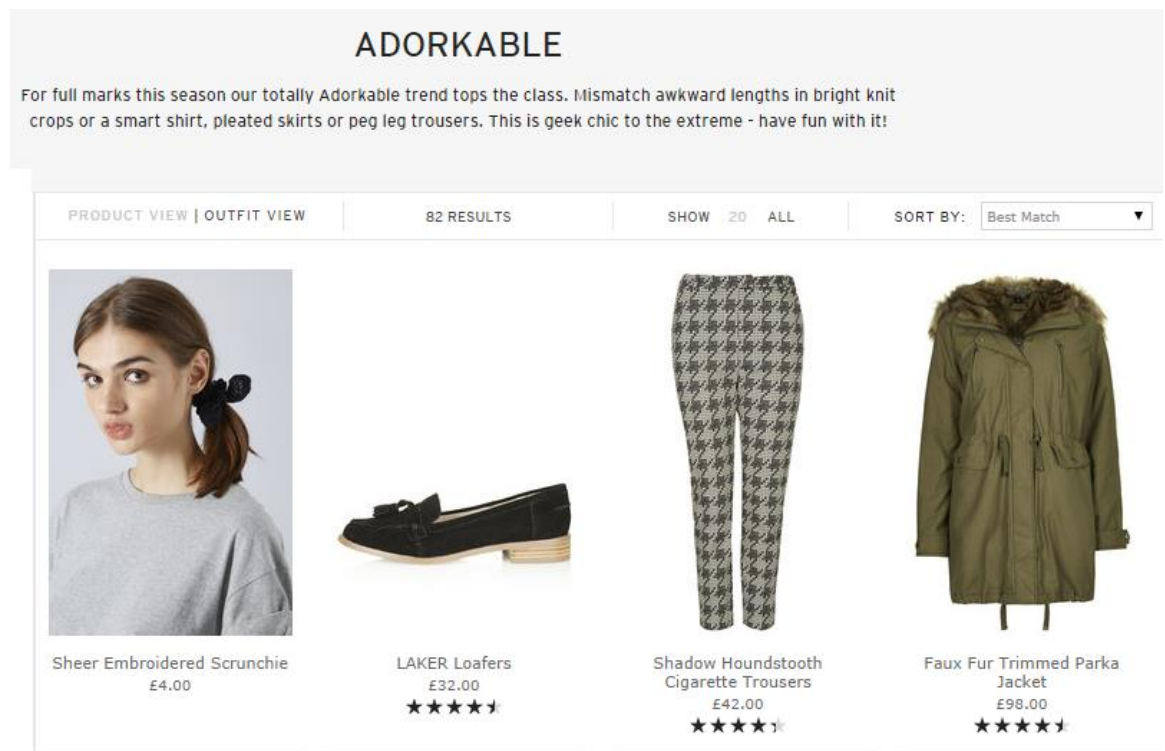
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6. Product collections and look-books

Product collections and look-books are curated groups of products based upon a current look or trend. They are the clearest point at which commerce (product pages) merges with content, usually giving context to a particular trend while offering associated products directly.

In a market of seemingly endless choice, a collection can nudge users towards particular products while simultaneously showcasing other related products within a listing. Rather than listing all products in a category, which we would see if we navigated to 'Jackets', they list items that associate with each other according to merchandiser selection.

The standard method of creating a collection was to simply create a new category page and list associated products on it, much like the below Adorkable page on Topshop:



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7. Editorial

This is possibly the key section of this paper; it was a review of the core research group in how they published editorial content. As we have seen in earlier sections, much of the content onsite was used to directly sell products, but there were also many examples that don't do this: how-to guides, fashion reports and lifestyle content were all in the mix.

"<SAMPLE REPORT"

Matt Ridout, Head Of SEO, Farfetch

The editorial reviewed in this section follows the concepts of 'stock and flow' outlined by technologist Robin Sloan¹. It is only reviewed in the context of owned channels; social media is reviewed in the next section.

...

...

7.1. Publishing frequency

Some editorial feeds attempted to publish at least one story a day. Marks and Spencer achieved this including weekends, and H&M managed a slightly higher rate (approximately 40 stories in September) but many were much more sporadic. For instance, River Island posted 16 times and French Connection ten times during September 2014. Lipsy maintained a blog but posted three times during September.

¹ See <http://>



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8. Social Media and Community Platforms

Fashion ecommerce is a vertical which has near perfect crossover with social media. People have a strong affinity with many fashion brands, and like to follow to see the latest product updates and news. Additionally, all social media enable some degree of feedback – and managing social media platforms has now become a critical function of customer service.

With this in mind, fashion brands are keen to spread themselves across multiple social platforms and ensure these platforms are properly managed. In this regard, the investment is much higher than many publishers.

When we think of social media, there are really seven main networks that are widely used throughout the industry:

Primary

- Facebook
- ...



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9. Conclusion

Throughout this paper a wide variety of publishing methods used by fashion ecommerce sites have been reviewed. As noted in the introduction, there are few better Business to Consumer industries better suited to widespread use of content marketing on so many different platforms, and it's clear that fashion websites are moving to produce more of their own content.

But are these brands really publishers? The answer is...

...



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