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The Britney Spears universe: Social media and viral marketing at its best

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Abstract Britney Spears is one of the most successful female recording artists in contemporary music, world-wide. Herein, we analyze how Britney Spears and her team of employees rely on social media applications to communicate around this pop icon, and create and maintain her celebrity brand image. Specifically, we look at the use of social media during the launch of her single 'Hold It Against Me' and the associated album *Femme Fatale* in early 2011. The interplay of postings on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook—combined with comments on her webpage, BritneySpears.com—can be seen as a prime example of social media usage to support new product introductions.

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1. YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter: The world of Britney Spears

When you think of contemporary music—and, more specifically, edgier dance pop—what comes to mind? For some, the answer might well be 'nothing.' For others, however, these music styles likely conjure up the image of 29-year-old U.S. singer, entertainer, and pop icon Britney Spears. Since launching her debut album—*Baby One More Time*—in 1999, Britney Spears has hardly been off the musical radar. With over 100 million units sold world-wide, Britney Spears is the best-selling U.S. female artist of the last decade and her songs have become fixtures on

pop charts globally. In 2010, Britney Spears was the first Twitter account holder to exceed 5 million followers, placing her far ahead of actor Ashton Kutcher and in the same ranks as fellow pop stars Justin Bieber and Lady Gaga. (Don't feel bad if these names don't ring a bell, either)

Besides her artistic achievements, what makes Britney Spears so outstanding is the near-perfect way in which she and her employees rely on social media to build and strengthen her celebrity brand image. Miss Spears maintains her own webpage/blog (www.BritneySpears.com), two YouTube channels (Britney Spears and Britney TV), a Twitter account, and a Facebook profile. These contact channels have been built up over the course of several years starting with the two YouTube channels in October 2005 and December 2006, the Twitter and Facebook accounts in August 2008, and—finally—BritneySpears.com in October 2008; the latter

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replaced a more traditional version of the webpage. Today, these channels' usage numbers speak for themselves: at the beginning of 2011, Britney Spears had around 100,000 subscribers on YouTube, 7 million followers on Twitter, and 8 million 'likes' on Facebook. Putting these figures into perspective, Coca-Cola—the most popular brand on Facebook—has 22 million likes, but only 200,000 Twitter followers and 22,000 YouTube subscribers. In addition to these primary activities, Britney Spears also maintains a profile on MySpace (created in October 2003) and has recently launched an iPhone application—'It's Britney'—which provides official news and exclusive messages, and allows users to assemble digital images of Britney and themselves.

These platforms allow Miss Spears and her employees to be in close touch with her fan base and to interact with her target group on a daily basis. Instead of giving interviews to mainstream media, Britney Spears communicates important messages through the social media applications she utilizes; reporters must rely on these for press announcements. This generates a feeling of privilege and appreciation among loyal fans, many of whom follow Britney Spears in real-time, since they receive information as soon as—or, even before—official press representatives. Together with her managers Adam Leber and Larry Rudolph, her social media manager Lauren Kozak, and her team of employees, Britney also responds to some of the questions her fans ask on these channels. In doing so, the Britney Spears team pays close attention to ensuring that it makes absolutely clear who is providing the responses. Postings made by Britney Spears, herself, are marked using the '~Brit' signature. Given that Miss Spears travels much of the time, such posts are typically sent to Lauren Kozak, who then copies them verbatim to Twitter, Facebook, or BritneySpears.com.

Although each application (i.e., webpage/blog, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook) serves a specific purpose in the overall social media strategy, the Spears team tries to integrate them as closely as possible. For example, 2 weeks prior to the launch of her new 'Radiance' fragrance, Britney Spears posted on her webpage, Facebook, and Twitter: "Happy Friday people! Am I part of your future?" This post was followed by a link to the Britney Spears Facebook presence, via which readers could launch an application related to the Radiance advertising spot. The app used the main theme of the advertising spot, a fortune teller, and showed users different pictures of themselves and their friends in the form of a crystal ball. These pictures, captured from the respective user's Facebook photo albums, were followed by a video of the Radiance spot itself. On

Twitter alone, this post received 1,052 replies and 666 re-tweets from 1,516 users. In addition to Britney Spears' 7 million followers, these messages were read by about 500,000 people. In total, 43,000 people clicked on the link and used the 'crystal ball' application on Facebook.

But for Britney Spears, integration does not stop at sites under direct control of the social media team; rather, it also extends to fan pages managed by third parties which are independent from the pop star. One example of this is the team's collaboration with BreatheHeavy.com, the biggest fan-crafted blog devoted to Britney Spears, maintained by 22-year-old journalism and media studies college student Jordan Miller. Although the site is completely independent from Britney Spears, Miss Spears' social media manager Lauren Kozak works closely with Jordan Miller to ensure that postings on BreatheHeavy.com are consistent with other messages transmitted through the 'official' channels. Whether you're personally a fan of Britney Spears—or, even know about her—these examples illustrate that your business can probably learn a lot about using social media from her and her team.

2. The launch of 'Hold It Against Me'

A particularly outstanding example of Britney Spears' social media and viral marketing strategy is the launch of her single 'Hold It Against Me' (HIAM). Hold It Against Me was first played officially on January 10, 2011 during the nationally-syndicated Top 40 radio program *On Air with Ryan Seacrest*. Four days prior to this official release, on January 6, a demo tape of the single 'leaked' and was available via YouTube. On the same day, Britney Spears posted on Twitter:

Heard an early demo of my new single leaked. If u think that's good, wait til you hear the real one Tuesday. ~Brit

This posting, combined with the demo tape, resulted in substantial press coverage of the single even before its premier. For example, Mario Armando Lavandeira—better known as gossip columnist Perez Hilton—posted on his celebrity blog, PerezHilton.com, on January 6:

With her vocals on that it's going to be an undeniable, surefire hit. I loved it. My own critique is that the demo sounds a little too much like Ke\$ha. I hope that the finished song feels like a Britney song. Beside that it's still to me a hit song.

A similar strategy was used to launch the Hold It Against Me video. Historically, music videos were

released simultaneously with their respective singles to be aired on music television channels such as MTV, in order to increase sales. Yet, in the case of *Hold It Against Me*, the video was not even produced by the January 10 drop date; instead, it was shot about 2 weeks later, on January 22 and 23. During these two days of filming, Britney Spears, her choreographer Brian Friedman, and music video director Jonas Akerlund provided daily updates on Twitter about the progress of the video shoot. For example, on January 22 and 23, Britney posted, accompanied by a picture from her on the set:

Day 1 of the HIAM shoot with Jonas. Such an incredible experience. I think this will be one of the best videos I have ever done.
~Brit (January 22)

Day 2 is a wrap! #HIAM video coming soon. . .
~Brit (January 23)

The video for *Hold It Against Me* premiered at 9:56 pm on February 17, 2011—more than 3 weeks after production and over 1 month following release of the single—when the clip was broadcast in parallel on MTV and the music video website VEVO; the latter being a joint venture between Sony Music Entertainment, Universal Music Group, and EMI. Beginning 2 weeks before this release date, 14 teasers were shown on YouTube on a daily basis under the motto ‘14 Days, 14 Teasers, 1 World Premiere.’ The initial 13 teasers lasted between 5 and 13 seconds each, while the final one—airing on February 16—lasted 30 seconds. Each clip generated between 1 and 5 million views. The grand premiere of the entire video was accompanied by a live discussion on MTV.com at 11 pm whereby choreographer Brian Friedman, Jordan Miller from *BreatheHeavy.com*, and some MTV celebrities expressed their thoughts about the clip. In parallel, Britney Spears commented on Facebook and Twitter:

Without further adieu [sic], I present my video for *Hold It Against Me*, directed by the wonderful Jonas Akerlund. Hope you guys love it as much as I do. If you didn't I'll kung fu kick you like I did to that chick in the video. ~Brit

In addition to its unique release strategy, the *Hold It Against Me* video was special in the sense that it relied heavily on product placement. Specifically, the video included several short sequences during which four products and logos were displayed prominently: the women's fragrance *Radiance*, the ninth in a series of perfumes produced by Britney Spears for Elizabeth Arden; an eye shadow from the company *Makeup Forever*, which in turn promoted the video on its own webpage; the logo of consumer

electronics giant Sony, 100% owner of Jive Records, the label of Britney Spears; and the online dating site *PlentyOfFish.com*, which also played an important role in the music video for ‘*Telephone*,’ equally directed by Jonas Akerlund and performed by Lady Gaga—one of Britney Spears' main competitors. Although this commercial aspect of the video received negative comments among many critics and journalists, it was perceived rather positively by fan groups, since the products were not chosen randomly but rather had a clear relationship to the Britney Spears universe.

3. Results and *Femme Fatale* album

Reactions to the *Hold It Against Me* single, video, and overall launch strategy were beyond comparison. The leaking of the demo tape on January 6 resulted in over 2,000 video responses, whereby fans used the music and vocals on the tape to develop remixes of what the final released version might sound like. While some of these video responses were only watched 1,000 times or so, others received 700,000+ views and became so popular themselves that they managed to create their own fan bases. Similarly, prior to the *Hold It Against Me* video launch, over 400 fan clips with potential choreography for the new song were posted on YouTube—some of which received 100,000+ views. Britney Spears and her team encouraged this development of user-generated content by including links to some of these videos on *BritneySpears.com*. For example, choreography produced by one fan on February 9 was featured on *BritneySpears.com* on February 16, one day prior to the official video release, and received 180,000+ YouTube hits. It goes without saying that being featured on *BritneySpears.com* was perceived as a huge privilege by all fans, resulting in further increases in the amount of user-generated content.

Financial results of the *Hold It Against Me* single were consistent with this abundance of user-generated buzz. During its first week, the single was downloaded 411,000 times from iTunes, the exclusive distributor during that period. This was the best sales week for a digital song in the history of Britney Spears and the most successful debut of a single with a woman as lead artist. Unsurprisingly, the song jumped to the top of the iTunes charts in 16 countries: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the U.S. The site *PlentyOfFish.com* increased its traffic by 20% and, according to TMZ, product placements in the video alone generated 500,000 dollars of profit for Britney Spears.

Detailed cost information regarding the social media activities of Britney Spears are hard to find. Yet, given that all applications can be used free of charge for both personal and commercial purposes, the only element of relevance is salary cost for the social media team. There is no reason to believe that promoting a new single through social media applications should be more or less work/time-intensive than doing so using more traditional means like TV, radio, or print media. Nevertheless, at equal cost, a product launch using social media is likely to be more far-reaching due to the ripple effect inherent in these types of applications. A significant share of the buzz about and visibility of *Hold It Against Me* was not directly generated by Britney Spears, but rather via user-generated content created by Britney Spears fans themselves. Return-on-investment (ROI) for the launch of *Hold It Against Me*—or any product launch relying on social media usage, for that matter—is, therefore, likely to be substantially higher than ROI for more traditional campaigns.

Following this huge success, Britney Spears decided to continue in the same way for the launch of her album, *Femme Fatale*. The normal version of the album contains 12 songs, while the deluxe edition features 16 songs with *Hold It Against Me* as the lead single. After the name of the album—along with the album cover—was released on February 2, the corresponding conversation on Twitter became the 10th longest trend on the site and the first music-related trend to make it in the top ten. On February 8, Britney posted:

Can't believe *Femme Fatale* has been trending 6 days. You guys are my motivation every single day. I love you all. ~Brit

Teasers of other songs included on the album were released immediately after the video premier of *Hold It Against Me*, including a 16-second audio teaser for 'Inside Out' on February 18 and a 23-second audio teaser for 'I Wanna Go' on February 22. On March 4, 'Till the World Ends'—the second single from the album—debuted during *On Air with Ryan Seacrest*, the same radio show that first highlighted *Hold It Against Me* approximately 2 months earlier. The *Femme Fatale* album itself was released on March 25, 2011.

4. Lessons learned

The launch of Britney Spears' *Hold It Against Me* is a prime example of how companies can use social media to support the introduction of new products through viral marketing; see Kaplan and Haenlein (2011b) for a more detailed analysis of the

relationship between social media and viral marketing. *Social media* can be defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media include applications such as collaborative projects, blogs/micro-blogs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011a), content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Specifically, we see five major areas in which other firms could take Britney Spears and her team as an example of how to use social media applications. Combined, these points illustrate very well how Britney Spears follows the key recommendations of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) regarding appropriate social media use.

4.1. Choose carefully

Britney Spears and her social media manager Lauren Kozak made the strategic choice of concentrating their efforts on three main social media applications—YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter—in addition to their own webpage/blog, BritneySpears.com. Given the abundance of social media sites and to avoid excessive complexity, firms must choose carefully in which communities they become involved. As stated by Lauren Kozak (2009):

Remember that social media is a toolset for you; it is not necessarily a checklist or a list of sites you have to have a presence on. Look at your strengths and weaknesses, look at the features sets of any different kind of social media tool, and see what makes sense for you.

While firms that have a lot of information to share might prefer the interactivity of Twitter, others probably see a better fit in Facebook, where infrequent postings are less of an issue, or in a personal blog that allows better control of the information flow and resulting comments.

4.2. Pick the application, or make your own

Britney Spears has decided to combine social media applications managed by third parties—YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter—with a personal blog that is under full control of her team. Even major applications such as Facebook are “probably going to go away and be replaced by newer, bigger sites in the next couple of years,” according to Lauren Kozak (2009). A nice illustration of this point is the social media application MySpace, which substantially lost

importance as Facebook gained in popularity. While Britney Spears still maintains a presence on MySpace, it is of decreasing relevance within the portfolio of social media applications used by the pop icon. This example shows how essential and probably even vital it is to have a very solid official site that is going to stick around, similar to the BritneySpears.com webpage/blog.

4.3. Ensure activity alignment and media plan integration

Substantial effort is made to ensure that information available on different social media applications is aligned and consistent with the overall Britney Spears media strategy. Such activity alignment and media plan integration is an important cornerstone of any social media strategy. For example, Britney Spears does not issue press releases, but rather communicates all information through her chosen social media applications. This ensures consistency between data available both online and via traditional media. The media team even tries to ensure consistency with third party applications, such as the BreatheHeavy.com blog maintained by Jordan Miller. According to Lauren Kozak (2009), the company uses all these sites “to play together, to intermingle, and to drive traffic back and forth using the main site—BritneySpears.com—as the hub in a spoke-and-hub model.”

4.4. Be active and interesting

The launch of *Hold It Against Me* and *Femme Fatale* illustrate well the importance of being active and interesting when using social media. By leaking demo tapes, posting teasers, and spreading the product launch over a period of several weeks, Britney Spears and Lauren Kozak have clearly met the tastes of fans, as indicated by the significant number of remixes and choreography posted on YouTube. Many companies lacking success with social media applications either fail to give regular updates or simply use those tools to distribute off-the-shelf advertising messages. It is clear that Britney Spears cannot interact with each one of her millions of fans and followers on an individual basis, and there is no need to respond to every single comment. Says Lauren Kozak (2009):

What companies need to do instead is to make their users feel cared about; feel loved, feel listened to. But they can do that in a larger way without it being a direct one-to-one, two-way dialogue.

For example, by selecting and featuring certain fan videos on BritneySpears.com, the company manages to create a feeling of community and interactivity with manageable effort in terms of time and money.

4.5. Be unprofessional and honest

The Britney Spears media team pays close attention to communicating with fans in their own voice. As indicated by the quotes herein, the language used for updates on Facebook and Twitter is colloquial, and therefore consistent with the way friends would speak to each other. There is also clear indication of who has authored each post, and it's made explicit that only messages signed ‘~Brit’ are actually posted by Britney Spears. Such honesty is important to differentiate between messages posted by the Britney Spears team and postings by Miss Spears herself.

Still, it seems important to highlight that despite the obvious success of their social media and viral marketing activities, Britney Spears and her team were not perfect from the beginning: they had to learn some of these lessons the hard way. For example, in its early days, the Britney Spears Twitter account was heavily criticized by fans for giving the impression that all posts were personally made by Britney. The importance of listening to such comments and adapting your social media strategy accordingly was articulated by Lauren Kozak (2009):

The Twitter account was very controversial at first. I will admit that we took the feedback from the various blogs that were criticizing the account and we have changed our strategy around the account.

Apparently, to listen is to learn—for the average company, as well as for pop icon Britney Spears!

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