

Kmart Themed Instagram Accounts and the Online Communities they Inspire

Thesis Statement: Social network platforms such as Instagram are providing an online digital space for influencers and followers to create an online community that changes the spending habits of young Australian females and their attitude towards the budget retailer.

Abstract: This conference paper is about Kmart themed Instagram accounts and the online communities that are created and supported by Kmart fans and Kmart Australia. This conference paper explains how the online communities evolved and why they are considered communities. This conference paper also touches on the benefits the online communities and the Instagram accounts afford to those within the community by providing examples from Instagram influencers and experts in the Retail, Media and Tech Industries from leading companies and organisations such as Inside Retail, The Sydney Morning Herald and the Smart Company.

Streams: Social Networks and Communities and Web 2.0

Keywords: Kmart, Social Media, Instagram, Social Networks and Online Communities

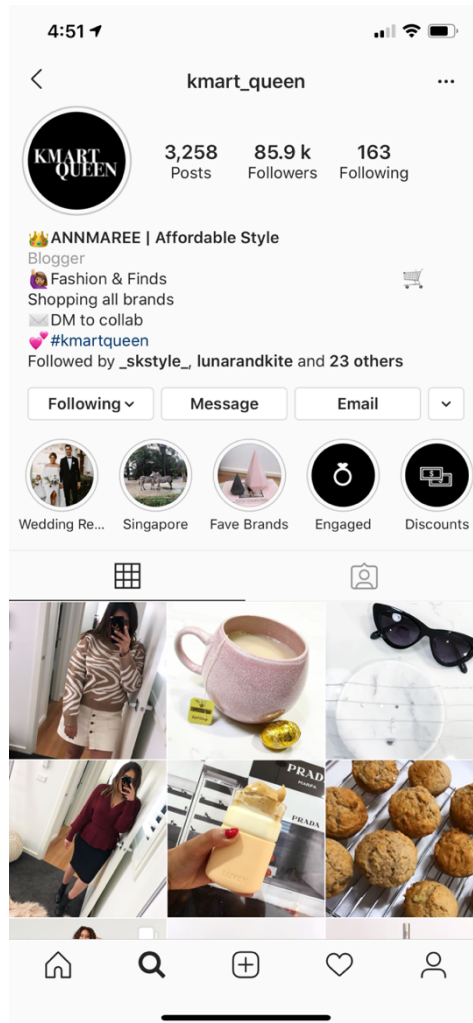
The online social network platform, Instagram has been integral in changing the attitudes of young Australian female consumers and their views towards the budget retailer by providing a free online digital space for Kmart fans to create and engage with other likeminded Kmart fans through Kmart themed Instagram accounts and online communities. Young Australian females are now spending more money at Kmart, spending more than ever on a variety of categories from clothing to furniture and electronics to plants. One of the most anticipated shifts is shoppers' attitudes when buying from budget retailers in particular Kmart. Shopping at a budget retailer such as Kmart is no longer something to be ashamed of. Finding a fashionable on trend product or coming up with a hack using Kmart products is something to now be proud of, something that is worthy of posting online via social media to share with followers on social networks using hashtags such as #OOTD (Outfit of The Day) or #kmartstyling.

The combination of showing off that Kmart purchase and the introduction of the social media platform Instagram that has spawned an online community in Australia of Kmart fans. There were two main changes that occurred almost simultaneously that contributed to the explosion of Kmart fans also known as #kmartlovers and its online communities on social networking sites. The new strategies that Kmart introduced coupled with the third place that online platforms

such as Instagram provide carved out a new way for #kmartlovers to interact online with likeminded people and other fans of the budget retailer. Kmart made strategic changes a few years ago that started a shift in how they were perceived by consumers. Kmart fans and online communities starting popping up on Instagram. #kmartlovers started sharing their Kmart runs and Kmart hauls online with other #kmartlovers and Kmart started acknowledging and leveraging these influencers and their followers utilising the online communities to benefit the Kmart brand which in turn benefited the influencers and their followers. Now more than ever social network platforms such as Instagram are providing an online digital space for influencers and followers to create an online community that changes the spending habits of young Australian females and their attitude towards the budget retailer.

Between 2015 – 2020 there has been a significant increase in in the number of Instagram accounts devoted to Kmart, created and maintained by millennials and mums or women aged 23 – 38 years old. Domenic Powell, Retail Journalist for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* states that “In the past five years, hundreds of similar Facebook groups and Instagram pages have sprung up across the internet, many with membership numbers that would rival some large country towns” (Powell, 2020, para. 1). kmart_queen or Annmarie as she is also known on Instagram is one influencer devoted almost solely to all things Kmart. kmart_queen currently has over 80,000 followers. kmart_queen posts about her Kmart hauls on Instagram almost daily along with Instagram stories of home styling and outfits of the day all from Kmart. Interacting with her 80,000 followers on a daily basis.

Figure 1
Kmart_queen Instagram Account



Note. From Instagram, Annmaree, 2020

(https://www.instagram.com/kmart_queen/).

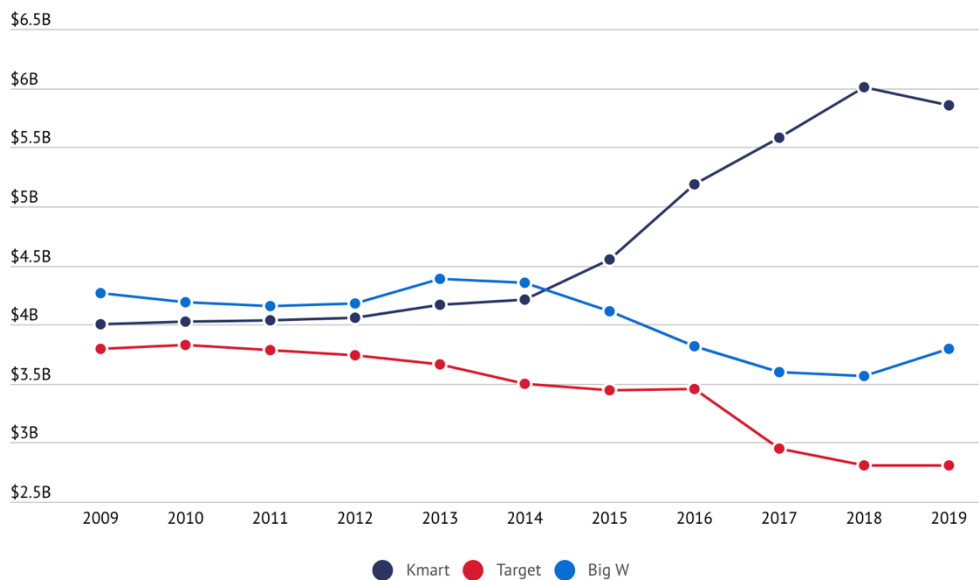
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Claire known to her 118,000 followers as The Kmart Lover is another Kmart fan that posts about all things Kmart on Instagram regularly. Recently stating in an article where she revealed that she was attacked online for allegedly making racist comments on 10daily.com that she does not get any payment for her posts and leverages her following to raise awareness and funds to prevent bullying and promote Instagram as a safe place. (Todoroska, 2020) There are many other accounts relating to Kmart on Instagram just like kmart_queen and The Kmart Lover and they all have one thing in common.

Though the different Instagram accounts focus on a variety of different interests they all share one common trait with each other and their followers. Their love for all things Kmart. The increase in Kmart related Instagram accounts is in part due to the change in product range available at Kmart and the move to advertising online via social media and online TV. Domenic Powell, Retail Journalist for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age states “that all have the same caveat: thou must love Kmart” (Powell, 2020, para. 1). A few years ago, Kmart implemented some changes to its business model. Kmart focused on value for money and up to the minute product ranges. Kmart also increased advertising via social media (Powell, 2020). Kmart’s General Manager, Laurie Lai said “We know our customers were moving on to digital, social media, watching online TV, all those things. So, we went that way too.” (Lai, 2020, Para. 12). These changes also changed the spending habits of Australian consumers. In 2009 Kmart, Big W and Target had an almost equal share of approx. \$4 billion in sales each. Fast forward to 2019 and Kmart’s share has risen to almost \$6 billion while Big W’s sales remain stagnant and Target’s sales have fallen to below \$3 billion. (Powell, 2020).

Table 1

Sales at Australia's biggest discount department stores



Note. Adapted from “How Kmart became the ‘cool mum’ of Australia’s discount retailers,” by D. Powell, 2020, The Sydney Morning Herald,

(<https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/how-kmart-became-the-cool-mum-of-australia-s-discount-retailers-20200207-p53yn1.html>).

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Interacting with likeminded individuals online that have a shared passion has created an online community on the social network site, Instagram. These online spaces act as a Third Place for Influencer's and #kmartlovers to interact. A good-natured inclusive online space to visit that is a distraction from the stresses of work and home life that provide a sense of belonging (Soukup, 2006). Originally evolving organically, the Kmart themed Instagram accounts act not only as a third place for Influencer's and followers, they act as online brand communities. Brands such as Kmart are happy to invest in online communities created by #kmartlovers as they provide an opportunity for engagement with long standing and new customers (Baldus, Voorhees & Calantone, 2015) leveraging both the Influencer's followers and Mark Granovetter's theory, The Strength of Weak Ties (Granovetter, 1973).

The influencers and their followers share and exchange Kmart product reviews and hacks as well as anything from interior design inspiration and home decoration ideas to outfit inspiration and styling advice. There is somewhat of a cult like following happening on Instagram that comes across as authentic and organically grown. In June 2016 Melisa Sorini from Creative Revolutions, Bendigo's Digital Marketing Agency wrote that "Social media has been one of the biggest markers of Kmart's recent success" (Sorini, 2016, para. 2). and the "biggest revelation is that most of it is organic. The "Cult of Kmart" has taken over Facebook and Instagram" (Sorini, 2016, para 2). Creating online communities and catapulting Kmart into a more prestigious brand. Melisa goes on to talk about how there are many women in Australia now sharing products on social media without any direction from Kmart or its head office or marketing team (Sorini, 2016). Kmart regularly collaborates with social media influencers and online communities such as Samantha Slater also known as Kmart Hack Queen and her followers who share a passion for all things Kmart, taking cues from influencers like Samantha and their followers to enhance their product offering. (Powell, 2020). Jana Bowden, Associate Professor in Marketing at Macquarie University explains shopping at the budget retailer is no longer something to be embarrassed about. Influencers and their followers view Kmart products as the latest trends at an affordable price that they can be proud of (Powell, 2020) The products along with Kmart runs and Kmart hauls are seen as worthy of sharing on social media or insta worthy.

Shopping at a budget retailer is no longer something to be ashamed off and is now considered something worthy or talking about and sharing with others. People have taken to social media to share their purchases with followers online. Arani Satgunaseelan from Inside Retail wrote in March of 2017 that Kmart "removed any sort of taboo with shopping in a store with low prices". (Satgunaseelan, 2017, para. 3). Changing shoppers' opinion of Kmart from discount or budget retailer to a department store with Everyday Low Prices (EDLP) by keeping most prices below \$10, reducing the product range from 120,000 products to 50,000, focusing on trends, stock levels, sourcing products from suppliers direct along with taking away any reference to cheap items and

bargain bins and a general tidy up of the stores has contributed to the change in shoppers perceptions leading to what Arani calls “a legion of #kmartlover fans” (Satgunaseelan, 2017, para. 3). Kmart is known for selecting a number of its #kmartlovers from Instagram to participate in events where the influencers have special access to view new products in the hopes they will post images and stories on their Instagram accounts to share with their 1000’s of followers. (Koehn, 2017). Helen Ahrens, Director of Good Things Marketing also stated in August 2017 in a Smart Company article written by Emma Koehn that “It allows mega fans to then go and be influencers in their own communities,” (Ahrens, 2017, para. 9). One could argue that there is still some stigma around shopping at a budget retailer like Kmart however the many Kmart related accounts on social media such as Instagram and the community spirit and love for Kmart products influencers and followers alike share online and the recognition of those accounts and communities by other experts in the Retail Industry and Kmart executives themselves are proving otherwise.

Kmart’s transformation driven by a focus on product and price range, fashion, trends and sourcing direct from suppliers changed shoppers’ perceptions of Kmart. Kmart went from a discount store that is embarrassing to admit that you shop at to department store with every day low prices that sells products that are fashionable and on trend at a reasonable price. Kmart changed the way it engaged with its customers by focusing on social media and online TV advertising. Kmart transformed shoppers’ perceptions of the budget retailer by becoming popular and fashionable which led to many shoppers sharing their purchases and love of Kmart and its products on social media in particular Instagram which has led to a burst of online communities organically sharing all things Kmart related benefiting the influencer, their followers and Kmart. This conference paper is limited to the social media accounts and followers on Instagram relating to Kmart. Further research and case studies on social media accounts on other social network platforms could be included if there was an opportunity for a second conference paper. This conference paper was also limited to research and case studies from online news and retail websites as there was limited to no research or Scholarly articles or papers online or on Google Scholar relating to Kmart Australia and it’s associated social media, social networks or online communities. This paper does not acknowledge changes in consumer spending over all. Further research could be conducted on the effects on consumer spending with the introduction of shop now pay later apps such as afterpay, openpay and zippay and if they are a contributing factor in the increased online community activity.

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