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WHAT'S TRUST GOT TO DO WITH IT?

While the marketing industry continues to debate the challenges of a cookie-free future and the value of attention metrics, it's easy to forget what really matters to people when it comes to brand choice.

BrewDog learnt the hard way recently when a group of ex-employees blasted the craft beer firm for its terrible company culture. Before them, the Boohoo boycott shined a light on unethical and unsustainable manufacturing standards. These high-profile fallouts are a timely reminder that a brand's credentials go way beyond just their product or service offering.

the7stars' quarterly tracker (The QT) has monitored consumer sentiment and intent since 2016. The most recent 12 months, including the pandemic and lockdown that followed, brought about a significant shift in how people are feeling about life and their intentions towards brand consumption. Trust, it turns out, is high on the agenda.

7 in 10 Brits agree that trusting a brand is more important to them now than in the past. Overtaking traditional rational considerations of quality and value, our data reveals the current top drivers of brand choice to have tilted into the emotional spectrum, towards trust-related metrics. 60% agreed that, over the past year, the feeling of 'being put first' by a brand had become more significant. People want to be treated like people – not like a body of consumers or a data point. It might seem minor, but it's a big deal in terms of the sentiment and positioning that brands have an opportunity to get right.

If reputation is a codeword for trust, 2 in 3 Brits agreed that it became more important during the pandemic. In turbulent times, people rely on safe bets, spending money with brands that promise to meet their expectations. Amongst 18-34-year-olds, 'knowing what to expect' was cited as the top driver of brand trust.

On the flipside, being seen as a 'category leader' and having 'brand heritage' were the two least important drivers of brand choice, as people favour a more relatable human experience with brands they want to consume.

This desire for human connection was confirmed by the 8 in 10 who cited a positive response to the pandemic as another deciding factor in brand choice, and by the 1 in 3 who changed their shopping behaviours accordingly, whether that response was supportive of customers or staff.

So how can brands build trust? Start from within. Whether it's a commitment to becoming a net zero company or being a vocal anti-racist advocate in your industry, people respond to brands that exemplify a more inclusive and responsible ethos, one embedded within company culture. Next, build on existing assets: authenticate your trust credentials by remaining true to the core values of a brand proposition and its communications. Finally, remember to adapt. The cultural landscape continues to evolve at pace, which provides an opportunity to build better relationships with the audiences we're trying to engage. As their world evolves, so too should a brand respond to what really matters: be helpful, be kind, be wise – and ensure trust metrics remain relevant.





WHY BRANDS ARE FINALLY TAKING NOTE OF THE PARALYMPICS

For decades, the Paralympic Games were, at least in the media world, an afterthought. With the British public seemingly fatigued after a marathon of summer sport, coverage of the games was too often neglected, relegated to a few hours a day on a lesser TV slot than its sister tournament, the Olympics.

Beijing 2008 was something of a turning point. Some 3.8 billion around the world tuned in to the Paralympics—a [ten-fold increase](#) on Sydney 2000. At long last, disability sport had gone mainstream.

Some brands were quick to take note. In 2010, [Sainsbury's](#) became the first brand to solely sponsor the Paralympics, not the Olympics. And Channel 4, after 40 years of BBC coverage, acquired the Paralympics TV rights. They had a momentous task ahead: having seldom covered sports in the preceding years, Channel 4 planned to broadcast over 400 hours of London 2012— a 400% increase on the BBC's offering from four years prior.

Spearheaded by the [ground-breaking Superhumans campaign](#), the 2012 Paralympics were a roaring success. Amid record levels of engagement, public perceptions of disability began [to shift](#). Over half of the UK's population tuned in, and [91% agreed](#) that disabled athletes were just as talented as other athletes.

For brands who had signed on, Paralympic sponsorship offered an opportunity to spotlight the stories of disabled athletes in their campaigns, and ties to the event resulted in positive associations. Duncan Blake of BP, another longstanding disability sport backer, [describes](#) sponsorship of the Paralympics as "sport's best kept secret" – noting also that those aware of the partnership were more favourable towards the brand.

Tokyo 2020 will mark another milestone for disability sport. For the first time, [all 13](#) of the International Olympic Committee's top partners will sponsor the Paralympics. As brands finally adopt the Paralympics into their portfolios, they must recognise the need to adapt to changing narratives around disability. *Superhumans'* greatest success lay in persuading people to see disabled athletes as athletes. But the world has come a long way in nine years, and the 10 million disabled people in the UK simply want to be viewed as ordinary people. That's reflected in Channel 4's [latest instalment](#), which places the emphasis on the humans behind the stories – the everyday challenges they overcome both on and off the field.

No longer is it enough for campaigns to depend on the emotional backstories of their featured athletes— they must be thought of as masters of sporting prowess, just as their non-disabled counterparts are. And they must not be limited to a fortnight's exposure, every two or four years. If public attitudes are to continue to change for the better, disabled people need to be visible in British advertising, 52 weeks of the year.





THE RISE OF CREATOR ECONOMY

The explosion of social media usage, evolving shopping behaviours, the democratisation of ecommerce and career flexibility have contributed to the rise of the creator economy. As people are looking for more ways to monetise themselves, their skills, and creations.

Like the rest of the ecommerce market, China has been leading the way. Creators or Kol's in China are incredibly powerful, and many have become brands in their own right.

Ruhan's (a Chinese incubator for influencers) [top influencer brand](#) sold over \$24.6 million in a single day. Ruhan's influencer brand ranked eighth, in terms of sales volume, for top women's fashion stores, only outsold by brands like H&M; and UNIQLO.

Whilst Influencers in the West have been using platforms like Instagram to build their fan base, most of their content is produced for free, relying on big brands to supplement their income. With the exception of YouTube, most haven't provided the tools to monetise that content.

But change has begun. Some creators have become influential enough to draw users to new platforms. Creators are gaining power in the media ecosystem as fans seek to connect with individual personalities.

New platforms are emerging that provide the tools and capabilities for creators to monetise their influence. One of these is Popshop Live, which recently secured \$20m funding, backed by the likes of Kendall Jenner. It allows creators to connect their products to their audiences through live shopping, video entertainment and conversation with their fans.

Another is Spri.ng, which allows creators to design their own products, create a customer store, integrate with social channels to share product launches with their community, all whilst Spri.ng handle production, shipping, and customer support.

In response, YouTube, Amazon, Facebook, Tik Tok and Snap are all fighting for creators' attention, knowing that they offer the secret to keeping both an audience engaged and the platform relevant. Tik Tok have put aside a creator fund of \$241m (increasing to \$1bn over the next 3 years), YouTube \$100m and Snapchat \$1m a day. Instagram recently rolled out their own creator network, allowing them to build, connect and monetise their brand across the platform.

The increased ability to engage with consumers through video and live content and with the ability to dovetail that with ecommerce, will make influencers more accountable, and the good ones more powerful, changing the way influencer marketing works. With the rise of the creator economy, brands have to acknowledge that no longer can they control the message. Instead, they must become part of the conversation. Associating themselves with the creators who can build trust and deep connections on their behalf is imperative for the ones who want to stay relevant.





WHY BRAND AUTHENTICITY MATTERS IN SUSTAINABILITY

As the Russian permafrost liquifies and weather patterns turn erratic around the world, the clock ticks for the challenge of climate change. Although collective responsibility is acknowledged, eyes turn to brands, both large and small, to don their own environmental credentials as some of the world's biggest contributors to waste production.

The sustainability space within the realm of brands, however, has evolved beyond meaningless green badges and occasional decorative initiatives. Consumers now demand complete transparency from their brands and are wising up to greenwashing with 71% of people saying that opaque buzzwords such as 'green', 'eco-friendly' and 'sustainable' have now lost their significance. In turn, pressure mounts for companies trying to navigate a sensitive landscape with a strategy that is both authentic and effectual. While a multitude of brands have joined the sustainability bandwagon, only a select few have made genuine impact.

From NatWest's carbon footprint tracking app to Ikea's buy back scheme, the market as it exists urges brands to innovate or risk being left behind. the7stars asked consumers which aspects of sustainability they thought different markets should focus upon, unravelling insight into which issues lie at the heart of each industry.

Arguably, for fashion and grocery, greenwashing has become the most widespread. More than half (58%) say that they struggle to find brands who live up to their environmental claims. Lightbox Pulse survey results also find that the two industries garner the most concern for sourcing sustainable raw materials alongside ethical working practices for employees. With fast fashion and food waste being two of the most alarming crises in climate change, banning overseas sweatshops and encouraging business with Fairtrade-certified producers could transform these industries. Brands leading the way in these initiatives include fashion label Reformation whose slogan is 'Being naked is the #1 most sustainable option. **Reformation** is #2.' The LA based label commits to being 100% water, waste and carbon neutral. For the food industry, M&S and ASDA tackle the issue by introducing refillable grocery concepts in their stores whilst Iceland pioneers as the only supermarket in the UK to sell 4 different types of bycatch fish that is otherwise wasted.

Home furniture brands and packaged goods, however, were top contenders for recycling and waste management concerns. Although the packaged goods/FMCG industry is infamous for its damaging throwaway culture, the rise of fast homeware is another threat, rivalling fast fashion in depleting the world's natural resources. Being the world's largest furniture retailer, Ikea joined the anti-waste movement through its 'Trash Collection' campaign by showcasing Ikea furniture deposited on Norwegian coastlines that the retailer refurbished and resold for a discounted price.

On the other hand, utilities and travel populated the most votes for concerns on carbon emissions. For the former, consumers' sustainability intent is evident with 81% of households switching to green energy tariffs in 2020 according to Compare the Market, as well as a steep incline in registered electric vehicles in the UK from 6,200 in 2011 to 200,000 in 2019. Meanwhile, for the travel industry, although only 16% are willing to forego air travel completely, consumers are willing to commit to smaller but maintainable green habits. For example, 1 in 3 plans to book eco-friendly hotels for their next holidays and younger cohorts are more favourable towards travel companies who offer carbon offsetting.

Although industries may differ in focus, one thing applies to all. Sustainability is now crucial not just for the planet, but for each brand's economic interest and market competitiveness. With social media and a growing cancel-culture, brands cannot risk being caught on the wrong side of a global societal awakening.





ANTI-RACISM IN THE WAKE OF THE EUROS

When Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and 19-year-old Bukayo Saka missed penalties in the Euro 2020 final, many people, particularly in the Black community, knew racial abuse would follow. These young men did their country proud, but racists took to online platforms to attack them.

It's a disgrace that this is the reality in the UK but, even worse, no one was surprised by the hate directed against Black players and the Black community more widely. Slurs flooded the leading social media platforms, but insufficient action was taken to remove them.

No doubt, the racists who jumped online the minute the trophy slipped out of reach will be overjoyed with the publicity they gained. Rather than dwelling on the abusers and fuelling the fire, it will be more productive to consider how we can minimise their presence online. Social media platforms should be doing all in their power to block and remove racist content, when currently anyone can create an anonymous mouthpiece from which to spread hatred without repercussion.

A report in *the i* revealed that when users flagged abuse on Instagram, they were told that the content did not violate community guidelines. What message does this send to victims? Similarly, Twitter accounts that sent racist abuse to England players remain active.

Social media companies have made trillions of dollars from advertising revenue and will continue to do so. We believe that with that comes a responsibility to reinvest a proportion of their revenue to ensure that hate speech is not allowed to spread. Regulation isn't a "nice to have", it's an obligation once platforms grow beyond a certain size.

If you spend time on any social media platform, it's clear that most of the abuse and misinformation is spread via anonymous accounts, whose operators are then spurred on by the attention they gain.

Many platforms claim to be removing 99% of fake accounts, but we should be sceptical of these figures considering we don't know how they are categorised. Facebook's public data suggests the situation is out of control with the active removal of 1.3bn 'fake' accounts in a quarter.

One solution that many people have put forward is requiring individuals to supply an ID when they set up an account. This will come at a cost to social media companies. Once illegitimate accounts are removed, their user base inevitably will drop. This may have a significant impact on advertisers, but the priority must be to protect individuals.

At the7stars we're calling on the government to regulate these platforms, finally, independently. Legislation must apply to any site that hits a certain level of adoption. There should be no alternative avenues that enable users to sign up under anonymity.

Whatever the cost to social media platforms, the cost to society is infinitely greater.



MINI STORIES

In the brand's latest product update, Netflix has announced it plans to expand its escapism options into gaming. They are making moves to launch video games via their streaming service with the goal of offering subscribers a device-agnostic way to engage with virtual worlds. The move suggests Netflix are looking to tap into the growing popularity of gaming and the attention this captures from consumers. It feels like a natural evolution from the interactive programming we've seen that blend passive watching and gaming; namely *Black Mirror*. Gaming has seen a global increase in popularity during the pandemic, and by entering the gaming world, Netflix will be able to reach consumers across the entertainment vertical.



Channel 4 are looking to launch a new platform vertical that will be reserved for true crime. The launch will be tapping into the boom in true crime watching and will be a destination for fans of the genre, featuring content on Jeffrey Epstein and "bling ring". The boom in true crime popularity is being driven by younger audiences and will therefore, drive additional touchpoints to reach an increasingly fragmented audience. The platform will launch on 4 in Autumn and will offer a mix of new commissioned shows, archive Channel 4 content and acquisitions, housing 150 hours' worth of programming with new shows dropping every fortnight. With more access to content becoming available for audiences, it will be interesting to see if genre verticals continue to launch to consolidate choice and help direct viewing.

YouTube is looking to roll out its new platform *Shorts* globally after receiving 6.5bn daily views during its beta test. The format first launched in Sept 2020 across 100 countries and looks to rival the snackable video content phenomenon accelerated by TikTok. The format allows consumers to upload 15 second or less short-form videos with access to audio and creator tools. YouTube have declared their desire to make creating content as easy as possible for users, making the platform as accessible as possible to invite new subscribers. They intend to continue to add more and more features to the platform for consumers to experiment with. It will be interesting to see if this move cannibalises consumers' time with the platform or steals time from rival short form content providers; namely TikTok, IG Reels and Snap.

