

Effects of fashion blogger credibility, engagement and risk-taking behaviour on followers' shopping intentions. A study of Italian consumers.

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Abstract

The present study investigates the impact of blogger credibility, homophily, engagement and risk-taking behaviour on readers' shopping intentions. Despite the growing relevance of these issues, past studies have neglected the relevance of a joint analysis of such dimensions. To fill this gap, the study proposes and tests a model that explains blog followers' intentions to buy products sponsored by the fashion blogger. Results from a survey on Italian consumers show that blogger credibility and homophily have a significant effect on blog engagement, which, in turn, positively affects both e-word-of-mouth and purchase intentions toward blogger's sponsored products. Finally, theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

1. Theoretical background and research objectives

In this digital age, a number of bloggers have reached high level of trust and recognition to the point of transforming themselves from amateur writers to opinion leaders. Bloggers now become social influencers, sharing persuasive opinions with their followers and encouraging interactions through comments and feedback. Most of blog readers habitually visit blogs for information or inspiration. The perceived usefulness is based on the conviction that the information obtained from the blog can facilitate purchase decisions. Few blog-related studies demonstrated that bloggers' recommendations can result in a powerful marketing effect for reaching consumers and persuading them (Hsu et al., 2013).

Through years, the most successful bloggers – in different contexts – have learnt to monetize their blogs in terms of advertising, campaigns and brand projects, thus creating a business model to be emulated. In particular, fashion bloggers were the first to launch a “second-wave style blogging” characterised by a more and more intense partnership with the fashion industry and established fashion brands (Fernandez & Karhawi, 2015). However, the proliferation and diversity of blogs together with the absence of a real expertise raise the question about the role exerted by the blogger credibility on behavioural intentions of the readers. These issues are increasingly topic in fashion industry. Just think to the recent declarations of Vogue editors: “Bloggers heralding the death of style” (Mower, 2016). However, despite the fact that fashion blogs and bloggers are gaining popularity in the blogosphere, also attracting the attention of marketing scholars (McDonnell, 2016; Cosenza et al., 2014; Zafiroopoulos, 2012), the literature review has highlighted some scientific gaps regarding the role of credibility and engagement within the fashion blog in terms of consumer behaviour implications (Lu et al., 2014). Such gaps call for further

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research. Starting from the above considerations, the study aims at assessing the impact of the fashion blog on behavioural consequences from interactions between credibility, risk-taking behaviour, engagement and post-reading purchase intentions toward blogger's recommendations.

2. Research model and hypotheses

The conceptual foundations of the proposed model and related hypotheses are drawn from three different research streams: *source credibility* (Pornpitakan, 2004; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, 1983); *consumer engagement* (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie et al., 2011; Taylor & Kent, 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010); *purchase intentions* (Moon et al., 2008; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Thanks to a review of relevant literature, the most robust constructs were assessed, and the selection was made according to their relevance and expected validity for the purpose of the study. From a structural point of view, the research model is composed by six main constructs, derived from the literature review: a) *blogger credibility*, resulting from the perceived level of expertise and trustworthiness of a blogger (Cosenza et al., 2014); b) *homophily*, defined as a tendency in social groups for similar people to be connected together (Kusumasondjaja, 2015); c) *risk-taking*, which refers to consumers' assessment and acceptance of possible negative consequences associated to their decisions and actions (Alhidari et al., 2015; Büttner & Göritz, 2008); d) *blog engagement*, which refer to outcomes of interactive blog communication encompassing cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural attachment (Yang & Kang, 2009); e) *intentions to buy*, defined as the probability that the consumer will buy the product sponsored on the blog in the near future (Mikalef et al., 2013); f) *e-word-of-mouth*, defined as "any positive or negative statement made by consumers, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet" (Alhidari et al., 2015).

The perception of source credibility might influence beliefs and opinions as well as behaviours through an "internalisation" process, where receiver welcomes the source influence in terms of his/her personal attitudes and values structure (Ermeç Sertoglu et al., 2014). In line with this perspective, we theorise that blogger credibility positively influences the consumer's acceptance of possible negative outcomes that may derive by interacting with other – unknown – followers (risk-taking behaviour). Moreover, blogger credibility is judged to be capable of impacting on the level of blog engagement. Wilson & Sherrell's (1993) meta-analysis highlighted that a credible message from an expert source is a powerful tool of attitude change. Presenting credible arguments on a blog - or on a social network - may increase the willingness of readers to be fully involved in the blog activities. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H₁: *Blogger credibility positively influences risk taking (H_{1a}) and blog engagement (H_{1b}).*

We also theorise that homophily may positively impact on risk-taking and blog engagement. As highlighted, homophily describes the situation in which communicator and receiver have similar characteristics (Gilly et al., 1998). The presence of similar values, preferences and lifestyles between individuals can facilitate consumers' external information search process because it reduces uncertainty (Chu & Kim, 2011). Following these arguments, blog readers who feel similar to other followers are expected to be more

inclined to express their ideas and opinions on the blog, even with unknown people (Kusumasondjaja. 2015). Moreover, interacting with others who share similar values and social identity may generate more interest toward the blog, thus leading to a greater level of engagement. Starting from the above considerations, it is hypothesized that:

H₂: *Homophily positively affects both risk-taking behaviour (H_{2a}) and blog engagement (H_{2b}).*

Turning to the third hypothesis, it is also assumed that risk-takers are more likely to be actively engaged in blog reading, in commenting or sharing posts. Risk-takers are consumers open to new ideas and if the fashion blogger is able to gain their trust they can become truly blog ambassadors. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H₃: *Risk-taking behaviour exerts a positive effect on blog engagement.*

Engagement represents a personal psychological state, and it may be interpreted as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, affective and behavioural components (Bowden, 2009). Customer engagement emphasises the interactive nature of the relationship between a person (reader) and an object (blog) (Magno, 2017). Several studies have demonstrated that engagement may positively influence followers' decision-making process by guiding them in consumption choices (Bouhleb et al., 2010). Furthermore, regarding the link between engagement and word-of-mouth, Muñiz & Schau (2015) found that readers who experiment a positive engagement toward the blog are more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth about the blogger. Therefore, we assume that higher level of blog engagement will result in a higher degree of intentions to buy the products suggested by the fashion blogger:

H₄: *Blog engagement exerts a positive effect on intentions to buy (H_{4a}) and e-WOM (H_{4b}).*

3. Method

3.1 Participants and procedure

A self-administered questionnaire was sent in electronic form to a sample of 452 Italian people. Respondents were immediately asked if they had ever consulted a fashion blog or the social network profile of a fashion blogger. Only those who answered "yes" were able to complete the questionnaire, thus reducing the sample size to 197.

After removing missing data, the number of valid questionnaires was 189. Respondents were mainly composed of women (86% vs 14%). The vast majority was aged between 18 and 34 (96%) and was graduated (63%). 34% visits the blog page and/or the social profile of his/her favourite fashion blogger at least once a day; 30% at least once a week.

3.2 Measures

The concept of homophily was measured using the four items developed by Kusumasondjaja (2015). Blogger credibility was assessed through the Cosenza et al. (2014) 4-items scale, adapted for fashion blogs. Risk taking was measured with three items extracted by Alhidari et al. (2015). The level of engagement within the fashion blog was assessed through the Shiao and Luo 4-items scale (2013). Purchase intention was measured using the six items proposed by Mikalef et al. (2013). Finally, the 4-item scale proposed by Alhidari et al. (2015) was used to assess e-word-of-mouth, with some adjustments for the

purpose of the research. All statements were on a seven-point anchored scale (from “completely disagree” to “It completely agree”).

4. Results

Data underwent two phases of analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). First, a preliminary analysis was conducted to examine the psychometric properties of the survey items via Cronbach’s alpha and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Second, the paths of relationships between the latent variables were explored.

Convergent and discriminant validity were evaluated through the strength and significance of the loadings, the Composite Reliability (CR) and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (Bagozzi & Heatherton, 1994). Structural equation modelling (SEM) with maximum likelihood method was employed for the analysis of the measurement model (CFA) and of the conceptual models. The fit of the models was interpreted based on a range of fit indices, namely the Chi-square (χ^2) value, the degree of freedom (df), the comparative fit index (CFI), the non-normed fit index (NNFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR).

Data analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS statistical software (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL; release 25.0) and the LISREL software (release 8.80).

4.1 Validity of the measurement model

As the skew and kurtosis statistics showed that the normality assumption was violated, ($\chi^2 = 3747.637$, $p < 0.001$), the model was estimated using the Satorra-Bentler method (Satorra & Bentler, 1994). The fit indices indicated an acceptable overall fit of the measurement model to the data: Satorra-Bentler Scaled $\chi^2 = 507.95$; $df = 260$; RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.98; NNFI = 0.97; SRMR = 0.07.

All items loaded strongly and significantly on the hypothesised latent variables, ranging from 0.53 to 0.91 and with the lowest t-value being 5,67. All constructs exceeded the recommended cut-off points for the adequacy of 0.70 for CR (Steenkamp & Van Trijp, 1991) and 0.50 for AVE (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), with the only exception of risk taking which shows an AVE of 0.48. Finally, the data met the Fornell & Larcker’s (1981) criterion: the average variance explained by each latent variable was greater than any of the squared correlations involving the variable, suggesting that discriminant validity was achieved. Cronbach’s alphas were also used to confirm the scales’ reliability. All constructs ranged from 0.70 to 0.94.

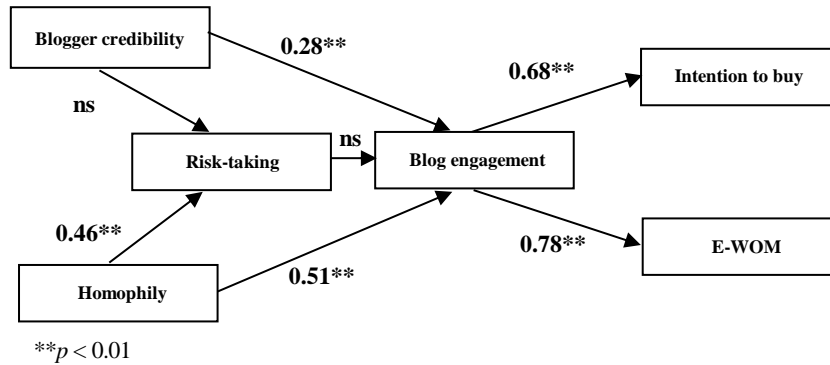
4.2 Test of the structural model

The structural model had a good fit with the empirical data (Satorra-Bentler Scaled $\chi^2 = 581.87$; $df = 267$; RMSEA = 0.08; CFI = 0.97; NNFI = 0.97; SRMR = 0.09). Overall, the model explains 47% of the variance for purchase intention and 59% for e-word-of-mouth. The significant parameters estimates are shown in Figure 1.

The examination of the path coefficients and p-values indicated that H1 is only partially supported. While the fashion blogger credibility positively influences the engagement within the blog (H1b; $\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), it does not translate in a greater propensity to interact with other followers (H1a). Conversely, homophily exerts a significant and positive effect on both risk taking (H2a; $\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$) and blog engagement (H2b; $\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$). H3 is not supported by empirical data: a risk-taking behaviour does not always

result in a higher engagement with the blog. The engagement in blog reading, commenting or sharing posts has, indeed, a strong and positive association with intention to buy (H4a; $\beta = 0.68, p < 0.01$) and to spread positive word-of-mouth about the fashion blogger (H4b; $\beta = 0.78, p < 0.01$).

Figure 1 – Structural model with standardized coefficients



5. Discussion

Nowadays blogs have become important sources of news and information. Particularly, fashion bloggers, thanks to their popularity in the blogosphere, are increasingly able to influence, with their suggestions, consumers' buying decisions. The present paper proposed a model aimed to investigate the impact of blogger credibility, homophily, blog engagement and risk-taking behaviour on readers' behaviour implications (shopping intentions and e-wom).

The analysis of the data showed that the perceived level of expertise and trustworthiness of a blogger (blogger credibility) as well as the tendency to be connected to the other followers (homophily) increased the level of engagement with the blog, which in turn positively influenced (a) the intention to buy products sponsored by the fashion blogger and (b) the propensity to trigger a positive word-of-mouth about the blogger.

The study has useful implications for both academics and professionals. From a theoretical point of view, it enriches the literature on the role of fashion blogs in the consumer decision-making process by proposing a joint analysis of some important dimensions that can influence the individual's involvement in the blog and his/her behavioural response. From a managerial point of view, these results provide guidance for both companies that create partnerships with famous fashion bloggers and bloggers who have turned their diary-style websites into a business. Encouraging the sharing of similar values, preferences and lifestyles among readers can facilitate the attachment to the blog and the engagement with its contents, thus leading to a greater ability of the blogger to influence the readers' buying decisions and, at the same time, increasing his/her popularity through a positive word-of-mouth. Similarly, investing in a partnership with a blogger, who is considered well-informed, sincere and trustworthy, may represent a strategic tool for fashion companies in order to significantly persuade consumers' decision-making process.

The study successfully shows that fashion blogs – through the credibility of the blogger – may influence their readers’ product consumption. However, limitations should be considered in interpreting and generalising the findings. We did not adopt a cross-national approach. Further studies may be conducted in other countries, for example by comparing developed and developing markets through larger samples so as to test the cross-national validity of the framework. Moreover, the study focused on fashion blogs, hence other product categories need to be explored to see if findings may be transferred to a different context. Lastly, the degree of influence exerted by the blog may depend on the level of innovativeness of readers, thus further research could verify the moderating role of fashion innovativeness of consumers.

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