

Instant Buying of Fast Fashion: Are Influencers to Blame?

INTRODUCTION

Marketing's contribution to the fame and success of fast fashion is highlighted and recognised (Mintel, 2017). Whilst fast fashion brands and retailers are attempting to change their working and supply chain practices, communications and sales remain unchanged. After all, this might result in anti-marketing and anti-profit results leading to another set of societal challenges such as economic prosperity. However, with the rise of social media influencers (SMIs), we could argue that fast fashion marketing practices became even more advanced and sophisticated in pushing consumers to carry on with impulsive and irrational buying, quite often leading to overconsumption.

Pemberton (2016) has found that 84% of millennials admitted that their purchasing decisions being influenced by user-generated content from strangers or marketing mavens (i.e. SMIs). From his work, it is clear that SMIs increase brand awareness and drive sales. However, with Instagram now enabling in-app checkout for e-commerce brands we question whether fast fashion sales are boosted as a result of instant and spontaneous behaviour that could be triggered by SMIs' content and social media-facilitated transactions. There are various explanations of the causes of impulsive purchasing such as the individual's personality traits (Wadera and Sharma, 2018), gender and age (Lin and Lin, 2005), or exposure to stimuli such as fantasy content (Applebaum, 1951). However, because SMIs are a somewhat new phenomenon, there is limited research into how their content stimulates consumers' impulsivity. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of SMIs' content on consumers' tendencies to buy fast-fashion products impulsively.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Fast Fashion in the Digital World

Today consumers are using social media to inform their buying decisions (Stephen, 2016). products. Fast-fashion stores often have a poor environment and atmosphere, which can prevent consumers from shopping there (Wang, 2010), making e-window displays the perfect trigger to desire the latest and accessible fashion. Many fast-fashion companies only started using social media around the year of 2009, which was relatively late compared to other industries (Elram and Orna, 2015). Despite this, consumers in Britain are now making twice as many fast-fashion purchases than they were ten years ago (BBC, 2018). Mintel (2018) estimates that online consumer purchasing of fashion products will rise by 72.5% to £32.8 billion by the year 2023. This significant increase has been facilitated by social media that allows brands to have a larger online presence, communicate necessary information via creative means, and therefore reach more consumers and increase their shopping propensity (Kim and Ko, 2012; Zhang et al., 2017). In many cases it is not just fast to market supply chain that makes fast-fashion brands successful but also instant buying generated by multiple stimuli including promotional content.

Impulsiveness

As the Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines, impulsiveness is the act of doing something suddenly, without considering the consequences. Expanding on this, Rook (1987, p.191) states that impulse purchasing occurs when *"a consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately"*. Here it is important to establish the difference between impulsive buying and compulsive buying. Compulsive buying is the problematic behaviour where impulsive purchases are repetitive and often result in negative consequences (Kwak et al., 2006). In this particular study the aim is to only investigate whether impulsive buying, which is an instant transaction-supported behaviour, is triggered by such external stimuli as SMIs' content.

Applebaum (1951) was one of the first to recognise how external stimuli, perhaps created by a promotional stimulus, can impact a consumer's impulsive purchasing behaviours. Impulsive buying often tends to be product or outcome oriented (Rook and Fisher 1995). Instant gratification would be a common outcome of purchasing something that has a symbolic meaning or associations with a certain goal that consumer wishes to achieve. However, advertising or contextual setting or other environmental stimuli are found to strongly stimulate the impulsive buying (Piron 1991).

Sundstrom et al (2013) discovered the impact of feelings was the most important factor when impulsively purchasing clothing online. The most recurring feelings included escapism, pleasure, reward, scarcity, security, and anticipation. Escapism reflects how the individual can temporarily escape a boring moment by browsing online and achieve happiness through shopping activities. However, it could be argued that boredom does not directly lead to impulsive purchasing – people may engage with social media when they are bored, but it is potentially the content or the context of this that stimulates impulsive behaviours.

Individual character traits can impact a consumer's impulsive purchasing behaviour (Wadera and Sharma 2018), for example, having high impulsivity traits makes consumers more likely to engage in impulse buying intentions (Chen and Wang 2015; Vogt et al. 2015). However, Parsad et al. (2017) suggest that a consumer's impulsive traits do not directly lead to impulse buying, as something else is needed to drive them and stimulate their impulsive buying tendency. Expanding on Applebaum (1951) and Piron's (1991) research on exposure to stimuli, impulse purchasing can be driven by online advertisements, discounts, suggestions from peers (Madhavaram and Laverie 2004), self-indulgence and exclusivity (Crawford and Melewar 2003). In the social media context, fast-fashion brands are often reliant on endorsements from SMIs. Hence, it is SMIs' content that could potentially lead to consumers' impulsiveness.

Social Media Influencers' Content

SMIs are defined as *"people who possess greater than average potential to influence others due to such attributes as the frequency of communication, person persuasiveness or size of – and centrality to – a social network"* (Audrezet et al. 2017, p.509). Research (Freberg et al., 2011; Gilani et al., 2018) shows that SMIs can shape consumers'/followers' thoughts, attitudes and behaviour via the content they post.

A survey conducted by Stackla (2017) found that only 23% of respondents said SMI content influences their purchasing decisions. However, Gashi (2017) postulates that SMIs do have a significant impact on each stage of a consumer's purchasing decision process, with the amount of influence depending on the content, expertise, attractiveness, social identity and trust. Consumers and SMIs share views on certain products and interests, creating a culture of online 'experts' (Johnstone and Lindh 2017). However, SMIs need to do more than just share information to generate engagement – they must demonstrate passion and skill (Solis and Breakenridge 2009). SMIs are regarded as "the most powerful force in the fashion marketplace" (Sudha and Sheena 2017, p.18) as they are considered to be experts in their field and can impact what becomes a fashion trend. The younger generation tends to be more easily influenced by SMIs, as the content can speed up their decision-making process when purchasing fast-fashion (Sudha and Sheena 2017; Lea et al. 2018).

Lou and Yuan (2019) developed a social media influencer value model, according to which SMIs content has two positive values attached to it, informativeness and entertainment. In the follow-up study Lou and Kim (2019) confirmed that SMIs' content is often seen valuable due to its entertaining nature. However, informativeness of the SMIs' content was seen to generate much more trust towards the SMI (Lou and Yuan, 2019). In both studies credibility of SMIs was seen as a critical element in driving purchasing of the SMI-endorsed brands. However, many recent studies (i.e. Gilani et al., 2019) argue that it is not credibility but authenticity, being 'real' or presenting a true self, distinguishes SMIs' content and recommendations from a traditional celebrity endorsement.

Lou and Yuan (2019) found that social media influencers' message value and credibility has a positive link with the followers' purchasing intention to buy influencer-endorsed brands. However, SMIs' content is yet to be examined in regards to any effect it has on followers' tendencies to react fast and buy instantly. This aspect deserves more attention as it seems that influencer-driven instant and fast commerce could extend the negative impacts of fast fashion industry.

Hence, the following hypotheses are to be tested in this study:

Hypothesis 1: Valuable SMIs content promoting fast-fashion stimulates the consumer impulsiveness.

Hypothesis 1a: The informative value of SMI content promoting fast-fashion stimulates the consumer impulsiveness.

Hypothesis 1b: The entertainment value of SMI content promoting fast-fashion stimulates the consumer impulsiveness.

Hypothesis 2: Credibility of social media influencers stimulates consumer impulsiveness.

Hypothesis 3: Authenticity of social media influencers stimulates consumer impulsiveness.

Figure 1 presents a summary of the above hypotheses.

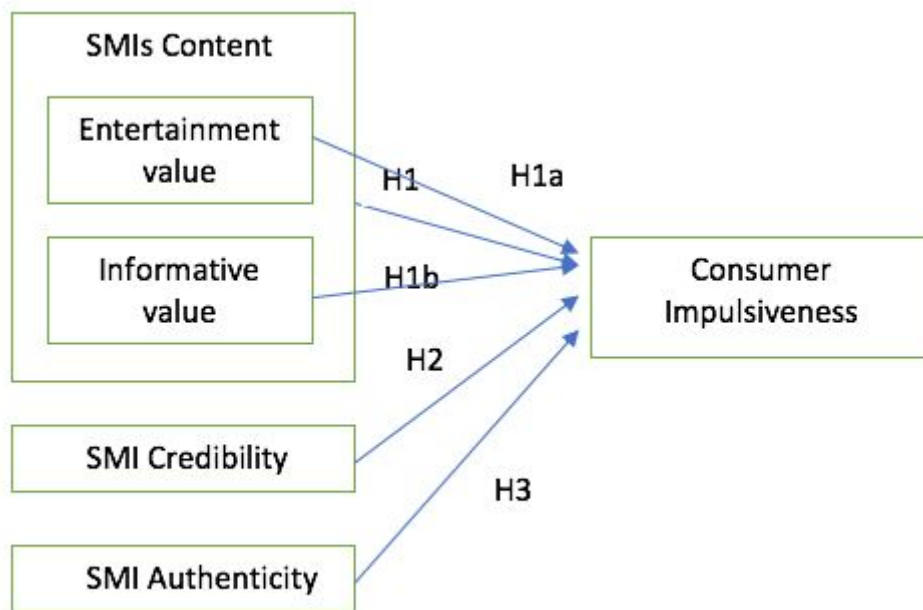


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

METHODOLOGY

We carried out the online survey, hosted by Qualtrics. The survey link was distributed on social media websites, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, to reach individuals of various ages, who use social sites and potentially follow SMIs. The final usable data set comprised of 465 responses. The majority of respondents were aged 16-24 (53%) and the majority were female (64%). However, these results may not be generalisable to the whole population, as there was not an equal distribution across genders and age ranges. Eighteen questions measured five constructs using Likert scale statements: SMI content (3 statements that examined SMI content consumption, interest and desire - internal validity (IV) = 0.761); Goldberg's (1990) 5-personality traits were used to test personality traits (10 reverse statements in total); consumer impulsiveness was measured with 7 items (IV = 0.910) adopted from Rock and Fisher (1995) - 2 items were dropped from the original 9-items construct to increase the validity and reliability of the construct; 16 authenticity statements (IV = 0.896) were borrowed from Choi et al. (2015) and adapted to social media context with 2 items dropped from the original 18-items construct to increase the validity and reliability of the construct; West's (1994) 13 items were adopted to test credibility (IV = 0.939). AMOS was used to test the hypotheses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All, apart from the first (H1), hypotheses were accepted. None of the personality traits were found to have a significant impact on impulsiveness as a result of exposure to SMI content. However, we found that SMI content has a strong and significant impact on consumers' impulsive purchasing ($R=0.575$, $p<0.01$). What is even more interesting is that SMI content explains 37.8% of the variance in consumer impulsiveness. When investigating consumer

impulsiveness within the study, 57% of respondents somewhat agreed that they often feel like buying things on the spur-of-the-moment after seeing something they liked on social media. Existing literature (i.e. Wadera and Sharma 2018; Vogt et al. 2015) postulates that certain personality types tend to be impulsive, and people can be impulsive based on the context. Our data disagrees with this and demonstrates that irrespective of personality traits SMI content triggers impulsive behaviour amongst content consumers. Our data also shows that the more authentic (increase in variance by 2%) and credible (increase in variance by 0.5%) SMIs are seen, the more likely consumers to react to SMI content and 'insta'tly purchase the advertised or featured fast-fashion brands. This is in line with Glucksman (2017) and Choi et al. (2015).

It has been found that credibility strengthened the relationship between SMI content and consumer impulsiveness - in line with Wang et al. (2017). It is also clear that when it comes to SMI content credibility is less important than authenticity. So as long as SMIs are honest, which they increasingly do today by disclosing paid and sponsored ads, consumers will be positively influenced to purchase the advertised or featured fast-fashion brands. Having a positive image, caring about the environment and social causes, and acting socially responsible were the characteristics that respondents considered to be the most important regarding SMI authenticity. An increasing number of SMIs (nano, micro, and macro) are promoting sustainable and ethical fashion products, to encourage followers to be more environmentally-friendly (Salibian 2018). Several fashion brands including H&M, PrettyLittleThing, and ASOS have also got involved in reducing their carbon footprint through their recycling schemes (Carder 2017). However, our data shows that as SMIs can be used as role models of sustainable consumption they also boost fast-fashion sales by triggering impulsive shopping. In light of our findings, we question fast-fashion brands' intent in working with SMIs. This ethical dilemma needs to be examined further.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

The results of this study clearly show that SMIs have made a big impression in our day-to-day lives and have the power to sway our consumption of fast-fashion. Nouri (2018) postulates that the use of SMIs is more effective to companies than using traditional celebrities as they are more engaging, authentic and relatable. The findings of this research support this as it is suggested that SMI content is perhaps now more important to the consumer than the number of followers they possess, therefore having 'celebrity status' is now less significant in the connected world. More needs to be done in regulating social media marketing as this study shows that SMI content may cause people to get into debt by constantly making impulsive purchases. Marketing advertisements and promotions on social media that feature SMIs could be dangerous to consumers for this reason, but at the same time, commercially it is fantastic for companies. Hence, fast-fashion brands need to rethink not just their production processes but also branding and communication practices. It seems that by collaborating with SMIs in an attempt to educate consumers about sustainable and ethical consumption, they are triggering a different outcome - overshopping and overconsumption.

References Available Upon Request.