

Understanding the Role of Instagram in Fashion Consumers' Problem Recognition Behaviors

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Introduction Social media plays a key role in the lives of young adult consumers and is a critical element of fashion marketing in the digital age, with 51% of consumers using social media to follow and communicate with brands (Dubina, 2020). The rise of social media has also resulted in the increased presence of key opinion leaders on platforms like Instagram. Commonly referred to as 'influencers,' these individuals build communities of followers through niche marketing and often serve as a source of unbiased product or experience-related information for their followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). The purpose of this study is to understand the role of Instagram in fashion consumers' problem recognition behaviors. Previous research has indicated that Instagram plays a key role in certain decision-making behaviors for fashion consumers, so the proposed study has the potential to provide further context on how consumers use Instagram in the earlier stages of the decision-making process. Specifically, this study focuses on content created by prominent fashion influencers on Instagram whose target demographic includes young adult consumers.

Literature Review The Engel Kollat Blackwell model of consumer decision making was developed in 1968 based on the framework provided by John Dewey's (1910) five-stage problem solving process and includes five key steps: (1) problem recognition, (2) information search, (3) alternative evaluation, (4) purchase, and (5) post-purchase evaluation (Darley, Blankson, & Leuthge, 2010; Engel, Blackwell, & Kollat, 1968). Bruner and Pomazal (1988) explained that problem recognition is based on the interaction between one's desired state and actual state, noting that problem recognition occurs, "when a significant difference develops between a person's desired state and actual state with respect to a particular want or need" (p. 54). For fashion consumers, problem recognition can occur with exposure to advertisements of the latest fashions, which can trigger a change in a consumer's desired state (Workman & Studak, 2006). In their study on social media and consumers' fashion decision-making, Nash (2019) noted that, "(while) browsing, especially in relation to high-street fashion, if content appeared that aroused and activated the decision process this created a previously unrecognized need [among participants]" (p. 91). With the rise in social media activity among young adult consumers, there has also been an increased presence of key opinion leaders or 'influencers' on social media platforms like Instagram. Gupta, Agarwal, and Singh (2020) noted that consumers build relationships and engage online with influencers and "Insta-famous celebrities," often taking direct recommendations and tagged product suggestions from those influencers when making

buying decisions. As influencers and Instagram celebrities continue to emerge as a driving force in the decision making processes of fashion consumers, it is important to explore the ways that such individuals present information to their audiences and how that information may impact consumers' decision making; this need is the driving force behind this study, which seeks to understand the different ways that information is presented by influencers to fashion consumers and how different strategies might affect consumers' problem recognition behaviors.

Methodology In order to better understand the tactics used by fashion influencers to elicit problem recognition behaviors, a content analysis was conducted of the Instagram posts of four prominent, non-celebrity, US-based fashion influencers. Content analysis is a qualitative research method which involves the collection, winnowing, coding, and interpretation of data from various sources, typically with the aim of extracting themes which capture the major points or perspectives being communicated in the content (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In recent years, content analysis has transitioned into the digital age, with researchers mining social media data from platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in order to better understand younger generations. Instagram influencers were selected based on lists of top fashion Instagram accounts from reliable online sources; several lists were consulted, then cross-matched to find individuals who appeared frequently. Influencers based in the same country with similar followings (between one and ten million), target demographics, and backgrounds (i.e. non-celebrities) were selected. The influencers' fifty most recent posts were documented; captions and tagged accounts were noted in the initial data collection, as was the post's sponsorship status (sponsored vs. non-sponsored content), the type of post (video vs. photo), and the number of images or videos contained in the post. A total of 200 posts were collected and analyzed contextually for prominent themes. Data analysis was conducted manually; content was reviewed independently and themes were extracted, then a second reviewer examined both the data and the resulting themes to confirm their appropriateness.

Results When evaluating the data obtained, brand placement and sponsorship were analyzed using an adapted version of the categories developed by Jacobsen, Hodson, and Mittelman (2022). Notably, 182 out of 200 posts (91%) mentioned a brand in the caption and/or tagged a brand in the images or videos featured in the post and 55 of 200 posts (27.5%) featured disclosed brand partnerships, advertisements, or commission-based shopping links. Post captions were analyzed for overarching themes and messaging strategies, and several distinct patterns emerged. The first of these was the use of questions to engage the audience — for example, asking, “1, 2, or 3?” or “which is your favorite?” alongside a series of photos — a strategy which encourages followers to respond and to consider how a particular product or brand might fit into their lives. The second theme which emerged in the captions analyzed was storytelling; influencers used personal stories and experiences as a means of connecting with followers emotionally, both for lifestyle content purposes and when featuring products or brands that were particularly meaningful. The third theme found in the content analyzed was product demonstration or strategic placement. This strategy was used for both sponsored and non-sponsored content, and

occurred as influencers demonstrated how a particular product should be used (i.e. skincare and beauty products) or how a particular clothing item or accessory could be styled. This strategy has the potential to increase need recognition as it provides consumers with the opportunity to visualize how a particular product could fit into their own routine or style.

Discussion and Implications The purpose of this study was to understand the role of Instagram in fashion consumers' problem recognition behaviors. Generally, content curated by these influencers fell into one of three categories: brand partnerships and sponsored content, fashion-focused content, and lifestyle content. Several distinct audience engagement tactics were identified which could potentially elicit problem recognition behaviors among followers; these included asking questions, storytelling, and product demonstration. The identified tactics were consistent with results from previous studies which utilized social media data (Tafesse & Wein, 2017; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Long-term, the purpose of this study is to provide foundational information on the strategies and content themes used by prominent fashion influencers to elicit a need recognition response from their audience. This study provides valuable information which can be used for future research on the role of Instagram in fashion consumers' problem recognition behaviors, a topic which is especially relevant as social media influencers become a prominent source of information for modern fashion consumers. Further content analysis, including additional posts per influencer, additional influencers, and brands, has the potential to expound upon these findings and provide additional insights on the strategies used by Instagram influencers to elicit problem recognition behaviors among their followers.

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