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Millennials' Fashion Consumption: Who Are Fashion Opinion Leaders in Social Media?

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Key words: opinion leader, social media, millennials, and consumption

Introduction. The evolution of social media has created a turbulent environment for consumers and fashion retail business by changing ways to create, share, and exchange fashion related information. Traditionally, fashion opinion leaders are “editors of leading fashion magazines and highly visible fashion consumers, such as society women, movie stars, and popular music stars” (Crane, 1999, p.16). Now, bloggers who share their unique tastes or product reviews through social media are considered fashion opinion leaders who diffuse information about products and services using a two-step flow communication model (Later, Lazarsfeld & Katz, 1955). In the first step, opinion leaders understand and interpret information or products that they received or found. In the second step, they pass along the digested information to their nearby environment; such as friends, relatives, contacts and social media followers. Bloggers specifically work as brand endorsers for millennial consumers; which mean the market is going through drastic changes to meet the needs of the millennial target market. However, while previous research has paid attention to how consumers use reviews and information in social media for their consumption, there is a lack of research on who creates content, how they are identified as opinion leaders, and their impact on fashion consumption. The purpose of this research was to offer a better understanding of fashion opinion leaders in social media and how they influenced millennial consumers' consumption. For this purpose, the following research questions were used: (1) what factors play an important role in identifying opinion leaders in social media? (2) how do opinion leaders influence millennial' fashion and consumption? and (3) how does social media influence their communication about fashion?

Methodology. To explore how millennials identified fashion opinion leaders in social media and their influence on millennial fashion consumption; a qualitative approach with online open-ended survey questions was adopted. Lead respondents were allowed to express themselves and provide valuable insights in their own words (Esterberg, 2002). Qualitative data analysis from 76 female college students from diverse classes at a large US Northwest university completed surveys were used. Thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990) was conducted by two coders. The inter-coder reliability reached 94% after further discussion and negotiation between the coders.

Findings. Analysis revealed the following factors identifying fashion opinion leaders in social media: (1) bloggers' personal characteristics and (2) Platform characteristics used by bloggers. Millennials considered whether an opinion leader had a trendy lifestyle (aspirations), unique style, positive personality, attractive physical appearance, were relatable (share similarities), well known in the industry, and popular to the public, before deciding to follow a particular opinion leader. Participants noted opinion leaders shared trendy and unique life styles (i.e., traveling, healthy living, fitness, fashion, beauty). Millennial opinion leaders were inspirational but at the same time related to followers causing connections between the opinion leaders and their

followers. For example, “I consider Karlie Rae a fashion opinion leader because I love her clothing style, and enjoy looking at her lifestyle. She shops and similar places that I shop, and she lives in Seattle, which makes her relatable (unlike bloggers from LA or New York). Also, she has a cute dog and her and her husband are very adorable” (P8). Also, bloggers’ platform characteristics, such as having large numbers of followers, aesthetically pleasing platforms or images, and posting regularly were considered factors that identify fashion opinion leaders. Participants mentioned consumers trust an opinion leader and were willing to follow them if they had more followers because it meant the opinion leader put more towards their followers. After they put trust toward an opinion leader, it was important to find regular postings by bloggers; which kept followers engaged in interaction with the opinion leader. Interestingly, participants mentioned vivid photos and a recurring theme as assets of aesthetically pleasing platforms. In regard to opinion leaders’ impact to fashion consumptions, the responses showed opinion leaders provided fashion product information (i.e., product reviews and locations), confirmation of purchases (i.e., relieving post purchase dissonance), and styling advice (i.e., introducing and inspiring new trends) which helped followers purchase products or follow a similar style the opinion leaders endorsed. The final part of this research revealed millennials use interact with opinion leaders in social media for entertainment, social interaction/communication, wanting to be on trend, fear of missing out on trends, easy/convenient to use, and routine behavior. It helps to understand what makes millennials visit opinion leaders on social media.

Discussion and Conclusion. The findings of this research offered an understanding of how millennials identified opinion leaders in social media and consumed fashion products through interaction with them. Compared with other cohorts, millennials considered opinion leaders to be inspiring but also share similarities with their followers. Millennials also point out the importance of non-verbal communication (esthetical pleasing platform) as considerations to engage in interaction. In addition, millennials actively sought information about fashion trends and products from opinion leaders’ shared comments but also the location of products. This means product availability in social media directly influenced their consumption online. These findings fill a gap when defining fashion opinion leaders in social media and build brand marketing strategies for hiring opinion leaders as endorsers or adopting social media platforms to interact with millennial consumers. This is an empirical study with a convenient sample of female college students. For future research, male millennial consumers could reveal other perspectives to identifying opinion leaders in social media and their consumption.

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