How Social Media is Transforming the Fashion Consumers:
The Effects of “Social” Consumer Attributes on
Brand Engagement in Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media has given rise to the new consumer group, namely, social consumers. This study identified the distinct characteristics of social consumers (i.e., online social search, online social navigation, online social connection) and examined the impacts of social consumer attributes on the engagement with fashion brands via brands’ SNSs (BSNSs). A sample of 141 U.S. consumers who had browsed and/or participated in a fashion brand’s BSNS (i.e., the Facebook page for fashion brands) was used to examine hypothesized relationships. The analyses involved running a confirmatory factor analysis and a structural equation modeling. The result indicates that the impacts of the social consumer attributes on the benefits of BSNSs (i.e., experiential and functional benefits) as perceived by consumers were significant, except the link between online social connection and functional benefits. In addition, consumers’ existing relationship with a brand served as a moderating variable, strengthening the impacts of social consumer attributes on BSNS benefits. The perceived benefits of BSNSs positively affected perceived relationship investment which in turn influenced brand loyalty. Practical marketing suggestions are provided for fashion brands.

Keywords: brand relationship, social consumers, social media, social networking sites

I. Introduction

Taylor was recently connected to her favorite fashion brand Loft’s Facebook page so she could receive time-sensitive promotional offers from Loft more conveniently. When the offer she likes is posted, she “Likes” it and comments on that post so she directly communicates with the brand. One of Taylor’s recent favorite things to do is to share her outfit of the day (#OOTD) with some of her favorite fashion brands like...
The fashion consumer is changing. The way consumers interact with fashion brands is strikingly different than they did a decade ago. As described in Taylor’s story above, consumers are actively engaged in the communication with a brand and influencing their power by “becoming friends,” “following,” and “tweeting” via fashion brands’ social networking sites (SNSs). For this reason, many of current fashion brands utilize SNSs as the first point-of-contact with their customer to inform demand and to initiate a dialogue on products (Milnes, 2016). The proliferation of social media has given rise to the new consumer group, namely, social consumers (Rucker, 2010; Schneider, 2016). These consumers use social channels and networks to learn about brands and make their purchase decisions. Social consumers value the information provided by like-minded people who share common interests with them and desire a conversation with a brand in SNSs, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In the fashion context, social consumers are often characterized by their strong interest in fashion and active engagement in SNSs (Netbase, 2013). These consumers consider SNSs as one of the most trustable information sources of their shopping and actively share their opinions on fashion products and brands via SNSs.

While industry reports have constantly discussed this new market segment and contended that fashion consumer behavior is changed in a fundamental way with new digital media, there seems no universal agreement among practitioners and academic researchers as to who “social” consumers are and how the unique attributes of this market segment influence the engagement with a brand in SNSs and consumer-brand relationship. To address these gaps in the literature, this study identifies the distinct characteristics of social consumers and examines the impact of social consumer attributes on the engagement with fashion brands via brands’ SNSs (BSNSs). In this study, Facebook was chosen as a representative platform of BSNSs because of its prominence in fashion brands’ marketing communications (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Morrison, 2010). According to the recent industry survey of nearly 4,000 brands worldwide, 82% of brand marketers agree that social media marketing is core to their business and rate Facebook as the most effective channels followed by Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram (McCorkle, 2016). Although precise statistical data are not available, most of top retail brands have developed their own pages on Facebook, cultivating their brand communities and engaging their customers in diverse ways.

II. Literature Review

1. Social Consumer Attributes

Recognizing the lack of a clear definition of social consumers, the social consumer in this study is defined as the consumer who uses SNSs to learn about products or services and to share the consumption experiences with others via SNSs. The most prominent characteristic of social consumers is that they consume information and learn about brands and products through SNSs (Solis, 2010a). While the traditional information source used for product/brand search was mainly mass-media, such as TV and print advertising, social consumers use social media like BSNSs when searching the product/brand information. In addition, social consumers are skillful in navigating through different platforms of SNSs (Das, 2015). They experience little difficulty in performing a variety of SNS activities, such as sharing or uploading photos, commenting on other posts, and sharing links or videos in SNSs. They also