

Assignment #1

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Student Name: Riya Srivastava
Student Number: 19916086
Unit Name: NETS5004 Social Media, Communities and Networks
Email Address: Riya.srivastava@postgrad.curtin.edu.au
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Stream: Identity & Online Advocacy

Thesis statement: Analyzing the creative use of social media and influencer culture by fashion brands, such as ‘green-fashion’ brands in building and promoting themselves, and investigating the challenges faced in doing so by exploring the concepts of identity and online advocacy.

Abstract:

With the rise of social media, businesses have shifted their marketing mannerisms to adhere to the changes of the times. Every business has its presence on multiple social media networking sites, and they effectively utilize those platforms to market, advertise, create brand awareness, and increase their sales. Marketing through social media platforms (such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.) is known as social media marketing. However, with the advent of the influencer culture brands alone cannot create trustworthiness, unless they have onboard a few influencers whom the audience trusts and follows. These social media influencers act as a channel of trust between the brands and the customers. This deep-rooted trust is born out of parasocial interactions and is used by brands to implement evolutionary changes such as sustainability in fashion and ethical consumerism. Therefore, by applying a reflective and in-depth study of research papers by prominent researchers and scholars and concepts discussed in tutorials, this paper seeks to understand how fashion brands use social media and use influencer culture to their benefit. This paper also investigates the issues faced by the ‘green-fashion’ brands and relevant influencers in promoting sustainable fashion.

Hashtags: Social media marketing, influencer culture, sustainable fashion, green-fashion brands

Introduction:

Social media and fashion are closely related to each other. Fashion brands heavily rely on various social media advertising and marketing tools to evoke consumer interest and trust. Moreover, “In brand management research, a social media approach based on the use of LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other such social networks can be deployed to develop marketing strategies.” (Wu., C.W. et al., 2020. p. 1185). Therefore, the performance of brands in terms of sales, brand awareness, brand image, and marketing costs can be analyzed and understood according to consumer response to these marketing strategies. Brands, specifically fashion brands, use several techniques to grasp consumer attention and trust, but the most popular marketing tactic for fashion brands in the contemporary world is the use of people known as “influencers”. But who are they and why are they so important to fashion brands? Well, as Abidin (2021) explains,

“Every day, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in “digital” and “physical” spaces, and monetize their following by integrating “advertorials” into their blog or social media posts and making physical appearances at events.” Moreover, Abidin’s studies rightly highlight the fact that influencers act as “opinion leaders for young internet users” (Abidin, 2021, p. 5) by communicating through several digital platforms using effective digital strategies, thus contributing to identity formation and online advocacy. Consumers follow their favourite influencers by attaching a deep one-sided personal connection with them that governs their lifestyle choices including fashion and beauty. “Green-fashion” (Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018) brands utilize specific influencer marketing tools such as campaigns and social outreach, etc., to derive maximum consumers. Moreover, such brands have facilitated the rise and popularity of “sustainable fashion social media influencers” due to their desperation to launch sustainable and eco-friendly clothing. The green-fashion brands benefit from the love of some influencers for fashion but ethical business beliefs, their “symbolic interactionism” (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021, p. 160) and their “front-stage performance of the self”. (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, this paper analyzes the use of social media and the popular influencer culture by the green-fashion brands to market and promote sustainability along with investigating the challenges faced while doing so.

Literature Review:

Social Media for Building Fashion Brands

Social media is not just for communicating and sharing your thoughts and life, it has evolved to become a platform for effective marketing and brand building. Brands use their social media handles to promote their presence, and products, create product launches, increase their brand awareness & image, and accumulate customers’ behaviour around these initiatives. “Customers search, evaluate, choose, and buy goods and services based on what they encounter on social media” (C.W. et al., 2020. p. 1186). “These social media developments have shaped marketing practices and strategic decisions” (Itani et al., 2017). Thus, “social media can facilitate brand interactions, collaborations, and sharing from online platforms and media” (C.W. et al., 2020. p. 1186).

However, one may wonder why brands use social media to target their audience and know their specific interests? This can be understood from the post-modern perspective model of identity, where one’s identity is fluid, expressive through language, performative, fragmented, and driven by internal contradictions. Therefore, the post-modern approach provides the flexibility to share one’s unique identity on the internet via social media. Moreover, Leaver (2015) makes some important revelations by studying that social media identity is part of a person’s life may be before they’re even born and

continues to exist even after their death. Through his study, he highlights the fact that social media is now an integral part of many families, especially in nuclear family setups, long-distance relationships, or families living countries apart. He points out that “a social media presence often begins before birth. On Instagram alone, every month, thousands of fetal images are shared and publicly tagged as ultrasounds. Often, these images capture the metadata visible on the ultrasound screen, which might include the mother’s name, the current date, the location of the scan, the expected delivery date, and other personal information.” (Leaver, 2015, p. 1). Moreover, all through their life, a person shares numerous personal interests and activities, comments, likes, dislikes, etc., about themselves. Thus, this hints at the fact that social media is now a reservoir of the personal data of individuals who are active on social media. Hence, brands lookout for such specificities through various content management and data retrieval applications (SEO) that help them find and target their niche audience and market their product specifically to them.

Furthermore, social media marketing is cost-effective and allows brands to understand the needs of their consumers via comments and queries. Companies and brands can form a distinct picture of their consumers' needs and process them accordingly. Therefore, social media marketing is the current marketing high. “The advantages of social media marketing have not been limited to small companies but are utilized by brands like Louis Vuitton and Amazon to name a few. These companies use social media platforms to communicate about their brand history, employees, and their upcoming events. The key role is to convince customers to be a part of the journey through the medium of storytelling” (Jin, S. Et al., 2021). Moreover, for effective social media marketing, it is important to choose the right platform for the product. “According to Statista, some of the best places to learn about, discover or buy fashion apparel are Facebook and Instagram” (Shepherd, 2022). Therefore, using Facebook and Instagram marketing techniques like Sponsored Ads, Reels, and Live Videos is a wonderful way to represent your fashion brand. Creating a Facebook and Instagram shop for your brand helps customers view the products directly from the apps and aids in brand image. Posting on social media regularly to promote, educate, inspire, and entertain is a marvelous social media strategy and increases customer trust. Brands also earn customer trust and support by resharing customer content that has a specific brand-generated hashtag. This strategy is immensely popular through the Ambassador programs followed by many organic and small-scale fashionpreneurs. Following the trends is also an important marketing strategy followed by brands to elevate their brand awareness. And finally, influencer marketing. This is the most important form of online marketing for fashion brands. Influencers bridge the gap between brands and customers by filling it with authentic, trustworthy, and reliable information about the products. Influencer marketing is one of the most useful and prominent marketing tools in the current digital marketing realm.

Influencer Culture for Marketing Brands

According to Goffman's (1959) study on "Performing the Self", an individual's effort to act and behave in a way that influences how an audience sees them, usually with the intent to create, present, and maintain a favourable image in a social situation for a specific purpose. His study talks about a much broader perspective of a person's behaviour and identity in a social context but certainly lays the foundation that the influencer culture is based on.

Moreover, reflecting on Abidin's (2021, p. 5) latest study on Influencer culture, it can be classified into influencer culture as a job, influencer culture as a concept and role, and influencer culture as amplification platforms. The less likely it may seem, but brands utilize all the three functionalities of influencer culture to promote their products. As a job description, influencer culture gives birth to influencers who are "individuals who became famous via their social media presence, as opposed to traditional celebrities who are famous from film, music and TV shows" (Jin, S. V., et al., 2021, p. 568). Brands utilize influencers and their power of self-presentation to avoid being bothered by the non-target groups, their ability to compete and wrestle with popular brands by hijacking their personalized hashtags, their intelligence to make it look less like a paid and biased job, their bravery to talk on controversial topics and attract their audience, and their use of sensuality and innocence to get the likes and followers flowing. Thus, brands promote influencer jobs to establish themselves in the market and build brand awareness.

Secondly, influencer culture as a concept or role simply means that "influencers have evolved as "opinion leaders for young internet users". (Abidin, 2021, p. 5). They are online advocates for raising awareness and creating change. Green fashion brands utilize this concept of influencer culture to market their brand's vision and scope, influence the audience's lifestyle choices, raise awareness about their brand, propagate the USP of their brand and establish their products in the market.

Lastly, influencers are differentiated based on many parameters such as size, niche, the platform they use, culture, etc. A simple classification of influencers in India based on their number of followers looks like Nano (1,000 to 10,000 followers), Micro (10,000 to 100,000 followers), Macro (100,000 to 500,000 followers), Mega (500,000 to 1M followers), and Celebrity (1M+ followers) (IIDE, 2021). However, this classification may alter with different cultures, regions, languages, etc. Nano, micro, and macro-influencers generally have a high engagement rate, word-of-mouth marketing power, mastery of a subject, strong reach, audience's trust and access, the ability to persuade conversations, and lead opinions. Brands reside themselves in this range of influencers to amplify their name, fame, vision, mission, sales, and marketing. However, the type of influencers approached by a brand directly depends on the budget the brand has for their influencer marketing campaign, their type, size,

and category. So, for instance, a ‘green-fashion’ brand selling sustainable clothing must narrow down its search to influencers who promote and engage in sustainable clothing brands with a good follower base and persuasive personality. Hence, Influencer culture as an amplification platform is consciously used by brands to gather maximum output.

Understanding Green/Sustainable Fashion & Green fashion Influencing

Fashion brands can be broadly termed into two main categories: Fast Fashion and Slow-fashion or Sustainable/Green fashion. Fast fashion induces consumerism by producing cheap and low-quality materials at high-speed and cheaper rates. Whereas green fashion refers to the production of clothing that cares for the labour rights and the environment, promises fair compensation and equal opportunities, values circular economy, reduces negative consumption patterns, and creates a positive social impact (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021). With the rise of environmental concerns and related awareness, fashion brands have become the most sensitive and are striving to change their ways to avoid further environmental degradation. Consumers, especially youngsters, are particularly attracted to sustainable clothing. (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021, p. 152). “49% of 18–24-year-olds are very supportive of sustainable fashion in comparison to 25% of those 55+” (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021). Moreover, other research suggests that consumers from high-income groups are more likely to buy sustainable fashion. Thus, green-fashion brands have the most need to market themselves effectively using the latest social media trends and influencer culture.

However, not all kinds of influencers are best suited to represent a sustainable fashion brand. Most fashion influencers are busy promoting fast-fashion goods as it increases their popularity and gives them comparatively more financial success. Therefore, a new category of influencers known as “sustainable fashion social media influencers” (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021) has emerged in recent years. Sustainable fashion social media influencers are the influencers who influence and advocate their followers to indulge in sustainable and eco-friendly fashion choices. They encourage the consumers to indulge in sustainable buying through practices like upcycling, thrifting, repurposing, and newly produced sustainable shopping. (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021, p. 152)

Moreover, in a study conducted by (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021) sustainable fashion social media influencers can be categorized into three types: Sustainable Lifestyle Influencers (SLI), Sustainability Influencers (SI), and Thrifting Influencers (TI). SLIs create content on fashion, sustainability, and various other lifestyle topics. Their goal is to gain maximum followership. SIs use social media to share their love for sustainable clothing along with inspiring and advocating to their audience about sustainability in everyday life. Lastly, TIs only talk about thrifting as a way of sustainable fashion, organize thrifting events, plan thrifting campaigns, and engage in “pre-shopping behaviours”. (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021, p.162). These types of influencers invest in other brands as the scope of

thrifting is limited. Therefore, for monetary reasons and more follower base, they indulge in non-sustainable fashion too.

Hence, the degree of a sustainable fashion social media influencer's connection with sustainable fashion depends on a variety of reasons including the criterion of their sponsorship, the focus of their content, monetary goals, and their attitude towards the brand endorsement opportunities. "The passion for fashion and commitment to sustainability exist as two independent dimensions" (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021, p.163). This explains that there is a gap between the zeal to earn fame and money by promoting fashion and the ethical goal to do it via green fashion brands.

Challenges Faced by Green Fashion Brands & Influencers in Promoting Sustainable Fashion

Sustainable fashion is not easy to promote. Since, years, green fashion brands have been facing challenges in promoting their products due to weak consumer knowledge, trust issues, costly price range, and plain & dull styles. Firstly, even after immense awareness, sustainability awareness is still around the corner and only a few are inclined to contribute to it. Developing nations usually provide cheap labourers who work for sustainable companies abroad due to illiteracy and low per capita income. Thus, the group of people being educationally aware of the significance of sustainable clothing are too little. Secondly, trusting the brands promoting "green" or "eco-friendly" products is an issue among the consumers. They might be speculative about the big brands' concerns about environmental issues and human rights. Thus, creating a weak link of trust. (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021). Thirdly, fast-fashion goods are cheap and easily accessible as compared to green-fashion stores. Therefore, it is obvious for people with a low-grade income to flock to the fast-fashion trends. Lastly, due to the pressure on advertisers to promote sustainable clothing that doesn't resemble richly patterned and brightly coloured fast-fashion brands, sustainable clothing seems to look comparatively dull and plain. Hence, they lose customer attention and interest.

Moreover, sustainable fashion social media influencers face the dilemma of "aligning their ethics of sustainability with their desire for compensation" (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021, p. 163). The nature of the gap seems to be rooted in the way identity frameworks are established in society and identity performance is the basis and root cause of influencer culture issues. Since influencers are people who create content on social media to attract an audience, entertain, inform, or educate them, and earn money out of it, their identities are primarily formed through their interaction with people. This ideology of earning money out of influencer identity can be a characteristic of the post-Marxist identity perspective of society. An individual of a society who identifies themselves as an influencer unconsciously believes to earn a name, fame, and money out of influencing career, rather than just for social service. Thus, this unconscious desire of a (green fashion) influencer to also earn materialistic pleasures by marketing green fashion makes it a challenge for them. Moreover, Goffman's (1959)

‘Performing self’ theory explains this gap even further and in detail. An influencer is always trying to act and behave to influence their audience and make them believe a certain opinion of something and subtly force their followers to adopt those opinions through creative content. Now here, the problem persists because a green fashion influencer has a particular online identity, opinions, and behavioural patterns to maintain, but the challenges faced by the green fashion brands make it difficult for the influencers to remain committed to that authentic online self and market sustainability. This creates a gap between their ethics to wholeheartedly promote sustainability and earn money. Therefore, one might see many green fashion influencers like thrift influencers promoting fast fashion for monetary desires.

Some other struggles faced by green influencers as discussed by Jacobson & Harrison (2021) include finding the right brand that aligns with their sustainability values since the influencers have earned an image with hard work, persistence, and perseverance. No regular payments or compensation via free products. At times, "balancing disclosure and authenticity is a challenge for sustainable fashion social media influencers" (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021, p. 164) due to a difference of opinion on a product between the brand and the influencer. Therefore, green fashion brands as well as green fashion influencers face these heavy challenges while organically promoting sustainable fashion.

Conclusion:

This paper tried to analyze how social media is used by brands to build their online presence and market themselves and their products. The paper defined social media marketing and the various tools of this form of marketing. The strategies of building brand awareness, getting influencer support, choosing the right platform, driving the web traffic with SEO techniques, creating online shops, etc., are some of the major social media marketing tactics. Moreover, this paper also explained the influencer culture through Goffman’s ‘performing self’ theory and how the brands utilize it for their benefit. Influencer jobs, which are an important part of the social media marketing strategy are also discussed in the paper. This paper also justified the role of influencer marketing in promoting brands and studied in detail green fashion and the role of influencers in marketing sustainability. Sustainable fashion is one such aspect of fashion that is ever-growing and forever hungry for promotions. The paper highlighted different types of sustainable fashion social media influencers who aid this problem of sustainable fashion promotions. However, understanding the social media marketing trends, influencer culture, green fashion brands and green influencers, the paper investigated the specific issues faced by the green fashion brands in promoting their products and a gap between the green influencers’ work ethics and materialistic desires. The paper was backed up and well-reasoned with the concepts of online identity, online advocacy, various identity models, and Goffman’s performance theory. However, the paper marks certain limitations in men’s fashion and men’s sustainable clothing as the data analysis taken from other papers was based on a list of female fashion influencers as

fashion is a woman-dominated domain. Moreover, the paper opens opportunities for further research on the same theme in the context of a specific culture/nation. These are a few ideas for future research.

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