The Power of Influencers'' in fashion communication: Examining consumer self-identity through social media

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Structured Abstract

Research issue to be addressed: This exploratory research examines online fashion retail brand marketing on social media platforms. Focusing on online retailer 'In the Style', based in Manchester UK, the research considers theoretical underpinnings of social identity theory that capture the zeitgeist – lifestyles constructed and communicated in such a way that creates superficial value rather than promoting artistic aesthetics or authenticity. While online fashion retailing has grown significantly over the last decade (Amed, 2019), supported by advances in digital technology (Iqani, 2019), 'In the Style' (ITS) is not as well established as ASOS (As Seen on Screen), PLT (Pretty Little Thing) and Misguided. To raise the profile of the brand, ITS have collaborated with successful Instagram fashion influencers with curated collections to expand their marketing potential, which founder Adam Frisby believes to be unique (Speed, 2019; Griffiths, 2018). While fast-fashion retailers have previously utilised celebrity as a marketing strategy (Keel and Nataraajan, 2012), the approach by ITS situates the influencer as very much involved in the design, fabric selection and photoshoot of the collection (Griffiths, 2018), and therefore are central to brand success. However, this approach is costly; the collaborative photoshoot in Monte Carlo with Lorna Luxe (Instagram influencer with 850k followers (Fearne, 2019)) cost £20m (Breaking Fashion, 2019). Through this lens, value is constructed within the aesthetic economy (Hewer and Hamilton, 2012), characterised by focusing on commerce and capitalism (Benson, 2019). This has been a lucrative business model of situating inexpensive garments within aspirational lifestyles; yet, it could be argued that fashion consumers are purchasing a homogenous 'lifestyle' devoid of personalisation (Gibson, 2019). Moreover, this

does not aid concern for a sustainable fashion industry Consequently, this research seeks to address notions of influencer power in fashion communication.

Background scientific research: The research is underpinned by social identity theory (Turner, 1999), postulating that individuals categorise themselves and others into social segments through the creation of in/out groups in which they want to belong. Social media platforms offer consumers a place to create their identity, using imagery, commentary and tags to people, places and brands (Ross and Lee, 2019), yet there has been limited research examining the consequences of this on self and individual constructions of identity and personalisation. While it is acknowledged that fashion marketing accentuates aesthetics, historically this has involved creativity and artisan craftmanship, for example Dior's new silhouette or Issey Miyake's pleated sculptures. However, the dominance of fast-fashion is reflected in fast marketing, less about the styling and the creative communication of photo-styled imagery to focus on glamorous lifestyles dictating new fashion. In examining the debate around how social selves are constructed, Grau & Zotos (2016) question whether social imagery either mirrors or mould notions of self-constructed self. Whilst Belk (1988) argued that possessions extend notions of self, the digital landscape suggests that this is exacerbated, or perhaps intensified, through imagery presented online (Belk, 2013). Zhao (2005) likens this to Cooley's (1902) looking glass theory were self-perception is created to manage others view and is peer endorsed.

Methodology: Existential phenomenology positions this exploratory research, which seeks to capture the current phenomenon of self-portrayal on social media and how this is influenced by fashion influencer imagery. This philosophical approach supports the notion that values are influenced by consciousness and experiences, shaped by one's existence or perceived place in the world (Satre, 2003); this infers that self-construction emerges from engaging with elements of interest, comprising of 'being': living, feelings and actions that are incorporated to represent one's agency. This implies that meaning is ideographically constructed and values made meaningful through exposure to experiences. This links into theories around conspicuous consumption (Veblum, 2005), where it is recognised that commodities are used as props to create a self-narrative to communicate self-identity and related values (Cooley, 1902). Falling under a social constructionist paradigm (Ross and Lee, 2019), the research critically analyses the BBC documentary Breaking Fashion which follows ITS marketing activities over six programmes with an Instagram influencer. Each programme follows a fashion influencer as they launch their collection, from the design process, negotiations with the factory and the photoshoot. The programmes highlight the ways in which the factories are pressurised to meet unrealistic

deadlines and the pressure to maintain certain appearances. From critically analysing the programmes and the marketing images promoted on Instagram, content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) enabled the devilment of core themes that correlate with social identity theory.

Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice: Preliminary findings illustrate that the fast fashion industry has adopted a more aggressive approach to supply chain management and marketing (Speed, 2019), none of which supports social or environmental values. This adds layers of pressure to the supply chain, providing a completing narrative around how values are constructed and where the 'power' for change originates. The zeitgeist of self-image is moving to represent pampered lifestyles, often aided by plastic surgery and enhancement extensions (eyelashes, nails), compounding expectations of appearance; it is anticipated that these images will have a wider impact on the construction of self. For those concerned with climate change (the fashion industry is the second largest polluter globally, (Benson, 2019)) understanding how the fast-fashion industry continues to grow in popularity, and profits, is vital. Over the last two decades, academic research has investigated how to make the fashion supply chain more sustainable, as well as examining consumer behaviour. We argue that understanding the way in which fashion contributes to individuals self-construction and how to position sustainability values within social identity will contrite to developing marketing to grow the sustainable fashion industry.

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