Review Article

Instagram Influence on Clothing Purchases – An Eye-opener

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A B S T R A C T

Retailers are constantly finding novel ways to attract customers and encourage brand loyalty. Social media is the newest channel of communication that most international, local, and e-tailers are relying on to promote their business. Amongst them, Instagram rich visual appeal places it at the forefront of e-tailing. Also, the features of business accounts namely the analytics, sponsored advertisements, contacts in bio make them more attractive to online retailers. Brand communication, using celebgrams, allowing loyal account followers to co-create value for their brands, establishing strong customer relationships, and opportunities for s-commerce seems to be the latest techniques in use on social media. The paper attempts to provide detailed insights into the research carried so far in the area of Instagram and its influence on global consumers. User and marketer generated content and its influence on the psyche of the consumers is touched upon. The impact of influencers on the buying behaviour of Instagram users is discussed. The concept of establishing brand communities and co-creating value on social media is presented.

Introduction

Social networking sites are communication tools used by many people, for a variety of reasons. Their use and relevance are much more meaningful, especially in the Covid era. With limited choices for entertainment and news during the lockdown, most people turned to these sites for building meaningful virtual relationships, freely articulating their thoughts, feelings, and sharing their activities. Some of the popular social networking sites are YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and TikTok. A host of topics trend on these social media daily. 'Fashion' is one such topic that is never out of trend on networking sites. Social media is known to have a profound impact on the buying behavior of consumers. Several studies establish this phenomenon. A study conducted in 2017 reports that 85% of Instagram users surveyed follow the accounts which center on style, fashion, clothing, and lifestyle [1]. Interestingly a focus group study points out that women gravitate towards Instagram due to its visual element while men lean towards Twitter when it comes to the most commonly used social media platform. Women look into Instagram accounts for tips on clothing and fashion, while men follow

general and sports-related accounts [2]. An Indian study that assessed the impact of Instagram on consumer choice points out that women were the frequent users of Instagram, regularly followed content related to 'fashion/glamour' followed by 'Memes/Jokes/Funny videos'[3]. A recent Malaysian study investigated gender differences in hashtag usage. The study reveals that women have used emotional and positive hashtag descriptions in their posts on #Malaysianfood when compared to men[4].

What is Instagram?

Instagram is a social networking application that was launched in October 2010, through which users can share photos, videos. Typically they are shared through 'posts' from the users 'accounts'. All the posts of a user can be viewed in their profile and are fed as a news feed on the 'followers' accounts. The user has absolute control of approving or ignoring 'follow' requests from friends and strangers. One can have 'followers' too, which indicates an account's popularity. Accounts with more than a million followers come under the mega-influencer category while accounts with followers between 100,000 and one million fall under macro-influencers.

Instagram accounts that have followers between 1000 and 100,000 are micro-influencers, while a nano-influencer has less than 1000 followers. A user need not reciprocate and follow his followers; it is completely his choice or discretion to follow any account of his choice.

Latest statistics on instagram

Instagram is the fastest growing platform in the world, which has reported one billion active users back in June 2018. The number of active users continues to grow worldwide.

October 2020 statistics put India in the second position with 120 million users, the first being USA with 140 million users [5].

Online retailing and instagram

Online retailing in India has seen remarkable growth in recent times. Facebook and Instagram are the preferred channels used by big-time brands, small-time entrepreneurs, and e-preneurs to target their customers. Social media makes it easy for these retailers to digitally stalk followers via stories, feeds, direct messages, and fan pages. With such superfluous information, it is no wonder that consumers of all ages and types are turning to virtual stores on the internet. There is 'virtually' no product category that is unavailable on the internet, they are just a fingertip away from the consumer. A qualitative research study taken up in Mumbai reveals that students found shopping online to be 'convenient' and 'flexible'. Moreover, the 'friendly return policy', 'free home delivery', 'ease of payment modes' were enticing factors for their choice of online shopping. Apparel was the top third choice in the list of frequently bought items [6].

Che, Cheung, and Thadani (2017) described social commerce (s-commerce) as a subset of e-commerce, which uses social networking sites for brand promotion, interaction with the target population, and direct interaction with brands. In their study, an attempt was made to understand the reasons why the younger generation buys from virtual stores on Instagram.

Using an integrative framework of trust, three groups of factors were identified that contribute to consumer trust in online stores. Three factors that emerged to have a lasting impact on consumers were perceived benevolence, perceived integrity, and KOL endorsement [7].

Interesting qualitative research on Malaysian and Singapore millennials' experience on Instagram has explored three areas of s-commerce namely payments, policies, and expectations. Payment for products purchased via online shopping was done through online banking or credit/debit cards. Products with clear terms and conditions were chosen for purchase lest there were disagreements later on. Most millennials did not abandon their shopping cart due to pop-ins as they had trust in the retailer chosen. Respondents indicated a mixed response in terms of delivery and product expectations [8].

A study on Indian consumers divulges that 'better deals' (45%) and 'convenience' (39%) were the two prominent factors that drove them towards online purchases. Coupons were valued by them as was the cash back facility [3].

User-generated content and marketer-generated content

Brands use social media to communicate with consumers. Information shared by the marketer is called as marketer generated content (MGC). Content created by a consumer is called as consumer generated content (CGC). Content can be informative or recreational. Both contents have the power to influence the buying behaviour of consumers. One study tried to compare the impact of both CGC and MGC on the consumer's expenditure on clothing. It was found that the expenditure pattern increased with an increase in social media engagement. UGC had a strong positive impact on the minds of consumers than MGC [9].

Role of instagram influencers

Influencers (mega, macro, micro, and nano) play an important role in a variety of ways be it clothing choices, clothing purchases,

fashion advice or styling tips, etc. Since many people look to Instagram to gather information on various aspects, it is expected that opinion leaders actively engage their followers by sharing things that they either believe in or have experienced. Amongst various social media, Instagram fashion-related accounts have more number of followers than others as well as a higher engagement rate. Content available on the Insta accounts is used by the consumers to make informed decisions regarding clothing purchases, so it is fair to assume that Instagram affects the buying behavior of consumers. Moreover, the aesthetically appealing pictures and creative videos posted by the influencers provide the much required visual cues to the uninformed with regards to the latest trends and styles. This is bound to nudge the consumer towards a sale.

Research conducted in 2018 attempted to study the key antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership on a fashion-oriented Instagram account. An account that has originality and uniqueness is bound to have many followers, which has the power to influence its community – the people who follow. The quality and quantity of posts are not the factors that drive an account into a popularity wave. Such influencers generate a whole lot of meaningful content on these social media which has many far-reaching consequences – influencing the buying choices of clothes, interacting with the virtual account holder, recommend it to friends and family, and finally involvement in the value-creation process on the influencer account. Both the opinion leaders and the faithful followers co-create content and thereby increase the value of the account [10].

Under such circumstances, it is not a wonder that not only the marketers but also the designers have solicited social media networks in engaging with their customers as

well as drive sales of their merchandise. Maatin Shakir, a Malaysian designer uses social media extensively to disseminate knowledge about his clothing line. The survey conducted among his followers on social media revealed that Instagram was the preferred media for information; informative posts about the line improved their knowledge and kept them up to date with the latest fashion trends. Viral marketing indeed was helpful to establish the brand and to constantly connect with the clientele across all platforms [11].

Zhang and Caverlee (2019) studied opinion bloggers on Instagram, Facebook, and other social media. In their paper, they put together the first-ever visual influence-aware fashion recommender with fashion bloggers and their vibrant posts on social media. The researchers attempted to extract unique features of each fashion influencer's posts on social media; learn personal implicit visual influence funnel from influential posts that have resulted in a purchase; user visual preference evolution over time. The study proposed Fashion visual Influence-aware Recurrent Network (FIRN). The results prove that fashion influencers can offer strong fashion visual cues across time and actively influence user clothing purchase decisions [12].

A quantitative online survey was taken up to understand the Instagram influence on the intention to purchase environmentally sustainable apparel amongst US consumers. Instagram has proved to be a good source of information; improves social connectivity and also helps in sharing ideas. Hence as a shopping mechanism, Instagram can be used to create increased purchase intention of clothes. The results of this study indicate that peers on social media influence other consumers, hence brands can take advantage of this relationship. The study proves that knowledge shared through Instagram in the

form of stories and feeds which are posted by peers can influence consumers. One can conclude that social media use and perception have a positive impact on the ultimate purchase intention on Instagram [13].

Pangkey and Tielung (2020) studied the impact of Instagram celebrity endorsement on the buying intention of women consumers. The results of the in-depth interviews of 15 respondents who had a history of clothing purchase after seeing a celebgram endorsement on Instagram show that posts from a trusted celebrity have influenced them to purchase clothes. Factors like honesty, true reviews, product information, discounts, etc shared by celebrities create an interest in the product, which has the power in swaying the customers towards a definite sale [14].

Sustainability in clothing is a concept that has not been explored in terms of marketing for obvious reasons. Sustainable clothes are those that are made from environmentally friendly fibers, use a cleaner and green production system, those which do not harm the environment. Sustainability in clothing use emphasizes concepts such as recycling, reusing, or donating old clothes. The manta is 'lesser the better'. An interesting survey on circular fashion fueled by Instagram micro-celebrities was carried out to measure the impact these influencers have on their followers. The circular fashion system aims at recycling used apparel and sending it back into the market in a usable improved form. Renting clothing is a concept that is popular in the west, but is concentrated only in the bridal wear category in India. A study was taken up to understand the factors that influence online shoppers to adopt renting to live a sustainable life. The power the micro-celebrities have in influencing their followers to adopt sustainable measures in clothing was also studied. The variables that had an impact on the consumer's intention to accept online

second-hand clothing rental platforms were attitudes, performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence. The attractiveness and trustworthiness of influencer's posts had a positive impact on promoting circular fashion and sustainability [15].

Impact of Instagram on consumers

The digital world has a massive relevance in the lives of people, especially during Corona times. In the absence of the more personalized touch and one-to-one interactions during pre-Corona, the virtual world has fulfilled man's informational, social, and functional needs by providing a digital connection. The context of virtual shopping has become more relevant now in the Covid era, with businesses using the omnichannel strategy for promotional activities. Social media networks especially Instagram has emerged as the leader in the digital business. New features like 'buy buttons' in Instagram offer the customers a virtual shopping experience while reviewing their feeds. The influence of Instagram on the purchase of feminine clothing and accessories was studied among Portuguese consumers. The underlying motivations and barriers to consumer behavior were explored. Under motivations - convenience, peer review, and building customer-brand relationships were studied. Under barriers, lack of trust, and absence of sensory experience were studied. Convenience and connection with the brand were indicated to be the most important motivating factors for online purchases. Lack of sensory experience was indicated as the major barrier for online shopping [16].

The factors influencing Thai customer's perceptions towards apparel promotion strategies on Instagram were studied by Apiraksattayakul, Papagiannidis, and Alamanos (2017). Three factors namely social value, perceived price value, and perceived benefits had a positive and significant impact on the minds of the customers. These factors were considered to prompt the customers in purchasing apparel. Another three factors namely perceived emotional value, perceived quality, and perceived electronic word of mouth have had no impact whatsoever on the clothing purchase. The study concluded to say that emotions, feelings, or opinions of other buyers have any direct influence on the customer's intention to buy online via Instagram [17].

Nuttamon Amornpashara, Nopadol Rompho, Monvika Phadoongsitthi () have tried to establish a relationship between Instagram use and purchase intention of clothes. The study population consisted of 400 Instagram users. Using structural modeling, the researchers were able to identify factors like the recreational message, involvement in the recreational message, commercial advertising, the group to which people aspire to belong, perceived ease of use, which were responsible for clothing purchase. Also, it was pointed out that merely looking at a recreational message did not influence the purchase intention. What was important was active involvement and engagement in the message [18].

Indonesian millennials reiterate that their attitude towards online shopping is closely linked to the intent to purchase on Instagram. The theory of planned behavior was used to know more about the intent to use Instagram. The variables of the study included attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, and trust. Using structural equation modeling, the variables were tested. People with a positive attitude towards Instagram shopping will have the intention to purchase products through the platform. Along with these, the subjective norm which indicates a measure of an individual's perception of social thoughts is also found to have a positive impact on buying behaviour. Study

subjects revealed that Instagram retailers were trustworthy, had integrity, and showed transparency in their posts. Hence these three factors namely - attitude, subjective norm, and trust influenced their online purchases [19].

Variables or factors that direct consumers' purchase of clothes via Instagram were studied by Maharani and Sevriana (2017). Four variables namely consumer knowledge, motivation, attitude, and lifestyle were found to contribute to buying clothes on Instagram. Digital savvy consumers who follow the posts by brands on social media, who were knowledgeable about the latest trends, and who had the right attitude toward online shopping were found to favor online platforms for their clothes purchase [20].

The way consumers think is very complex. Marketing professionals study their target population and look for behavioural patterns that they can cash upon. Researchers also study consumers to know what drives them towards online shopping. One such study analysed nine factors which are likely to have an impact on online clothing purchase. Five factors namely like perceived ease of use, online trust, informativeness, attitude to online shopping, and impulse purchase intention were found to significantly contribute to online clothing purchase among the study population. The subjects were mainly young adults in the age group of 18-23 years [21].

An Indonesian study conducted in 2020 identified the factors that influence impulse buying among 993 subjects aged between 15 to greater than 33 years. The study found out that high product variety available on Instagram urged them to buy online. There was a positive relationship between product variety, price, and usefulness as perceived by the customers. Even though the product was visually appealing, it did not mean it

enhanced its usefulness in the customer's mind. Imaginary interpersonal relationships (Parasocial interaction) where one person knows more about the other is usually seen in social media. This aspect was also studied and it had a positive effect in determining individual behaviour. Five factors namely visual appeal, product variety, price, information quality, and parasocial interaction had a positive impact on the buying behaviour of consumers [22].

Establishing brand communities on social media and co-creating value

Co-creating value is a collaborative new product development strategy that encourages customers to actively involve themselves in brand/product development. Involving the end-users is a smart move on the part of the digitally-oriented businesses. Direct customer interaction provides valuable inputs regarding their products, processes, and advertising. Four types of co-created experiences - brands' individual usage experiences; individual experiences; brands' communal usage experiences; and collective celebration experiences [23]. Consumers who are a part of a brand community can help the brand deliver an effective value proposition. Brand communities forge a strong bond between customers, between an influencer and the follower, between the brand per se and the ultimate consumers.

To understand the power of social media in establishing brand communities and co-creating value of the brands a study was conducted by Roncha and Radclyffe-Thomas (2016). A 2015 ad campaign of TOMS, identified by #withoutshoes on Instagram was analyzed for content created by the brand through social media and the followers. Qualitative data was gathered from the marketing professionals of the brand through interviews. Using triangulation data from

multiple sources was converged. The results indicate that TOMS used Instagram for brand engagement and content co-creation [24].

In conclusion the social media is being increasingly used by consumers to seek information on their favorite brands and be informed of the latest fashion trends. Many research studies found a strong correlation between social media use and intention to purchase clothing online. Electronic word of mouth in the form of recommendations, reviews, likes, and comments seem to have a very influential effect on the purchasing behaviour of the consumers. Researchers have extensively studied the effect the 'influencer marketing' (done by the social media influencers), has on the buying behaviour of social media users. Realizing the importance of advertising on social media especially Instagram, many e-tailers are making conscious efforts to focus their marketing efforts on this medium. Instagram offers businesses to share visually appealing videos and photos with their followers. The whole phenomenon has necessitated that brands come up with a well-structured strategy focusing on product promotion exclusively for social media. Many research studies have successfully proved that the social engagement of customers is vital for better performance and sales. In the wake of the Coivd-19 pandemic situation, e-tailing is a #safechoice to stay afloat in the marketing world.

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