THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON SALES IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of Problem

Social media has changed the world in many significant ways. It has changed how we think, act, and how we make decisions. In 2000, social networking became popular; it emerged to easily interact with people who share common interests in different spheres. (Edosomwan *et al.*, 2011). Before, traditional media like TV, Radio, Newspapers were the primary form of getting information and staying on top of trends. Social media has changed this static form and made it easy and flexible for everyone to get information and stay on top of trends. The new era of technology has made it seamless for everyone to create their content and position it for their target audience to consume. A Reels video, caption, blog post, tweet, youtube, or TikTok video can be shared and viewed by a vast number of people at different times at little or no cost (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012).

Social media is a two-way street; it can be seen as a give and take situation, there is a platform, and there are users. According to Touchette & Schanski (2015), there are two parties involved in social media, the users, web publishers, and a platform where people can share and receive information (Ansari *et al.*, 2019). Evans (2010) defined social media as a channel for like-minds to share their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and personal experiences. Social media goes beyond electronic media; it is a method of socialization. In contrast, some people get validation from social media, others use it to share their thoughts and ideas through pictures, reels, audio, GIFs, etc. It gives people the freedom to express how they think and act (Ansari *et al.*, 2019).

Recent research has discovered that many people use social media platforms for different reasons, such as making friends, socializing with friends, entertainment, online shopping, and receiving information (He, Zha, & Li, 2013). As a result of this, organizations adopt social media as one of their marketing channels to meet business goals and objectives. These goals could range from brand visibility, customer traffic, inquiry rates, brand loyalty, retention rate, increase in sales and revenues, customer satisfaction, website visits, website click, brand awareness, brand shares, and saves.

The wide adoption of social media has allowed brands in the fashion industry to incorporate social media as one of their marketing channels to help Gen Y and Z cohorts make easy purchase decisions. However, many brands in the fashion industry do not know how to use social media to influence consumer purchase decisions. This study, therefore, focuses on how social media use by Gen Y and Gen Z can impact sales in the fashion industry.

1.2 Purpose of Study

According to Statista (Tankovska, 2021), as of 2020, 3.6 billion people were using social media worldwide, and it is projected to increase to 4.41 billion by 2025. The constant rise in social media use has made businesses adopt social media as their primary marketing channel. Companies now allocate a considerable budget to social media to communicate with their target audience; social media study is of great importance to all the stakeholders (Kwahk & Kim, 2017). While some organizations adopt social media as one of their marketing channels to create more impact on their businesses, one pertinent question that is yet to be answered is how social media use influences sales in the fashion industry?

Every organization's Marketing and Communications department is faced with the challenge of cracking the nut on how to use social media to influence purchase decisions. That is, more than ever, people now result to social media to satisfy their needs (Hinz *et al.*, 2011). In this regard, the fashion industry is not oblivious to this development. Social media has been used to increase fashion brand awareness and industry designs among consumers in the fashion industry. Social media is an effective tool for fashion brands to sell their new designs and styles. Ananda, Hernández-García, and Lamberti (2017) believe that social media is a powerful tool in the fashion industry because it helps brands build customer loyalty and foster customer-brand relationships.

There are numerous studies on how social media influences the behavior of consumers. However, there is a need to understand how social media use impacts the fashion industry to increase online sales. Therefore, the study investigates how social media use influences sales in the fashion industry. From a theoretical standpoint, this study's results will help fashion brand managers and stakeholders understand how social media as a means of communication influences consumers to purchase from fashion brands. This study will also show how the fashion industry can use social media to increase sales to meet business objectives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Diffusion of Innovation Theory

According to Rogers (1983), "Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system. It is a special type of communication, in that the messages are concerned with new ideas." New ideas can either be accepted or rejected. Rogers (1983) identified that there are four vital stages; Innovation, communication (innovation can be passed from one person to the other), the social system (this is where the innovation is transferred), and the period in time this happens. Rogers (2003) also identified some vital innovation attributes to be considered in an innovation adoption process: a) relative advantage - this is the extent to which an idea is seen as superior to the innovation that it supersedes; b) compatibility - the extent to which an innovation is considered to be in line with the existing values, previous ideas, and needs of potential adopters; c) complexity - the degree to which an innovation is perceived as challenging to use and understand; d) trialability - the degree to which an innovation can be experimented with on a limited basis; e) observability - the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others (Oyelana, Kamanzi, & Richter, 2020).

Communication is "a process in which participants create and share information with one another to reach a mutual understanding" (Rogers 2003). In the process of adopting innovation, there are two channels: mass communication and interpersonal channels. The mass media is crucial at the knowledge and awareness stage, while interpersonal channels have an essential effect at the persuasion stage (Chang, 2010). Social media can be seen as a form of mass communication because it connects individuals and communicates real-time information.

2.2 Social Media Use

Social media can be seen as an internet-based platform that allows users to contribute, share, and evaluate the content and communicate and interact with each other (Hutter *et al.*, 2013). There are similarities with most social media platforms, such as filters, tagging, and real-time content (Hutter *et al.*, 2013). Social media allows users to interact, be present, give real-time updates, take people through their journey and events, and create content out of their own will to either entertain, motivate, or socialize with others (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

As stated above, organizations are now heavily investing in social media because consumers are highly invested in using social media (Ansari et al., 2019); there is a lot of concentration and interaction in that space, making social media relevant. Gen Y and Gen Z can easily produce social media content through videos, text, images, audios, and graphics to either engage their followers, build their personal brand or attract their ideal customers. Social media is flexible enough for people to connect and disconnect whenever they want (Ansari et al., 2019).

Further research has been carried out on social media use to investigate the influence it has on consumers. Leerapong and Mardjo (2013) investigated the causes of consumer purchase decisions via online social platforms, mainly through Facebook. They discovered that the customers looked at factors like a relative advantage, brand trust, and compatibility. They would purchase from a brand that meets all these requirements (Yogesh, & Yesha, 2014).

Also, both positive and negative information about a brand or product available on social media has a significant impact on consumer purchase behavior (Yogesh, & Yesha, 2014).

Most researchers have seen that social media use can influence how a consumer perceives a brand. However, there is a need to study how social media convinces Gen Y & Z to buy from a fashion brand and the factors the consumers consider before making that final purchase decision. This will help fashion brands and stakeholders set their marketing goals strategically and know how to budget for social media marketing activities.

2.3 Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing is a digital platform for carrying out marketing activities (Ansari et al., 2019). In recent times, organizations have no control over how consumers perceive them in the market because they define who they are and what they stand for.

Social media makes content go viral quickly; because of this, it has the power to expose the good and bad sides of a brand. It allows organizations to communicate with their customers and vice versa (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

According to eMarketer (2013), Social media serves different purposes for organizations such as sales, brand management, public relations, content management, advertisements, brand influencing, etc. This is leading to companies adopting social media (Alves, Fernandes, & Raposo, 2016). They also show evidence of the positive impact of using social media in marketing strategies.

2.4 Generation Cohort - Gen Y and Gen Z

This research selects Gen Y and Z from other generation cohorts to understand how their use of social media can increase sales in the fashion industry. Using Brosdahl and Carpenter (2011) categorization, Millennials (Gen Y) are people born within the age of 1982 to 2000 who have a buying power that is, with the use of technology and other means available to them, they play a vital role in the financial circulation of the economy. Gen Y uses technology for different purposes. It could be for entertainment, validation, ideas, shopping, or communication; this exposure to social media helps them satisfy their needs leading to the frequent use of social media (Bolton, Parasuraman, Howfnagels, Migchels, Kabadayi, Gruber & Solnet, 2013). Similarly, Gen Z is not any different from Millennials regarding social media and technology, and they are just more in tune with recent social media updates. Hampton and Welsh (2019) describe the Gen Z people as those born after 1995; they believe they are exposed to technology early on, leading to a lot of social media use and a broad base of knowledge through the internet. Gen Y and Z are open to various sources of information through social media, blogs, websites, and other media platforms; therefore, this increases their zeal to use the media to validate pieces of information and drive purchasing decisions.

Therefore, this study tests the hypothesis:

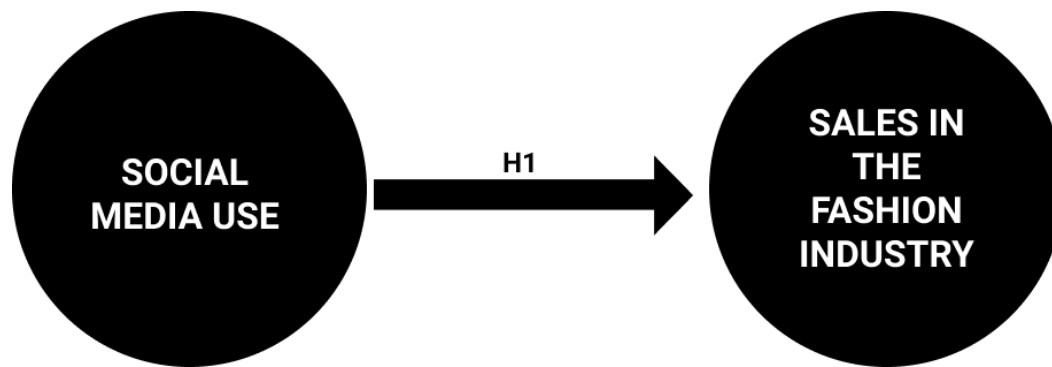*H1: Gen Y and Gen Z's social media use is positively correlated with increased sales in the fashion industry.*

Fig 1: Research Framework.

2.5 Fashion Industry

Over the years, fashion has evolved; different seasons for different styles make fashion dynamic. It gives the consumers something to anticipate. Social media is now a driving tool for the fashion industry, and styles, fabrics, and attires are being displayed elegantly on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc. Sen (2008) highlighted that the fashion industry is an ever-changing and unpredictable place where there is a variety of supply and demand. Consumers and their styles influence fashion; it depicts possession of materials and images (Ananda, Hernández-García, & Lamberti, 2017). With the increase in social media use by Gen Y and Z, fashion brands can evaluate the fashion trends and create a likable product or style, which can increase the interest of this cohort. Fashion can be likened to a breath of fresh air as it stands for newness and distraction (Loureiro, Serra, & Guerreiro, 2019). Fashion shows the style of a group of people at a certain period (Loureiro, Serra, & Guerreiro, 2019). Fashion is one-way people display their financial status. Fashion brands like to show their products and styles where their consumers are so that they would have top of mind (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018).

For the purpose of this research, fashion refers to fabrics, attires, designs, styles of materials, and fast fashion wears. The influence of social media has been investigated in other industries. Still, little or no research has been done in understanding how social media influences sales in the fashion industry, hence this research. There is a grey area that needs to be explored and uncovered in fashion management so that fashion brands can adopt the right strategies in the ever-changing technological world (Kontu & Vecchi, 2014). There is a need more than ever for fashion brands to have an online presence. Millions of people use it to create personal relationships with their favorite brands, connect with others and discuss diverse issues (Kontu & Vecchi, 2014). In other words, fashion brands need to use social media deliberately to meet their goals and increase sales. Social media provides brands with an excellent online presence, but it also assists customers in making a purchasing decision seamlessly; this can help brands have a good reputation for trust and improve customer relationships (Loureiro, Serra, & Guerreiro, 2019).

2.6 Online Sales

The increase in social media use by Gen Y, and Z has led to increased online shopping through websites, blogs, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, LinkedIn, and many other technology sites. It could be argued that the convenience of online shopping through Instagram and other social media platforms makes it easier for Gen Y and Z to satisfy their fashion needs. Interestingly, fashion brands are seen as contributors in the online space who can easily display their products and walk Gen Y and Z through the buying process, thereby increasing sales for their business or brands through social media.

Social media has proven effective in helping brands increase awareness through word of mouth communication, which invariably leads to increased sales (Astuti & Putri, 2018). Instagram has given brands the privilege to display their goods online and attract the right consumers through accessible channels like Direct message (DM) and clickable link in bio. As Astuti and Putri (2018) put it, social commerce is a means that allows for a personal relationship between consumers and vendors. Social media is a good source of support for Gen Y and Z; therefore, it is easy to find information about products they may need. Different fashion brands have resulted in building an online store to increase sales and meet business goals. E-commerce sales are growing daily as the Gen Y, and Gen Z cohorts constantly use social media platforms for online shopping (Dharmesti, Dharmesti, Kuhne, & Thaichon, 2019).

Every day, Gen Y and Gen Z's make tons of decisions; they have to cope with consuming lots of information. This makes their attention span short. There is a contest for who has the power to convince consumers to make a purchase. Therefore, brands in the fashion industry have to be deliberate on how to position themselves for the right target audience to know their product and further purchase that product. Consumers develop specific behaviors and values towards making decisions; this will help them cope with the information overload from social media (Hutter *et al.*, 2013).

There are various steps consumers pass through before making a purchase decision (Olshavsky & Granbois, 1979). These steps consist of the realization to purchase to get knowledge about making its purchase and the feeling after the purchase regarding the product/service and its satisfaction.

There are four stages of the consumer decision journey: (a) consider; (b) evaluate; (c) buy; and (d) enjoy, advocate, and bond (Hudson & Thal, 2013). The consideration and evaluation stages are very relevant as regards the use of social media. This can also be related to DIO theory, where the consumer either adopts or rejects an innovation.
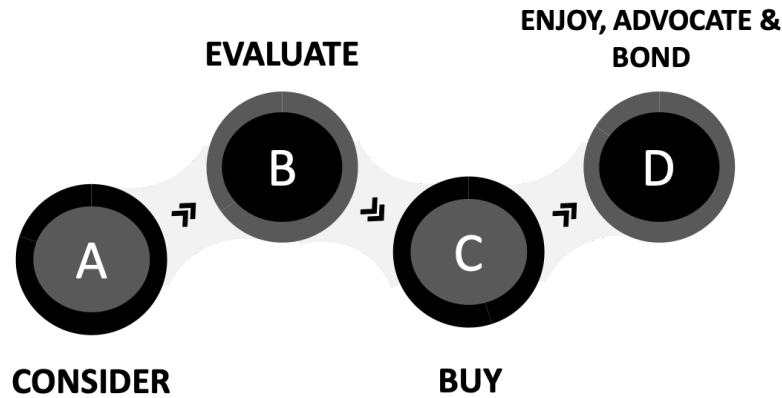

Fig 2: Consumer Decision Journey (Hudson & Thal, 2013).

At the "consideration" stage, the consumer is still contemplating whether or not to buy; social media campaigns can drive traffic to the website or direct message (DM), depending on the call to action the brand uses (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). The "evaluation" stage is where the consumer is trying to get more information about the product in question; they search for other information sources to persuade them. Here social media marketing is essential because it can be used as a search tool for more information. Customers' reviews are critical because they go a long way in convincing other consumers about a brand or product (Ludwig *et al.*, 2013).

After evaluation of a product, consumers can either choose to "buy" or not. Looking at this through the lens of diffusion innovation theory, we can say the consumer can either adopt or reject this product. In the fashion industry, consumers can either adopt or reject a new fashion

design or style. The last stage is the "enjoy, advocate, and bond," how brands plan to retain consumers who made a purchase or how they create brand loyalty. Ensuring that the customer uses word of mouth is also very important in a consumer journey. From observation, young consumers are more likely to share their views about a product or service they experience by different brands (Ansari *et al.*, 2019).

2.7 The Role Of Instagram On Sales

Social media is now a basis for consumers to make online shopping decisions; they see it, like it, and buy it. It appears more convenient for consumers to select their favorite fashion style on social media, primarily through Instagram. Instagram is among the many other social networking sites that have an increasing number of users yearly.

Instagram is a social media platform; however, it is unique in its operations; it allows users to share photos and videos while adding a bit of text called captions. It also allows for comments, likes, shares, and saves. The platform continues to evolve to serve its users and update to different features. Instagram has over one billion active users, and it is one of the most popular social networking sites (Tankovska, 2021). Therefore, for the fashion industry to succeed on Instagram, there is a need to understand the intricacies to convince consumers to purchase a product through the platform.

Instagram is a crucial tool for fashion brands to showcase their style, mainly because of how it works - it prioritizes images and videos (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). As users enjoy the app and see visual products, they are tempted to buy and inquire about the product. Instagram usage acts

as a motivation for impulse buying (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). According to Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2018), Instagram, unlike other social media platforms, gives consumers visually appealing and creative content in the form of good photos and visuals, making fashion brands products enticing to purchase. Due to the strong influence of Instagram in purchasing decisions, brands and organizations have started conducting Instagram adverts to increase brand awareness and sales. However, Instagram saw that there was a high demand for easy shopping and convenience. They further went ahead to release the "Instagram Shopping Feature" in March 2017; since then, Instagram is now seen as a place for buying and selling (Gordon, 2021). In their research, De Perthuis and Findlay (2019) highlighted that Instagram had positioned itself as a marketing channel for fashion and luxury brands.

Following the literature review of this study, my research question is:

RQ: Can the use of Instagram Increase Sales for brands in the Fashion Industry?

3. METHODOLOGY

This study begins with the problem definition. It refers to a detailed understanding of how social media use of the Gen Y and Gen Z cohort influences sales in the fashion industry. This research intends to conduct an online survey of students at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Using this tool, the research will examine social media usage, the convincing attributes of social media, online purchasing behavior, the factors people consider before consumers purchase from a fashion brand on social media, and general attitudes and beliefs that can be used for this thesis.

3.1 Population

The study population is University students, majorly focusing on the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Given that the two largest groups of Instagram users are between the ages of 18-24 and 25-34 (Tankovska, 2021), who are primarily part of the Gen Y and Z cohort, it is only logical to use University students who are within this age. Therefore, this sample size is best for this analysis to understand whether their social media use influences sales in the fashion industry. To get a broad overview and for this study's purpose, the researcher will use a random sampling technique.

3.2 Procedure

This study will select respondents from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Participation will be voluntary, and all participants will be required to sign the in-form consent page before filling the questionnaire. Data collection will be done through an online-based survey, Google form at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, located in the United States. A random sample of 250 students will be retrieved from the University's Student union, Registrar's office, and

other student bodies. The researcher will send this survey to the students via email, and it will consist of a short description and reason for the survey. To ensure the major participants of the study are Instagram users, the first two questions of the survey will confirm if they use Instagram or not.

This study will use the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis technique to examine the collected data for H1 and RQ. For both analyses, the p-value will be set at 0.05.

3.3 Variables In The Study

In this study, there are two independent variables that predict the outcome of one dependent variable. The independent variable is Age and social media use, while the dependent variable is sales in the fashion industry.

Demographic Variables: This study will collect data about respondents' demographic characteristics, such as age to determine if the respondents fall within the stipulated category in which the researcher is seeking to explore.

Social Media Use: This study will analyze students at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette that use social media, particularly Instagram. This study will survey the students to understand their social media use and online purchase from brands in the fashion industry.

Sales In the Fashion Industry: This is the dependent variable social media use affects. This research will use an online survey to measure the relationship between social media use and sales in the fashion industry.

3.4 Measurement

This study will adopt the 22-items social media marketing factor analysis (EFA) measurement scale developed by Khan et al. (2019), which measures the seven different functionalities of social media platforms on a 5-point Likert scale from "never" to "always" (i.e., "the brand Facebook page keeps updating information about its products," "the Facebook page of the brand is active"). In order to assess social media use, the research would replace "Facebook" on social media marketing (EFA) with "Instagram."

3.5 Anticipated Limitations & Future Research

This study has some limitations that can lead to future research opportunities. This study will be conducted on university students in Lafayette, and the results will stem from this selected population. Therefore, the results from this study cannot be generalized across different populations. Future researchers can adopt a broader population sample that would be more generalizable. A non-probability sampling technique (random sampling) will be adopted, which could also affect the generalization of this study. The results from this study will be majorly used to understand how social media use by Gen Y and Gen Z could impact sales in the fashion industry.

Also, this study cannot be generalized to different countries and areas because it explores university students in Lafayette, which is a part of Gen Y and Z who use social media.

Furthermore, the study will be conducted online; therefore, it is exposed to online survey's limitations, such as lack of identification of the respondent and self-report, including bias. Future

researchers can use qualitative methods, such as focus groups and interviews, to rectify this limitation.

Finally, future researchers can also investigate the impact of social media use on sales in the fashion industry using the Uses and gratification theory (UGS). They can explore the attributes of satisfaction and motivations for the use of social media for online shopping.

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