

Influence of Social Media Platforms on the Purchase Decisions of Luxury Apparel

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Abstract: The widespread usage of social media and its impact across several dimensions of individuals' daily lives has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention to providing insightful explanations. However, very few studies have looked into understanding how social media directly influences the decision-making process regarding purchases in the luxury apparel sector. This study seeks to add onto the discipline's understanding of this dimension. A pilot survey was conducted prior to the main electronic survey to evaluate the feasibility and reliability of the questionnaire responses. An electronic survey was rolled out and a total of 100 responses were received. The respondents fall within the age range of 20 to 40. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with six selected individuals to gain further insights. The study's primary findings indicate that, on average, the respondents reported that, on average, they spend between three to six hours per day on various social media platforms. Social Media is generally preferred over traditional media primarily for two main reasons: real time updates and information available on social media and the various forms of multimedia content that are supported upon social media platforms. It is understood that social media plays an influential role in every stage of the consumer decision making process, but especially the stages of product awareness and evaluation of alternatives. Positive brand reputation and ease in the purchase process are crucial factors that motivate consumers to complete a purchase decision. Negative reviews may not completely prevent purchase decisions, but they possess the potential to postpone or prompt consumers to consider alternative products. Numerous factors contribute to the final purchase decision, yet various forms of social media content serve as motivational elements that enhance purchase intentions. This study aims to provide valuable insights into the intricate relationship between social media content and consumer purchase decisions of luxury apparel, contributing to both academic discourse and practical marketing strategies.

Keywords: Social Media, Consumer Behavior, Purchase Decision, Luxury Apparel

1. Introduction

Social media has undergone significant transformation since the inception of early platforms such as Myspace and Friendster, culminating in the current prominence of giants like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This progression reflects not only technological advancements but also a profound shift in communication practices. The widespread use of social media has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in examining its impacts across several dimensions of individual lives, including mental health, empathy, consumer behavior, among others. In recent times, social media has emerged as a crucial factor influencing consumer behavior. Consumer behavior is a multifaceted area of study that encompasses various contexts. When contemplating the purchase of a product or service, a person engages in a multi-phase procedure referred to as the consumer decision-making process. The five stages are problem identification, data collection, alternatives exploration, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation. Several factors play a role in the decision-making stage; social influences such as familial relationships, friendships, social status, psychological elements that include individual motivations, perceptions, and attitudes. Furthermore, marketing factors—including advertising strategies, brand image, and discounts—contribute to shaping consumer preferences. Personal factors like age, income, and lifestyle further tailor the purchasing landscape, influencing decisions in diverse ways. Consumers, equipped with a comprehensive understanding of this process, are more predisposed to making informed choices that align with their needs, leading to heightened satisfaction post-purchase. This study attempts to understand the convergence of social media and the consumer purchase process.

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, social media platforms have introduced profound changes in consumer behavior, particularly in the way individuals evaluate products. A significant factor is the ability of social media to generate viral trends. Visually captivating material is used by social media platforms to draw consumers in and introduce them to a variety of companies. Promotions and discounts shared on social media could influence consumers' decisions regarding purchase decisions. Another significant factor affecting consumer purchase decisions is the emergence of user generated content (UGC). All consumer-produced content, including reviews, testimonials, images, videos, and social media posts, is referred to as user-generated content. Social media platforms offer a broad ecology for UGC to thrive. Brands are actively encouraging customers to share content about their goods as they increasingly understand the value of incorporating UGC into their marketing

campaigns. The high quality of UGC improves consumers' perception of product reliability, their impression of the products, improves trust, reduces transaction risk, and enhances purchase intention (Wirtz and Lwin, 2009). Studies conducted on fashion apparel brands (Godey et al., 2016; Sunday and Bello, 2016) found that marketing through social media has a positive impact on consumers' purchase decisions. The use of digital technologies, to promote fashion companies to consumers has been found to be beneficial in attracting new customers within the fashion sector (Kalbaska and Cantoni, 2018). Fashion heritage encompasses both physical and intangible aspects such as cultural practices, social knowledge, and local knowledge (Permatasari and Cantoni, 2019). Burmann (2010) observed that users find it simple to judge the quality of fashion items on social media platforms since consumers share both positive and negative experiences. Companies with positive feedback and superior customer service tend to generate brand loyalty among customers and brand trust is established in shorter time than traditional methods (Alatawy, 2021).

Influencer marketing has become a powerful tool for brands to reach their target audiences. A study by Lou and Yuan (2019) found that influencer endorsements positively affect brand attitudes and purchase intentions, especially when the influencer's values align with those of the brand. The influencer marketing sector has evidently reshaped the marketing landscape, enabling brands to bridge the gap with their potential customers via the powerful tool of influencers as a medium via the usage of social media platforms. (Mishra and Ashfaq, 2023). Influencer authenticity has been proven to sway purchase decisions, which prompts the idea that influencer sincerity could impact the consumer's view of said product (Lee and Eastin, 2020). Influencers tend to have the greatest impact when buying clothes, shoes, cosmetics. (Zak and Hasprova, 2020). Luxury goods encompass highly exclusive personal items, including apparel, footwear, eyewear, watches, jewelry, and cosmetics that convey the status of their owners. The luxury market continues to and is projected to expand and evolve in the upcoming years, ongoing research in the area remains crucial for maintaining a competitive edge and fostering sustainable growth. Taking in consideration of the significance social media holds upon consumer purchase decision, it is essential for businesses in the luxury apparel sector to hold a reputable and appealing brand image. Social media serves as a platform wherein brands can directly engage with their target audience through the usage of marketing strategies that would foster a sense of loyalty and exclusivity among consumers. Comprehending the impact of social media interactions on customer satisfaction and loyalty can aid brands in formulating strategies that improve engagement and establish long-lasting relationships.

Given the pervasive nature of social media presence in luxury goods purchases, it is imperative to investigate how social media influences the process of consumer decision making. The study seeks to investigate these relationships by addressing several key research questions: Do negative reviews have an impact on purchase decisions? What type of social media content - Brand Image, Influencer Content or User Generated Content - most significantly influences purchase decision? What factors lead to the actual decision to purchase? The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Following this is a section on review of literature followed by a section on research methods and data sources. Next section presents the results and discussions. The last section concludes with certain policy recommendations.

2. Review of Literature

Hudson (2019) defines social media as "websites and applications that are designed to allow people to share content quickly". The monotonic upward rise in users on social media platforms and the heightened budgetary allocations in social media marketing by businesses have rendered the examination of social media increasingly relevant for stakeholders across multiple sectors (Mehta and Funde, 2014). Gupta (2016) noted that consumers are increasingly becoming cautious regarding their spending habits, thereby prompting businesses to reconsider their marketing strategies and align them with the evolving consumer landscape. Further, the study reported social media as a vital tool for businesses seeking to increase brand awareness and visibility in the modern marketplace. The nature of reviews about a product or brand on social media platforms affect consumers' choices to make a purchase or consider alternative options (Oumayma, 2020). Most respondents in Oumayma (2020) study reported that while social media plays an integral part in consumers' decision-making process, it does not necessarily lead to the final product purchase. Additionally, the choice the consumer makes at the final stage may be influenced by several factors, including the payment method and the number of delivery days. Bloemer and Ruyter (1998) define brand image as thoughts people hold about a company and all its information. Brand image plays a significant role in consumers' perception, which is crucial for decision-making (Guliyev, 2017; Parris and Guzmán, 2022).

The emergence of social media and internet platforms has fundamentally changed the way consumers interact with brands and make decisions about their purchasing decisions in the digital age. User generated content (UGC)

has been a game changer in influencing consumers' purchase decisions. Chen et al. (2022) observed that when users see others praising a product, it enhances trust and credibility and therefore helps reduce perceived risks and boosts consumers' confidence in their purchasing decisions. Previous consumers' experiences offer potential buyers with authentic insights about products (Geng and Chen, 2021). Filieri et al. (2015) highlights the importance of trustworthiness in guiding consumer choices. In an empirical study on high-end fashion firms, Kim and Ko (2012) found that UGC significantly enhanced customer equity by improving brand awareness, perceived quality, and loyalty. The study revealed that recommendations had the greatest impact on consumer purchase decisions, followed by product reviews and ratings, all of which were important in shaping consumer perceptions.

The fashion industry has made extensive use of social media networking sites and other online channels to engage with its consumers (Ahmad et al., 2015). Available research on fashion apparel manufacturers have shown social media marketing to positively influence consumer purchasing decisions (Godey et al., 2016; Sunday and Bello, 2016). The concept of 'luxury', that was previously associated with very exclusive and highly prized goods available only to the wealthiest of people, is currently evolving (Mundel et al., 2017). Balabanis and Stathopoulou (2021) find the emergence of 'affordable luxury goods' in this digital era. Premium brands are trying to remain ahead of the curve by influencing even middle-class consumers, who are drawn to the luxurious lifestyles of the upper classes and seek "affordable luxury products" (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Bai et al., 2021; Truong et al., 2009). Consumers' demand for prestige, which pushes them toward the benefits and values of luxury goods, is one of the primary variables influencing their willingness to accept them (Lo and Yeung, 2020). Affordable luxury serves as a viable option to make a prestige-price trade-off, as it combines a high perceived prestige with reasonable price premiums to attract such consumers (Truong et al., 2009; Kumar & Paul, 2018). Since these products can enhance consumers' status and taste (Mundel et al., 2017) and boost brands' sales volume (Deloitte, 2017), brands are creating "sub-brands" at "lower entry-level prices" in product categories like apparel, cosmetics, accessories, and perfumes to attract the current generation of affluent. The surveyed literature for this essay clearly demonstrates the ever-increasing role that social media platforms play in influencing consumers' purchase decisions through several social media marketing strategies, including user-generated content, social media influencers, among others.

Income as a factor was carefully excluded from the scope of the study. There is an understanding that income plays a role in determining whether the final purchase decision takes place. This aspect can be taken up to gather further insights into this exploratory study.

The influence of social media in post purchase decision of luxury apparel remains underexplored. Much of the existing literature focuses upon the consumer decision making process that lead up to the purchase of the product. There has been less attention given to how consumers respond after the purchase has been done, how do brands encourage repeat purchase behaviour, aspects of consumer satisfaction and so on. Also, there is a lack of extensive literature in the aspect of corporate social responsibility. Although it is a well-documented topic, when considering the interlay of social media and purchase decision of luxury apparel, there is a deficiency in the extant literature. Understanding this aspect would enable brands the importance of incorporating sustainable and ethical ways of running their business.

3. Research Methods

This study employed a quantitative and qualitative methodology to assess the association between content on social media platforms on purchase decisions. The study utilizes a convenience sampling strategy for data collection. The criteria were that the respondent uses at least one social media platform like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, etc. and engages with different types of social media content on these platforms. Individuals in the age range of 20 to 40 were included in this study. Quantitative data was collected using an online Google form in the month of September 2024. A pilot survey was conducted prior to the main electronic survey to evaluate the feasibility and reliability of the questionnaire responses. A total of 100 responses were received. It sought to give an overview of the general social media usage. The questions sought to understand which platform was popularly used, how many hours was it used for, for what reasons, why is it preferred over traditional media, and so on. It also sought to uncover the impact of different types of content on social media and the influence each of them has on consumers' purchase decision of luxury goods. Quantitative data was complemented with conducting in-depth interviews with selected six individuals to gain insights into the respondent's social media usage, influence of social media in the consumer decision making, understanding the different types of social media content and degree of influence on purchase decision, impact of negative reviews on purchase decision. An interview, on average, lasted for approximately thirty minutes. The interview questions were structured, and all the interviews were conducted in English to avoid any confusion or misinterpretation of the questions.

Of 100 respondents, 61% were female, and 39% were male. Approximately two-thirds of the sample fall within the age range of 20 to 24. The mean age of the sample is 26 years. A total of forty-nine participants reported using social media for around 3-6 hours daily, whereas only five participants reported social media for 9 or more hours. The primary reasons that respondents use social media for is for entertainment/leisure, this segment constituted a significant majority, amounting to 85% followed by gathering information/news. Instagram, comprising about over three quarters of the total responses, was opted as the most preferred social media platform by the respondents. Three-fifths of the participants have purchased a luxury product, while the rest of the participants have not.

4. Results and Discussion

Now, we present the analysis of the results obtained from this study. More than seventy-five percent of the survey respondents identified positive customer reviews as the most important factor influencing a brand's image on social media. This finding concurs with Yang's (2015) analysis, which reports that the customer reviews of a product or service influence the purchase intentions of potential consumers. The presentation of products, high quality visuals, and the quality of content on these platforms were identified as the second most important factor in evaluating a brand's social media image. Brand image is related to the consumers' use of the brand to reflect their symbolic meaning of consumption and identity in self-expression (Lau and Phau, 2007). Consumers ascribe high quality to esteemed brands (Rubio et al., 2014). This is reflected by the interview participants' responses which point out craftsmanship and heritage as crucial factors that play a motivational role in the purchase decision of luxury apparel. An interviewee narrated:

"Brand's social media image plays a significant level of importance. Key factors, when considering purchase of luxury apparel would be its heritage and craftsmanship. The frequency with which the brand engages with its audience, is another important criterion I look for." (An interviewee, age 23 years, India, September 2024)

The constant availability of social media at consumers' disposal has enabled consumers to make more informed purchase decisions. Consequently, brands must maintain a positive and consistent social media presence to effectively engage with their audience. Kotler and Pfoertsch (2007) posited that branding via the use of social media platforms can serve as key components in determining a business's success if it is aligned to meet the market trends.

Influencer marketing has become a powerful tool for brands to reach their target audiences. A study by Lou and Yuan (2019) found that influencer endorsements positively affect brand attitudes and purchase intentions, especially when the influencer's values align with those of the brand. Approximately seven-tenths of the survey respondents reported that the authenticity and credibility of influencers' endorsements are the most important factors influencing their purchase intentions. An interviewee narrated:

"Expertise and authenticity, personally to me, are the most appealing factors of an influencer endorsement when considering a purchase decision of a luxury apparel. If they are an expert or possess good knowledge about both the luxury apparel and the brand, they are giving a review of, I will be inclined to consider that product. But influencer content alone, or within itself is not enough to ensure I go ahead with the purchase decision or whether the purchase decision will happen altogether but plays a motivational role in aiding my purchase decision." An interviewee, age 25 years, India, September 2024.

Studies conducted on influencer content (Hajli, 2014; Mishra and Ashfaq, 2023; Lee and Eastin, 2020) emphasized the role that trust plays in influencing the intention to purchase. The responses received from interview participants reflect upon the role of trust - if a product is endorsed by an influencer whom they have followed for an extended period, and if they regard the review as authentic and trustworthy, they are likely to purchase the recommended product. More than fifty percent of the survey participants agreed that they were more likely to consider purchasing a luxury apparel item if it were endorsed by an influencer. This finding is in line with Ayoubi and Naweer's (2024) study conducted on impact of brand endorsement by influencers on consumers.

The rise and influence of user generated content has only increased with the increased usage of social media platforms. Consumers trust other consumers because unlike most influencers, customers are usually not paid to promote a product, so thereby the reviews put forth by customers will be authentic and credible. Specifically, consumers use comments from other users to avoid possible risks from information asymmetry due to the untouchability of online shopping (Hong et al., 2017). More than two-thirds of the respondents, interact with user generated content. Most of the UGC that respondents interact with come in form of customer reviews and

social media posts. User generated content usually acts as a reference point to base purchase decisions. This is reflected in the words of an interview respondent:

“User Generated Content is very useful when I decide about buying a product. Many consumers out there have bought the same product. They have different opinions about a product, so as a consumer it helps me as I can obtain different customer experience of the same product, evaluate the pros and cons of it and come to a more informed decision based on it”. An interviewee, age 23 years, India, September 2024.

The nature of customer reviews is crucial in determining purchase decision. When there is an influx of negative reviews, the consumer may consider alternative options or may delay the purchase of a certain product/service but generally does not consider giving up on the purchase decision altogether. Around four-fifth of the survey participants indicated that negative reviews are the most popular type of negative content that influences respondents’ perception of a brand. When asked about their approach to working around negative reviews, the most common responses (around 66%) were that they were inclined to research more about the brand before proceeding with the purchasing decision. Few of the participants indicated that they would avoid purchasing from the specific brand and consider alternatives. An interviewee illustrated:

“If there is a negative review about the product I want to purchase, I will reassess and double check the information. Additionally, I will ask my friends and family for their opinions or maybe go on social media to the brand’s social media page, check related hashtags, how other people’s experiences have been about the product and what their overall reviews are. I will not avoid purchasing that product altogether, but I may delay the purchase decision”. An interviewee, age 25 years, India, September 2024.

Undoubtedly, purchase intentions do not always lead to purchase decisions. However, factors influencing purchase intentions have a significant role to play in consumers’ actual purchases. Income as a determining factor has been excluded from this study. The survey participants indicated numerous factors influencing their purchasing decisions. About three-fifths of the respondents reported about emotional and psychological barriers, including feelings of discomfort from spending lots of money, and guilt. Long term consideration about the maintenance costs and whether a product will remain trendy also is a contentious factor on why purchase intention does not translate into purchase decision. The most repetitive response is the awareness of a new alternative which may shift their purchase decision or sometimes the availability of different options brought to consumers’ awareness may lead to a sense of confusion.

5. Concluding Remarks

This study has attempted to explore the influence of three types of content on social media – brand image, influencer content and user generated content – on purchase decisions within the luxury apparel sector. Findings from the survey and interviews corroborate existing literature, revealing consistent themes. Additionally, the research explores the impact of negative reviews on purchasing decisions, aiming to ascertain whether such reviews can entirely dissuade consumers from completing a purchase. The analysis indicates that while negative reviews may not completely prevent purchase decisions, they possess the potential to postpone or prompt consumers to consider alternative products. Numerous factors contribute to the final purchase decision, yet various forms of social media content serve as motivational elements that enhance purchase intentions. Ultimately, this study highlights that social media wields significant influence over purchasing decisions by providing a platform where consumers can swiftly access information. Among the content types analyzed, user-generated content emerges as the most influential, engaging users from the initial stages of product awareness through to post-purchase evaluation in the consumer decision-making process.

This study acknowledges its limitations, such as the inability to generalize findings due to convenience sampling and potential self-reported bias among respondents; however, it provides significant insights. Overall it can be understood that social media holds a significant influence in shaping purchase decisions, as it offers the platforms upon which consumers gather their information from in a more quick and comprehensive manner. User Generated Content is understood to be the most influential type of content on social media most users engage with from the very first stage of product awareness to all the way to post purchase evaluation in the consumer decision making process.

A practical recommendation for businesses in the luxury fashion sector would be to analyse the existing competitors and to understand how they tailor their marketing strategy around luxury apparel to deliver a well curated and concise branding image. Social media can help in deriving meaningful insights. Interactions on social media platform pages of different brands allow brands to collect data and analyse this information. With this

insight, brands can tailor the shopping experiences of users to be more attentive and reciprocatively of consumer's needs. This would allow them to adapt their marketing strategies and provide product recommendations based on personalized consumer preferences.

Exclusivity, craftsmanship and storytelling are crucial aspects of a brand's image. A brand can foster these characteristics in a conducive manner through their presence in various social media platforms. Creating a personalized and exclusive experience around the concept of the product are what customers look forward to along with superior quality and a brand's ability to stand out among its counterpart competitors. Customers are further willing to pay a premium as long as this criterion is fulfilled.

Brands must pay attention to the UGC as this is understood as the most effective social media content opted by most customers. They need to ensure to be responsive to consumers' feedbacks and complaints in a professional and respectful manner. Consumers are more inclined to purchase from those brands that do not surround themselves in any negative limelight.

6. Conflicts of Interests

The authors of this paper declare that they have no conflicts of interest. Further, we have not received any funding/grant from any organization.

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