Exploring how social media platforms influence fashion consumer decisions in the UK retail sector

Abstract

Social media has become a critical marketing mechanism for the fashion retail industry and while existing literature has researched the impact these media platforms have on the general consumer decision-making process, there is research deficiency on the specific influences on consumer motivations within the fashion retail sector. The purpose of this paper is to explore the levels to which social media platforms are influencing the consumer decision-making process for Generation X and Y consumers in the retail fashion environment. This study adopts an interpretive, exploratory approach, applying a qualitative design. The research involved 8 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups in order to gain in-depth insights of two generational cohorts opinions, arguments, motivations and ideas.

The findings revealed that consumers use a variety of internal and external motivations that influence their behaviours and perceptions of high-street fashion retailers, and these factors are aided and facilitated by the use of social media. However, the research also revealed that social media is not the only source that motivates their consumer decision- making process, and with the proliferation of active users on social media, these platforms are (and will continue to have) an ever more increasing impact on consumer decision-makings. Participants were found to actively use social media to gain inspiration and information regarding high-street fashion retailers, however their final intentions to purchase were not as highly influenced by the content produced as previously expected.

Keywords: social media, consumer behaviour, high-street fashion retailers, consumer motivations

Introduction

The high-street fashion retail sector is a dynamic industry that is innovative and willing to meet the challenges of new technologies. However, the rapid changes within the industry, with the emergence of fast-fashion and strong online-only retailers, means that it is imperative for UK high-street retailers to pitch their communication strategies correctly, and thus have the flexibility to respond quickly to changing demands (Meadows 2009). As a continually evolving market, the widening of consumer demand and changing consumer expectations has intensified this process. Therefore, retailers should be encouraged to think outside the traditional boxes (Burt and Sparks 2003) in meeting the changes of consumers' behaviour that these shifts have brought.

Within today's society the presence of the internet and Web 2.0 technologies have spurred the development of social media platforms and substantially changed the environment that consumers operate in. This has been significantly apparent within the UK high-street retailing environment where British web-only retailers ASOS and Boohoo are racing ahead of online sales (British Retail Consortium 2017). This has consequently impacted the sales of UK high-street fashion retailers. Thus, it is inevitable that UK fashion retailers will have to modify their marketing strategies to adapt to a digital-led society to target consumers. Within retail environments, social

media can accelerate the accessibility of content to consumers (Kim and Johnson 2016). However, this poses a challenge for high-street retailers as changes in consumer's expectations increases demand. The Consumer Decision-Making Process (CDMP) is recognized as a central component of consumer behaviour. As research, has developed it has been recognized as a complex process with many internal and external factors influencing all stages of the process. These factors can be defined as "the motivated activation of knowledge stored in the memory and psychological traits or acquisition of information from the environment" (Gursoy and McCleary 2004). Therefore, understanding how social media influences this process is a vital next step in comprehending the modern-day consumer and adding a new complex layer to the CDMP.

It has been identified that social media aids the interaction between consumers and fashion garments online (McCormick and Livett 2012) and this communication is a key in influencing consumer behaviour, awareness and attitudes (Mangold and Faulds 2009). It's therefore beneficial for UK fashion retailers to continue to research and develop their understanding of how these social media platforms impact fashion consumers and their CDMP. Many researchers have acknowledged that age is an important influencer in fashion decision-making (Rocha et al. 2005), however there is limited academic research exploring how social media effects age demographics within this process.

This paper utilised qualitative research to explore whether social media has a significant positive influence on the CDMP for the UK retail fashion market; whilst identifying how social media effects different generational cohorts.

Consumer Decision-Making Process (CDMP)

Traditionally consumer researchers viewed CDMP as a rational perspective (Schiffman and Kanuk 1997), with a vast majority of literature including linear models that incorporate the fundamentals of Dewey's (1910) widely accepted five-stage decision process (Engel et al. 1968; Howard and Sheth 1969). This process is still evidenced in a majority of consumer behaviour textbooks (Assael 1998; Blackwell et al. 2005; Darley et al. 2010). However, further investigations identified that there are various psychological factors impacting the CDMP, with the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell Model (1968) attempting to trace the psychological state of consumers through their decision performance and satisfaction (Figure 1) (Brosekan et al. 2013).

The very nature of the CDMP is what causes its challenges as the process is considered unquantifiable. This introduces the notion that consumers' goals are often imprecise and are constructed in any given situation (Dhar 1997). This poses an issue when looking at online consumer behaviour literature as most researchers draw theories from classical DM models and therefore the application is not as straight forward as just relying on traditional components (Cheung et al. 2005). Darley et al. (2010) further explores the influence of the web on CDMP highlighting this is a "complex phenomenon" adapting the EBM model to include web stimuluses.
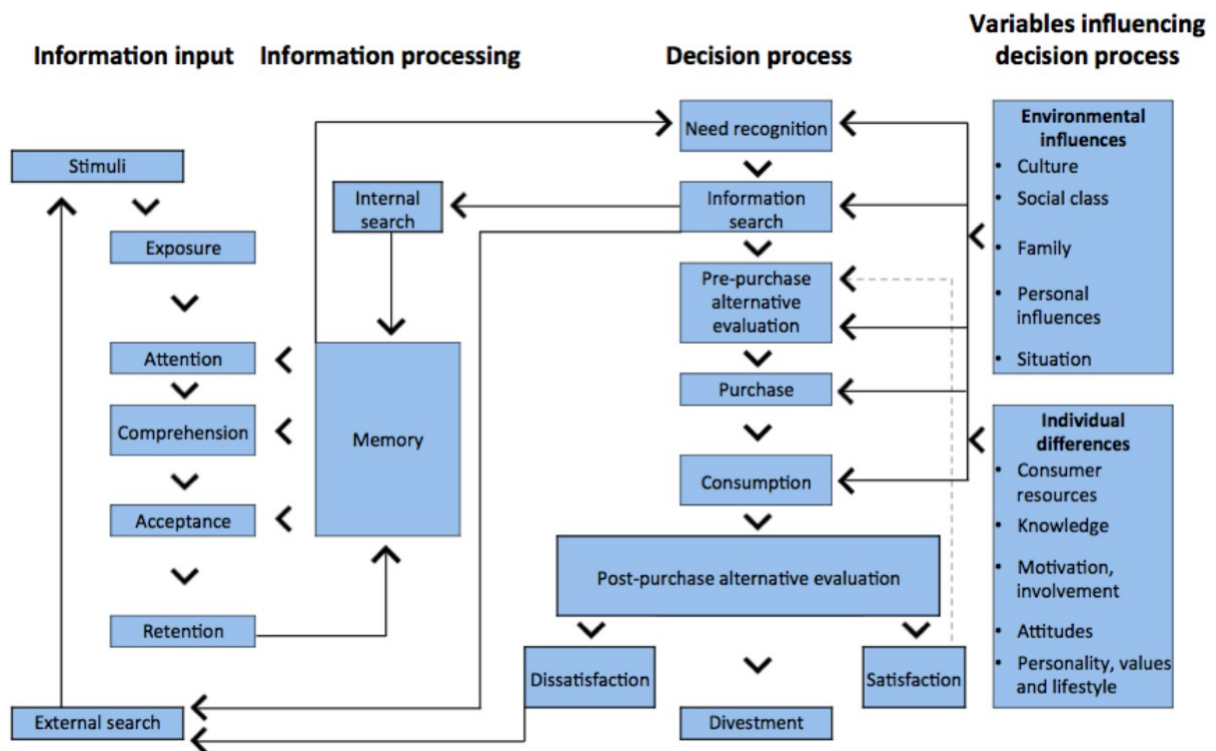
Figure 1. The Engel Blackwell Miniard model (1995)

Furthermore, the influence of social media (SM) on consumer behaviour has not been empirically tested within the context of fashion retailing, despite its growing importance (Kontu and Vecchi 2014). The inability to easily observe how and when different factors influence consumers means that linear models can only justify part of marketers understanding of the DMP, contrasting Livette (2006) who debated that models were the best way to understand this process. Thus, it can be argued that a clear-cut stage structure to decision activities maybe an inappropriate technique to illustrate DM for fashion consumption. This is particularly crucial when investigating the underdeveloped connection between fashion and consumer behaviour (Wang 2010), as behaviour within the fashion retail marketplace is characterised by impulse purchasing and fickle consumers.

Research has identified there are numerous dimensions of a purchase that impacts CDMP strategies at every stage, these include various internal and external factors, increased by online communications (Kim and Jones 2009; Darley et al. 2010). However, within the literature there are significant inconsistencies and differences across empirical studies investigating the internal and external factors of CDMP (Darley et al. 2010). This is heightened for fashion consumption as existing fashion research highlights that consumers are regularly distributed across a range of fashion consciousness and behaviours (O'Cass 2000).

With the proliferation of high-street fashion retailers utilising the Internet and SM, this can serve as an efficient source of fashion information (Seock and Chen-Yu 2007). Thus, enabling retailers to strengthen relationships and create two-way communication seeking empathy with younger consumers (Kim and Ko 2012). Therefore, external sources provided by the internet is changing the dynamics of the fashion information search and the literature indicates that SM may have different influences on the CDMP for different generations, increasing the complexity to these behaviours, furthering the need for a more comprehensive understanding.

Social Media

Web 2.0 more commonly known as social media (SM) sites have a varied and rich ecology that differ in terms of purpose and scope. Meyer's (2017) SM Platform Comparison illustrates the diverse environment of SM and how different platforms now attract different demographics. Thus, allowing for retailers to segment and target consumers more effectively and aiding the understanding of consumer behaviour within these platforms (Hanna et al. 2011). However, due to its expansive nature of sites, devices and consumers' behaviours online it is challenging to recognise all at once (Tuten and Soloman 2014). Therefore, consumers' predisposition to respond, interact and follow brands on social media constitutes the notion of consume engagement (Hollebeek et al. 2014).

eWOM has encouraged a shift towards SM marketing as companies notice that more positive responses towards a product or service is considered more impactful on CDM. Hajili et al. (2014) argued that businesses are happy to see consumers share information among each other through content generation. While eWOM can provide a positive impact for an organization, Laroche et al. (2012) claim that SM is not always an ideal environment for companies to operate in as consumers are becoming more powerful (Fournier and Avery 2011). Furthermore, consumer interactions can be either positive or negative. Therefore, the relative effectiveness that eWOM has on consumer behaviour is not clear within the literature.

There is evidence that reviews posted online are considered a more powerful tool than expert reviews (Gillin 2007). Research identified that credible source in combination with reviewers' transparency lead to subjective norms (Gunawan and Huarng 2015), having a positive effect on users' intentions. Kulmala et al. (2013) uncovered that amplified eWOM on fashion blogs were often written to resemble organic eWOM and were predicted to have a more positive impact on consumer reactions to promotional material (Corcoran 2010). Therefore, the credibility and transparency of the reviewer is essential in the reliability of information received through the exchange.

Online Communities

As participation in online communities and social networks continue to become popular for fashion (De Valck et al. 2009), the relevance of understanding the impacts on consumer behaviour has also grown (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Scaraboto et al. 2012). Online communities are based upon new technologies ability to facilitate a platform where consumers can carry out behaviours of sharing and gaining. A number of authors have demonstrated the usefulness of social identity in clarifying the relationships between identity and behaviour (Cruwys et al. 2012), however none of these studies have investigated change behaviour in the context of online communities. It is therefore possible to envisage a new direction for research that is more directly orientated to users' DMP. Kozinets (1999) states that the emergence of virtual communities has transformed consumers' information search processes into a "source of community and understanding." Therefore, a deeper understanding of the role of communication in consumer DM is crucial as the motivations to participate and accept the information shared impacts the significance of online communities (Zhu et al. 2014).

Communication through SM can positively impact the perceived risk of any consumer purchase by the assumption that the information online will reinforce their decision, therefore the degree in which the perceived risk is felt will be dependent on not only the type of purchase but also purchase involvement (Gunawan and Huarng 2015). Therefore, the credibility of the source is important in the consumers' management of risk as part of the CDMP (Schoorman et al. 2007). uncovered within the online shopping environment only WOM had a significant effect on purchase intentions. Therefore, the impact of visual information on CDMP in the online environment appears to be contradictory within literature.

Factors Influencing High-Street Fashion Consumers' DMPs

Rogers (1959) defined self-concept as a combination of the physical and mental 'self.' Relating it to the apparel market, consumers buying behaviour satisfy two needs: the physical needs and the offer of consumer self-ideals to fulfil their hedonic needs (Solomon and Rabolt 2009). Banister and Hogg (2004) stated self-esteem is a key driver for consumption involving acceptance and avoidance of goods that can be considered a representation of self. For fashion retailers, this is a crucial concept to explore as the literature recognises the prominence clothing has in the formation and exhibition of self (Evans 1989). This is further explored within SMS serving as a place to share and garner shopping information, as consumer can monitor common interests and styles amongst peers, thus satisfying interpersonal needs such as conformity. Therefore, it is evident that societal norms where people want to feel that their choices are in accordance to the accepted practices of the group are crucial to understand, not only as consumer motivation (Reynolds et al. 2010) but as an evaluation consideration within CDMP.

Motivations and involvement

O'Cass (2004) defines fashion clothing involvement (FCI) as "the extent to which a consumer

views the related fashion [clothing] activities as a central part of their life." Goldsmith et al. (1999) further explored involvement as feeling of interest and enthusiasm consumers hold for various product categories. Thus, the degree of involvement in a product category has become a major factor relevant to organisations promotional strategies (Kim 2005), particularly with regards to fashion consumption. Previous research has sought to understand the way in which consumers become involved with fashion products and understand the effect involvement has on various consumers' behaviour (Tigert et al. 1976; Browne and Kaldenberg 1997). Thus, this extends Petty and Cacioppo's (1984) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), that suggests there are clear differences between the decision-making of consumers who are higher or lower involved with fashion (Josiassen 2010).

Drivers of fashion clothing involvement have been argued to include materialism (O'Cass 2004), gender (Tigert et al. 1980) and age (Solomon and Rabolt 2009; O'Cass 2000). However, according to O'Cass and Fenech (2003), major problems with involvement lies with not only in understanding involvement, but also understanding the role it plays with other variables guiding

the formation of consumption patterns. While recent work has expanded the knowledge of FCI, the literature fails to provide a comprehensive picture of conditions that foster involvement within the UK high-street fashion sector. Furthermore, the heavy influence of SM has not been regarded as a driver within this topic. Thus, to capitalise on involvement this research needs to be further developed.

Generational Cohorts

Generational cohorts are comprised of a group of individuals who experience similar life events due to growing up within similar time periods (Bakewell and Mitchell 2003). Accordingly, it can be presumed that consumers who belong to these cohorts have behavioural traits that are akin as they go through different stages of the life cycle, with different cohorts following different patterns in developing values, attitude and preferences (Parment 2013). A number of studies have investigated students and young adults as a cohort within the fashion retail setting (Bakewell and Mitchell 2003, Bakewell et al. 2006). With marketing and apparel literature agreeing that fashion leaders are more likely to belong to Generation Y (Gutman and Mills 1982; Goldsmith and Stith 1991). However, noted by Mintel (2016) there is a substantial increase in those aged 35-54 shopping for clothes. The lack of research comparing generational cohorts is notable (Pentecost and Andrews 2010) and is particularly significant with the growth of Generation X's spending power and fashion fanship within the UK (Mintel 2016). It can further be argued that because of the UK's aging population this will have a profound impact on the fashion retail sector, thus this calls for research within this domain.

Research Objectives & Philosophy

The following research objectives were established to address the limitations and facilitate understanding consumers within this current dynamic and competitive market place, as well as following the academic curiosity.

RO1 - To explore if consumers' perceptions of high-street fashion retailers are positively influenced by social media

RO2 - To investigate if and how high-street fashion retailers' presence on social media influences any part of the consumer-decision making process

RO3 - To identify the tools of social media which influence consumer desires and intentions to purchase

RO4 - To evaluate the social media efforts of high-street fashion retailers

This paper will implement an interpretative philosophy as it acknowledges the participants as social actors (Saunders et al. 2009). Although it is expected that this research may uncover patterns in consumers' behaviour, it is assumed that level of involvement and influencing factors will impact the CDMP differently. An inductive approach is argued to be more appropriate for this study as its deemed more suitable for an interpretative philosophy and qualitative research methods (Gratton and Jones 2010).

Given that this research explores participants' behaviours and motivations an in-depth qualitative method was believed to be most suitable (Punch 2014). While quantitative methods have been previously used within the field of online consumer-behaviour a qualitative approach acknowledges areas that may not have been initially considered to be explored, allowing for new insights into the subject (Walliman 2005). According to Barbour (2008) focus groups are perceived as particularly well suited when studying DM behaviour, however in- depth interviews were considered as the most suitable process to support this inductive approach (Malhotra et al. 2006). To gain benefits from both approaches a multi-method tactic was adopted, with two focus groups and eight semi-structured interviews being conducted. Both methods imply time consuming data analysis, involving transcribing and summarizing. Generation Y and Generation X were selected as population samples with the requirements being that participants were male and female, between the ages of 19-52 who used SM and had an interest in high-street fashion.

Non-probability purposive sampling was used and participants were chosen that had certain characteristics to contribute richer insights into the phenomenon explored (Hennink et al. 2011), thus increasing the probability of meeting research criteria (Vogt and Johnson 2011). Furthermore, quota sampling was employed to ensure the studies population was divided into relevant strata (Yang and Banamah 2014). Whilst no specific guidelines exist regarding sample size (Luborsky and Rubinstein 1995), in qualitative research sampling is inclined towards smaller numbers ensuring a study of depth and detail (Patton 1990). However, this method can generate biased results and limited ability to generalise data.

Data Collection & Analysis

The focus groups and interviews were conducting in a relaxed atmosphere to encourage natural discussions. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or over FaceTime, depending on the geographic availability of the participant. An interview protocol was developed, this included the rules that guided the administration and implementations of the interviews, it was also used as a tool to prompt participants on subject topics and questions within focus-groups. The specific research questions developed for the in-depth interview, were used as the framework for developing discussion within the focus-group. This distinguished if the different data collection methods produce similar or dissimilar responses, thus identifying if one method was more prevalent in generating responses to the themes within the research. In both settings to ensure no data was overlooked a Dictaphone recording was taken with the participants' consent. The details from the research were transcribed and summarized.

Quote extraction and analysis was obtained from participants' transcriptions, providing precise and rich data (Saunders et al. 2009). Thematic coding was undertaken which provided flexibility to gain rich accounts of data through the identification of emerging themes. Research transcripts and summaries were colour coded and were chosen based on relevance and frequency of occurrence.

Findings and Discussion

Research Objective 1: To explore if and how consumers' perceptions of high-street fashion retailers are positively influenced by social media

Self-concept

According to Onkvisit and Shaw (1987) consumers develop self-concepts through interactions with an external environment, confirming their feelings and opinions are consistent with the stimuli. Generation Y participants expressed that viewing images of high-street fashion on SM generated positive feeling by identifying their own sense of style with different fashion accounts, thus satisfying their own hedonic needs and expressing their own identity:

"Sometimes you can identify your body shape to the bloggers that you follow [for fashion] and then you can imagine what the outfits would look like on you" (P13)

This proposes that the participants frequently engage with retailers and products through SM that are congruent with or enhance their actual or ideal self-concept (Malhortra 1988).
As participants' self-image was reinforced, the positive perception they had of the retailer also increased. Consumers' feelings of satisfaction were influenced through the use of products as an identity bolster.

"I like the feeling of wearing a really nice outfit and feeling that people like it too" (P3).

Thus, complementing the findings of Sirgy (1982) suggesting that self-concept is an important factor in shaping consumer behavior.

Involvement

Within this study involvement is categorised as the level of perceived personal relevance from the consumer by fashion clothing (O'Cass 2000). The researcher found that participants who were more involved with fashion were more likely to follow high-street retailers and trends on SM. Emphasising that through engaging with retailers online, their involvement with fashion and affinity to the fashion retailers increased. Thus, reinforcing that fashion involvement is conceptualised along a continuum.

"I like to keep up with trends because it makes me feel good to wear

good clothes and everything that I like I tend to follow it online"

(P2)

Consequently, the use of defining the levels of consumers' fashion involvement provides the potential to capture the diversity of the involvement construct and can be used as a basis for market segmentation (Solomon and Rabolt 2009).

Douglas (1976) posited that highly involved consumers represented a market of frequent clothing buyers. Contrary to this, P4 stated that when using SM "its more about inspiration than going and buying exactly what they are wearing," this sentiment was repeated by many of the participants. Thus, indicating that when using SM high fashion involvement translated to interest and inspiration and as a result created a positive perception of the retailer as opposed to purchase intentions and behaviour.

Psychographics and Lifestyle

Existing literature suggests that generational cohorts' behaviour is predicted to be homogenous within the online environment however, Generation X exhibited contrasting behaviours within their cohort. The use of SM in Generation Y was higher across all participants, thus implying that Generation Y have a more positive perception of SM with regards to high-street fashion. This can be attributed to Generation Y participants being the first generation to have spent their entire lives in the digital environment (Bolton et al. 2013), having a greater confidence when using SM.

This could also be explained by Generation X perceiving that fashion retailers are not posting content relevant to their age group. P5 highlighted that "unfortunately we are the forgotten generation in fashion, and it's frustrating because… we have the time to shop and look online, but there are very few high-street retailers out there that really cater to our age group." This indicates that high-street retailers are limiting the opportunity to have a positive influence on this cohort, thus impacting behaviour.

Participants within Generation Y did not indicate any material behavioural differences between gender when using SM and the influence it had on high-street fashion perceptions. Bakewell et al. (2006) identified that although Generation Y males were becoming more fashion conscious, this did not translate into fashion adoption. However, in the ensuing eleven years since this study was conducted it can be seen within the current study that the participants' responses were contrasting. These findings based on SM and the fluidity of gender roles support the assumption that societies expectation of gender is slowly changing (Gentry et al. 2003). Thus, reinforcing and complimenting the literature. The finding identified that within SM consumer developed positive perceptions of high-street fashion retailers through emotional consumption (Sweeney and Soutar 2001). This is considered the utility from products' ability to generate feelings, and in turn can influence expressive behaviour, thus supporting existing literature (Lofman 1991; Blumenstein 2014).

<u>Research Objective 2</u> To investigate if and how high-street fashion retailers' presence on SM influences any part of the consumer-decision making process

Need Recognition

As stated by P7 'browsing' was one of the principal behaviours when using SM. Participants acknowledged that whilst browsing, especially in relation to high-street fashion, if content appeared that aroused and activated the decision process this created a previously unrecognised need. The findings expanded the theory identified by Shao (2006) that due to the volume of internet-based information, the way consumers are processing information for decision-making are not aligned with the traditional models:

"I feel like I'm constantly shopping because pictures come up and even though I'm not looking at them with the intent to buy anything, I'm still browsing and thinking 'oh that's nice'" (P11)

Thus, this complements consumer actively seeking information as participants gathered information through heuristic and subconscious behaviours. One participants indicated that although they were highly involved with keeping up with trends, if they were in close proximity to the high-street shop they did not have to follow them online:

"I go into Zara a lot more then I would go into other shops because I have one really close to me so I feel like I don't need to follow it on Instagram because I see when it releases new things" (P3)

Whilst, not stated by other participants it would advantageous for further understanding to pursue whether this has a general impact on consumers' online behaviour and the CDMP.

Information Search

Participants indicated that SM facilitated their active searches when seeking high-street fashion information as these platforms were an integral part of their day to day lives thus, deeming it a *'natural fit'* (P1). Therefore, enabling them to obtain relative information quickly and easily, and in turn emerging as a new value perception and changing search tactics:

"I feel like how you would go about making a purchase now days is by using SM as a first step" (P3)

This succinctly corroborates with Kim (2010) who proposes that SM is a main driver for increased traffic to retailers' websites, and therefore is developing as a new entry hub for ecommerce (Refer to Chapter 2.1.2).

Alternative Evaluation

Adding to the understanding regarding to the awareness of choice within the CDMP for high-street fashion, it is important to take note that participants strongly agreed that using SM enabled them to focus the information they received specifically to their interests:

"I narrow the brands I'm looking for [on social media] and I know it will be something I like, so this means I'm not spending a lot of time looking at things I don't like" (P1)

Indicating that if an account they follow does not post anything they deem relevant, they will most likely unfollow without considering the consequences. This can be attributed to the competitive retail environment, where consumers are more sophisticated in narrowing their choices displaying less loyalty, by comparing brands online before making decisions (Hein 2007). Validating Bruner et al. (1956) who states consumers increasingly seek ways to simplify the evaluation process.

Participants confirmed that SM allowed for them to make a confident and more-informed decision. Corresponding with the findings of Lecinski (2011) who identified that consumers encounter multiple decision-making moments before they experience a product in a physical or digital   form:

"… I would purchase the products maybe in store or online, but I always check what

they have on social media first" (P4)

This theme of looking through SM before making any decisions was common among participants, implying that SM assist with the DMP as opposed to confirming final purchase behaviour.

Social Influencers

Literature denotes that social influencers are critical in creating subjective norms which effect consumers' purchase intentions (Gunawan and Huarung 2015). However, although many participants followed blogger, celebrities and influencers accounts that featured high-street fashion products, the impact was identified as indirect on their purchase intentions. Participants used these influencers for inspiration and advice as opposed to having a direct impact on purchasing intentions:

"I don't think I'm looking at bloggers with the intention to buy those products its just

to see how they put their outfits together" (P4)

Although not clearly stated, comments indicated that this may be contributed to sources not being truly authentic by posting content that was sponsored or created by a single source (Metzger et al. 2010). Thus, resulting in more sceptical behaviours within the online context.

However, participants within the Generation Y focus-group indicated that social influencers had an effect on their own self-identity:

"I would say that bloggers and social media influencers is the biggest influence on my

own personal style, because I see it all the time and they put outfits together that look

good" (P13)

Therefore, illustrating that developing personal style is not just an individual process, but evolves through a process of social experience (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). Through the finding it is clear that SM further complicates the DMP within the high-street fashion context, resulting in new uncontrollable layers that impact the Inputs-Processing-Response equation.

Research Objective 3: To identify the tools of social media which influence consumer desires and intentions to purchase

eWOM

Participants indicated that eWOM has some value and influence in creating a positive perception of high-street fashion retailers, with P7 stating that '…because they are customers and have experienced the product its more relevant'. In the literature eWOM was considered a highly persuasive factor on CDMP, however, the findings presented that while participants used eWOM it was not a vital component in their assessment of high-street fashion retailers on SM. This can be a result of the participants using SM as a conduit when gaining inspiration as opposed to a direct impact on final purchase, thus the relevance of consumers' reviews become less pertinent.

SM Platforms

There are a prolific number of social networking sites operating at present with Facebook being accredited as globally the most popular (Tuten and Solomon 2015). However, the majority of participants specified that Instagram was the primary platform of choice when following fashion. This supported the research by AbdelFattah et al. (2017) who states that Instagram generates a high rate of reactions and sentiments, providing a powerful tool for fashion houses to create images that have higher 'social value' through preferred visual aesthetics.

However, the Generation X focus group indicated they did not use Instagram to follow high-street fashion retailer, and that Facebook was their preferred platform:

"I mainly use Facebook when I'm looking at fashion, especially when Facebook ad's

come up but I don't follow any brands, I just see them on there" (P9)

Thus, through this conflict in the data, it is apparent that different platforms will influence different consumers' DMP in various ways, both consciously and subconsciously. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that one platform is more efficient than another for fashion retailers as the data illustrates that different platforms address different consumer purposes within the CDMP.

Visual information

Participants affirmed that the benefits of being able to see visual content through SM, was more impactful than verbal content when discussing high-street fashion retailers online (Refer to Chapter 2.2.4). Participants stated that the way the account is displayed, the quality of photos and way outfits are depicted through pictures created more of a desire to engage with the

retailer or products. Generation Y cohorts also mentioned the importance of an accounts aesthetics, indicating that it is not only important to have quality pictures, but that accounts use images that create themes or tell stories, as opposed to just showcasing products:

"What deters me from the Topshop account is that some of the pictures do look very staged... I would want to see something less processed than that" (P3)

Data from this study develops the notion that whilst participants were influenced by other tools of SM, the main driving factor remained the visual representation of high-street fashion retailers through SM.

Online Communities

Whilst, participants indicated that they did follow a variety of online communities, surprisingly it appeared that this had a less influential impact on their behaviour than as stated within the literature. Thus, contrasting Brogi (2014) findings that online brand communities are viewed as powerful instrument for fashion marketers to influence consumer buying behaviour. It appeared that participants relied more on own personal style and internal factors, questioning the assumption that retailers can rely heavily on online communities to induce purchase behaviour.

Perceived Risk

The degree of perceived risk was considered a strong motivating force behind the acceptance of eWOM (Palka et al. 2009). The findings indicated that there was a cascade of trust in terms of fashion advise and opinions. Participants felt that fashion bloggers and influencers were more trustworthy than retailers and sponsored content, but the main source of trusted advice was obtained from family and friends. This would indicate the more traditional source of influence is still prevalent within the online environment, contrasting with Hong and Yang (2009) who purported SM creates a new dimension of volume and reach thus, requiring a shifting in focus from close interpersonal links to weaker ties.

Participants who belonged to the Generation X cohort were noticeably more sceptical of biased posts as they identify that these sources could have been prompted to positively promote the products:

> *"When I see things on social media that are to do with retailers it all feels very false and nothing is genuine about the products they are telling me about through Facebook" (P8)*

This finding was not as pertinent within the Generation Y cohort who identified a higher level of confidence in the honest information received by bloggers and influencers. P6 stated 'It's [what they are] interested in, so it's coming from a better place.' This complemented the findings by Schoorman et al. (2007) who affirmed that one evaluates a trustee's aptitude in the area of interest prior to coming to decisions about taking risks. Therefore, this proposes a strong link between perceived source credibility and reduction of risk, as participants expressed loyalty towards bloggers and influencers who they believed to be more credible (Chen and Ku 2013).

Literature states that SM provides powerful tools enabling engagement of consumers involving rich user-generated content therefore, allowing for new marketplaces and instruments for marketers to operate (Akar and Topçu 2011). These tools of SM in creating demand and desire was undoubtedly presented within the findings, however, participants acknowledge that they did not directly impact final intentions to purchase.

Research Objective 4: To evaluate the social media efforts of high-street fashion retailers

High-street Fashion Retailers

Of the high-street fashion retailers that participants followed on SM, there was an overall positive response to the content and efforts published on these pages:

"I think social media really gives the brand a personality, it's a really good way of bringing consumers closer to a brand" (P4)

P3 also voiced that retailers often posted about them as a brand instead of just pushing their products. This theme was commonly reiterated by participants illustrating that the high-street fashion retailers' SM platform offered venues for consumers to engage and allows for brands to increase the unique distinctiveness of their identity (Kim and Ko 2012). Furthermore, these findings support Bruhn et al. (2012) study that established SM strongly influenced a brands image on a functional and hedonic basis.

A theme that was raised by a number of participants was that the quality and the perceived work that the high-street fashion retailer made with their posts had a positive direct correlation on the participant following them on SM. Thus, corroborating with Tuten and Solomon (2014), who propose that quality indicators on SM serve as evidence of value and relevance for consumers.

With P2 stating that 'quality has a lot to do with why I wouldn't follow an account, if the pictures are poor quality I wouldn't follow them.' This indicates that high-street retailers' pages who put more perceived effort behind their content positively incentives the participants to engage with the retailer through SM. Thus, contributing to an area of research that is underdeveloped.

Based on the findings it was recognised that a negative perception was generated towards a high-street fashion retailer if they promoted products through their SM accounts, that could not be found or were not available for purchase:

> *"If they are going to picture someone in something or an outfit they should have it all easily available in the shop" (P9)*

This suggests that that retailers must align their online content with the retail activity and merchandise, as participants indicated this negatively impacted their perception of the retailer.

Brand Presence on SM

When asked what high-street retailers were the most successful on SM, participants stated a variety of retailers with Topshop being regularly flagged as an account Generation Y cohorts would engage with. Based on comments it was indicated that Topshop was considered a trend leader (Kim and Ko 2010), and thus motivated participants to have higher involvement with the retailer, however they did not state whether this increased their share of wallet. Conversely, amongst Generation X cohorts there were no retailers that were commonly followed between the participants. What was noticeable was that traditional high-street retailers deemed to be popular within this cohort such as Next and Marks & Spencer's did not appear to be noted as engaging on SM.

Conclusion

Research on CDMP and the dynamics influencing it through SM, has revealed there are significant factors that drive consumers' decisions to participate with high-street fashion retailers online.

The findings met the researchers' initial expectations of the impact SM has on participants' behaviours. However, the anticipated focus was that these tools would facilitate purchase decisions. Contrary to these assumptions, the findings concluded that SM has created a consumer that can be impacted at any stage of the decision process (Ciotti 2014) and has added to the research regarding unplanned consumer behaviour (Koufaris 2002). Participants behaviours were stimuli-driven and user-controlled. Therefore, this had a larger impact on inspiration as opposed to modifying their behaviours to align exactly with trends or products.

Addressing the research aim, attitudes and behaviours of participants belonging to each generational cohort provided interesting insight into this topic. As expected Generation Y were observed to highly use online platforms when engaging with high-street fashion, as SM was indicated as being an integral part of their day-to-day lives. However, in Generation X, women appeared to be extensively more involved with fashion on SM than males. The stark comparison of behaviours between males in Generation Y and X, introduces the interesting notion of the metrosexual man, where due to the intensification of social and commercial pressures, Generation Y male consumers illustrated higher levels of fashion consciousness (Bakewell et al. 2006) and have higher willingness to indulge in their appearance in order to attract attention. Therefore, this suggests that the increase use of SM is changing the acceptance and adoption of Generation Y males fashion behaviours.

Prior to consumers' making any decisions they are impacted by various stimuli, however, with the proliferation of active users on SM, the influence these platforms unconsciously have on consumer behaviour is vast. Therefore, suggesting that consumers are not as predictable as traditional CDMP theory postulates. Although thought processes do appear to exist, consumers now demonstrate a much more complex process, which create multiple layers of motivations where internal and external factors overlap.

Primary research established that the perceptions of high-street fashion retailers were positively influenced by its presence on SM, with the sample stating that self-concept, involvement and psychographics were significant influencers impacting this result. These various internal factors had a noteworthy impact on their emotional consumption (Sweeney and Soutar 2001). Overall, it can be argued that SM facilitates a platform where consumers can adapt their perceptions of retailers in accordance with the posts published due to consumers desire to engage with this content. However, the precept of positive influence was dependent on whether the participant was highly involved with fashion, as suggested by O'Cass (2001). Participants who had a predisposition of interest in following trends and adapting their own personal style to incorporate these were considered highly involved. Thus, it can be argued that further research is required to understand whether consumers who are less involved with fashion would replicate these feelings and behaviours.

The findings conclusively support current literature that SM provides multiple tools for engagement with fashion brands. Therefore, clothes shopping is no longer restricted to the high-street with digital becoming an integral part of the shopping experience (Bearne 2016). Participants attributed factors such as quality and perceived effort to the success of high-street fashion brands on SM, thus having a positive influence over brand image and equity. Supporting previous research, through SM it was identified that brands were proficient in illustrating their own brand personality (Kim et al. 2001) through different SM mediums, thus supporting theory that emotional brand attachment is perpetuated through connecting brand's personality with consumer's ideal self.

The findings of this study present valuable implications for high-street fashion marketers and are anticipated to enhance and deepen fashion marketers understanding of CDMP when using SM. Thus, they must strive to understand and provide relevant content to consumers', not only for

26

Generation Y but also Generation X, responding to quickly changing consumer demands and expectations with both of these cohorts.

Overall, these findings propose that high-street fashion retailers on SM must understand the complexity of internal and external factors motivating consumers to interact with retailers online and off, and therefore, generating added value for their consumers.

When conducting future research within this field more probing questions could allow for deeper insight of internal driving factors and in helping to understand what creates the affective feelings of aspiration within the SM arena as opposed to driving behaviours. Therefore, adaption of questions to uncover deeper emotional influencers would be recommended for future research.

A highly interesting area for further development is the change in dynamics in gender within Generation Y that can be seen to be facilitated through the use and adoption of SM. This noteworthy topic in which men are increasingly becoming extroverted about their fashion choices and expression is important as it identifies a market which appears to have not been extensively researched to date.

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