

Chapter 14

The Effects of Online Consumer Reviews on Fashion Clothing Purchase Intention: Peripheral Cues and the Moderating Role of Involvement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines a particular type of electronic word-of mouth; that of online consumer reviews featured on fashion retailer websites, and studies the effects they have on female fashion consumers in terms of subsequent purchase intention decisions. Using the Elaboration Likelihood Model as the theoretical framework, this study has focused on examining the effects of three peripheral cues; source credibility, review volume and valance on purchase intention, and also investigated how fashion clothing involvement moderates these relationships. The results suggest that reviews that are perceived to be credible, featured in high numbers and predominantly positive all had a significant effect in increasing the purchase intention of female fashion consumers. The level of fashion clothing involvement did not appear to be a significant moderator of cue effects with the notable exception of negative reviews, which were more likely to deter purchase intention from low involvement consumers compared to high involvement consumers.

INTRODUCTION

Word of mouth (WOM), defined by Westbrook as the ‘informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers’ (1987, p. 261), has long been recognised as a highly effective communication channel and an important inducement of consumer purchase behaviour. The proliferation of the internet and the development of Web 2.0 technologies have ensued a series of continuous technological developments including e-commerce operations and social media, which has resulted in profound changes to the way fashion companies and consumers relate to one another (Winer, 2009). This is particularly pertinent in the fashion sector, where the amount of control the consumer can now wield in the purchasing and product development process has enabled new levels of collaboration and empowerment; indeed it is certainly the case that ‘customers are voicing their opinions and interacting digitally in a manner never before imagined,’ (Brennan & Schafer, 2010, p. 3). WOM, traditionally limited to a consumers’ immediate circle of family, acquaintances and colleagues, has been transformed by the onset of these digital technologies into the realm of eWOM, where numerous online forums and mechanisms exist to elicit and amalgamate informal evaluations which are published to large-scale, possibly vast, audiences (Chatterjee, 2001; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003).

This study aims to focus on one particular form of eWOM in relation to fashion e-commerce, that of websites that enable customer-generated content in the form of online consumer reviews (OCRs), defined by Liu, Karahanna, and Watson (2011, p. 231) as ‘an important type of user-generated content, through which consumers share their experiences with products and services in order to help others make informed purchasing decisions.’ First introduced by the e-retailing pioneer Amazon in 1995, the growing popularity of OCRs in the e-commerce environment demands attention from firms across a spectrum of managerial concerns including brand engagement, customer retention, product development, quality assurance and operations management (Dellarocas, 2003). Recent research has suggested that OCRs, if leveraged effectively, can directly influence the bottom-line profit of institutions, with 77% of UK consumers using the internet now looking to online reviews before making their purchase decisions, and a further 62% claiming to spend more with a company after reading a positive review (Doherty, 2014). Empirical studies have revealed how OCRs have become an important determinant in consumer purchase decisions with several studies suggesting that the presence of OCRs can increase sales (Ho-Dac, Carson, & Moore, 2013; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Chen, Wu, & Yoon, 2004; Moe & Trusov, 2011), influence buyer behaviour (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Park & Han, 2007; Zhu & Zhang, 2010) and increase levels of consumer trust (Dellarocas, 2003; Senecal & Natel, 2004). However, within the literature there are mixed results due to the subjective nature of OCRs and the complex nature of contextual cues which moderate the effects of consumer behaviour. In addition, to date the studies have originated predominately from the USA or Asia focusing mostly on books (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Chen et al., 2004; Li & Hitt, 2008; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Chatterjee, 2001) or digital products (Ho-Dac et al., 2013; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; Park & Kim, 2008; Park & Lee, 2008; Chen & Xie, 2008) with no study focusing exclusively on fashion clothing.

A UK-based study specifically considering the effects of OCRs on fashion clothing purchase intentions is worthy for several reasons. Fashion clothing occupies a unique position in the wider retail environment, as no other sector produces single-purchase experience goods at the speed and stock turn of the fashion industry (Zhu & Zhang, 2010; Nelson, 1970). Further complications arise with the issues of fit and sizing, accurate colour representation, the tactile nature of the base materials and the importance of manufacturing quality. In addition, fashion purchases can be highly affected by personal taste prefer-

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