Click to impress: The power of fashion designers in the digital luxury space

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Abstract

The current paper examines how parasocial interaction (PSI), imaginary and illusory relationships with fashion designers, enhances luxury consumers' social media contributions. SEM results (Mplus 7.4) from an online survey with visual stimuli (n = 555) show that PSI with fashion designers increases opinion leadership and content production. Specifically, opinion leadership mediates the impact of PSI on user-generated content (UGC) creation, but not electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Luxury consumers only produce UGC when their leadership abilities are emboldened through PSI with fashion designers. Overall, these findings contribute to a growing body of digital luxury studies while helping luxury firms to counterbalance their legacies and brand awareness through social media.

keywords: digital luxury, parasocial interaction, social media, opinion leadership

Introduction

Recent studies demonstrate that the parasocial nature of consumers' interactions with celebrities can make them feel like opinion leaders by association, which increases their social media use within relevant areas such as the arts, recreation, and entertainment (Daniel, Crawford Jackson, & Westerman, 2018). *Parasocial interaction* (PSI) is defined as a history of mass-mediated interactions between a consumer and celebrity that manifests into an illusory relationship (Giles, 2002). However, few researchers to date have considered whether parasocial interactions with fashion designers could have a similar effect on luxury consumers and their social media use. For instance, luxury consumers often regard fashion designers as creative geniuses and celebrities in their own right (Lawry & Helm, 2014). Furthermore, some luxury brands are giving online audiences behind-the-scenes access to fashion designers' creative processes and personal lives, thereby prolonging consumers' emotional attachments to them (Chandon, Laurent, & Valette-Florence, 2017). Hence, this paper will examine how consumers leverage PSI with fashion designers to demonstrate opinion leadership and create relevant social media content.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Previous studies have demonstrated that similarity and knowledge are key predictors of PSI (Tian & Hoffner, 2010; Turner, 1993). As a person identifies with and knows more about a fashion designer, it increases the likelihood of PSI due to the perceived intimacy and senses of belonging cultivated from knowledge and similarity (Fu, Xu, & Yan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, in press; Thomson, 2006). Thus, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

H1: Similarity is positively related to PSI.
H2: Knowledge is positively related to PSI.

Additionally, PSI can increase opinion leaders tendencies in consumers. *Opinion leaders* are influential people with expertise in fashion designers and styles (Kang & Park-Poaps, 2010). First, many studies have verified that knowledge and prestige-seeking can underlie opinion leadership (Gnambs & Batinic, 2013; Song, Cho, & Kim, 2017; van Eck, Jager, & Leeflang, 2011). By passively interacting and building weak social ties with fashion designers online, consumers may gain senses of prestige from "knowing" them and by extension behave as opinion leaders. Secondly, PSI with fashion designers can generate self-flattery and make consumers feel more confident in their leadership abilities (End, 2001; Stehr, Rössler, Leissner, & Schönhardt, 2015). Based on this logic, several hypotheses can be proposed:

H3: Knowledge is positively related to OL.

H4: Prestige-seeking is positively related to OL.

H5: PSI is positively related to OL.

According to extant models of communication, opinion leaders filter the flow of information between mass media, brands, and consumers (Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015). Opinion leadership, therefore, is often an impetus for social chatter –e.g, sharing electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) or creating user-generated content (UGC) (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008; Teichmann, Stokburger-Sauer, Plank, & Strobl, 2015). PSI also can be linked directly to social media use. As previously noted, PSI strengthens users' social bonds, loyalty, and engagement within online communities, which stimulates the production and flow of eWOM and UGC (Tsiotsou, 2015; Yuan, Kim, & Kim, 2016; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). This leads us to:

H6: OL is positively related to the production of (a) eWOM and (b) UGC.

H7: PSI is positively related to the production of (a) eWOM and (b) UGC.

Lastly, prior studies have illustrated that opinion leadership can be an intervening variable between different forms of emotional attachment and content production. For example, opinion leadership qualities and feelings are pivotal for building social influence. When consumers possess enduring involvement with specific product classes, opinion leadership gives them momentum to spread word-of-mouth about brands, people or products (Venkatraman, 1990). Additionally, recent findings support that opinion leadership can enhance the impacts of hedonic value and perceived uniqueness (from social media participation) on consumers' production of eWOM (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, in press; Kobia & Liu, 2017). Similarly, opinion leadership should mediate the associations between PSI with fashion designers and content production:

H8: OL will mediate PSI and the production of (a) eWOM and (b) UGC.

Methodology and Results

Luxury consumers (n = 555) were recruited from an online panel and completed a 60-item survey. The independent variables were adapted from widely accepted scales. Behavioral intentions were captured with a visual stimulus of a luxury online community. Respondents were

asked to rate their desire to post photos of themselves wearing their favorite designers' apparel (UGC) and to comment on other people's photos (eWOM). SEM (Mplus 7.4) was used to test the hypotheses using standard latent regression modeling and validation procedures (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2013). H1 to H7 were supported, but H8 was partially supported. Opinion leadership mediated the association between PSI and UGC, but not eWOM (Table 1):

Table 1. SEM Results

Hypothesized Paths	Standardized β	SE	t-value
Similarity → PSI (H1)	.38	.04	9.76***
Knowledge → PSI (H2)	.51	.04	13.40***
Knowledge → OL (H3)	.24	.07	3.76***
Prestige-seeking → OL (H4)	.35	.05	6.61***
PSI → OL (H5)	.14	.06	2.25*
OL → eWOM (H6a)	.19	.06	3.20***
OL → UGC (H6b)	.24	.05	4.38***
PSI → eWOM (H7a)	.28	.06	4.95***
PSI → UGC (H7b)	.23	.05	4.38***
PSI → OL → eWOM (H8a)	.03	.01	1.85
PSI → OL → UGC (H8b)	.03	.02	2.03*

Model Fit: X^2 (431) = 1277.78*** RMSEA = .065, TLI = .93, CFI = .94

Concluding Remarks

In toto, eWOM does not seem to necessitate opinion leadership when consumers express PSI with fashion designers. That is, PSI with fashion designers can directly enable luxury consumers to comment on other people's photos. Nevertheless, producing UGC is dependent on both PSI and feelings of opinion leadership. Luxury consumers are willing to post their own photos when they exhibit opinion leadership characteristics by virtue of PSI. Importantly, this study is the first to provide a snapshot of how PSI with fashion designers can enhance social media use in the luxury market. Equally, this study addresses current needs for research on digital luxury strategy, while answering industry calls for luxury brands to gain control of their digital content (Jaekel, 2019). Luxury brands should give online customers selective glimpses into the inner workings of their creative directors and fashion designers because they can motivate content production within social channels. Yet, when launching a new online community, luxury brands should focus on granting influencers or exclusive and backstage "passes" to fashion designers' digital content, since they are more likely to contribute photos and user-generated content in-kind that may inspire other users.

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