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Article

Social Media Influencers in Virtual Selling Tools: How Do Consumers Perceive the Influencer's Role in Fashion Hauls on Instagram, and How Do These Perceptions Affect Purchase Intentions?

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Marketing Review St.Gallen

Contemporary Branding



Schwerpunkt

Das Erbe pflegen und ausbauen,
ohne zu verstauben –
Ein Interview mit Thomas P. Meier,
Chief Executive Officer, Ricola

Markenführung, die Brücken baut –
Ein Ansatz zur integrierten Markensteuerung

Return on Brand Investment –
Taking a Data-driven Approach to Branding

Auf Taten müssen Worte folgen

Fünf Thesen zum Thema Branding – zugespitzt

Ädverteising –
Dialekt in der geschriebenen Werbung

Social Media Influencers in Virtual Selling Tools

Gamification als Erfolgsfaktor moderner
Markenführung – Das Beispiel SHEIN

Spektrum

Lead-Scoring bei B-to-B-Unternehmen –
Eine Bestandsaufnahme



Social Media Influencers in Virtual Selling Tools

How Do Consumers Perceive the Influencer's Role in Fashion Hauls on Instagram, and How Do These Perceptions Affect Purchase Intentions?

This study examines the perception of the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in the virtual sales tool of fashion hauls from a consumer perspective and its influence on purchase intention. The results show that the role of SMIs is partly comparable to that of traditional salespeople. The behavioral impact depends on the consumers' relationship with the SMIs.

Luisa Mahn, M.Sc.

Digital branding through social media marketing is playing an increasingly important role for brands (Vrontis et al., 2020). For example, brands are partnering with social media influencers (SMIs) to promote their products. Previous research has shown that SMIs can significantly influence their followers' behavior (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017) and that products promoted by SMIs are bought more often (Taylor, 2020). On the social media platform Instagram, so-called fashion hauls have established themselves as an advertising format. Fashion hauls are short videos that are typically posted by SMIs, in their stories and not in the feed, to introduce recently bought fashion products to their followers (Harnish & Bridges, 2016; Jeffries, 2011; Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018; Sykes & Zimmerman, 2014). In fashion hauls, SMIs act in a sales-like manner, encouraging their followers to buy the promoted products by aggressively presenting and advertising them. In contrast, in most other types of feed posts and story formats, SMIs advertise products in a more casual and indirect way, so that product promotion is more discreet and not perceived as a sales pitch. Compared to other current trends in digital branding, such as co-creation with SMIs, fashion hauls explicitly focus on the advisory and informative sales character. Because Instagram posts in picture format are static, products in such posts can only be shown as a snapshot; conversely, in videos and thus in fashion hauls the products can be shown dynamically and from all sides. To a certain extent, SMIs act like traditional salespeople in this scenario because they present the products to their followers in detail. In fashion hauls, SMIs represent the brand, including the brand values, just as traditional salespeople do, thus contributing to (digital) branding. Furthermore, SMIs often wear the products and style them in complete outfits according to their own tastes, thus taking on the role of fashion stylists. In addition, considering that SMIs can take on the role of a virtual friend, a well-established concept identified in

influencer research (Bond, 2016), they may also embody this role in fashion hauls.

In summary, SMIs can take on different roles in fashion hauls. The central question of this study is how consumers perceive the role of SMIs in fashion hauls and how these roles influence purchase intention. To answer this question, 31 qualitative, semi-structured guided interviews were conducted with female Instagram users.

The findings of this study are especially relevant for marketers. By understanding how consumers perceive SMIs in virtual sales tools and how this perception influences purchase intention, brand managers can determine how SMIs should act in fashion hauls. In the future, fashion hauls can thus be designed in a more targeted manner and implemented more effectively in the digital branding strategy.

Theoretical Foundations and Research Assumptions

State of Research on Fashion Hauls

Although many brands now use fashion hauls on Instagram as virtual sales tools,

no research has addressed this topic yet. Therefore, there is a need for research that examines the effects of fashion hauls on brand-related goals. Moreover, little research has addressed (fashion) hauls on YouTube. One of the few exceptions is Jeffries (2011), who analyzed the socio-demographic characteristics of haulers. Sykes and Zimmerman (2014) investigated the production of hauls by analyzing hauls on YouTube. Harnish and Bridges (2016) conducted four studies to investigate the role of self-monitoring on the intention to create hauls, thus providing psychologically oriented research without any brand reference. Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018) analyzed 139,475 YouTube videos from 2009 to 2017 and found that beauty and fashion are mainly promoted on YouTube in the form of (fashion) hauls.

Classification of SMIs

In influencer research, SMIs are often classified using key figures (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Piehler et al., 2021). A relatively new approach categorizes SMIs according to the role they perform in different advertising formats (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018; Marwick, 2015; Rundin & Colliander, 2021). For example, Marwick (2015) categorizes SMIs



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according to the “micro-celebrity” techniques they use for achieving attention (Instagram celebrity, pseudo-celebrity, or luxury enthusiast), and Gross and Wangenheim (2018) classify them by attributing the roles of snooper, informer, entertainer, or infotainer.

Another new approach defines SMI roles in relation to the advertised brand (Rundin & Colliander, 2021). Depending on the advertising format, SMIs can embody different roles and thus perform different functions. Rundin and Colliander (2021) identify three main roles (with corresponding sub-roles):

- spokesperson (billboard, stylist, and ambassador),
- co-creator (consultant and co-designer), and
- co-owner (sole proprietor, facilitator, and partner).

As virtual salespeople, SMIs can assist consumers at specific points in the purchasing process and, as brand ambassadors, strengthen the brand in the digital environment.

In connection with fashion hauls, the role of the spokesperson is particularly relevant—above all, the role of the stylist. As the spokesperson, the SMI is responsible for presenting the product and sharing his or her experiences with the product. With the sub-role of stylist, SMIs also have the freedom to design the content and thus the staging of the product themselves. With regard to fashion, this means that SMIs can put together individual outfits and thus give the product presentation its own aesthetic touch.

The Perceived Role of SMIs in Fashion Hauls

In fashion hauls, SMIs sometimes perform functions that would otherwise be performed by salespeople. In stationary retail, salespeople are employed to actively influence consumers; foster the establishment, development, maintenance, and strengthening of customer relationships; represent the brand including the brand values; and ensure customer satisfaction. An additional function is to inform customers about the product features and the brand (information function). Salespeople are also responsible for providing holistic support to customers, from the pre-sales phase through to the usage phase. As brand representatives, salespeople influence the attitude and image formation of consumers (Weitz & Bradford, 1999). All of these efforts ultimately serve to generate sales.



Source: © Adobe Stock.

During fashion hauls, SMIs should also actively influence their followers; establish, develop, and maintain a relationship with them; inform them about the products, sizes, fit, and the ordering process; represent the brand; and ultimately generate sales. From a theoretical perspective, SMIs are functionally comparable to traditional salespeople and can therefore be classified as virtual salespeople. So far, however, no research has examined whether consumers also perceive the role of influencers in fashion hauls in this way.

Therefore, conceptual considerations are relevant to address the first research question of the study. Questions about the roles of traditional and virtual salespeople are raised to determine their comparability in fashion hauls from a consumer perspective.

Success Factors in Influencer Marketing

There is a well-established research stream that focuses on the success drivers of traditional salespeople (Stros et al., 2019; Verbeck, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2011). By contrast, no comparable research exists to date in the influencer context. Research on the success drivers of traditional salespeople can be transferred to SMIs to a limited extent only because of the fundamental differences between traditional and virtual salespeople in terms of the contact point, the contact intensity, the interaction frequency and the relationship level.

The frequent contact between followers and SMIs can lead to the development of emotional closeness, such that SMIs can become parasocial friends (Bond, 2016). Therefore, it is possible that consumers perceive SMIs in fashion hauls not as virtual salespeople but as parasocial friends. The corresponding literature is based on Horton and Wohl's (1956) PSR theory, which suggests that followers can form a one-way emotional relationship a parasocial relationship (PSR) – with SMIs that resembles a friendship.

Previous research has shown that followers trust SMIs with whom they have a PSR. Trust is therefore a downstream component of a PSR and can have a positive influence on purchase intention (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). The psychological principle of liking according to Cialdini (2006) would also suggest that consumers are more likely to be influenced and persuaded to buy something by SMIs they like. By contrast, the relationship with traditional salespeople tends

to be more distanced and professionally oriented. In the present study, the relationship of consumers with advertising SMIs is examined to investigate the influence of a PSR with the SMI on the perception and effect of fashion hauls and on purchase intention.

The Role of SMIs as Stylists in Fashion Hauls

One of the biggest differences between traditional and virtual sellers is product presentation. When presenting products, traditional salespeople cater to customers' tastes and use their entire assortment to do so (Stros et al., 2019). In contrast, in fashion hauls SMIs act not only as salespeople but also as models and fashion stylists (Rundin & Colliander, 2021). They present the products as worn, usually as an entire outfit (which provides added value: inspiration on how to combine the products). When influencers present the products while wearing them, consumers are likely to have a better idea of how the products would look on them, which can increase the persuasiveness of the product recommendation.

This assumption can be explained by fluency theory. Processing fluency is defined as the ease with which information can be processed (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). Graf, Mayer, and Landwehr (2017, p. 394) define processing fluency as "a subjective feeling of ease or difficulty associated with any type of mental processing". Processing fluency influences consumers' judgment (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Graf, Mayer, & Landwehr, 2017; Winkielman et al., 2003). For example, the same stimulus is rated more positively when it can be processed with high rather than low fluency (Winkielman et al., 2003). Applied to fashion hauls, consumers can process product advertising more easily if the SMIs put on the clothes and present them in fully styled outfits. This higher processing fluency might make it possible for consumers to like and potentially buy

Management Summary

This study examines the perceived role of SMIs in the virtual sales tool of fashion hauls from a consumer perspective and its influence on purchase intention. The results show that the role of SMIs is partly comparable to that of traditional salespeople. The behavioral impact depends on how consumers perceive the SMI's role.

products that SMIs are wearing in fashion hauls that they would never consider in a store. If this hypothesis is confirmed, brands may be able to achieve higher sales through fashion hauls.

Method of Research

This study uses qualitative research to reach inductive conclusions based on the assumptions guiding this research (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative research is the method of choice when analyzing mechanisms and modes of action that cannot be derived from existing theory. It is suitable in this context since no studies have investigated fashion hauls on Instagram to date. The aim of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of consumers' perceptions of fashion hauls. Qualitative, semi-structured guided interviews were used for this purpose.

Following Robinson (2013), suitable participants were selected according to defined criteria, identified as gender, age, fashion affinity, knowledge of the stimulus, and regular contact with the stimulus.

In line with the definition, female participants aged 14 to 34 years were recruited, because this is the age group most likely to use social media platforms (Statista, 2022) and the majority of fashion hauls

on Instagram are aimed at female consumers. The mean age was 25.3 years, and participants had to follow at least one influencer on Instagram, have a medium to high affinity for fashion, be aware of fashion hauls, and follow them regularly. 31 interviews were conducted in person, via video call or by phone, from November 12, 2021 to January 14, 2022, and lasted between 15 and 60 minutes. For further details see the online Appendix.

All interviews were conducted by the author herself. The author took care to avoid influencing the participants by keeping the conversation neutral. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed into detailed reports with the verbatim statements of the participants. All interviews were conducted with German participants, and the responses were translated into English by two native speakers working independently of each other, with the two versions being superimposed to produce the final version. The interviews were then evaluated with qualitative content analysis using MAXQDA software, following Kuckartz (2019).

Findings

Perceived Role of SMIs in Fashion Hauls

In order to clarify the role consumers ascribe to SMIs in fashion hauls, participants were asked whether they compared SMIs in fashion hauls to traditional salespeople, and the interviews support this idea. SMIs seem to be able to give product-related advice, which is one of the functions of traditional salespeople.

Therefore, it can be concluded that SMIs provide their followers with information that can help them make a purchase decision, just like traditional salespeople. This observation confirms the hypothesis that the salesperson concept is transferred to SMIs as virtual salespeople in fashion hauls.

However, while SMIs do provide their followers with product-related information, they cannot give the personalized advice consumers may receive in retail outlets, which limits the comparability of traditional and virtual salespeople.

Influence of the Relationship Between SMIs and Consumers

The interviews showed that the participants primarily bought products advertised by SMIs with whom they have a PSR and/or with whom they identify. The participants stated that they compare their own body shape with that of the SMI in order to be able to draw conclusions about how the advertised garments would look and fit on them. Emotional closeness and identification with the SMI therefore seem to have a positive influence on purchase intention. These

findings are consistent with previous research (Piehler et al., 2021).

A new relevant finding of the present study is that SMIs are still perceived as parasocial friends even when they aggressively promote products, provided an emotional closeness exists. As long as there is a stable emotional relationship between the consumer and the SMI, this type of product advertising does not seem to damage the close PSR.

The Role of SMIs as Stylists in Fashion Hauls

Almost without exception, participants stated that they were inspired by SMIs in fashion hauls, both in terms of new products and new brands. Participants also reported that they do not specifically look for products in fashion hauls; rather, they are spontaneously inspired by the SMIs.

Therefore, the most important finding regarding inspiration is that consumers permit SMIs in fashion hauls to inspire them to buy new products even when they actually have no need for them.

One advantage of fashion hauls is that products are presented in fully styled outfits, with the SMI taking on the role of a stylist. As a result, fashion hauls inspire consumers not only in terms of an individual product but also in terms of the overall outfit, styling options, and accessories. According to the interview results, the advertising of clothing in fully styled outfits seems to have a relevant added value for the participants. The higher processing fluency resulting from this way of presentation may also lead to a more positive evaluation of the clothing advertised in the fashion haul and subsequently to a higher purchase intention. Possibly, part of the success of fashion hauls is based on this type of



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product presentation. It was also found that fashion hauls mostly take place in the SMIs' own living quarters (bedroom, living room, hallway, etc.). This embedding of the fashion hauls in the everyday life of the SMIs was felt by many participants to be particularly authentic.

Conclusion, Managerial Implications, and Limitations

This study examines the roles consumers ascribe to SMIs in virtual sales tools and how SMIs in different roles influence consumer behavior. So far, research has focused primarily on the conceptualization of different roles (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Gross & Wangenheim, 2018; Marwick, 2015; Rundin & Colliander, 2021) but not on empirical evidence for downstream behavioral effects of these roles.

Based on the findings, this study proves that fashion hauls are an effective sales and digital branding tool for (fashion) brands. From a functional point of view, it seems that SMIs in fashion hauls act like virtual salespeople for a brand, and to some extent, consumers perceive this role as such. As virtual salespeople, SMIs can assist consumers at specific points in the purchasing process (e.g., size advice, product advice, recommendation of current, fashionable garments) and, as brand ambassadors, strengthen the brand in the digital environment. Rundin and Colliander (2021) do not differentiate the role of the virtual salesperson, so the present study complements previous research. A relevant success factor identified in the interviews is SMIs' special product presentation in fashion hauls. Products are presented in a worn condition, which likely contributes to a higher processing fluency and makes it easier for consumers to imagine wearing the product themselves. The present findings provide initial evidence that this factor increases the persuasive power of the products, because

clothing can only fully unfold its effect when it is worn. One of the clearest findings is the inspirational function of SMIs in fashion hauls. If SMIs act as stylists, the inspirational function of SMIs is a relevant added value for consumers that can positively influence their purchase behavior.

Moreover, novel moderating factors in the role attribution from the consumer perspective are identified. The novel contribution is that consumers perceive SMIs as parasocial friends even in aggressively "salesy" fashion hauls. From this, the author infers that these relationships are solid and stable and persist in different situations. The data show that the greater the emotional closeness between the consumer and the SMI, the higher the probability that the advertised products will be bought. Consumers perceive fashion hauls as a recommendation from a friend and trust them more than, for example, a recommendation from a traditional

salesperson or "pure advertising." In addition, SMIs are constantly evaluated by other users and thus build up a certain reputation. If an SMI has a generally good reputation (positive comments, many likes, many followers), this can also lead to an increase in trustworthiness.

From a brand perspective, these insights are particularly relevant, as they can help marketers use fashion hauls in a more targeted manner in their digital branding strategy. Great potential was identified for brands to generate additional sales even in otherwise saturated markets. First, considering that the participants frequently mentioned the importance of SMIs communicating product-related information in fashion hauls, marketers should brief SMIs on this topic. As a result, in the virtual sales tool of fashion hauls, consumers could also receive advice from SMIs as virtual sales assistants, similar to that provided by traditional sa-

Main Propositions

- 1 Fashion hauls are an effective sales and digital branding tool for (fashion) brands.
- 2 From a theoretical perspective, SMIs are functionally comparable to traditional salespeople and therefore can be classified as virtual salespeople.
- 3 The closeness of consumers' parasocial relationship to advertising SMIs influences the perception of SMIs in fashion hauls and their impact on purchase intention.
- 4 Consumers can process product advertising more easily if the SMIs put on the clothes and present them in fully styled outfits.

Lessons Learned

- 1 Since the participants emphasized the importance of product-related information in fashion hauls, marketers should brief SMIs accordingly.
- 2 Brands should recognize SMIs as virtual salespeople who address consumers on a more personal level than traditional salespeople in retail outlets.
- 3 Consumers trust the product recommendations of SMIs to a much greater extent than those of traditional salespeople, provided they have a (close) PSR with the SMI.
- 4 For consumer inspiration, brands should ensure that SMIs present their products in fully styled outfits.

lespeople in a retail store. Second, brands should ensure that SMIs present their products in fully styled outfits. Consumers attach great importance to seeing how the products look on the body and in complete outfits, and this can increase the likelihood that consumers buy the advertised products.

In the future, brands should recognize SMIs as virtual social media salespeople who engage with consumers on a more personal level than traditional in-store salespeople. In this role, SMIs can make a significant contribution to positioning and strengthening brands in the digital environment. In fashion hauls, SMIs appear trustworthy because they

share their personal experiences with the products. In addition, consumers trust their product recommendations to a much greater extent than those of traditional salespeople, provided they have a (close) PSR with the SMI. As fashion hauls are designed to encourage consumers to make purchases, they can lead to overconsumption of inferior products. To counteract this, SMIs should consider the brands they cooperate with and choose those that take sustainability aspects into account.

Finally, the limitations of this study should be mentioned. One limitation of the study is the sample: only German women were interviewed. Furthermore,

the study is industry-specific and limited to fashion brands. Future research could address these issues.

When brands cooperate with SMIs, they always give up some control. Brands should therefore check beforehand whether the SMIs fit their brand and their values. With regard to fashion hauls, brands should also check whether the SMIs are in line with the fashion style, as otherwise there may be a negative impact on the image.



For a further supplementary table to the article, visit: unisg.link.MRSG-Mahn

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