Reproducing the fashion system:

the myth of the influencer

Previous work in marketing has shown that the social media influencer plays an important role in attracting consumers to brands (Kapitan and Silvera 2016). The fashion ‘influencer’ appears in a number of consumer research studies that seek to understand how individuals shape and negotiate market dynamics (Dolbec and Fischer 2015) whether that be in terms of emerging within the established fashion field through amassing audience reach (McQuarrie et al 2013), establishing relatable person-branding (Delisle and Parmentier 2016; Khamis et al 2016), creating a counter space within the market to incorporate an un-catered for consumer group (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), bringing attention to the brand by acting as ‘microcelebrities’ (Luvaas 2017; Marwick 2013; Senft 2013), or by forming careers and becoming central actors in the fashion system (Abidin 2016; Duffy 2015).

While these processes highlight and work to legitimize the brand and actors themselves within the fashion system, they often do not directly acknowledge the role played by the fashion system itself in sustaining the idea and logic of the fashion ‘influencer’. In this project, we will seek to understand and unpack what we perceive to be the ‘myth of the influencer’. To do so, we turn to the literature on myths and marketplace myth-making within consumer research. Myths are a powerful construct for exploring and unpacking cultural approaches to branding (Holt 2002; 2006) and for understanding how well-known societal memories can be transformed into culturally rich marketplace myths in the interests of generating profit (Thompson and Tian 2008; **Tillotson and Martin 2015**). In this way, when ’emptied of reality’, myth can be used to gloss over countermemories that would otherwise continue historical reminders of cultural division and societal conflict (ibid.). This is apt for our fashion system context wherein social class differences have historically been a central ingredient for innovation, renewal and sustenance (Barnard, 2002).

This paper takes an institutional approach (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013) to explore the influencer phenomenon and approaches fashion not as a material item, but as an idea (sustained by the continuous construction of ‘fashion’ in an institutionalised system) (Kawamura 2004). This gives us the opportunity to explore the question: how does the fashion system reproduce itself and produce/construct actors to legitimate itself by inventing and creating the influencer as an actor to uphold and sustain the logic of the fashion market. We do this by utilizing the example of the fast fashion market. The logic of the fast fashion market hinges on newness, high volatility and low predictability, instant gratification and chasing the market i.e. the ‘buy now’ trend (Samsioe 2017). Questions we are raising in this project are: what institutional role does the influencer play in this fashion system? Is the influencer a symbol of the system? A myth? How are influencers utilized in the fast fashion system to communicate to the consumer what is a legitimate way to understand fashion, to approach fashion, to consume fashion? How does the fashion system direct and master the formation of the influencer to legitimize a certain way of acting as consumers? What kind of fashion is in demand (i.e. the fast fashion way, which in turn can be problematic as it sustains an unsustainable way of fashion production and consumption)?

Such an approach merits throughout ethnographic immersion in the fast fashion context. Consistent with previous consumer research adopting an institutional lens, this will involve the collection of archival, netnographic and in-depth interview material (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Dolbec and Fischer 2015). An initial search will identify all mentions of ‘influencer’ and more specifically ‘fashion influencer’ across popular mainstream news outlets including the New York Times, Business of Fashion and Financial Times. Specifically, we are interested in the ways in which the influencer is created but also, how the concept emerges in different types of ‘material’ expressions such as the design of fast fashion items. Industry professionals (such as E-Com & Digital Marketing Manager, Design Coordinator, and Assistant Buyers) will be consulted for interviews which explore their position (Tuncay-Zayer and Coleman 2015) in terms of how they understand the role of the influencer and their perceived degree of agency over the concepts evolution in the mass media and the fast fashion blogosphere. Next, following Kozinets (2009; 2015) netnographic principles, 14 leading blogs with an active following of more than 10, 000+ within the fast fashion movement will be selected and subsequently interpreted. Lastly, subscription to leading YouTuber channels and the selection of high impact viral videos within the fast fashion movement will help identify and decode the consumer ideas and myths surrounding the fashion ‘influencer’.

This project is of significance because it seeks to uncover how the fashion system uses what we will theorise as the ‘myth of the influencer’ to create what is a legitimate way to understand, approach and consume fashion. We will go beyond understanding the influencers agency in shaping fashion systems to explore the overall institutional dynamics at play in the development and evolution of a commercial, contemporary, powerful marketplace myth.

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