

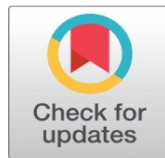
IMPACT OF FASHION INFLUENCER DETERMINANTS ON BUILDING FUNCTIONAL AND SYMBOLIC IMAGE OF BRAND

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ABSTRACT

This study article specifically aims to look at how fashionistas affect the symbolic and functional brand image. This work approaches the quantitative analysis of the data acquired via surveys. The primary focus of the study is on consumer perceptions of companies relying on interactive social media components and the trustworthiness of fashion influencers. While visual appeal and engagement-driven material help to enhance brand image, fashion influencer credibility and social media following significantly influence customer view of a company's fashion-ability. This paper increases knowledge of fashion industry digital marketing dynamics and emphasizes the part influencers play in building brand image in the digital environment.

Keywords: Fashion Influencers, Brand Image, Social Media Marketing, Influencer Marketing, Consumer Perception, Digital Branding, Engagement-Driven Content, Visual Aesthetics, Fashion-ability, Digital Era

1. INTRODUCTION

Fashion influencers' roles have also evolved drastically as the internet sphere evolves constantly. These days, fashion companies' branding and marketing plans revolve heavily on them. Since the advent of social media, fashionistas have grown rather powerful and significantly affect consumer preferences as well as market movement (Bilgihan, 2016). By effectively connecting with a large consumer base on popular social media sites like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, they have fundamentally transformed the traditional perception of fashion marketing and branding. Therefore, they play a vital role in modern fashion marketing strategies.

The emergence of digital technology has transformed the customer journey from a straightforward path to an intricate web of points of contact that include interactions before and after a purchase, which are essential for cultivating brand loyalty, as well as the actual act of completing a purchase (Verhoef, 2016).

Particularly social media sites have become digital megacities, alive with activity and full with chances for firms to interact with consumers (Claro et al., 2020). Regarding the fashion industry, it is impossible to exaggerate the significance of having a brand image that is both functional and symbolic. The set of useful and practical characteristics of a brand including quality, durability, and usability is its functional brand image. These qualities are absolutely essential to ensure consumer loyalty to a brand and satisfaction (Chen et al., 2013). Conversely, the symbolic brand image transcends the obvious characteristics of the brand. It covers the brand's supposed position, identity, and emotional worth that connects with the consumers' self-concept and lifestyle goals (Cheng et al., 2020). This content isn't just a one-way message; it's a place to start a conversation that builds a community around the business and lets you connect with your audience more deeply (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). In the fashion industry, which is very competitive, people often choose brands based on the symbolic values they represent. For this reason, making a strong symbolic image is just as important as making sure the products work well. Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and Search Engine Marketing (SEM) are like the roads of digital marketing. They direct traffic and make sure that your business stands out in a crowded market (Ryan & Jones, 2009). Furthermore, serving as the city's sensors and monitoring systems, analytics and big data offer real-time analysis of customer behaviour and campaign performance (Kannan, 2016). Instead of depending just on reach to generate significant advertising impact, marketing communication should be appealing and engaging enough to persuade consumers to interact voluntarily (Hanna et al., 2011).

Fashion influencers are very important for creating both of these parts of a brand's image. They facilitate brands in demonstrating the practical and symbolic worth of their products by showcasing them in real-life scenarios, sharing personal anecdotes, and creating compelling content that stimulates consumer interest in the items. The credibility, knowledge, and relevance of influencers enable them to significantly shape public perception of a product or service. This makes their suggestions a great approach to raise the image of a brand (Bruhn et al., 2014; Alves et al., 2016). Furthermore, their influence on how people view brands is much stronger since they may interact with followers on social networking sites by surveys, contests, and direct messages (Coelho et al., 2019; Confos & Davis, 2016). As fashion influencers take front stage in branding strategies, fashion companies are changing their sales and customer interaction. Rising understanding of this trend clearly shows that influencers are more than just marketing tools. Their thoughts on and contacts with online fashion companies greatly affect others. This paper aims to research and assess the different ways in which fashion influencers define the image and goal of fashion firms, thereby highlighting how their relevance is changing in the digital fashion industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the fashion industry, the concept of brand image is particularly critical in influencing the way consumers perceive and engage with companies. This concept is meticulously deconstructed into two fundamental dimensions: symbolic and functional brand images. Each dimension makes a unique contribution, but they work together to establish the overall brand image. The functional brand image of a

business is determined by the actual, practical qualities of its products. This dimension includes things like reliability, quality, and ease of use. In fashion, it could mean how comfortable the clothes are, how long the materials last, or how well the accessories and gadgets work.

Chen et al. (2013) suggests that the functional image directly reflects the expected tangible advantages for a customer from a product. The basis for objective product evaluations and the first building of consumer trust depends on this part of brand image. Therefore, especially in situations where product uniqueness is strong, the functional brand image forms the basis of brand credibility and can significantly influence customer purchasing choices. Conversely, the symbolic brand image looks at more abstract, emotional aspects related with a brand. This picture links the psychological, social, and emotional spheres of consumer experience to go beyond the obvious physical traits of products. As Cheng et al. (2018) reveals that the brand can satisfy more fundamental psychological needs including group membership, identity, and prestige. The symbolic image is much influenced by marketing tales, celebrity support, and social media activity as well as by personal experience. The brand appeals to people's hopes, lifestyles, and ideas about who they are, so they develop emotional connection to it. In terms of business image, the symbolic and pragmatic elements interact in many various ways. Because of this, fashion bloggers' impact becomes even more significant in this context, since their sponsorships and content serve to highlight a brand's practical and symbolic aspects (Chen et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2018). Because of the carefully chosen lives they live and the fashion tips they give, fashion influencers have a big effect on how people act. Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) look into how the personal brands of influencers, which are made up of the things they do on social media, might change how people feel about themselves and what they buy. People who read these writers' posts often trust them as sources of information because they have experience, a style that works for them, or traits that people want to have. Coelho et al. (2019) examine the ways in which brand communities facilitate the establishment of customer connections and emphasise the significance of influencers in fostering brand loyalty and community integration among followers. Influencers act as intermediaries between businesses and consumers by not only promoting products but also incorporating them into idealised lives and storylines. There is a complex and dynamic relationship between fashionistas and brand impression. Bilgihan (2016) shows how adding influencers into brand strategy could raise the company's perceived worth, especially for consumers who are technologically advanced. The endorsement of influencers can provide a brand a more real and sympathetic impression, therefore boosting its appeal. Bruhn et al. (2014) shows how adding influencers into brand strategy could raise the company's perceived worth, especially for consumers who are technologically advanced. The endorsement of influencers can provide a brand a more real and sympathetic impression, therefore boosting its appeal. Cheung et al. (2019) see how social media platforms give companies interesting venues to communicate with consumers, therefore presenting a more friendly and approachable image. It underlines how digital channels enable personalised marketing, help to gather consumer data, and provide a stage for consumer advocacy and co-creation of brand stories (Chandra et al., 2022). These websites provide companies opportunities to showcase their uniqueness, values, and culture, therefore enhancing brand identification and differentiation. Laroche et al. (2012) stress the significance of social media community building for companies to produce committed and involved customer bases. The interactions between a brand and its followers on social media channels

greatly influences brand image; active engagement usually yields higher brand loyalty and advocacy.

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To study the impact of determinants of fashion influencer on building functional and symbolic image of brand

- **H0a:** There is no significant impact of fashion influencer on functional brand image.
- **H0b:** There is no significant impact of fashion influencer on symbolic brand image.

4. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The section on the methodology of this research paper explains the methodical approach applied to investigate how fashion influencers influence the practical and symbolic character of a company. The paper describes the statistical analysis techniques, data collecting methods, and study research plan applied in the project.

- **Research Design:** The study adopts a quantitative research design, an approach suitable for testing specific hypotheses and quantifying variables. This method allows for the collection of numerical data that can be statistically analyzed to infer patterns and relationships (Coffey et al., 1996). The quantitative design enables the examination of the relationship between the influence of fashion influencers and brand image perceptions, providing empirical evidence to support or refute the proposed hypotheses.
- **Data Collection:** Data for this research was collected through a structured survey administered to a targeted sample population. The survey comprised questions designed to assess respondents' perceptions of fashion influencers and their impact on both functional and symbolic aspects of brand image. The sample population was selected to include individuals who are active on social media platforms and are likely to be exposed to fashion influencer content. This demographic was chosen as they represent a relevant audience for understanding the influence of fashion marketing in the digital age.
- **Statistical Analysis:** The data collected from the surveys were subjected to rigorous statistical analysis, primarily using Chi-Square tests and cross-tabulation methods. The Chi-Square test is a statistical tool used to analyze the significance of the relationship between categorical variables (Coffey et al., 1996).

It is particularly useful in determining whether the observed associations in the data occur by chance or reflect actual trends. Cross-tabulation, on the other hand, helps in exploring the relationship between two or more categorical variables by displaying the frequency distribution of variables in a tabular form. This method aids in understanding the interaction effects and the relative impact of different variables on brand image. Together, these statistical techniques provide a comprehensive understanding of the data, allowing for a robust analysis of the influence of fashion influencers on brand image.

5. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

- **H0a:** There is no significant impact of fashion influencer on functional brand image

Table 1

Table 1 Impact of Interactive Elements on Social Media on Brand Image				
Crosstab				
Count				
		Interactive elements like polls or contests in a brand's social media content increase brand image		
		STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL
Social media marketing helps in building a positive brand image	STRONGLY DISAGREE	1	6	4
	DISAGREE	4	108	40
	NEUTRAL	5	39	39
	STRONGLY AGREE	6	29	15
Total		16	182	98

Table investigates the assertion that interactive elements like polls or contests in a brand's social media content can elevate the brand image. The table presents a breakdown of responses ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement, categorizing participants' opinions on whether these interactive strategies effectively enhance the brand image. It demonstrates a diverse range of consumer attitudes toward the effectiveness of interactive content in social media marketing efforts.

Table 2

Table 2 Detailed Cross-tabulation with Strong Agreement on the Impact of Interactive Content			
Crosstab			
Count			
		Interactive elements like polls or contests in a brand's social media content increase brand image	Total
		STRONGLY AGREE	
Social media marketing helps in building a positive brand image	STRONGLY DISAGREE	6	17
	DISAGREE	49	201
	NEUTRAL	19	102
	STRONGLY AGREE	30	80
Total		104	400

In above Table, the focus is narrowed down to those respondents who 'Strongly Agree' that interactive elements such as polls or contests amplify a brand's image. This subset of data provides an in-depth look at how many participants are staunch advocates of interactive social media content as a tool for brand image

enhancement, thus underscoring the perceived value of engagement-focused marketing strategies.

Table 3

Table 3 Chi-Square Tests for the Effectiveness of Interactive Social Media Content			
Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	28.554 ^a	9	0.001
Likelihood Ratio	27.275	9	0.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.304	1	0.129
N of Valid Cases	400		

Table outlines the results of the Chi-Square tests, which are used to measure the statistical significance of the relationship between social media marketing and the increase in brand image due to interactive elements. The Pearson Chi-Square value indicated here, with an asymptotic significance of .001, is well below the .05 threshold for statistical significance, suggesting a strong association between the use of interactive elements in social media and the enhancement of brand image.

Inference: The inference from the analysis in above Tables is that the null hypothesis, which posited no significant impact of interactive elements on brand image, is rejected due to the p-value of .001. This result indicates a statistically significant impact, accepting the alternative hypothesis that interactive elements like polls or contests on a brand's social media content do indeed have a significant effect on enhancing brand image. The low p-value signals that the likelihood of this result occurring by chance is minimal, and interactive content can be considered an effective tool for improving brand perception among social media users.

- **H0b:** There is no significant impact of fashion Influencer on symbolic brand image

Table 4

Table 4 Assessing the Impact of Fashion Influencer Credibility on Brand Perception				
Crosstab				
Count				
		I am unlikely to perceive a brand as fashionable if it is associated with popular fashion influencers		
		STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL
The expertise and credibility of a fashion influencer have a minimal impact on my perception of a brand	STRONGLY DISAGREE	4	6	0
	DISAGREE	6	138	18
	NEUTRAL	4	24	52
	STRONGLY AGREE	0	26	6
Total		14	194	76

Table examines the relationship between the perceived expertise and credibility of a fashion influencer and the resulting perception of a brand's fashion-

ability. It quantifies the responses of individuals who agree or disagree with the statement that a fashion influencer's credibility has a minimal impact on their perception of a brand. The distribution of responses from strong disagreement to strong agreement provides insight into the weight that consumers place on the endorsements of fashion influencers when forming their perceptions of a brand's style and trendiness.

Table 5

Table 5 Strong Agreement on the Influence of Fashion Influencer Credibility			
Crosstab			
Count		I am unlikely to perceive a brand as fashionable if it is associated with popular fashion influencers	Total
		STRONGLY AGREE	
The expertise and credibility of a fashion influencer have a minimal impact on my perception of a brand	STRONGLY DISAGREE	4	14
	DISAGREE	30	192
	NEUTRAL	8	88
	STRONGLY AGREE	74	106
Total		116	400

In above Table, the data is concentrated on those who 'Strongly Agree' that a brand's association with popular fashion influencers is unlikely to make them perceive the brand as fashionable. This subgroup reflects a significant portion of the sample population that is resistant to the influencer marketing efforts, indicating that there are consumers who are not influenced by influencer endorsements in the way brands might hope.

Table 6

Table 6 Chi-Square Test for Fashion Influencer Impact on Symbolic Brand Image			
Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	252.806 ^a	9	0
Likelihood Ratio	213.804	9	0
Linear-by-Linear Association	99.728	1	0
N of Valid Cases	400		

The Chi-Square test results presented in above Table statistically evaluate the impact of a fashion influencer's expertise and credibility on the symbolic brand image. With a Pearson Chi-Square value of 252.806 and a p-value of .000, the test shows an extremely significant relationship, strongly suggesting that the involvement of credible fashion influencers is a powerful factor in shaping consumers' perceptions of a brand's fashion-ability.

Inference: The statistical analysis leads to a clear rejection of the null hypothesis, which suggested there would be no significant impact of fashion influencers on the symbolic brand image. The p-value is .000, indicating that the impact is not only significant but also possibly quite substantial. Consequently, the alternative hypothesis is accepted, confirming that the expertise and credibility of

fashion influencers have a significant effect on how consumers perceive a brand's fashion image. The implication for marketers is clear: engaging with reputable fashion influencers can be an effective strategy for enhancing a brand's symbolic image and, by extension, its appeal to fashion-conscious consumers.

6. FINDINGS

- **H0a:** There is a significant impact of fashion Influencer on functional brand image

Table 7

<u>Test Area</u>	<u>Variable considered</u>	<u>P value</u>	<u>Inference</u>
Impact of Interactive Elements on Social Media on Brand Image	Variables taken: Social media marketing helps in building a positive brand image * Interactive elements like polls or contests in a brand's social media content increase brand image	0.001	Interactive elements on social media significantly enhance a brand's image, suggesting the effectiveness of engagement-driven content.
The Role of Visual Elements in Social Media Marketing on Brand Perception	Variables taken: Social media marketing helps in building a positive brand image * Visual elements (images, videos) in social media marketing attract attention and enhance brand perception	0.047	Visual content in social media marketing has a significant positive effect on brand perception, emphasizing the importance of aesthetics in digital branding.
The Influence of Social Media Following on Perceptions of Industry Leadership	Variables taken: Social media marketing helps in building a positive brand image * Brands with a large following on social media are more likely to be considered as industry leaders	0	A substantial social media following strongly correlates with perceptions of a brand being an industry leader, highlighting the impact of social media popularity.

- **H0b:** There is a significant impact of fashion Influencer on symbolic brand image

Assessing the Impact of Fashion Influencer Credibility on Brand Perception	Variables taken: The expertise and credibility of a fashion influencer have a minimal impact on my perception of a brand * I am unlikely to perceive a brand as fashionable if it is associated with popular fashion influencers	0	The credibility and expertise of fashion influencers significantly influence brand perception, particularly in terms of fashion-ability.
Analyzing the Influence of a Fashion Influencer's Social Media Following on Brand Perception	Variables taken: The expertise and credibility of a fashion influencer have a minimal impact on my perception of a brand * The size of a fashion influencer's following on social media has minimal impact on my perception of a brand	0	The size of a fashion influencer's social media following has a notable impact on brand perception, indicating the value of influencer popularity in branding.
Assessing Fashion Influencer Endorsement versus Negative Brand Feedback	Variables taken: The expertise and credibility of a fashion influencer have a minimal impact on my perception of a brand * I am unlikely to defend or support a brand if it receives negative feedback but is endorsed by a fashion influencer I admire	0	Endorsements by fashion influencers can significantly counterbalance negative feedback about a brand, underscoring their influence in crisis management.

7. CONCLUSION

The comprehensive analysis presented in this research paper elucidates the significant impact of fashion influencers on the tangible and symbolic company image. The results indicate that the inclusion of interactive elements in social media marketing, such as contests and polls, greatly enhances the reputation of a company, therefore validating the effectiveness of content strategies focused on fostering interaction. Moreover, emphasising the significance of aesthetics in digital branding, the incorporation of visual elements in social media marketing has been demonstrated to significantly enhance brand perception. Fashion brands seeking to create their online presence rely unequivocally on these findings. Moreover, the study underscores the extent to which fashionistas influence brand perception. Particularly with regard to a company's fashion-ability, the reputation and expertise of these influencers significantly impact consumer perceptions. This analysis highlights the increasing significance of influencer marketing in the fashion industry. The study also demonstrates that the perception of a brand is greatly impacted by the social media following of a fashion influencer, so suggesting that the popularity of an influencer confers a substantial benefit for branding. Moreover, the endorsements of fashionistas highlight their vital role in managing brand crises and effectively counteracting unfavourable remarks targeting a company. Finally, this study highlights the evolving landscape of digital age fashion marketing, where influencers play a crucial role. It provides valuable insights for fashion brands looking to leverage influencer marketing for enhancing both functional and symbolic brand images. The study's findings are instrumental for marketers and brand managers in strategizing their digital marketing campaigns, particularly in the highly competitive and dynamic fashion industry.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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