



Original Article

Influencer Marketing driving Conspicuous Consumption among Social Media Users

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The way people interact with companies, goods, and consumption habits has been profoundly changed by the digital transformation of consumer culture. The rise of influencer marketing has become a major force in modern advertising, paralleling the changing trends of conspicuous consumption in digital arenas. This study looks at the theoretical underpinnings, empirical data, and new research directions that provide light on the connection between conspicuous consumption and influencer marketing. This review provides a thorough knowledge of how influencer marketing techniques generate status-oriented purchasing habits by synthesizing existing work from a variety of disciplines, including marketing, consumer psychology, sociology, and digital media studies. This study identifies important research gaps and lays the theoretical groundwork for comprehending this intricate interaction in the digital age by examining theoretical frameworks, empirical data, and methodological approaches.

Keywords:

Influencer Marketing, Conspicuous Consumption, social media, Digital Consumer Culture, Parasocial Relationships, Social Comparison, Luxury Consumption, Experiential Consumption, Instagram ability, Consumer Psychology, Materialism

Introduction

Veblen's (1899) groundbreaking work, "The Theory of the Leisure Class," which developed the idea of conspicuous consumption, serves as the theoretical starting point for comprehending status-driven consumption. According to Veblen, this phenomenon includes the buying and showing of pricey items, mostly to show off one's money and social standing rather than for practical purposes. Through the adaptation of Thorstein Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption to contemporary online situations, recent research has successfully bridged the gap between classical economic theory and the digital age. Social media platforms are essentially new and potent platforms for status display, as scholars such as Chaudhuri and colleagues (2011) have shown. This effectively creates digital arenas where people perform and communicate their social capital. This expands on Belk's (2013) groundbreaking study on the "extended self," which posits that material belongings are no longer the only things in a digital age. Rather, digital assets—from carefully chosen photo galleries and trip logs to follower numbers and viral posts—become essential elements in the development of identity and self-concept. When taken as a whole, these theoretical modifications offer an essential starting point for comprehending how conventional status-signaling behaviors are not just repeated but also magnified and changed in influencer-mediated online spaces.



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As important designers of these digital environments, influencers skilfully combine experiential and material consumption, making their lifestyles the ultimate Veblen commodities for a generation that is connected. This theoretical synthesis enables us to examine influencer marketing as the natural progression of status rivalry in a new, globally interconnected domain rather than as a new phenomenon.

1. Influencer Marketing

Different definitions of influencer marketing can be found in the academic literature, which reflects the field's interdisciplinary character and quick evolution. Influencer marketing, according to De Veirman et al. (2017), is "a form of marketing that identifies and targets individuals with influence over potential buyers." This broad term includes peer recommendations and celebrity endorsements, among other types of influence. Lou & Yuan (2019) provide a more specific definition focused on social media contexts: "influencer marketing on social media refers to the practice of marketing that focuses on specific individuals (influencers) rather than target markets as a whole." This definition emphasizes the personalized nature of influencer marketing relationships. Influencer marketing is a modern digital technique in which companies work with people who have built a loyal following and credibility on social media platforms, known as influencers, to market their goods, services, or ideals. Companies use influencers' personal connections and trust with their audience instead of advertising directly to consumers. As a potent kind of social proof, these influencers produce real content that speaks to their fans, including product evaluations, how-tos, or lifestyle integrations. Through reputable voices in particular sectors like fashion, gaming, wellness, or technology, this strategy bridges the gap between businesses and consumers by transforming traditional marketing into a more relatable and personalized recommendation.

1.1. Influencer Marketing Effects on Consumption

Since Thorstein Veblen first described the status-seeking behaviors, influencer marketing has emerged as a potent contemporary stimulant for conspicuous consumption, successfully digitizing and democratizing them. Today's influencers serve a similar purpose globally through carefully managed social media feeds, just as Veblen's 19th-century aristocracy demonstrated their wealth through material possessions and leisure in exclusive social circles. Their personal brands become living portfolios of an aspirational lifestyle as they display luxury purchases, far-flung trips, and unique experiences. Consumption is used as a tool for identity building and status display in the digital sphere as a result of these dynamics, which feed a cycle of desire and emulation. Followers are urged to buy items not just for their usefulness but also to indicate membership in a desired social group.

1.1.1. Direct Consumption Effects

Numerous empirical research shows a clear correlation between exposure to influencer marketing and consumer behavior. A thorough study that is a fundamental empirical investigation into the workings of influencer marketing was carried out by Lou & Yuan (2019). Titled "Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media," this study was significant because it provided quantitative proof of how influencer content influences customer behavior, going beyond theoretical presumptions. In order to map the psychological pathway from exposure to purchase, the researchers polled 293 social media users. Their main conclusion was that the two most important elements in gaining the trust of consumers were the influencer's trustworthiness and the perceived worth of their message. It has been demonstrated that, once built, this trust directly and significantly influences a follower's propensity to purchase a marketed product and, more importantly, their actual purchasing behavior.

1.1.2. Psychological Mechanisms

Influencer marketing stimulates consumption through important psychological processes, according to research. According to Chung & Cho (2017), parasocial relationships, the sense of a one-sided friendship with an influencer, make the marketing message seem more persuasive and personal, which increases the audience's receptivity to the promoted products and, by fostering trust, directly increases purchase intentions. Influencers' carefully chosen content causes upward social comparison, which makes followers want luxury products to close the gap between their own lives and the idealized lifestyles they observe (Jin et al., 2019). Furthermore, Schouten et al. (2020) showed that followers' parasocial link and purchase impulse are strengthened when they see an influencer as similar to themselves, which amplifies the impact of the marketing message.

1.1.3. Platform-Specific Effects

The efficacy of influencer marketing and consumption influence varies among social media platforms. Instagram's highly aesthetic and visual qualities make it the perfect platform for promoting fashion and lifestyle products, where image is crucial (Casaló et al., 2020). Reinikainen et al. (2020) discovered a trade-off between credibility, i.e., social media influencers on platforms like Instagram or TikTok achieve higher direct engagement because of the interactive and instantaneous nature of their posts, while blog-based influencers are frequently seen as more knowledgeable and reliable, probably because the platform can accommodate longer, more detailed content. Femenia-Serra et al. (2019) demonstrated that Instagram is especially effective for experience-based categories like travel, where aspirational images and personal stories directly influence destination choices and booking behaviors.



1.2. Conspicuous Consumption in Digital Contexts

The mechanics of status display in this digital age have expanded beyond the possession of luxury things to encompass performative experiences like attending exclusive events, traveling to exotic places, and dining at fine restaurants. The "Instagrammability" of an experience, its capacity to elicit social validation through likes and comments, has emerged as a critical determinant of purchase choices (Gretzel, 2017). Belk (2013) refers to this as an "extended self," where digital belongings, from carefully curated photo galleries to virtual commodities and even one's follower count, become essential elements of identity presentation, made possible by the digital environment.

1.2.1. Digital Transformation of Status Display

The digital revolution of conspicuous consumerism has been extensively documented by scholars who suggest that online platforms have become key arenas for identity performance and status display. According to Schau and Gilly (2003), who emphasized how identity building online is essentially dependent on consumption, this digital self-presentation is closely linked to consumption. Belk (2013) expanded on this by proposing the idea of the "extended self," contending that digital belongings, such as lists of "liked" companies and carefully managed photo galleries, have become essential parts of who we are. Social media does not just mirror traditional status-seeking, but actively amplifies it by providing a global, relentless, and visually-driven arena for the performance of identity through consumption, as evidenced by empirical research. Marwick (2015) noted that platforms such as Instagram foster a culture of "status anxiety," where users feel pressured to make significant consumption investments to maintain a competitive and appealing online persona. Djafarova and Bowes (2021) most recently provided direct evidence of this cycle, demonstrating a strong link between Instagram use and increased materialistic values and conspicuous consumption among young women.

1.2.2. Luxury Consumption and Social Media

Pentecost and Andrews (2010), for example, confirmed that the same underlying desires for social visibility and status signaling that traditionally fuel luxury purchases also predict how consumers engage with fashion content online, effectively bridging classic conspicuous consumption theory with digital behaviors. Scholarly research has consistently shown that social media platforms act as powerful accelerants for luxury consumption by directly engaging with the psychological drivers of conspicuous display. Hennigs et al. (2015) established a clear link between mere exposure to luxury content on social media and an increase in both consumer desire for luxury goods and subsequent purchasing activity, highlighting the platform's role in stimulating aspiration. The process of influence is most directly identified by recent empirical findings from Park and Cho (2020), which demonstrate that influencers in luxury fashion are powerful catalysts. Their study offers verifiable proof that viewing an influencer's well-chosen luxury content not only boosts followers' awareness but also motivates them to make actual purchases.

1.2.3. Experience-Based Conspicuous Consumption

Conspicuous spending in the modern era has changed dramatically, moving from the simple purchase of luxury things to the carefully staged presentation of unique experiences, especially in dining and travel. Although research by Gilovich et. al. (2015) reveals that experiential purchases naturally result in higher levels of personal happiness than material things, this trend is complex because these experiences have also developed into powerful new means of status signaling. As Gretzel (2017) noted, social media platforms are essential to this change, with a destination's "Instagrammability"—its capacity to elicit online jealousy and awe—now serving as a major consideration when choosing a destination. This leads to a cycle of conspicuous consumption based on experience, where decisions are made with their digital display in mind. This cycle is strongly fueled by influencer marketing.

1.3. Demographic and Individual Difference Factors

Research demonstrates that demographic characteristics significantly moderate consumer susceptibility to influencer marketing and conspicuous consumption. The different demographic factors that are observed to influence conspicuous consumption are as follows:

1.3.1. Age and Generation Effects

Age serves as a primary differentiator, with generational cohorts exhibiting distinct response patterns. Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) found that younger consumers, particularly Generations Z and Y (Millennials), demonstrate stronger affective and behavioral responses to influencer content compared to older, more skeptical demographics. Turner (2019) attributes Generation Z's heightened susceptibility to their status as "digital natives" for whom social media is a primary source of social norms and consumption cues. Meanwhile, Bolton et al. (2013) note that Millennials, while responsive, prioritize authentic peer recommendations, making them particularly receptive to micro-influencer strategies.

1.3.2. Gender Differences

Another important moderating variable that comes up is gender. Numerous research regularly show that female consumers respond more strongly to influencer marketing overall (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This effect is especially noticeable in contexts related to fashion and beauty, where Djafarova & Bowes (2021) found a clear link between materialistic consumption and young women's Instagram use. On the other hand, Boerman (2020) discovered that male consumers respond better to appeals focused on competence than on lifestyle or beauty.

1.3.3. Personality and Individual Differences

Individual psychological characteristics are strong determinants of influencer-driven consumption involvement, even more so than demographics. A well-known connection is materialism, which is the value ascribed to material belongings in order to accomplish life's objectives. Materialistic values are linked to a greater sensitivity to external social cues, which in turn translates to a higher reactivity to influencer marketing that promises status and identity through consumption, according to the seminal work of Kasser & Ryan (1996) and Richins (2004). On the other hand, a mitigating aspect is a person's demand for individuality. According to Tian et al. (2001), those who have a strong demand for individuality are naturally less receptive to social pressure, such as influencer endorsements, because they are driven to deviate from rather than follow popular trends. Additionally, self-concept-related factors are important. People with lower self-esteem are more susceptible to the status-oriented appeals found in influencer material, which use consumption as a means of identity validation, according to Jin et al. (2019). People who have a clearer self-concept are more resistant to this kind of societal pressure.

1.4. Negative Consequences and Ethical Concerns

Digital producers' enormous reach has serious ethical ramifications and a history of detrimental effects, especially for marginalized groups. Research indicates observable financial harms. According to Djafarova & Bowes (2021), excessive Instagram use is associated with greater levels of debt and financial stress from purchases of fashion and leisure items. Young adults are particularly vulnerable; Scott (2020) found a strong link between college students' use of social media, influencer following, and credit card debt accumulation. This trend is made worse by the rise of "buy now, pay later" services, which encourage impulsive purchases of products promoted by influencers (Prosperity Now, 2019). The psychological effects are just as worrisome. Numerous studies, such as Fardouly et al. (2015), link social media use that is appearance-focused to higher levels of body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms. These impacts are mostly caused by upward social comparison processes, in which users negatively compare their own lives to the carefully manicured perfection of influencers. Meier & Gray (2014) have linked this mechanism to an increase in depressed symptoms. Last but not least, influencer content exacerbates the phenomena of FOMO (fear of missing out), which has been evaluated by Przybylski et al. (2013). This anxiety leads to compulsive consumption in an effort to engage in a promoted lifestyle.

1.5. Conclusion

The existing research on the connection between influencer marketing and conspicuous consumption has been compiled in this review of the literature, exposing a complicated phenomenon that functions through a number of psychological, social, and technological factors. Strong empirical evidence is presented in the paper to support the idea that influencer marketing can affect consumption patterns, especially status-oriented purchases made by younger consumers. Across a variety of settings and approaches, empirical data consistently shows that influencer marketing raises both buy intentions and actual purchase behaviors. The review points up a number of significant research gaps, such as the requirement for methodological advancements, theoretical development tailored to digital consumption contexts, and longitudinal investigations. These gaps offer significant chances for further study to deepen our grasp of this quickly changing phenomenon. Knowing how influencer marketing and conspicuous spending are related has significant ramifications for marketing strategy, consumer welfare, and regulatory policy. It is crucial that scholars continue to examine how influencer marketing affects consumer behavior and well-being as it develops and grows.

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