

Fashion YouTube Influencers and Consumers' Buying Behavior: A Para-Social Interaction Approach

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Background. User-Generated Content (UGC) on the Internet has been exponentially increasing since the 2000s (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Yang et al., 2010). Millions of users create and share daily content that includes photos, audios, and videos with their opinions about companies and their products (Westenberg, 2016). Such content, known as UGC, often is more effective than professional advertisements from brands and retailers in informing consumers about new products and services (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Popular content creators, also known as influencers, are critical for brands to develop meaningful relationships and successfully engage with consumers. Many businesses leverage the status of social media content creators as brand ambassadors (Miranda et al., 2021).

In comparison with other social media, such as Twitter or Facebook, YouTube is ideal for UGC creators because it allows users to freely share and watch videos uploaded by others as well as engage by posting comments, voting, and subscribing to favorite channels (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2021). In the United States, YouTube has been a top social media platform for video-watching and sharing since the late 2000s (Andika et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2010). While YouTube covers a wide variety of contents, consumption-related posts are very common, especially in the area of beauty (Gannon & Prothero, 2018). Over 1.8 million videos uploaded by content creators have focused on or included fashion and beauty contents; these videos were viewed more than 45 billion times, illustrating the popularity of YouTube influencers (Thomson, 2017). Successful YouTube influencers enjoy a large number of followers subscribed to their channels, indicating potentially high impact on consumer product choices (Westenberg, 2016). Although the prevalence of YouTube influencers and their impact are undeniable, research on consumers' perception of fashion YouTube influencers (FYTI) as well as their effects on consumer behavior is lacking. Specifically, the emotional bonding between FYTI and viewers has not been examined. To address the gap, the **purpose of this study** was to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the bonding between FYTI and consumers as well as its potential impact on buying behavior.

Development of Conceptual Framework. An extended review of literature was conducted on influence of social media, celebrities, influencers on consumers. To develop a conceptual framework, two theories were selected: para-social interaction (PSI) theory and theory of reasoned action (TRA). PSI refers to "the relationship between a spectator and a performer with an illusion of intimacy as for the 'real' interpersonal relationships" (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p. 3). PSI occurs when audience interaction with media characters (i.e., FYTIs) takes place virtually via TV, social networking service (SNS), video, etc. (Park & Lennon, 2004), therefore, it can be employed to explain pseudo interpersonal relationships between FYTIs and content viewers. Per PSI theory, when viewers are exposed to a certain media character (i.e., FYTI) over time, they assign credibility and develop loyalty toward the character (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). This indicates viewers who repeatedly engage in watching FYTI's channels develop a positive attitude toward them and build an emotional connection with the content creators (Lee et al., 2011).

TRA explains an individual's intention to conduct a given behavior, and the intention is driven by attitude toward the behavior and subjective norm (Ajzen, 1985). The subjective norm is based on one's perceptions of important others' opinions on a given behavior (Xu et al., 2014). When one's friends or

family have an affinity with a FYTI, the person is likely to engage in watching the FYTI's channel and forming PSI.

TRA has been applied to explain not only attitude toward certain behaviors but also attitudes toward a media persona (c.f., Korotina & Jargalsaikhan, 2016). FYTI characteristics (i.e., authenticity, physical attractiveness, and informative content) may affect viewers' attitudes toward the FYTI (Ilicic & Webster, 2010; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). *Authenticity* of FYTI is important to maintain followers and to attract new viewers (Kulmala et al., 2013). For example, beauty-related videos (e.g., skincare routine or daily outfit styling) show FYTI's in their everyday life, making them look authentic (Hou, 2019). Indeed, being true to oneself is the essence of celebrity authenticity that positively influences consumers' attitudes toward the celebrity (Ilicic & Webster, 2010).

Physical attractiveness of FYTI has a great impact on consumers' attitude toward them, as attractive individuals are more effective in changing one's beliefs and perceptions (Broeder & Goorden, 2019). That is, physical attractiveness of FYTI may lead to favorable attitude toward FYTI among viewers. Lastly, the ability to deliver *informative content* is also critical for viewers when they evaluate FYTI (Kulmala et al., 2013). FYTI provide detailed information about products and companies as well as share personal tips and advice on how to use these products. Quality of content is a major requirement for FYTI success

(Kulmala et al., 2013). It has been shown that FYTI content has an influence on viewers' buying decisions (Westenberg, 2016).

Based on PSI and TRA theories, attitude toward FYTI and subjective norm contribute to consumer forming an intimate bond, or para-social interaction between FYTI and viewers, which then affects their buying intention of a product or service promoted by the FYTI. Further, authenticity and physical attractiveness of FYTI as well as informative content they produce have a positive influence on consumers' attitudes toward FYTI. The proposed conceptual framework illustrates the mechanics of and contributors to bonding between FYTI and viewers (Figure 1).

Discussion. This is the first study that combines two influential theories, PSI and TRA, to develop a conceptual framework that explains the bonding between FYTI and consumers as well as its potential impact on buying behavior. The central construct of the framework, para-social interaction between viewers and FYTI, connected attitude toward FYTI and subjective norm. Physical attractiveness and authenticity of FYTI as well as the quality of content they create are proposed as critical determinants of the attitude toward FYTI. The results of the study can be used to guide future empirical research and have practical implications for marketers to develop effective communication between FYTI and consumers. A further exploration of the role of PSI in consumer behavior is needed.

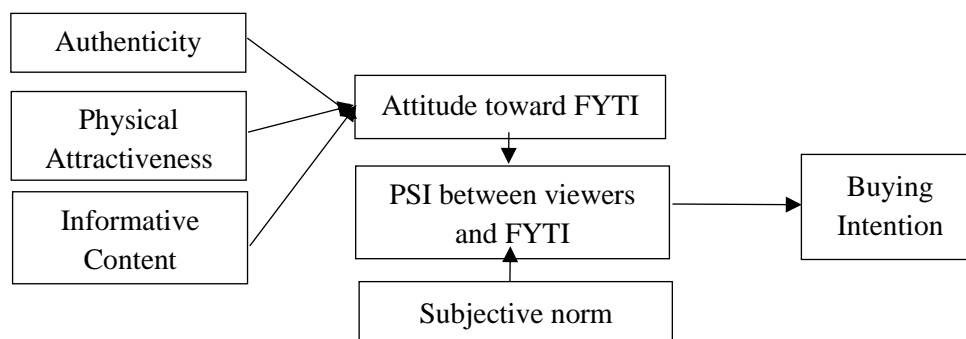


Figure 1. FYTI and viewers bonding framework

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