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FROM CULTURAL INTERMEDIARIES TO SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS: ALGORITHMS AND TASTE IN SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS.

Bachelor's Thesis
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Abstract

Social media and digital environments have shaped the consumer consumption habits and the world of marketing for good. This literature review studies how has the phenomena of social media influencers emerged from the origins of cultural intermediaries in the context of fashion. We aim to understand how are these two phenomenon connected and what are the major similarities and differences between the two based on the current academic literature. Additionally, we aim to form an understanding how do the social media influencers relate to algorithms and what new understanding can we gain by studying this type of relationship in terms of taste exercising activities.

The review is carried out concentrating on peer-reviewed academic articles that focus on cultural intermediaries in the context of fashion, social media influencers in the context of fashion and their relationship with algorithms. As social media is evolving rapidly, the review will concentrate on as recent academic articles as possible.

The findings of this literature review showed that even though the gap between cultural intermediaries and social media influencers in the field of fashion is narrowing, there are still some distinguishing differences between the two. Being considered a cultural intermediary requires certain level of cultural capital to be able to act as taste attributor in the field and mediating events such as fashion shows. Social media influencers have the opportunity, created by the online environment and social media platforms, to act as taste leaders if they manage to gain large audiences and be perceived as having good taste by them even without any prior cultural capital.

The review also showed that the algorithms do have an affect on the behavior of social media influencers. To be able to gain the desired level of visibility for their content, the social media influencers need to understand and obey the algorithmic rules of the social media platforms. Algorithms can be seen as gatekeepers of the taste making activities as they filter what content reaches the consumers on social media platforms.

Keywords social media influencers, cultural intermediaries, algorithms, fashion, taste

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1 Introduction

As consumer habits change and the world has become digitalized, old marketing efforts have become outdated and companies are required to find new ways to reach their customers. Social media influencers have changed the nature of marketing and the market value of global influencer marketing has been estimated to hit 13.8 billion U.S. dollars during year 2021 (Statista, 2021). Even if social media influencers as phenomena is relatively new, the concept of influencing consumption sensibilities and consumer taste has been around much longer.

Since the 1980s there has been a phenomenon called cultural intermediaries who establish so-called good taste and shape consumers consumption attitudes and preferences. This study concentrates to understand how these two phenomenon are connected to each other in the current literature and what are the possible similarities and differences between cultural intermediaries and social media influencers. As social media platforms (and the economic opportunities within them) have grown, it has established a new type of business demand to manipulate the algorithm that affects certain metrics related to social media influencer marketing. The relationship of influencers and algorithms is still scarcely covered by academic literature and this study aims to form an understanding on how algorithms mediate taste exercising activities of social media influencers based on current literature.

This study concentrates on cultural intermediaries in the context of fashion and how is that phenomena connected to social media influencers. It will aim to understand the relationship between the two and see what the defined differences between cultural intermediaries and social media influencers in the context of fashion are. Additionally, this study aims to review the current literature on the relationship of social media influencers and algorithms. In more detail the research questions are:

I. *How different are social media influencers to the cultural intermediaries characteristics in the context of fashion?*
II. *How do social media influencers relate to algorithms?*
III. *What new understanding can we gain by studying this type of relationship in terms of taste exercising activities?*

The research approach is to start by studying the origins of influencing others, which is the key concept of social media influencers. This means looking at articles about cultural intermediaries and how the concept has evolved throughout the years. The chosen context is fashion to give a clear scope for the research, that is meaningful from both viewpoints: cultural and economic relevance. Choosing a certain context also fits with the concept of fields originally introduced by Bourdieu (1984), whose theory about cultural production will be used as a lens for the whole study. The theory introduced by Bourdieu is often also referred to in most of the academic articles which also makes it a suitable lens for this study.

After forming an understanding of cultural intermediaries in the context of fashion, the focus will be shifted on the emergence of social media influencers. What contributed to the phenomena and how are they different compared to cultural intermediaries? Social media influencers have been dominating the marketing industry over the past decade, yet the concept has some ambiguity around it in the academic world. As a final research question there is the algorithms and how do they effect the taste making activities of social media influencers. Algorithms determine the experience of a consumer in the social media platform. However, they are mostly kept in the dark by companies and the academic research on the subject is somewhat limited in the context of fashion and social media. Yet, it is an important actor in the consumers’ taste making process in social media platforms.

The literature review will be carried out concentrating on peer-reviewed academic articles. Article sources will be collected from research databases such as EBSCO and where required, Google Scholar. The relevance of articles is determined based on abstracts of articles and focusing on topics including cultural intermediaries in the context of fashion, social media influencers in the context of fashion and their relationship with algorithms. Articles that study cultural intermediaries or social media influencers from some other viewpoint, such as ethicality or feminism, will be left out from the review to keep it concise. The review will be done focusing on as recent research as possible to be able to form an up-to-date understanding of the phenomena.

2 Emergence of cultural intermediaries

To understand the phenomena of emergence of social media influencers it is necessary to first study the origins of the term. The concept of influencing others' taste has been acknowledged already at the 1980's. Pierre Bourdieu introduced the term 'cultural intermediaries' in his book Distinction in 1984. Bourdieu argues how the social class of a person determines their likes, dislikes, and cultural interests. According to him, these predetermined factors, coming from the socioeconomic class the person is born into, affect the 'taste' the person develops. An individual who's from a higher socioeconomic background is likely to be exposed to high culture, such as art or music, from early on and therefore likely to develop what is seen as 'good taste' in the society. People who have 'good taste', possess more social capital, and therefore gain more symbolic power in the society. For Bourdieu, good taste was only judged by the social position of the one judging (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013).

Bourdieu identified" the producers of cultural programmes on television or radio or the critics of "quality" newspapers and magazines and all the writer-journalists and journalist-writers' as 'the most typical' of cultural intermediaries" (Bourdieu, 1984: 315). He later also included" the new middle class" to the definition: "practitioners from areas such as design, packaging, sales promotion, PR, marketing to a group called new cultural intermediaries" (Nixon, & Gay, 2002: 496). In other words, according to Bourdieu, to be able to act as a cultural intermediary, it was necessary to have a legitimated and higher socioeconomic role in a field and certain level of cultural capital to be able to affect the taste of others.

For the purposes of this paper, it is also important to understand Bourdieu's definition of fields in the cultural production and how it relates to fashion. Lonergan, Patterson, & Lichrou, (2018) explain the fields as heterogeneous key arenas, where each field has their own rules and value systems. In these fields, the players compete to gain cultural authority (Lonergan et al., 2018). Bourdieu (1993: 53) divides the field of cultural production to two subfields: the subfield of large-scale production and the subfield of restricted production. Rocamora (2002: 39) explains the subfield of restricted production as "an autonomous field where high cultural goods such as art, literature or high fashion are produced by and for producers and addressed to a limited audience. The pursuit of financial profit is rejected and 'art for art's sake' is the dominant value. The field of large-scale production, on the other hand, a 'discredited' field Bourdieu argues (ibid: 39), caters for a wide audience, and its market is what is referred to as '"mass" or "popular" culture'." (Rocamora, 2002: 344-345). The field of fashion has been traditionally divided to two different subfields: haute couture and mass fashion (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). Haute couture fits to the definition of restricted production and mass fashion to the definition of large-scale production.

The fields are also closely related to Bourdieu's (1984) understanding of cultural consumption: "certain goods tend to be favored by the dominant fraction of the dominant class, and others by the dominated fraction of this class. The former class fraction, according to Bourdieu's explanation, have high levels of economic capital, but lower levels of cultural capital. The latter, dominated class fraction have lower levels of economic capital, but make up for this by accumulating cultural capital, which can be converted to other forms of capital, including economic and social capital." (Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 214). The roles of the different actors in the field of fashion have been recognized and can be mirrored against Bourdieu's definitions of the cultural consumption by different fractions of classes. These will be later discussed in this paper.

Negus (2010: 503) notes, that the" central strength of the notion of cultural intermediaries is that it places an emphasis on those workers who come in-between creative artists and consumers (or, more generally, production and consumption)" (Negus K, 2010: 503). They shape how others interact with goods, meaning products, services, ideas and behaviours (Maguire, J. S., & Matthews, J., 2012). By influencing consumers' taste, and thereby consumption decisions, cultural intermediaries have an important role in the economy by creating a link between production and consumption.

More recently, the research on cultural intermediaries has taken two different perspectives. Either originating from the theory introduced by Bourdieu; cultural intermediaries as examples of the new middle class; involved in the mediation of production and consumption or following developments in actor-network theory and new economic sociology; cultural intermediaries as market actors involved in the qualification of goods, mediating between economy and culture (Maguire, J. S., & Matthews, J., 2012). For the purposes of this study, we will concentrate to mirror findings from the current literature against the Bourdieu's perspective, cultural intermediaries as taste makers and mediators between production and consumption.

2.1 Cultural capital and taste

Cultural capital and taste are terms that are constantly referred to in the current literature about cultural intermediaries and the terms are also important to understand in the context of this study. McQuarrie et al. (2012) defined taste having two meanings: difference or boundary and elevation or prestige. They are drawing the definition from the current literature aligned with Bourdieu's (1984: 6) definition "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make." (Bourdieu 1984: 6). According to McQuarrie et al. (2012), taste can be used to draw boundaries, meaning finding out if you share the same interests, or as a function to claim status and distinct one another based on their taste.

Lonergan et al. (2018) define cultural capital as "socially rare and distinctive attributes such as tastes, skills, tacit knowledge and styles of consumption." (Lonergan et al., 2018:7). Cultural capital can be deployed within the field, of which the actors are bound to (Holliday & Cairnie, 2007), which will legitimate" the field and those within it as special, rare and intrinsically pure." (Lonergan et al., 2018:7). Simply put, the consumption decisions of cultural intermediaries are turned into cultural legitimacy of the field, which in return, affect the taste of others. This can mean for example wearing certain type of clothes or consuming certain type of music to send a tacit message to others what is good taste and what should be consumed. These choices of the cultural intermediaries, who obtain cultural capital, affect the consumption decisions of consumers and other cultural intermediaries. They are important market actors as they work as attributes of good taste linking the production and consumption together.

The term cultural capital has also been criticized. Pawar (2006) argues that social capital as a term is faulty as the words have contrasting features. Capital refers to the individualistic ideological roots whereas the term is trying to explain a social cause. According to Pawar (2006), the term could be replaced with multiple different better descriptive words such as networks, collective action, norms, relationships, etc., depending on the context the term is used in. Rocamora (2002) suggest a term fashion capital to be used within the field of fashion to describe the needed cultural capital (Rocamora, 2002) to obtain power and be able to influence others.

3 Cultural intermediaries in the context of fashion

Lonergan et al. (2018) define fashion as “the commodification and sale of dreams” (Lonergan et al., 2018: 5) that’s value drives from experiences which are abstract and hard to rationalize cognitively. They argue that aesthetic value and cultural legitimacy overtake the desire for economic gain which can be seen abnormal in the traditional business world.

Dolbec and Fischer (2015) found that scholars who have studied the field of fashion have usually noted two different subfields: haute couture and mass fashion. These fields are tied to underlying logics of the field of fashion and to the subfields defined by Bourdieu (1993), logic of art and the logic of commerce. Bourdieu defined certain constraints to separate the two subfields from each other, but it is important to acknowledge, that according to Rocamora (2002) these subfields influence one another both directly and indirectly in the field of fashion. This could for example mean, that a streetstyle mass-fashion trend can inspire and influence an haute couture designer and also the other way around, mass-fashion retailers are influenced by the haute-couture designers through their fashion designs.

The traditional actors of fashion field have been identified to include “fashion designers, stylists, models, manufacturers, and retailers, fashion as- sociations, design and fashion schools, fashion media (including mainstream media that reports on fashion), celebrities, and consumers. More recent work has added to the list of actors fashion bloggers.” (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015: 1450). These traditional actors are the cultural intermediaries, powerful agents (Lonergan et al., 2018), with years of experience in that field (Preece, Kerrigan & O’Reilly, 2016, Mears, 2010) mediating between the production and consumption of fashion and affecting the consumers and other market actors’ taste.

Lonergan et al. (2018) defined events, such as fashion shows, photo shoots and parties, as mediation events where production of competent consumers is ensured, and cultural legitimacy is enhanced. According to Woodward (2016), during these events intermediaries “harness symbolic codes, narratives and objects to achieve certain ends” (Woodward 2006, 264). These physical events play a crucial role in the field on fashion to legitimate who is fashionable enough and has appropriate amount of cultural capital to be to be invited to these events and have the institutional access that can be leveraged to other type of capital later.

3.1 Fashion designers

Skov (2002) studied the fashion designers from Hong Kong as cultural intermediaries. He found that the garment industry is generally export oriented whereas the designers from Hong Kong wished to grow the value of their local fashion business and accumulate cultural capital as designers to be taken more seriously in the industry. The history of the phenomena of producing garments in China is shaped by the Cold War. At the time, the most sophisticated and profitable consumer markets were situated in the west and the production of the garments for these markets happened in China and Hong Kong. As the local wages rose, Hong Kong started to focus more on the fashion design and acting "as an intermediary between Western brands and third-world factories." (Skov, 2002: 276). Skov (2002) argues that designer's job, as cultural intermediaries, is to add value to the garments to shift the view away from just subcontracting companies to brand-builders that are designer led. They represent a new type of entrepreneurship as they are trying to move away from the traditional export-oriented garment industry. However, this is the key task that cultural intermediaries do – they shape the taste of others and aim to build value around their field.

Skov (2002) notes, that the upper-class, nor many working-class or middle-class parents, aren't happy with their children presuming a career within fashion design. The parents are worried about the future of the children and would often rather see their children studying something more conventional that would secure their future income. In that sense, the fashion designers are also mediating to establish the industry and the view of it to their parents and others. Skov (2002) points out, that Hong Kong designers are not against the commerciality of the market, compared to young British fashion designers, who "use a variety of discursive strategies to distance themselves from the commercial nature of the market" (Skov, 2002: 282: McRobbie, 1998). Hong Kong designers have the traditional role of mediating between production and consumption, but they also have other roles as mediators between East and West and building the value of local designers (Skov, 2002). Fashion designers, especially smaller unknown ones, haven't always been directly visible to the consumers. Skov (2002) found, that in the recent years the identity of fashion designer has also started to interest the consumers. Therefore, their fashionability, and not just their designs, is under judgement.

3.2 Fashion buyers

Entwistle (2005) studied fashion buyers as cultural intermediaries in the UK clothing retail market. They found, that “stores depend upon their buyers for their extensive market knowledge, taste level and fashion sense.” (Entwistle, 2005: 11) and that the meaning of the buyers’ role is to link up producers and consumers. Buyers, especially of big chains such as M&S, hold a lot of power as they determine the brands that will end up in the stores and available to consumers. Interestingly, Entwistle (2005) points out, that also big brands hold plenty of power as they choose the retailers they want to work with. Exclusive and big brands are especially protective over their brand image fitting to the retailer’s brand, which affect their distribution channel choices.

The buyer’s role is very influential as they represent the taste of the store and retailer when negotiating with brands. Therefore, there is a need for the buyer to withhold appropriate cultural capital “in the form of knowledge of fashion trends, brands, and names in the business […] and in terms of wearing fashionable clothes, having a sense of ‘style’, and appropriate high-fashion taste.” (Entwistle, 2005: 12). Interestingly, the buyers, who are not directly in contact nor visible to the consumer, are expected to be and look certain way and have for example, a slim body shape to be able to translate the right type of taste of a retailer to the desirable brands (Entwistle, 2005). There is a circle of mediation: buyers mediate the store’s image to the brands and in turn, the identity of the supplier to the retailer. All these taste making activities also affect the consumer as it is the buyer, and their cultural capital, who plays a crucial role in determining which products end up available in the high-fashion stores or departments.

3.3 Fashion models

Lonergan et al. (2018) studied fashion models as cultural intermediaries and found that even though fashion modeling, as a cultural phenomenon, is strongly related to the rapid development of consumer culture, the academic attention to their profession has mostly been negative. “Rather than figures that command significant influence in shaping cultural taste, fashion models have been theoretically framed as ‘cardboard-cut-outs’” (Lonergan et al., 2018: 8). However, Lonergan et al. (2018) state that models and ‘being in fashion’ play a key role in helping to define and legitimate cultural and aesthetic standards. They help spread the standard and shape the consumer opinion towards a lifestyle that can then be sold in forms of television shows and other branded products that consumers "use to create a sense of community around the idea of fashion, in a form of pre-programmed agency that is profitable for marketers" (Wissinger 2009: 284).

Lonergan et al. (2018) argue that for fashion models, to achieve their goals to make the fashion world more tangible and more real for the consumers, and to be seen as more authentic, they themselves need to have the sense of authenticity and be seen as being "in fashion". Being in fashion is closely tied to cultural capital and determined by performance of the model, similar to the phenomena of fashion buyers as cultural intermediaries. The same attributes of obtaining appropriate level of cultural capital and looking and acting certain way, meaning for example having what is considered the right type of body shape for the fashion field, is necessary to be seen as fashionable by the fashion field experts. Being perceived as fashionable enables to act as a model and cultural intermediary of fashion.

Even though all of the three traditional actors studied have their own unique tasks in the field of fashion, they all have an important shared task to link the production and consumption. They mediate between the producers and consumers to act as taste attributors sending out messages with their actions and decisions what should be consumed, directly or indirectly. Likewise, what combines them all is the necessity to have a certain level of cultural capital to be able to act as a cultural intermediary who has power to influence others taste. Skov (2002) also points out, that according to Bourdieu (1984), often the work of cultural intermediaries is related to body which was noted by all the three authors that had studied cultural intermediaries in the field of fashion.

4 Evolvement of the cultural intermediaries

The term 'cultural intermediaries' has become more widely used in the recent years and has evolved quite far away from its origins introduced by Bourdieu strongly related to social classes. It is sometimes used in a precise way but also in a casual manner (Negus, K. 2002). Maguire and Matthews argue how the original meaning of the term has been diluted and may now be overly inclusive for all creative or cultural occupation or institution. According to Lonergan et al. (2018) one reason for the ambiguity around cultural intermediaries might be that they symbolize different degrees of authority, meaning capital, and are capable to influence others in varying levels. They also point out, that value in cultural fields is often aesthetic and "this value is underpinned by the belief that cultural work is special and mysterious and, as such, can only be undertaken by special and mysterious people" (Lonergan et al., 2018:1). They argue, that for these reasons, cultural intermediaries have been studied as "merchants of mystique" and their influence on consumption as sorcery (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003) and magic (Arnould, 2004). According to Molloy and Larner (2010), cultural intermediaries need to be considered as contextualized market actors instead of aiming to build a comprehensive definition of their influence.

4.1 Reaching the large audience with the megaphone effect

What made an excessive difference in the field of cultural intermediaries is the emergence of the web. It greatly impacted the creation of celebrities and the social interactions they have with their audience (Spápálová, Mikuláš & Púchovská, 2021). Through the web, ordinary people can reach large audiences and the phenomena is called the megaphone effect (McQuarrie et al., 2012). It builds on Bourdieu's (1984) concept of accumulating cultural capital and influencing others taste and consumption decisions. However, there are some fundamental differences compared to the original definition. The megaphone effect means, that it is no more required to have the institutional legitimation or enablement to gain a large audience for yourself. By posting about shared interest, such as fashion, bloggers can gain the interest of large audiences. Before the web, it was necessary to have some type of legitimation, such as a role in a reality tv-show or celebrity status, to gain the interest of mass audiences (McQuarrie et al., 2012).

Now, an ordinary individual can post about their consumption, for example by writing a fashion blog posts, and acquire a large audience of strangers. By these actions, ordinary people can increase their opportunities to appear in media and be acknowledged by the traditional, legitimated actors of the fashion field. There is a clear shift in the market dynamics as earlier this type of media attention was only possible through credentialed institutional setting (McQuarrie et al., 2012) such as fashion tv-shows. By writing a fashion blog about their consumption decisions, ordinary people can through their large audiences gain institutional access which can be further leveraged to cultural capital. The web has created taste to become a resource to climb up the latter of hierarchy and this type of taste is the one that enables the megaphone effect (McQuarrie et al., 2013). The large audiences', meaning consumers, taste is often shaped by the consumption decisions the fashion bloggers make and post about. However, it is important to acknowledge, that megaphone effect creates the access to audience, but not direct access to cultural, or other type, of capital (McQuarrie et al., 2012).

Dolbec & Fischer (2015) found that the field-level market dynamics have changed by ordinary consumers interacting with each other about topics they find mutually interesting. Their analysis emphasizes that "in such a context, the accumulation of rather small, individually incremental, innovations in existing practices by consumers can cumulatively help to usher in important market-level changes in the institutional work that supports a market, the categories of actors within it, and the underlying logics that inform it" (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015: 1464). The evolvement of the web and social media has enabled the birth of a new subset of cultural intermediaries: digital influencers, also sometimes referred to as microcelebrities. They have the ability to engage with their large audiences to demonstrate the value of objects they have identified to be 'cool' (Hutchinson, 2020).

5 Emergence of social media influencers

Digital and social media have reshaped the nature of marketing (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010). The change in consumers' media consumption habits affects how and when consumers are exposed to marketing and advertising. Consumers spend vast majority of their media exposure time online, on social media and react differently to advertising in that environment (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Consumers are known to be goal-directed in an online environment which makes them more reluctant to clear, traditional advertising (Cho, 2004). Consumption patterns have also changed towards anywhere, anytime consumption, away from the "standardized timing formats that scheduled programmed media at routine times of the day" (Hutchinson, 2020: 1288).

These reasons have been driving a rapid change in the advertising industry, resulting to the rise of social media marketing. As the traditional advertising did not result in the desired outcomes anymore, social media marketing has adopted more softer, less direct, and more authentic advertising approaches (Association of National Advertisers, 2018). Authenticity in social media posts was found to be a key favorable factor and positively influence the outcomes of word-of-mouth and purchase probability (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). However, even if the look and feel of social media posts is more authentic to the consumers, Hutchinson argues that very often, influencers'" media production focus is on commercial products and services to increase their social and economic capital" (Hutchinson, 2020: 1286). Hutchinson (2020) defines influencers as intermediaries and tastemakers in social media platforms, who are acting in alternative creative ways to converge social, cultural, and economic capital into other forms of capital (Hutchinson, 2020).

As the digitalization and social media took over the world, also the demand for different type of digitalized fashion content rose. Dolbec & Fischer (2015) found that what started off as editors posting pictures online of interesting outfits on other people, drew attention to the editors themselves. Ordinary people were posting fashion pictures of individuals they had access to – other ordinary people. Earlier, an institutional access was needed to the traditional fashion shows, that had been dominating the taste making of the fashion field for very long. Dolbec & Fischer (2015) found that as the trend grew, the ordinary peoples' "practices may come to be regarded as acceptable and even important forms of institutional work, embraced by professionals and consumers alike." (Dolbec & fischer, 2015: 1456).

The growing trend of posting to social media has led to the actors who were originally just ordinary consumers, and not part of the industry professionals, to be recognized by the traditional actors of fashion field. The recognition from the traditional members grows the cultural capital which then opens other possibilities to institutional access such as seats in the front row of a fashion show. The interesting point here is, that it was no longer needed for the person to have any prior cultural capital to start posting pictures to large crowds. Of course, not everyone ends up reaching many people, but as the megaphone effect explains, it is now technically possible through social media platforms. These taste making activities can grow the cultural capital of the person posting the content through followers, likes and other social media reactions that the crowd uses to judge if they are interested in the content. The posted pictures and other content influence the taste of the consumers of social media, by these social media posts of outfits and such.

5.1 Who are social media influencers?

Social media influencers have been determined as “a third-party who significantly shapes the customer’s purchasing decision, but may ever be accountable for it.” (Brown and Hayes, 2008: 50). They post to social media in exchange for compensation and to be seen as more persuasive by the audience, influencers often present themselves as fellow consumers (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Ki & Kim (2019) defined social media influencers as individuals whose taste and opinions consumers desire to mimic by for example purchasing the same products, services, or brands they endorse.

Social media influencers often concentrate on one area of expertise, such as, beauty, fitness, food, or fashion, and enthusiastically share self-generated content that gains them fame and brands them as experts of the specific topic (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020). However, Guoquan, Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman (2021) noted, that even though this type of behavior creates the opportunity for the social media influencer to become an opinion leader and build their personal brand in the field, it is important to note, that this” strategic self-promotion can also be considered inauthentic when it becomes too obvious” (Guoquan et al., 2021: 334). Interestingly, the same phenomena has been acknowledged already with fashion models, who are part of the traditional cultural intermediaries in the fashion field. They have a need to be perceived as authentic to be seen as fashionable (Lonergan et al. 2018).

Social media has given any individual access to large audiences and the opportunity to aim to act influential and affect others’ taste and consumption habits, for example by sharing product recommendations on social media platforms. However, even if everyone can technically act influential now, only a small fraction of users can be perceived as social media influencers (Guoquan et al., 2021: 160).

5.2 Different types of social media influencers

Social media influencers are discussed in many academic articles about marketing, but the meaning of the term in more detail is often vague and can differ based on the context and other factors. Similarly, to cultural intermediaries, their ability to affect the taste of others can differ causing ambiguity around the understanding of the phenomena. Campbell and Farrell (2020) did a literature review to establish a framework to identify different types of social media influencers. The definitions were built based on the follower amount, perceived authenticity, accessibility, expertise, and cultural capital and the division can be seen in figure 1 (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Additionally, Guoquan et al. (2021) defined two central characteristics in their analysis of the current literature to be considered an influencer: reach and impact. Reach refers to the size of the follower base and" subsequently, a large secondary reach through these followers. Impact refers to the influence one has on the decision-making of others" (Guoquan et al., 2021: 334).

However, it is important to note, that higher amounts of followers do not always indicate better results in terms of influencers ability to affect their followers' taste and opinions. Campbell and Farrell (2020) note that the importance of each of the characteristics described in the figure 1 might depend on the strategic goal of the marketing efforts.

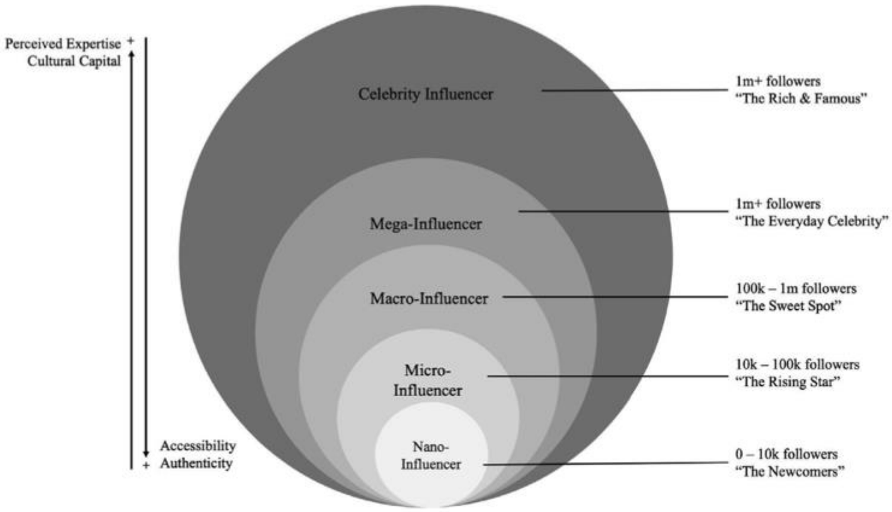
Perceived Expertise +
Cultural Capital
Accessibility
+ Authenticity
Celebrity Influencer
Mega-Influencer
Macro-Influencer
Micro-Influencer
Nano-Influencer
1m+ followers
"The Rich & Famous"
1m+ followers
"The Everyday Celebrity"
100k – 1m followers
"The Sweet Spot"
10k – 100k followers
"The Rising Star"
0 – 10k followers
"The Newcomers"

Figure 1. Types of social media influencers

For example, a strong intimate bond and engagement with the followers can be seen as more value creating than high amounts of followers (Guoquan et al., 2021). For instance, micro-influencers have lower number of followers, but have higher persuasive impact on consumers compared to macro-influencers. This is due to their perceived authenticity and intimacy (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). As authenticity is the key favorable factor to influence the outcomes of word-of-mouth and purchase probability, it seems, that influencer's ability to affect consumer taste cannot be directly ranked through their number of followers or celebrity status.

Supporting the statement about irrelevance of number of followers, it is important to note, that influencers can influence each other and therefore indirectly affect the consumer's taste. Dolbec and Fischer (2015) argue that individuals with lower amounts of followers can and do imitate and strengthen the work of the fashion field insiders and they question the McQuarrie et al. (2012) view presenting ordinary consumers as outsiders of the field of fashion. As the understanding of social media influencers in the academic world is relatively new, there is new research that might contradict the previously established as can be seen above.

The second characteristic defined by Hutchinson (2020) is impact which more directly refers to social media influencers' ability to affect consumers taste by producing content to social media platforms. The higher impact compared to traditional marketing is based on the perceived authenticity and consumers' likelihood of trusting people rather than traditional adverts (Hutchinson, 2020). The power social media influencers hold as tastemakers by affecting consumers purchasing habits takes a very crucial role in the world where there is more supply than demand on most fields. However, interestingly Cotter (2018) noted, that social media influencers content production methods are affected by social media platform's algorithms and that the content production process can be seen as a game for visibility. This phenomenon shifts some of the power held by influencers towards the automated algorithms as they must understand and play by the rules encoded in algorithms to gain the level of visibility they are aiming to achieve (Cotter K., 2018).

5.3 Social media influencers and taste exercising

McQuarrie et al. (2012) note that safe choices such as nice clothes on attractive people on catalogues is not adventurous enough to serve the needs of a fashion blogger. They argue that just repeating what has already been established in the fashion world will not lift the perception of a fashion blogger to be fashionable and stylish. According to them, to be perceived as a taste leader, fashion blogger needs to take risks with their content and combine pieces of clothing in an unexpected manner. "Here it appears that aesthetically discriminating taste judgments lead to an advantageous social position, rather than a privileged social position producing a particular kind of taste judgment." (McQuarrie et al., 2012: 146).

Ki & Kim (2019) found that social media influencers' content on Instagram was evaluated most highly by consumers based on the perceived appealing visuality, conveyed prestige, and showcase of expertise. A social media influencer producing this type of content was perceived as representing good taste. There were three qualities that affected consumers' attitudes towards social media influencers as taste leaders: attractiveness, prestige, and expertise. As a most important finding from their study, they propose that" consumers' desire to mimic as the decisive response that links their positive attitudes toward SMIs to positive behavioral outcomes (e.g., sharing SMIs' posts or purchasing the products/services/brands they endorse)." (Ki & Kim, 2019: 918).

Ki & Kim discuss social media influencers as both, taste, and opinion leaders. However, they found that taste leadership motivated consumers to mimic social media influencers more strongly. Interestingly, they suggest that consumer purchasing habits may have changed towards a more rapid process which doesn't anymore include the traditional complex process of recognizing a need, searching for information, and evaluating options to buy. Instead, their purchases might be motivated by people they encounter with in an online platform and who they view as obtaining good taste and opinions. These actions might be "derived from their hedonic need to be more like someone who inspires them" (Ki & Kim, 2019: 919).

However, it is important to note, that even if fashion bloggers affect the consumer taste and possibly market dynamics, it often is not intended. Dolbec & Fischer (2015) studied the fashion field dynamics and how have they been affected by the emergence of social media and influencers. They found that the phenomena has started by ordinary people forming groups online based on shared interests, such as fashion, which has led to the phenomena of emergence of social media influencers as taste and opinion leaders who shape the consumption decisions of others. The large crowds gained have enabled some social media influencers to obtain institutional access to so-called cultural mediation events discussed earlier in the context of cultural intermediaries, for example fashion shows. This institutional access is changing the market dynamics, as earlier, cultural legitimacy was needed. Now, the social media influencers are seen as fashionable enough to get to sit in the front row with other traditional fashion market actors.

6 Cultural intermediaries and social media influencers in the field of fashion

There is some tension between the traditional cultural intermediaries, such as fashion press, and social media influencers who can be seen as intruders in the field (Hogan, 2014, Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). Fashion press has criticized the high amounts of sponsored products accepted by the fashion bloggers. Dolbec and Fischer (2015) argue that the reason for this is the traditional actors aiming to preserve the boundaries between themselves and newer categories of actors. They suggest that the sense of internalized illegitimacy experienced by the fashion bloggers doesn't mean, that it would in reality affect their ability to influence the tastes and practices in the field. Rather, that it can be expected from the traditional actors, such as fashion press, to position these newer roles as "“poseurs” whose semi-professional status marks them as lesser in authority and standing." (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015: 1459).

What has been seen in the field as a shift of power dynamics, is the allocation of space in the fashion shows (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). Traditionally, the front row seats have been reserved to the most influential people including actors from the traditional cultural intermediaries of the field such as fashion media journalists and other institutionally legitimated actors of fashion world. Now, some of the seats have been allocated to fashion bloggers and possibly to reflect the hierarchy of the field of fashion (Dodes, 2010). The members of the traditional cultural intermediaries of the field lost some of the space which reflects the shift that is happening in the field. As McQuarrie et al. (2012) found, it is no longer needed to have the institutional legitimization to be able to access large crowds and accumulate cultural capital that can be leveraged into institutional access. The phenomena around fashion shows' front seats showcases the power of megaphone effect in the real world.

Dolbec & Fischer (2015) argue that the traditional actors of the field still hold influential power over the newer phenomena of social media influencers and interactive consumers. They argue that consumers who share their opinions with other consumers, have access to large amount of information provided and produced by the traditional actors, such as fashion magazines. Same applies to the fashion bloggers, it is extremely difficult to draw the line on who is influencing who. Is it organically produced content from a fashion blogger or were they influenced by a traditional media article before the post? It seems that there is a circle of influence comparable to the subfields of haute couture and mass fashion. Just like those two fields affect one another, similarly, so do the new social media influencers and traditional cultural intermediaries of fashion.

7 Relationship between algorithms and social media influencers

What determines the experience each individual gains from a social media platform is an algorithm. Different social media platforms bring together and enable interaction with wide variety of people who share the same interest, for example fashion. Social media is by nature an interactive environment where different types of actions such as likes, pins and shares play a crucial, interactive role for the content shared in the platform. For example, in Pinterest there is over 2 million pins related to fashion posted every day (Strugatz, 2013).

Algorithms can be seen as automated tools to assist users to find and consume content that is relevant to their interest (Hutchinson, 2020). Gillespie (2014: 1) notes that algorithms" provide a means to know what there is to know and how to know it, to participate in social and political discourse, and to familiarize ourselves with the publics in which we participate" (Gillespie, 2014: 1). Cotter (2019: 896) argues that influencers have made it their business to understand the algorithms to gain visibility and to grow their follower-base. According to them, this is because the idea of influencer marketing is that "influencers can impact their followers' beliefs and practices so long as they can captivate and maintain their attention." (Cotter, 2019: 896). However, algorithms and the mechanisms how they filter information are mostly kept in the dark by companies. According to Gillespie (2014), more open communication about the methodologies of the algorithms would hand out competitors easy ways of duplicating the working mechanisms. Additionally, giving out details about the algorithms' working methods would enable actors who aim to gain visibility, a tool guide on how to "game the system" and maximize the probability of their content to be favored by the algorithm (Brown, 2018, Gillespie, 2014, Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Cotter (2019) studied the influencers' behavior on Instagram in relation to the platform's algorithm. They found that influencers are aware of the algorithmic rules and that their decisions are affected by them to gain the desired visibility for their content. They named the phenomena as the visibility game. Cotter (2019) notes that scholars have acknowledged similar type of behavior earlier as gaming the system, but they argue, that renaming the phenomena to playing the visibility game shifts the focus from an individual to a group of actors. Interestingly, they found, that influencers did not aim to break the rules of the algorithms. Instead, they play by the rules with the knowledge that they have, to succeed in the game for visibility. However, important to note is that, even though influencers might play by the rules, they don't necessarily follow the spirit of the rules (Cotter, 2019). This can mean for example, that algorithms are supposed to filter the content based on the organic popularity and other factors. Influencers might aim to manipulate these metrics to gain more visibility for their content. This can be done by following the rules, but it is not what the rules were made for.

Weerasinghe, Flanigan, Stein, Mccoy & Greenstadt (2020) found that the user demand for account popularity has started a new area of business to manipulate the algorithms. According to their study, likes, shares, followers, and comments are the currency of social media platforms as content with high level engagement, such as large number of likes on a post, is prioritized by content curation algorithms. The value of an influencer can be estimated for example by these metrics when a brand is researching a suitable influencer to work with. Therefore, the size and engagement of their followers is monetized. As a response for the need, social media users had formed groups on Instagram, so called pods, to grow the engagement rates of their post by for example commenting and liking each other's content.

The approach was found successful and grew the organic visibility of their content (Weerasinghe et al., 2020).

Association of National Advertisers found that the objective of companies to use influencer marketing is to gain general brand awareness according to 86% of respondents in their survey about influencer marketing. The effectiveness of a campaign was measured by the engagement rate according to 84 % of the respondents (Association of National Advertisers, 2018). Influencers tend to drive increased engagement to brand-related communication more effectively and personally than brands can do themselves, but because of the emphasis on metrics, there is a growing trend amongst influencers to buy engagement or follower bots to increase their success metrics (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

There seems to be a codependency between algorithms and social media influencers. To be able to reach a large audience, social media influencers need to understand algorithmic rankings to produce content that fits the encoded values and will be favored by the algorithm. Then again,” algorithms are inert, meaningless machines until paired with databases upon which to function” (Gillespie, 2014: 3) meaning, that the content produced by social media influencers is needed to give the algorithm means to work.

8 Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to see how the shift from cultural intermediaries to social media influencers has happened and how has it been understood in the current academic literature. Additionally, the goal was to see how the taste exercising happens and how algorithms affect the social media influencers based on the literature. The main research question was to see how social media influencers are different compared to cultural intermediaries, in the context of fashion. There are certain aspects that bring the two phenomena closer to each other, yet certain aspects that make a distinguishing difference between the two. They both share the setting of fields and subfields. Both actors often concentrate on one area of expertise such as fashion. However, a distinguishing difference is that social media influencers operate in online surroundings whereas cultural intermediaries often have a physical setting as we saw with the studies about traditional actors of fashion field. Both, social media influencers and traditional cultural intermediaries, share the need to be perceived as authentic to be able to be accepted as taste exercisers by others. As we can see from the literature findings, the gap between social media influencers and cultural intermediaries is narrowing (Ki & Kim, 2019) and the market dynamics are changing (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015, McQuarrie et al., 2012) as social media influencers are gaining access to the taste mediation events of cultural intermediaries.

What distinguishes the two from each other is the start of the career within the industry. Social media influencers can through social media, with no prior experience nor institutional access, gain large audiences and accumulate cultural capital that can be leveraged into other forms of capital such as economic or social. Cultural intermediaries need some sort of legitimization, such as a profession, to gain the needed amount of cultural capital to be able to affect others taste.

There is also a distinctive difference in the mediating technologies of social media influencers and cultural intermediaries. The traditional cultural intermediaries interact and socialize with others in physical mediating events, such as fashion shows, where the legitimization of actors of the field and good taste is established. Then again, social media influencers mediate mostly in online environments, even though some of them have eventually gained access to the traditional mediation events of fashion field. Social media influencers mediate and socialize with others in their social media platforms where they establish what is seen as good taste. Through likes, comments, and other interactive formats of social media currency, they are legitimated by the others as taste leaders of a specific field. This taste leadership enables them to shape the consumption decisions of others as the purchasing habits of consumers have also changed. Consumers have been found to have a desire to mimic a taste leader, a social media influencer. Mimicking is done for example by purchasing products they share in their social media platform and the encounter might result into a rapid purchasing process if social media influencer is perceived as having good taste.

The motivation of cultural intermediaries and social media influencers for their actions might differ. Cultural intermediaries are often aiming to create something meaningful that might contribute to the industry evolving, for example fashion designers designing a new haute couture collection. Social media influencers often share content based on their interests and own lifestyle and their intention might not be to affect others taste nor cause a field wide disruption of market dynamics. However, there seems to be a shift in the influencer behavior after certain level of cultural capital is obtained and the economic opportunities of influencing others through paid marketing content arises. Social media influencers are continuously evolving more towards accumulating economic capital through paid posts, but the evolvement is still relatively new.

The second research question aimed to form an understanding on how the social media influencers relate to algorithms. The relationship of algorithms and social media influencers is circulative. The algorithm is meaningless without the content produced by social media users and then again, social media influencers need to understand the logics of algorithms for their posts to gain visibility. Naturally, algorithms are formed to filter all kind of content in the platform, not just content produced by influencers. However, as the media consumption habits of consumers have changed, it seems that influencer marketing on social media platforms is here to stay. As Cotter (2019) explained, the influencers aim to understand the algorithmic rules as well as they can to exploit the algorithm in their taste making activities.

The final research question aimed to grasp what new understanding we can gain by studying this type of relationship in terms of taste exercising activities. Algorithms can be seen as gate keepers in taste making activities of social media influencers as algorithms determine what consumers see in social media platforms. It has also been noted that algorithms do affect the decisions made by social media influencers in the so-called visibility game where they aim to maximize the visibility of their content. Algorithms determine what content others encounter with and for this reason, it affects how social media influencers produce content that attributes good taste. These dynamics of the field of social media influencers distinguish them from the traditional cultural intermediaries who mediate in utterly different settings. To be able to exercise taste making activities in the field of fashion as a cultural intermediary, you need a certain level of cultural capital to gain institutional access. Social media influencers act in an online environment where algorithms and the legitimation of ordinary people play a crucial role in building them into a taste leader and no prior cultural capital is needed.

9 Limitations and future research

This study aimed to concentrate on peer-reviewed academic articles, however, as the whole phenomena of emergence of social media is relatively new, it created challenges to find relevant suitable articles. Especially the topic about algorithms in the context of social media influencers and fashion has limited number of prior studies. Additionally, as social media platforms evolve extremely rapidly, academic world cannot keep up with the pace. Additionally, most of the scholarly articles study social media influencers behavior on Instagram. Platforms such as Tik Tok, that has gained a lot of users in relatively short period of time, had to be left out from this study because of the lack of academic articles. As new research is published, some of the findings from current literature might be challenged as these platforms have different dynamics compared to each other and therefore the influencers' behavior and taste exercising activities might differ.

In the future it would be beneficial to study the different social media platforms in terms of taste making activities by social media influencers. To better understand the consumer behavior in those settings, future research could investigate how the different platform dynamics affect the social media influencers behavior and ability to affect others taste. As Ki & Kim (2019) suggested, it could also be beneficial to study the purchasing habits of consumers in those environments, as it seems it has changed into a more rapid process compared to the traditional understanding.

The current literature recognizes that algorithms do affect the behavior of influencers for them to maximize the visibility for their content. However, there is only limited amount of prior study on the subject, and it would be beneficial to research the topic more. As influencers are shaping the taste of others, it should be understood better, how do algorithms affect their behavior and therefore taste making activities in social media platforms.

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