

The Collective Development of Consumer Persuasion

Knowledge

Introduction

“Most of us have no context in which to parse what we’re seeing. A fat woman, in a couture dress, and who is not being employed as the punchline to a joke. What? What does that mean? It’s like trying to read a language you think you know but written in an alphabet you’ve never seen before.” (Lesley Kinzel).

The quotation above reflects the reaction of a blogger associated with the Fat Acceptance Movement to seeing plus-sized singer Beth Ditto wearing a luxury brand dress in a fashion editorial. Several other bloggers and their audiences manifest similar confusion and try to make sense of this and other similar marketing communication attempts in various online expressions. Through these online discussions and exchanges, these consumers pool resources to understand the reasons why fashion brands and magazines have recently started to feature plus-sized celebrities and models in its advertisements, and jointly discover ways to deal and to respond to such persuasion attempts. In other words, these consumers collectively work to develop their persuasion knowledge.

Persuasion attempts abound in the marketplace, coloring dynamics and interactions between consumers and marketers. The ability and effectiveness of a marketer to persuade the intended target to perform a particular action or behave in a certain way in part depends on the targeted consumers’ knowledge of and reaction to marketing persuasion tactics (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Persuasion knowledge research has primarily focused on an *individual’s* development of, access to, and use of persuasion knowledge in various

contexts and in response to marketing stimuli (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Hardesty, Bearden, & Carlson, 2007; Kirmani & Campbell, 2004; Tuncay & Otnes, 2008; Van, Eva, Lammers, Rozendaal, & Buijzen, 2015; Verhellen, Oates, De Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2014; Verlegh, Franssen, & Kirmani, 2015; Wright, Friestad, & Boush, 2005). Yet, consumers increasingly congregate online around their shared interests on brands, products, or consumption activities, creating multiple opportunities to access diffuse knowledge and collectively develop understandings about marketing strategies and marketers' persuasion tactics. Marketing and consumer researchers still know little about how consumers develop persuasion knowledge as they interact in online collectives.

To address this gap, we conducted a qualitative study of an online collective dedicated to combating prejudice against people who are fat: the Fat Acceptance Movement. Among Fat Acceptance activists, some consumers who are particularly interested in fashion, the self-labeled *fatshionistas*, have congregated in blogs and social network pages, generating a voluminous archive of discussions about the logics and practices of the fashion industry. To be clear, our focus is not on the development of persuasion knowledge at the individual level, nor at the widely shared, cultural level. Rather, we argue that an intermediary level of intelligence development can be identified in the collectives that evolve around conversations in social media.

This paper's contributions are threefold. First, our study complements extant literature by adding to it an understanding of how consumers relate to persuasion knowledge in real-world settings. Second, our study suggests that the implications of consumers' persuasion knowledge may extend beyond their coping with persuasion attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and the achievement of personal goals related to the persuasion episode

(Kirmani & Campbell, 2004). Our findings indicate that the public manifestations of connected consumers motivate marketers to align future persuasion attempts to the goals of the consumer collective, ultimately supporting the advancement of the collective's social goals such as the promotion of changes in market practices and in cultural understandings of persuasion, and the inclusion of marginalized consumers in mainstream markets. Third, by understanding the construction of persuasion knowledge in a collective setting, our study unveils negotiations and the rhetorical strategies consumers employ to develop collective readings of marketers' offerings and practices.

Literature review

When presenting the persuasion knowledge model, Friestad and Wright (1994) propose that a complete theory addressing consumer's knowledge about persuasion tactics should explain the development of this knowledge, how it is assessed and used, and its effects. Their model incorporates the perspectives and behaviors of the target (i.e. in marketing contexts, the consumer) in the persuasive appeal as well as the agent responsible for delivering the appeal (i.e. brand, company, salesperson, etc.). Friestad and Wright's model accounts for the agent's knowledge of the topic, their knowledge regarding persuasion, and their knowledge of the target. Together, these three elements represent the persuasion attempt, or the agent's efforts to influence the target. The target also possesses some knowledge of the topic, knowledge of persuasion, and knowledge regarding the agent. Importantly, the target's knowledge reflects how the target will respond and cope with the persuasive appeal.

The persuasion knowledge model, like other theories to explain how consumers respond to persuasive appeals, focuses on the internal knowledge and state of the consumer.

For instance, Friestad and Wright (1994) explain that the coping behaviors of consumers depend on a number of individual factors including the consumer's self-control and competency. Similarly, individual beliefs about the agent's intentions and tactics are posited to influence persuasion outcomes.

Studies on persuasion knowledge have so far addressed its effects on consumers' responses to pricing strategies (Kirmani & Wright, 1989; Moreau, Krishna, & Harlam, 2001); advertising (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Verlegh et al., 2015; Williams, Fitzsimons, & Block, 2004); influence agents and sources (Artz & Tybout, 1999; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000), mood and brand responses (Van et al., 2015), loyalty (Siemieniako & Urban, 2015) and children's response (Verhellen et al., 2014) and product placement (Cowley & Barron, 2008; Wei, Fischer, & Main, 2008). Researchers have also investigated how consumers respond to market agents in different situations when persuasion knowledge is activated (Kirmani & Campbell, 2004; Williams et al., 2004). Most of this research, however, is conducted at the individual level, and in laboratory settings.

A series of experiments conducted by Schlosser, White, and Lloyd (2006), for example, showed that consumers tend to be more trusting and less resistant to persuasive appeals when marketers invest in the design of their websites. Consumer knowledge of covert attempts at persuasion also influence persuasive outcomes, as Wei, Fischer, and Main (2008) demonstrate in a series of experimental studies. Both of these examples capture the literature's focus on the individual consumer and the agent, and its predominantly experimental approach to collecting evidence of persuasion knowledge development and application.

Our research extends this literature by moving beyond the individual consumer and agent, and by employing qualitative methodologies that use non-elicited, naturally occurring

data, to demonstrate how consumers develop persuasion knowledge and apply it in a given context.

Research Method and Context

To address these research questions, we conducted a qualitative investigation of the “Fat Acceptance Movement” (FAM), which spreads globally over a net of interconnected blogs and social networking websites, approximating a diverse group of people with different beliefs about how to change individual, medical, and societal attitudes towards fat. A particular subset of participants, known as the Fatshionistas, focuses on fashion-related issues, and their online manifestations provide insight into key aspects of how these consumers collectively develop their persuasion knowledge to account for the featuring of individuals similar to themselves in luxury fashion brands advertisements.

Our dataset consists of archival data collected on blogs, social networking websites, and online media that comments on plus-size women cast in fashion magazines and fashion brands shows and advertisements. Due to space constraints, we narrowed our voluminous dataset to the data covering the featuring of two plus-sized women: One is celebrity-singer Beth Ditto, a singer known for her unique and revealing stage performances. Another is Crystal Renn, a former “regular” model who suffered from anorexia and became a plus-size model after regaining her health. While Ditto has walked the runway for Jean Paul Gaultier, photographed with Karl Lagerfeld, and performed at a Versus Versace fashion show, Renn is notable for her editorials in high-end fashion magazines and has modeled for Dolce & Gabbana, Chanel, and Jimmy Choo ([Examples of ads featuring Renn and Ditto](#)).

We conducted a netnography, following the recommendations of Kozinets (2007, 2010). For more than five years (2009-2014), we observed as full as possible an array of blogs addressing fat acceptance in order to achieve a rich understanding of the issues of importance for those who identify with the movement as a whole. After this broader investigation, we narrowed our focus to 7 bloggers who self-identify with the Fatshionista branch of the FAM, and who have been actively covering fashion industry developments related to plus-sizes. Blog data consists of 363 single-spaced pages of text produced by Fatshionista bloggers and their audiences, and pictures related to fashion brands advertising and sources. One of the authors coded the data, guided by our research problem, and following guidelines offered by Miles and Huberman (1994, p.62). We then conferred, debated, and, iterating between the data and our conceptual structure, we identified a set of themes in the process of collective development of persuasion knowledge, and a series of agent- and target-related aspects that are involved in that process.

Findings

In the consumer collective we studied, every persuasion episode that involves plus-sized sources or agents is scrutinized: usually a blogger writes a post about a new persuasion attempt, her readers comment on that post, and other bloggers link to that post, or write other posts about the same persuasion episode. Altogether, these online manifestations constitute a conversation within the collective about a persuasion attempt.

Prior individual persuasion knowledge is engaged in these conversations, and a repository of collective persuasion knowledge is activated as consumers browse through the archives and links of the blogs. That is, the online format of the discussions facilitates

retrieval of information about agents and topics and facilitates the discussion of controversial persuasion attempts.

Agent Knowledge

We also found that, when responding to persuasion attempts featuring plus-sized celebrities and models in marketing communications, Fatshionistas and their audiences consider three key aspects of the agents (“whomever a target identifies as being responsible for designing and constructing a persuasion attempt” [Friestad and Wright 1994]): (1) Representativeness, by which we mean the target’s understanding of the agent’s identification with the Fat Acceptance Movement; (2) Reach, including the agent’s social status and power in the fashion industry; and (3) Reliability, which refers to the consistency of the messages sent by the agent regarding issues that are relevant to the collective. We explain each of these aspects in detail below.

Representativeness: In discussing the presence of plus-sized sources in marketing persuasion attempts, Fatshionistas consider how represented they feel by the celebrity or model. They collect additional information from media outlets, and share that information online as they make considerations such as the following: *“I love Ditto’s candor about one of the outfits pictured [in an essay] that was put together in a hurry, that it’s basically a sheer sheath “and Spanx and a bra, and shoes, and that’s kind of all there is to it.” There’s an inventiveness and DIY flavor to Ditto’s style that’s both appealing and accessible to femme-inclined fat folks of all persuasions ... This is what stylish fat girls do, especially those of us who are outside the in between-range of plus sizes: we make fashion of out the shit other folks dismiss or discard, ... we make love out of nothing at all.”* (Lesley Kinzel)

Lesley's blog post indicates that she perceives Ditto as a true representative of "stylish fat girls", a group in which most Fatshionistas would feel included. It is not Ditto's appearance in a fashion editorial that leads to that perception of her representativeness, but her candor about the backstage of the photo shoot. Moreover, Ditto frequently acknowledges in the media that she faces the same issues other Fatshionistas do, when it comes to dressing fashionably with the limited offerings available to plus-sized women.

Crystal Renn, in contrast, is understood by most Fatshionistas as less representative of the stigmatized group of consumers. Due to her fluctuating weight and body size, Renn has been considered a "regular" model and a plus-sized model at different moments in her career. Fatshionistas, however, note that even at her largest size, Renn has a body that can pass as normal (Goffman, 2009). The following quote illustrates such considerations made by Fatshionista bloggers and their audiences: *"...while I appreciate that Crystal Renn has spoken up about her eating disorder and how it was fostered by the size 0 ideal in modeling she never was what most people in general society perceive as "plus-sized". If she wants to speak out for body/size acceptance that is great and valuable, and she even can be an ally for fat acceptance. But honestly, at least for me she cannot/ never will be some kind of role model when it comes to accepting your body at any size because as a conventionally (very) beautiful and midsized to thin woman her experiences are just very, very different from my experiences.... There is a huge difference between asking society to accept someone the size of Crystal Renn and someone who is much larger than her."* (Mona)

These considerations made by Fatshionistas indicate that, solely from facing persuasion attempts, consumers may not be able to identify an agent's representativeness. It is through the additional information that these individual consumers piece together in the collective that their persuasion knowledge develops to include knowledge about an agent's

trajectory and her identification with the goals of the collective, in this case, her stance regarding activism combatting the stigma. Consumers can then define whether a brand, advertising source or company can be considered representative of themselves or not.

Reach: In addition to an agent's representativeness, connected consumers ponder its reach – that is, the capacity the agent has to influence other relevant actors and make a positive difference towards reducing the stigma or promoting acceptance. The blogger Charlotte Cooper, who is a Fat Acceptance activist and Fat Studies scholar, considers Ditto's influence among high fashion designers as she writes about the launching of the singer's own line of clothing in partnership with UK retailer Evans: *“Not only did she work the paparazzi and the most prominent and fatphobic fashionistas in the world, she did it with humour, style, intelligence and talent. She created the most bizarre intersection of fat activism and pop culture that I have ever witnessed at the launch for her clothes range in July ... She broke all the rules. Oh yeah, and she's still an amazing singer. Keep doing what you're doing Beth, keep going up, up, up.”* (Charlotte Cooper)

Ditto keeps her radical roots in the fat acceptance activism. Therefore, consumers measure her reach by her capacity to make their case visible and their cause known in circles where it has been mostly absent (such as the luxury fashion industry). Other sources, who are not explicitly vocal about the movement's cause – or who do not explicitly identify with the FAM, are considered less efficient in supporting the collective's search for acceptance and inclusion in the fashion industry. The following quote illustrates such observations made by fat acceptance bloggers: *“The fact that models like Crystal and Lizzie aren't clinically fat gives the magazines who feature them in their issues and the designers who send them strutting down the runway the marketing opportunity to pay lip service to body diversity while still yet shielding themselves from claims that they're promoting an 'unhealthy lifestyle.’*

Caught somewhere in the contradictions are the majority of American women, who have yet to see themselves represented in fashion or print.” (Rachel).

Reliability: The collective of consumers we studied also keeps track of agents through time, noting those who have been consistent and reliable in their trajectory. Consumers value agents who do not “flip”, that is, those who, despite collecting the perks associated with participating in a fashion industry that privileges thin, still identify with the struggle of most plus-sized consumers who are excluded from the mainstream fashion market, and attempt to serve them. Statements such as the one quoted below, in which Beth Ditto confesses to still having trouble putting a fashionable outfit together despite her publicized friendship with fashion designers, increases stigmatized consumers’ perception of her reliability as a marketing agent: *“Some fat girl blogger was saying, ‘It’s cool that all these famous designers are making clothes for her, but they’re not going to make them for everyone.’ And the truth is, yes, they’re not going to make them for everyone. They make only a few pieces just to fit me [...]. For the rest, I have to make it work my own way. Maybe it wasn’t supposed to go round my shoulders because it was a skirt, but that’s how I wear it.”* (Beth Ditto, quoted by Lesley Kinzel)

While Ditto reinforces her identification with Fatshionistas, Renn makes a point of distancing herself from any particular collective who could see her as a representative, thus lowering stigmatized consumers’ perceptions of her reliability as an advertising source for marketing agents: *“I feel pressure probably more than any place from the public and the media. I think by placing a title on my head—which is plus-size—and then the picture that these people have created in their mind about what plus-size actually is, I basically fail you just with that, because I couldn’t possibly live up to that. That’s where my message is going: I want to get rid of titles because they demean women.”* (Crystal Renn).

In fact, when reacting to Renn's statement, bloggers and their audiences ponder her trajectory, and note the disconnect between her early proximity to the Fat Acceptance Movement and her intentions to distance from it after having become an endorser for luxury fashion brands: *"The fact of the matter is, she chose to be in the limelight, she chose to be a face of FA and plus-size modeling, and she appears to be acting in a way inconsistent with her FA roots. FA activists have a right to question it. If she didn't want attention, she should have withdrawn from the public eye altogether."* (A.T.)

Importantly, some bloggers and their audiences also adopt critical readings of Ditto, and supportive readings of Renn as advertising sources. In doing so, they mobilize different cultural cues associated with each agent, furthering discussions within the collective, and allowing individual members to commute between alternative coping modes for each persuasion attempt.

Topic Knowledge

In addition to agent knowledge, consumers who participate in online collectives develop topic knowledge that they apply to coping with persuasion attempts. They do so by sharing cultural resources within the collective. Cultural resources consist in the values, vocabularies, meanings, and templates for thinking and acting that are acquired through socialization and membership within a cultural group (Rindova, Dalpiaz, & Ravasi, 2011). As individuals immersed in a contemporary consumer culture, Fatshionistas have knowledge about the fashion industry, and are able to identify its most important players and their practices. These consumers are very knowledgeable about brands, designers, styles, retailers,

and fashion trends – they constantly engage with the fashion culture, even though most brands do not offer clothing in sizes larger than a 14.

“Last month I learned that Diane von Furstenberg had written a book, so I got my hands on a fresh copy and I’ve been reading it ever since. It’s called “The Woman I Wanted to Be.” When you think of the idea of an education, you might think of a classroom, but the older (and wiser) I get the more I understand that great people have incredible lessons to impart. Every woman is the sum of her influences.” (Jay Miranda)

“My desire and wish for the fashion industry is that people can feel empowered as they are (short, tall, wide, gaunt, whatever), rather than using fashion as a tool to propel self-hatred or mask unwanted features or hide “problem areas,” (but, I’m realistic: all consumer-based industries use insecurities to fuel buying of problem-solving solutions).” (Nicolette Mason)

In addition to being consumers, most Fatshionista bloggers and a large part of their audience belong to the subculture of the FAM. As fat acceptance activists, Fatshionistas have developed shared understandings of the political and societal implications of the stigma associated with fat. The FAM also provides these consumers with membership to a group whose members support critical, feminist, and political readings of any industry, including fashion. Fathionistas usually challenge the logics of the fashion industry, and find value in creating their own rules for dressing fashionably, as pointed out by one blogger: *“Colors that are even remotely close to my skin tone have been on my “No, absolutely no, I will not wear that” list for as long as I can remember, and even though I know the fashion authority and rule-enforcers will tag this as a major washing-you-out moment, it feels really good to me, and maybe that’s the only thing that matters.”* (Nicolette Mason)

In sum, because they collectively develop knowledge about the topic, fatshionistas may be better equipped to cope with fashion marketers' persuasion attempts than consumers who do not participate in online collectives.

Discussion

Our study examined how plus-sized consumers collectively develop their persuasion knowledge when persuasion attempts such as advertisements for luxury fashion brands feature plus-sized sources as persuasion agents. We found that when reading those types of persuasion attempts plus-sized consumers make use of their prior knowledge about the brand, the model, the location and even the situation that this persuasion attempt is placed in order to develop responses collectively.

Our findings went beyond the individual ways in which consumers deal with persuasion attempts, and showed that consumer collectives that congregate online can develop a collective reading of advertising sources activating their persuasion knowledge in a collective manner. We demonstrate that they do so by drawing from individual and cultural resources, which are mobilized through online discussions that culminate in the development of two reading modes (challenging and supportive) between which these consumers alternate.

Observing consumer interactions in the FAM and the Fatshionista collective longitudinally, our study has noted an evolutionary pattern for both. The trajectories of plus-sized celebrities and models as persuasive agents are also dynamic, and their changes are closely observed by plus-sized consumers. Consequently, the responses that this group of consumers collectively develops to persuasion attempts are not static. Rather, those responses are under constant negotiation among members of this interpretive community (Fish, 1980).

Further investigation could look into why and how fashion brands craft their persuasion efforts and why they choose to use plus-size sources as persuasion agents even though these brands do not offer a full range of sizes in their collection. Our findings suggest that future research in consumer's responses to persuasion attempts should particularly focused on the role of consumers who are able to obtain a level of symbolic capital that separates them from others. Given that stigmatized consumers such as the Fatshionistas, which are marginalized from the mainstream fashion market for being fat, are much more critical of representations of people who share the same stigma, future research should examine different kinds of consumer collectives. We believe that more research with actors less culturally stigmatized, situated in other consumer collectives (such as those adopting celiac and gluten free diets, premature babies' parents, among others) will be required to fully appreciate the range of persuasion knowledge consumers may develop as they cope with marketers' persuasion attempts.

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