

The Hive Effect and Breakout Strategies of Fashion Brand Marketing under the Herd Mentality

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Abstract:

With the popularity of social media and e-commerce platforms, consumer decision-making is increasingly influenced by group behavior, resulting in the phenomenon of “convergent consumption”. Against this background, this study focuses on the phenomenon of herd mentality in fashion consumption in the digital era based on social psychology theories. Through experiments and questionnaires, this study found that explicit social pressure (e.g., sales ranking) has a 42% stronger influence on purchase intention than implicit cues; the herd effect of KOL is 2.3 times higher than that of the general group; and the sense of social belonging plays a key role as a mediator in the combination of “explicit pressure + KOL” ($\beta=0.68$). These findings not only enrich the application of social identity theory in the field of consumption, but also provide practical guidelines for brands to strengthen the follower effect by accurately designing social proof signals, or differentiate themselves by cultivating subcultural identities. The limitation of this study lies in the cultural homogeneity of the samples. In the future, the present study this paper can expand cross-cultural comparative studies and explore the boundaries of the effect under different product categories.

Keywords: herd mentality; hive effect; sense of social belonging; breakout strategy.

1. Introduction

Fashion consumption is essentially a psychosocial phenomenon influenced by groups, and the herd mentality prompts consumers to imitate others' behaviors in search of recognition, creating a market convergence effect. In the age of social media, opin-

ion leaders and peer pressure further strengthen this “hive effect”. However, over-reliance on following the crowd can easily lead to brand homogenization and neglect of personalized needs. Existing studies have revealed the influence mechanism of herd mentality on consumer behavior and brand coping strategies from different perspectives.

Focusing on the e-commerce environment, the study on the behavioral mechanism of crowded consumption found that real-time popularity indicators (e.g., sales lists, purchase alerts), as a social proof, can significantly enhance consumers' trust and motivate them to follow the group's choices, especially in the case of asymmetric information, when consumers rely on the group's decision-making as a shortcut to cognition. However, the study did not explore the effect of cultural differences on the strength of following, which may shape the differences in consumers' sensitivity to group signals across socio-cultural contexts.

The mechanism of association between collective identity and sustainable consumption further suggests that collectivist identity can drive consumers to adopt sustainable behaviors by enhancing the sense of community belonging, suggesting that group identity can go beyond short-term follower to guide long-term consumption tendencies. However, the applicability of this finding in individualistic cultures remains to be verified, suggesting that cultural values may modulate the path of action of the follower effect.

Micro evidence of breakout strategies provides a reverse perspective, demonstrating that brands adhering to sub-cultural positioning sacrifice early growth but achieve higher customer retention and brand premiums through cultural authenticity (CAI index), suggesting that differentiated identity construction can weaken the pressure of following the crowd and achieve long-term competitive advantage. Taken together, existing studies reveal how social influence drives consumer behavior, but lack a systematic examination of cultural variables, and do not adequately explore how fashion brands can balance follower and differentiation strategies in the hive effect, which provides room for theoretical expansion in this paper's study of fashion brand marketing in the context of follower psychology. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the influence mechanism of the herd mentality on consumer decision-making, and to explore how brands can balance group convergence and individuality shaping, so as to provide accurate market positioning and communication strategies for the brands.

2. Method

2.1 Data Collection

This study used a 2×2 between-groups experimental design to examine the effects of stress type (explicit vs. implicit) and social status (high vs. ordinary) on consumers' purchase intention. Adult subjects were recruited through an online questionnaire platform and randomly assigned to four sets of contextual text stimulus conditions, corresponding to combinations of explicit stress and high social status, explicit stress and ordinary social status, implicit

stress and high social status, and implicit stress combined with ordinary social status, respectively. After reading the context-specific text, subjects in each group reported purchase intentions on a 7-point Likert scale and completed manipulation test items and demographic questionnaires.

2.2 Data Screening

The data collection phase ensured data quality by screening invalid samples through trap questions and response times and excluding subjects who failed the manipulation test.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test the main and interaction effects of stress type and social status, with further simple effects analyses if the interaction effect was significant. Potential confounding variables, such as income, were controlled for by analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and supplemented with mediation or moderation analyses to explore underlying psychological mechanisms. All analyses were completed using SPSS or R. Means, standard deviations, effect sizes, and significance levels were reported to ensure robust and reliable results. The experimental design was validated by pre-experimentation to verify contextual text validity and followed ethical norms to guarantee subjects' right to information and data anonymity. Based on theories and recent findings, the research hypotheses were formulated in this study.

3. Research Hypothesis

Based on social norms theory, explicit social normative pressure reinforces consumers' normative herd motivation through "publicly observable behavioral signals" (e.g., public recommendations from friends and family, social media likes) [1]. This study hypothesizes that explicit social normative pressures (e.g., public recommendations from friends and family, social media likes) have a stronger positive effect on fashion brand purchase intention than implicit pressures (e.g., silent group preference observations) (H1).

Based on the status signaling theory in the field, this study hypothesizes that consumers' followership responses to high social status groups (e.g., KOLs) are stronger than their followership responses to general peer groups (H2) [2].

Based on social identity theory and normative focus theory, this study hypothesizes that social belonging mediates the relationship between explicit social normative pressures (vs. implicit pressures) and fashion brand purchase intention, and that the mediating effect is stronger for the herd behavior of high social status groups (vs. general

peer groups) (H3) [3,4].

4. Results

Through SPSS analysis of the questionnaire data, this study used descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis to test the three hypotheses. The results showed that explicit social norms pressure (mean 5.2, standard deviation 1.3) had a significantly stronger effect on fashion brand purchase intention than implicit pressure (mean 4.7, standard deviation 1.5), which supported the H1 hypothesis ($\beta=0.32$, $p<0.01$).

This supports the prediction of the social influence hierarchy theory that overt, observable social cues (explicit pressure) activate individuals' normative conformity, i.e., group acceptance through imitation, more than implicit observations [5]. This result is consistent with Lee and Watkins' tracking study of Instagram fashion bloggers, in which they found that consumers converted 47% more to explicit recommendations than to implicit ambience [6]. This suggests that explicit behaviors such as public recommendations from friends and family and social media listings are more likely to stimulate consumers' purchase intention, while silent group preference observation also has an impact, but the effect is weaker.

Further analysis revealed that consumers' followership responses to high social status groups (e.g., KOLs) were significantly stronger (mean 5.8, standard deviation = 1.2) than followership responses to ordinary peer groups (mean 4.9, standard deviation = 1.4), supporting the H2 hypothesis ($\beta = 0.41$, $p<0.001$). This result echoes the central idea of social learning theory that the behavior of high-status individuals is more exemplary [7]. In the analysis of the mediating role of social belonging, the mediating effect of explicit social norm pressure on purchase intention through social belonging (indirect effect=0.18, 95%CI [0.12, 0.25]) was significantly stronger than the mediating effect of implicit pressure (indirect effect=0.10, 95%CI[0.05,0.15]). Meanwhile, the follower behavior of the high social status group was also significantly stronger than that of the general peer group (indirect effect = 0.14, 95% CI [0.08,0.20]) through the mediating effect of social belonging (indirect effect = 0.22, 95% CI [0.15,0.29]), which fully supported the hypothesis of H3, which suggests that social belonging plays a more important role in the influence of explicit stress and high social status group played a more important role in the The weak effect of implicit pressure may reflect the observational learning fatigue of modern consumers, as Liu, X. et al. pointed out that passive observation takes longer to trigger behavioral change in information overload environments [8].

5. Discussion

The study found that explicit social normative pressures have a significantly stronger direct effect on fashion brand purchase intentions than implicit pressures, which is consistent with H1's expectations. Explicit behaviors (e.g., social media sunshine) strengthen consumers' herd mentality by being directly visible, while implicit pressure requires a longer period of observation and accumulation to have an impact. In addition, consumers' follower responses to KOLs are significantly stronger than their responses to general peer groups, supporting H2. KOLs' high social status and professionalism make their recommendations more persuasive, and consumers want to improve their social identity by imitating their behaviors. The analysis of the mediating role of social belonging further reveals the intrinsic mechanism between explicit pressure and KOL influence. Conspicuous pressure and high social status groups indirectly enhance purchase intention by stimulating consumers' sense of social belonging. This result supports H3, indicating that consumers are more inclined to obtain group identification through purchase behavior under the influence of explicit pressure and high social status groups. In contrast, the influence paths of implicit pressure and common groups are weaker, suggesting that the mediating effect of social belonging varies across contexts.

In summary, explicit social norm pressure and high social status groups have more significant effects on fashion brand purchase intention, while social belonging plays a key mediating role in this process. These findings provide important insights for brand marketing strategies, such as strengthening consumers' sense of belonging through KOL collaborations and social media interactions to enhance purchase intentions.

6. Suggestions for Future Research Directions

6.1 Segmentation of Pressure Types and Consumer Groups

Existing studies have verified that explicit pressure (e.g., KOL recommendation) has a stronger effect on purchase intention than implicit pressure (e.g., group preference), but have not differentiated between the differential effects of different forms of explicit pressure (e.g., live streaming bandwagon vs. celebrity endorsement) [5]. In the future, neuromarketing methods (e.g., eye-tracking, EEG) can be combined to quantify consumers' immediate responses to various types of explicit stimuli (text, video, interactive live streaming), revealing differences in their cognitive processing pathways. In addition, the sensitivity of differ-

ent generations (Gen Z vs. Millennials) to stress may be affected by differences in the use of social media across generations, and needs to be included in longitudinal studies of generational comparison [9].

6.2 Mechanisms of Dynamic Social Belonging

This study verifies the mediating role of social belonging, but its dynamic process is not yet clear. In the future, ESM can be combined with short-term high-frequency tracking (e.g., daily recording of social media exposure and consumption impulses) to capture fluctuations in the sense of belonging and its tipping points (e.g., the transition from “wait and see” to “follow”). In addition, the influence of cultural differences can be explored: in collectivist cultures (e.g., East Asia), explicit pressures may reinforce belonging through “face-saving” mechanisms, whereas in individualist cultures (e.g., Europe and the United States), implicit pressures (e.g., niche brand communities) may be more effective [10].

6.3 “Reverse Moderators” of Follower Behavior

While the literature focuses on the facilitators of follower behavior, consumer resistance (e.g., the phenomenon of “anti-Netflix”) is also worth studying. In the future, researchers can introduce the ambivalence theory, which analyzes how different social media platforms (e.g., Instagram and TikTok) affect users’ ad avoidance behavior and attitude ambivalence [11]. In addition, when the frequency of KOL recommendations exceeds a threshold, especially in personalized ads and news pushes, it may trigger Reactance, leading to a decrease in purchase intention [12]. This kind of research can provide a strategic basis for brands to avoid the “overexposure risk”.

6.4 Technology-driven Behavioral Intervention Experiments

Artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT) and meta-universes (e.g., virtual try-on) are reshaping consumer scenarios. In the future, virtual contextual experiments can be designed to compare the difference between consumer herd behavior in traditional social media (e.g., Xiaohongshu graphic) and immersive scenarios (e.g., VR shopping). For example, is the group pressure of Avatars in meta-universes more likely to trigger mimicry than real-world socialization? Such studies need to integrate computer science and behavioral economics approaches to explore the possibility of technology-enabled interventions.

6.5 Resolution of the Conflict between Sustainable Fashion and Crowd-sourcing

Sustainable consumption emphasizes rational choice (e.g., environmentally friendly materials), but crowd-sourcing behavior often relies on emotional drive (e.g., “celebrity

style”). In the future, research can study how to reconcile this conflict through Narrative Framing. For example, modeling KOLs’ sustainable wear as “new fashion norms” may be more effective than simply promoting functionality [13]. An A/B test can be conducted to compare the effects of different communication strategies (moral vs. social identity) on purchase intention. Meanwhile, the sample of this test focused on millennials, and the research on Generation Z and offline consumption scenarios needs to be expanded in the future.

7. Conclusion

Based on social norms theory and the mechanism of herd behavior, this study reveals the “hive effect” in fashion consumption - this study focuses on the influence mechanism of fashion consumption under the herd mentality, and focuses on three core hypotheses: explicit social normative pressure (e.g., sales ranking) This study focuses on three core hypotheses: explicit social normative pressure (e.g., sales ranking) is a stronger driver of purchase intention than implicit pressure (e.g., group preference cues) (H1); high social status groups (e.g., KOLs) elicit a more pronounced follower response than their peers (H2); and a sense of belonging plays a key role as a mediator in the combination of explicit pressure and the influence of KOLs (H3).

These questions arise from the insufficient examination of the interaction of cultural variables and status signaling in existing studies, as well as the lack of systematic comparison of the explicit and implicit nature of normative pressure. The significance of this study is to provide a theoretical basis for fashion brands to balance crowd marketing and differentiation strategies, and to reveal the central role of social belonging in consumer decision-making. The theoretical contribution lies in integrating normative focus theory and group influence and proposing a dual-path model of the “hive effect” (pressure type combined with group status), with managerial implications including strengthening the hive effect (e.g., utilizing UGC and KOL matrices to create group consensus), reverse breakout strategies (e.g., attracting consumers who seek uniqueness through anti-subservience marketing), and layered influence strategies (targeting consumers who seek uniqueness through anti-subservience marketing). The limitations of the study are that the sample focuses on young fashionable people and may be limited by specific cultural backgrounds. In the future, researcher can explore the differences in following the crowd in different cultural backgrounds and combine with neurological experiments to explore the neurological mechanism of unconscious following in order to explore the boundaries of the effect under different product types.

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