

Major Research Paper

The Effects Of Social Media On E-Commerce: Social Influence & Consumer
Behavior Within The Parent Community

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ABSTRACT

Social media channels are being used as a way to market products and services. Some of those who utilize the advantages of these social media channels are parents who depend on the opinions of other parents to provide them with genuine reviews on e-commerce products and services. In examining the effects social media has on e-commerce businesses through social influences and consumer behavior, it is evident that social media influencers impact the purchases people are making. In this paper, I explore a variety of theories that provide evidence of social media influencers having an effect on purchasing behaviour. I will argue that parent bloggers have committed to creating an interactive and close-knit parent community through their personal anecdotes and posts. Thus, as parent bloggers maintain this community, they enable new levels of trust, affecting the purchasing behaviors of their followers.

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To my father Samir, thank you for encouraging me to pursue this master's degree. Although you passed away before I was able to show you this final research paper, just know I pushed myself to complete this degree in your memory.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Author's Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Dedication	v
Table of Contents	vi
1. Introduction	5
2. Literature Review	7
3. Methods of Collection & Analysis	16
4. Parent Bloggers & Purchasing Behaviors.....	22
5. Purchasing Behaviours & Sponsorships	27
6. Parent Bloggers & The Impact Of E.W.O.M.....	31
7. Conclusions & Further Areas Of Research.....	35

Introduction

The emergence of the digital age has impacted the way we access our information, as the access to any type of information is in the palm of their hands. In accordance to its emergence, many new trends were introduced in marketing for e-commerce business' allowing a more accessible way to shop; with mobile devices in the market, the e-commerce industry will only grow as more and more individuals are adopting to shop online.

Technology is playing a crucial role in the culture of entrepreneurship, as digital tools are allowing small business owners to overcome traditional barriers in seizing business opportunities. E-commerce has become a universal option for entrepreneurs; before the internet small business retailers had a tougher time setting up their own brick and mortar retail business as it involved a lot more time and money (Bose, 2017). E-commerce has changed the world of retail as small business owners can set up an online shop on Amazon, Etsy and Ebay and launch their own branded e-commerce shop for an extremely low cost. With the rise of e-commerce business', the advancements within online shopping has caused effect on the way individuals utilize social media as business owners can market their products for free with its use (Bose, 2017).

Using social media as a way to market e-commerce businesses through well-known social media influencers who increase brand awareness, drive engagement and boost conversions. When influencers vouch for a brand, they help gain the trust of a target audience generating buzz and

interest. According to Forbes, influencer marketing can be defined as a form of marketing in which focus is placed on specific individuals rather than a target market as a whole (Beer, 2017). Influencer marketing it is often associated with a celebrity on television or in advertisements, however the rise of social media has opened up new ways for brands to connect with their consumers more directly and organically (Beer, 2017). This tactic has become popular within digital marketing because it allows brands to interact and connect with their consumers on a more personal level, creating connections and credibility. As a result of these tactics, social media brand influences are on a rise and have become one of the biggest marketing trends within the past two years.

With the rise of social media influencers, brands can no longer overlook one of the most powerful influencers: the parent blogger. Sixty-six percent of mothers say word-of-mouth marketing is their number one trusted source of information. Thus, these social media influencers are used to integrate brand communications and marketing campaigns in their daily blogs (Beer, 2017). With its ability to provide a quick and convenient checkout process, two out of three parents now choose to utilize shopping from online platforms (Beer, 2017). More and more parents are depending on the opinions of their favourite parent blogger to provide them with genuine reviews on products or services. Often reviewing the product or service on their well-followed platforms, parent bloggers are interactive and committed to providing genuine reviews to their followers enabling new levels of trust. Parenting bloggers are beginning to move beyond reviews for advertisers and are even brought into corporation's marketing teams.

“Companies have gotten better at realizing that the objective shouldn't be to get your story in

front of moms. It should be to have your story become part of hers; so that when moms are in digital environments, their engagement with that you're doing is organic and authentic (Krashinsky, 2014, 1).

In examining the effects social media has on e-commerce businesses through social influences and consumer behavior, it is evident that social media influencers impact the purchases people are making (Beer, 2017). Thus, the primary question I will answer is: how do parent bloggers on Instagram try to influence purchasing decisions for non-sponsored and sponsored posts?

In order to address this question, I will examine the Instagram pages of two parent bloggers: Cat and Nat (@catandnat) as well as Ilana Wiles (@mommymyshorts). By examining these pages, I will determine whether their posts harbour qualities that are based on three theories: Social Identity Theory, Social Comparison Theory and Electronic Word Of Mouth Marketing.

Literature Review

The rise of social media influencers has opened doors for e-commerce business owners to use as leverage in promoting and marketing their products or services (Liu, 2015). The focus on past research regarding these impacts is important in shaping my research about online parent communities (Liu, 2015). Influencer parents are able to develop trusting relationships with their followers by posting photos and stories that other parents can easily relate to. Unlike traditional influencer promotions, parent influencers are often able to create a sense of community with their followers, enabling an online relationship and common interest platform that creates a

development of trust from their followers. Thus, this creates an ideal environment for promoting products and/or services (Liu, 2015). The following literature review will focus on three specific theories that will shape the understanding of how social media influencers are able to affect the purchasing decisions of their followers.

Social Identity Theory

Introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1979), Social Identity Theory argues that a person's concept of self derives from the groups a person belongs to. An individual has identities that are associated with affiliated groups such as social class, family and nationality (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The interpersonal behaviour will be influenced by the intergroup behaviour as individuals have the tendency to maintain self-identity and distinctiveness by their membership in a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In approaching communication within social media, individuals are guided by social identities where group communicative processes are likely to happen. The Social Identity theory, states that an individual will categories themselves in social groups that he/she feels they belong in. In applying the Social Identity theory within social media, social identities are activated to drive intergroup communicative processes. Social and group identities may be a part of the social media environment itself, and the use of visual cues allows for the result of social identities to cure together into a given medium. In this case, Social Identity Theory is the basis of the framework in understanding parent influencers and the way they are able to build a strong trust network that will result in enabling other parents to act and think on the basis of their identity as a parent (Carr, 2017) . Followers of these parent influencers may identify themselves as more than parents in other contexts, however on the medium, they are

guided by their social categorization of being a parent rather than other facets of their identity (example, cat lover, CEO , wife) Social media can be seen as a medium in building these social identities in the case of parent influencers (Carr, 2017).

Social Media often provides an outlet for parents to vent through their blogs, share stories about their children, and connect with other parents (Bailey, 2009). Once the use of brand influencers for marketing e-commerce platforms began to rise, so did the attention of parent bloggers, as they became more than just the individual who blogged about the details of their family lives (Bailey, 2009). Parent bloggers began to revolutionize and adopt the habits of higher-profile bloggers (Bailey, 2009). They contact brands for sponsorship, rather than waiting for brands to approach them and would integrate social media platforms (Bailey, 2009). This source of promotion and advertising has been successful due to the relationships that parents are able to build that these parent bloggers have advanced from receiving free products to review to now having brands invest significant money in exchange for endorsements (Mendillo, 2018). For example, The Walt Disney Company flew several mother bloggers to Hawaii to experience its new resort and give an honest review of their experience, thus raising the question of why brands are trusting parent bloggers to endorse their brands, and how much power they truly have on their followers (Mendillo, 2018).

According to Liu, “influencers on an online social network can affect consumer-purchasing decisions among followers with the use of Electronic Word-of-Mouth Marketing” (2015, p.36). Identifying such influencers has become increasingly important, as trust plays a critical role in a user’s decision to purchase a specific product or service (Liu, 2015). Users in an online social

network increasingly trust their peers who essentially have the same interests and preferences, which forms a user trust network. Nielsen's (2012) "Global Survey of Trust in Advertising" states that 92% of consumers say they trusted word-of-mouth recommendations rather than branded communications and advertising. Trusted influencers lead consumers to accept recommendations and make consumer purchase decisions. The study by Liu (2015) focuses on identifying effective influencers by understanding the dimensions of trust, domain, and time. Liu (2015) focuses on their influential power status and identifies emerging influencers, holding influencers, and vanishing influencers. Based on social identity theory, I was able to develop a framework around parent influencers and the way they are able to build a community, thus contributing to the formed trust network. Social identity theory corresponds to circles of group membership and may trigger an individual to think or act on the basis of their social identity (Liu, 2015). In social media pages run by parents, it is evident that a group was formed whose followers also identify as parents and closely relate to various aspects such as their daily blog updates and family stories (Liu, 2015). As the community or network forms within these social media platforms, so does the building of trust as followers of an influencer will closely engage and read their posts as they group themselves within the same social identity. Therefore, if a parent influencer posts short stories and anecdotes to their Instagram posts, their followers who may also relate to the stories of being a parent will engage with the post. Engagement may range from "liking" a post to commenting on it, to even reposting it on their own personal pages. Eventually as an influencers followers grow, a community and network grows creating a basis for these followers to be influenced by the posts and decisions of the influencer they are following because they recognize themselves as sharing the same social identity.

Attribution Theory: Electronic Word-Of-Mouth

Introduced by Fritz Heider (1958), Attribution Theory attempts to understand the behavior of others by the attributions of their feelings, beliefs and intentions to them. It attempts to explain the interpretive process by the judgements people make about the cause of their behavior and the behavior of others. Attribution theory explains the impact of electronic word of mouth and other marketing practices on persuasion (Laczniak et al., 2001). Attribution theory describes how an individual can advocate a certain position (Kelley & Mizerski et al, 1978). The individual would attribute this review and consumers or followers would assume that the communicator only reviewed the product because they received incentives or free products in exchange (Mizerski & Green,1978). Attribution theory predicts that the more the consumer relates to the communicator's review about a product, the more consumers will perceive that the communicator is credible in their opinions (Lui, et al., 2015). As a result, consumers have confidence that the review of that product promoted is genuine thus persuading the consumer in purchasing the product or service. Attribution theory also states that when a consumer suspects that the communicator's positive review has been caused and influenced by factors such as, a paid endorsement or an exchange of free products for a review, the consumer will feel discouraged, lied to and will not be persuaded to purchase the reviewed item or service (Lui, et al., 2015)

Social media platforms also offer grounds for Electronic Word-of-Mouth communication (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Consumers use social media platforms to communicate their opinions on products or services. Electronic Word-of-Mouth communication can contain both

positive and negative reviews made by influencers about a product or company through their online platform and/or social media page (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Research in consumers' purchasing decisions has shown that people rely on and trust online reviews rather than traditional media (newspapers, television, commercials etc.) (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Social media content in the form of online reviews influence consumer-purchasing decisions. For instance, researchers have found that 91% of respondents stated that, "they follow and consult online reviews, blogs, and social media platforms before purchasing a product or service" (Zamanian & Khanlari, 2015, p. 25). It is evident that influence through Electronic Word-of-Mouth communication has been found to be a more trustworthy and persuasive way to sell to consumers when compared to the traditional ways of marketing service (Zamanian & Khanlari, 2015). The current influence on purchase decisions through word-of-mouth communication extended to virtual settings as the Internet and social media platforms created an open space for reviews and opinions (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). It is easier to retrieve a large number of Electronic Word-of-Mouth messages and analyze their characteristics through bodies of text unlike traditional word of mouth communication that can often be altered or misinterpreted (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Electronic Word-of-Mouth posts affect consumers as social media influencers may choose to recommend a product to followers when their review was positive (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). However, negative reviews from social media influencers would have detrimental effects on followers who choose to trust the social media influencers' opinion and review of a product (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Thus, the Electronic Word-of-Mouth Theory can further explain the effects that Social Media influencers may have on the opinion of products and services on their followers (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

Social Comparison Theory Online

Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954) argues that people have a natural desire to compare themselves to other individuals in order to see how their opinions measure up (Burke, 2017). Essentially, Social Comparison Theory states that individuals will compare their standards to others. Social Comparison Theory helps explain why consumers compare themselves with individuals who perceive similarities in their choices and self-evaluation. This results in product consumption that makes it easy to compare to others. An example Kang and Park-Poaps (2011) gave was clothing purchases, as it is a visual product that consumers could easily compare to others. If a social media influencer has the same fashion style, one is more likely to enquire on where their clothing purchases were made. In my research on parent social media influencers, it is evident that most of their followers are also parents who relate to the same lifestyle, thus enabling and encouraging the community.

Social Comparison Theory on online platforms is, "the degree to which an individual tends to compare his or her opinions with others, and be influenced by others, particularly when shopping online" (Shen, 2012: 201). This occurs when followers feel they have a bond with an online page or source and accept that the information they provide about a product is genuine and true (Burke, 2017). When an online consumer wants to purchase a product and service, and is unfamiliar with it, they will most likely look for online reviews and/or sources that would reassure the consumer of whether they should purchase the product/service or not (Luo, 2005). This information is paralleled by consumer online reviews such as parent bloggers who are able

to influence their followers into purchasing or not purchasing a product. In the online world, consumers have a higher chance of purchasing a product when the same product was purchased by a social media influencer that the consumer follows and trusts (Wu and Lee 2008). This is a further example of how social comparison can increase a consumer's willingness to purchase a product (Bearden and Rose, 1990). The social comparison theory would support the idea that a social media influencer is a person that individuals would seek to compare themselves to. Individuals who follow social media influencers tend to do so because they share and exhibit similar characteristics and lifestyles to themselves and assume that what the social media influencers recommend for them to purchase would also benefit them (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). As a result, brands seek out social media influencers who would resonate with their product and ask them to review or feature them on their pages.

Imagined Communities: Social Media & Parent Bloggers CatandNat and Mommyshorts

Parents began using social media platforms as a way to share stories about their children and families in hopes to connect with other parents who may share a mutual understanding of parenthood (Bailey, 2009). Howard Rheingold introduces the concept of a Virtual Community in his 1993 book. When the Internet started to become an easily accessible platform, Rheingold stated that it was the “first time we saw the web, and wanted to make communities there” (Rheingold 2000, 334). Rheingold described the Internet as a place that can establish communities and challenged the conventional ideas about connecting with people in the old forms of media (via phone call, snail mail etc). Mark Lemley stated that “We speak of the Internet in spatial terms, and in certain respects users may experience some aspects of the

internal as a physical space (Lemley, 2003: 523). Thus, there was a mixing of both a physical and virtual world. We do not necessarily leave our physical surrounding but we enter another place virtually. “We must remember that going to Cyberspace, unlike previous great emigrations to the frontier, hardly requires us to leave where we have been”, (Barlow, 1995). All of the mentioned authors describe an original concept introduced by Anthropologist Benedict Anderson who fathered the term, “imagined communities” to describe the way individuals form a community that is imagined because the members may never know fellow-members, meet them or hear of them but in their minds they share a similar identity and the same community. It is valid to regard to Anderson's concept when discussing online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. For example, Facebook pages that can be seen as a personal blog can be considered our virtual home. We post comments on other individuals posts to let them know we stopped by, and one may visit a website or blog in the same way we visit physical places.

Healy introduces a concept that speaks of the Internet as a way for individuals to find balance between separation and connectedness, resulting in understanding the emergence of imagined communities on the web. Rheingold states that one of the explanations for this is the hunger for virtual communities grow around the world as more and more public spaces disappear from our real lives (Rheingold 2000, 362). The Internet creates a type of community that is not limited by geographical boundaries and is able to reach a whole variety of participants. Anderson's theory is clear on this point as he states that, “All communities larger than primordial villages of face to face contact are imagined”, (Anderson 1991, 6). In these liminal spaces, individuals are

participating and engaging in online communities in a space where they can become who they need or want to be.

Amiee Morrison states that there is a, “widespread distribution of nuclear families into geographical disparate suburban communities, who are isolated from existing social networks, and young families who settle into communities far from their families of origin”, (Morrison, 2010). Due to this geographical spread, women are finding themselves without the support they need that were traditionally in place (mothers, sisters , or female family members) who would assist in the transition of motherhood (Morrison, 2010). Parent bloggers created a way to cut the distance and become a way for woman to share stories and receive advice from those they meet through personal “mommy blogs” or social media pages.

METHODS OF COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

In my analysis I will look at the basis of the three theories mentioned and will be focusing on collecting the appropriate data through the social media platform of Instagram, through methods of participation observation and by analyzing images and texts posted by both parent influencers @mommyshorts and @catandnat. The selected parent bloggers were chosen due to their large number of followers (over a hundred thousand followers) and the use of key words, such as “parent” “blogger” “mother” “kids” that are found in their Instagram bio which is a short page description. I monitored the interaction and comments that are shared, as well as what type of posts received the most interaction and activity. I have chosen to strictly observe the

platforms of Instagram as recent research states that parents tend to utilize this social media platform most frequently (Duggan, et al., 2015). By observing the Instagram pages of both parent bloggers, I was able to gather various data samples over a total of four weeks. I had observed their pages once in the morning and once in the afternoon and observed any new comments or posts. Considering “observation without intervention”, observation via social media has allowed for a well-established avenue for research (CIRT, 2018). I will be conducting a comparative analysis of the parent bloggers I have sampled. The data that has been collected will revolve around the methods of social influence between parent bloggers and their followers with a particular focus towards posts that are sponsored. The data collected from the two parent blogger Instagram accounts will be drawn from three key posts. The posts include an image, a caption and interaction comments from their followers. The totaled six Instagram posts will be manually selected by identifying the top three most interacted based posts from the start of January 2017 to January 2018. Screenshots of those selected posts will be taken via the Instagram platform and will include the visibility of comments, images, likes and captions. Due to the length of the MRP, only six images will be analyzed in order to deeply examine the social influence techniques of each parent blogger for the Instagram posts that are selected. I will be using a visual semiotic analysis and discussion surrounding the six posts collected from the Instagram pages of @mommyshorts and @catandnat. By using visual semiotic analysis I will be able to analyze the way visual images communicate a message. It will allow me to breakdown which six images I choose to analyze as I will determine what images provide a context that may result in followers inquiring about the purchases of certain items or services.

This MRP will offer an analysis of some of the ways parent bloggers are able to successfully influence the purchasing decisions of their followers through their emotionally-driven posts. The literature that has been reviewed will allow for a better understanding of the analysis of these posts.

I will be using a semi-structured observation that will allow me to observe specific information and various aspects that are naturally occurring without predetermined ideas. I will be observing naturally occurring comments by the followers of both @mommyshorts and @catandnat that will be found under their Instagram posts. I will then be examining the differences in interaction between sponsored and non-sponsored posts as well as the predetermined captions added by the users @mommyshorts and @catandnat under each of their photos. With a semi-structured observation I will be able to pre-plan what I observe, also keeping in mind that this form of observation will allow me to observe areas on these social media platforms that are both naturally occur and pre-determined by the user , thus creating a more diverse pool of data collection.

Findings and Discussion:

This section provides a visual semiotic analysis and discussion surrounding posts collected during the selection process. The data collected is discussed using the following categories (a) image (b) image and caption relationship (c) intended sponsorship message (d) blogger-follower relationship and interaction. Following this analysis, each section will provide an overview of the importance of the posts and the conclusions drawn from this analysis process. Within this analysis I have chosen two prominent parent bloggers who have over 100k followers on

Instagram. Instagram influences @catandnat as well as @mommymyshorts are the two parent bloggers I have chosen to analyze and discuss, as both exhibit characteristics that further confirm my initial observation.

Forming a Trusted Community

One of Cat & Nat's Instagram posts regarding the struggle of body acceptance and weight loss as a mom represents a struggle that perhaps other parents can easily relate to.



(catandnat, 2018)

Receiving over 10,000 likes and over 1000 comments, this post is an example of how open and vulnerable Cat & Nat were willing to make themselves to a community of parents who may also

closely relate. This is a tactic for community building and the building of trust and relationship with their followers (Barlow, 1995). There were several comments written by their followers who felt the need to express how much they related to their post.

(@ArianaBat): “Love this so much!! I feel like we all feel like we have to be “trying” to lose weight. Like when we talk to people we have to tell them that we’re trying to be less fat. And make excuses for why we are. Like who cares!!! If we genuinely love ourselves. We will find someone who loves us too. And then that’s really all you need. So yeah, I think you’re both so beautiful, and if I’m honest.. I am so jealous of a delish curvy body like yours NAT! My junk is not in my trunk or in any of the good places. but I cant help that. So I am done explaining myself. I’ve had 3 kids that are still small not even in school yet. And I like food. What...? “ (catandnat, 2018)

(@bodilwalke): Someone said to me recently “when you look back at photos of your mom in your childhood you don’t think damn my mom was hot, you think about the memories you made” that is all I needed to hear! My kids will remember the fun we had not that I was feeling insecure in a bathing suit and there was no photos of us together. Of course I’m nowhere near my ideal but right now I’m okay with that and just being the best mom I can be!

In this example, it is clear that their followers expressed how much they were able to relate to a post about the tribulations and experience of being a parent (catandnat, 2018). These examples

show the results of building online communities through social media platforms and the ways parent bloggers are able to create this sense of belonging and community with other parents who may share similar experiences while receiving a sense of support and belonging.

Ilana Wiles, also known as @mommyshorts, on Instagram posted a photo of her daughters and an update of her current process in moving houses.



She expressed the difficulty of purging old items and creating a fresh start for her and her family.

Once again, in a similar stance to the post by Cat & Nat, Ilana had posted an update on her life that some of her followers can closely relate to. Some of the comments left by her followers expressed a sense of understanding and relation (mommyshorts, 2018).

@ conard_rachel We just moved across 2 states, but are finally getting settled. Husband was out of town for 2 weeks during the move, so it was me on my own with 3 little ones 😬 No fun, but good luck to you all and I can't wait to see how your apartment looks after!

@Lyssclem Have been slowly purging since having baby #2

In cross examining the two IG accounts of @catandnat and @mommymyshorts, it is evident that there are similar patterns within the comment sections, as their followers describe their understanding of identifying as a parent with the daily life updates of their favourite parent bloggers. Based on Social Identity Theory, I was able to develop a framework around parent influencers, thus contributing to a formed trust network. The social identity theory relates to circles of group membership (Liu, 2015). Within these social media pages run by bloggers like Cat & Nat and Ilana Wiles, it is evident that their group of followers were formed who also identify as parents and are able to closely relate to various aspects such as their daily blog updates and family stories (Liu, 2015). As the community or network forms within these social media platforms, so does the building of trust.

Parent Bloggers & Purchasing Behaviours

As a community forms within the social media pages of parent bloggers and the foundation of trust is formed, and thus their loyal followers begin to have the desire to compare themselves to their favourite parent bloggers in order to see how their opinions measure up (Burke, 2017). Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954) argues that individuals will compare their own standards to others. In understanding this theory, we can note that followers

of these parent bloggers, will compare themselves with their favourite parent blogger to perceive similarities in their choices. Leading to self-evaluation this is the basis of creating a perfect environment for marketing products. Kang and Park-Poaps (2011) gave an example of clothing purchases, stating that if a social media influencer has the same fashion style as you do, you are more likely to enquire on where clothing purchases were made. Thus, it can be confirmed that most of the followers of parent bloggers are also parents who may relate to the same lifestyle, thus enabling and encouraging the community.

In one of Cat and Nat's recent posts on their Instagram page, they expressed the emotional struggle of being a parent, in the post highlighted below, Cat And Nat described the struggle of juggling their time with their kids. Once again, they use their posts as a way to create a sense of belonging and understanding from a community who closely relates to the emotional feelings of being a parent. Although this post had a very strong emotional message in regards to being a parent, it was hard to dismiss the comments posted that inquired about certain furnitures in the white bedroom, that provided a subtle example of how parent bloggers influence purchasing behaviours even if it is unintended (catandnat, 2018).



Some of the comments are as follows,

- *[Danielle_joanne](#) where did you get your light from?! It's stunning! 🥰*
- *[Haylsimkins](#) Where is that bed frame from? 🥰*

As stated by Festinger, The Social Comparison Theory on these online platforms, is “the degree to which an individual tends to compare his or her opinions with others, and be influenced, particularly when shopping online” (Shen, 2012: 201). Although this is not a direct promotion for a particular item, it is important to note that Cat & Nat’s followers formed such a bond with their online page that they inquire and accept information about a product that they assume is genuine and true (Burke, 2017). It is interesting to question, whether these followers would have been interested in some of the furniture found in the photo, if it was not posted by Cat and Nat themselves.

funnyvalentine where is the blanket from?

Similar to the photo posted by Cat & Nat, it is evident that although these posts do not blatantly promote products, there is still this subtle influence on the way they affect their followers purchasing behaviours. For example, some of the comments posted below these posts are often inquiries posted as comments regarding their interest in the products and services featured in their post.

Research shows that online opinions affect consumer purchase behavior (Luo, 2005). When an online consumer wants to purchase a product and service, and are unfamiliar with it, they will most likely look for online reviews and/or sources that would reassure the consumer of whether they should purchase the product/service or not (Luo, 2005). This information is paralleled by consumer online reviews such as parent bloggers who are able to influence their followers into purchasing or not purchasing a product. In the online world, consumers have a higher chance of purchasing a product when the same product was purchased by a social media influencer that the consumer follows and trusts (Wu and Lee 2008). This is a further example of how social comparison can increase a consumer's willingness to purchase a product (Bearden & Rose, 1990). The social comparison theory would support the idea that a social media influencer is a person that individuals would seek to compare themselves to. Individuals who follow social media influencers tend to do so because they share and inhabit similar characteristics and lifestyles to themselves and assume that what the social media influencers recommend for them to purchase would benefit them too (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). As a result of this, brands

seek out social media influencers who would resonate with their product and ask them to review or feature them on their pages.

Purchasing Behaviours and Sponsored Posts

As social media influencers, parent bloggers who have a significant amount of followers and follower interaction often receive opportunities of sponsorship. Sponsorship opportunities are usually done by big brands or companies who use their loyal followers to promote their product or service. As per Instagram and Facebook rules, sponsorships must be disclosed if posted thus creating this question of whether sponsored posts affect shopping behaviours in comparison to non-sponsored posts (Facebook, 2018). It is already evident earlier in this report that there are reasons to assume that parent bloggers have a profound effect on the purchasing behaviours of their followers. In following Cat&Nat and Ilana Wiles I was able to spot their sponsored posts and analyze whether similar comments are evident in product sponsored posts. In Ilana Wiles recent Instagram post @mommyshorts, she takes a photo of her and her daughter and a small bag of Godiva chocolates. Once again, Ilana uses the same tactic in her non-sponsored posts by providing an emotional detail of what it is like to be a parent on a plane with young kids and how that has changed since being able to indulge in some Godiva chocolates (mommyshorts, 2018). She later states that she is holding a contest for any moms who feel like they deserve to indulge in some chocolate and to comment her photo below to enter.



With 2,798 likes and hundreds of comments it is clear that her engagement levels on this post are at an average engagement rate as her other non-sponsored posts (mommyshorts, 2018). It was interesting to find her need to add an emotional element to this photo enticing her followers to try and connect with what she is posting about in order to slide in a sponsored post in a non-commercial sense. A lot of social media influencers often come across as “commercialized” as their posts are constantly sponsored and pushing on products and services to others. However, Ilana masked the “commercialized” effect of this sponsorship by adding an element in her caption that parents can relate too. For example “A few years ago i would have never called a plane ride with kids anything close to enjoyable[...] when I took out some @godiva masterpieces that I had stowed away in my bag, making my flight much sweeter. The comments following

made it clear that although this was a sponsored post Ilana tactics steered way into creating an environment that would influence other parents purchasing behaviours for Godiva chocolates (mommysshorts, 2018). Below are some examples of comments found that would further suggest purchasing behaviours and influencers are not much different than non-sponsored posts.

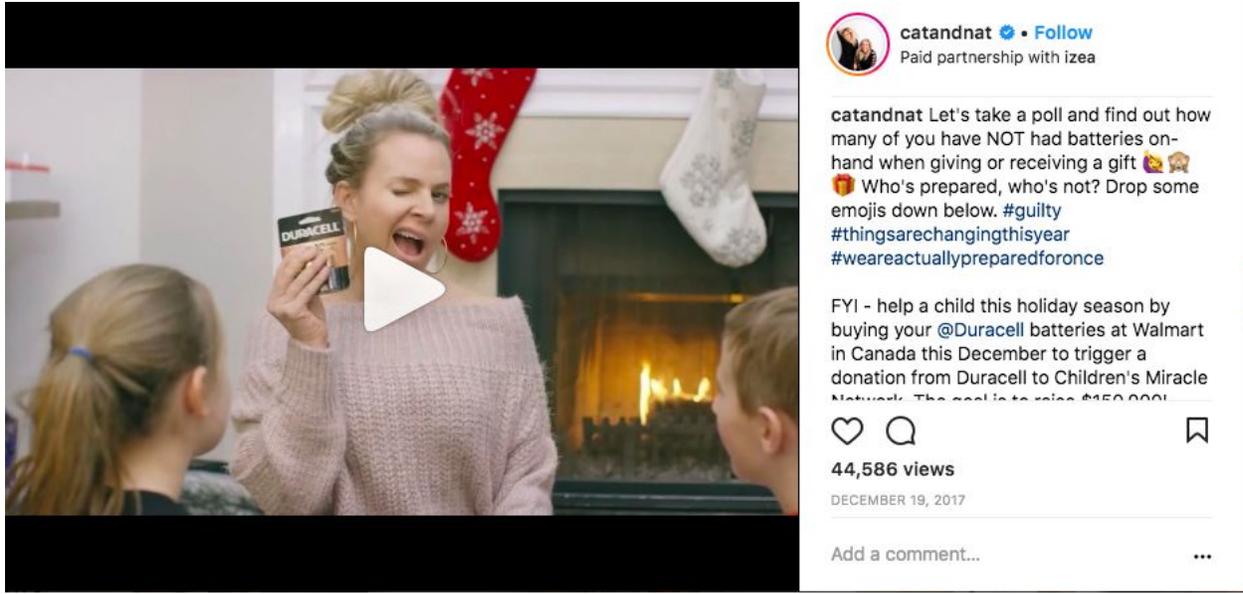
- [rachelnoble0123@kglass71](#) I will have to get those before the flight! I am sure my flight will be just as amazing! ;)
- [kayleewren@pharper0512](#) 🍷🍷🍷🍷 these chocolates are amazing. I literally just had some tonight 😂

It was also interesting enough to note that although this post was sponsored, there was still that follower community that dismissed the post about the chocolates entirely and discussed their own experiences of being on airplanes with their kids.

- [ang3lakim](#) What kind of things do u let ur girls watch? Do u pay for the WiFi and let them just surf the Internet? I find my kids get bored of movies after 30 min :(
- [millilumum](#) I have our first flight coming up with a 5 and an active almost 2 year old who doesnt sit still. Eek.

It is interesting to note that strong sense of community and engagement that prevails even when it is a sponsored posts about a certain product/service.

Similar to @mommysshorts, @catandnat have a few sponsored posts that also provide evidence that it suggests the effect they have on purchasing behaviours even when the post is obviously sponsored.



In December, Cat and Nat posted a sponsored post by Izea and Duracell batteries. Similarly to @mommysshorts, @catandnat also created a post with a caption for their followers to closely relate to. Using a common problem parents normally have during the holidays “lets take a poll and find out how many of you have NOT had batteries on hand when giving or receiving a gift? Who is prepared?”(catandnat, 2018). This caption provides us with a clear example of how mommy bloggers use sponsored posts as a way to affect purchasing behaviors. By asking their followers if they are prepared to have batteries on hand when their kids open their gifts up, subliminally suggests that perhaps they should prepare themselves ahead of time and purchase batteries (the sponsored item of this post). There were a few comments under the post that would suggest that this subliminal message in this sponsored post may have affected the purchasing behaviours of their followers.

- [Chloiedotcom](#): Legit this ad makes me actually want to buy these batteries.
[#RealisticAdvertisingWorks](#)

- Siobhan.donnely: That's great- all my teen wants is batteries! For his controllers 😬 will have to hit Walmart!
- Charlette99: Thanks for the reminder! Gotta have those dang batteries.

Although being an obviously sponsored post, once again the caption catandnat provided allowed their followers to understand the connection the post has with being a parent, subliminally encouraging the purchase of the particular product.

Parent Bloggers And The Impact Of Electronic Word-Of-Mouth

Social media is no longer considered to be just a platform for conversation, rather now commerce is introduced to be a large part for the use of social media. Social factors have always played a part in a consumers purchasing behaviours, but now word-of-mouth marketing has taken to new heights. Consumers around the world who use smartphones have purchasing power right in their pockets with them everyday. Without the need to physically walk into a store anymore, online shopping has become a new norm. Consumers now can just scroll through their Instagram feeds for purchasing inspiration, and what better way to do it than to follow their favourite bloggers and celebrities (Zamanian & Khanlari, 2015). Prior to the rise of social media, consumers would perhaps take purchasing recommendations from a friend however now, they are able to crowdsource unfettered responses from strangers. Electronic word-of-mouth communication is a theory that describes consumers using social media platforms to communicate their opinion on products or services. As stated previously, it is clear that parent bloggers have built a strong community of followers who also identify themselves as parents.

Thus, Electronic word-of-mouth communication is clear as social influencers are constantly reviewing products or featuring them on their social media pages. Consumers making purchasing decisions has resulted in the trust of online reviews and thus, 91% of respondents stated that they follow online reviews, blogs and social media platforms before purchasing a product or service (Zamanian & Khanlari, 2015). The current influence on purchasing decision word-of-mouth communication has, is evident creating a community that trusts the opinion of the blogger they feel they resonate most with. Bloggers like Cat&Nat and MommyShorts have presented several sponsored posts on their instagram pages.

It is evident that influence through word-of-mouth communication has always been found to be a more trustworthy and persuasive way to sell to consumers instead of traditional ways of marketing service (Zamanian & Khanlari, 2015). Buyers tend to make emotional buying decisions as they are influenced by their emotions knowingly and unknowingly (Ahmed, 2015). 41% of people who purchase a product say they just saw it and were not necessarily in the search of wanting to buy it. As humans, emotions play a role in purchasing a product that we may not have planned to purchase before. Descarte Error, states that emotions are one of the key notions to all purchasing decisions (Ahmed, 2015). It is also evidenced that it is often difficult to establish a sense of trust with customers before pitching a product. Thus, social media influencers such as catandnat and mommyshorts have an upperhand in convincing their followers to purchase a product they have personally recommended. Being influenced by someone they relate to on an emotional level, 44% of woman on social media state that their purchasing decision is influenced by a trusted blogger that they follow (Ahmed, 2015). Instagram is a unique

platform as its main purpose is to post and share photos. Thus, companies are finding it easy to convince the purchase of their products by asking social media influencers to post a visual that may influence a follower to purchase or inquire about a product. For example, the following Instagram post published by catandnat provides their followers with a visual of their kids enjoying their new water slide (catandnat, 2018).



Although obviously sponsored by Canadian Tire, catandnat was able to clearly convince her followers by posting a photo that depicts what a summer may look like for parents with small aged children.

The following comments on the photo confirm an interest in the product that was being shown:

Angiecampanelli I have to get that waterslide

Thaizawacky Where did you get this blow up thing?

I had also noticed that as human beings with a “crowd” mentality , it is easy to sway a large number of followers when they are in groups. Individuals can be convinced to make a purchasing decision if they notice their peers or other followers of these social media influencers who have already done so (Ahmed, 2015).

Electronic Word-of-Mouth posts affects consumers as social media influencers may choose to recommend a product to followers when their review was positive (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

Attribution theory explains the impact of electronic word of mouth and other marketing practices on persuasion (Laczniak et al, 2001). Attribution theory describes how an individual can advocate a certain position. (Kelley & Mizerski et al, 1978). Understanding this concept is simple and involves a communicator who might have positively reviewed a product because of its good features. The attribution theory predicts that the more the consumer relates to the communicator’s review about a product, the more consumers will perceive that the communicator is credible in their opinions (Lee & Youn, 2015). As a result, the consumer will have confidence that the review of that product is genuine, thus leading to persuasion in purchasing the product/service.

Conclusion and Further Areas Of Research

With the rise of e-commerce business and the daily use of technology, it can be said that the way an individual consumes information and builds self-identity often relies heavily on social media channels and social media influencers. The Internet has created a type of community that is no longer limited by geographic boundaries, and with the reach of a large number of participants and followers social media influencers can be seen as a bridge between a strong online community and digital marketing that results in affecting purchasing behaviours. In these liminal spaces, followers of parent bloggers are engaging and participating in a space that they can relate closely to. In their self-identification through these online imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) it is evident that the emotionally driven posts based on what it means to be a parent effects of purchasing behaviours as there are subliminal along with non-subliminal areas within these posts that suggest a certain opinion on a product or service that is mentioned. With the strongly knit communities of parent bloggers, quite often their followers are interested in their opinion of certain products and this can be seen through interactions and comments under their posts. I have found that even when a post does not suggest the opinion of a product or service, their followers are often questioning any product or service that they see in a post by their inquiries written in comments below a post. Within this MRP, it is evident that the Social Identity theory, Social Comparison Theory and Electronic Word-of-Mouth Marketing Theory and its application to my online observations of parent bloggers @catandnat and @mommysshorts has allowed me to conclude that parent bloggers are able to influence purchasing behaviours through emotional ties

which later result in the influence of purchasing behaviours through sponsored and non-sponsored posts as this community of followers trust the opinion and purchasing decisions of the parent bloggers they chose to follow.

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