



## Are fashion consumers like schooling fish? The effectiveness of popularity cues in fashion e-commerce

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effectiveness of popularity cues in online fashion retail. Despite the fact that popularity cues have shown to be effective, we expect that popularity cues can be detrimental to expressive products like fashion products under certain conditions. Two experimental studies were conducted. The first study adopted a single-factor (popularity vs. no cue) between-subjects design. The results revealed that consumers exhibited a negative attitude toward the brand (Ab) for fashion products with a popularity cue vs. no cue. In the second study, a 2 (popularity vs. no cue) by 2 (conspicuous vs. non-conspicuous fashion product) by 3 (low vs. medium vs. high price) between-subjects factorial design was conducted. Upon running a series of moderated mediation analyses, the results showed that the price level and the product conspicuousness moderated the indirect effect of popularity cues on Ab through perceived quality.

### 1. Introduction

Popularity cues (e.g., a best-seller label) have been widely used in advertising, brick-and-mortar stores, and e-commerce. Many theories have been used to explain the effect of popularity cues such as social influence theory, signaling theory, bandwagon effects, and the theory of herding. In brief, popularity cues signal to potential buyers that many people have purchased the product, which provides social validation for the product (Griskevicius et al., 2009). As the fashion industry continues to seek out opportunities in e-commerce, fashion brands such as Lacoste, Nike, and Coach have used this practice in their online stores. For example, in the winter sales, Coach lists all bestselling items to increase the revenue of the online store. However, do online fashion consumers respond like schooling fish, following trends and imitating what other people wear?

At present, the effectiveness of popularity cues for fashion brands remains questionable (Steinhart, Kamins, Mazursky, & Noy, 2014). It has been proven that the popularity of a fashion item determines its success (Sproles & Burns, 1994). However, consumers may still turn away when a fashion product is perceived as being too popular. In fact, fashion is the result of continuously changing cultural trends in preferences and tastes (O'Cass & Frost, 2002). The fashion cycle is driven by differentiation of the upper classes who seek to distinguish themselves from the masses and adopt a new style, after which the masses imitate and follow the style (Simmel, 1957). Fashion consumers enjoy

the novelty of new fashion styles (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2010). However, popularity cues convey a signal that many consumers have purchased the same product. Although purchasing a popular fashion item decreases the risk of not fitting in the trend, it may also increase the perceived risk of outfit clash. A significant example is the blue and white printed coat from ZARA (Biddlecombe, 2016). This \$80 coat went viral because of its overexposure on the street. The popularity of this coat also indicated the end of its lifecycle because fast fashion items are generally produced in small quantities. Through limited quantities, fashion consumers can express their uniqueness by avoiding similarity and unpopular choice counter-conformity (Shen, Jung, Chow, & Wong, 2014).

It is difficult to understand the effect of popularity cues without taking the underlying mechanism into account. Steinhart et al. (2014) suggest that perceived quality mediates the positive effect of popularity cues on purchase intentions. However, this mediating process is moderated by the product type. Popularity (vs. exclusivity) cues are less effective for self-expressive products (i.e., products with symbolic features, personal and social meanings, Berger & Heath, 2007) than for functional products (i.e., utilitarian products designed to achieve a practical goal, Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). However, this study poses many questions for researchers. Although Steinhart et al. (2014) compare popularity cues to exclusivity cues, the actual effect of displaying popularity cues (vs. not displaying) remains unknown. For self-expressive products such as fashion products (Lee & Rhee, 2009), are

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**Table 1**  
The similarity and difference among the three studies.

	Steinhart et al. (2014)	Wu & Lee (2016)	The current study
Focus	Popularity vs. exclusivity cues	Popularity vs. scarcity cues	Popularity cues vs. no cue
Product type	Generic products Expressive vs. functional products	Generic products (functional) Self vs. other purchase products	Fashion products (expressive) Conspicuous vs. inconspicuous products
Price level	N/A	Low (10) vs. high (20)	Low (10) vs. medium (120) vs. high (450)
Mediators	Perceived quality	N/A	Perceived quality

there any other influential factors that further moderate the indirect effect of popularity cues on brand attitude through perceived quality? To answer this question, this study will be built on the mediation model of Steinhart et al. (2014) and try to unravel the unsolved puzzles. In this case, this study will focus on expressive products (i.e., fashion products) and examine potential moderators (i.e., price level, conspicuousness) inspired by other research (e.g., Wu & Lee, 2016). Table 1 summarizes the similarity and difference among the current study, the study by Steinhart et al. (2014), and the study by Wu and Lee (2016).

Price is an important criterion with which to segment the fashion industry (Miller & Mills, 2012; Preiholt, 2012). Saviolo and Testa (2002) classify fashion items into five price categories: couture (highest price), ready-to-wear, diffusion, bridge, and mass (lowest price). Different fashion segments target different customer demographics and therefore have different marketing strategies. The price level of the fashion product may influence the positive effect of popularity cues on perceived quality. Unlike fast fashion consumers who value quality less than other consumers, luxury fashion consumers regard quality as the most important factor (Kapferer, 2015; Li, Li, & Kambele, 2012). Similar to word-of-mouth, when purchasing expensive fashion products online, popularity cues can be used as a risk-reduction strategy to eliminate uncertainty about the quality of the brand (Buttle, 1998) (Fig. 1).

It is also not clear how effective popularity cues may be for conspicuous vs. non-conspicuous fashion products. At present, fashion brands have extended their product lines from apparel and accessories to perfume (e.g., Gucci Guilty, Chanel No. 5), cosmetics (e.g., Dior Skin Care, Armani Beauty), and even home utensils (e.g., Zara Home, Versace Home) (Kapferer, 1994). Popularity cues may have different effects for inconspicuous products (publicly unobservable, e.g., cosmetics) and for conspicuous products (e.g., apparel and accessories).

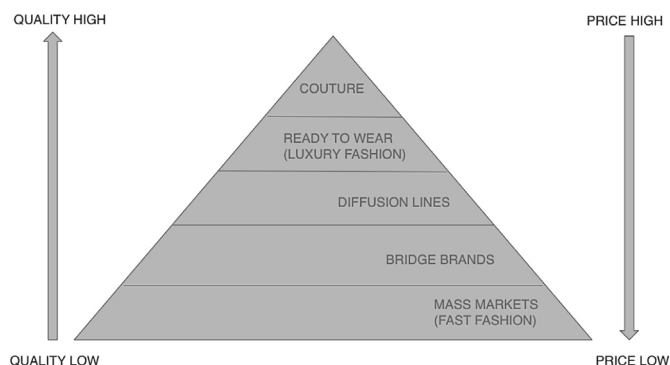


Fig. 1. Market segmentation of fashion brands (Saviolo & Testa, 2002).

## 2. Theoretical foundation and conceptual framework

### 2.1. Popularity cues

Popularity cues can be defined as “promotional cues that indicate pervasive consumer interest in a product” (Wu & Lee, 2016, p. 487). For example, a popularity cue can be “a best-seller label” or “a large number of online reviews.” Many researchers examine the effects of popularity cues used in advertising (e.g., Dean, 1999; Song, 2015) and e-commerce (e.g., Steinhart et al., 2014; Wu & Lee, 2016). When shopping online, consumers cannot evaluate the product directly. If consumers are unfamiliar with a specific product, they tend to rely on extrinsic cues and follow the buying behavior of other consumers. In cases such as these, popularity cues (e.g., a bestseller label, number of reviews) provide reassurance of the quality of the product (Dean, 1999) and, thus, enhances consumers' purchase intentions (Myers & Sar, 2013; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007). In e-commerce, an information asymmetry environment, individuals are likely to incorporate popularity cues as an informational source in the pre-purchase stage in order to evaluate the product and the brand (Jeong & Kwon, 2012; Myers & Sar, 2013).

Researchers investigate the effect of the presence vs. the absence of popularity cues, popularity vs. exclusivity cues, and appeals of scarcity due to demand vs. supply. Abundant studies (see Table 2 for an overview) confirm that popularity cues can enhance perceived quality (Dean, 1999; Jeong & Kwon, 2012), elicit positive attitudes (Myers & Sar, 2013; Viglia et al., 2014), and increase purchase intention and sales (Myers & Sar, 2013; Park et al., 2007; Sorensen, 2007). However, popularity cues are not always effective. The effect of popularity cues depends on individuals' personality traits, such as their self-monitoring level (Myers & Sar, 2013), the regulatory focus (Song, 2015), the tendency toward risk-aversion (Jeong & Kwon, 2012), and the need for uniqueness (Roy & Sharma, 2015). Apart from individuals' personality traits, the product attribute also influences the effect of popularity cues, such as the type of products (functional products vs. self-expressive products, Steinhart et al., 2014), consumption target (self-purchase vs. other-purchase, Wu & Lee, 2016), price level (low vs. high, Wu & Lee, 2016), and product involvement (low vs. high, Park et al., 2007). Although previous studies on popularity cues are abundant, most studies (e.g., Gierl & Huettl, 2010; Jeong & Kwon, 2012; Myers & Sar, 2013; Wu & Lee, 2016) focus on functional products (e.g., coffee mugs, USB flash drives, laptop, yogurt, champagne). An exception is a study of Steinhart et al. (2014) that compares functional and expressive products. By conducting two experimental studies, Steinhart et al. (2014) suggest that the effect of popularity cues depends on the product type. Popularity cues are less advantageous than exclusivity cues for self-expressive (vs. functional) products. This implies that the findings of prior research may not be applicable for expressive products (e.g., fashion products).

### 2.2. Fashion branding and the effectiveness of popularity cues

The associated symbolic meaning of fashion products is more important than their functional value (Kim & Hall, 2014; Veryzer Jr, 1995). Therefore, fashion products belong to the product type that is highly expressive (Lee & Rhee, 2009). Fashion brands produce these products, including apparel, accessories, footwear, and cosmetics (Spacey, 2017). By using fashion brands, individuals can express their identity, self-image (Azuma & Fernie, 2003; Forney, Joo Park, & Brandon, 2005), and status (Hoyer & MacInnis, 1997; O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2013). For example, Chinese young adults prefer fashion clothing brands from the West in order to display their status (O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2013). People can infer one's identity by checking the fashion product used. For such products that are viewed as a symbol of identity, individuals generally diverge from the options preferred by the majority (outside of the relevant group) to avoid signaling undesired identities (Berger & Heath, 2007). Consistent with the study of Berger and Heath

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