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# **The Influence of Digital Marketing on Consumer Purchase Decisions toward Fast Fashion Products**

**Supervisor**

Ch. Prof. Andrea Ellero

**Graduand**

Hoai Thuong Tran

Matricolation number 877214

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the influence of digital marketing on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products. Four major digital channels that are popular with fast fashion consumers are selected for the study, namely social media marketing, blogs and websites, branded mobile apps, and email marketing. A quantitative research methodology was adopted, and the data were collected from 420 consumers through online questionnaires. The findings of the study revealed that there is indeed a relationship between the chosen digital marketing channels and the decisions to buy fast fashion products of the consumers. Hypothesis testing indicated that consumers consider blogs/websites, branded mobile applications, and email marketing as having positive impacts on their purchase decisions, whereas contrary to the expectations, the effect of social media marketing on purchase decisions is negative. The results of this study contribute to the existing literature related to digital marketing and consumer behaviors in the fast fashion industry. Businesses are recommended to adopt suitable marketing strategies to increase sales and remain competitive in today's business environment.

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## **Introduction**

The world we live in has been revolutionized by technology at a fast pace over the past decades. The Internet has become an irreplaceable source of information consumption. Thanks to its global coverage, consumers are able to access an unlimited range of offers from companies around the world with a minimal amount of time and effort. With a simple click, they can purchase a product, and have it delivered to their front doors within a few hours, and they have 24/7 access to brands' information. The beginning of the digital age and the rise of online shopping have driven an unprecedented transformation of marketing for businesses – a shift from traditional mass communication to digital marketing. Digital marketing and advertising have been developed in a way that allows marketers to easily measure their marketing efforts or return on investment (ROI). Traditional marketing channels such as radio and newspaper no longer lie at the forefront of a campaign. Digital marketing practice is very important to all types of business as it can be used to achieve any purposes ranging from real-time communication with customers to increasing sales, brand awareness, and brand management. Digital mediums such as smartphones, tablets, smart televisions, and computers are used to demonstrate products and services to current and prospective customers at any time and place. These marketing messages can be placed in several forms on the internet such as images, video, text, animation, and games. Using different digital channels such as social media, emails, blogs, or websites, companies can listen, respond to, and engage with their customers in a timely manner, while also working to adequately address customers' concerns. Digital marketing is on a steady rise and will continue to soar, so companies must constantly update knowledge about how to leverage it to remain competitive in the market. However, the limited empirical studies on the impacts of digital marketing activities on consumers have prevented brands from maximizing their return on marketing investment. This limited knowledge and inability to predict customer behavior towards online advertising leads to the popularity of poor content, which triggers consumer mistrust and high resistance rate to digital advertising (Taylor, 2011).

In line with the rise of digital marketing, there is a radical change in the way consumers behave in the digital age. Today's consumers are more enlightened and empowered. They are flooded with digital messages from various brands on a daily basis. Thus, consumers have become more demanding. They desire and expect a personalized service experience,

as well as useful, relevant content from brands. As consumers are becoming tech-savvy, they will turn away from anything they perceive as intrusive or irrelevant marketing. Instead, they often look for reviews from other sources such as friends, influencers, experts, past users, ratings, testimonials, and do search on the brand by themselves to make purchase decisions. Moreover, modern consumers are not loyal, they are always experimenting various products and ready to switch at any time. Consumer behavior is a very complex and robust domain that has gained significant attention from marketers and researchers for a long time and may never lose its spotlights in the future. There could be two main reasons for this. First, consumer behavior is always changing simultaneously when the surrounding economic, social, and technological environment evolves. Second, the study of consumer behavior allows for the understanding of consumers' purchase decision processes and how they utilize their existing resources including money, time, and effort to obtain a product or service. Businesses who can acquire this knowledge can anticipate success and achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml, 1988; Bolton et al., 1991; Dodds et al., 1991; Holbrook, 1994; Cronin et al., 2000). Therefore, it is not surprising that this subject requires a large and expanding field of research throughout the years. As consumer behavior in the digital age is an ever-changing and ever-expanding phenomenon, new research needs to be constantly carried out to provide timely insights, add more information, or modify the existing theories. Retail managers should also frequently update their knowledge about what factor may play a significant role in forming the final purchase decisions of the consumers.

The fast fashion industry is a newly emerged market, which has been around for only thirty years. However, today it is developing at an incredible speed with the dominance of several global brands. Generally, there is not plenteous research about the connection between fashion and consumer behavior in the existing literature. As for the fast fashion sector, the situation is even worse when studies in consumer behavior seldom involve or pay attention to this growing market. The possible explanation for this could be that the fast fashion industry is a young market, so this topic needs a certain amount of time to form an appropriate theoretical environment around it. Additionally, fast fashion is always considered as a small segment of the whole fashion industry. Thus, its features and consumer behaviors are assumed to be the same as the ordinary fashion industry. Actually, the fast fashion field has its own distinctive and recognizable characteristics

hence should be treated separately from the conventional fashion field. Therefore, it is significantly meaningful to find out the characteristics of fast fashion consumer behaviors. In this digital age, fast fashion brands are also active users of digital marketing. Previous studies reported that digital marketing plays a significant role in influencing a consumer's purchase decision towards a brand. Nevertheless, it is no surprise that only a few scholars examined their effects on purchase decisions in the fast fashion industry settings. In fact, the threshold for entering the market for the new entrants and the level of competitiveness in the fast fashion market are both very high (Wang, 2010). Hence, it is necessary to carry out more research about the application of digital marketing to generate consumer purchase decisions, which would enable fast fashion brands to achieve greater success.

In order to provide more insights and potential solutions to the pre-mentioned matters, this study attempts to examine the impact of digital marketing on consumer purchase decisions towards fashion products. Based on the observation of the author and past literature's suggestions, four channels of digital marketing are selected to be analyzed including social media marketing, blogs and websites, branded mobile apps, and email marketing. The particular influence of each channel on consumer purchase decisions will be tested with the development of four separate hypotheses. With this aim, the study has been divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides the literature review on the development of digital marketing and the concept of the fast fashion industry. The second chapter is about the hypothesis development based on the literature relating to each marketing channel and buying decisions. The third chapter explains the methodology of this research by highlighting the research design, survey instrument, and data collection method. The sample description and analysis of the results are included in chapter four. In this chapter, the exploratory factor analysis will be conducted to find the independent latent variables and after that, a multiple regression analysis is adopted to test the proposed hypotheses. Finally, the last chapter discusses the reasons behind the obtained outcomes and delivers marketing implications as well as research limitations and directions for future study.



## **Chapter 1. Literature review on digital marketing and fast fashion**

This chapter provides a comprehensive explanation of the study matters, namely the development of digital marketing and the concept of fast fashion through selected reviews of existing literature and studies.

### **1.1. The development of digital marketing**

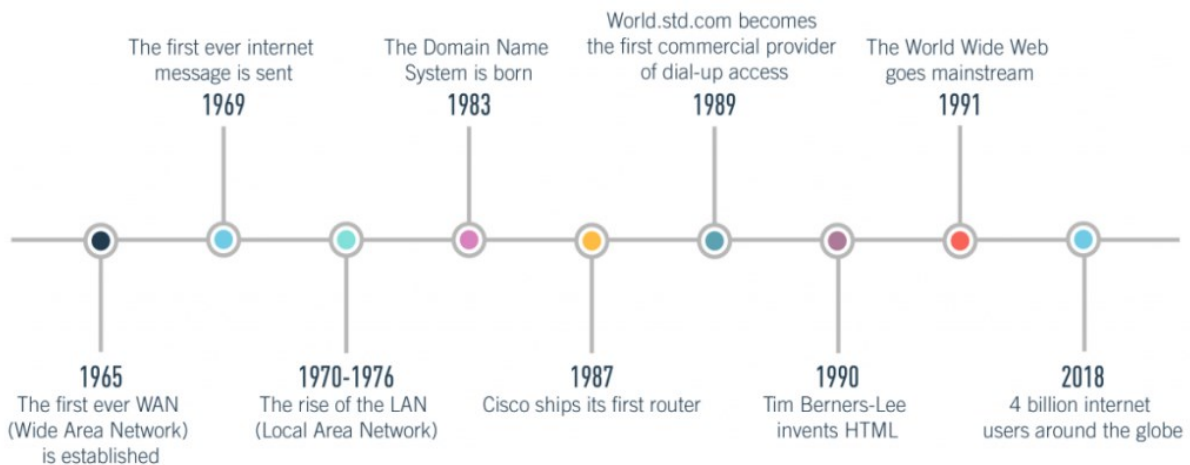
To have a thorough understanding of digital marketing, it is necessary to look back at the evolution of the Internet and digital technologies, which are the premise of almost every important aspect of the modern world. The following paragraphs then describe how the development of the Internet influenced the marketing field and stimulated its transformation from traditional concepts to digital marketing as nowadays. After the history and definition of digital marketing are clearly explained, its main channels and characteristics will be introduced. Finally, digital marketing's benefits and limitations will also be described to make the whole picture complete.

#### **1.1.1. The evolution of Internet and digital technologies**

The Internet is defined as a global system that allows various networks of computers to interconnect by using the same "language" called TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet protocol) (Wikipedia, 2020). Although in the 1970s, the Internet made its first appearance in the United States, it was not until the early 1990s did it become available to the general public. It is estimated that, by 2020, approximately 4.5 billion people, or more than half of the world's population have access to the Internet (Dennis & Kahn, 2020).

The Internet as we know it today does not exist until much later, but its history dates back to the 1960s. In 1962, an MIT computer scientist J.C.R. Licklider came up with the idea for a global computer network, then he shared his idea with colleagues at the U.S. Department of Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) (Jefferson Online, 2016). In 1969, the development of packet switching theory, a method of data transmission in computer networks, together with research conducted by ARPA scientists gave birth to ARPANET, one of the first general-purpose computer networks. It was able to send a message using text to binary encoding and decoding, which made ARPANET serve as a backbone for the interconnection of regional academic and military networks. In 1971, the first email was

sent using @sign in ARPANET, over the following years of the 1970s, the system continued to grow. In 1983, the Internet protocol suite was invented, this is a technology that links multiple networks together in such a way that if one network collapses, the others remain. People were able to share data from one computer to another using a Network Interface Card (NIC) that was supported by TCP protocols (VentCube, 2019).



*Figure 1.1 - History of the Internet in a nutshell (VentCube.com, 2019)*

Around 1990, Tim Berners-Lee, a British scientist, invented the *World Wide Web* (“www” or “web” for short) while working at CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research). Originally developed for scientists in universities and institutes around the world to share information automatically (CERN, 2020), the web was open to the public in 1993. This action allowed it to flourish and begin to transfer to the modern Internet by linking the commercial networks and enterprises. The networks continued to exponentially grow when generations of institutional, personal, and mobile computers were connected to it. In 1995, the world-famous marketplace Amazon.com made its first launch on the world wide web and they are still the best sellers in online shopping until now. In 1997, Google introduced itself as a search engine with Yahoo and both are top search engines nowadays. Between 2000 and 2010, social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram, etc. were created and have become an indispensable part of modern life. Figure 1.1 above briefly describes the history of the Internet and major milestones along the way.

The terms *Internet* and *World Wide Web* are often used interchangeably in daily contexts; when people say they are “going on the Internet”, they usually mean to use a web browser to view web pages. However, the web, which is a collection of web pages, is only one of several Internet services, just like electronic mails (or e-mails) or social media sites. With the help of the Internet, people can access a variety of web resources such as documents, images, media, applications, and many other things. Each resource is identified by a URI (Uniform Resource Identifier), a string of characters that unambiguously identifies a particular page. Since it was invented in 1989, the web has radically changed the lives of billions of people around the world in the way they think, create, and connect with one another. As the number of Web users increases unceasingly every day, the web has been redesigned and improved to accommodate different types of users and devices through the years. Figure 1.2 below shows various stages of the web from Web 1.0 in the past to Web 5.0 that is believed to be present in the near future.

Web 1.0, the first version of the web, was present between the early 1990s and the year 2000. It was basically a read-only and static version which means the users could not interact with the website, therefore, some people call it “The Information Web”. Web 1.0 was primarily used by major companies to publish corporate information, marketing plan, product catalogs, and transactions with their customers.

Around the year 2000, Web 1.0 transitioned to “read and write” version, known as Web 2.0 or “The Social Web”. At this stage, users could not only read information but also interact and connect with one another. They were able to share information, collaborate on ideas, and contribute new information that was then available to the whole world. Many companies had realized the potential benefits of this collective power and networking effects and changed their business models to make the most of them. Examples of Web 2.0 are web communities, web services, web applications, wikis, and especially social networking sites such as Facebook, Youtube, blogs, among many others (O’Reilly, 2005). Web 2.0 existed for a decade from 2000 till 2010 then slowly transformed into Web 3.0 which some people believe we have today.

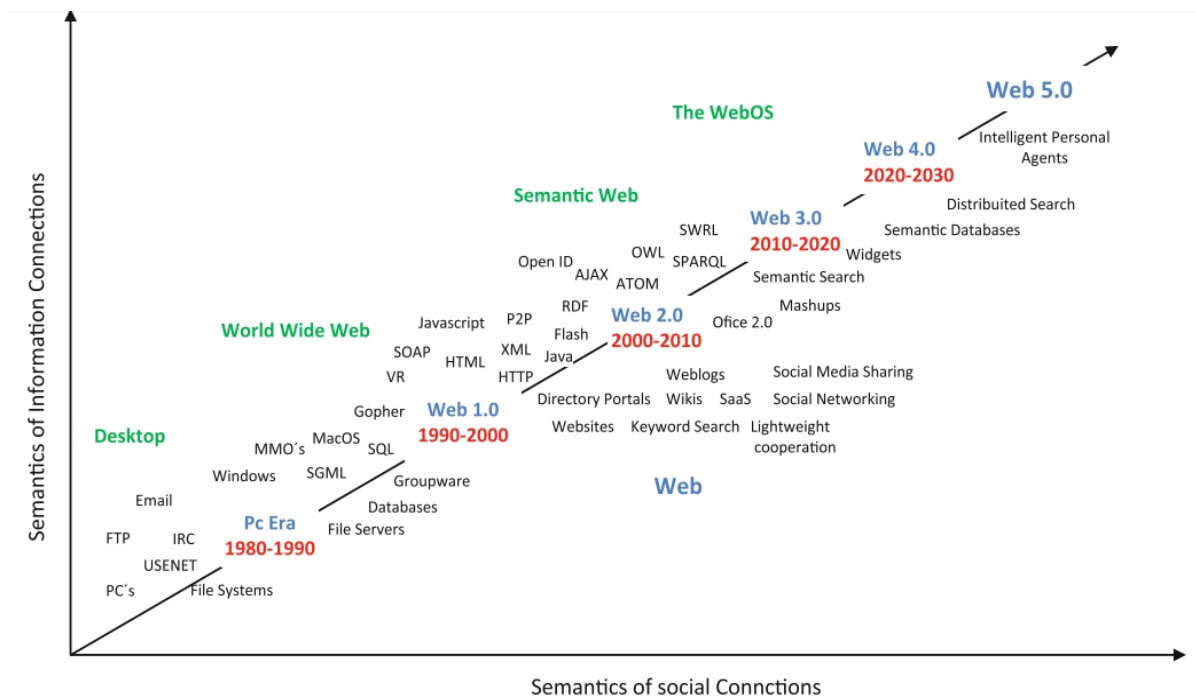


Figure 1.2 – The evolution of World Wide Web (Benito-Osorio, et al.,2013)

Unlike Web 2.0 whose focus is on the connection and interaction between people, or people-centric, Web 3.0 focuses on connecting people with devices. It has a powerful language derived from neuronal networks and genetic algorithms, with a particular emphasis on analysis, processing capacity, and ability to producing new ideas based on user-generated information (Benito-Osorio, 2013). For example, the web may look at a user’s search history to show a personalized advertisement later. For this reason, Web 3.0 is known as “The Semantic Web”.

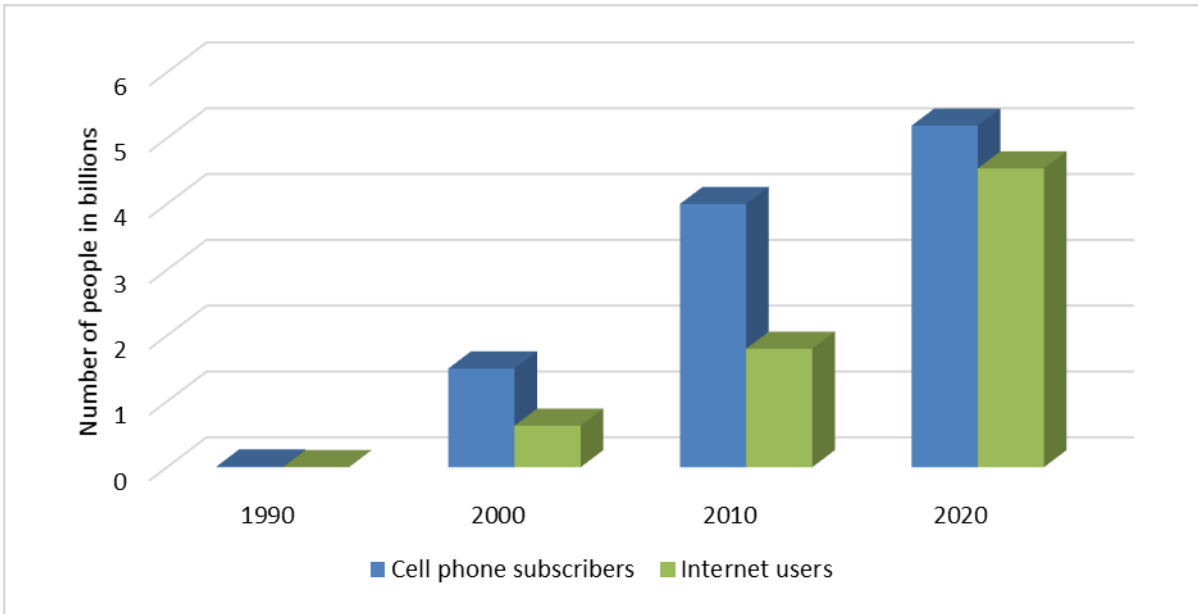
The wireless communication is the core value of Web 4.0, it can connect people and all devices (mobiles, computers, house appliances, cars, etc.) whenever and wherever in the physical and virtual world in real-time. This situation is best described with the term “Internet of Things”. Web 4.0 is called “The Symbiotic Web” because the interaction between humans and machines is described as symbiotic. It has only one single operating system, called Web OS, in which information flows from one point to another. This generation of the web is just around the corner in comparison to apparently remote Web 5.0, which is estimated to be present after the year 2030.

The last generation of the web to mention is Web 5.0 that is “The Emotional Web” as it will communicate emotionally with users in the same way as humans do with each other,

like a personal virtual assistant, through the advanced development of artificial intelligence. It is a sensory and emotive version and this interaction will become a daily habit for a lot of people based on neurotechnology. At the moment, the web as we know is “emotionally neutral”, which means it does not perceive what the users feel. Although human emotions are definitely difficult to map, technologies are already developed to measure their effects (Benito-Osorio, 2013).

The Internet and World Wide Web, along with the computers and cellular phones, are among the most outstanding technological innovations of the Digital Revolution (also known as the Third Industrial Revolution) which took place in the second half of the 20th century. Before the digital age, primitive technological devices had just one function and rarely interrelated. Businesses were arranged around production and selling products, consumers’ demand and awareness were abundant, but the information was scarce. Marketing efforts were limited to a few print and broadcast channels, and not available for all classes of people. The evolution of digital technologies has transformed how people live, work, and communicate and how business is conducted because it allows huge amounts of information to be compressed on small and portable devices. Following the launch of the web to the public in 1993, the 21st century began the digital era with the extensive use of digital media, mobile devices, and Internet resources. Computers and cell phones became ubiquitous and provided access to the Internet to large parts of human society. The digital revolution became truly global in this time. In 1990, the whole world has only 12.5 million cell phone subscribers and 2.8 million Internet users while in 2020, after thirty years, these numbers have hugely grown into 5.19 billion (67% of the world population) and 4.54 billion (59% of the world population) respectively (Wikipedia, 2020).

Like other countless aspects of business orientation, the marketing field is also incredibly impacted by the evolutionary process of the Internet and digital technologies. A window of opportunities is opened in front of marketers to engage with customers in a way that was never possible before. After we have a considerable understanding of the development path of the Internet and digital technologies, the next paragraphs will describe in detail their influence on marketing and how marketing has changed to adapt to the new situation.



*Figure 1.3 – Number of cell phone subscribers and Internet users from 1990 to 2020*

*(We Are Social Inc, 2020; Wikipedia, 2020)*

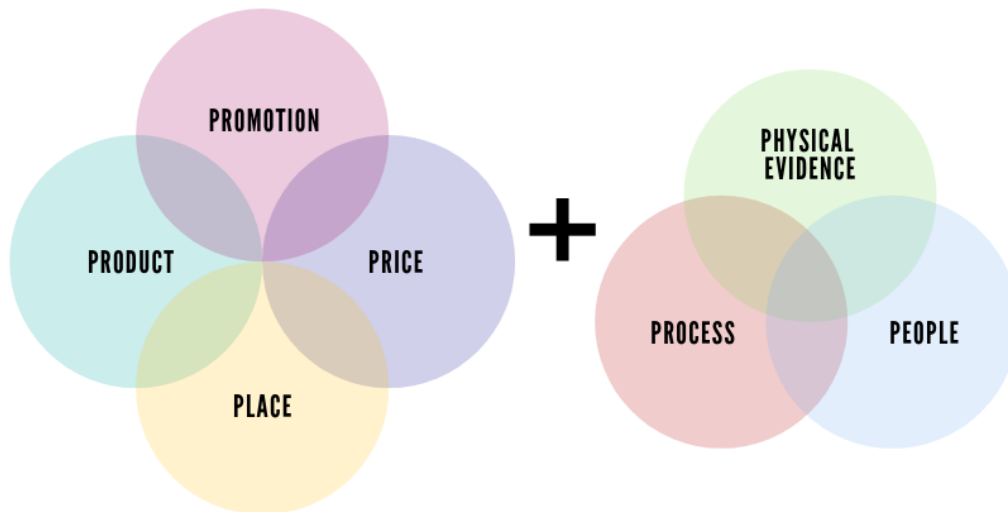
**1.1.2. From traditional to digital marketing**

Marketing in one form or another had existed long before the philosophy surrounding it came about at the beginning of the 20th century. Basically, the idea behind the word “marketing” is to make people interested in your company's products or services. Ever since the introduction of the printing press in the mid-1400s, which revolutionized our ability to communicate on a mass scale, humans have always been looking for new methods to connect and interact with consumers. Within the same decade, the first recorded print advertisement was also launched in the 1450s (Marketing Evolution, 2020). From there, the use of print media skyrocketed, more sophisticated advertisements ranging from magazines to direct mail were sequentially introduced in 1742 and 1862 respectively. Print ads dominated the marketing landscape until 1920 when they met the first opponent – radio advertising. It did not take long for radio ads spend to overtake print, just the same way as it was beaten by Television ads later in 1942. TV ads created even more opportunities for brands to reach their consumers across a growing media landscape.

Since brands began spending a lot on mass communication to advertise their products, they soon recognized the need to measure the effects of their marketing efforts and

understand how to optimize it. The birth of marketing as a focused and professional discipline was designated to the first decade of the 20th century when “marketing courses” were introduced in universities. In 1902, what is believed to be the first course in marketing is offered by University of Michigan. Things got more complex when broadcast media entered the scene, it was the first time for marketers to manage a large number of marketing channels simultaneously. They had to understand when, where, and how to make the best use of those channels to get the most favorable ROI (Return on Investment index) for millions of dollars spent on advertising. As a result, marketers were pushed to develop novel strategies that went beyond the traditional “spray and pray” method of sending a generic message to as many people as possible. This is the time when the first modern marketing measurement concept - “Marketing mix” was born. Originally coined in the 1940s and popularized in 1964 by Neil Borden, the marketing mix focuses on outlining key ingredients of what a product or service provide to consumers and how marketers can best align those ingredients to develop an effective marketing strategy. Later E. Jerome McCarthy grouped these elements into four top-level categories called “4Ps” including product, promotion, place, and price. Specifically, the “Marketing mix 4Ps” suggests that marketers should understand the demand for the product, the price that consumers are willing to pay, the promotions that can get their attention, and the place to put those promotions in front of consumers in order to have a successful marketing campaign. Over the years and in many other applications, this concept was expanded into 7Ps, 10Ps, and many more but the 4Ps approach is still the cornerstone of marketing practice until now (Figure 1.4).

The marketing practice reached an important turning point in 1972, when the first wireless mobile phone was invented and kicked off a wave of emerging technologies. By 1975, the first personal computer entered the digital landscape, and advertisers were quick to grasp the chance. In 1978, the first SPAM message was sent to around 400 users via ARPANET, widely known as “the first internet”. The more technologies progressed; the more opportunities are open for advertising specifically tailored to those technologies. As mentioned in paragraph 1.1.1, the digital revolution has completely transformed the way consumers and marketers interact and gave birth to the modern digital marketing. Soon, everyone had their own personal computers, interconnected to each other via new communications technology: the World Wide Web.



*Figure 1.4 – Marketing mix from 4Ps to 7Ps (Deghaye, 2019)*

Sequentially, by the early 1990s, the first search engine (Archie) emerged to help users navigate the web, bringing with them early variations of search engine optimization and advertising. Within this decade, the term “Digital Marketing” was first coined. It has grown in popularity over time and become the most common term, among its many other variations such as “online marketing”, “Internet marketing”, or “web marketing”. Digital marketing can be defined as “the component of marketing that utilizes digital technologies such as computers, mobile phones, and other digital media (any media that are encoded in machine-readable formats) to promote products and services and improve customer knowledge by matching their needs” (Chaffey, 2013). The term refers to all channels that provide digital media in both online and offline way such as mobile phones (SMS and MMS), TVs, and radios. This feature distinguishes it from “online marketing” or “Internet marketing”.

The 2000s witnessed a boom of social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter. It was also the decade when smartphones and the Internet were popularized, after the birth of the iPhone in 2007, consumers became increasingly dependent on digital electronics in their daily lives. Figure 1.3 and paragraph 1.1.1 already showed the sudden growth of cell phone and Internet users in the 2010s and the trend is projected to continue in the upcoming years. This change in consumer behavior increased the diversification of marketing technology and shifted the focus to online marketing. In 2012, Facebook introduced mobile ads and seven years later it accounts for



94% of their total advertising revenue (Statista, 2020). Figure 1.5 below indicates that global ad spending in the digital marketing market is steadily rising over years and expected to continuously grow in the future.

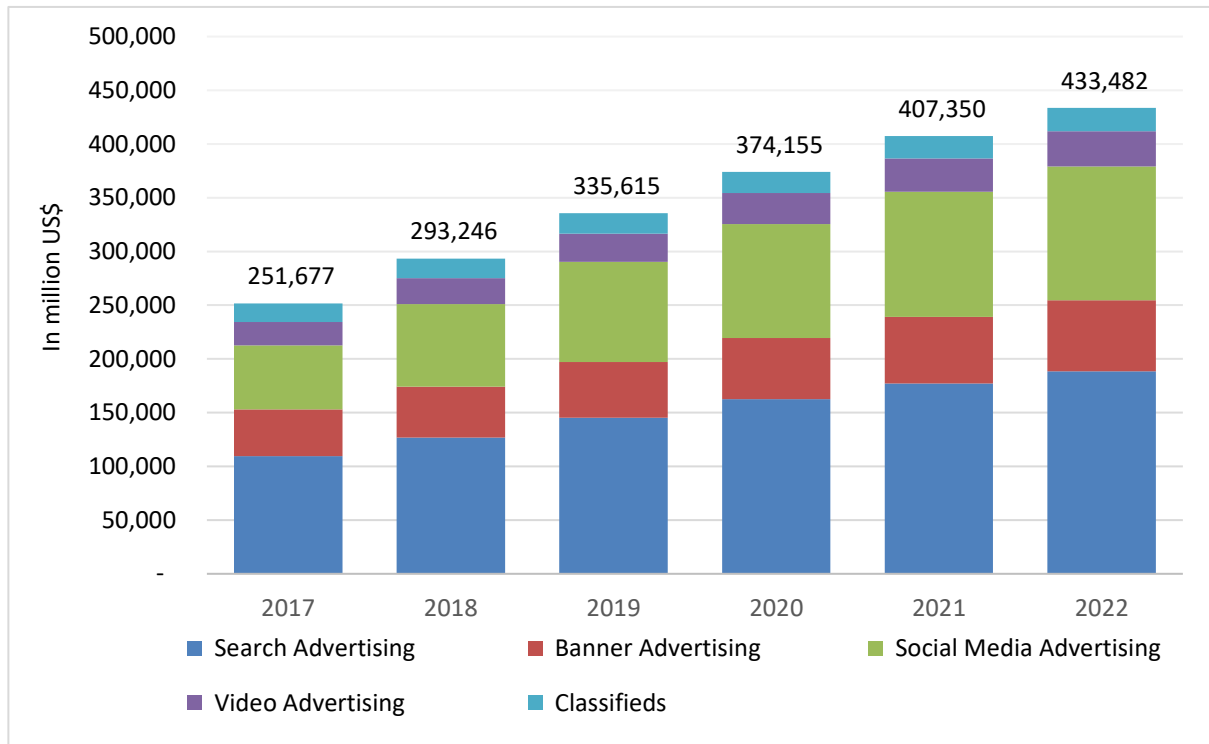


Figure 1.5 – Global Digital Ad Spending from 2017 and forecast to 2022 (Statista, 2020)

From the chart above and what has been discussed so far, there is no doubt left about the importance of digital marketing to any kind of business in the modern economy. Now that its history and definition are clearly interpreted, the next paragraph will provide details about the most commonly used channels of digital marketing.

### 1.1.3. Main channels of digital marketing

Another definition for digital marketing is that “it is a system based on the Internet that can create, accelerate, and transmit product value from producer to a consumer terminal, through digital networks” (Key, 2017). These networks are constituted by multiple channels and in order to achieve marketing objectives, an advertiser can utilize one separately or combine different channels, which usually is the strategy for most companies. The list of digital marketing channels is a long one so the followings to be described are some of the most common tactics and channels (Clutch, 2018).

## **Email marketing**

In general, email marketing refers to any messages sent by email to a prospective or existing customer. Its specific definition is that it is “a form of direct marketing which involves sending a commercial or fund-raising message to an audience, usually a group of people, by using emails” (Fariborzi and Zahedifard, 2012). There are three key objectives that an email marketing strategy commonly seeks to fulfill. The first goal is to foster the relationship between a business and its current or past customers and to motivate the loyalty from customers. The second goal is to acquire new customers or encourage current customers to make a repeat purchase. The last goal is to increase brand awareness by placing advertisements in emails sent by other companies to their customers. Email can be considered as one of the oldest but still highly effective tools in digital marketing. In fact, it is one of the best methods to educate and influence prospects to eventually turn them into long-term clients. Email marketing is relatively cheap compared to other alternatives, yet, produces the highest return on investment. According to the Direct Marketing Association, email offers an estimated \$44 return for every \$1 spent. For every business still struggling with putting together an effective marketing program, email is an easy choice to start. Email is the dominant method in terms of B2B marketing (Taylor, 2020). One of the most important advantages of email marketing is meaningfulness since brands can customize the message for different customers and provide relevant content and promotions according to their profiles. The benefits of email marketing are numerous but there are also some drawbacks that need to be considered when implementing this tool. Nowadays a lot of complex junk mail filters are available so there is a high chance that brands’ emails will fail to get into the target customers’ inboxes. Even when an email successfully reaches the customers, there is no guarantee that it will be opened as customers can receive many types of emails every day. It is difficult and time-consuming for them to classify their emails, so sometimes they may even delete all commercial emails. Another disadvantage of email marketing is the risk of transmitting software viruses which makes customers frustrated and establishes a hostile attitude toward the brands. Using email marketing is usually challenging as it may be perceived by recipients to be irritating, however, it is certainly rewarding if implemented correctly.

## **Display advertising**

Display advertising is a form of advertising on Internet websites, applications, or social media that conveys a commercial message through different formats such as banners, text, images, flash, video, and audio. The main purpose of display advertising is to support brand awareness and to increase the purchase intention of consumers (Robinson, et al., 2007). Display advertisers frequently target Internet users with particular traits to increase the influence of the ads. They identify anonymous users by using cookies, which are the unique identifiers of specific devices. A typical example is that cookies can track whether a user left a page after viewing a product without buying it so the advertiser can later retarget that user with ads from the site the user visited. Advertisers can collect data about a user's online activities across multiple external websites then combine this information to form a picture of the user's behavior and interest to deliver even more targeted ads later. Additionally, they can also target their audience by using contextual and semantic advertising method, which delivers the display ads relevant to the content of the web page where it appears. As advertising is becoming more sophisticated, display ads can be personalized based on users' geography through IP addresses and GPS of mobile phones.

The display advertising uses paid space in a content page to promote a product or service. Its formats fall into four main categories: banners and buttons; pop-ups and pop-unders; rich media; interstitial and superstitial. One way to increase the effectiveness of display campaigns is to make good planning of the spaces to catch the users' attention. The measurement and sale of spaces are carried out by impression or CPM (cost per thousand impressions), which refers to the cost an advertiser agrees to pay per one thousand views by the users. Another important metric for advertisers to consider is the click-through rate (CTR), which is the number of clicks by visitors to the site through the banner or links in the ads. Therefore, the success of a campaign is measured by the click rate (CR), in other words, the percentage ratio between the number of impressions brought by an ad and the number of clicks on it.

### **Search engine marketing**

One of the most effective methods to grow business in an increasingly competitive marketplace nowadays is *search engine marketing* or SEM. It is a form of Internet marketing that involves the promotion of websites by increasing their visibility in *search*

engine results pages (SERPs), primarily through paid advertising. Advertisers bid on specific keywords that users of search engines such as Google and Bing may enter when looking for certain products or services, which gives the advertisers the opportunity for their ads to appear alongside the organic results for those search queries. These ads are widely known by the term *pay-per-click* ads and come in various formats. Some are small, text-based ads, while others, such as product listing ads (PLAs, also known as Shopping ads), are more visual, product-based and provide important information such as price and reviews for consumers at a glance (Figure 1.6). The greatest advantage of SEM is that it allows advertisers to put their ads in front of motivated consumers who are ready to make a purchase at the precise moment they are searching for the products in need. No other channel can do this, which makes SEM such a powerful advertising tool.

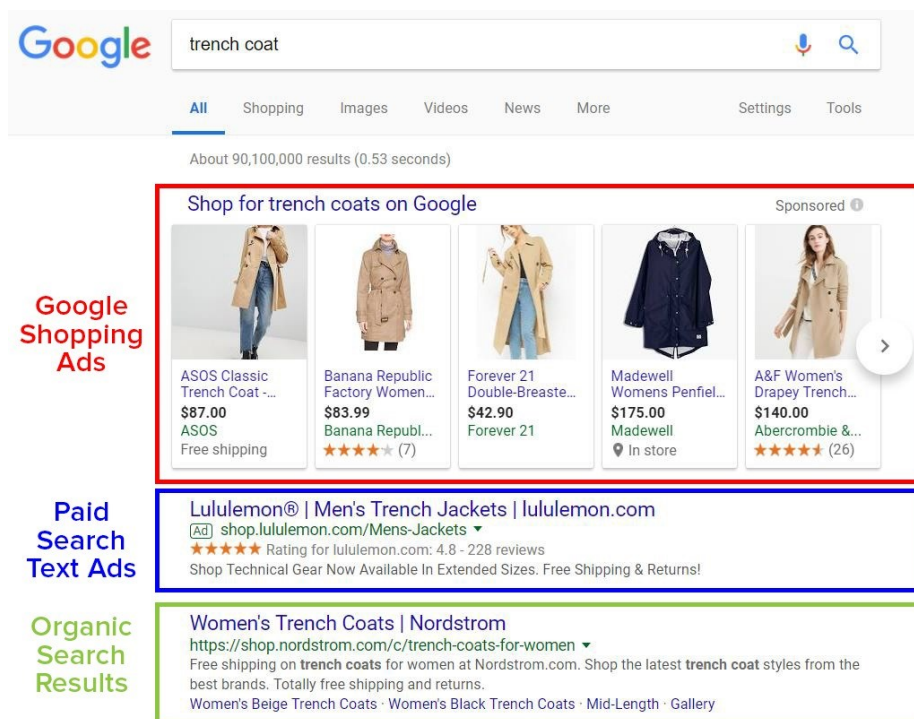


Figure 1.6 – Examples of search engine marketing (Disruptiveadvertising.com, 2019)

SEM may incorporate *search engine optimization* (SEO), which refers to the marketing practice of adjusting or rewriting website content and site architecture to achieve a higher ranking in search engine results pages, to enhance the product listing ads. Although SEM and SEO can be utilized together to achieve the optimal result, they are entirely different. SEO helps businesses earn a free spot in the organic search results by having the most relevant content for a given keyword search, whereas SEM refers to a paid system, where

businesses pay to show their ads in the SERPs. In other words, SEO is a powerful way to drive evergreen traffic to the website and lies at the top of the funnel, while SEM is a highly cost-effective way to drive conversions at the end of the funnel.

### **Social media marketing**

Social media marketing can be simply defined as “the utilization of social media platforms and websites to promote a product or service via the Internet” (Felix, et al., 2016). There are a variety of reasons why businesses should invest a lot in this virtual dynamic marketplace, but we could consider the four most beneficial ones as follows. First, sharing content related to products as well as details about companies on social media can incredibly help companies improve brand awareness due to the sheer huge amount of audience on it. In 2020, there are 3.8 billion people on social media globally (We are social, 2020). Brand awareness can also be increased by employing social engagement, which includes actions such as likes, shares, comments, and re-posts. Second, similarly, by connecting and engaging with their social media followers, brands are able to foster lasting relationships with their customers. Nowadays, it is common for brands to directly interact with their followers on their posts, respond to customers’ questions and comments, and provide them any help they may need. Third, promoting products on social media is a simple way for businesses to improve lead generation, boost conversions, and increase sales because they are advertising to the right audience who have chosen to engage with them by following their account. In fact, 78% of consumers say that they will visit the physical store of a brand they follow, and 84% are more likely to buy from a brand they follow (Sprout Social, 2019). Last but not least important, social media enables firms to closely observe their competitors in several aspects such as their social media tactics, the products they are promoting, the campaigns they are implementing, or their level of interaction with followers. These activities allow firms to learn valuable lessons about what is and is not working for their competitors, in order to further modify their marketing approach and achieve success.

While social media as a whole is undoubtedly beneficial to business growth, brands’ strategy differs based on where their target audience spends time on. Blogs or web blogs, such as WordPress and Tumblr, are places where individuals or organizations frequently post news, articles, or commentary on particular topics, and invite public comments.

Likewise, micro-blogging sites, primarily Twitter, also allow users to post comments and web links, but in a format limited to 140 characters. Media and document sharing sites host specialized content such as video clips (Youtube), photographs (Flickr, Instagram), music and audio (Soundcloud), presentations, and documents (Scribd, SlideShare) rather than text or a mix of media. Another type is social bookmarking sites on which users share links, articles, images, and videos to classify and prioritize them into relevant general categories, examples are Reddit, Delicious, or Digg. Finally, the most popular form is social and professional networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, which encourage members to connect and interact with one another. Facebook is the dominant social media site with around 2.5 billion active users in 2020, and at 58 minutes per day on average, it is the platform on which users spend the highest amount of time daily (Molla, 2020). Figure 1.7 describes the most commonly used platforms as in 2020, with the surge of TikTok, a trending video sharing sites, along with other familiar social network sites.

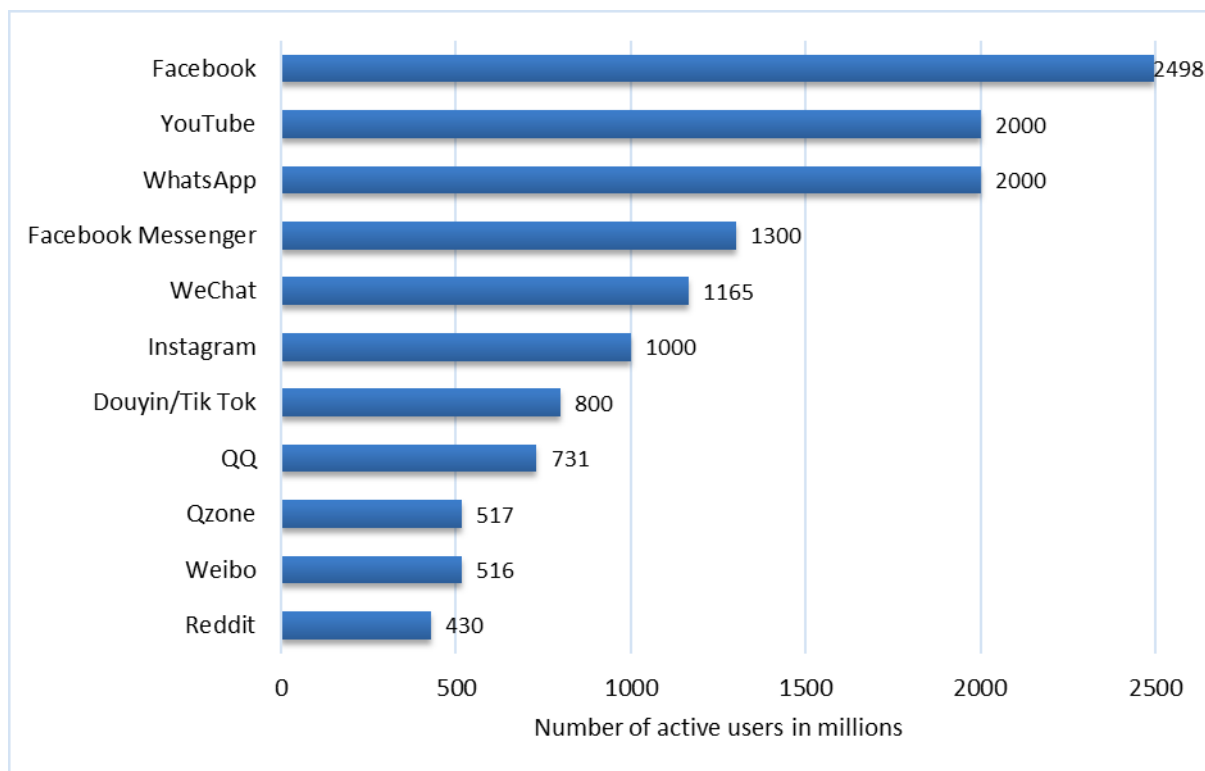


Figure 1.7 – Most popular social media platforms in 2020 (Dataportal.com, 2020)

### Mobile marketing

As mentioned in paragraph 1.1.1, the number of people owning a personal mobile phone and connected to the Internet is growing enormously, which is an unmissable opportunity

for marketers and advertisers. According to Kaplan (2012), “mobile marketing can be any marketing activity conducted through a ubiquitous network to which consumers are constantly connected through their personal mobile devices”. It is considered as a compelling channel in the digital era due to its abilities to support one-to-one as well as one-to-many communication cheaply and effectively (Watson, et al., 2013). The effectiveness of mobile marketing can be achieved with the fast development of technologies. For example, by using location-based techniques, local brand advertisers can deliver their ads correctly and easily to their potential customers in a specific area. Other advanced technologies even allow advertisers to collect users’ behaviors and preferences through their phones to deliver timely and personalized content or advertisements later. Among a diverse array of mobile marketing strategies, the most outstanding ones are SMS and MMS marketing, in-game mobile marketing, QR codes, location-based marketing, mobile search ads, and app-based marketing.

App-based marketing is part of mobile marketing which involves mobile applications. There are over 3 billion smartphone users across the world today (Statista, 2020), and according to eMarketer, people spend 90 percent of their mobile time on using apps. In fact, app usage has exponentially grown at a steady pace without any signs of slowing down. In 2019, the annual number of app downloads reached a huge amount of 204 billion (Statista, 2020). As this trend keeps going on, app-based marketing is thriving. Particularly, one approach of app-based marketing that is newly emerging, but quickly gaining in popularity is branded mobile apps. They are defined by Bellman et al. (2011) as “software downloadable to a mobile device which prominently displays a brand identity, often via the name of the app and the appearance of a brand logo or icon, throughout the user experience”. Their main purposes are to increase mutual communication, customer relationships, product innovation, marketing research, and sales volume (Zhao and Balague, 2015). The apps offer various unique features which no other channel possess, such as push notifications, entertaining gamification, easy user experience, detailed information, and fast market transaction. As a result, branded mobile apps produce a great level of engagement with customers for businesses. This method has been widely used in the fashion industry lately and this phenomenon will be discussed in detail in the later paragraphs.

#### **1.1.4. Benefits and limitations of digital marketing**

Digital marketing should always be implemented with great attention. For firms, who manage to do appropriately, it can bring great benefits. In contrast, this method can also severely damage firms' reputation and profits if it is wrongly utilized.

##### **Benefits**

The benefits of digital marketing can be summarized through the 5S framework introduced by Chaffey and Smith in 2001. Their model specifically defines the top five goals to have an effective digital marketing strategy for a business and assess each of them in terms of expected outcomes. The first S stands for *Selling* which means distributing the products and services to customers through online marketing tools. Increasing sales volume is the ultimate goal of any organization, and digital marketing helps them achieve this with lower cost, higher efficiency, and enhanced sales experience. The second S is *Serving* or providing additional values to customers. Digital channels can do this by facilitating real time service, firms can always be present and responsive to customers' inquiries, support them when they need help. The quality of online service can also be constantly improved through customers' feedback and satisfaction scores. The third S is *Speaking*, which refers to direct communication to attract and engage with potential and existing customers. One of the most useful tactics to attract public attention and raise brand awareness is relevant and engaging content. With the boom of social media, e-commerce sites, and other microsites, brands can get closer to customers at a higher speed and on a larger scale than ever before. *Saving* is the fourth S, digital marketing brings benefits to both sides in terms of saving costs and time through the extensive availability of information, easy mutual conversations, fast and convenient market transaction. Nowadays customers can make their purchase online quickly at anytime from anywhere, and brands can save a vast amount of money by reducing unnecessary staff, print, and postage costs. Lastly, the final S refers to *Sizzling*. Brands stand a lot of chances to extend their online presence by providing attractive and unique offers or experiences for their customers like never before such as community building, online contests, or entertaining games. These activities allow them to win customer attention and loyalty, which may ultimately lead to increased business via word-of-mouth and referrals.



The 5S framework has provided a relatively comprehensive picture of potential advantages digital marketing offers to businesses. Dann and Dann in 2011 also identified six reasons to turn to digital marketing, which basically cover again these fine aspects, with possibly a new discovery referring to competitive pressures. One of the reasons why companies often invest a lot in building their online presence is that they do not want their customers taken away by their competitors through online channels. Online competition could be a good way for firms to investigate competitors' activities then reflect and continuously improve their own performance. The modern battle has shifted from product differentiation to less tangible attributes such as brand image and style, forcing companies to put greater efforts to stand out from the crowds.

### **Limitations**

Although the benefits of digital marketing may outweigh its limitations, it is still crucial for companies to pay attention to the possible downsides to avoid unexpected mistakes. Firstly, the most noticeable limitation of digital marketing is the *lack of personal contact* (Goldsmith and Goldsmith, 2002). Some parts of customers, who are not proficient in utilizing technologies or uncomfortable with online services, still prefer the experience of shopping in person to examine the products physically, interact with a salesperson, or other customers, in physical stores. It is worth to mention that some types of products even specifically require the relationship-building abilities of a salesperson to persuade potential customers such as the insurance sector (Kiang and Chi, 2001), and definitely, this is not what digital marketing methods can offer. Secondly, *security and privacy* are among the top issues that customers care about these days. Not all companies can assure firm protection and appropriate use of their customer private data, which makes people irritated. In worse cases, customer information is even shared with other parties without asking for their permission. Moreover, the risks of hackers stealing crucial data including the personal identity or bank account password are always present in this digital world (Lantos, 2011). Also, some forms of e-marketing such as pop-up ads are considered by Internet users as intruding privacy (Drozdenko & Drake, 2002). These security and privacy problems are probably the biggest challenge for digital marketing. Thirdly, the heavy *dependence on technology* of digital marketing makes firms vulnerable to damages when it comes to technical failure. For example, if a customer chooses to buy a product online and has finished all required steps including providing personal information and

bank account, and due to a technical glitch, his transaction fails, he may become truly frustrated and even turn against the whole company. This scenario happens quite regularly and represents an existing limitation of digital methods. Lastly, another challenge for businesses when conducting e-marketing practice is the *lack of trust* from customers. In the absence of face to face interaction with the seller, many buyers still hold negative or doubtful attitudes towards online information and transactions. Urban, in 2008, pointed out that with the increased power of customers, it is becoming more important for marketers and IT managers to put great efforts to retain the trust of online consumers.

In conclusion, digital marketing is a complicated practice, and in each channel, its strengths and weaknesses are presented in a different way. Thus, businesses must consider their characteristics carefully when choosing or integrating various approaches to achieve desirable outcomes.

## **1.2. The concept of fast fashion**

For the purpose of this study, it is important to clarify the concept of fast fashion. This section will specifically describe the fast fashion industry with an emphasis on its historical background, particular features, and consumer characteristics. In general, fashion can be simply defined as the styles of clothing and accessories worn by groups of people at any given time. The fashion industry covers a vast sector of clothing, and several minor sectors including furniture, footwear, accessories, cosmetics, and hair care products (McKelvey & Munslow, 2011). Fashion is a way of self-affirmation and communication about tastes and lifestyles for each person (Steele, 2005; Godart, 2012). The sharing of common tastes and lifestyles of different individuals in a society collectively forms the tastes and lifestyles of that society. Therefore, fashion can reflect the aesthetic, economic, political, cultural, and social life of a large group of people (Cholachatpinyo et al., 2002). The fashion industry has undergone significant transformation over the last thirty years, particularly with the massive rise of fast fashion. Although it is widely regarded as a fairly new concept, fast fashion is actually the result of the constant evolution over time of the production systems.

### **1.2.1. The emergence of the fast fashion industry**

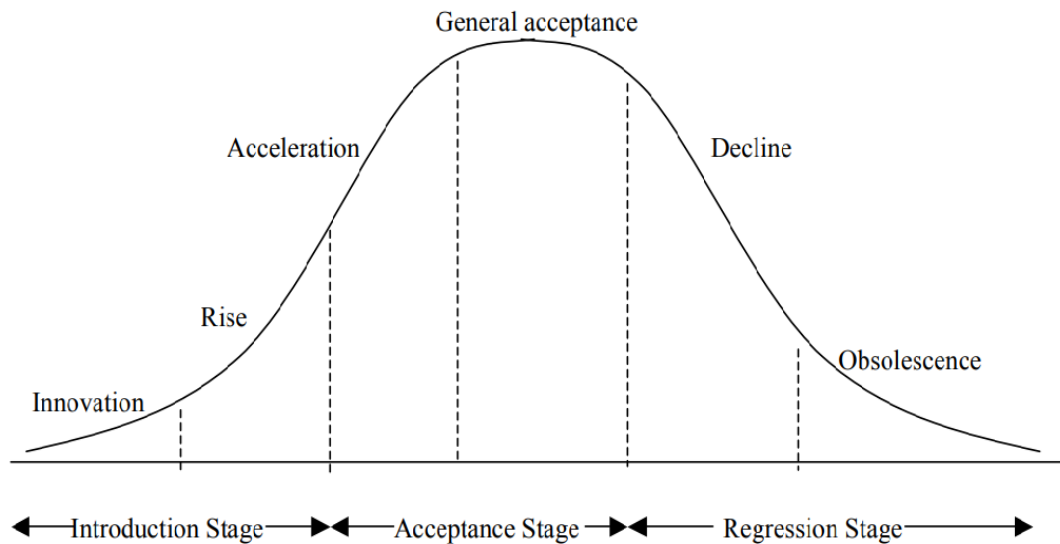
Along with the flow of time, there are several factors leading to the emergence of fast fashion, but the three most outstanding ones will be interpreted as follows.

#### **The fading of mass production**

Since the early beginning, the garment industry has always been characterized by low capital and labor intensive. It heavily relied on fashion runways and fashion shows to get inspiration for the upcoming trends. These trends would not frequently change as they were primarily restricted to designers and fashion leaders. Therefore, the fashion industry was able to achieve great success with the mass production of standardized styles such as Levi's jeans and men's white shirt (Brooks, 1979). Moreover, consumers during that time were seemingly less sensitive toward style and fashion and preferred basic apparel items. Until the mid-1980s, there was a sudden rise in the import of fashion-oriented apparel for women (Bailey and Eicher, 1992), which contributed to the reduction in demand for classic and simple products as consumers became more aware of styles and fashion. As a result, an increase in markdowns in the market occurred due to the failure to sell standardized apparel during these normal forecasted seasons (OTA, 1987). A chain of successive disruptions finally brought about the collapse of the mass production system of fashion products, which was necessary because it was not a correct solution to gain profits in the fashion industry (Malone, 1998).

#### **Changes in fashion seasons**

Traditionally, a fashion life cycle comprises four stages: the introduction by trendsetters and fashion leaders; the growth in public acceptance; the mass conformity; and lastly the decline and obsolescence of fashion as shown in Figure 1.8. A full year fashion calendar is primarily based on fashion shows or trade fairs and used to only consist of Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter ranges.



*Figure 1.8 – A general fashion life cycle (Kaiser, 1985)*

Before the late 1980s, traditional apparel retailers gained competitive advantages by using their ability to forecast consumer demand and fashion trends long before the actual time of consumption (Guercini, 2001). The inability to accurately predict future trends (Christopher, Lawson, and Peck, 2004) or quickly produce apparel items imitating those introduced on runways (Richardson, 1996) can generate risk associated with longer lead times and failure to sell to fashion-conscious consumers.

Therefore, towards the beginning of the 1990s, retailers started to expand their product ranges with a focus on faster responsiveness to the latest fashion trends revealed by fashion shows and runways. They competed with one another by the speed of providing updated and trendy products to the market. Furthermore, the addition of more phases to the existing seasons in a fashion calendar year was introduced to accelerate the diversity of products in the market. This increase in the number of mid-seasons arose from the changes in consumers' fashion sensitivity and at the same time, from the adoption of suppliers to meet their consumers' demand. This change consequently put an immense pressure on suppliers to deliver "quick fashion" in smaller batches with reduced lead time (Tyler, Heeley, and Bhamra, 2006), which requires an innovative supply chain model to replace the old one.

### **Changes in supply chain model**

Within the same time frame, towards the beginning of the 1990s, the fashion industry was dominated by several large retailers. In order to win the competition, they had to adopt a quick response to change in fashion tastes through reduced lead times while still maintain low manufacturing costs. As a consequence, apparel companies started to shift their production to developing countries, where there were abundant labor resources at low cost. The rise of globalization facilitated this trend to thrive further. Apart from the substantial cost advantage, the outsourcing trend yielded high profits for fashion firms for many other reasons such as vast tax breaks, distinctive brand position, high-value research, and unique design (Gereffi, 1999). It is not a surprise that the fashion sector has one of the largest chains of production and consumption of all industries. Since apparel companies moved their production overseas, the price of fashion products has fallen dramatically over the past thirty years.

To conclude, the emergence of the fast fashion concept was unavoidable when the addition of more fashion seasons in a year was combined with the fact that consumers became more fashion-conscious. Confronting with the new challenges, the outdated mass production systems revealed obvious shortcomings. This directly led to the introduction of a new supply method for fashion companies to respond faster to consumer demand – outsourcing manufacturing processes to developing countries. All these issues contributed to the growth of the fast fashion industry.

Up to this point, we can introduce a full definition of fast fashion products as “inexpensive items, including clothing and other accessories (shoes, glasses, handbags, hats, belts, jewelry, etc.), produced rapidly by mass-market retailers in response to the latest fashion trends” (Hines and Bruce, 2007). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, fast fashion became a booming industry with the prominence of leading retailers such as Zara, H&M, Topshop, and Primark. They were able to quickly replicate the designs and styles from runways to put new products in their stores in just around three to five weeks. The next paragraphs will point out the particular features of the fast fashion industry.

### **1.2.2. The nature of fast fashion**

The most outstanding features of the fast fashion industry are encapsulated in the word “fast”. According to Cohen (2011), the fast fashion model is “a streamlined system involving rapid design, production, distribution, and marketing”, so the key point lies at

the high speed of the chain. Firstly, the demand for fast fashion products is fast in changing or *highly volatile*. With the widespread of the Internet and digital technologies, fashion shows and catwalks have become popular with the public. Photographs of the recent events could be easily seen in magazines, on the web, and social media. Other than fashion shows, today's demands can also be influenced by other factors such as the vagaries of the weather, celebrities' styles, movies, or social media trends. As a result, fashion-conscious consumers are exposed to a variety of styles and rapidly change their demands to catch up with new trends. Because of this instability, it is extremely difficult to forecast with any accuracy the total demand within a period, not to mention week-by-week or item-by-item demand. Thus, the fast fashion industry has very *low predictability*. Secondly, the frequently changing demands in turn require fast responsiveness from fashion retailers to make profits in the industry. This puts pressure on their decision-making process as consumers require shorter and *shorter lead times*. Thirdly, the culture of rapid purchasing and disposal combined with the seasonal nature of fashion means that styles often have a *short life cycle*, or they are only produced for a few weeks per year. In fact, fast fashion brands would do anything to shorten their products' cycle. For example, the world-leading fashion brand Zara implements a strategy that no design stays in their stores for more than one month. If a design doesn't sell well within a week, it will be withdrawn from shelves, further orders are canceled, and a new design is pursued. Their customers are urged to make a buying decision right away when confronted with a favorite product at the point of sales as they know it may be probably gone in their next visits. This is the reason for the *high impulse purchasing* feature toward fast fashion products.

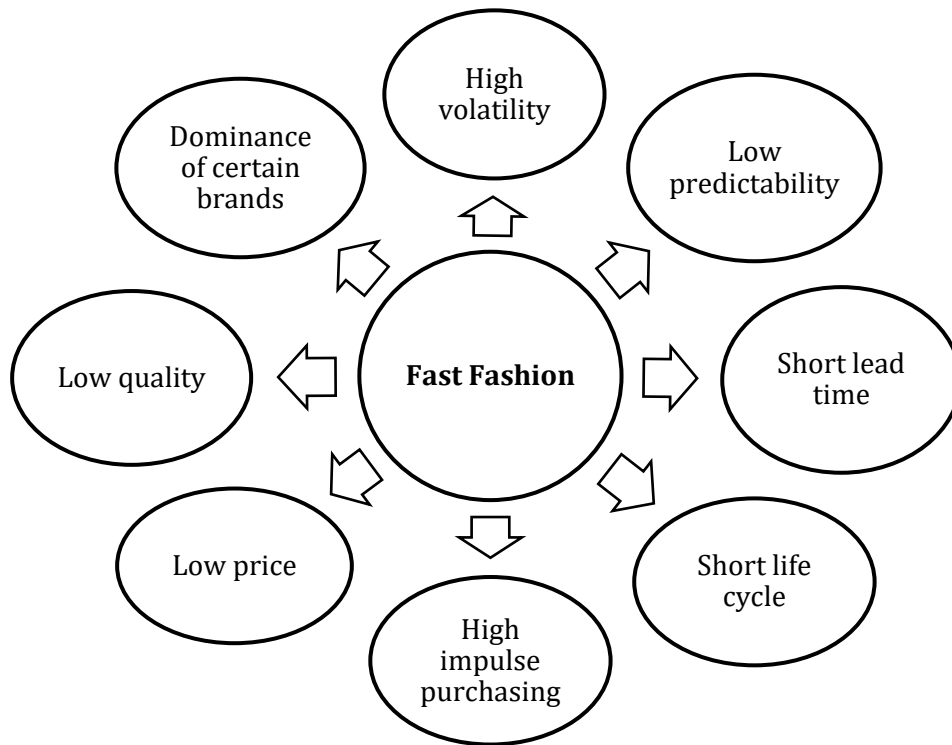
Additionally, fast fashion products are also characterized by *low price*. While in the past, consumers could only get high fashion content at a high cost, today fast fashion brands are able to do the opposite. For instance, the famous brand H&M describes its mission as "Fashion and quality at the best price". Low price can in turn encourage customers to purchase more frequently and make products flow quicker. In order to get such low prices, fashion companies need to have low labor and raw material costs. They took advantage of globalization and expanded production capacity in developing countries or outsourcing to contract manufacturers. Recently, there is also a trend toward vertical

integration. This delocalization from production to distribution with relative ease makes the low price more achievable in the fashion industry than many others (Bosshart, 2006).

The consumer demand for instant supplies of cheap and trendy products results in their *low quality*. The quality of a fast fashion product can be measured in the amounts of washes before it starts to fall apart (Cline, 2012). Some fast fashion companies openly admitted that their products would last for about ten washes, after which they would start to deteriorate due to low-cost materials and manufacturing processes (Joy et al., 2012). The latter reason is something those companies did not specifically explain but we can understand that as clothing is made in a rushed manner, there would not be enough time for proper quality control. Each rapidly produced item is not built to last long and instead, to “easy come and easy go” as much as possible. In this way, brands can set an attractively low price and get their products consumed quicker and in larger volumes.

Another noticeable feature of the fast fashion industry is the *dominance of certain large brands*. A fast fashion system integrates enhanced product designs that capture the latest trends with quick response production capabilities and minimal lead times to encounter with uncertain demands (Cachon & Swinney, 2011). All of these require a strong and mature organization to manage and operate. These conditions make only some well-established fashion brands such as Forever 21, Gap, H&M, TopShop, or Zara able to beat the competition and dominate the fast fashion market.

Based on the work of Čiarnienė and Vienažindienė (2014) about the main characteristics of the modern fashion industry which the fast fashion sector has many aspects in common, the following model is developed to summarize the above discussed features (Figure 1.9).



*Figure 1.9 - The main characteristics of the fast fashion industry  
(Čiarnienė and Vienažindienė, 2014; own elaboration)*

### **1.2.3. Fast fashion consumers**

As already mentioned in paragraph 1.2.2, today fashion consumers are deeply influenced by technology and social media. They are exposed to a large amount of information surrounding the latest trends or styles on a daily basis. Many fashion-conscious consumers follow celebrities' pages and see them wearing trendy apparels that are emerging from high fashion shows. The difficulty lies in the fact that consumers often want to possess similar items right away but are unable to afford them (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). This is when fast fashion brands step into the game and satisfy the need. One fast fashion consumer described what she looked for when she went to the store that "I want to see new things and styles that help me recreate my wardrobe and who I am. When I see them on the catwalks or in the magazines, I want them immediately" (Joy et al., 2012). Thus, it is important to recognize that consumers will shop at the store that gives them their desired products the quickest and the cheapest.

Despite the prosperity of the fast fashion industry, there is a shortage of researches adopting a consumer-driven approach and addressing why consumers keep purchasing



these cheap disposable pieces of clothing. Miller, in 2013, found that many consumers seek pleasure and entertainment when going shopping fast fashion, and this hedonism influences their behaviors. These consumers like the fact that there are limited chances to get a product as fast fashion retailers frequently renew their portfolio; and by the time they wear that product and other people may see it and like it, it will no longer be available for sale. The limited amount of items satisfies their needs to be unique. Certainly, fast fashion brands can take advantage of the hedonistic motive's value to increase sales and earn profits (Miller, 2013). Another reason pointed out by consumer psychology expert C. W. Park is that they are driven by the amazingly cheap price (Cline, 2012). The consumers have fun getting fashionable clothes at such low expense so keep getting for more; sometimes they do not have the intention to purchase but the price is too attractive which motivates them to buy or they may regret later. He adds more details that there is no physiological or psychological limit to how much clothing people are willing to buy, so the trend keeps going on.

Although there are some exceptions occasionally, in general, fast fashion is made to be thrown away after a couple of wears due to low quality. This perception of throwaway fashion varies among different generations. A high number of fashionable, cheap, and low-quality clothes is more preferred by the young modern part of the population constituting the millennials. Whereas, older generations would choose to purchase a fewer number of clothes but having higher quality and longer duration (Crewe and Davenport, 1992). Fast fashion is regarded as a "waste" by conservative consumers because people buy multiple low-quality merchandises then throw the old ones away as fast as they bring in new ones. This throwaway culture combined with other elements of fast fashion such as rapid production, low quality, competitive pricing is putting heavy pressures on the environment and people involved in its manufacturing process.

## **Chapter 2. Hypothesis development**

The introduction of the Internet has accelerated the customer-brand relationship and shaped a new concept of consumer behavior in the digital environment. Regarding the fast fashion sector, social media marketing, fashion blogs/websites, branded mobile apps, and email marketing are observed to be popular methods adopted by the majority of fast fashion retailers. This chapter will include the review of existing research on how these particular digital marketing channels can possibly shape the consumer purchase decisions and their contemporary application in the fast fashion industry. Based on these rationales, hypotheses will be developed. As these chosen tools are also the major channels of digital marketing, their definitions and main features have already been explained in paragraph 1.1.3. There is an exception for blogs and websites, which are not common channels for all types of audiences (Nielsen, 2012). Thus, they will be given a definition and characteristic highlights in this chapter as well.

### **2.1. Consumer purchase decisions**

First of all, it is essential to understand the concept of consumer purchase decisions as it is the object of impact by the concerning digital marketing channels. Purchase decision is a part of consumer behavior study which is a very broad topic. Regarding the objectives of the current study, this section will only go into details about the decision making process and final purchase decision of the consumers.

#### **2.1.1. Decision making process**

In order to comprehend consumer purchasing decisions, it is advised that marketing managers should understand the whole process of consumption because it is a continuous circle with inseparable phases. Blackwell et al., (2001) reported that when consumers intend to buy certain products, they will pass through a learning process which would impact their purchase decision and post-purchase behaviors. The traditional framework for the analysis of the buyer decision making process is a five-stage model. The first stage is problem recognition when the consumers initially experience a state of felt deprivation. In other words, they recognize a problem or need that can be satisfied by a product or service in the market. The need could be triggered by internal stimuli such as hunger or thirst or external stimuli which involve the role of marketers to

use advertisements, personal selling, and packaging to arouse this desired need or want (Kotler et al., 2009). In the second stage, consumers begin to search for information to solve problems at hand. They may use their own knowledge gained from past experiences with the products or other outside sources such as family, friends, relatives, neighbors, commercial advertisements, salespeople, catalogs, publications, packing labels, or social media. The information gathered provides the foundations for the evaluation of alternatives which is the third stage. While evaluating goods and services, different consumers adopt different methods. Usually, they develop a set of criteria based on the attributes of the product such as the degree of importance, belief in the brand, quality, or satisfaction to compare alternatives correctly. The consumers will also assess whether the products can deliver the benefits they are seeking. The fourth stage is when consumers select the best brand that satisfies their needs and make the actual purchase decision. Finally, the last stage of the buyer decision process is post-purchase evaluation during which the consumer determines if they are satisfied or not with the purchasing outcome. This stage directly shapes the consumers' perception of the product or service and may affect their decision in the next purchase; thus, it has a significant meaning in the marketing perspective (Blythe, 2008).



*Figure 2.1– Consumer decision making process (Blackwell et al., 2001)*

This classic purchase decision making theory comprises the essence of consumer behavior under most contexts. In the case of an impulse purchase, for example, a personal treat of a chocolate bar, the consumer may minimize engagement in information search and evaluation of alternatives and proceed rapidly to the purchase decision (Kotler et al., 2009). This decision process can also be characterized as a continuous extension of normal problem-solving routine, from limited problem-solving behaviors towards

extensive problem-solving behaviors (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007). The consumer decision process model is very important to marketers as it has the ability to explain and predict consumer purchase behaviors. Marketers can make use of it to actively influence the process and win the competition.

### **2.1.2. Purchase decisions**

According to Blackwell et al. (2001), consumer purchase decisions can be defined as “those activities directly associated with obtaining, consuming, and disposing of products and services”. From marketing perspectives, generating purchase decisions inside the target consumers means meeting their needs and increasing their perceived satisfaction (Porter, 1985). This perceived satisfaction of purchase decision is very multidimensional and largely depends on the context. Past literature on consumer behavior has considered the purchase decision in a symbolic way in terms of emotional responses, sensory pleasures, daydreams, or aesthetic considerations. Blackwell et al., (2001) concluded it as a personal phenomenon, a situational phenomenon, a social phenomenon, and a perceived contextual phenomenon. In the decision making process, the purchase decision is the key step after a sequence of thoughtful, consistent actions undertaken by a consumer to bring about need satisfaction. As for Azjen et al. (1980), usually, consumers are quite rational and able to make use of the information available to them. They would attempt to avoid risks in their purchase decisions (Chaipradernsak, 2007). Thus, the consumers should reach a decision after taking into account all aspects surrounding a purchase including the purchasing quantity, the amount of money to be spent, time, place, the chosen brand, model, and the method of payment. Several consumers’ decisions are formed by combining past purchase experience with marketing programs and non-commercial information sources (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007). The final purchase decision can be disrupted due to two factors. The first one is the negative feedback from other consumers combined with the level of intrinsic motivation to accept it. The second factor is the unanticipated situations such as the closing of a retail store or a sudden job loss (Kotler et al., 2009).

### **2.2. Social media marketing**

Most brands or industries in the modern world have acknowledged the efficiency of social media and integrated it among the most important part of business policies at the

organizational or industrial level (Hesmondhalgh, 2005). One of the biggest industries that extensively utilize social media is the fashion industry (Easey, 2009). Many fashion brands have continually incorporated social media as a strategic promotion method to educate their customers, obtain their feedback, and increase sales. Currently, the success level of these brands is notable (Kim & Ko, 2012; Galloway, 2012). The reason for this success is simply due to the fact that almost all of today's customers, especially the youth, are the active users of social media. VanAuken (2015) conducted a survey and explored that Instagram is the key social site to engage customers in purchasing fashion products by developing their fashion consciousness. The famous designer "Alexander Wang" supported this finding and added that social media attracts customers through eye-catching images. Social media has been drastically changing people's behaviors toward fashion, whereby potential customers can satisfy their desires for fashion trends and access product information anytime and anywhere (Durmaz, 2014). Direct interactions with a brand can influence the purchase decisions of consumers by increasing awareness, engagement, and ultimately stimulating purchases. For the young and digital generation, it is even easier for social media to boost their interest in new products and trends through viral marketing (Kim & Ko, 2012). The use of social media is nothing new to luxury brands. For example, Gucci updates its Facebook site as often as three times a day and is constantly tweeting on Twitter. Dolce & Gabbana invites fashion bloggers to fashion shows and lets them instantly upload videos and images on social media. In this way, customers can see their favorite brand modeled directly and build up purchase intentions right away. So those cases are from the luxury world, how about fast fashion brands? Zara, H&M, Mango, Uniqlo, ASOS, Forever 21, Bershka, Pull&Bear, Topshop, etc. now all have Facebook, Instagram, as well as Twitter accounts and operate actively in these platforms.

It is necessary to recall that social media is an important marketing communication tool to reach and interact with a large number of customers at minimal cost and at different times. According to Brodie et al. (2013), social media allows organizations to build their engaging relationships with committed and profitable customers, influencing customers' perceptions towards their products or services and sharing the information with others. Moreover, through the support of social media, companies are able to learn more about their consumers' needs and expectations. Prior to the age of the Internet, consumers could only obtain information about a product or service by physically visiting the stores.

Today they can find any information they are curious about, from products' characteristics to brands' reputation with just a simple click on the Internet. The huge exposure and embracement of social media facilitate these changes in consumers' buying behavior even more intensely. In this era of digitalization, people often read a lot of reviews about the products and the brands before deciding to purchase. Social media enables consumers to easily share opinions about products or services offered by brands with their peers. These reviews on social media can exert a great influence on potential consumers' perception and emotion and eventually guide their buying decision. The recommendation from other people on the Internet or the "electronic word-of-mouth" has become one of the most trustworthy forms of marketing. This view is supported by Soewandi (2015) who indicated that user-generated content on social media plays a significant role in forming brand choice. Similarly, a number of scholars (Khatib, 2016; Yogesh and Yesha, 2014) previously reported that social media marketing plays an important role in forming consumers' purchase decisions.

Based on the above discussion, the first hypothesis for this study is proposed:

***H1: Social media marketing has a positive influence on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products.***

### **2.3. Blogs and websites**

Blogs and websites are not described as main marketing channels in paragraph 1.1.3 because they are not popular with the audience of all age groups and used by a large part of business organizations. A study by Nielsen in 2012 revealed that the majority of bloggers and blog readers are young women aged 18-34. However, the blogging phenomenon has increasingly become an effective way of communicating and sharing information through its user-generated content in the digital era. The term "blogs" is a shortened form of "web logs" and defined by Chaffey et al. (2006) as "an easy method of regularly publishing web pages that are best described as online journals, diaries, or news events listings". They may include feedback comments from other sites or contributors to the site. Blogs are unique online sources that deliver news and information with subjective self-expression (Kaye, 2005). The main purpose of blogs is to serve as an online environment for users to share their opinions, add or correct information, and interact with bloggers and other readers. For businesses, blogging is also rising as an important

form of marketing organizations' products online. Recently, marketing and SEO experts started advocating for organizations to incorporate a blog into their websites where they will discuss their products. An organizational blog gives the organization a unique opportunity to interact with its customers, provide them detailed information about products and services, and learn more about the customers' buying behaviors. Blogs enable consumers to easily and directly give feedbacks, which helps companies keep their products and services at the highest quality thereby bring more value to the customers. Additionally, since a blog's followers are usually related to a specific interest such as fashion, travelling, cooking, reading, pets, etc., together they build up a community around it. Therefore, advertising through these specialized blogs or websites is an ideal choice for brands to approach target communities of customers. Bloggers and site owners have equally used their blogs/websites for advertising purposes. Typically, there are two methods for them to advertise. In one way, the bloggers publish content and provide space for advertisers to display product images to their reading audience. The other way is that bloggers or site owners directly review and promote the products to their followers and get paid by the brands. These methods have become among the leading sources of online income today.

Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) have earlier projected that the fashion industry should connect with the target market of customers by developing official business webs or blogs. In this context, different fashion brands and companies including Zara are publishing their fashion blogs on social sites or companies' official websites to attract customers and now a great number of people have become their regular customers. In fact, the largest segment of the blogosphere today is occupied by fashion blogs and websites focusing on fashion brands, fashion products, street styles, and personal style (Halvorsen et al., 2013). Examples of potential topics to be covered are: 1) Personal style (outfit of the day, street style, celebrity style, trends); 2) Brands, designers, and retailers (collections, history, and other company details); 3) Tips and advice (experience, sales, product alternatives, favorite shops, product details, buying procedures, shopping events); 4) Purchases new products, stories, online, desired products); 5) Products received (outfit of the day, purchase' like stories, product details); 6) Competitions (product prizes, gift vouchers). The classification of fashion blogs/websites and bloggers are summarized in Table 2.1 below.

<b>Fashion blogs location</b>	<b>Types of blogs</b>	<b>Types of blogger</b>	<b>Topics covered by fashion blogs</b>
Fashion magazines	Individual	Ordinary people	Personal style
Fashion platforms	Community of Bloggers (multi-authored blogs)	Fashion professionals	Brands, designers, and retailers
Sites about fashion		Celebrities	Tips and advice
Communities fashion bloggers		Brands	Purchases
Individual sites			Product received
			Competitions

*Table 2.1 - Classification of Fashion blogs and bloggers (SanMiguel & Sádaba, 2014)*

Little research has been done about blogs and websites influencing the consumer decision making process. Indeed, blogs can be considered as the new version of the traditional word-of-mouth. Penttala and Saarela (2012) stressed that the consumer buying decision would differ from the traditional purchasing model when it is influenced by a blog. The consumer may consult various blogs to find information about the product and brand of their interest. According to Kaye (2005), one of the first researchers analyzing blog readers to understand the motivations for using blogs, information seeking lies among three key factors, besides community and convenience. Even if the buyer is not currently following a specific blog, he is still motivated to find one with hopes of discovering helpful suggestions in terms of style, price, and other similar qualities. The consumers are also likely to follow the links provided by bloggers to purchase products online. Several things such as friends' opinions, the economic situation, and the age group of a consumer can have a huge impact on whether he or she decides to trust the blogger's recommendation and buy the product. Furthermore, as mentioned before, blogs show comments, product reviews from other consumers, tips, and advice from people who are experts in the field like no other platforms. The overall results of Kaye's study discovered that blog readers are foremost attracted to intellectual and in-depth news and commentary on blogs. They appreciate this in-depth information because it is not provided by the mainstream media (Frauenfelder & Kelly, 2000; Seipp, 2002). Moreover, the more information the customers have about the product and the brand, the more likely they will patronize that



brand (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). All of the ideas suggest that blogs can have enormous effects on both future consumers and the ones who are about to make a buying decision on the spot. This phenomenon may also be applicable to fast fashion blogs and websites.

The above literature discussion has provided the rationale for the second hypothesis:

*H2: Blogs and websites have a positive influence on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products.*

#### **2.4. Branded mobile applications**

Although branded mobile apps were already introduced in paragraph 1.1.3 with its definition and features, it is worth restating that they are becoming the dominant form of digital marketing given their prevalence and mobility. Consumers today spend more time with apps on their smart phones than on the web (Newark-French, 2011). As a marketing and communication channel, branded apps help sponsoring brands to create positive attitudes toward them and increase purchase decisions among consumers. Firstly, branded apps possess superior advantages over other mobile advertising tools such as SMS or banners on mobile-optimized sites due to the personal nature of a mobile phone. According to Tsang et al. (2004), consumers' attitude toward advertising on mobile devices are generally negative, unless permission is obtained as opt-in. Advertisers are therefore advised to ask for authorization from mobile users before placing advertisements on their phones. However, this is not the case for branded apps. As consumers actively initiate to download apps that they are interested in, they have a mental preparation and control over what advertisements they may be exposed to. Thus, there is an opportunity to create a favorable attitude toward the sponsoring brand. In contrast, disruptive advertising on other platforms usually causes irritations leading to a hostile attitude toward the brand. This aspect is supported by the study conducted by McRae et al. (2013) which tested the response times of consumers on different platforms (branded apps, SMS, and online websites) and on different communication devices (desktop computers, laptops, tablets, and mobile phones). The result showed that consumers have more positive emotional responses to brands' messages when received on personal mobile phones than on other devices. There was also a higher number of site visits when the visit was conducted through a mobile platform such as an app than other platforms. The explanation was that the consumers felt a sense of privacy respect and

more personal connection with the brand which made the messages more trustworthy. Secondly, the high level of user engagement with mobile apps also enhances the impacts of advertising on consumers' minds and behaviors (Hutton and Rodnick, 2009). Branded apps offer a variety of interactive features that allow consumers to perform many tasks from information searching, to communicating, to shopping and buying. Through these features, marketers can communicate, interact, and deliver messages in unique ways unlike SMS or mobile websites. Bellman et al. (2011) found that this high level of interactivity reinforces the effectiveness of advertising messages within apps, which leads to positive attitudes toward the brand and purchase intentions. Similarly, Hoogendoorn (2013) discovered that interacting with branded apps produced more positive affective brand equity when he examined the influence of branded mobile apps on cognitive and affective brand equity. Thirdly, in addition to interactive features, Bhave et al. (2013) found that the involvement with the app and the interface design of mobile devices such as screen size, advertisement size, contextualization, personalization, and ease of use affect consumers' emotional responses to advertising within branded apps. Even though consumers do not mind in-app advertisements, they prefer ads that are based on involvement with the apps. The researchers concluded that in-app advertising could lead to higher brand awareness than through other platforms, which could generate purchase decisions.

Over the past few years, almost every industry is embracing various technology solutions, and the fashion industry is not an exception. More and more fashion brands have introduced their branded apps to connect with their customers. Fast fashion brands are not standing outside the game, in contrast, they are competing against one another fiercely for online market share. Today each fast fashion brand has its own customized branded apps. Indeed, they cannot fail to do so because the majority of their customers are millennials who are the heavy users of mobile media. Besides the main functions of the apps to assist customers to search for information about products and promotions, communicate with brands, or make a direct purchase, many fast fashion brands also offer unique functions on their apps to win the competition. As an example, Forever 21 offers the "Discover Your Style" function on its mobile app which allows shoppers to click on icons representing features they want in apparel, such as material and color, to see corresponding results in the brand's inventory. This feature was so successful at

increasing conversions and average purchase value that the company decided to conduct its large-scale web integration. Another instance is that Zara has added a button for customers to discover similar items to the ones they are currently viewing. ASOS and H&M's apps provide the ability for shoppers to upload images that can be matched to corresponding items of the brands, which makes it easier to replicate outfits seen on the runway or worn by celebrities. These efforts of fast fashion brands infer that branded apps can potentially exert positive effects on the purchase decision of consumers.

Based on the above discussion, the third hypothesis is proposed:

*H3: Branded mobile applications have a positive influence on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products.*

## **2.5. Email marketing**

Emails have been used by businesses as a powerful marketing tool for a long time. There are several factors of an email that can determine the consumer's attitude toward the brand and ultimately generate purchase decisions. These factors are informativeness, entertainment, credibility, and irritation (Haq, 2009). Concerning the first aspect – informativeness, the quality of information contained in each email puts a direct impact on the customers' perceptions of the brand and its products. In any events, consumers always pay attention to the messages that are relevant and useful for them (Milne and Gordon, 1993). It is the top priority that the content of email services should be tailored to consumers' interests before any pieces of information related to advertising (Robins, 2003). Apart from usefulness, information delivered to consumers via emails also needs to satisfy qualitative features, such as accuracy and timeliness (Siau and Shen, 2003). As recipients react very positively to email that transfers relevant and engaging content, the informative characteristic of emails is considered as a very valuable incentive in email marketing. This favorable attitude further leads to purchase decisions in the long term (Varshney, 2003). Another crucial element of email content is entertainment, which can add more value to consumers and thus increase their loyalty to the brand. Concise and funny messages will immediately capture consumers' attention (Katterbach, 2002). Providing games and prizes via emails is also an effective way to deeply engage and reward customers. Since most people have natural playfulness, this method yields a high participation rate. As a result, this high level of pleasure and involvement will create

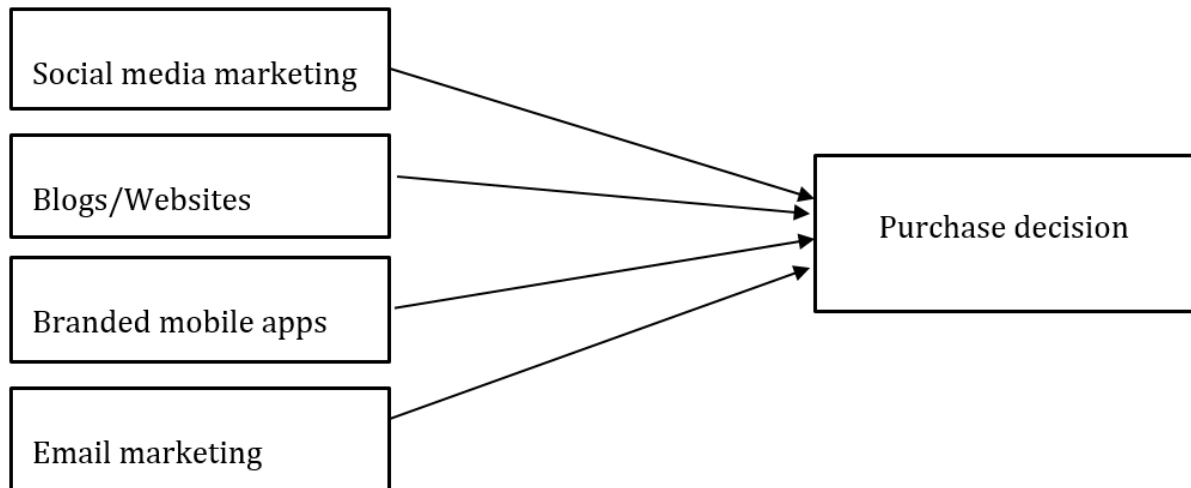
positive brand perceptions inside the consumers (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Shavitt et al., 1998). The third feature of email is credibility which may help the brand win the competition over other alternatives in consumers' evaluation process. Credibility is defined by Mackenzie and Lutz (1989) as consumers' perception of the truthfulness and believability of advertising in general. The credibility of an email is mainly determined by the company's reputation, the bearer of the message, and the advertising medium (Goldsmith et al., 2000; Lafferty et al., 2002). It has been found out that a general message on the Internet is perceived as less credible than a direct message sent to the mailbox of an individual unless the former is communicated by strong brands. Lastly, the irritation aspect of email marketing can have negative effects on consumers' perception. E-mail advertising may sometimes carry an array of information that distracts or overwhelms consumers. Similarly, unclear or irrelevant messages make the recipients confused and react negatively (Stewart and Pavlou, 2002). In worse cases, unwanted messages, commonly known as spam, intrude into consumers' privacy and cause real concerns for them. However, if marketing experts are competent at dealing with it and able to minimize this adverse side, the overall influence of email marketing on consumer purchase decision can be positive.

In the fast fashion industry, email marketing is a popular channel used by almost every retailer. Nine out of ten brands have a newsletter sign up box in their homepages (Brui, 2018). Some brands such as Ralph Lauren, GAP even use pop-up windows to ensure the subscription form reaches potential buyers at the moment they visit their websites. Once the subscription is completed, a welcome email will be sent to the new subscribers with possibly a code for a discount. Regarding the frequency, fast fashion brands send emails on an average of one every three days (Brui, 2018). However, each brand has a different email marketing strategy. For example, Topshop and ASOS do not send any emails apart from the initial welcome and special events like International Women's Day to avoid spamming the mailbox of the customers. In contrast, other brands such as FarFetch make sure to catch the most attention as possible by sending three emails in a single day. The content of emails from fast fashion brands varies from storytelling, style tips, new collections, to promotional events and sales seasons.

The popularity of email marketing combined with the above reviewed literature facilitate the formation of the fourth hypothesis:

**H4:** *Email marketing has a positive influence on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products.*

Based on the above literature review, a research framework which posits that social media marketing, blogs/websites, branded mobile apps, and email marketing have positive impacts on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products is presented as follows (Figure 2.2).



*Figure 2.2 – Research framework*

Up to this point, all necessary literature review was fully completed as well as the research hypotheses are formulated, the following chapter will provide a description of the research methodology.

## **Chapter 3. Research methodology**

To recall, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between digital marketing channels and consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products. In the third chapter, the research methodology used to achieve this objective will be presented. It entails three parts including research design, survey instrument, and data collection.

### **3.1. Research design**

Research design is defined as the set of methods and procedures that describe how, when, and where data are collected and analyzed (Churchill, Brown and Suter, 2009). A more generic definition provided by Malhotra (2010) is that it is the researcher's framework to find the answers to the research questions or to test the research hypotheses. There are various types and sub-types of research designs. However, from a broad perspective, research design can be categorized into two major forms - qualitative and quantitative. A qualitative study relies on unstructured and non-numerical data generated from different sources including both primary and secondary (Ankiewicz et al., 2006). As for Mangan et al. (2004), this approach is relatively a simple and easy way for researchers who have to complete a project within a limited time constraint. Since qualitative research produces information only on the specific cases studied, any further conclusions are only suggested hypotheses. In the case where a high level of accuracy is demanded and actionable insights are prioritized, quantitative research is more favored. This approach deals with numerical data collected through structured tools such as surveys, polls, observations, and secondary data. The obtained data are then analyzed by adopting statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques. These hard numbers are expected to produce unbiased results that can be representative for a larger population (Given, 2008). Therefore, while qualitative methods are used to gain a general sense of a phenomenon and to propose new hypotheses, quantitative methods are used to verify whether such hypotheses are true with empirical evidence and a strong investigative construction (Mangan et al., 2004). Considering the subject's nature as well as the overall purpose of this study, it is essential to opt for a research approach that can maintain unbiased facts and at the same time, generate useful insights for decision making in business practice. Moreover, the influence of digital marketing tools on consumer purchase decisions has

already been addressed and tested by an array of previous quantitative studies. They offer well-built constructs that are applicable to this particular study. For all these reasons, the current thesis employs the quantitative approach.

Within the quantitative orientation, this study applies a survey research type. Survey research is the collection and gathering information from a sample of population through their responses to questions (Check and Schutt, 2012). Its primary purpose is to quickly obtain information describing the characteristics of a large sample of individuals of interest (Ponto, 2015). For this study, an online questionnaire is developed to collect quantifiable data and to test the research hypotheses. A questionnaire is a form of survey methods and basically defined as “a set of standardized questions, often called items, which follow a fixed scheme in order to collect data from individuals about specific topics” (Lavrakas, 2008). The rationale for utilizing this method is that a survey conducted through the use of an online designed questionnaire can reach more people regardless of their location and time. Additionally, the targeted population contains a large number of individuals without requiring special skills to answer the survey so this structured questionnaire can be delivered to as many participants as possible to obtain a large number of responses. Another reason is that upon data extraction, it is easier for interpretation as the questionnaire involves standardized data collected which is then subjected to rigorous quantitative analysis (Saunders et al., 2009). In this study context, the data collected then will be entered into SPSS version 27.0 to be analyzed. SPSS stands for Statistical Package for Social Science, which is a common program used by researchers to perform different tests for statistical analysis.

For the current research, three main statistical techniques are applied. Firstly, *descriptive statistical methods* are used to describe the demographic information and 25 observed measure items. According to Williams (2007), the descriptive research approach is a basic method to examine the situation in its current existing state. It is concerned with the identification of the frequency with which a phenomenon occurs based on an observational basis; or the exploration of the correlations between two or more phenomena.

Secondly, the *Exploratory Factor Analysis* (EFA) is used to identify the underlying latent variables that significantly determine the four digital marketing tools and consumer

decisions to buy fast fashion products. Factor analysis is considered a suitable method to interpret self-reporting questionnaires and is a popular choice in the fields of psychology and education (Hogarty et al., 2005; Thompson, 2004). Although factor analysis has many uses, its main purposes are to reduce a large number of variables into a smaller, manageable set of variables (also referred to as factors), and to examine the relationship patterns among those variables. Thus, it allows for the formation and refinement of the study instrument (Pett et al., 2003; Thompson, 2004). There are two major types of factor analysis, which are exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The EFA enables the researcher to explore the main dimensions to generate a theory from a set of latent constructs, each of them is in turn represented by a set of items. In contrast, the CFA is used to test a proposed theory that has assumptions and expectations regarding the number of factors, and which factor models best fit (Pett et al., 2003; Thompson, 2004). As the primary objective of this study is to develop an instrument to explore consumer behavior, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) can be considered an appropriate statistical model of analysis. The EFA is specifically defined as “a statistical model which explores the relationship pattern between the latent constructs (factors) and observed items” (Gerbin and Hamilton, 1996; Litavcova et al. 2015). Thus, a factor is constituted by a list of observed, interrelated items that are grouped together based on the loadings. Unrelated items do not explain the factor, hence do not belong to the group and need to be deleted (Munro, 2005).

Thirdly, after obtaining the required factors, a *regression analysis* will be carried out to test the proposed hypotheses. This study applies the linear regression, which is one of the most commonly used approaches (Sweet and Grace-Martin, 2003). Linear regression can be used when a change in the independent variable is associated with a constant change in the dependent variable, either decreasing or increasing. The equation for linear regression looks like this:  $Y = \alpha + \beta x$  where  $Y$  acts as the dependent variable,  $x$  is an independent variable,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  represents the height of the regression line and the angle of the line relative to the horizontal axis. The coefficient ( $\beta$ ) has the explanatory power of the regression as it demonstrates the strength and direction of the relationship between the dependent and the independent variable. In this study, as the research framework already illustrated, the dependent variable is consumer purchase decisions, and the



independent variables are social media marketing, blogs/websites, branded mobile apps, and email marketing.

### **3.2. Survey instrument**

For this study, Google Form was used to develop an online questionnaire. It is made up of a set of closed-ended questions that provides the respondents with a fixed number of alternative responses from which to choose an answer (Lavrakas, 2008). In the beginning, respondents are briefly introduced to the purpose of the study and assured that their answers will be kept confidential to minimize the response bias and sampling error. The questionnaire starts with some introductory questions on demographics and general backgrounds such as age, gender, education, and employment status. This part consists of multiple-choice questions that provide respondents with a certain number of possible answers. The remaining parts of the questionnaire focus on the research problems. All the variables are measured based on the selection and adoption of existing validated scales from past literature related to digital marketing and purchase decisions. Five items measuring social media marketing are taken from the studies of Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014), Kim and Ko (2012). Whereas, blogs/websites are measured through the scale adapted from Malär, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, and Hoyer (2012), Hsu and Tsou (2011). To measure branded mobile apps, a total of five items are taken from the studies by Mittal (1995), and Zang (2014). In addition, the measurement scale of email marketing is adapted from Ducoffe (1995), Jamalzadeh, Behravan, and Masoudi (2012). Finally, five items measuring consumer purchase decisions are extracted from Shareef, Kumar, and Kumar (2008).

All the items use a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The focus of every item or statement is also put on fast fashion products. Table 3.1 illustrates how the constructs are operationalized and their corresponding references. The questionnaire is presented in English and was tested on five people to make sure all the questions are understandable and clear enough.

<b>Constructs</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Measures</b>	<b>Sources</b>
<b>Social media marketing</b>	SMM1	Social media marketing for fast fashion products is frequently seen.	Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014); Kim and Ko (2012).
	SMM2	The social media advertisements for fast fashion products are very attractive.	
	SMM3	The social media advertisements for fast fashion brands can be easily remembered.	
	SMM4	I like to use social media to get information about fast fashion products, services, and brands.	
	SMM5	Social media sites of fast fashion brands enable opinions exchanging with others.	
<b>Blogs /Websites</b>	BW1	Information related to fast fashion (products, trends, etc.) from fashion blogs/websites is credible.	Malär, Nyffeneggr, Krohmer, and Hoyer (2012); Hsu and Tsou (2011).
	BW2	Communication activities related to fast fashion brands of bloggers (complimenting, criticizing, evaluating, etc.) are credible.	
	BW3	I frequently browse fashion blogs/websites.	
	BW4	I feel good about browsing fashion blogs/websites.	
	BW5	Given the chance, I intend to buy fast fashion clothes that are posted (or discussed) in the fashion blogs/websites.	
<b>Branded mobile apps</b>	BMA1	I frequently use fast fashion branded apps to see their products.	Mittal (1995);
	BMA2	Fast fashion branded apps are pleasing to use.	
	BMA3	After using a fast fashion branded app, I think the brand is more attractive.	

	BMA4	After using a fast fashion branded app, I have a better perception of the quality of the brand's products and services.	Zang (2014).
	BMA5	I intend to buy products through fast fashion branded apps.	
<b>Email marketing</b>	EM1	Emails from fast fashion brands are pleasing to read.	Ducoffe (1995);
	EM2	Emails from fast fashion brands provide timely and relevant information on products and promotion.	Jamalzade, Behravan, and Masoudi (2012).
	EM3	Fast fashion email advertising is credible.	
	EM4	Fast fashion email advertising is not annoying.	
	EM5	Fast fashion email advertising does not bring privacy concerns for me.	
<b>Consumer purchase decisions</b>	PD1	I frequently purchase products of fast fashion brands.	
	PD2	I feel good when I decide to purchase products of fast fashion brands.	Shareef, Kumar, and Kumar (2008).
	PD3	I will positively recommend fast fashion products to other people.	
	PD4	I intend to purchase again from fast fashion brands in the future.	
	PD5	Overall, I am satisfied about my purchase of products from fast fashion brands.	

*Table 3.1- Constructs and Measures Employed*

### 3.3. Data collection

Data collection refers to the process of gathering information in a systematic manner. To examine how digital marketing may affect consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products, the convenience sampling technique is applied for the data collection process. With this sampling technique, the respondents are selected randomly without any criteria, however, a significant amount of acceptable responses can be guaranteed

with less cost and time. A high response rate is ensured so the non-response error is reduced. The study participants were recruited online through two popular survey participant finder platforms, namely SurveyCircle<sup>1</sup> and SurveySwap<sup>2</sup>. Participants from these open platforms are of different nationalities and come from all over the world. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn are also utilized to promote the survey. The total duration of survey delivery and collection was five weeks between 8th August and 5th September 2020. A subjects-to-variables (STV) ratio of 15:1 that means fifteen respondents per item was adopted as the rule of thumb to determine the sample size (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). As this study has 25 items in total, it needs to obtain at least 375 respondents to satisfy the rule. Therefore, the questionnaires were distributed to 430 individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.surveycircle.com/en/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://surveyswap.io/>

## Chapter 4. Sample description and analysis of the results

This chapter demonstrates the data analysis and findings of the study through four subsections. Section one describes the demographic characteristics of the participants. Section two provides the descriptive statistics of the questionnaire responses to give an overview of the data collected. After the exploratory factor analysis is presented in section three, section four will address the measure reliability of the obtained factors. The last section is about the regression analysis to test out if the research hypotheses are supported. The process of analysis and presentation of results is carried out with the help of SPSS software, and the results are presented in the form of tables.

### 4.1. Sample characteristics

Among 430 questionnaires distributed and returned, there were 10 inappropriate surveys due to extreme and neutral responding where the participants consistently chose the extreme or neutral point to every statement. Thus, the effective sample size of this study was 420. The demographic statistics are summarized in the following table.

Characteristics	Categories	Frequency	Percentage %
<b>Gender</b>	Female	279	66.4
	Male	141	33.6
<b>Age</b>	Under 18	12	2.9
	18 – 25	192	45.7
	26 – 30	117	27.9
	31 – 35	54	12.9
	36 – 40	27	6.4
	Above 45	18	4.3
<b>Educational Level</b>	Less than high school	6	1.4
	High school	54	12.9
	Bachelor's degree	159	37.9
	Master's degree	147	35.0

	Doctorate or higher	54	12.9
<b>Employment status</b>	Student	252	60.0
	Employee	120	28.6
	Unemployed	12	2.9
	Self-employed	36	8.6

*Table 4.1- Demographic Profiles of Respondents*

As can be seen in Table 4.1, most of the respondents were female representing 66.4 percent of the sample and the remaining 33.6 percent were male. Regarding the age, almost half of the respondents were young people of 18 – 25 years old with 45.7 percent. The group of 26 – 30 years represents 27.9 percent of the sample. While 12.9 percent were between 30 – 35 years, 6.4 percent were in the age group of 35 -40 years. The smallest portion was occupied by participants under 18 and above 45 years old with 2.9 percent and 4.3 percent respectively. Of these 420 participants, the large part has completed a bachelor’s degree representing 37.9 percent, followed by master’s degree owners with 35.0 percent. The same portion of 12.9 percent was shared by high school diploma owners and people having a Doctorate or higher-level education. Participants who have yet completed high school took up only 1.4 percent. In terms of employment status, the vast majority of participants were students taking up 60.0 percent. Whereas 28.6 percent were employed, 8.6 percent were self-employed, and 2.9 percent were out of jobs.

#### **4.2. Questionnaire’s descriptive statistics**

Before conducting further analysis, descriptive statistics of 25 questions or items in the questionnaire are provided in Table 4.2 to give a general view of the data.

<b>N=420</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Social media marketing</b>					
SMM1	4.5%	6.9%	20.0%	30.5%	<b>38.1%</b>
SMM2	5.2%	14.5%	28.8%	<b>29.3%</b>	22.1%
SMM3	12.6%	20.7%	<b>27.9%</b>	24.0%	14.8%

SMM4	9.8%	16.2%	24.5%	<b>25.5%</b>	24.0%
SMM5	7.6%	15.2%	25.5%	<b>27.9%</b>	23.8%
<b>Blogs/websites</b>					
BW1	9.8%	21.9%	<b>30.2%</b>	24.5%	13.6%
BW2	12.4%	22.9%	<b>30.5%</b>	22.6%	11.7%
BW3	<b>24.5%</b>	23.8%	23.1%	17.1%	11.4%
BW4	16.2%	22.1%	<b>26.2%</b>	22.4%	13.1%
BW5	19.8%	21.2%	<b>25.5%</b>	19.0%	14.5%
<b>Branded mobile apps</b>					
BMA1	<b>28.6%</b>	23.3%	21.0%	15.2%	11.9%
BMA2	13.6%	22.6%	<b>25.2%</b>	24.8%	13.8%
BMA3	17.1%	26.0%	<b>27.4%</b>	21.2%	8.3%
BMA4	14.5%	22.4%	<b>26.7%</b>	22.9%	13.6%
BMA5	<b>26.0%</b>	23.3%	20.2%	16.7%	13.8%
<b>Email marketing</b>					
EM1	28.3%	<b>28.8%</b>	23.6%	13.3%	6.0%
EM2	16.9%	22.1%	<b>26.0%</b>	21.2%	13.8%
EM3	14.3%	23.8%	<b>27.4%</b>	22.9%	11.7%
EM4	<b>31.9%</b>	28.3%	21.7%	11.9%	6.2%
EM5	15.2%	24.0%	<b>25.5%</b>	21.7%	13.6%
<b>Purchase decisions</b>					
PD1	17.1%	17.9%	<b>23.1%</b>	21.4%	20.5%
PD2	17.4%	23.3%	<b>26.0%</b>	20.5%	12.9%
PD3	19.0%	23.3%	<b>26.7%</b>	19.5%	11.4%
PD4	11.9%	18.3%	<b>26.0%</b>	24.5%	19.3%
PD5	10.2%	20.0%	<b>28.3%</b>	25.0%	16.4%

*Table 4.2 – Frequency Table*

From the table, we can understand how each statement was assessed by the respondents. Concerning the social media marketing aspect, consumers generally agreed to all statements. Point 4 – “somewhat agree” is the most frequently chosen option, accounting for 29.3% for SMM2, 25.5% for SMM4, and 27.9% for SMM5. For SMM1, 38.1% strongly agreed that social media marketing of fast fashion products is frequently seen, and for

SMM3, 27.9% were neutral about the statement that they can be easily remembered. In terms of blogs and websites, the participants chose point 3 – “neutral” the most frequently in the 5-point scale, with 4 items including BW1, BW2, BW4, BW5. Nearly half of the respondents opted for point 2 - “somewhat disagree” and point 1 - “strongly disagree” toward BW3 which refers to the frequency of browsing fast fashion blogs/websites. Among the items of branded mobile apps, BMA1 and BMA5 were addressed with point 1 – “strongly disagree” the most frequently, with 28.6% and 26.0% respectively. For the remaining items BMA2, BMA3, and BMA4, the most favorable answer was also “neutral”. In terms of email marketing, EM1 and EM4 were rated with point 1 and point 2 by the majority of the respondents. This frequency statistics implied a disagree attitude from the consumers toward the assumption that emails from fast fashion brands are pleasing to read and not annoying. Point 2 and point 3 were the most popular choices for EM2, EM3, and EM5. Lastly, considering the items that belong to purchase decisions construct, three out of five items, namely PD1, PD4, and PD5, received a favorable response, with the most frequently chosen options ranging round point 3 and point 4. For PD2 and PD3, point 2 and point 3 were more frequently chosen than the rest of the options.

### **4.3. Exploratory factor analysis**

The questionnaire data were then subjected to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to find the latent constructs (i.e. factors) representing four concerning digital marketing channels and purchase decisions. Before running the EFA, several tests need to be done to assess the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Firstly, the factorability of the correlation matrix was checked. The result showed that no correlation went beyond 0.8, hence there was no indication of multicollinearity (a linear association exists between two or more explanatory variables) (Elith et al., 2006). The dataset was conceptual appealing to carry out factor analysis.

Secondly, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy test was conducted. KMO is a test of the amount of variance within the data that could be explained by factors, the closer to 1 the value is, the better (Brace et al., 2012). As a rule of thumb suggested by Kaiser (1970), the KMO index should be greater than 0.7 to be considered suitable for factor analysis. According to Table 4.3, the obtained measure was 0.934 which was a very good indicator of the validity of the data.



Thirdly, the Bartlett's test of sphericity was also checked, and it should be significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) if the data is favorable (Hair et al., 2009; Brace et al., 2012). As shown in Table 3.3, the result of this study was significant. All these measures collectively proved that the sample size was sufficiently adequate, and the data were suitable for exploratory factor analysis (Field, 2013).

<hr/>		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.934
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	6810.028
	df	190
	Sig.	.000
<hr/>		

*Table 4.3 – The result of KMO and Bartlett's Test*

The next step of the EFA is to set the factor extraction method. There is a wide range of methods to extract factors but Principal components analysis (PCA) and Principal axis factoring (PAF) are the two most commonly-used ones in published literature (Henson & Roberts, 2006; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007; Thompson, 2004). For this study, the PAF method was used. This data extraction stage aims to reduce a large number of items into a few factors and considering this, there are several available criteria to determine how factors are extracted. This study specifically needs 5 factors to represent 5 variables of interest, namely social media marketing, blogs/websites, branded mobile apps, email marketing, and consumer purchase decisions. Hence, a fixed number of 5 factors was set to be extracted. Another decision needed to be made is to select the factor rotational method, which helps to maximize the high item loadings and minimize low item loadings, thus producing a more simplified and interpretable solution. For this study, an oblique promax rotation was selected because it allows items to correlate, which is often considered as producing more accurate results for research related to human behaviors (Costello and Osborne, 2005). When using oblique rotation, the pattern matrix was then examined for item loadings. The loadings are the regression coefficients for the linear combination of the items for different factors. According to Hair et al. (2009) and Hooper (2012), an item with loading below 0.4 on all factors indicates that the item is insignificant and should be deleted. Thus, all items with loadings lower than 0.4 were suppressed in the output so that the results would be easier to interpret. Additionally, any items with

loadings greater than 0.4 but cross-loaded on multiple factors were also removed (Hair et al., 2009). These exclusion criteria resulted in the elimination of 5 measurement items including SMM4, SMM5, BW1, BW2, and EM1. The final output pattern matrix is given below in Table 4.4.

	1	2	3	4	5
SMM1					.827
SMM2					.646
SMM3					.456
BW3			.963		
BW4			.666		
BW5			.616		
BMA1		.675			
BMA2		.736			
BMA3		.838			
BMA4		.723			
BMA5		.805			
EM2				.507	
EM3				.586	
EM4				.723	
EM5				.628	
PD1	.821				
PD2	.733				
PD3	.686				
PD4	.948				
PD5	.799				

*Table 4.4 – Pattern Matrix*

After performing the EFA, all the factors were automatically standardized to have their means equal to zero. Table 4.4 showed that factor 1 consisted of five items and measured the construct “Consumer purchase decisions”, thus it was named after it. Likewise, factor 2 containing five items was named “Branded mobile apps”, factor 3 containing three items was named “Blogs/Websites”, factor 4 containing four items was named “Email marketing”, and the last one, factor 5 containing three items was named “Social media marketing”.

#### 4.4. Internal consistency reliability

In order to further ensure that the designed measurements are reliable, all the factors were evaluated based on the internal consistency of reliability. Internal consistency is a measure that checks the correlations between different items on the same test and shows how well these items fit into a conceptual model (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994; Devon et al., 2007). One of the most commonly-used approaches to test the internal consistency of reliability of the test items is Cronbach’s Alpha (Trochim and Donnelly, 2006). A Cronbach’s Alpha greater than 0.7 is considered acceptable for most research objectives (Allen & Bennett, 2012). Table 4.5 showed that all factors had the Cronbach’s Alpha values passing 0.7 and ranging from 0.774 to 0.934, which indicated a good internal consistency of measurement scales. Therefore, this factor analysis’s results will be kept as the finalized research instruments.

<b>Factor Names</b>	<b>Number of items</b>	<b>Cronbach’s Alpha</b>
Social media marketing	3	.857
Blogs/websites	3	.863
Branded mobile apps	5	.918
Email marketing	4	.774
Consumer purchase decisions	5	.934

*Table 4.5 - Reliability statistics-Cronbach’s Alpha*

#### 4.5. Hypothesis testing

After the EFA was completed, a multiple regression model was applied to investigate the relative impact of digital marketing on purchase decisions toward fast fashion products. As the research framework illustrated in the former section, the dependent variable is consumer purchase decisions, and four independent variables are social media marketing, blogs/websites, branded mobile apps, and email marketing. There is no need to add a constant to the regression equation since all factors were already standardized to have means equal to zero. The results of the regression were demonstrated in tables.

Firstly, the multicollinearity was evaluated by using the tolerance value and the variance inflation factor (VIF). The statistics in Table 4.6 specified that each variable had a tolerance value of more than 0.2 and a VIF of less than 10, so multicollinearity would not interfere with the outcome of multiple regression analysis (Field, 2013; Hair et al., 2009).

	<b>Social media marketing</b>	<b>Blogs/Websites</b>	<b>Branded mobile apps</b>	<b>Email marketing</b>
Tolerance	0.429	0.386	0.391	0.416
VIF	2.331	2.593	2.555	2.404

*Table 4.6 - Multicollinearity statistics*

Table 4.7 is “Model Summary” which determines how well a regression model fits the data. The result showed that all the independent variables representing digital marketing channels explained a significant 67.2% of the variation in consumer purchase decisions with  $R^2 = 0.672$ . This value indicates that the model has a good fit.

<b>Model</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>R Square</b>	<b>Adjusted R Square</b>	<b>Std. Error of the Estimate</b>
1	.822	.675	.672	.555472

*Table 4.7 – Model Summary*

To check the statistical significance of the model, Table 4.8 presents the results of the ANOVA test. The test-statistic  $F(4,416) = 215.894$  at an observed very small  $p$  ( $p < 0.05$ )

shows that the model is significant. Hence, it can be confirmed that the miniature of this research has gained statistical understanding.

<b>Model</b>	<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	
1	Regression	266.456	4	66.614	215.894	.000
	Residual	128.357	416	.309		
	Total	394.812	420			

*Table 4.8 – ANOVA Test*

Finally, the statistical significance of each independent variable was analyzed to test whether the unstandardized (or standardized) coefficients are equal to 0 (zero) in the population (Table 4.9). Specifically in this study, two independent variables including branded mobile apps ( $B = 0.587, t(416) = 13.092, p = 0.000$ ) and email marketing ( $B = 0.339, t(416) = 7.287, p = 0.000$ ) had  $p$  – value smaller than three significance levels of 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01. Whereas, the social media marketing variable ( $B = -0.114, t(416) = -2.566, p = 0.011$ ) only satisfied two significance level of 0.1 and 0.05, and blogs/websites ( $B = 0.085, t(416) = 1.864, p = 0.063$ ) satisfied one significance level of 0.1. These results showed that the coefficients are statistically significantly different from 0 (zero).

<b>Model</b>		<b>Unstandardized Coefficients</b>		<b>Standardized Coefficients</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
		<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Beta</b>		
1	Social media marketing	-.114	.045	-.110	-2.566	.011
	Blogs/Websites	.085	.046	.084	1.864	.063
	Branded mobile apps	.587	.045	.585	13.092	.000
	Email marketing	.339	.046	.316	7.287	.000

*Table 4.9 - Coefficients*

With regard to the proposed hypotheses, the particular result are stated as follows.

**H1:** *Social media marketing has a positive influence on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products.*

It is interesting that the social media marketing variable had a significant negative coefficient ( $B = -0.114$ ). This means that the hypothesis H1 was rejected as social media marketing would exert a negative effect on consumer purchase decisions.

**H2:** *Blogs and websites have a positive influence on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products.*

The blogs/websites variable has a significant positive coefficient ( $B = 0.085$ ). Therefore, the hypothesis H2 was supported.

**H3:** *Branded mobile applications have a positive influence on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products.*

Since the branded mobile apps variable also has a significant positive coefficient ( $B = 0.587$ ), the hypothesis H3 was supported.

**H4:** *Email marketing has a positive influence on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products.*

The same as hypothesis H2 and H3, the email marketing variable has a significant positive coefficient ( $B = 0.339$ ). Therefore, the hypothesis H4 was supported.

The general form of the equation to predict consumer purchase decisions social media marketing, blogs/websites, branded mobile apps, and email marketing, is:

Predicted *consumer purchase decisions* =  $-0.114$  (*social media marketing*) +  $0.085$  (*blogs/websites*) +  $0.587$  (*branded mobile apps*) +  $0.339$  (*email marketing*)

For further interpretation, the standardized regression coefficients, also called “beta” weights, are used to rank the independent variables based on their contribution in explaining the dependent variable, irrespective of their signs. In this case, the standardized coefficients revealed that the branded mobile apps variable ( $\beta = 0.585$ ) was the most influential variable that accounted for the variation in purchase decisions. It was

followed by email marketing ( $\beta = 0.316$ ), social media marketing ( $\beta = -0.110$ ), and blogs/websites ( $\beta = 0.084$ ) was the least influential factor on purchase decisions.

To sum up, it was proved that there is a strong relationship between digital marketing channels and consumer purchase decisions when it comes to buying fast fashion products in the market. Hypotheses H2, H3, and H4 were supported which suggest that blogs/websites, branded mobile apps, and email marketing indeed have a significant positive influence on the final purchase decisions. Whereas, contrary to the expectations, hypothesis H1 was rejected as social media marketing negatively affects the decisions to buy of the consumers.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion and implications**

In this chapter, the results achieved from the analysis in chapter 4 will be discussed and interpreted in relation to past literature and research. After that, they will be further developed into marketing implications. The last section will expose the limitations of the current study and at the same time, provide some suggestions and ideas for further studies.

### **5.1. Discussion of the results**

Overall, this study provides insights into four different digital marketing channels adopted extensively by the fast fashion industry and how these tools influence consumer purchase decisions. The multiple regression analysis confirmed a significant relationship between the four digital tools variables and consumers' final decisions to purchase fast fashion products. However, there was a discrepancy in the directions of the relationships concerned.

Specifically, the findings showed that social media marketing exerted a negative impact on consumer buying decisions in the context of the fast fashion sector. This result is opposed to that of many prior studies in other industries (Kim & Ko, 2012; Khatib, 2016; Yogesh & Yesha, 2014). However, since this study focuses only on the fast fashion industry, there could be variations in the result. The possible explanations for this phenomenon come from both objective and subjective sides. Firstly, from an objective point of view, information overload caused by using social media is a critical issue in the online decision-making process. Undoubtedly, social media offers a huge amount of information that can lead the consumers to experience a state of analysis paralysis. In this state, people find it extremely difficult to process all the available data and navigate the useful and relevant information (Powers et al., 2012). The bounded rationality theory has clearly indicated that there is a limit to the amount of information that can be examined and understood by individuals at a particular period of time (Thaler and Mullainathan, 2008; Simon, 1960). As information seeking and evaluation are the first stages of the decision-making process, if the consumers have to encounter such difficulties, their purchase intentions may get diminished and they can eventually disregard all the information and give up buying the products. This is especially true for the fast fashion industry which is often considered as a dynamic industry and very active on social media.



Various types of content and information from the brands, past consumers, third party pages, and fashion communities can make people get overwhelming. Secondly, from a subjective point of view, the inefficient marketing activities on social media performed by some of the fast fashion brands could be blamed for this negative result. One of the most fundamental but common mistakes made by many companies, especially newly established ones, is not having a proper social media marketing plan in the first place. According to this survey's result, around 70% of people agree (answer point 4) and strongly agree (answer point 5) that social media marketing for fast fashion products is frequently seen. Some companies may excessively post content on their social media accounts and run continuous advertising campaigns to increase impressions and attract followers and fans. These actions from different brands may collectively disrupt and annoy consumers and deteriorate their purchase decisions toward fast fashion products. Additionally, from traditional to digital marketing, the power of word of mouth is undeniable. According to Ahmad et al. (2014), word of mouth can influence the views, thoughts, and final decisions of other people and negative words of mouth in any cases about anything can exert a stronger effect than positive ones. Any negative review left by a past customer may discourage potential future buyers and vice versa (Ramanathan et al., 2014). Positive comments are certainly welcomed and appreciated, but negative comments are also a part of the brand conversation and hard to be controlled by the companies (Kohli et al., 2015; Ho-Dac et al., 2013). Fashion, in general, is always a hot topic to be discussed and fast fashion brands nowadays are very popular. They have acquired a mix of opinions among consumers, therefore the negative word of mouth is unavoidable. These negative comments and content shared across social media sites can shape negative perceptions among fast fashion consumers, which in turn hinder their purchase decisions. Overall, social media sites are absolutely effective places to build brand awareness, but its influence on purchase decision may not be positive in the fast fashion sector.

Unlike social media marketing, the results of this study imply that fast fashion blogs and websites have a positive effect on consumer purchase decisions. The result was supported by many scholars (Penttala & Saarela, 2012; Kotler & Armstrong, 2012; Navarro & López-Rúa, 2016) who confirmed that the influence of fashion blogs/websites is very important in pushing the consumption of these products. The interviewees in the

study of Navarro & López-Rúa (2016) admitted that there was a real change in the way they made purchases due to the advent of blogging. These changes mainly happened in the early stages of the purchase decision process, which are the recognition of needs, information search, and evaluation of alternatives. Specifically, in the recognition of needs phase, respondents stated that the use of fashion blogs and websites provokes inside them a much stronger desire for purchase. The explanation is that as they browse fashion blogs on a daily basis, they are exposed to several stimuli, see various appealing brands, garments, or combinations of supplements, and all of these significantly influence their desire to purchase. Indeed, the relationship between browsing blogs/websites and purchase decisions has been noted in literature for a long time and it is particularly strong in the context of online searching and purchasing (Shim et al., 2001). Furthermore, this study's result is also in line with the statistic numbers from research conducted by Dynata, the world's largest online market research platform (Gunelius, 2014). It revealed that nearly nine out of ten consumers (84%) make purchases after reading information about a product on a blog. Blogs occupied the first position among the most important sources of information to make buying decisions for 18-34 aged consumers, the second position for 35-54 aged consumers, and the third position for the older group of 55 and above, in comparison to other sources such as friends, family, and colleagues and editorial articles. Therefore, blogs and websites are not dead in the modern world and still an effective marketing tool to be utilized in the fast fashion industry.

Regarding branded mobile applications, results reveal that they do play a significant role in arousing consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products. In this study, its beta coefficient is the highest of all independent variables which shows that the influence of fast fashion apps on purchase decisions is more profound than that of other digital channels. Similar views were shared by a number of researchers (McRae et al., 2013; Hutton and Rodnick, 2009; Bellman et al., 2011; Hoogendoorn, 2013; Bhave et al., 2013) who also reported that branded mobile apps have a significant positive effect on purchase decision. The result was further supported by Kim et al. (2015), who stated that there is a direct link between the use of branded apps and purchase activity as the more engaging the app is, the more customers spend in the future. Even though the app did not include a purchase feature, it did still generate purchase intentions and eventually drive sales. Specifically, customers, who downloaded the branded app and used it continuously for a

period of three months, would increase their spending by 19 to 48 percent. The highest increase reported was attributed to customers using a lot of interactive features (Kim et al., 2015). Therefore, the engaging level of the app is the key factor determining the consumer's future spending. Sticky and engaging apps, which can attract continuous usage, allow consumers to interact with the brand on a habitual basis, hence can increase the efficiency of brand messages and the likelihood of purchase.

Finally, there are several existing studies on the effectiveness of email marketing but not in the fast fashion industry, which is a young field, so this study aims to confirm whether those theories and studies are also applicable to this sector. And the outcome of the current study showed that email marketing also has a positive impact on the buying decisions of consumers toward fast fashion products. This finding is consistent with past research in other sectors (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Shavitt et al., 1998; Varshney, 2003). Emails can carry brands' messages and information about new product offers which grab consumers' attention and trigger their curiosity. They may follow the links embedded in the emails or do online research to find out more information about products. All these activities stimulate a purchase intention inside them. The result was also supported by Dufrene et al. (2005) who stated that the mailing content affects the probability of consumers taking notice of the offer; and the offer's attractiveness, in turn, increases the probability of them making buying decisions. Furthermore, the beta coefficients showed that after branded mobile apps, email marketing is the second most influential channel on consumer decisions to buy fast fashion products. Hence, email marketing is an old but still effective tool for fast fashion brands to build relationships with customers and motivate them to arrive at a buying decision.

## **5.2. Marketing implications**

This study suggests that marketers in the fast fashion sector should attempt to develop an effective digital marketing strategy to increase their brands' performance and generate sales from targeted consumers. Key marketing implications for each channel are presented as follows.

First of all, for social media marketing, the objective problems that may decrease consumer purchase decisions toward buying fast fashion such as information overload cannot be actively tackled by the brands as it is an inseparable part of using social media.

Unless consumers are well aware of its existence and prepare themselves to pull useful and relevant information toward them, there is no other way to fix it. In terms of subjective reasons, or inefficient marketing activities, having a detailed and well-defined social media marketing plan is an “old but still gold” lesson. Marketers should create specific goals, budgets, and a concrete plan of action that outlines how to achieve these goals, how to measure results, and what resources need to be allocated. One more important thing to keep in mind for fast fashion companies is to make sure they have defined the target audience clearly from the beginning of the campaigns to get the best result and avoid sending massive messages to irrelevant audiences and causing negative impressions about the brands. When the campaigns finish, the impact those social media marketing efforts have on the business should also be measured appropriately, not only focusing on the total number of new fans or followers obtained. Moreover, attracting new customers and retaining existing ones are of equal importance to businesses so marketers should always take care of growing relationships with customers instead of aggressively gaining likes and followers. Regarding the negative words of mouth in the online environment, it is difficult to control as they come from the consumer’s side. This problem should be prevented at the root of it – providing the best products and services in the first place. Consumers have the ability to either reinforce or destroy a brand through their online reviews and comments. When they share their experiences, perceptions, and opinions on social media, they do not only comment about the product but also express their feelings about the tangible and intangible service they received throughout their purchase decision journey. Any failure in marketing and customer relationship management can lead to negative reviews exposed to thousands of other audiences. Therefore, it is critical that consumers are treated with sufficient care and respect to ensure that they have a positive purchase experience which will result in positive word of mouth in the future. Regarding how to react when there is a negative comment, the suggestion is not to ignore it but be polite and apologize sincerely. Indeed, every comment from the customers, whether positive or negative, presents an opportunity to communicate with the customer directly. This direct communication helps brands gain a deeper understanding of the expectations and intentions of consumers about their products and services. Through that, they can make suitable changes to increase the business’s performance and retain customer’s support.

Secondly, to remain competitive in today's environment, fast fashion brands should not fail to take advantage of fashion blogs and websites. If choosing to set up an owned corporate blog, brands need to invest time and research to develop relevant and meaningful content for their audiences. For audiences, who browse blogs/websites for pleasure, the most important thing is to make sure they will have a unique and enjoyable experience when browsing. Moreover, customers usually want to clarify all the doubts about the product or service before they decide to make a purchase, and blogs make it easy for them to post questions in the comment section. Brands must be quick in replying to these inquiries otherwise they will lose the chance to increase sales. When brands regularly answer customers' questions in the comment section, they are also able to nurture a relationship with their customers and motivate their loyalty towards the products. The more comments and communication are exchanged, the more popular the blog becomes which will result in higher search engine ranking and more conversion rate. Another option for fast fashion brands is to promote their products on other blogs/websites of professional bloggers. Blog advertising in forms of display or text as well as sponsored posts offer excellent ways for brands to get visible to target consumers. The first thing to do is to do thorough research on the top blogs in their niche. It is recommended to collaborate with blogs that have a general theme fitting well with the product of the company. The ideal ones are also regularly updated and have a lot of people commenting on each post. These blogs ensure that there is a high chance brands' product review will get a lot of interactions. However, such popular blogs or even smaller, niche blogs with coveted audiences receive dozens of blog advertising and sponsored post pitches every day. Most of these pitches will go directly to the email trash can as they are templated email messages sent to many bloggers at the same time. If brands do not want to miss valuable sponsored content opportunities in this way, they should invest time into finding the right blogs to connect with the right audiences, crafting pitches that are exclusively suitable for those individual blogs. After brands successfully connect with a blogger, they must provide interesting and meaningful content to the blog's audience and strictly avoid too much self-promotional content that is irrelevant and could damage the blog's reputation as well as the audience's trust. Additionally, it is important to take into account how consumers may feel when discovering that the blogger was paid to review the products but failed to mention this. Thus, brands who want to sponsor posts need to make sure that the bloggers do honestly reveal being sponsored to achieve a favorable

attitude from consumers. Blogs and websites are powerful tools for fast fashion brands, but they have to be leveraged correctly.

Thirdly, with the rapid growth of mobile app usage, the findings of this study are significant for fast fashion brands. Although almost every fast fashion retailer has their own branded app, not many of them can drive sales and benefit from it. Specifically, 36 percent of the respondents in the current study disagree that fashion branded apps are pleasing to use, and 49 percent do not intend to buy products through fast fashion apps. Other research showed that more than half of the apps downloaded are deleted after one use by the users (Kim et al., 2015). Therefore, marketers should develop apps that include credible, informative, and attractive content as well as bring a positive feeling for users when navigating. An app that has high quality content will put a great impression on consumers on the first time they use it so it can be used again later. This aspect is very important because consumers usually do not give the app a second chance after one first try. Before launching the apps, companies need to conduct research to fully understand what their target consumers want in order to create apps that provide values to them. In terms of technical quality, the app should be frequently monitored and maintained to make sure it is compatible when operating systems are updated and works well on different devices. A poorly designed app will certainly cause frustrations among users and hurt their brand experience, as a result, company revenues will be reduced. As young consumers are highly demanding and fast in losing their interests, continued marketing research is essential to keep them engaged in using the app. The importance of engaging features was highlighted previously in paragraph 5.1. Some examples of these features are games or customized information display according to users' locations and preferences. They should be employed on branded apps to bring more entertaining experiences for users. Moreover, in order to drive sales, fast fashion brands can encourage real-time purchases with downloadable coupons and promotions offered through the apps. It is also recommended to integrate social media with the apps to streamline the process so that users can share their online or in-store experience with other potential customers. Security and privacy issues related to purchasing via branded apps should also be carefully controlled to make the app fully reliable and gain customer's trust.

Lastly, the findings are a reminder for fast fashion brands who are not paying enough attention to email marketing. Email marketing creates great opportunities for brands to

get their latest styles into the customers' inboxes, minds, and ultimately their closets with just a simple click. There are some important aspects that should be considered for successful email campaigns. In terms of the technique, firstly, the subject line is the first impression, which can decide whether the email will be opened or not so it should contain specific and informative phrases related to the content and attractive enough to hook the recipient. Secondly, marketers should pay attention to what kind of address to leave so as not to be considered as fraud or spam. Thirdly, there are several methods to deliver the brands' messages such as newsletters, articles, events, and personalized messages so they should be carefully selected when designing the email. In terms of the content, no matter what the specific object is, the content should be rich and preferably tell a story that highlights the products or services' key values. The term "Content marketing" can be referred to in this case, it is a strategy that involves the development and distribution of valuable information to attract and engage a defined audience (Short, 2012). Content marketing seeks to help prospects make better and more informed decisions regarding the products required. For email communication, the key to success is to thoroughly understand the audience. One of the main reasons for the email's leading position in the list of effective channels is that the message it carries can be personalized and go to the right mailbox of existing customers or prospects. Email can do this because most businesses, especially large corporations, possess a big database that contains contact numbers, email addresses, and possibly other personal information of their customers and prospects collected through lead generation and other marketing activities. Thus, marketers can do research to understand their target audiences more clearly through surveys or other ways to tailor suitable content for them. In conclusion, positive, helpful, and qualified emails will keep existing customers loyal to companies and convert prospects into customers.

### **5.3. Limitations and future research**

Although this study may offer valuable contributions to existing literature and marketing implications for fast fashion brands, it still bears some limitations. These limitations would in turn suggest the directions for future research.

Firstly, since close-ended questionnaires were implemented in this study, it could expose some disadvantages, for example, the respondents' misunderstanding of a question could

go unnoticed, or the questions might suggest ideas that the respondents would never have. Besides, the 5-point Likert scale assumes an even metric number between all of the points, which fails to measure the true attitudes of respondents. It is also likely that the participants' answers would be influenced by their previous questions or they might heavily concentrate on one response side between agree and disagree. These issues suggest that future research can consider employing interviews as an approach to better understand fast fashion consumers in terms of their perceptions, decision-making process, and experiences with different digital marketing channels.

Secondly, it is no doubt that there are limitations related to the review and adoption of measurement scales from previous studies in the current research. Some scales may not be directly designed to measure the overall impact of the concerning digital marketing tools. Those scales that are created and tested for digital marketing continue to show off their drawbacks in the empirical literature and hence could impact the overall results of this study. Furthermore, studying consumer decisions could be rather difficult due to its abstract and complex nature, and some consumers do not formulate a purchase decision unless an actual stimulus, or a situational factor triggers it at the time being. Therefore, besides the digital channels, future research can focus more on these situational aspects or other possible factors and develop more appropriate methods to measure the final decisions of the consumers.

Thirdly, another observable limitation of this study is that the respondents are mainly 18-30 aged female students. This sample made the observations less objective and could entail a risk of sampling bias. Gender, age group, and employment status differences could possibly play a significant role in the perception of digital marketing and its influences on buying decisions. Thus, future studies can extend diversity by collecting the data through different methods other than online platforms or social networking sites to get better insights into the impact of digital marketing in the fast fashion industry.

Fourthly, this research examined only four independent variables. Studies in the future can consider analyzing other marketing channels, such as search engine marketing, display advertising, or video marketing to gain further understanding of their roles in affecting consumer purchase decisions in the fast fashion sector.



Finally, this study utilized an exploratory factor analysis, which, by its names, has an exploratory nature and is designed to explore the underlying factors of a theory. So future research can involve other research methodologies such as confirmatory factor analysis to validate the current obtained factor model and confirm these findings.

## **Conclusion**

In a rapidly evolving technology world, it appears that fast fashion consumers have also experienced a rapid increase of the Internet and digital media usage in the past years, which render a specific study to be conducted within this industry context. The investigation of the direct effects of social media marketing, blogs and websites, branded mobile applications, and email marketing on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products has delivered a contribution to the existing literature in this field. Specifically, the findings have a theoretical significance by providing empirical evidence with regard to the relationships between the stated channels and consumer purchase decisions, or at least, the decisions they intend to make. Furthermore, this study has suggested several useful practical implications for marketers and business practitioners in the fast fashion industry. Brands who understand these trends can improve their sales records as well as achieve greater competitive advantage in the marketplace.

# Appendix

## Online questionnaire

Thank you for your participation in this questionnaire. This questionnaire is a part of a study on the influence of digital marketing on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products. The research is conducted by a Master student of Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy for the final thesis. I would like to assure you that your responses will be used for research purpose only and will be treated in a confidential manner.

Fast fashion is inexpensive items, including clothing and other accessories (shoes, glasses, handbags, hats, belts, jewelry, etc.), produced rapidly by mass-market retailers in response to the latest fashion trends. Famous fast fashion retailers include H&M, Zara, Mango, Stradivarius, Bershka, Pull&Bear, Uniqlo, ASOS, Forever 21, Topshop, etc.

### 1. Preliminary information

1.1. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

1.2. How old are you?

- Under 18
- 18 – 25
- 26 – 30
- 30 – 35
- 35 – 40
- 40 - 45
- Above 45

1.3. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

- Less than a High School diploma
- High School
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate or higher

1.4. What is your current employment status?

- Student
- Employee
- Unemployed
- Self-employed

## **2. The influence of digital marketing on consumer purchase decisions toward fast fashion products**

Please state your agreement with each of the following statements, using a 1 to 5 scale (1= Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree):

### 2.1. Social media marketing

- Social media marketing for fast fashion products is frequently seen.
- The social media advertisements for fast fashion products are very attractive.
- The social media advertisements for fast fashion brands can be easily remembered.
- I like to use social media to get information about fast fashion products, services, and brands.
- Social media sites of fast fashion brands enable opinions exchanging with others.

### 2.2. Blogs/websites

- Information related to fast fashion (products, trends, etc.) from fashion blogs/websites is credible.
- Communication activities related to fast fashion brands of bloggers (complimenting, criticizing, evaluating, etc.) are credible.
- I frequently browse fashion blogs/websites.
- I feel good about browsing fashion blogs/websites.
- Given the chance, I intend to buy fast fashion clothes that are posted (or discussed) in the fashion blogs/websites.

### 2.3. Branded mobile applications

- I frequently use fast fashion branded apps to see their products.
- Fast fashion branded apps are pleasing to use.
- After using a fast fashion branded app, I think the brand is more attractive.

- After using a fast fashion branded app, I have a better perception of the quality of the brand's products and services.
- I intend to buy products through fast fashion branded apps.

#### 2.4. Email marketing

- Emails from fast fashion brands are pleasing to read.
- Emails from fast fashion brands provide timely and relevant information on products and promotions.
- Fast fashion email advertising is credible.
- Fast fashion email advertising is not annoying.
- Fast fashion email advertising does not bring privacy concerns for me.

#### 2.5. Consumer purchase decision

- I frequently purchase products of fast fashion brands.
- I feel good when I decide to purchase products of fast fashion brands.
- I will positively recommend fast fashion products to other people.
- I intend to purchase again from fast fashion brands in the future.
- Overall, I am satisfied about my purchase of products from fast fashion brands.

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