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## **Instagram captions matter. How regulatory fit relates to consumer interactions and brand evaluations on social media.**

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**Background.** Social media is today's mortar for a fashion brand to build strong ties with its consumers. When consumers follow a fashion brand on social media, for instance, Instagram, they get the brand's post updates on their profile feed, which tracks likes, comments, views, and other interactions. However, not all social media fashion brand profiles are equal. A fashion brand may have many more followers on Instagram than its competitors, but that number does not necessarily correlate to increasing consumer equity. Consumer equity is defined as a customer-centered approach for measuring profitability by placing the consumer's needs at the root of each decision that determines the long-term value of a brand (A. J. Kim & Ko, 2012; K. H. Kim et al., 2010). Consumer equity is built up by real actions, real customer input, and real, measurable outcomes Rust, Lemon, and Zeithaml (2001) measured by three dimensions: brand equity, value equity, and relationship equity (Lemon, Rust & Zeithaml, 2001). Most research has focused on the perception of liking but does not measure actual behavior. Thus, this research explored how consumers' enthusiasm for interacting with fashion brands on Instagram affects their brand evaluations. More specifically, this research integrated consumer equity as defined by Rust, Lemon, and Zeithaml (2004) with the regulatory orientation theory put forth by Higgins (1997) to explore how chronic regulatory fit influences the relationship between interactions and brand evaluations.

**Theoretical framework.** Regulatory orientation theory proposes that a person's self-regulation is affected by perceiving a given situation as a binary construct involving an ideal and an "ought" (Higgins, 1997). If a person's view of a problem or an opportunity prompts that person to focus on the ideal outcome or seek acceptance of the outcome, his or her self-regulation involves a promotion-focused solution (Higgins, 1997). These people seek solutions to align themselves with whom they want to become (Brockner, Higgins, & Low, 2004). However, if a person's view of a problem or an opportunity causes that person to consider what ought to be done to avoid or solve the problem, his or her self-regulation involves a prevention-focused solution (Higgins, 1997). When a consumer successfully induces a specific regulatory solution, known as regulatory fit (Higgins, 2000), the consumer experiences a "feels right" reaction (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004). Over time, if a person's choices generate the same regulatory-oriented solution, yielding high benefits with simultaneously low costs, the orientation is reinforced. This process leads to chronic regulatory orientation (Higgins, 2000). This research used Higgins's (1997) regulatory orientation theory to test the regulatory fit on Instagram using the following hypotheses: (H1a) Consumers who have a chronic prevention orientation will have a higher rate

of interaction when given prevention-focused Instagram posts and (H1b) consumers who have a chronic promotion orientation will have a higher rate of interaction when given promotion-focused Instagram posts. The research will also test if (H2a) passive consumers will increase consumer equity when given prevention-focused Instagram posts and (H2b) active consumers will increase consumer equity when given promotion-focused Instagram posts.

**Methods and survey instruments.** A total of 394 university students completed the questionnaire after interacting with the 12 selected images. Participants were also asked about demographic and Instagram usage questions. The survey participants reflected the university demographics: 25.6% were minorities; 49.5% were female. The average participant age was 20.5 years ( $SD = 1.28$  years); 41.1% were freshmen, 29.7% were sophomores, 22.8% were juniors, 5.8% were seniors, and two individuals did not respond. Although all 394 students completed the survey, some responses could not be linked back to the respondent at each stage of the survey. Therefore, each hypothesis reflects a different number of usable responses.

**Results.** H1a, H1b, H2a and H2b was statically supported. More specifically, for H1a, consumers who had a chronic prevention orientation tended to increase interactions when given prevention-focused images and H1b, consumers who had a chronic promotion orientation tended to increase interactions when given promotion-focused images. Results indicate the three predictors with interactions accounted for 12.5% of the variance of likes on brand posts for the last purchased brand. The interaction between regulatory messages and images was statistically significant  $p < .05$ . These findings suggest that prevention fit is greater than prevention non-fit, whereas promotion non-fit is greater than promotion fit. For H2a, passive consumers showed higher consumer equity when given prevention-focused Instagram posts from a fashion brand and H2b, active consumers showed higher consumer equity when given promotion-focused Instagram posts from a fashion brand, the results indicate that the three predictors with interactions accounted for 9.6% of consumer equity. The main effect of people who follow fashion brands on Instagram was statistically significant,  $p < .005$ , which suggests that followers have a higher evaluation of social equity than non-followers. When controlling for people who do not follow fashion brands on Instagram, the fit/non-fit relationship was significant  $p = .038$ .

**Discussion.** This research confirmed that Instagram likes are increased by creating a regulatory fit “feels right” reaction in post messages. This fit could be achieved by (a) matching regulatory-focused posts with the consumer’s chronic regulatory orientation (Higgins, 2001; Motyka et al., 2014) (b) matching passive or active usage behaviors with the chronic regulatory orientation (Burke et al., 2010; Krasnova et al. 2013; Hoffman et al., 2017). One may conclude that the current student sample can be influenced to react in specific ways (liking) with purposeful Instagram posts from fashion brands that increase their brand evaluations.

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