



An Investigation of Fashion Brands' Social Media Marketing: How Young Women's Photographic Image Preferences effect eWOM behaviors and Purchase Intention based on VALS

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It is undeniable that social media has left its mark on society. Not only is it changing the way people communicate, but it is also impacting the way business is done. Across all industries, especially fashion, social media is no longer just nice to have; it is now an essential marketing strategy. In 2008, only 24% of the U.S. population had a social media profile. Fast forward to 2017 and the number of social media users drastically grew, reaching 81% (Statistica, 2017). While these statistics are a powerful indicator of social media's influence today, it doesn't reflect consumer responsiveness. For instance, just because a fashion brand has a social media account to help advertise its merchandise doesn't mean it is being used in the most effective way to reach their target market. Time and money may be in jeopardy if promotion strategies are not in line with what consumers want to see. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify the type of photographic images posted on social media by fashion brands that stimulate young women's eWOM behaviors and purchase intention, in addition to whether or not individuals' VALS typology played a role in their preferences.

Mohr (2013) contributes the adoption of social media marketing (SMM) by fashion brands as a response to the financial crisis of 2008, in hopes that a more personalized approach through online platforms would help entice customers to purchase luxury goods when on a tighter budget. Findings depicted a strong, positive relationship between social media and fashion, specifically in regards to fashion week. Additionally, Chu (2011) acknowledges that based on past research, college-aged students are among the most prevalent population segment to use social media sites to learn about products, especially females (60%). These studies exemplify research that has focused on social media and fashion, as well as social media and college-aged consumers. Yet, there is a lack of investigation incorporating all three aspects together, especially in regards to the actual visual content of the posts and its effectiveness in reaching customers. It is clear that images have been a huge stimulus in marketing for several years (Brandwaite, 2002), but there are conflicting views regarding the elements of pictures that are displayed to consumers. For example, Choi and Rifon (2007) based their research on the idea that featuring celebrities in fashion ads create an 'illusion of intimacy' that in turn gains exposure and increases potential sales. On the other hand, Philips and McQuarrie (2011) tackled their research with the predisposition that by featuring only flawless models and elite individuals, such as celebrities, in beauty and fashion ads can actually have an adverse effect on vulnerable women and their self-esteem. The need for additional research is evident, with the intention to provide more insight on identifying potential customers' characteristics, beliefs, and behaviors. Hence, this study incorporated key constructs including electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), purchase intention, and Values and Lifestyles (VALS) typology based on a review of previous

studies, including Alboqami et al. (2015), Kim and Ko (2010), and Mathews and Nagaraj (2011). Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

- H1: Photographic images featuring a celebrity in a fashion product will have no effect on young women's purchase intentions.
- H2: Photographic images featuring a celebrity in a fashion product will have no effect on young women's willingness to share and comment online.
- H3: There is no difference among VALS typologies in terms of its influence on young women's photographic image preferences.

A convenience sample of female college students who attended a mid-large size Midwestern university was used. We utilized an online survey via Qualtrics to collect data. The survey consisted of four parts, which included demographic information, social media usage, a short VALS assessment (Chan & Leung, 2005), and questions about three types of photographic images (product itself only, a celebrity, and a non-celebrity) to establish preferences that led to sharing, commenting, and purchase intention online. Prior to the distribution of the survey, a pilot test involving a focus group of ten individuals was conducted through snowball referencing to ensure the construct and content validity.

A total of 216 useable responses were collected, with a majority of participants identifying themselves as Caucasian women (81%) between the ages of 18-23 years old (81%). Almost all (97.2%) use social media including Facebook, Twitter, and/or Instagram, with nearly three quarters (74%) of users utilizing those sites 2-3 times a week or more to look at fashion products. Factor analysis was run on the VALS assessment. The results suggested that it was suitable to proceed and five factors were extracted, including 'Makers/Thinkers' ($\alpha=.832$), 'Experiencers' ($\alpha=.822$), 'Strivers' ($\alpha=.877$), 'Innovators' ($\alpha=.718$), and 'Survivors' ($\alpha=.746$). ANOVA with repeated measures was used to evaluate the preference of photo types in relation to the behaviors of interest. Results showed no statistical difference between photo types in reference to sharing and commenting online, but did show significant differences in purchase intention. In particular, young women preferred to see a product worn by a non-celebrity model than the product itself and a celebrity. Thus, H1 was partially supported and H2 was fully supported. Regressions were run based on extracted VALS factors to assess its influence on participants' image preferences. Results showed that 'Strivers' would be more likely to share, comment, and have purchase intention toward a product regardless of which type of photo is posted on social media by fashion brands. Additionally, 'Survivors' would be more likely to share a photo that featured a fashion product by itself and 'Experiencers' would be more likely to have purchase intention if the photo featured a celebrity. Thus, H3 was partially supported.

The contribution of this study is that we were able to confirm VALS typology can be used to assess whether photographic images posted by fashion brands for product promotion can influence potential consumers to share information with others, comment on the product through the selected platform, and intention to purchase the product. We also found that celebrity endorsement is not always effective and when it comes to making the purchase decision, potential customers place a stronger emphasis on the product itself and more relatable models.

References available upon request.