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Citation for published version:

Colliander, J & Marder, B 2018, 'Snap happy' brands: Increasing publicity effectiveness through a snapshot aesthetic when marketing a brand on instagram', *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 78, pp. 34-43.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.09.015>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1016/j.chb.2017.09.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.09.015)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Computers in Human Behavior

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‘Snap happy’ brands: Increasing publicity effectiveness through a snapshot aesthetic when marketing a brand on Instagram

Introduction

Snapping photos to your ‘followers’, ‘fans’, and ‘friends’ is daily practice for both general social media users and brands. Photo sharing is the *raison d’être* for many social media technologies (e.g. Instagram, Flickr, Pinterest), and an integral gratification for more general sites such as Facebook (Joinson, 2008; Lang & Barton, 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). The premise that these technologies are ‘social’ rather than ‘commercial’ media has instilled and subsequently socialized a decorum of “phatic” (Miller, 2008, p. 387) and “lightweight” (Zhao & Rosson, 2009, p. 243) communication, wherein otherwise formal public figures appear more informal (Park, 2013). Following this, the posting of studio quality professional photos by brands is somewhat juxtaposed to an arena where filtered landscapes and gratuitously amateur selfies taken on phones are the norm (Chua & Chang, 2016; Chae, 2017). It has been discussed that to be seen as more personal, brands have begun to post photos in a user-generated/amateur aesthetic, in line with the general etiquette of social media technologies (Mojca, 2015). Indeed, a number of well-known fashion brands are already using a more amateur aesthetic when engaging their social media following (e.g. Alexander Wang, ASOS and Topshop). This aesthetic is herein referred to as a ‘snapshot aesthetic’, as photos of this type are most commonly ‘snapped’ and uploaded through phone cameras.

It is understood that social media presents a novel challenge for brands and they must adapt their practices to keep up (Colliander et al., 2015; Dehghani & Tumer, 2015). Following this, snapshot aesthetics has gained recognition in later years in marketing literature (Schroeder, 2010) as it has gained mainstream traction thanks to photographers like Terry Richardson. Researchers have, for example, sought to explain the motivations for the postings of images of this kind (such as so called selfies) on social media (Gannon & Prothero, 2016; Kedzior, Allen & Schroeder, 2016). At present however there is no empirical validation as to whether consumers respond better to a snapshot aesthetic compared to a traditional studio quality aesthetic when it comes to images from companies in their social media feeds, though it is generally accepted within the marketing literature that high quality images perform best (Lohse & Rosen, 2001; Lombard & Snyder-Duch, 2001; Pollay, 1986). Existing studies into consumer reactions to marketing images, however, have all been performed in a non-social media setting. Taking into account the nature of social media as a forum for mostly user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and the strong influence of communal norms on the responses to marketing in this sphere (Kozinetz et al., 2010), we see reasons to believe that consumers should play by a different set of rules when judging marketing images in social media.

We will contribute knowledge to this gap by empirically testing the effect of a snapshot aesthetic versus a traditional studio aesthetic in brand photo posts on Instagram. As social media is being increasingly used by corporations to get their messages across to consumers, studies into the effects of various communication tactics in these media on consumers ought to be of critical importance to both those who design and those who run these tools within organizations. In addition, as photos

are becoming the norm in these media and investigating the effects of various kinds of image styles should be especially useful to both researchers and practitioners. The choice of Instagram as the focal technology is consequently due to it being the world's leading photo sharing social media platform (Chua & Chang, 2016). We draw from the theory of aesthetics (Berlyne, 1971; Schroeder, 2010), which is more commonly used within the study of computer human behavior to understand the usability, appearance and appeal of web technologies (Li & Yeh, 2010; Seckler, Opwis, & Tuch, 2015; Tuch, Bargas-Avila & Opwis 2010). Through a between-subjects longitudinal experiment with Instagram users, we will contribute valuable knowledge on the impact of using a snapshot aesthetic versus a studio aesthetic on social media, on brand credibility and on users' attitudes towards the brand. Implications for managers will be provided.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Snapshot aesthetics

Authors have discussed aesthetic influences to be essential in users' satisfaction with technologies or facets of these technologies (Hartmann, Sutcliffe & De Angeli, 2007; Schenkman & Jonsson, 2000). Berlyne (1971) proposed that positive reactions to aesthetic stimuli hinged upon the arousal properties of an object. This in turn was determined by its collative properties (e.g. novelty, incongruity), psychophysical properties (e.g. intensity, color) and ecological properties (signal value or meaningfulness). Testing this theory, Martindale et al. (1990) found that "meaningfulness seems to be the main determinant of aesthetic preference" (p. 129).

This finding seems particularly pertinent in the context of a snapshot aesthetic in social media, since snapshots are the norm in social photo sharing and therefore hold greater congruence with the custom of the medium (see Miller, 2008; Park, 2013; Zhao & Rosson, 2009). This is especially true for Instagram, the core existence of which is built on the sharing of user-generated photos with a snap aesthetic (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

Further supporting the advantage of a snap aesthetic within social media are the findings of Reber et al. (2004) who concluded that the more fluently an observer can process an object, the more positive the aesthetic evaluation. Again, since a snapshot aesthetic is more congruent and meaningful in a social media setting, an observer should be able to process it more fluently, leading to more favorable responses to the images. In another study of aesthetic judgments, Leder et al. (2004) concluded that successful classification of style should lead to self-rewarding cognitive experiences, which in turn is likely to positively influence the aesthetic appreciation of an object.

We propose that in addition to the snapshot aesthetic carrying more meaning for social media users, users are more “fluent” in this aesthetic as they are more frequently exposed to it in social media, and thus are more likely to classify the snapshot style as something congruent with the norm of the platforms. This, in turn, should lead to positive cognitive effects and thereby to an increased liking for images with a snapshot aesthetic. Liking is discussed as an instrumental human emotion that motivates and coincides with the development of relationships with other individuals or brands (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Ye & Van Raaij, 2004). Thus we propose the following.

H1. Using pictures with a snapshot aesthetic in image based social media will result in higher levels of liking of the images than using pictures with a traditional studio aesthetic.

Snapshots and credibility

We also expect that using a snapshot aesthetic will result in higher perceived credibility of the brand's Instagram account. The credibility of a source is most commonly defined as consisting of expertise and trustworthiness (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Selnes, 1998; Smith et al., 1999). Thus a source (e.g. a person, a brand) is perceived as more credible if they have relevant expertise to the assertions they are making and these assertions are deemed valid, or in other words trustworthy. If a brand manages to create meaningful images that fit into the overall aesthetic landscape of the medium (as was argued for images with a snapshot aesthetic leading up to H1), then this should signal to users that the brand has expertise in understanding the media landscape in which it operates. Wells et al. (2011) have demonstrated the importance of such signals in an online environment where physical cues are absent. We argue that as consumers grow increasingly savvy (Macdonald & Uncles, 2007) these signals of expertise become even more important. Granted, the use of professional photography also signals that the company possesses expertise. Pollay (1986), in his seminal article, in fact attributes part of the effectiveness of advertising to ads being "professionally developed, with all the attendant research sophistications" (p. 21). However, we argue that in the context of social media,

signaling that you grasp the decorum of the medium would outweigh the expertise signaled by the use of a professional studio aesthetic.

In addition, research also shows that trustworthiness is an equally important part of source credibility (McGinnies & Ward, 1980), in particular when it comes to affecting evaluations of the brand (Yoon et al., 1998) and especially when affecting the brand in a social media context (Bilgihan, 2016; Colliander & Erlandsson, 2013; Laroche et al., 2012). This is key since Schroeder (2010) has demonstrated that a central aspect of the snapshot style is the appearance of authenticity, as the snapshots could seemingly have been taken by anyone. Authenticity, a key component of contemporary life (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), has in turn been explicitly linked to an increase in trust (Gilmore & Pine II, 2007; Lim et al., 2015). We therefore propose that by using snapshot-like images on Instagram a brand will appear more authentic, and therefore more trustworthy as a source within users' Instagram feeds. Combined with the signaling of media expertise, using a snapshot aesthetic should therefore result in higher perceived source credibility than using a traditional studio aesthetic. Hence, we hypothesize:

H2. Using pictures with a snapshot aesthetic in image based social media will result in higher levels of perceived source credibility than using pictures with a traditional studio aesthetic.

Snapshots and brand attitude

If our hypotheses 1 and 2 – that snapshot-like pictures produce higher levels of liking and are perceived as having greater source credibility than traditional studio photographs – hold, we also expect that the effectiveness of the snapshot aesthetic versus a traditional studio aesthetic would result in a more positive brand attitude.

Brand attitude is defined as consumers overarching evaluation of a brand, this is important as it is likely to impact on decisions to choose that brand instead of others (Solomon, 2014). Brand attitude develops from exposure to the brand, gaining knowledge of functional and symbolic attributes of the brand, through physical experience with the product/service or through digesting marketing content (Keller, 1993).

Existing studies overwhelmingly support the notion that higher liking of a marketing stimulus (such as an ad) will directly result in higher brand attitudes (Brown & Stayman, 1992; Gelb & Pickett, 1983). Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez (2012) found that promoting green issues in advertisements made consumers like the ads more that led a positive brand attitude. Similar to the association between liking of advertisements and brand attitude, research strongly supports the association that the higher credibility of the source will also enhance attitudes to the provider (see Pornpitakpan, 2004 for a review). For example, Clark & Maas (1988) demonstrated that highly credible groups of people were able to affect attitudes more than groups low in credibility. In another study, Gotlieb et al. (1987) found that sources high in credibility could attract new customers more easily due to them having a more positive attitude. Also important to this study, where a company stands behind the Instagram accounts used, are the findings of Goldsmith et al. (2000), who found that

corporate credibility as well as endorser credibility induced more favorable brand attitude.

Therefore, given that the liking of the images and the source credibility increases with the use of a snapshot aesthetic on a company's Instagram feed, we expect the levels of brand attitude to increase as well. We therefore hypothesize:

H3. Using pictures with a snapshot aesthetic in image based social media will result in higher levels of brand attitude than using pictures with a traditional studio aesthetic.

Snapshots and intentions to recommend the social media account to others

Studies have demonstrated that marketing content can produce value for consumers in its own right (Rosengren & Dahlén, 2014). Following these findings, an increase in both liking and source credibility should increase consumer's willingness to spread word-of-mouth about the Instagram account. Word-of-mouth is defined as "all informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers." (Westbrook, 1987, p.261). Several studies have found that consumers spread word-of-mouth both offline (e.g. Dichter, 1966) and online (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) in part out of concern for other consumers and their own wellbeing. (For a full review of antecedents of WOM please see Berger, (2014).) Given the fact that consumers are motivated to exchange information, recommend brands or recommend peers to follow

certain Instagram feeds, we propose that this is more likely to occur if a possible recommender likes and perceives the poster to be credible. The positive relationship between liking and WOM has been widely acknowledged in the literature (e.g. Anderson, 1988; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). For example, Harrison-Walker (2001) found a direct link between the amount a service experience was liked by a consumer with their intention to enact WOM. Supporting the link between credibility of the source brand in increasing WOM intention, studies on viral marketing effects online have found that quality, authenticity and authority are all important for accepting messages from peers online as well as passing them on to others (Huang et al., 2011). In addition, recent research has found that more credible sources on Twitter receive more re-tweets (Chua et al, 2016). We therefore hypothesize:

H4. Using pictures with a snapshot aesthetic in image based social media will result in greater intentions to recommend the social media account to others than pictures with a traditional studio aesthetic.

A model of photo aesthetic impact in social media

In the preceding section, we have outlined the theoretical connection between using a snapshot aesthetic (vs. a traditional studio aesthetic) in social media and liking of the images, source credibility, brand attitude, and word-of-mouth intentions. As per the reasoning above, we expect that liking of the images and source credibility will both mediate the effects found on brand attitude and WOM intentions when using pictures

with a snapshot aesthetic in social media. The proposed model with independent, mediating and dependent variables is below.

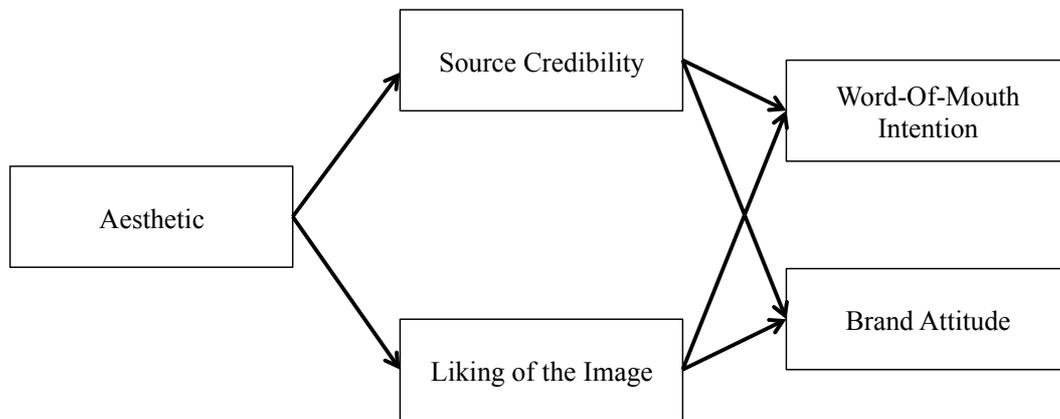


Figure 1: A model of photo aesthetic impact in social media

Method

To test the hypotheses, responses of users exposed to posts with a snapshot aesthetic within their Instagram feed were compared to others who received posts utilizing a traditional studio aesthetic appearance in an experiment. Experimental methods are useful for evaluating stimuli in a controlled setting free of confounding factors. Thus we saw it as the most suitable research method to test our particular research question since we wanted to isolate the effects of two particular kinds of aesthetics. In order to achieve validity, fashion was chosen as the product category for this research. Fashion has been used in previous studies of communication effects in web technologies including social media (e.g. Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Peña & Pan, 2016). Oscar de la Renta asserts that the fashion industry has long embraced social media as a

marketing tool. In fact, Instagram has been labeled “one of the most important platforms a [fashion] blogger can be on” (Veselinovic, 2014, p. 2). The choice of fashion as the context for this study thus increases the validity of the research.

Instrument development

In order to avoid potentially confounding effects of brand recognition and fit, a fictitious fashion brand, “Blacklabel”, was created for the purpose of the experiment and two separate Instagram accounts were set up for the brand. One of these accounts displayed pictures using a snapshot aesthetic and the other displayed pictures using a traditional studio aesthetic. The pictures used in the feeds were the only difference between the two accounts, all other aspects remained identical. The surrounding layouts of the two accounts were the same and since both accounts were specifically created for this research, there were also no differences in the number of posts or followers that could affect the results of the study.

A large pool of fashion related photographs utilizing either snapshot aesthetics or traditional studio aesthetics were subsequently collected from various social media originating from outside the country of study. Photos in both the snapshot and traditional studio aesthetics were selected to represent one specific style of clothing that was fashionable in the country of study but at the same time discreet, without logos, and using similar colors. The purpose of this approach was that 1) respondents could perceive photos from both aesthetic styles as being of clothes from the same brand and thus avoid confounds arising from this, 2) respondents would not be able to

identify the actual maker of the clothes, and 3) respondents would be unlikely to have been exposed to either of the photos prior to the experiment. After reviewing the pool of photos, 21 pictures from each aesthetic style were subsequently selected as the stimuli for the experiment (please see Appendix 1 for examples).

The pictures were pre-tested to ensure that they fitted the purposes of the study. Thirty-two respondents in a marketing research class at a Swedish business school were asked to what extent they found the photos to be a) professional and b) personal in nature. The respondents were all in their early twenties and the class was roughly evenly divided gender-wise. The photos using a traditional studio aesthetic were rated as significantly more professional in nature than the ones using a snapshot aesthetic ($M_{trad} = 6.3$, $M_{snap} = 3.3$, $p < .05$). The reversed pattern was true regarding which photos were personal in nature ($M_{trad} = 3.1$, $M_{snap} = 6.1$, $p < .05$). Pretest respondents were also asked to what extent they believed it likely that the clothes in all the photos came from the same brand, and whether they had seen any of the photos before. Respondents found it likely that all the clothes were from the same brand ($M = 5.9$ on a seven-point Likert scale with end points “not at all likely/very likely”. Sig. larger than 4 at $p < .05$) and none of them stated that they had previously been exposed to any of the photos. Following validation of the research instruments, the main study thus proceeded.

Procedure

The experiment took place in Sweden over the course of one week. Three pictures from each aesthetic were uploaded to separate accounts (one for each aesthetic style) daily for a grand total of 21 pictures per aesthetic style over the course of the week. Responses from a questionnaire administered at the end of the week were compared between respondents that had followed an Instagram feed using snapshot aesthetics and respondents who had followed an account using traditional studio aesthetics. Thus, the merits of using these aesthetics could be evaluated.

Respondents

Respondents were recruited from the panels of a professional market research company (which pays respondents a small sum for their participation in studies). Participants were instructed to open an Instagram account and subsequently follow one of the two stimuli Instagram feeds (or follow the stimuli feed in their existing account). The allocation of respondents to experimental accounts was random. Respondents were instructed to access the account at least once daily for each of the seven days of the study's duration. There were no significant differences regarding age (mean age 26 for both groups, $p=.98$) or gender (approx. 70% females in both groups. $X^2=.12$, $p=.73$) between the two experimental groups.

In order to ensure that respondents had been active on Instagram every day they were instructed to "like" one of the fresh pictures each day. This was controlled for daily and only users who were active every day of the experimental week were subsequently presented with a questionnaire. At the outset, 125 respondents were assigned to each experimental group. At the end of the week, some respondents had

been excluded from the study for not following the instructions provided. 115 respondents remained in the group exposed to snapshot aesthetics and 100 respondents remained in the group exposed to traditional studio aesthetics.

Measures

All measures were recorded on seven-point Likert scales (1= completely disagree, 7= completely agree).

Liking of the images was measured with two items amended from Sánchez & Espinoza (2010). “I like the images in Blacklabel’s Instagram account” and “I associate positive things with the images in Blacklabel’s Instagram account”. Responses to the two items were averaged to form an index, $r = .85$). *Brand credibility* was measured with three items: “Blacklabel is credible” “Blacklabel is believable”, “Blacklabel is honest”. The scale was adapted from Mackenzie & Lutz, (1989). Responses to the three items were averaged to form an index, *Cronbach’s alpha* = .94). *Brand attitude* was measured with three items: “My impression of Blacklabel is good”, “My impression of Blacklabel is pleasant”, “My impression of Blacklabel is favourable” (Mackenzie & Lutz, 1989). Responses to the three items were averaged to form an index, *Cronbach’s alpha* = .96). *Intentions to recommend* the Instagram account were measured with two items amended from Babin et al. (2005): “It is likely that I would recommend others to follow Blacklabel’s Instagram account” and “It is likely that I will talk to others about Blacklabel’s Instagram account”. Responses to the two items were averaged to form an index, $r = .745$).

Results

In order to test hypotheses H1, H2, H3, and H4 (that liking of the images, source credibility, brand attitude, and intentions to recommend the Instagram account to others would be higher after following image based social media utilizing a snapshot aesthetic) we employed independent samples t-tests. Results show that for each of these variables the means of respondents following the Instagram account utilizing a snapshot aesthetic were significantly higher than the means of those respondents following an Instagram account utilizing a traditional studio aesthetic (please refer to Table 1 below). Thus, hypotheses H1, H2, H3 and H4 are all supported.

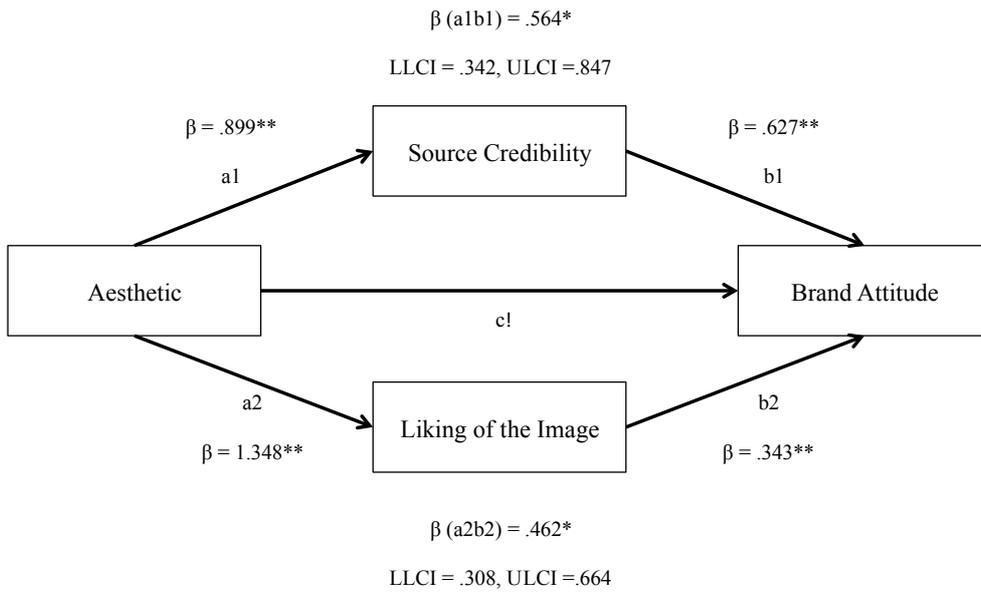
Table 1: Provides differences in key variables for the snapshot aesthetic vs. traditional studio aesthetic conditions

Variable	Mean Snapshot	Mean Traditional	Significance
Liking of the images	4.28	2.93	$p < .000$
Source Credibility	3.88	3.0	$p < .000$
Brand Attitude	4.13	3.27	$p < .000$
WOM Intentions	2.88	2.12	$p < .000$

To test the underlying notion that liking of the images and source credibility both mediate the effects found on brand attitude and WOM intentions when using pictures with a snapshot aesthetic in social media, we used Preacher & Hayes's (2008) model of bootstrapped mediation, a common method within research in the field (Marder et al., 2016; Roberts & David, 2016). The independent variable was a dummy variable representing the experimental group (0 = traditional studio aesthetic, 1= snapshot aesthetic). The Preacher & Hayes (2008) model assesses the effect of an indirect path (denoted *ab*) through a bootstrapped confidence interval. The path is deemed

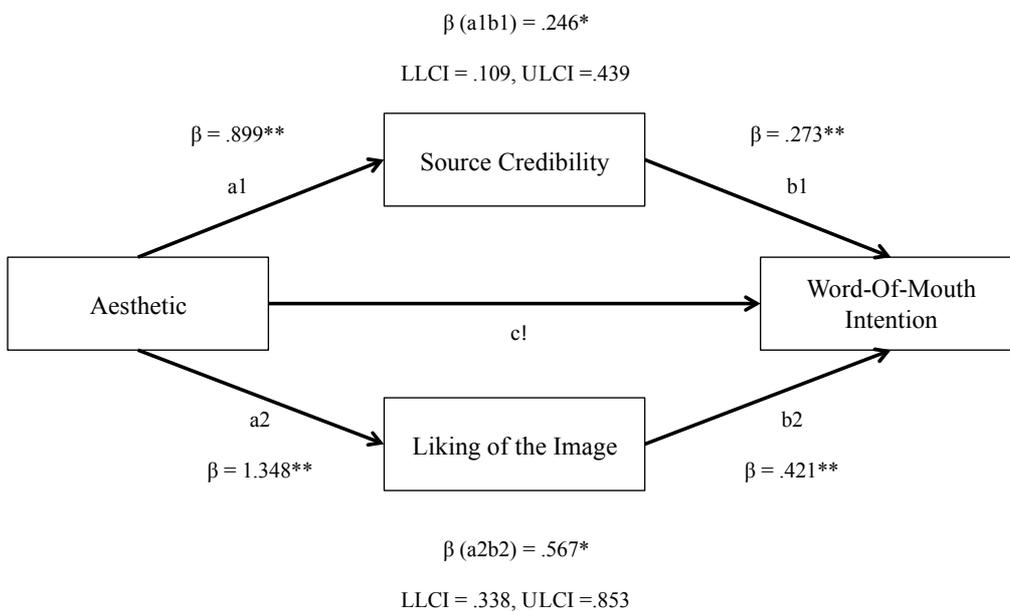
significant by the upper and lower confidence intervals not including zero. For mediation to exist, the necessary condition is a significant path ab . Two different mediations are possible. During indirect-only mediation, the direct path (c) is non-significant, meaning that the pathway between the independent variable and dependent variable can exist solely through the mediator (Zhao, Lynch Jr., & Chen, 2010). In addition, complementary mediation is also possible when the significant presence of the mediator reduces the effect of the pathway between the independent variable and dependent variable, but does not diminish the effect to non-significance. In addition, the effects of pathways ab and c must be in the same direction.

Two mediations were tested, one for each dependent variable (please see Figures 2 and 3). Bootstrap resampling was set to 5,000. For both brand attitude ($N = 215$, $R^2 = .826$, $F = 333.17$, $p < 0.001$) and WOM intentions ($N = 215$, $R^2 = .433$, $F = 53.64$, $p < 0.001$), indirect-only mediations were established, meaning that the relationships between our independent and dependent variables were fully mediated by liking of the images and source credibility. Thus, when exposed to snapshot aesthetics in social media, consumers' brand attitudes and WOM intentions increased, a relationship that was mediated by whether they liked the images (Brand attitude: $\beta_{(ab)} = .4622$, $LLCI = .308$, $ULCI = .664$; WOM intention: $\beta_{(ab)} = .567$, $LLCI = .338$, $ULCI = .853$) and the credibility they perceived the source behind the images to possess (Brand attitude: $\beta_{(ab)} = .564$, $LLCI = .342$, $ULCI = .827$; WOM intention: $\beta_{(ab)} = .245$, $LLCI = .108$, $ULCI = .439$). Thus, the underlying reasoning behind our hypotheses was supported.



±n.s.; $**p < 0.01$

Figure 2: Results for parallel mediation test for the effect of aesthetic on brand attitude



±n.s.; $**p < 0.01$

Figure 3: Results for parallel mediation test for the effect of aesthetic on brand attitude

The results show that using a snapshot aesthetic, as opposed to using a traditional studio aesthetic, when marketing a fashion label on Instagram resulted in more liking of the images used and a higher perceived credibility of the brand behind the account. This, in turn, positively affected brand attitudes and intention to recommend the Instagram account.

Discussion

We provide the first examination of a snapshot aesthetic versus a traditional studio aesthetic for brands engaging their followers on social media. Our results show that use of a snapshot aesthetic by a clothing brand is more liked by users and is associated with increased credibility/attitude of the brand as well a heightened intention to enact WOM. Our findings sustain the notion upheld by existing research that considering aesthetics is crucial within computer-mediated environments (Seckler, Opwis, & Tuch, 2015; Tuch, Bargas-Avila & Opwis 2010). In the context of Instagram or arguably social media more generally, our findings support the use of images by brands to evoke affect (Miniard et al., 1991; Stuart et al., 1987). However, this contrasts with previous research within marketing that upholds the superiority of a more professional aesthetic (Lohse & Rosen, 2001; Lombard & Snyder-Duch, 2001; Pollay, 1986). It appears that within social media, consumers resonate with brands that abide by the decorum of the media, which is discussed by prior research as

informal, light-weight and phatic (Miller, 2008; Park, 2013; Zhao & Rosson, 2009). In essence, 'in Rome do as the Romans do'. As hypothesized based on aesthetics theory, the results support that within social media a snapshot aesthetic carries greater meaning for the consumers (Martindale et al. 1990) which they are able to translate more fluently (Reber et al, 2004).

However it must be noted that although most social media can be viewed as a rather informal arena for communications, and based on our findings snap aesthetics are preferential for brands, for certain social media such as LinkedIn, which are more professional in nature, our findings are less likely to hold. Overall our study adds further evidence to support the growing acceptance that social media truly provides a novel arena for brand interaction, one which is different arenas for brand communication (Colliander et al, 2015; Deghani & Tumer, 2015; Marder et al., 2017). Furthermore, the aesthetics used to communicate with users within computer-mediated environments should be carefully considered in line with the conventions and etiquette of the specific technology.

In addition to the core finding above, the results support the model derived from the literature for understanding the impact of the photo aesthetic in social media from the perspective of the viewer. For the present research the model holds that differences in aesthetic can affect both liking and credibility of the image. These relationships are supported by previous research that consider other forms of stimuli on human reaction (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Pollay, 1986; Ye & Van Raaij, 2004). Liking and credibility, in addition, mediate the relationship between aesthetic and brand attitude and word-of-mouth intentions. In the case of a snap aesthetic versus a traditional

studio aesthetic, this was by indirect only mediation, meaning without increased liking or increased credibility there would be no effect on brand attitude or word-of-mouth intention.

Implications

We provide two theoretical contributions. First, our study provides a snappy message for scholars and managers; exposure to a snapshot aesthetic evokes preferential response in consumers compared to the traditional studio aesthetic. This is based on the rationale that a snapshot aesthetic is more congruent with the decorum of social media and therefore is processed by consumers with greater meaning and increased fluency. Second, given the importance of aesthetics, supported by our research and prior studies discussed, we contribute a model to understand the effect of photo aesthetics in social media. Though the model was developed in mind of our specific research aims we intend that this model have value beyond the context of this study. We propose that by adapting the aesthetic stimulus our model can be used to understand the impact of other aesthetic content in social media environments and digital arenas more generally.

The study provides a number of managerial implications. Brands must consider the norms of the media they are leveraging in decisions regarding the aesthetic of content created. Specifically for fashion brands engaging followers on Instagram, managers should follow our finding that the snap-aesthetic outperformed the more traditional studio aesthetic and should opt for the arguably less costly former of the two. Thus a company such as Oscar de la Renta, which launches fashion ad campaigns on

Instagram, needs not only to tailor the garments but also the aesthetic style of the content to suit the particular medium in which it is presented. Furthermore, it is well known that brands benefit from consumer involvement through social media (e.g. through posting pictures of themselves wearing branded garments) (see Thompson & Malaviya, 2013). Given that photos posted by consumers will more than likely use a snapshot aesthetic, an aesthetic style found here to provide benefits to the brands, our findings should be viewed as further impetus for encouraging such ‘snap happy’ consumer behavior. For managers that work for the social media technologies themselves, our advice is to promote the use of a snap aesthetic to brands (i.e. their clients) as a successful means of gaining a competitive advantage. This may be done as a pop up notification within the user interface itself and/or within other communication channels the technologies have with brands (e.g. industry websites, best-practice help sections).

The present research has several limitations that we encourage future researchers to address. First, only one brand from one product category, fashion, was used in the study. Within the fashion category, different brands might benefit from different aesthetics. In this study, the fictional brand employed was portrayed as a typical mid-level brand. However, a brand producing so-called haute couture creations, for example, could potentially have benefited more from a studio aesthetic. Also, fashion is a product category where there have been discussions in recent years regarding the intentions and indeed morals of those creating images that are not perceived as accurately representing the average consumer. This might cause respondents to devote more thought to the intentions and character of those behind fashion images than they would have had the study focused on a different, less involving, product category.

Results might therefore have differed had another type of brand and/or another type of product been portrayed in the research stimuli.

Another important limitation of this study is that no distinction was made between heavy users of Instagram and novices to the medium. It is plausible that heavy users, accustomed to the medium as they are, might spot details in photos that novices do not. Consequently, they might respond differently to the communication. Investigating how reactions between these two groups of Instagram users might differ is a task we leave to future researchers. In addition, our respondents followed the Instagram accounts over a period of one week but attitudes and intentions might form differently over a longer time period. We therefore urge those future researchers to conduct studies of this nature over a longer time period than was used in the present study.

Furthermore, many companies, fashion companies such as Alexander Wang included, use a mix of aesthetic styles in social media. That is, they alternate between snapshot aesthetics and professional looking studio aesthetics. This approach might be harvesting the best of both worlds. Whether or not that is the case we leave to future researchers to determine, as there was no mixed account included in this study. Lastly, given the proposal that the norms of the technology are crucial in deciding what aesthetic should be used by brands, future research should aim to replicate the study across different social media technologies where the norms are arguably different to Instagram (e.g. LinkedIn).

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