

Social Media's Role in Influencing Social Consciousness and Purchase Intent

COM 615 Integrated Marketing Communications Research

Week 4 Assignment: Final Paper

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Letter to H&M North American Marketing Director

Marketing Director
H&M North America
Dedham, MA 02026
United States

Dear Mr. Steve Lubomski,

H&M has been successful internationally with your expansions upwards of 2,800 stores spread across 49 markets worldwide, however I believe there are several marketing communications strategies currently underutilized within the United States that would aid in increasing your company's value proposition for consumers while *increasing brand recognition* and *building consumer engagement and loyalty online*.

There are currently over 200 stores across almost 30 states in the US, yet H&M North America's online presence lacks an e-commerce function, search engine optimization, and significant user engagement. My research provides several actionable gages for online marketing success through measuring conversions (e.g. spikes in the number of visitors to websites, numbers of new social media followers, numbers of new customers from specific marketing campaigns, better search engine rankings, and more brand awareness) that I believe you will find advantageous. As you know, today's consumers are relying more heavily on digital technologies than ever before which re-affirms why H&M North America must improve its online position if it wishes to obtain and maintain the same success garnered worldwide as a retail powerhouse.

To *increase brand* recognition, H&M must use banner ads, blogs, and consistent incorporation of its tag line 'fashion and quality at the best price'. To *build consumer engagement and loyalty online*, incorporation of highly interactive online consumer forums such as an HM.com blog, provision of user-engaging digital contests with prizes and special events, and the creation of a more relatable community web presence on all social media platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) will increase your return on investment.

In addition to the following marketing research plan, I welcome the opportunity to answer your questions, offer more resources and work with you on potentially implementing this set of clear, actionable, and measurable strategies for improving H&M's value proposition in the United States market. I am confident that these strategically constructed tactics will be used to achieve your corporate marketing objectives while changing levels of awareness in the target audience, influencing consumer preferences for your products, and stimulating overall sales. Thank you for your consideration.

Warmest Regards. Michael Kelly

Introduction

As an avid social media user of Instagram as well as a menswear and fashion blogger on platforms such as Instagram and Tumblr, I have witnessed first-hand how imagery and textual content can be used to directly or indirectly influence the social consciousness and buying habits of consumers. More specifically, the role of social media networks as an antecedent to consumer socialization agents with their effect on social consciousness and purchasing intent.

Marketing researchers Kotler and Keller (2012) describe social factors such as reference groups as having a direct or indirect influence on a person's attitudes or behavior. As social media networks are more heavily integrated online, digital networks such as Instagram and Tumblr blogs can provide the technical infrastructure for the emergence of contemporary network-based social movements. Research by Luczak and Younkin (2012) supports that the Internet provides individuals with knowledge "acquired through directly reading and processing information about a social cause or acquired through the membership of on-line communities". People learn what is important through the "association to a particular group that they participate in". The more that individuals participate in a group, the greater the likelihood that they will adopt those beliefs for themselves.

Online social interactions help engage consumers and increase their participation in groups. These associations can increase the likelihood that consumers' values will reflect those of the groups' because values influence consumers' attitudes and attitudes in turn influence consumer behavior. On Instagram, depending on the amount of an Instagrammer's fan following along with their provision of value-added content, they have the ability to directly or indirectly affect the social consciousness of other users. Popular Instagrammers that gain a large fan following are similar to opinion leaders of social reference groups. An opinion leader is a "person who offers informal advice or information about a specific product or product category" (e.g. which brands are the best or how particular products may be used). These opinion leaders "are often highly confident, socially active, and frequent users" of their product or image category (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

This project's marketing research helps support the ideology that opinion leaders ultimately have the ability to directly or indirectly "expose individuals to new behaviors and lifestyles, influence attitudes and self-concept, and create pressures for conformity that may affect product and brand choices" (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Businesses and brands that provide daily content-driven posts (while aligning with their organizational values) to users on social media platforms are presented with unique opportunities to reach millions of people worldwide, just as Instagram users do today. If strategic influence-marketing tactics are formulated focusing on the use of social media platforms (with an emphasis on m-commerce and marketing via mobile hand-held devices), marketers could utilize consumer-generated content to positively affect corporate marketing objectives

while changing levels of awareness in the target audience, influencing consumer preferences for products, and stimulating overall sales.

For this marketing research project I first conducted the quantitative analysis via an administered Shopping Apparel Lifestyle survey/questionnaire. The insights that I obtained from the results of that questionnaire reaffirm that H&M's current target market is still aligned with the brand in terms of the consumer value proposition, being that they will continue to shop in the store in exchange for high fashion, low cost quality collection items. The next step is to survey a focus group in order to find out if achieving H&M's marketing objectives can really be measured and improved via use of social media. Though H&M has a large following internationally, it is still attempting to increase its consumer base in the United States. Nationally, not many people are aware of H&M and their customer value proposition. And because more consumers are relying so heavily on digital technologies than ever before so it is necessary for H&M to improve its online positioning if the company wishes to remain a retail powerhouse. This can be achieved by **increasing brand recognition**. By doing so, the company will create a more recognizable brand image and give consumers a clear picture of the company's reputation and values.

The target customers of H&M belong to a group of fashionable and trendy consumers who see shopping as a social activity providing pleasure in their daily life. The key word here is "social". Engagement and user-generated content will foster a sense of trust and authenticity among new and existing H&M patrons. Customers will feel like they have more say in what they are purchasing, which will go a long way in extending H&M's reputation and improving future product offerings. Therefore the last objective identified is to **build user engagement and loyalty online**.

Company Background

Hennes & Mauritz AB (also known as H&M) is a Swedish clothing company that first opened in 1947 by founder Erling Persson, known for offering a wide-ranging apparel collection from timeless basics to the latest trends. Persson brought the business to the United States in hopes of delivering fashion to young adults who couldn't afford traditional haute couture designs. Erling Persson revolutionized the Swedish Fashion industry by not ordering new collections for every season. Instead, with smaller time intervals his intention was that the H&M stores should always offer something new to their customers. Today, H&M's mission is to offer **fashion and quality** at the best **price**. The brand has become a retail powerhouse internationally operating nearly 2,000 retail stores in 38 countries.

The latest *fashionable* garments are generated through the company's main buying and design department that crafts the apparel collections ensuring the latest trends are always available. The term *quality* indicates that their products are produced, transported and sold with care of the people and the environment with a goal is to inspire and surprise their customers as they become increasingly conscious of social issues.

According to research by Berglund (2012) Persson's original idea was to consider fashion products as commodities with a high turnover, which has to quickly be sold and thus has H&M in a Just-In-Time manner, decreased their store keeping and emphasized the logistics. H&M does not own any factories for manufacturing products, instead production takes place at around 1,650 factories that are owned or subcontracted by almost 750 suppliers. In addition, "other factors contribute to ensuring the best price in store: in-house design, no middlemen, large purchasing volumes, efficient logistics and *cost* consciousness at every stage" (H&M Annual Report, 2012).

Mission Statement

The H&M 2012 Annual Report indicates that the company has strong values based on their fundamental respect for their consumers and their belief in each individual's ability to show initiative. The company employs more than 100,000 people worldwide to form a 'design driven, creative, and responsible global fashion company' (H&M, 2012). Their mission statement "fashion and quality at the best price" represents the organization's belief that it should always have the best customer offering in each and every market with collections that are wide-ranging and varied, offering women, men, teenagers and children everything from timeless basics to the latest trends.

Considerable resources are devoted to increasing sustainability. H&M does not own factories, but instead buys products from independent suppliers and works to bring about long-term improvements for people and the environment – in the supply chain, the garment lifecycle and the communities in which H&M is active. In addition to sourcing the right product from the right market, other factors contribute to ensuring the best price in store: in-house design, no middlemen, large purchasing volumes, efficient logistics and cost consciousness at every stage. Efficient decision-making and flexible assortment planning ensure that the product range is always adapted to the latest trends and customer expectations.

With a strong offering that appeals to customers around the world, H&M is able to grow successfully in all its existing markets as well as in new ones, with growth among all its brands and through new concepts. This expansion is long-term and self financed. The goal is to increase the number of stores by 10–15 percent each year while at the same time increasing sales in comparable units.

Vision Statement

H&M's corporate vision is that 'all business operations shall be run in a way that is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable'. It only takes a quick look at the company's website to see the extent to which their vision has materialized into specific and measurable actions (i.e. projects and pledges) that work towards their goal of a co-existence between business and ethics. H&M has defined seven corporate objectives designed to ensure the organization stays true to its mission statement. The organization considers the idea of being ethical as a means for acting with integrity at all times, within all activities with considerations aimed

towards showing respect to everyone who contributes to their success. The company gives back to the community with the help of a proactive approach to their long list of ethical challenges by reinforcing the ideology that fashion and sustainability can be achieved at the same time instead of having to choose between one and the other. Improving the environmental and social sustainability of the H&M supply chain has been a major focus of their work since the 90's and has remained a core part of their vision.

Corporate Objectives

H&M has defined seven corporate objectives designed to ensure the organization stays true to its mission statement. The first begins with **providing fashion for conscious customers**. This business decision aligns their values with socially aware consumers. The company's "Conscious Collection" is the most recent sustainable choice for customers, which is a line produced with attention to producing, transporting, and selling garments with care for people and the environment. They attempt to demonstrate that green fashion and designs do not need to undermine trends. The public in today's economy has more increasing demands for corporate conscience, which is why their sustainable approach can be seen as a corporate strength in driving consumer loyalty, employee commitment, and better business performance. The company has set a firm target to obtain all of their cotton from sustainable sources by the year 2020 at the latest (Lampa, 2013). Since 2010, the company has been the biggest user of organic cotton worldwide.

H&M uses their influence to promote better working conditions and environmental consciousness throughout their value chain (located around 1,650 factories owned or sub-contracted by up to 750 suppliers) through **choosing and rewarding responsible partners**. The company focuses on strengthening their suppliers' ability to take ownership for their sustainability issues and work towards larger involvement with the workers themselves. The ideology behind is to reward responsible partners who share the company's values and are willing to work with them to improve on social and environmental practices. H&M as a company understands that even though they do not produce any products themselves, they have to take responsibility for the entire value chain so they work to provide better working conditions, avoid human rights violations, and reduce negative environmental impact that aids in **being ethical**. The company states on its website that this allows for them to contribute to stability in production countries which will translate into more efficient operations and higher quality products.

H&M has stated that climate change is one of the major challenges of our time (even more so than any other organization or individual), which is why they have an interest in **being climate smart**. The nature of the business means the organization consumes enormous quantities of energy but strives to utilize renewable sources to counteract this fact. They attempt to reduce their greenhouse emissions globally at a faster rate emitted by their operations through emissions reduction initiatives via their transport providers and supplier

factories. They also work to raise awareness in the public to allow consumers the opportunities to play their parts in reducing climate impacts through buying and using their products.

In order to keep unnecessary costs down and continue offering fashion and quality at the best price, H&M attempts to make the most of the resources they buy through their commitment to **reduce, reuse, and recycle** at every stage in their value chain. They apply these to the processing of waste generated by product packaging, shopping bags, store construction, etc. with the utilize goal of sending zero waste to landfills. In February of this year, H&M launched a global garment-recycling program that aimed to improve the ecological footprint of the fashion industry by encouraging people to bring clothes of any brand, condition, or quality into the stores. To future consider the needs of both the present and future generations, they are committed to **using natural resources responsibly**, which they have identified as a source of competitive advantage. They have a commitment to conserving water, soil, air, and species while trying to influence consumers and stakeholders (e.g. suppliers, customers, partners, communities and governments) to help them use these natural resources responsibly.

Finally, because the company is apart of many communities around the world (particularly within their supply chains) they attempt to drive positive change for people and the environment by investing in projects that **strengthen communities**. As noted by Porter and Kramer (2006) in the Harvard Business Review, there is a link between competitive advantage and corporate responsibility that tends to be mutually reinforcing. H&M invests in projects that benefit the communities they work in and its business by addressing issues including employment rights, education, health, and sustainable raw materials.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths are found in their low cost offerings due to local partnerships and cutting of middlemen as discussed in great detail within the core objectives. This carries over to customer savings ensuring consumers return for more. They also profit from their well-established branding, relatively well perceived value, and good employee relations. As a fast fashion retails their styles are designed in collaboration with high fashion designers such as Stella McCartney, Jimmy Choo, and Karl Lagerfeld, which in turn allows for them to stay at the forefront of fashion. They also heavily advertise with high profile partnerships with celebrities such as David Beckham and Beyonce, which keeps the brand modern and within consumer's minds. In addition to their contemporary designs, they replenish their stores consistently and bring designs to market much more quickly than typical retailers in the industry. The company is able to do this by producing large volume basics in low cost locations like Asia and the small volume high fashion collections in closer low cost locations like Turkey.

They also have a commitment to sustainability, which enhances the brand image in the minds of consumers while ensuring that resources are used efficiently in the long and short terms of the product lifecycle. This commitment is evidenced by their support in the Better Cotton Initiative that provides best practices in

cotton supply; cotton is currently the primary input for the apparel industry. They also have a commitment to governing fair pay and ensuring that natural resources are used fairly (with low gas emissions from their suppliers). Their sustainability commitment is evidenced by their support of the Better Cotton Initiative, ensuring best practices in cotton supply. This is essential as cotton is the primary input for the apparel industry. H&M is also part of initiatives governing fair pay and hazardous materials discharge. H&M also has a strong global presence with operations in North America, Western Europe, Nordic Europe and Asia. They are able to decrease their dependence on mature western markets while still being able to capitalize on opportunities in higher growth Asian market, which has allowed H&M to consistently beat market growth averages. In 2012 they were able to improve their overall customer satisfaction ratings based on price, convenience, layout, and services.

The most prevalent **weakness** for the purposes of this study is the lack of available online shopping within the United States customer base, which is counterproductive as online shopping is a major source of sales in today's global economy. H&M also currently depends on outside suppliers to manufacture their products, which can be a risk to the company's reputation (based on external factors out of its control). With their current rate of outsourcing to independent suppliers around the world they also have limited control over the factories which leads to low quality products, that also reflects poorly on the brand. This further leverages their risk because having distribution centers in everywhere but the US makes it much more difficult to develop and implement an online store in the US.

Another perceived weakness to some insiders would be its wide range of customers that the brand targets. They target market segments from ages 0-45 with a huge range of different styles which could be difficult to manage in a vertical company due to lack of focus on a particular consumer.

Forbes online (2011) had already predicted that online sales would boom in a number of ways ever since induction of the option for consumers. This also presents a number of **opportunities** for H&M in the business market including extending to mobile shopping, online retailing, e-commerce, m-commerce, mobile shopping, shopping through social media networks, etc. "Retailers of all types are expanding product offerings, adding in-store pickup, free shipping and experimenting with social media. It's getting harder to tell pure play Internet retailers from the bricks and mortar shops with online portals, and all of them are reinventing how we'll shop online". Some of the top trends to watch from 2011 are happening in today's shopping market including in-store pickup, pick up depots for smaller retailers without a vast network of stores for goods ordered online, using mobile applications for price comparisons and sending out coupons.

More interestingly than these items, research from Forbes discusses how companies are forgetting about flashy apps and features like virtual dressing rooms, as consumers haven't responded to these. Companies are now employing user reviews as better gages of clothing fit and quality. Retailers are also letting customers

upload video clips modeling new clothes or using a new purchase, which is one trend that is currently picking up speed through social networking sites. This in turn allows consumers on these sites to increasingly “like” or follow their favorite retailer and get discounts or tips on deals. This creates an active population of customers reaching out and requesting information from the retailers. These forms of digital advertising will also ensure that the in-store experience is better as online shopping grows because it will become that much easier to compare prices. Stores are in turn forced to create better physical experiences with more knowledgeable staff and proprietary items hard to find anywhere else.

H&M is a brand that is very unique; therefore it has very few **threats** as far as retail chains are concerned. However, today's consumers are relying more heavily on digital technologies than ever before, which re-affirms why H&M North America must improve its online position if it wishes to obtain and maintain the same success garnered worldwide as a retail powerhouse. If H&M does not develop an e-commerce site within the US, it will lose out on even bigger share of the market already lost to its major competitors.

Situation Analysis

Strategic Groups: In 2010 there were over 100,000 stores that made up the fashion industry in the United States (Hoovers, 2011). The largest 50 companies account for more than half of the fashion industry's revenue making up 65% of total industry revue. In the United States, the top five companies in retail are foreign brands including Paris retail powerhouse Louis Vuitton. The fashion industry can also be divided into five different market segments including haute couture, luxury, affordable fashion, mainstream, and discount. These categories can further be divided in terms of price, exclusivity and quality. The smallest segment that caters to the wealthiest clientele with infamous brand names such as Christian Dior, Chanel, and Givenchy is “haute couture”. This segment focuses on quality rather than quantity and may sell for as much as \$25,000 each. The second segment is comprised of products sold as “luxury” items, which are expensive though not as much as haute couture and also serve a wealthy clientele (e.g. Gucci and Hermes). “Affordable luxury” can often be seen as a substitute set of products for traditional luxury brands with names such as Coach, Nordstrom, and Hugo Boss providing high-end items at lower prices. “Mainstream” designers lack the air of exclusivity that luxury and haute couture afford with a focus on quantity rather than quality. This segment is popular with American middle class consumers because of their affordability and availability with labels such as American Eagle, Gap, and Abercrombie & Fitch. H&M would be considered amongst the mainstream segment because it is a brand perceived as having lesser quality than common affordable luxury brands. Fashion houses in the mainstream segment earn less money per garment so they focus more on moving volume. The “discount” segment includes stores that sell other brand's products but at reduced prices and caters to low-income customers with brands such as Target and Payless.

Target Audience: H&M provides affordable clothing to the young-minded, fashion-forward individual. The company primarily targets 18- to 34-year-olds, supplying merchandise for both men and women. H&M also carries a line of teen and children's clothing in some locations. H&M prides itself on being able to provide clothing and accessories at a reasonable price. Therefore, its consumers tend to be price sensitive. Apparel ranges from casual to dress wear tailored toward a youthful audience. The company is a pioneer of "fast fashion" which is a term used to describe clothing collections which are based on the most recent fashion trends on the catwalk but which are designed and manufactured quickly, are affordable, and are aimed at mainstream consumers. By maintaining efficiency and flexibility throughout its supply chain, H&M is able to respond quickly to changes in fashion trends. By virtue of its fashion capacity of anticipating trends, H&M has achieved instantaneous popularity among consumers. This popularity has enabled the company to grow quite quickly, despite overcrowding in the clothing market and the current degree of sluggish in consumer spending due to the economy.

The company's target market is made up of the low price, high fashion end of the fashion apparel sector and is closely tied to the needs and wants of mainstream consumers. It enjoys a strong following among women, particularly those in younger age groups, who make up the majority of its customers. By selling a broad range of fashionable collections that are renewed frequently through the provision of attractive prices and maintenance of a strong presence in optimum shopping locations, the company has ensured that its stores enjoy a steady flow of customers. They attract publicity using bold and striking advertising and by regularly promoting high profile designer collaborations and celebrities to reinforce the company's brand and image. They have built a strong product concept established through its growth in a wide variety of countries before expanding into the US retail market.

Consumer Characteristics: Current consumer behaviors could be monitored through the companies online shopping catalogue (currently only available in other countries than the US) or surveying online consumers via their social media networks, which will allow for them to identify the locations of their customers. Social media surveillance can also help for them to identify which style of clothing is popular in those specific regions from studying consumer purchase behaviors. Another current source of controversy in terms of general marketing research is the use of keywords found directly from social media platforms such as Facebook. Facebook and other companies are able to look at users search history to identify characteristics based on past behavior in searching online (particularly when looking for apparel).

Because H&M finds their store locations as one of the most important factors when it comes to expanding and considering building new locations in certain cities or new countries, it is important for them to study consumer lifestyles particularly of people in certain geographic locations. Because the company is a value based store they make every attempt to be environmentally friendly (seen through their most recent Conscious

Collection branding and shown throughout their entire core values proposition – objectives). With a target amongst a variety of ages, when it comes to demographic segmentation the company has several things to consider because they make apparel for both male and female genders. They also find a competitive advantage in providing consumers with price pointed merchandise.

The company understands their target markets so well by offering high fashion and quality at the best price points, so teens can look for trendy yet affordable clothing through H&M without breaking the bank or their parent's budget. The brand is worn by all different diverse groups with no specific ethnicity in mind and an offering for every race, which also implies that consumers that shop in the stores reside in urban areas as well as big cities. Because the brand is trendy and fashion forward, it receives a lot of attention from consumers in the current economic condition.

Brand Positioning: H&M sends out a strong message to its customers in emphasizing that the latest collaborative collections embody all of the elegance and refinement of luxury, while remaining faithful to its purpose of offering clothes at affordable prices. The message conveys the idea that price and value must be viewed as distinct elements and that a set of clothes does not have to be highly priced in order to be fashionable and designed with quality. Haute couture designers transfer very valuable know-how in relation to design techniques and also provide new ideas to H&M in-house designers. When H&M is about to advertise the sale of limited collections, they also create a lot of buzz which alters the perception of consumers by providing added value to the brand in terms of offering premium quality in superior design at accessible prices (which makes the overall brand more appealing).

H&M also repositions the brand in the minds of their current customers by attracting them to higher-fashion designed clothing. The partnerships enable H&M to offer a bargain in terms of targeting fashion conscious, but price sensitive consumers. In return, H&M can leverage the partnership to charge higher yet affordable prices than it would for the regular H&M non-designer clothing lines. Chang (2011) discusses this partnership in her Los Angeles Times article by illustrating the time when H&M worked with Versace on a particular collection in which they offered prices that ranged from \$30- \$400. Whereas, typical consumers at high-end department stores such as Neiman Marcus or Bloomingdales would have to spend around \$2,925 for a Versace dress.

Competitors: Fast-growing H&M operates some 2,470 stores in some 35 countries and offers online shopping in eight countries. Germany is its #1 market, accounting for more than 20% of sales. Hoovers business solutions (2013) indicate that H&M has three main competitors including Arcadia, Inditex, and Gap. *Arcadia* is the leading British retailer and operates about half a dozen apparel chains numbering more than 2,500 stores in the UK, mostly in urban areas. The company opened a flagship Topshop store in New York in Spring 2010. Therefore, Topshop is considered H&M's main competitor. *Industria de Diseño Textil (Inditex)* is a Spanish

company specializing in disposable chic fashions that sell on a global scale, with some 4,430 shops in 70-plus countries, under eight different banners including Zara (which is H&M's most relevant competitor). *Gap* operates about 3,150 stores worldwide, built its iconic casual brand on basics for men, women, and children, but over the years has expanded through the urban chic chain Banana Republic and ailing budgeteer Old Navy.

All of H&M's competitors have e-commerce online retail shops. If H&M hopes to continue to prevail as a contender in the fast fashion industry, they will need to strategically enter into the e-/m-commerce arenas.

Statement of Problem

A problem identified through my research on H&M is their lack of brand positioning in the United States fast fashion industry. While H&M has found considerable success in the international marketplace, the perception of brand equity (in terms of quality and brand value) in the US market is not quite as established. Though a major focus of the organization is to provide fashion to conscious customers, not many of their own established consumers are aware of this positioning. I myself have been an H&M consumer for many years and have only just now learned about their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts in staying at the forefront of sustainability in the industry. What this says to me is that their current target market and advertising efforts are not effectively relaying their corporate objectives of demonstrating that green fashion and designs do not need to undermine trends. Perhaps the public in today's economy does have more increasing demands for corporate conscience, but it's apparent to me that there is a communications channel disconnect portraying their sustainable approach as a corporate strength towards driving consumer loyalty, employee commitment, and better business performance.

There is also a significant disconnect in relaying this information due to the fact that H&M currently does not have an e-commerce website set up in the United States. There is a lot of valuable corporate responsibility and brand differentiating information that would be useful to consumers on their current website, but because they do not offer online shopping in the US, there is nothing driving consumers (current or potential) to the website to discover all of this. Aaker (1996) defines brand identity as a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organizations members. He indicates that brand identity should help establish a relationship between the brand and the customer by generating a value proposition involving functional, emotional or self-expressive benefits. If the organization were to open an online shopping e-commerce site, they would no longer have to rely solely on in-store purchases, thus increasing its demographic reach within the US and generating greater profits for H&M presently and into the future.

The target customers of H&M belong to the group of fashionable and trendy consumers who see shopping as a social activity providing pleasure in their daily life. In order to drive more business to the website

(which is a vault of worthwhile information available to the target market), the organization must create more attempts in providing online communities to promote consumer engagement and user-generated content. This will foster a sense of trust and authenticity among new and existing H&M patrons. Customers will feel like they have more say in what they are purchasing, which will go a long way in extending H&M's reputation and improving future product offerings. Advertisements in-store and online strategically developed using social media can help promote bimonthly giveaways in which social media visitors who post comments, photos and feedback regularly would be entered to win H&M products. Incentives such as exclusive discounts and coupon codes also could be offered to fans to invite their friends to sign-up for e-newsletters or follow the company on all of their social networking sites. A regularly updated social media feed will keep content fresh and give consumers a reason to frequent the website and keep the brand at the forefront of their minds. It can function as a way to introduce consumers to new products and to reinforce purchasing decisions. Incorporating the company's tag line, "fashion and quality at the best price," onto all social media networks, blogs, and website homepages will create a more recognizable brand image and give consumers a clear picture of the company's reputation and values.

Secondary Market Research on the Shopping Apparel Industry

There are certain consumer shopping lifestyle trends that serve as a starting point for identifying new approaches for existing brands and as devices for mind stretching. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) households spent, on average, \$1,700 (nominal dollars) on apparel, footwear, and related products and services 3.5 percent of average annual expenditures in 2010. Since 1985, as a percentage of total apparel expenditures, households spent more, on average, on apparel designed for women aged 16 and over than any other apparel product or service.

The Consumer Price Index for all items has risen at a much steeper rate than the indexes for apparel and shoes since 1978. Prices for apparel rose 62 percent from 1978 to 1998, declined somewhat through 2005, and have been fairly steady in recent years. Prices for footwear followed a similar pattern as apparel from 1978 to 2004, and footwear prices have increased somewhat more rapidly since 2004. Consumer prices for men's and boys' apparel rose at somewhat faster rate than prices for women's and girls' apparel from 1978 to 1998. Prices for both categories declined somewhat through 2007 before leveling off in recent years. Prices for men's and women's footwear followed similar patterns as prices for apparel. These statistics beg the question on if apparel shopping is currently still on the rise within the current state of the economy.

According to Market Force Information, consumers are continuing to shop in 2013 and are more prone to trying more shopping retailers for the first time, particularly retailers offering lower price point merchandise. According to their nationwide survey, 39 percent of consumers reported trying a new fashion retailer over the past 90 days – a 22% gain from 2011, and a 179% increase from 2010 when just 14% of consumers said they'd

tried a new retailer. H&M was the retailer that consumers reported visiting for the first time most often, followed by Kohl's, Macy's, Abercrombie & Fitch and Forever 21. Out of the top-ranking retailers in the study, H&M did the best job of attracting new customers for the second time in a row. The Swedish retailer received the highest ranking when the survey votes were indexed to account for number of locations per chain. The survey also revealed that consumers were most likely to try a new retailer when shopping for casual clothing (46%), business attire (17%), eveningwear (12%), athletic wear (9%) and outdoors apparel (8%). As the research indicates, good deals are primarily responsible for getting people into the doors of a fashion retailer for the first time. The Market Force study found that a sale, discount or promo was the impetus for nearly one in five who tried a new retailer (19%, up from 11% in 2011). But recommendations from family and friends – which was the top influencer in the 2011 study – ranked a close second with 17 percent. 14 percent reported stopping on impulse.

The proceeding research details the shopping apparel lifestyle consumer survey/questionnaire that I administered online to 10 participants. The results of this market research will enable H&M to make informal decisions, react to changes in the market place (e.g. legislation or technological advances) and confirm or disprove any assumptions.

Quantitative Research Logistics

Research plan **objectives** were focused on asking specific questions about purchase intent relating to quality, value, and fashion propositions in attempts to provide insight to how people feel about apparel shopping lifestyle on a daily basis. The online survey questionnaire was developed to elicit responses about fashion interest, knowledge ability, and fashion awareness. Other questions focused on shopping behavior of participants regarding their frequency of shopping for apparel and/or money spent shopping for apparel. This was developed so that participants could rate each statement to the extent that it applied to their beliefs about their shopping lifestyle.

The **participants** targeted for this survey are young-minded, fashion-forward individuals that are current H&M apparel consumers. A majority of the solicited participants are friends of mine on Facebook however their identities and responses are anonymous (even to me). They were identified based upon their social status in liking/following the H&M Facebook fan page and were further filtered based upon the criteria of being 18-34 years old (this age range represents H&M's current target market segmentation). After these individuals were identified, I emailed them a request to partake in the voluntary survey to gauge their attitudes on apparel shopping.

H&M has a concentrated marketing campaign aimed at younger audiences who are fashion forward. This ideal target customer is young, educated, or aspiring to some sort of stability in their life. They value fashion, quality and stylish merchandise. This customer wants all the attributes that a fashionable life would

posses; yet do not wish to pay the high prices associated with such a lifestyle. Typically this customer would be difficult to reach, however the company uses a marketing strategy harnessing components relating to what the market was lacking and fortified its offerings based on this gap. At the time, the market lacked a strong product offering that catered to lower-income individuals who desired the same goods as those with accommodating salaries. The products offered by H&M range from tastefully classic to extremely trendy and styles expire by the end of a month's lapse. With its in-house design teams, numerous looks are designed and manufactured over the course of a season and then placed in stores which is how the company has been able to keep designs current and prices low, thus satisfying the penny pinching and stylish target customer.

The web-based survey **procedure** asked for 10 volunteers to take my online questionnaire through KwikSurveys.com detailing their ideology about how they as consumers typically shop for fashion apparel garments. They were asked to indicate how important each of the attributes were, relating to their decisions to purchase clothing. To avoid moderator bias I decided against including specific information about Instagram or social media networks in order to fully grasp standard fashion consumption metrics to be used as a basis for this study. H&M currently has a brand-customer relationship entailing a mutual understanding of what to expect from one another; the brand provides fashionable items at reasonable prices and the customers continue to purchase garments and accessories on a regular basis.

A study by online retailer Price Grabber (2013) released a fashion trends survey that tracked shopping and spending trends collected from more than 3,000 American online consumers. Surprisingly, more than 80 percent of shoppers said they still shop in brick & mortar stores and 57 percent said they also shop online via a computer. What this tells me for market research purposes is that conducting a basic questionnaire on consumer shopping particularly in-stores is extremely beneficial to gauge the current state of the market in order to formulate hypotheses and conclusions in support of my social media trend analyses. What I am hoping to further measure through this questionnaire is a better understanding of consumer's preference for shopping in stores. While consumers are interested in being fashionable and staying current with new trends, they are still budget conscience when it comes to purchasing new clothing and accessories. The survey data could be indicative of 'show-rooming,' where a shopper browses in-stores and then shops online to find the lowest price.

The online survey **questionnaire** was developed to elicit responses about fashion interest, knowledge ability, and fashion awareness. Other questions focused on shopping behavior of participants regarding their frequency of shopping for apparel and/or money spent shopping for apparel. This was developed so that participants could rate each statement to the extent that it applied to their beliefs about their shopping lifestyle. The entire web-based questionnaire can be found within the appendix, however as a frame of reference leading into the next section on results, respondents were asked to specify their level of agreement or disagreement on a

symmetric agree-disagree scale for a series of statements. This range captures the intensity of their feelings for the given **21 survey items**:

1. It is important for me to be a fashion leader.
2. I prefer the tailored look in my clothing.
3. I always buy at least one outfit of the latest fashion.
4. I never read fashion magazines or pay attention to fashion trends.
5. I spend a lot of money on clothes and accessories.
6. Clothes are one of the most important ways I have of expressing my individuality.
7. It's important to be well dressed.
8. The quality of the merchandise I buy is more important than its fashion appeal.
9. I spend a lot of time on fashion-related activities.
10. It's just not worth the money to be well dressed all the time.
11. If you have a few good clothes you can get by in most situations.
12. I prefer to buy designer labels rather than store-branded merchandise.
13. If you want to get ahead you have to dress the part.
14. I usually get bored with clothes if I keep them too long.
15. I like my clothes to be practical.
16. I avoid high fashion clothing because it goes out of style too quickly.
17. My clothing selections are made with an eye toward the future.
18. My apparel selections are strongly influenced by clothing worn by people I admire.
19. I am aware of fashion trends and want to be one of the first to try them.
20. I'd spend my money on clothes before I'd spend it on most other things.
21. I am confident in my ability to recognize fashion trends.

Quantitative Research Results

Results from the questionnaire produced interesting findings based upon analysis of common themes and relevancy to my hypothesis. Unfortunately I was limited in the amount of analytical tools as the free/basic version of KwikSurvey.com only provides very basic analysis of findings. The results for each item are as follows on the basis of 10 participant's responses involving scales of "strongly agree" and "agree":

1. 50% agree it is important for them to be a fashion leader.
2. 60% prefer the tailored look in their clothing.
3. 80% always buy at least one outfit of the latest fashion.
4. 30% never read fashion magazines or pay attention to fashion trends.
5. 40% agree that they spend a lot of money on clothes and accessories.

6. 70% agree clothes are one of the most important ways they have of expressing their individuality.
7. 90% agree it is important to be well dressed.
8. 50% say that quality of the merchandise they buy is more important than its fashion appeal.
9. 40% say they spend a lot of time on fashion-related activities.
10. 30% state it's just not worth the money to be well dressed all the time.
11. 40% agree if you have a few good clothes you can get by in most situations.
12. 20% prefer to buy designer labels rather than store-branded merchandise.
13. 60% agree that if you want to get ahead you have to dress the part.
14. 70% agree that they usually get bored with clothes if they keep them too long.
15. 90% agree that they like their clothes to be practical.
16. 20% avoid high fashion clothing because it goes out of style too quickly.
17. 50% make clothing selections with an eye toward the future.
18. 80% agree that their apparel selections are strongly influenced by clothing worn by people they admire.
19. 20% state they are aware of fashion trends and want to be the first to try them.
20. 40% spend their money on clothes before spending on most other things.
21. 60% say they are confident in their ability to recognize fashion trends.

Questions 3, 8, 9, and 18 had respondent rates that align with the situational analysis of consumers for my research project. The following are tabular representations of the survey data sets used to organize and summarize the data. Specifically, these are lists of the quantitative values that a variable takes in a data set and the associated number of times each value occurs. Frequency distributions are the basic building blocks of statistical analytical methods and are usually the first step in analyzing survey data. This data helps me as a researcher to organize and summarize the survey data in a tabular format, interpret the data, and detect outliers (extreme values) in the survey data set if relevant.

Figure 1. Quantitative Frequency Distributions

| Question 3 | Count | Percentage |
|------------------------|-------|------------|
| Strongly Agree..... | 5 | 50% |
| Agree..... | 3 | 30% |
| Neutral..... | 0 | 0% |
| Disagree..... | 1 | 10% |
| Strongly Disagree..... | 1 | 10% |
| Total | 10 | 100% |

| Question 8 | Count | Percentage |
|------------|-------|------------|
|------------|-------|------------|

| | | |
|------------------------|----|------|
| Strongly Agree..... | 3 | 30% |
| Agree..... | 4 | 40% |
| Neutral..... | 2 | 20% |
| Disagree..... | 0 | 0% |
| Strongly Disagree..... | 1 | 10% |
| Total | 10 | 100% |

| Question 9 | Count | Percentage |
|------------------------|-------|------------|
| Strongly Agree..... | 5 | 50% |
| Agree..... | 4 | 40% |
| Neutral..... | 1 | 10% |
| Disagree..... | 0 | 0% |
| Strongly Disagree..... | 0 | 0% |
| Total | 10 | 100% |

| Question 18 | Count | Percentage |
|------------------------|-------|------------|
| Strongly Agree..... | 6 | 60% |
| Agree..... | 2 | 20% |
| Neutral..... | 0 | 0% |
| Disagree..... | 1 | 10% |
| Strongly Disagree..... | 1 | 10% |
| Total | 10 | 100% |

The statistical analysis shows that for question 3, 8 respondents (80%) either "strongly agree" or "agree" that they buy at least one outfit of the latest fashion. Results from question 8 indicate that 7 respondents (70%) either "strongly agree" or "agree" that clothes are one of the most important ways they have of expressing their individuality. Results from question 9 indicate 9 (90%) respondents either "strongly agree" or "agree" that it is important to be well dressed. Finally, question 18 (which is the most important in relation to my specific market research study) shows that 8 (80%) respondents either "strongly agree" or "agree" that their apparel selections are strongly influenced by clothing worn by people they admire which correlates with insight from my focus group revealing the psychological role that social media plays in influencing consumer purchase intent and behavior. 71% of respondents in my focus group agreed they are more likely to accept a brand if portrayed within their social network by an individual or individuals that they trust (followers or people they follow). There was also an underlying theme relating to when others within their social network provide their "stamp of approval", users are more willing to adapt trends for themselves and/or purchase garments based on this visual acceptance.

Krupnik (2013) points out a recent survey showing 59% of American women admit to seeking fashionable, trendy items when shopping. Moreover, 55% of American female shoppers admit that they've bought clothes they didn't even like purely because they were trendy. Of those shoppers, 67% say they never

actually wore the items in question. This secondary market research data aligns with survey results from question 14 where 70% of respondents agreed that they usually get bored with their clothes if they keep them for too long (see Figure D in appendix for pie chart). This is valuable insight into the perception that consumers currently have about shopping and apparel in their lifestyle and the need to continue to shop regardless of the economic conditions. The relationship between consumers' perceptions of certain apparel items and human behavior can be explained through characteristics of society. Society largely impacts the way in which consumers behave towards evaluating, purchasing, and using products. Goodwin et al (1997) indicate that America is characterized as a consumer society where individual identity is related to consumption, so that consumers' judgments of themselves and others are related to the lifestyle that is created by consumption activities. Clothing is one of the most noticeable aspects of adolescent culture and is an important means by which individual adolescents express their identities. Societal influence is apparent in its influence on the clothing items that people choose to wear and can be an important means to gain social appreciation and develop positive self-esteem.

Research by Luczak and Younkin (2012) supports that social interactions (specifically through social media networks) provides individuals with knowledge "acquired through directly reading and processing information about a social cause or acquired through the membership of on-line communities". People learn what is important through the "association to a particular group that they participate in". The more that individuals participate in a group, the greater the likelihood that they will adopt those beliefs for themselves. Online social interactions help engage consumers and increase their participation in groups. These associations can increase the likelihood that consumers' values will reflect those of the groups' because values influence consumers' attitudes and attitudes in turn influence consumer behavior.

Secondary Market Research on Social Media

Forbes online (2011) is one of many credible sources that have already predicted that online sales would boom in a number of ways ever since induction of the option for consumers. The number of offerings extends to mobile shopping, online retails, e-commerce, m-commerce, mobile shopping, shopping through social media networks, etc. "Retailers of all types are expanding product offerings, adding in-store pickup, free shipping and experimenting with social media. It's getting harder to tell pure play Internet retailers from the bricks and mortar shops with online portals, and all of them are reinventing how we'll shop online". Some of the top trends to watch from 2011 are happening in today's shopping market including in-store pickup, pick up depots for smaller retailers without a vast network of stores for goods ordered online, using mobile applications for price comparisons and sending out coupons.

According to figures calculated by the U.S. Department of Commerce (2011), there was even an increase of 17.2 percent for Q2 2011 over Q2 2010, with total retail sales — stores and online — for Q2 2011

increasing 8.4 percent over the same quarter in 2010. Ecommerce accounted for 4.2 percent of total retail sales in Q2 of 2011. Even more surprising in this so called 'recession', the total number of individuals making purchases on the Internet rose from 147 million in Q2 2010 to 170 million in Q2 2011, an increase of 16 percent. The number of transactions increased from 440 million to 539 million in the same time period, an increase of 22 percent. Taking this a step further to lead into the emergence of social media marketing, The capability for consumers to use mobile phones to research and shop online while in brick-and-mortar stores creates one more advantage for Internet sellers with the right pricing and products. This allows businesses to compete with retailers even when the customer is in their stores.

To put all of this data into context, research by comScore (2011) indicates a number of variables increasing online shopping including price, convenience, free shipping, daily specials, and mobile benefits. The study shows that consumers are comparison shopping to find the best deals online, have the ability to shop at any time, have more e-commerce vendors to choose from offering free shipping, and with new online shopping models such as daily deals and flash sales, excitement and impulse purchases are more prevalent. There are even mobile benefits allowing consumers the ability to comparison shop, research products, and purchase from their smartphones thus giving e-commerce vendors another advantage over brick-and-mortar sellers. Which goes to show that even in bad economic times, people will still shop when they are bored. Further, over 35 percent of shoppers regularly look for deals online with high income consumers (those earning over \$100,000 a year) more likely to comparison shop online with their smartphones while being present in retail stores, thus abandoning in-store purchases for the e-commerce/m-commerce experience all together!

So with all of this media consumption data readily available it seemed only natural to incorporate social media networks into building brand equity for H&M. According to Smith (2012), key contributor of Chapter 15 (p. 296) in *Leading Edge Marketing Research*, it's not that marketers have ignored the context of social influences in the past, what has changed in "knowledge of the primary importance of social influences... Trends research looking for new fads has flagged social networking as a change in the marketplace" as the study of marketplace regularities that "point to the ways in which social networks control and accelerate the spread of new outcomes". This is the perfect starting point for my social media marketing research as it provides the essence in which social media influencers not only help shape public opinion and consumer purchasing behaviors, consumers actually enjoy using the networks which in turn gives them the type of user-engagement linking to positive associations with brands (thus improving brand equity).

New Lightspeed (2012) research shows social apps such as Facebook are used most frequently by smartphone owners with almost three quarters (73%) accessing social networks through apps daily and a further 19 percent at least weekly. A study by Witfong (2013) indicates one-third (34%) of those who follow a brand's social networking page say fun or interesting posts make them feel more connected to that brand. The younger

the demographic, the more effective these kind of posts are as connection boosters: 39 percent of those under 35 claim a stronger connection is forged when a brand's posts interest them, 31 percent of those between 35 and 49 and 28 percent of those between 50 and 64. While other brand actions – e.g., discounts, free offers, contests – have a stronger effect on brand and consumer connections, injecting interesting and funny posts can help keep interested consumers coming back to social networking sites for the most recent updates. That is why it makes sense for marketers to be hands-on when it comes to social networking content.

According to Nielson's (2012) State of the Media report, mobile phones are one of the key factors in driving social media. Their report indicates "more people are using smartphones and tablets to access social media. The personal computer is still at the center of the social networking experience, but consumers are increasingly looking to other devices to connect on social media. Time spent on mobile apps and the mobile web account for 63 percent of the year-over-year growth in overall time spent using social media". This has tremendous implications for companies who wish to reach their targeted consumers and even further infiltrate the consumer market. Nielson continues adding that "46 percent of social media users say they use their smartphone to access social media; 16 percent say they connect to social media using a tablet. With more connectivity, consumers have more freedom to use social media wherever and whenever they want". While the social media platform Instagram is now available online through its website Instagram.com, the application originated as a mobile app and continues to function strongly via smartphones.

The use of social media networks to reach targeted consumers presents a variety of opportunities for engagement that go beyond companies' spending money with brand marketers. Nielson notes that while "roughly one-third of social media users find ads on social networking sites more annoying than other types of Internet advertisements, research suggest that there are opportunities for marketers to engage with consumers via social media". User-generated content from social media opinion leaders that have substantial fan followings are inadvertently advertising to their fans simply through their "outfit of the day" posts and daily updates describing brand garments incorporated into their wardrobe to create overall looks. As such, when followers on Instagram "like" the imagery shown on their feed, they are exposed to the textual content as well which most likely includes phrases such as "blazer: H&M – belt: H&M – bow tie: H&M" indicating the description of where fans can find such stylish garments for incorporation into their own wardrobes. "More than a quarter of social media users say they are more likely to pay attention to an ad shared by one of their social connections", but my research shows how this form of user-generated content via photo sharing influences the subconscious thus providing links towards driving changes in consumer spending behavior. The opportunities for companies to harness this potential is substantial given statistics showing that app usage now accounts for more than one third of social networking time across both PCs and mobile devices. "Compared to last year, consumers increased their social app time by 76 percent, spending more than seven times more minutes on apps

than the mobile web. While the social media audience via PC declined a slight five percent from a year ago, time spent increased 24 percent over the same period, suggesting that users are more deeply engaged” (Nielson, 2012).

Followers of social media users on the popular photo-sharing app Instagram are exposed to various forms of indirect advertising created by those they follow. Certain opinion leaders on the social network have the ability to expose followers to new behaviors and lifestyles, influence attitudes and self-concept, and create pressures for conformity that affect product and brand choices (Kotler & Keller, 2012). These individuals consistently offer formal and informal advice and information about products and product categories (i.e. brand choices) simply through photo sharing. Because followers of these opinion leaders have accepted them into their social circle(s), they are more prone to adopting these beliefs for themselves. Online social interactions help engage consumers and increase their participation in groups. These associations can increase the likelihood that consumers' values will reflect those of the groups' because values influence consumers' attitudes and attitudes in turn influence consumer behavior. This should be a key identifier for marketers as it highlights a methodology for harnessing the power of friend recommendations when it comes to sharing experiences and content. Research by Nielson (2012) titled *Ads With Friends* indicates “on average, social ads generate a 55% greater lift in ad recall than non-social ads”, and as previously stated a large majority of U.S. consumers have agreed that they most trust recommendations from personal acquaintances, while nearly half of all consumers trust general consumer opinions posted online.

So what does this mean for H&M for increasing their brand equity? Well, their advertisers may consider leveraging ads with social content as a means to better utilize the power of the network of consumers engaged with their brands. They may not have to pay a lofty marketing fee to promote this type of ad campaign however, due to the current potency of social media users inadvertently generating marketing content for them through their own photo-blogging and textual content. This research should serve as justification for marketers' efforts to create more social connection points with their consumers, as their brands will be better positioned to reach a larger group of prospects. On another level, using user-generated media content also helps intended audiences organically discover and share the content. There is already a deep circle of trust embedded within social media networks, so much so that consumers are more likely to purchase products based upon their exposure from friends.

An Inside Look At Instagram

I can personally identify with how my personal uses of the social media application influences my buying habits, attitudes on fashion, and ways that I view my lifestyle. Research by Luczak and Younkin (2012) indicates that consumers within the ‘Net Generation’ (those born in 1979 through 1997) spend “approximately 4 hours per day” engaging in daily media viewed through computers and their mobile devices. I can attest to

using the social media application multiple times throughout the day to snap, edit, and share photos directly from my smartphone to expand the reach of my personal brand. The photo editing and sharing platform users (also called Instagrammers) are in high demand by major businesses and brands. According to a digital strategist in *Adweek*, using Instagram to advertise is a smart tactic for “visually driven brands in industries like fashion and travel, especially for those already dabbling in influencer marketing” (Beltrone, 2012). Popular Instagrammers that gain a large fan following can be seen as opinion leaders for social reference groups.

On Instagram, depending on the amount of an Instagrammer's fan following along with their provision of value-added content, they have the ability to directly or indirectly affect the social consciousness of other users. Ever since I began using Instagram in the latter part of 2012, I have established a personal brand chronicled by my “fit of the day” style details and a fashion blog comprised of daily photos of designer menswear collections that inspire me. As of today, I have over two thousand fan followers worldwide and I view the application as the perfect platform for identifying new fashion-forward trends that appeal to my tastes. Instagrammers and brand marketers use hashtags (e.g. #lookbook, #fashionblogger, and #mensstyle) as a means to generate interest about new photos shared. By simply adding hashtags to photos within the caption, those photos are directly linked to pages with the same hashtag (making it that much easier for members to share their life or products in photos). The success of my personal brand and blog is predicated upon my follower's continued interest on the ways my commentary, style, thoughts, and daily inspirations are portrayed through the pictures shared. The following graphic is an interesting depiction of Instagram users, the ones that you'll be reading about very shortly. If you are unfamiliar with the social network, here are some statistics about users that you'll find useful for framing the characters in the focus group.

Qualitative Research Logistics

Research plan **objectives** were focused on asking specific questions about purchase intent relating to quality, value, and fashion propositions in attempts to provide insight to how people feel about social media's role in their everyday lives. The questions were developed in order to measure the level of influence that Instagram in particular had on the individuals in reference to their brand perceptions, perception of self and others, and more or less revealing the number of ways that social media already plays significant parts in influencing underlying subconscious and consumer purchasing behaviors. I ultimately designed this focus group predicated upon the notion of indirect use of social media campaigns to influence user's subconscious mindset on purchases and brand recognition (also driving brand equity). As a social media user of the Instagram network, I unfortunately do feel that I may have had some moderator bias present in my intentions of the key themes that would be uncovered. This focus group revealed a wide variety of insights through contextual dialogue of these social media users who also partake in the creation of indirect user-generated media. The transcript and following proceedings paint a strong picture of Instagram user's perception of self and others

within their social media networks. My end goal was in hopes of generating measurable data that there is a significant measure between social media exposure and brand equity from consumer perspectives.

Initially it was my intent to have each participant have a bit of pre-interview homework to help drive more meaningful discussions during the live focus group (**methodology**), however as I soon discovered, because these participants are avid social media users who partake in social media sharing via the photo-blogging medium known as Instagram as well as other social networks (e.g. Pinterest), no amount of homework was needed to help engage the participants. The **setting** of the focus group was within a moderate sized conference room at my workplace that I had scheduled and arranged an hour-long focus group session with the 7 participants (located at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Miramar). Before beginning the focus group discussion, I passed out a "consent to participate in focus group form" which explained the background and intent of the focus group, as well as notifying the participant that the session would be recorded through my smartphone audio recorder, followed by an interactive discussion where participants were asked about 10 survey questionnaire qualitative data points as they relate to the study. Questions were asked to probe beyond superficial thoughts and ideas and create deeper discussions or brainstorming of how social media networks directly and indirectly influence participants. Answers were **tape recorded** so that I could revisit the session at a later date to transcribe my findings. In order **to avoid moderator bias**, open-ended questions were asked to not betray any preference or suggest desired responses, which helped to reduce the possibility of bias significantly. The questions were developed to be direct and not leading in order to avoid researcher or moderator bias. The questions were also simple, easy to understand and in the interviewees language style. The conversations were analyzed to pick out recurring words or themes. The tape recording of the focus group session is transcribed in full in the appendix.

There were 7 focus group **participants** (4 females and 3 males) between the ages of 22-32. All are H&M identified fans on Facebook and also happen to be my co-workers. Specific interest/reach was for consumers within luxury and mainstream target markets as identified through surveying Instagram users who have used hashtags such as #dailystylebattle, #outfitoftheday, #guyswithstyle, #gq, #fashiondiaries, #fashionblogger, #whatiworetoday, #styleblog, etc. These participants exemplified social media consumers who may or may not have understood the importance of social media's role in shaping their own and other's social consciousness through fashion. This focus group incorporated different perspectives from fashionable men and women within market segments similar in nature to those that H&M commonly targets. The H&M consumer-base is comprised of individuals who understand that that various collections can embody all of the elegance and refinement of luxury, while remaining faithful to offering affordable prices. They understand the ideology that price and value must be viewed as distinct elements and that a set of clothes does not have to be highly priced in order to be fashionable and designed with quality.

Participants were asked the following **10 survey questions**:

1. What is your favorite low-cost brand?
2. What characteristics do you associate with other people that have good personal style?
3. Do you feel more influenced to purchase clothing items when they are seen on stylish social media users within your network or more by professional brand advertisements seen in magazines? Please explain.
4. "Fast Fashion" is used to describe clothing collections that are based on the most recent fashion trends, are quickly designed and manufactured, and are affordable to mainstream consumers. What are some of the perceived pros and cons of purchasing this type of clothing?
5. How do daily social interactions on Instagram influence your attitudes on fashion?
6. How do you feel your consumer purchasing behavior has changed as your amount of Instagram followers has risen (while obtaining numerous "likes" and comments on your personal style)?
7. When Instagrammers you follow regularly use certain brands in their personal style posts, how does this shape your perception of the brands?
8. In light of the current economy, how have your spending habits changed relating to brand selections? If your spending habits have not changed, why not?
9. How has your interaction on the Instagram social network impacted your short and long-term consumer purchasing behaviors?
10. What are your feelings on the possibility that social media communities are indirectly influencing your subconscious and value perceptions? If this is the first time you have heard about this, please provide your reaction(s).

Qualitative Research Results

This focus group brought valuable insights into how active participation in the social media network is impacting consumer-purchasing behavior and is influencing ideas on self-concept and identity. A summary of the findings is as follows in chronological order based on the question asked.

1. 42% of respondents identified H&M as being their most favorite low-cost brand offering.
2. When a garment fits well, it is an indication that the individual wearing the garment has good personal style. On the other hand, individuals who wear poorly fitting clothing are perceived as having a lack of good taste. 3 out of 7 (42%) respondents identified this characteristic as an overwhelming theme of good personal style.
3. 4 out of 7 (57%) respondents identified more with social media networks having an influence on their purchasing intent. 66% (2 out of 3) of remaining respondents identified with neither of the

choices or otherwise stated - 28% of respondents did not identify with social media or magazine/print advertisements as a means of influencing their purchases.

4. 5 out of 7 (71% of respondents) identified that low price points for fast fashion apparel were a significant benefit of this type of apparel and merchandise with common themes including affordability and allowability for everyday people to try new styles. 3 out of 7 respondents (42%) agreed that quality is a point of concern when considering buying fast fashion apparel items.
5. 5 out of 7 (71% of respondents) agreed in some form or another that seeing fashionable garments on Instagram inspires their own sense of style including providing an awareness of what is trending and how to wear and incorporate these items into their wardrobe. 4 out of 7 (57%) respondents provided responses implying that exposure to this type of media impacts their intent to purchase as consumers in order to try new trends and fashionable items.
6. 3 out of 7 respondents (42%) agreed that exposure to social media networks in some form or another has increased their spending habits in relation to purchasing new clothing. 4 out of 7 (57%) respondents provided responses that provide another ideology for further research (that of boost of self-image or self-worth). These respondents have provided responses or examples relating to how their use of such social media networks has increased their own exposure in the world (perception of fans and desire to improve/increase wardrobes or skills to continue receiving praise from followers).
7. 5 out of 7 (71% of respondents) agreed in some form or another that they are more likely to accept a brand if portrayed within their social network by an individual or individuals that they trust (followers or people they follow). One participant even felt compelled to investigate her own use of social media based on the perceived benefits offered from other respondents. The underlying theme is that when others within the network provide their "stamp of approval", users are more willing to adapt trends for themselves and/or purchase garments based on this visual acceptance via their online communities.
8. Surprisingly 4 out of 7 (57%) respondents agreed that they have not changed their spending habits in light of the current recession and state of the economy. 2 out of 7 (28%) suggested that they actually shop more and only 1 respondent stated that their shopping/spending habits has decreased with a downgrade to non-brand apparel. Another respondent who was apart of the initial 57% indicated a change in perception in how value is measured: "Not that I sacrifice quality for quantity, but I only tend to buy items that I truly like and can see myself using a lot versus the experimental, trendy items, which I may end up not using".
9. 4 out of 7 (57%) respondents agreed that their perception of self-worth/self-capability was impacted via use of the social media network with the provision of examples detailing their change in

perception on consumer value propositions (e.g. quality), being impacted by the attempt to continue to inspire their fan following through individuality and personal style (e.g. wearing what you want - not sacrificing individuality to fit the societal mold), and awareness of current trends and new brands.

10. 5 out of 7 (71% of respondents) were aware of the affects of social media in their lives and on their purchasing behavior. 2 out of the 5 represented deeper views on social media's role in changing value propositions as individuals in society stating examples such as: "I honestly feel that social media networks like Instagram have encouraged me to figure out who I am and what I work best with in terms of clothing options. It's encouraged me to thrive in life rather than just sit by. These communities have awakened me"; another provided an even deeper analysis that may require further research: "This is very weird to say I guess, but I these online communities are doing a lot more than influencing consumer buying decisions, as you mentioned it can also influence your value perceptions and bring about feelings of low self-worth and possibly depression because these photos are a constant reminder of what everyone else has (that you don't have). In the same regard, social media networks like Instagram is so cool because you can express your individuality through showing off how you arrange your wardrobe or how you put together your outfits through your personal style. You get to show off to people all over the world the things that you love doing, whether it's food, fashion, photography, hair, makeup etc. It does help in showing how to value people that are so dedicated and passionate about what they like that they are showing it off to the world. I give these people a lot of credit because not everyone can do what they do in showcasing things that they love".

What these findings and trends reiterates to me is that social media allows an outlet for identity exploration to occur through peer feedback and strengthening of relationships. And because these social media networks provide an easy way to receive feedback and communicate with peers, user attitude of themselves can alternatively be affected through daily interactions. Obtaining comments from other users on pictures and wall postings improves images that individuals have of themselves. It is a way of receiving attention from a broad spectrum of people in an indirect way. A timely response elicits gratification and good feelings of self and satisfaction of personal and interpersonal desires. Emerging adults within the H&M target market segment use social media communication methods as they make lifelong decisions for themselves (Arnett, 2000). Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined social network sites as public web-based services that allow users to develop a personal profile, identify other users ("friends") with whom they have a connection, read and react to postings made by other users on the site, and send and receive messages either privately or publicly.

Social media sites empower users to take an active role in their own socialization process and in constructing their own self-identity (Urista et al., 2009). Due to digital technology, users can show considerable information about themselves and their friends. This self-disclosure is a way for them to open up their own identities of how they want others to perceive them (Pempek et al., 2009). Producing an attractive personal profile for others to admire is a way to improve self-concept. Another study found that young people created a virtual identity in which they fashioned an ideal self so that they would impress others. This method of improving social capital and appearance boosted one's self-concept and self-esteem in both the online and the real world (Urista et al., 2009). Social support from others on social media websites influences how an individual self-discloses (Lui & LaRose, 2008).

Research Validity, Generalization, and Reliability

I would like to start this section of the paper off by stating that I had initially misunderstood the requirements for the weekly market research project, which made me rush the quantitative testing portion of the study. I designed the questionnaire survey on the basis of shopping apparel lifestyle trends but didn't elaborate on the basis of what I truly meant to test during the study on social media's influence on consumer purchase intent. I can't say that the questionnaire that was administered truly made an impact towards what I was hoping to accomplish within this project. Thought I was able to draw meaningful conclusions to the overall study, the questions within the survey were somewhat misguided. However, the findings of the qualitative market research measured what I had intended which was to identify if there is a measurable correlation between exposure to social media campaigns with driving social consumerism and overall purchase intent. Without a doubt, my focus group findings proved this but even elaborated on the psychological depths that further research could evaluate further if more time were dedicated to this qualitative research method. The qualitative research is valid in that it measures what it claims to have been measuring. In terms of statistical validity of the survey results, two of my survey participants were students from our class therefore it wasn't quite the random sample that I had anticipated in relation to respondents.

My research audiences were identified and determined directly from the intended target market of H&M so there is a problem relating to whether the results could be applied to a wider group than those who took part in the study (generalization). If a completely random group of respondents were used for the focus group (those who do not use Instagram or rarely use social media in the manner in which it is being evaluated for this study), the results would not have been similar. These results would not apply to non-social media users representing a completely different larger population than my sample size. On the other hand, results from the web-based questionnaire/survey would have been synonymous with non-social media users therefore could have been generalized.

On a positive note, because reliability is mainly concerned with generating consistent results, if another researcher were to question the same number of people from the sample, the responses would have been similar. This is an indication that my results are good and can therefore represent a wider population of fast fashion apparel shoppers for both sets of research methodologies. I will say that due to the shortened length of the class and time needed to conduct such a quantitative survey to produce reliable results, the number of respondents for the online questionnaire would have to be increased in order to identify if I am dealing with a stable measure. Had I had more time to conduct this quantitative research and more time to properly plan out the research questions being asked in the survey, I would have administered the questionnaire to far more than 10 people in order to gauge the level of reliability of my results. Because my sample was so small, it is hard to tell if I would have had the same results given there were say 100 people.

As stated, my research findings do apply to the audience I am trying to reach because both sets of research (e.g. qualitative and quantitative) were modeled off of H&M's current target audience. This is the same audience that I tried to reach to improve brand equity (i.e. recognition) and build user engagement and loyalty online. H&M provides affordable clothing to the young-minded, fashion-forward individual. The company primarily targets 18- to 34-year-olds, supplying merchandise for both men and women. H&M prides itself on being able to provide clothing and accessories at a reasonable price. Therefore, its consumers tend to be price sensitive. Apparel ranges from casual to dress wear tailored toward a youthful audience. The company is a pioneer of "fast fashion" which is a term used to describe clothing collections which are based on the most recent fashion trends on the catwalk but which are designed and manufactured quickly, are affordable, and are aimed at mainstream consumers. By maintaining efficiency and flexibility throughout its supply chain, H&M is able to respond quickly to changes in fashion trends. By virtue of its fashion capacity of anticipating trends, H&M has achieved instantaneous popularity among consumers. This popularity has enabled the company to grow quite quickly, despite overcrowding in the clothing market and the current degree of sluggishness in consumer spending due to the economy.

Conclusion – Final Thoughts

After having conducted my qualitative and quantitative analyses through a focus group and via a web-based questionnaire survey, I believe that I have uncovered additional valuable insight to the ways that business leaders and marketers can incorporate social media into driving brand awareness, equity, and loyalty online. More importantly, this can be done without spending hundreds of thousands of marketing budgetary funds, commonly spent upon print advertisements and campaigns by utilizing the resources currently available via social networks (e.g. user-generated content). Many popular Instagrammers with large fan followings are already strongly passionate individuals who are directly or indirectly promoting brands that they like and/or trust. This advice trickles down through their photo-blogging updates to their social networks that then

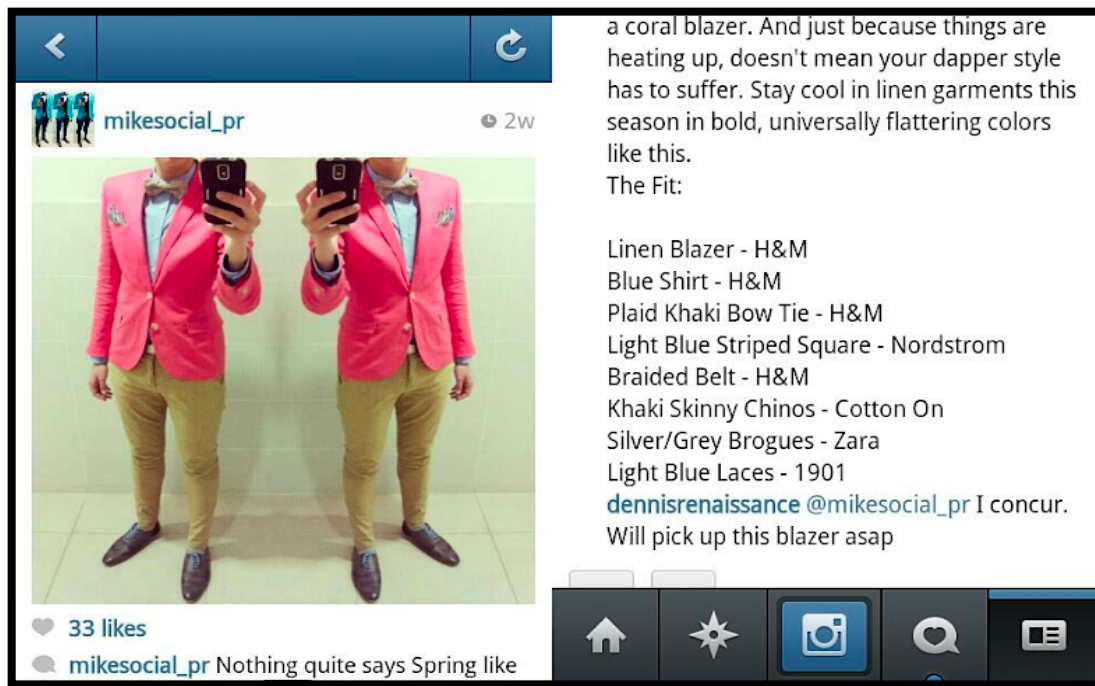
subconsciously form similar opinions and beliefs on brands, products, and upon their own behaviors.

This is an important driver of what I had intended to study in the first place relating to the power of social media networks in influencing consumerism and purchase intentions.

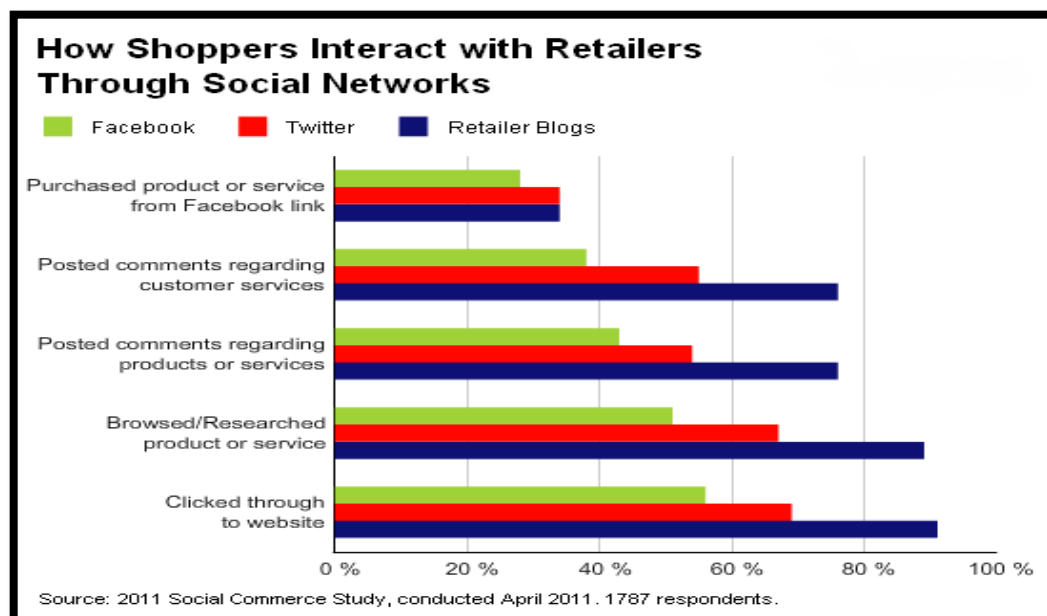
Predisposition to buy a brand is built on the aggregation of positive perceptions built over time by marketing and brand experience. Positive brand experiences will enhance equity and ultimately base sales. Pink et al (2012) in *Leading Edge Marketing Research* (p. 147) discuss how cross media research and data analysis can fill in the gaps for effectiveness and efficiency of a specific campaign by focusing on how the campaign moved brand metrics (e.g. awareness or purchase intent). Explicitly designed to measure the degree to which marketing activities are working at the granular level, I decided to not only collect standard brand metrics but also collect data on media consumption and brand predisposition. I did this by testing a my theory on my own Instagram social network for influencing my followers to go out and purchase garments displayed within my “fit of the day” photo updates. The following post was used to determine whether someone exposed to an ad in a particular medium would impact his or her purchase intent in relation to frequency of seeing informal advertisements for individual looks, incorporation of timing of the purchase relative to the timing of the social media informal advertisement, number of days since the post was uploaded, and decay rate to derive an estimated opportunity for respondents to be exposed to the photo.

On Saturday May 18th, 2013 I posted an Instagram update detailing my latest “Fit of the Day” referencing my newest purchase of a coral linen blazer from H&M. More specifically my blog post indicates, “Nothing quite says spring like a coral blazer. And just because things are heating up, doesn’t mean your dapper style has to suffer. Stay cool in linen garments this season in bold, universally flattering colors like this”, followed by a breakdown of the garments worn and the brands.

The same day, my follower @dennisrenaissance commented on the photo relatively 20 minutes after stating that he was going to go “pick up the blazer ASAP”. The following day (Sunday May 19th, 2013), this Instagrammer (who also has a large Instagram fan following) posted a photo update on his feed wearing the same coral colored H&M linen blazer. The fascinating insight to these events is that neither @dennisrenaissance nor myself are employed by H&M or have been endorsed by the brand to advertise product usage to our followers. I am personally visually sharing garments through my photo-blog that I use (i.e. showing others that I support a brand or that I’m already a customer of the brand) in my daily wardrobe/outfits while contextually providing the details of where to purchase the items via the provision of the specific brands displayed in the photo description. This is an example of “user-generated content” referenced throughout this paper. Using available user-generated content simply by inspiring popular Instagrammers to continue to use the brand in their outfit of the day posting while describing to their followers where to purchase and/or obtain the featured product is one cost-effective and imaginative way to convert likes to purchases.

Figure 2. Saturday May 18th, 2013 Instagram Update

If brands want to connect with shoppers and impact their purchasing decisions, they need to devise strategies to influence the influencers (the popular Instagrammers with large fan followings) by continuously engaging with them. These types of social media campaigns are vital and highly effective in attracting customers and influencing buying decisions, resulting in increased traffic and sales for the brand. Popular Instagrammers are choosing to post either positive or negative reviews about a brand on their photo-blogging platforms or traditional blogs. Smart marketers can monitor these social media conversations and incorporate the feedback into their marketing strategies.

Figure 3. How Shoppers Interact with Retailers Through Social Networks

Social media has revolutionized consumers' purchasing behavior over the years by directly impacting the way they buy and view products and services. The steady growth of social media opens a variety of opportunities for marketers to message and connect with customers.

According to the 2011 Social and Mobile Commerce Consumer Study, 58% of online consumers have "followed" a retailer proactively through Facebook, Twitter or a retailer's blog; almost half (49%) of respondents were keen on keeping a tab on product updates through social media; over 1/3rd follow online retailers for information on contests and shopping events; 35% of shoppers are likely to directly purchase from Facebook, while 32% are willing to make a direct purchase through Twitter; and group-buying sites like Groupon and LivingSocial are being used to purchase non-traditional items.

Several studies show that consumers are sharing opinions on multiple social networking sites and blogs so for marketers, this means consumers have a growing hunger for information, which can easily be converted to actual purchases if there is an understanding of the factors that influence buying behavior most. There are so many different ways to convert 'likes' to purchases in social media by understanding the mind of the consumer. The first way to do this is by monitoring social media sites to research and learn about target customer's age, geographic distribution, what social media channels they use, and if they are high-engaged in social media circles (the influencers), etc. Monitoring tools such as Brand Monitor can help marketers get a clearer insight into consumers' mindset and know what customer types they are targeting.

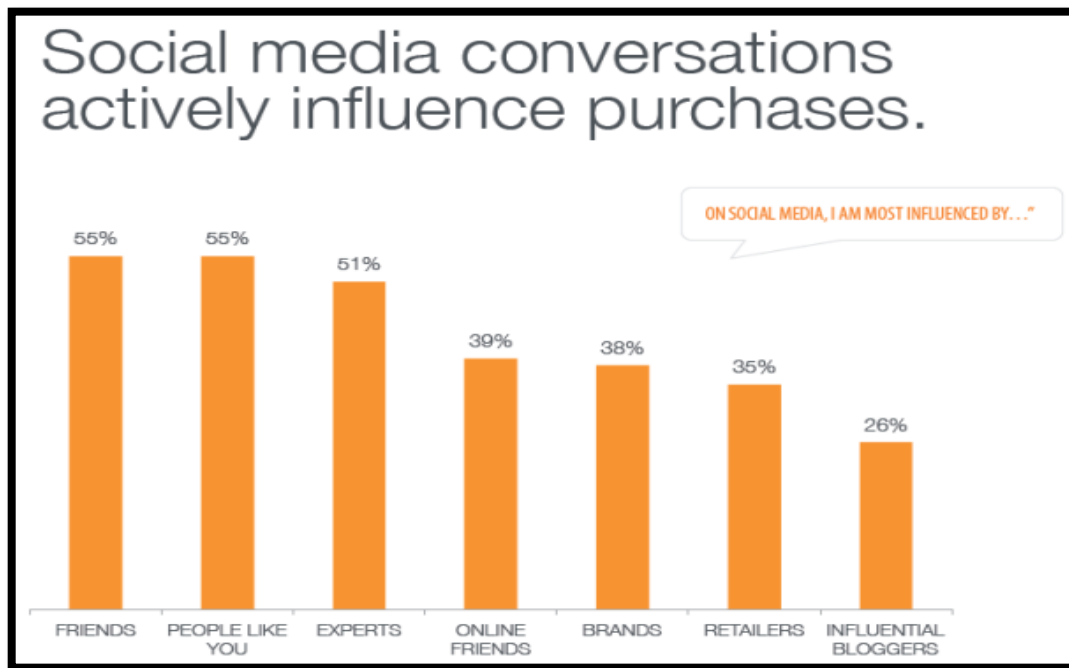
However, because H&M already has a target consumer (the 18-34 demographic of fashion-forward, young-minded individuals, who value high-design yet low-cost/affordable merchandise), there is more power in creative campaigns to encourage ongoing involvement after consumers have been following and connecting with the brand. Social networks have a huge audience that spends a significant amount of time posting reviews and recommendations related to various products and services.

What this means is that besides making personal connections, social networks are places where buying decisions are influenced through group interactions. Trust in recommendations has increased to such an extent that 1/3rd of social media users follow recommendations made by their friends and followers on their social networks before deciding the buy products and services. According to a 2010 study by research firm Chadwick Martin Bailey, 60% of Facebook fans and 79% of Twitter followers are more likely to recommend a brand after becoming a fan or follower, while 51% of Facebook fans and 67% of Twitter followers are more likely to buy the brands they follow or are a fan of.

These statistics indicate that online research is one of the key factors that influence buying behavior for consumers. Because more and more people depend on social media research versus opinions from within stores, marketers can no longer ignore user-generated reviews (e.g. Yelp and comments on feeds within social media platforms). Comments generated by followers and fans have such an impact on people's buying decisions that

its imperative for brands to not only have a social media presence but also actually listen to shoppers to find out what they are saying. Based on the technological advances that have been made over the last 20 years, virtual sharing and the manner in which virtual content is shared reinforce why companies must respond to positive and negative feedback in social media. Companies that are interactive in addressing reviews by the public end up failing because they aren't creating the sense of community (which in essence is what social media and social networking is comprised of).

Figure 4. Social Media Conversations Actively Influence Purchases



Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) highlight a set of theories in the field of media research including “self-presentation” and “self-disclosure” that are the two key elements of social media. The higher the social presence, the greater of an impact the communication partners have on each other's behavior. They also distinguish the facets of ‘self-presentation’ in terms of objectives to influence others to gain rewards and/or create an image that is consistent with one's identity (e.g. perception). In order to obtain these objectives, there is a certain degree of ‘self-disclosure’ that is the “conscious or unconscious revelation of personal information (e.g., thoughts, feelings, likes, dislikes) that are consistent with the image one would like to give”. Self-disclosure is the critical step in the development of close relationships (dependent upon the degree).

So what does this research mean for the impacts of social media and its effects on consumers? In order for companies to really engage their customers via social media and even have a social media presence that is effective, they must participate, share and collaborate with the consumer instead of simply using tactics to advertise and sell. When consumers post negative reviews on products or service on social media platforms, in order to create a sense of community through the perception of self-disclosure, companies must present an

image consistent with their identity in order to continually influence consumers in their favor. While some companies may consider the areas of social media and traditional media (marketing) as two separate platforms, all the customer sees is one's corporate image, so integration of the two platforms is essential! Social media is no different and requires the participation, sharing, responses, and interactivity from the company being represented. Engaging customers in discussions either in the posting of content or in the response to positive/negative content is what will influence the success and effectiveness of the social media efforts.

What H&M needs to keep in mind is that social media shoppers are not always actively social. One in four social media shoppers contribute to a conversation about a brand or product, while the others view these conversations and decide if they want to make a purchase; the group of influencers may be rather small, where as the impact on those influenced is large. Recommendations and product reviews from such influencers play an important part in shopping via social media therefore the smart approach for digital marketers looking to add value to their campaigns is to understand their shoppers, study the impact of online reviews, and design campaigns accordingly. I see this as an opportunity for them to truly interact with their customers on a public platform (instead of traditional website contact forms or emails where questions and responses are received on an individual basis never to be shared with the broader audience). Social media networks provide organizations the opportunity to help shape public perception and opinion.

It's important to note that negative reviews or comments left on social media platforms that are left unaddressed or are addressed in the wrong manner, can ultimately impact the image of the organization and/or the services and products that they are offering. The brand is more determined by what customers and prospects say (e.g. word of mouth, social media, blogs, user review sites, etc.) than by what controlled company communications say (i.e. TV/Radio/Print, products, support services, corporate websites, corporate social media, internet advertising, and retail stores). The perception of consumers of a business can be one of the key determinants to their success and the overall bottom line. I understand that interactivity, engagement, and collaboration from an organization on social media platforms is a crucial means of shaping customer's perception of the business. I also firmly believe that training on ways to counteract negative responses on social media should be apart of core business process training because I'm sure there are many times when poor reviews are received, that company representatives and/or leaders feel attacked and feel the need to "fire-back" to gain the upper hand in hopes of counteracting bad press. From my experience, this almost never works to the company's advantage and often can prompt media frenzies (from arenas outside of that immediate platform in forms of newspaper articles, television coverage, etc.). Perceptions of impropriety or immorality can go a long way towards depleting a company of its top assets (it's consumers).

Research by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) takes this interaction a step further by stating organization respondents must also be interesting, humble, unprofessional, and honest. For the interest quotient, they indicate

that if companies want their customers to engage with them, they need to give them a reason for doing so. They note that the first step is to find out what customers want to hear, what they want to talk about, what they find interesting and then develop and post content that fits those expectations. Being humble means companies cannot expect to know more about the product or service than the customers do. They suggest that being unprofessional includes avoidance of overly professional content offerings (i.e. pricey Facebook presences or professionally written corporate blogs) because social media users are just like corporate professionals and if you're nice to them, they might provide free advice on how to improve or enhance an organization's products or services. Finally, honesty goes a long way, organizations must not try to force their way into or attempt to rectify information when company involvement is not solicited. Business owners cannot expect that other social media participants won't know who stands behind anonymous user accounts; these individuals after all are "the most technologically sophisticated people on the planet".

Final Recommendations

Social networks are a necessary supplement to traditional marketing means. I would recommend that H&M incorporate a **new product strategy**. By adding the tag line "fashion and quality at the best price" onto every major piece of information used and promoted by H&M, the company's presence will increase substantially across the country by increasing their exposure, visibility, and brand recognition. The advertisements will drive traffic to their existing stores as well as to the main e-commerce website. Using consistent branding will also improve digital search engine optimization by enhancing key phrase relevancy. To further perpetuate H&M's brand image, all means of communication must be utilized including established news sources for men's and women's fashion including magazines such as GQ, Details, Vogue, Glamour, Seventeen, and Cosmopolitan. Using consistent branding campaigns within these magazines will help increase brand recognition by at least 8% within one year of launch in effectively targeting an appropriately aged, fashion conscientious audience similar to H&M's current target market segments.

Once advertisements are in place and social networks have been optimized for strong key phrases, the company can assess the effectiveness of its promotional campaign by measuring traffic volume and traffic quality. To identify the effectiveness of its banner ads and key phrases, each ad and phrase will link to a relevant microsite within HM.com. The server log will record the source from which a visitor entered HM.com. The company can use this information to identify the ads and key phrases that are driving the most traffic to the site, as well as the most useful referring sites on which the ads are placed. The company can evaluate the value of the banner ads by looking at the click-through rate, which is calculated by dividing the number of click-through(s) by the number of impressions served. This number will show the rate at which online consumers are clicking on a given ad. The click-through rate, in correspondence with the cost-per-click will give a good impression of the success of a banner ad in relation to the amount of money spent by H&M to generate one

click-through. The banner ads that prove to be poor investments in terms of being ineffective at driving traffic – or quality traffic – should be redesigned and/or relocated. Key phrases will be monitored with similar scrutiny and reworked as needed. Moreover, the company can also determine the effectiveness of these promotional tools by dividing the contribution (the percentage of sales generated by customers who enter the site via a banner ad or key phrase) by the cost of implementation (the percentage of the budget allocated to banner ad placement or key phrase optimization).

H&M must also implement a **new promotion strategy**. H&M will focus on staying relevant and relatable to its customers in order to encourage user engagement and loyalty online by an increase in 5% within 1 year of its strategy launch. H&M will offer incentives to its social media network followers to encourage customer engagement and to incentivize user-generated content through the promotion of bimonthly giveaways in print advertisements, digital announcements on their website, Facebook status updates, tweets on Twitter, and e-flyers on Instagram. Users will be entered to win H&M products or gift cards if they leave a comment on H&M's Facebook wall, upload a photo onto Instagram wearing H&M apparel using “#HMMusa” hash tags, reply to H&M tweets on Twitter, or fill out a form inviting five friends to become an H&M fan or follower on all of their social media networks which will increase H&M's demographic reach across the US. Coupons and promo codes will not only drive sales but also direct online users to H&M's new Internet purchasing application. The e-newsletter will engage H&M enthusiasts and create brand loyalty through personalization and will also be tailored according to the consumer's name and location (e.g. consumers who live within 100 miles of an H&M store will be reminded of the nearest store location; those who do not live by a brick and mortar store location, will be reminded of H&M's new e-commerce site). H&M's blog will act as yet another avenue of two-way dialogue between H&M and its customers. Blog posts will showcase H&M's fashion expertise and invite users to exhibit their own advice on the latest trends, which would be effective in increasing the number of H&M brand loyalists and advocates. The blog will keep the homepage content fresh and encourage repeat visits to the site.

Similar to how the product strategy was evaluated and measured (e.g. banner ads and key phrases), the server log will record site visitors' time and date of entry, duration of visit, and number of pages viewed, and entry point. The log can be used to determine the way in which visitors are entering the site. This information will be telling in terms of determining whether H&M's blog improves overall visitor duration on HM.com. Web analytics like Google Analytics can also be used to compile and sort through the information. This data will also detail the extent to which the blog or social media networks drive unique repeat visitors to the e-commerce site. An increase in repeat visitors, in addition to user engagement via social media outlets and the blog and purchases of products referenced in blog posts and on social networks, will indicate whether these

communications are increasing brand engagement, loyalty, and advocacy. If H&M's number of social media followers and blog readers is continuously rising, the company's marketing initiatives are working.

Analytic reports of data collected via the H&M blog can be reviewed in order to determine who is reading, what they are reading, and where they are coming from. This information can be helpful in shaping the content of future blog posts and in getting to know H&M customers better. The better it knows its customers, the better it can deliver relevant online content and product offerings. The contests and giveaways promoted through Facebook, Twitter, and H&M's blog will be monitored in order to determine whether they are increasing sales, engagement, and loyalty or are hurting H&M's bottom line. H&M will determine the cost per lead of its giveaways and e-newsletter sign-up by dividing the total amount of money spent on the prizes by the number of leads (fans, Twitter followers, e-newsletter subscribers) generated by promoting giveaways and discounts.

In order to build user engagement and loyalty online, H&M must provide various avenues for which they communicate with their consumers. In order to do this they need to elaborate more on their consumer focused brand approach through digital communications channels (i.e. social media networks and blogosphere). In order to achieve these results, an **updated digital marketing strategy** is needed. H&M is a Business To Consumer company with a national target market and well over \$10 million dollar total annual revenue. With this information in mind an updated digital marketing strategy is necessary in order to implement proficient tactics for Search Engine Optimization and Social Media Marketing. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is an online marketing tactic that can take 3 – 6 months before the end results are achieved. Considering that the basis of the strategy relies heavily on the use of key words, the most important action for this strategy would be to improve the company's search engine optimization. Right now, the company is rather hard to find unless you are directly typing in the phrase H&M. Therefore, the company needs to employ workers who are more skilled in SEO practices to help tailor the content on the main website. By imprinting key phrases, it would be more likely for search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing to pick up the site faster and rank it higher, thereby connecting more people to the site and increasing brand recognition. Increasing the occurrences of the company's key phrases on the pages of the site, and increasing optimal keyword density should also achieve this.

Logistically speaking, there are budget considerations for social media marketing that include the strategy (expectation to invest \$5,000 to \$10,000 in strategy and a solid month of time), build (investment here includes graphic design, technology development, planning, and training which can cost anywhere from \$2,000 to \$5,000), and content development (including blogging a minimum of two to three new posts per week, infographics or other illustrations, online videos, white papers, reports, podcasts, articles written for specific influential blogs and online publications as directed in my plan, professional photography including products

and live events, recorded webinars and webcasts – content development per month can range from \$3,000 to \$5,000 per month at minimum). Additional considerations are channel management (hire a professional or team to manage content delivery, engagement in groups, outreach, commenting, and fan/follower/connect building with a budget of at least \$3,000 to \$5,000 per month for this work), campaigning (cost factors include: design, goal-setting, analytics and reporting, outreach and management – minimum of \$1,500 per quarter), and management and monitoring tools (\$5,000 or more per month).

Once these strategies are put into action, H&M would be able to see the results of their online efforts. These results would be manifested in increased conversion rates and overall sales, and the H&M brand would greatly benefit. Moreover, in a world that is relying more heavily on digital capacities, it is necessary for H&M to improve its online position if the company wishes to remain a top retail company.

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Appendix A: Quantitative Research

Figure 1. *Shopping Apparel Lifestyle Web-Based Questionnaire*

Apparel Shopping Lifestyle

Dear Participant:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project. However, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you can withdraw from the survey at any point. It is very important for me to learn your opinions.

Your survey responses will be strictly confidential and data from this research will be reported only in the aggregate. Your information will be coded and will remain confidential. If you have questions at any time about the survey or the procedures, you may contact me by email at mikesocialpr.sd@gmail.com.

Thank you for your contribution!

Michael Kelly

1* Listed below are statements about shopping behavior for clothes and clothing fashions. Please check one box for each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Comments: |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--|
| It is important for me to be a fashion leader. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/> |
| I prefer the tailored look in my clothing. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/> |
| I always buy at least one outfit of the latest fashion. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/> |
| I never read fashion magazines or pay attention to fashion trends. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/> |
| I spend a lot of money on clothes and accessories. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/> |
| Clothes are one of the most important ways I have of expressing my individuality. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/> |
| It's important to be well-dressed. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/> |
| The quality of the merchandise I buy is more important than its fashion appeal. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/> |
| I spend a lot of time on fashion-related activities. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/> |
| It's just not worth the money to be well dressed all the time. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/> |
| If you have a few good clothes you can get by in most situations. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/> |

| | | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| I prefer to buy designer labels rather than store-branded merchandise. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| If you want to get ahead you have to dress the part. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| I usually get bored with clothes if I keep them too long. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| I like my clothes to be practical. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| I avoid high fashion clothing because it goes out of style too quickly. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| My clothing selections are made with an eye toward the future. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| My apparel selections are strongly influenced by clothing worn by people I admire. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| I am aware of fashion trends and want to be one of the first to try them. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| I'd spend my money on clothes before I'd spend it on most other things. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| I am confident in my ability to recognize fashion trends. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| Finish Survey | | | | | | |

Figure 2. *Shopping Apparel Lifestyle Statistical Data*

| Shopping Apparel Lifestyle | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|----------------|---------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| It is important for me to be a fashion leader. | 2 (20%) | 3 (30%) | 3 (30%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (20%) |
| I prefer the tailored look in my clothing. | 3 (30%) | 3 (30%) | 3 (30%) | 1 (10%) | 0 (0%) |
| I always buy at least one outfit of the latest fashion. | 5 (50%) | 3 (30%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (10%) | 1 (10%) |
| I never read fashion magazines or pay attention to fashion trends. | 2 (20%) | 1 (10%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (10%) | 6 (60%) |
| I spend a lot of money on clothes and accessories. | 3 (30%) | 1 (10%) | 3 (30%) | 2 (20%) | 1 (10%) |
| Clothes are one of the most important ways I have of expressing my individuality. | 3 (30%) | 4 (40%) | 2 (20%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (10%) |

| | | | | | |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| It's important to be well dressed. | 5 (50%) | 4 (40%) | 1 (10%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| The quality of the merchandise I buy is more important than its fashion appeal. | 3 (30%) | 2 (20%) | 1 (10%) | 3 (30%) | 1 (10%) |
| I spend a lot of time on fashion-related activities. | 3 (30%) | 1 (10%) | 2 (20%) | 1 (10%) | 3 (30%) |
| It's just not worth the money to be well dressed all the time. | 3 (30%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (20%) | 2 (20%) | 3 (30%) |
| If you have a few good clothes you can get by in most situations. | 1 (10%) | 3 (30%) | 5 (50%) | 1 (10%) | 0 (0%) |
| I prefer to buy designer labels rather than store-branded merchandise. | 1 (10%) | 1 (10%) | 2 (20%) | 2 (20%) | 4 (40%) |
| If you want to get ahead you have to dress the part. | 2 (20%) | 4 (40%) | 2 (20%) | 1 (10%) | 1 (10%) |
| I usually get bored with clothes if I keep them too long. | 2 (20%) | 5 (50%) | 1 (10%) | 1 (10%) | 1 (10%) |
| I like my clothes to be practical. | 5 (50%) | 4 (40%) | 1 (10%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| I avoid high fashion clothing because it goes out of style too quickly. | 1 (10%) | 1 (10%) | 2 (20%) | 4 (40%) | 2 (20%) |
| My clothing selections are made with an eye toward the future. | 1 (10%) | 4 (40%) | 2 (20%) | 2 (20%) | 1 (10%) |
| My apparel selections are strongly influenced by clothing worn by people I admire. | 6 (60%) | 2 (20%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (10%) | 1 (10%) |
| I am aware of fashion trends and want to be one of the first to try them. | 2 (20%) | 0 (0%) | 5 (50%) | 1 (10%) | 2 (20%) |

| | | | | | |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| I'd spend my money on clothes before I'd spend it on most other things. | 2 (20%) | 2 (20%) | 0 (0%) | 3 (30%) | 3 (30%) |
| I am confident in my ability to recognize fashion trends. | 3 (30%) | 3 (30%) | 2 (20%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (20%) |

Appendix B: Quantitative Research (Focus Group Transcript)

| RESPONDENT NAME | QUESTION | GENDER | AGE |
|---|-----------------|--------|-----|
| 1) What is your favorite low-cost brand? | | | |
| Valerie | Forever 21 | F | 22 |
| Tony | H&M | M | 25 |
| Amanda | Uniqlo | F | 30 |
| Shonelle | Charlotte Rouse | F | 21 |
| Milo | H&M | M | 22 |
| Trev | H&M | M | 32 |
| Rumur | Debenhams | F | 26 |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|----|
| 2) What characteristics do you associate with other people that have good personal style? | | | |
| Valerie | I first notice the color of clothing, the style presented and the fit of the garments. I also notice if there is unique jewelry. | F | 22 |
| Tony | Fit. To me it's all about fit. Tight where its right, loose when needed. When a person knows their personal fit, I think to myself, "hey, they know style". | M | 25 |
| Amanda | Nothing too revealing, I think good personal style comes from within. If you feel you look good, and are not disheveled, you probably have good personal style. | F | 30 |
| Shonelle | Good fit, great use of colors and pattern choices. I also always look at people's shoes, so if they are nice then they obviously have great style! | F | 21 |
| Milo | Characteristics I associate with good personal style are individuals who are fashion-forward, brave in trying new trends that other people may not be readily comfortable in trying, and creative with their outfit selections. | M | 22 |
| Trev | Characteristics would include projecting success, independence, and confidence in attire. | M | 32 |
| Rumur | Outfit choices such as cardigans, jeans, hairstyles, and clothes that are similar to my tastes. Also you can never go wrong with a great smile! | F | 26 |

3) Do you feel more influenced to purchase clothing items when they are seen on stylish social media users within your network or more by professional brand advertisements seen in magazines? Please explain.

| | | | |
|----------|--|---|----|
| Valerie | I feel more influenced to purchase clothing items when I see it on stylish social media sites and users. A lot of my inspiration comes from how people show off their style and outfits on Pinterest. | F | 22 |
| Tony | I am really only influenced to purchase new clothes if I really like the look in the picture at first glance (this applies to both social media and magazine advertisements). Though some editorials in print magazines are too out there on their outfits. However, if I really like the look and appeal of a user's outfit of the day for example, if I can see myself making it work I will find something similar and feel inspired to go out and buy something new. | M | 25 |
| Amanda | Neither. I'm not a very big social media user and I also don't read a lot of magazines or public media articles other than the newspaper. So if anything, I am more influenced when I see someone wearing something in person. | F | 30 |
| Shonelle | Honestly, I focus more on if my followers wear new trends that are put out into the public, "real" media users. If I really like a new trend that is promoted and I see social media users that I trust wearing the trend well, then I'm more accepting of trying it out for myself. When it comes to magazines and editorials, I kind of run in the opposite direction when I see more mainstream campaigns. | F | 21 |
| Milo | I am usually influenced by professional brand advertisements seen in magazines only because I am not as fashion-forward as those considered stylish within my social media network. | M | 22 |
| Trev | Neither. I agree with what Amanda said but because I shop more often and rely on the store positioning of the mannequins and the advertisements within the store, I decide at the store if its something I want to purchase and try for myself. | M | 32 |
| Rumur | Definitely more from stylish social media users because although professional brand advertisements use real people (models), social media users are regular people who show how to wear the clothes in their daily lives by incorporating their personal style and opinions into the overall look. It gives a better perspective of the clothing than a model in a magazine wearing the clothes. | F | 26 |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|----|
| 4) "Fast Fashion" is used to describe clothing collections that are based on the most recent fashion trends, are quickly designed and manufactured, and are affordable to mainstream consumers. What are some of the perceived pros and cons of purchasing this type of clothing? | | | |
| Valerie | <p>I feel a con would be that if it were considered "fast fashion", it wouldn't be as uniquely perceived to be trendy if everyone had it. A pro would be that trendy clothes are easily available to purchase at a lower price point so it allows just about anyone the opportunity to try out a new trend or fashion without being "wealthy", it evens the playing field for everyone.</p> | F | 22 |
| Tony | <p>An easy pro is of course that you'll look good, but at what cost? Does this mean that I'll have to sacrifice quality for this type of clothing? Usually quality and price go hand in hand. Along with this fast fashion merchandising trend, will this imply that I'll be seeing everybody at the bar or club rocking the EXACT same outfit? If so, I think when it comes to fashion, mixing your own styles, and not buying what's new and trending is more important than sacrificing your personal style and image. Don't get me wrong, I definitely support the trends and purchase this type of clothing but I don't feel the need to follow exactly what "looks cool". My advice is don't lose yourself, stay a unique individual.</p> | M | 25 |
| Amanda | <p>As many people have said, the pro is that this kind of garment is affordable. But the obvious con is that they may not last long or be lasting styles in the long run.</p> | F | 30 |
| Shonelle | <p>Cons of fast fashion are usually the effects on the environment and the support of overseas cheap labor factory work and harsh conditions for employees. These types of things are usually a consideration factor for me before I decide to purchase a garment (even though it may be extremely well priced and might be exactly what I'm looking for), I want to make sure that I'm doing my part in the environment before purchasing things that may be harming it. However, on the other hand, the pros are that almost anyone can look stylish! And that almost anyone can afford the style that most fits him or her.</p> | F | 21 |

| | | | |
|-------|---|---|----|
| Milo | The pro is definitely low cost; the con is you might only wear it once. I always try to purchase items that are versatile even if they are fast fashion. Then I can incorporate the item into more outfits. I have some H&M items that I have worn for years this way. | M | 22 |
| Trev | Pros: you show others how dedicated you are with fashion, and it makes you unique and makes others want to have what you have. It can sometimes go a long way towards helping others by showing them that they shouldn't be afraid to be themselves. Cons: Sometimes the price of the garments is not worth it. Also because of how fast fashions come and go, if you spend a great deal of money on a collection, who's to say that the trends won't just disappear the next season? | M | 32 |
| Rumur | Pros: it makes fashionable and in-style items readily available and more affordable for normal-income people. It also makes trends evolve faster. Cons: It allows trendy items to flood the market, rendering them "obsolete" before the end of the fashion season. It also stunts people's creativity in terms of fashion since it is easier to just follow the trend instead of making your own. | F | 26 |

| 5) How do daily social interactions on your social media networks influence your attitudes on fashion? | | | |
|--|---|---|----|
| Valerie | I see other's outfits and I take bits and pieces of it and adapt it to my style of clothing. | F | 22 |
| Tony | I follow a few men's fashion pages, and let me say, the influence me big time. I wake up and see some ties, a pair of wingtips, or some accessories and i immediately imagine owning it. I take a lot of my daily dress choices from my IG also. Helps me mix and match my options. | M | 25 |
| Amanda | They Don't. | F | 30 |
| Shonelle | They make me much more conscious about what I'm wearing and usually encourage me to get ready for the day. They inspire me to try new things and to be at my best. Also it teaches me about different ways to choose garments to wear that look best on my body type. | F | 21 |

| | | | |
|-------|---|---|----|
| Milo | The other day I was introducing my friends to Instagram and I surprised me how much we are influenced by it. Before Instagram it was only jeans and a t-shirt, after its influence it was the latest chinos with a nice blazer or some studded Christian Louboutin shoes. My friends started wearing their hair differently and their styles changed. I'm not saying Instagram is bad but it's definitely more of a tool to find out about your personal likings in fashion and trends and attempting to mimic them. Personal styles of all of my friends that use Instagram have changed because of its use. | M | 22 |
| Trev | I don't actively use many social media networks so I can't really comment on this. | M | 32 |
| Rumur | The new fashion trends are more apparent since you get to see a lot of them every day, thus it makes me more aware of what's hot right now. If I like what is in trend, then I will probably go out and buy it. | F | 26 |

| 6) How do you feel your consumer purchasing behavior has changed as your amount of social media followers has risen (i.e. obtaining numerous "likes" and comments on your personal style)? | | | |
|---|---|---|----|
| Valerie | This does not apply to me because I don't post personal photos of my style onto my social media sites. Though I do shop more often based off of what I've seen on networks such as Pinterest for example, but I don't personally post anything for people to view or comment on that pertains to my personal style. | F | 22 |
| Tony | I definitely feel more obligated to have something new to show off to my followers so as the amount of followers grow, I feel more pressured to keep buying new clothes and keep finding new unique trending items to show off to them. | M | 25 |
| Amanda | As mentioned earlier, I'm not a big social media user and so this doesn't apply to me, though I could see how daily interactions could probably sway your judgment on the perception of always having to have the newest and latest trends to keep impressing your friends. | F | 30 |
| Shonelle | It has not changed my consumer views since I don't really put up a lot of posts regarding my personal style, though I do post random objects onto certain social media sites using the photo filters – which somewhat drives me to find more creative ideas for posting pictures. But this doesn't affect my shopping habits. | F | 21 |

| | | | |
|-------|---|---|----|
| Milo | I feel it really hasn't changed. I enjoy getting likes on looking good, but I really use social media networks for a lot more than fashion. However, I will say that since I've begun using Instagram, I definitely buy and dress more on the dapper side. | M | 22 |
| Trev | This question isn't applicable to me because I don't use social media networks. I'm sure a lot of impressionable young adults using these networks are probably being advertised to through their social circles without even knowing about it; which is helping drive the economy so I have no problem with it, ha-ha! | M | 32 |
| Rumur | Unfortunately my followers are not as interactive and do not leave comments and as many "likes" to photos I'm posting, though this may be a result of my hashtags not working properly at the moment (which is a totally different problem). I guess it all just depends on the person and how engaged they are with the followers, which would determine if they are more affected or not. I do get text messages all the time though from people at my cosmetology school who are always asking where I shop, so in this regard Instagram has helped expose my fashion sense to my social circles and is a platform used to show the world all of the unique and stylish things that I currently own (which is pretty cool!). | F | 26 |

7) When Instagrammers you follow regularly use certain brands in their personal style posts, how does this shape your perception of the brands?

| | | | |
|----------|--|---|----|
| Valerie | This really doesn't shape my perception of brands since I don't buy a lot of brand named clothing. I shop at stores that have similar styles to name brand clothing but are not name brand. | F | 22 |
| Tony | I feel that this all depends on the person that I'm following. If I follow them and enjoy their style choices, then in turn I really would be more likely to trust a brand they sport. But on average, it's more about style and look as oppose to name and brand. | M | 25 |
| Amanda | I feel like I'm not cut out for this focus group, sorry everyone, this is another one that's not applicable to me! Maybe I should look into joining some more social media groups though, it sounds like they can do a lot more than just edit pictures?? | F | 30 |
| Shonelle | I definitely acknowledge the brands more but I still stick to my own style and budget. | F | 21 |

| | | | |
|-------|--|---|----|
| Milo | Yes I like this question a lot because it goes along with the theme of this group, but social media is another kind of branding and advertising. If someone whose taste level I approve/agree with gives their "stamp of approval" to certain brands, I am definitely going to check out that brand to see if they have items that I like. | M | 22 |
| Trev | Though I'm similar to Amanda on a lot of these scenarios, I think that when I see things on social networks or even on the internet from someone that I know, it makes think twice about what they are wearing and prompts me to take a closer look next time I'm at the mall. So I guess I'm saying that it plants a little seed in the back of my mind to check out that label's store if it's something that I'm really intrigued by! Wow! | M | 32 |
| Rumur | Sometimes brands do not matter to me, but if the person that I follow shows a specific brand that I'm not expecting (based on my previous perception of that brand or store) I am surprised because I wouldn't have thought that such a cool item or wardrobe garment could have come from that particular brand. So before this group I don't think that I would have thought of this being the case but certain images do tend to change my mind on brand perceptions in terms of quality and style. | F | 26 |

| 8) In light of the current economy, how have your spending habits changed relating to brand selections? If your spending habits have not changed, why not? | | | |
|---|--|---|----|
| Valerie | I am always cautious of my spending on clothing. I am what you call a "bargain shopper". My spending habits may change if I were to make more money. | F | 22 |
| Tony | My spending is about the same. It's just the choices in style that I make. Maturity has driven me in a different style direction this past year or so. | M | 25 |
| Amanda | I used to shop at stores like BCBG, J. Crew, Loft, etc. But now I only go if there is some ridiculously large end-of-the-year sale. These days I've started shopping at places like Target. Target does offer some different non-brand apparel options, which I've settled for because of the economy, but I do miss shopping at some of the stores I used to shop at. I'm certainly more "thrifty" when it comes to my clothing selections. | F | 30 |
| Shonelle | I spend more than I should but I also believe to wear more of what makes you feel at your best than what makes you feel just average. | F | 21 |

| | | | |
|-------|---|---|----|
| Milo | My spending habits have not changed only because I most often like to wear garments that are different so if I don't find anything I like when shopping at name brand stores, I'll just go to a thrift shop to find it. Most of the time I do end up finding something for a great bargain, so at the end of the day, my spending hasn't changed. | M | 22 |
| Trev | I spend money all the time on high quality lasting items. I don't care if the economy is completely in the dumps, if it's something that I want, I'll spend any amount of money to buy it. That sounds crude but it's true. I buy what I want, when I want it. | M | 32 |
| Rumur | With the current economy, I have become more "thrifty". Not that I sacrifice quality for quantity, but I only tend to buy items that I truly like and can see myself using a lot versus the experimental, trendy items, which I may end up not using. | F | 26 |

| 9) How has your interaction on the Instagram social network impacted your short and long-term consumer purchasing behaviors? | | | |
|---|---|---|----|
| Valerie | It hasn't impacted it at all really. Pinterest is what influences me the most on style. | F | 22 |
| Tony | I'm definitely more opted to buy something I see on Instagram on someone that I trust or follow as opposed to things I see in commercials and in magazine campaigns. So I guess you could say that Instagram has made me more conscientious of my perception of self in terms of personal style and the potential that I have to put something really great together instead of just becoming easily swayed by some high-priced marketing schpeel put out into the world by brand marketers. | M | 25 |
| Amanda | This does not apply to me, sorry! | F | 30 |
| Shonelle | I've learned to save more for better purchases than a bunch of little things that I hardly ever desire to wear. Quality has become much higher on my list of needs than quantity. Before I started using Instagram, I would really make my decisions based on how much of that particular collection I could afford versus one really expensive designer item. But now, I'm more excited by the idea of purchasing big designs because I understand their importance and can easily identify quality with such purchases. | F | 21 |

| | | | |
|-------|--|---|----|
| Milo | I usually don't like to copy people but if I like a picture of some guy wearing a specific type of shoe, I will probably go out and buy them. It hasn't really impacted me other than to say that now, I'm more often showing others how I dress and how I put outfits together, so that they can go and buy what I'm wearing or at least so I can inspire them to wear what they want to wear regardless of traditional societal norms of what "cool" is and what "appropriate" looks like. | M | 22 |
| Trev | It hasn't. I am still the same person I was before ever seeing anything on social media networks. I'm not easy to influence! | M | 32 |
| Rumur | Instagram has made me aware of some brands that I have not heard of before. It has also made me more aware of what's current/trending fashion-wise. | F | 26 |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|----|
| 10) What are your feelings on the possibility that social media communities are indirectly influencing your subconscious and value perceptions? If this is the first time you have heard about this, please provide your reaction(s). | | | |
| Valerie | I 100% agree that social media communities are influencing subconscious and value perceptions. 50% of our style comes from inspiration of others. | F | 22 |
| Tony | It makes sense, and social media definitely does this. But we are all humans capable of making decisions and choices. And we should be able to decipher when somebody is trying to influence us (directly or indirectly) and make our own mind up of what we want. But I don't mind. Social media can try to influence me all they want. Or try to anyways. | M | 25 |
| Amanda | Well, there are two things I've wanted for about a year now because of Facebook ads but that I haven't purchased. One being a dress that you can wear an infinite number of ways and the other being Stella McCartney shoes. I still probably won't purchase either because they're expensive or because there is no way to try them on since they are advertised virtually as opposed to in-store/in-person. | F | 30 |

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| Shonelle | I feel that this does not affect me as a person because I value my own opinions and views on how I dress more than the idea of allowing others to influence me in this way. I honestly feel that social media networks like Instagram have encouraged me to figure out who I am and what I work best with in terms of clothing options. It's encouraged me to thrive in life rather than just sit by. These communities have awakened me. | F | 21 |
| Milo | This is very weird to say I guess, but I these online communities are doing a lot more than influencing consumer buying decisions, as you mentioned it can also influence your value perceptions and bring about feelings of low self-worth and possibly depression because these photos are a constant reminder of what everyone else has (that you don't have). In the same regard, social media networks like Instagram is so cool because you can express your individuality through showing off how you arrange your wardrobe or how you put together your outfits through your personal style. You get to show off to people all over the world the things that you love doing, whether it's food, fashion, photography, hair, makeup etc. It does help in showing how to value people that are so dedicated and passionate about what they like that they are showing it off to the world. I give these people a lot of credit because not everyone can do what they do in showcasing things that they love. | M | 22 |
| Trev | It's in my subconscious so without hypnosis I'm not able to really comment or give an answer to this. But would you say that I'm subconsciously influencing you with my answer right now? And what are your feelings about it? | M | 32 |
| Rumur | Social media has become an extension of advertising/consumerism but with the use of everyday people instead of paid models to promote the latest trends. One difference is, the models advertise the items since it is their job (they have minimal to no input as to what they are being asked to market) while the everyday people posting on social media are putting their stamp of approval on these items based on their personal sense of style and fashion taste. I don't believe that social media communities are indirectly influencing people's subconscious and value perceptions any more than the popular kids in school who look like they just stepped out of a magazine. | F | 26 |

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