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Insights for Marketers: College Student Consumer Trends

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INSIGHTS FOR MARKETERS:

COLLEGE STUDENT CONSUMER TRENDS

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial
fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to a few influential individuals in my life:

To my father, who has inspired my love for learning and always pushed me to be my best.

To my mother, who has shown me unconditional love and been courageous through many trials.

To Corey Schaal, the man who will always have my heart.

The Lord has surely blessed me beyond measure.

ABSTRACT

JANA ELISABETH NEWCOMER: Insights for Marketers: College Student Consumer Trends (Under the direction of Professor Scott Fiene)

This thesis will aim to examine the ways in which college students can best be reached by marketing efforts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 21 million students will attend college this year—a whopping 5.7 million more than in 2000. Considering the impact of their preferences and the billions of dollars of discretionary money spent by college students annually, this segment of the market is a critical one. College students are consuming social media constantly, embracing technological change, and desiring for brands and products to help define them. Through the use of quantitative and qualitative data, this thesis was an attempt to uncover valuable insights into the mind of the college consumer, and determine how marketing efforts should best be directed. The researcher used a survey created with Qualtrics software, and conducted one-on-one interviews with students from different colleges at the University of Mississippi. This thesis addressed topics such as social media consumption, brand interactions, online shopping, consumer behavior patterns, approachability, brand loyalty, and appeal. The researcher found that college students experience a shift in what they value in brands and products. While popular and in-style products and brands are significantly valued at the beginning of the college years, students increasingly place more value on high quality and affordability. It appears from the data that there is a link between brand loyalty and brands and products that students consider to play a large part in their lives. These insights were among many others that were uncovered in the course of this thesis research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The college years are such a unique time in life. College is the time of leaving

home, but still having the safety net of parents if all else fails. It is the time in life when

an individual solidifies his or her beliefs about the world, and decides what they want

their role to be in life. A college student undergoes emotional, mental, psychological,

financial, and philosophical changes during his or her time in higher education. Along

with these changes comes one of product preference and consumption. When a student

leaves for college, it is generally the first time the individual will make most—if not all,

of their consumer choices by themselves. With this thought in mind, it seems easy to

conclude that marketers should focus on how to best reach these individuals during this

critical consumer transition. What makes this window of opportunity even more

appealing is the chance to create a customer for life. One of the goals of this thesis is to

prove or disprove the hypothesis that consumers—specifically college students—are

increasingly allowing products, brands, and companies to have a bigger role in their

everyday lives. One must not look far to find evidence of this phenomenon. Take for

example the bumper stickers that are plastered all over vehicles—on a daily commute,

one can observe anything from PETA to Patagonia and everything in between. The

researcher contends that more than ever before, people desire for brands or companies to

help define who they are; People want brands to speak about them. And if this is the

case, how do marketing professionals best focus their efforts towards being in the lives of

their publics? What is the best way to convince college students to embrace a product or

brand? This thesis will take a deeper look.

CHAPTER I: COLLEGE STUDENT CONSUMERS

In the world of marketing, knowing the consumer is absolutely critical. This point may sound obvious, but it is amazing how many companies do not truly know or understand whom their audience is or what they want. In order to best know the target market, one must ask and answer a few key questions--who are the consumers? Where are they? What is important to them in a product? How do they discover new brands and products? How do they like to be approached or engaged? What makes them loyal to a brand or product?

ALL ABOUT COLLEGE STUDENTS

Perhaps one of the most interesting articles written about Millennials is Time Magazine's *The Me Me Me Generation*, which concludes that Millennials (anyone born between 1980-2000) show more narcissistic traits than any other generation before them (Stein, 2013). The observation is not a difficult one to make. The age of selfies and the marketing of the self on social media platforms are convincing enough that young people are pretty into themselves. But all joking aside, what can marketers gleam from this insight? College student consumers want a personal experience with their products: They desire for a product or brand to fit their lifestyle, align with who they are, and create an image for others to admire.

Where is the consumer? It is important to know where the consumer physically resides, but this question is asking more than just that. Where do the consumers have a

presence? In other words, a marketer needs to meet the consumer where they are right now. This thesis attempts to find a better answer to these questions.

How do marketers best reach college students? In 2012, the New York Times published an article declaring new findings about the difficulties of reaching young people with TV advertising. The writer of the article, Brian Stelter, attributes the decrease of impact to the "alternatives to the television set that are taking up growing slices of the American attention span" (Stelter, 2012). Recent inventions such as TiVo allow consumers to skip through advertisements. As Bloomberg Business penned it, TiVo allows for "PRIME TIME ANYTIME" (Trambino, 2006).

Radio, another traditional medium, is being affected in new ways, as well. Internet radio such as Pandora, I Heart Radio, and Spotify are highly personalized. At the end of 2012 already, the percentage of Internet radio listeners surpassed traditional AM/FM radio listening. While no current research spells out what is really happening, it would be logical to conclude that traditional radio advertising doesn't have the kind of reach that it had just a decade or two ago. An article published by the Boston Globe sums up the challenges facing radio, TV, and more:

> While its viability hasn't yet reached endangered species status, music radio does
> face many of the same challenges other mass media—including newspapers,
> magazines, and network television—are up against. New technologies and
> delivery options, more choices tailored to individual consumers, fragmented
> audiences that can find music they enjoy while bypassing glib-talking DJs and
> annoying commercials—all are factors driving programmers and station owners
> to retool themselves for the digital media age. (Kahn and Reed, 2009).

College students are online. Today's generation of young people is digitally connected, on multiple devices, multiple times a day. A study conducted in 2005 revealed that over 95% of college-aged students use the Internet, and of those students, 91% of them make online purchases. This study also made this observation that "having been raised in a media-saturated, brand-conscious world, these teens maneuver through the Internet with the same ease that their mothers and fathers shopped in malls" (Lester, Forman, Loyd, 2005, p. 126). The increasing online presence of college students (and young people, in general) is great news for the marketing industry.

> The Internet provides the consumer with numerous benefits and offers an appealing promise with an unlimited source of information. It provides the opportunity for a company to develop or enhance its image, reach geographically dispersed customers, promote and demonstrate new products, and develop relationships with potential customers which allows instantaneous communication and feedback (Lester, Forman, Loyd, 2005, p. 127).

Furthermore, a more recent study concluded that, "In conducting personalized marketing, consumers' personal data (e.g. name, geographic location, income, family size, brand preference, shopping history) is a crucial asset for marketers...the collection of consumer data is an almost universal practice of commercial websites" (Jai, Burns, King, 2013).

Once the consumer is identified and located, the next important thing is to know what they value in a product or brand. How important is price? Does style trump quality? Is customer service important to college students? Does convenience play a factor in consumer choices? After the consumer has been identified, located, and it is clear what they desire in a product or brand, the next step is naturally to determine how

best to approach them. Do college students respond well to advertisements? Are promotional events on campus effective and do students interact much with brand representatives?

Lastly, when the consumer has purchased the brand or product, what is next? How does one guarantee they will be a repeat customer? Will the consumer be loyal to the brand or product? The research in this thesis will look to uncover what factors influence college students to be loyal to certain brands and products. Creating a customer for life is a wise investment for any brand, product, or company.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND COLLEGE STUDENT CONSUMERS

There are two major implications of college students embracing social media. First is the growing trend of associating with products or brands—either by liking their pages, or by mentioning brands or products in posts, pictures, tweets, and more; second is the ability to personalize social media advertisements based on internet searches. It is no secret that today's college students are very active on social media. Young people of all sorts have embraced the age of the promotion of the self, and spend plenty of time, effort, and concern making sure they create a perfect picture of their life on social media. They want others to see how good they look in that new workout outfit, the award they won last week, where they are eating dinner and whom they are eating dinner with. No one has to prompt these users to act in such a manner--they do it on their own. What if marketers could harness this power and align social media users with their favorite brands and products? They can, and many already do. According to research done by Burson-Marsteller in 2010, 79% of large international companies use one or more social media platforms to engage customers and stakeholders.

The ability to personalize social media advertisements is one of the greatest windows of opportunity marketers have seen in years, and it is all due to the willingness of people to surrender their personal information to have an online presence. A study about college students revealed that the majority of students freely disclose personal information on social networking sites--anything from relationship statuses to political views and interests. Furthermore, up to 40% of respondents in the survey indicated that they even list a phone number on social networking sites (Yang, 2012).

An interesting study published by the College Student Journal in 2011, researchers examined the percentage of college students who made the decision to like or "fan" pages of brands or products, and explored student motivations for doing so. Researchers found that the act of liking a brand or product's page was related to more than just a way of connecting with the company, but also as a way to make identity announcements (Hyllegard, Ogle, Yan, & Reitz, 2011).

In an article published by Forbes, the writer outlined six benefits of social media marketing. They included improved social signals, company branding, improved brand awareness, word-of-mouth advertising, increasing customer loyalty and trust, and improved audience reach and influence (DeMers, 2013). The common denominator in those factors is that in some way they are all part of the concept of customer relationship management (CRM).

COLLEGE STUDENT CONSUMERS AND BRAND PREFERENCES AND
INTERACTIONS

Brands serve as an important tool in constructing one's identity. Choices in consumption aid in defining, expressing, reinforcing, and communicating the identities that consumers possess (Akerlof and Kranton 2009). Furthermore, research done in Australia found that marketers should identify and communicate the experiential meaning that brands have in defining a person's construction (Schembri, Merrilees, Kristiansen, 2010). So brands are important to people across the board, but what characteristics make a brand important to a college consumer?

Do college students actually care about causes that a brand supports or stands for? It is an important question that should be answered. In a study published in the Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management in 2014, researchers found that "prosocial claims", such as environmental, labor, and cancer research listed on clothing tags had a significant impact on the student. In fact, 60 percent of the college student participants were in the habit of reading hang tags on items. Furthermore, students viewed items with "prosocial claims" more positively than they did items without these claims (Hyllegard, Ogle, Yan, 2014). Both the quantitative and qualitative portions of this research will ask respondents about prosocial claims such as environmentally responsibility and respectable mission statements of companies.

CHAPTER II: QUANTITATIVE DATA

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research is excellent because it is easily measurable. According to quantitative data, something is or is not a certain way—there is no guessing involved. The researcher designed a survey using a University of Mississippi Qualtrics account, and received Institutional Review Board approval. The survey link was distributed using a Google e-mail account. The use of the campus directory on the Myolemiss portal allowed the researcher to gather a convenience sample. Respondents included any University of Mississippi students who decided to complete the survey. Research results were collected and analyzed using the Qualtrics software. Some charts and graphs will be scattered throughout this section, and a complete version of the statistical report from Qualtrics will be attached in the appendix of the thesis.

FINDINGS

103 students at the University of Mississippi completed the survey. Surprisingly, a whopping 73% of survey respondents were female (27% male) (See figure A-4). When it came to academic classification, freshman represented 12%, sophomores represented 16%, juniors represented 28%, and seniors represented 44% (see figure A-3). The survey found that of respondents, 61% are not currently employed (see figure A-5). Only 7% responded that they work more than 20 hours each week. For the spending question, 58% of participants responded that they spend on average $0-$100 each month, while 22% chose the $101-$150. The remaining respondents answered that they spent $151-$200 on average each month, and the final 11% responded that they spend more than $200 each month on discretionary purchases (see figure A-6).

The next set of questions was in regards to social media consumption—outlets and corresponding frequencies. The numbers can be seen in figure 1 below.

#	Question	Many times a day	Once a day	Once a Week	Never	Total Responses
1	Facebook	69	16	5	3	93
2	Twitter	36	10	17	30	93
3	Instagram	59	10	5	18	92
4	LinkedIn	3	5	24	60	92
5	Youtube	16	27	37	14	94
6	Pinterest	17	11	27	38	93
7	Google+	12	9	6	65	92
8	Foursquare	0	1	1	90	92

Figure 1

After participants were asked about their social media use, they were then asked how often they post a status, picture, or tweet on social media with or about their favorite products, brands, or companies. 48% of respondents selected that they rarely act in such a way, and 25% indicated that they occasionally did. Only a meager 1% of respondents answered that they frequently use social media to post a status, picture, or tweet about their favorite product, brand, or company (see figure A-8). A later question in the survey inquired about respondents following their favorite products, brands, or companies on any social media platform. 64% responded that they follow 1-10 products, brands, or companies on social media, and only 10% claimed to follow more than 20. Meanwhile, 18% answered that they do not follow any products, brands, or companies (see figure A-12). Furthermore, a follow up question asked about the motivations behind behaviors such as social media following. Nearly half (47%) of respondents answered that their social media behavior was motivated by being a fan of the brand or product. 32% answered that good deals motivated their behavior, and 18% answered that contests and giveaways prompted them (see figure A-13). The next social media question asked respondents if they had ever made an online purchase as a result of a post seen on social media, to which respondents answered yes (57%), and no (43%) (see figure A-21). Finally, the last question in the set asked participants what they thought about seeing ads that are personalized using information from previous Internet searches. Surprisingly, nearly half (44%) answered that they were not comfortable with the described advertisements (see figure A-22).

The next set of questions focused on product or brand preferences and consumer behavior. When asked how easy it was for them to think of their favorite brands or

products, the majority of 69% answered "somewhat easy" or "easy". 16% found the task "somewhat difficult" or "difficult", leaving the remaining respondents (14%) as neutral (see figure A-9).

Next, the participants were asked about the appeal that their favorite brand or product held. The results can most clearly be seen in figure 2.
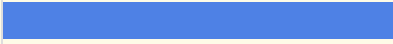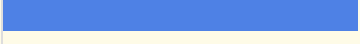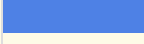
#	Answer		Response	%
1	High quality		74	82%
2	Good customer service		37	41%
3	In-style		40	44%
4	Environmentally friendly		5	6%
5	Affordable		67	74%
6	Entertaining		19	21%
7	Popular		27	30%
8	Mission Statement		6	7%

Figure 2

When asked how the participant usually found out about new brands or products, they were allowed to choose all options that applied. See Figure 3.
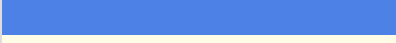
#	Answer		Response	%
1	TV		49	54%
2	Social Media		59	66%
3	Friends		75	83%
4	Newspapers		3	3%
5	Email		21	23%
6	Magazine		31	34%
7	Mail		6	7%
8	Radio		6	7%
9	Billboards		6	7%
10	Online		65	72%

Figure 3

When asked how often respondents thought their friends affected their brand or product preferences, only 6% answered "not at all", while 70% answered "occasionally", and the remaining 24% answered "frequently" (see figure A-15). The follow up question asked if there had ever been a time when the respondent had refrained from making a purchase because they were worried about what other people would think of the brand or product. 40% answered that they had in fact decided against a purchase for that very reason (see figure A-16). Furthermore, a related question asked respondents if they prefer to buy the best-selling brands and products, to which 68% of participants answered "yes" (see figure A-18).

Next, a few questions were asked about online shopping. The first one asked about the

participant's frequency of online purchases. The results can be seen in figure 4.
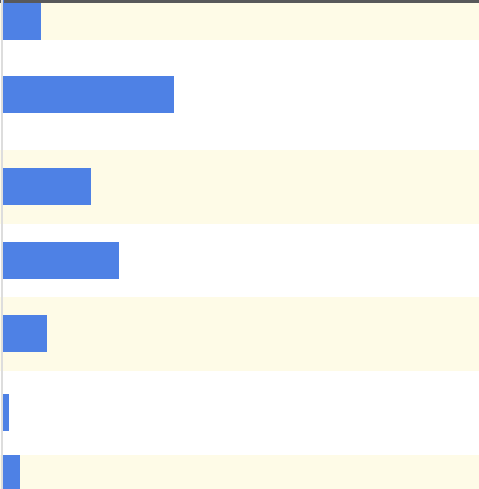
#	Answer		Response	%
1	Never		7	8%
2	Less than Once a Month		31	36%
3	Once a Month		16	18%
4	2-3 Times a Month		21	24%
5	Once a Week		8	9%
6	2-3 Times a Week		1	1%
7	Daily		3	3%

Figure 4

Next, participants were asked if they had ever made a purchase as a direct result

of an ad or post they had seen on social media. 57% answered "yes" (see figure A-21).

Participants were also asked what types of items they generally shop for. See figure 5.
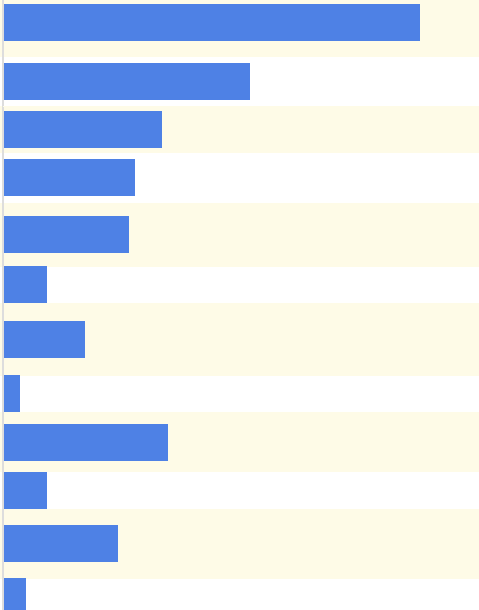
#	Answer		Response	%
1	Clothing		76	87%
2	Shoes		45	52%
3	Books		29	33%
4	Technology		24	28%
5	Music		23	26%
6	Art		8	9%
7	Movies/DVDs		15	17%
8	Car accessories		3	3%
9	Make up		30	34%
10	Furniture		8	9%
11	Jewelry		21	24%
12	Pet stuff		4	5%

Figure 5

After selecting the items they most frequently shop for, respondents were then asked about whether they wait for something to come on sale before they make a purchase. Interestingly, 83% of participants answered that they buy something whenever they want or need it (see figure A-25). Next, students were asked about how often they used coupons. 9% answered "never", 39% answered "less than once a month", 25% answered "once a month", 3% answered "once a week", and just 2% answered "2-3 times a week" (see figure A-23).

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH INSIGHTS

While some of the data above speak by themselves, the numbers do not give a clear statement about the participants in blinking white lights. It takes some digging and an abundance of critical thinking to uncover what the numbers really mean for the client. Data does not hold much power unless it can be translated into actionable information. After much number crunching, many cross-tabulations, and more than a few late nights, the researcher was able to identify the multiple insights about social media use, online advertisements, discretionary spending, shopping habits, brand interactions, and qualities that college students look for in a brand, product, or company.

The data revealed some interesting information about social media use. Firstly, respondents are very active on Facebook (91.5% check FB at least once a day) and Instagram (75.3% check Instagram at least once a day)—in some cases they are on it multiple times during the day. Furthermore, 82% of participants indicated that they follow at least one of their favorite brands, products, or companies on social media. Only a quarter of participants (25%) answered that they 'occasionally' made a post, picture, status, or tweet on social media about a product, brand, or company, and only 1% responded with 'frequently'. Males and females follow or fan brands and products at about equal rates, and are about equally as likely to post, tweet, or Instagram about their favorite brands or products. A minority of social media users are posting about products. Participants who placed a high value on popularity and in-style products were more likely to post about them on social media. Participants who follow or fan their favorite brands or products on social media were more likely to have made an online purchase a result of an advertisement or post on social media if their fanning/following behavior was done

because they wanted good deals or entered contests and giveaways (contest and giveaways work). On the same note, contests and giveaways tend to appeal more to males. Women seem to respond more to social media advertisements or posts if they are a true fan of the product or if they can receive a good deal. As students progress, they are less likely to make a post, tweet, or status about their favorite brands or products. Similarly, as academic classification progresses, students are less likely to make an online purchase as a result from an ad or post on social media.

A large majority of respondents (82%) indicated that they 'always' or 'usually' buy the same brands. It appears many college students are brand loyal when it comes to discretionary shopping. Respondents who indicated brand loyalty placed a high value on good quality and affordability. Participants who identified themselves as brand loyal usually found out about new products or brands most often from friends (85.7%), TV (71.4%) and online/social media (73%). The high percentage of participants that choose TV as a way of hearing about new products and brands came as a surprise, and goes against what other research has revealed about Millennials. It seems that TV advertising is still significantly successful in reaching people folks—despite challenges in recent years to compete with technology such as TiVo, Netflix, and online TV. Brand loyalties aside, 84% of respondents discovered new products from friends.

Participants who consider themselves as consumers who buy the best-selling brands and products are more likely to be early adopters of products or brands. These participants also seem to place more value on popularity and style of a product or brand. A large majority (64%) of participants answered that they 'wait for others to see if they like it' before they purchase something. 20% were trendsetters. Participants who showed

more willingness to try new brands and products placed more value on customer service and style than the respondents who indicated high levels of brand loyalty. In general, though, high quality and affordability were the most appealing things about a brand or product. Respondents of all discretionary spending categories did not indicate much value in company mission statements or whether a company, brand, or product was environmentally friendly. Respondents who shop online regularly are more likely to try out a new brand or product early on. Additionally, respondents who made an online purchase as a result of an ad or post on social media answered that they were more willing to try new things occasionally.

Over half (52%) of students indicated that they shop for and buy a product online at least once a month. Only 8% of respondents answered that they 'never' shop for or buy a product online. College student consumers seem fairly comfortable buying items online regularly. Nearly 3 in 5 respondents (57%) indicated that they have made an online purchase as a result of an advertisement or post on social media. However, females are more likely to make a purchase as a result of seeing an ad or post on social media. Interestingly, respondents who indicated that they were not comfortable with personalized ads on social media sites made more purchases as results of seeing an advertisement or post on social media. Regardless, the researcher was surprised by the high percentage of respondents who indicated that they were uncomfortable with such ads. 43% of students indicated discomfort. Many were neutral, and only 27% of students responded that they didn't mind targeted ads.

Over half (51%) of participants indicated that they use a coupon or promotion at least once a month. However, 83% of respondents selected the statement 'I make

purchases whenever I want or need something,' as opposed to 'I wait until the item I want is on sale before I purchase it' (17%). It appears that while this group of students likes good deals, values affordability, and regularly uses coupons promotions, they will not hesitate to make a purchase if those things are absent.

CHAPTER III: QUALITATIVE DATA

METHODOLOGY

       Qualitative research is phenomenal because it allows for the researcher to dig deeper when he or she wants to know more about a subject. Interviews and focus groups are primary forms of qualitative research. For this thesis, the researcher decided to conduct one-on-one interviews with students from different colleges at the University of Mississippi. A convenience sample was used.   Interviews were scheduled with each student individually, and the researcher asked IRB-approved questions. Some students were asked to elaborate on their answers or experiences. All interviews were conducted in a professional space and manner, and lasted approximately 20-30 minutes each.

INTERVIEWEES

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with a total of seven students during the first weeks of March. The researcher ensured that the sample was diversified. Four females and three males were interviewed. All students were traditional college students. Only first names will be used in consideration of privacy. The interviewees' information can be seen in figure 6 below.

Name	Academic Classification	Major	Interview Date
Taylor	Senior	Communication Sciences and Disorders	March 18, 2015
Marquita	Sophomore	Biology	March 18, 2015
Joseph	Junior	General Studies	March 18, 2015
Joe	Junior	International Studies	March 19, 2015
Cassidy	Sophomore	Exercise Science	March 20, 2015
Lainey	Senior	Integrated Marketing Communications	March 20, 2015
Caleb	Freshman	Education	March 20, 2015

Figure 6

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INSIGHTS

The findings from the qualitative data matched up very well with the findings from the quantitative data. The advantage the researcher had during the interviews was the ability to ask interviewees to elaborate on their answers or explain their viewpoints on certain topics.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Facebook and Instagram are still a huge part of college students' everyday lives. Nearly all interviewees said they had made a purchase as a result of an advertisement on social media. Furthermore, many reported that they have often clicked on advertisements on social media. Interviewees tend to follow their favorite brands and products on social media, but almost all responded that they don't make posts or tweets or Instagram about their favorite brands and products. "As far as people posting stuff, that's kind of declined over the last few years. I check in at restaurants, but that's about it," said freshman education major, Caleb. One interviewee said she followed about 25 brands or products on Facebook, but had trouble naming a single one. The brand interaction on social media was less than what the researcher had expected.

BRAND LOYALTY & IMPORTANT QUALITIES IN A BRAND OR PRODUCT

From the interviews, the researcher determined that college students are very brand loyal about "bigger" or specialty items—such as Apple products, Levi Jeans, and Patagonia or North Face jackets. One interviewee, a senior general studies major, had this to say about his high level of brand loyalty: "I think I'm very brand loyal. I look for products that are continually going to keep up with the time if not go ahead of their time,

all while still keeping their company identity." Students expressed comfort in knowing a product's value and performance. "I'm loyal to brands that don't change—I know what I'm getting," expressed freshman history major, Caleb. When asked about trying new brands and products, a sophomore exercise science major interviewee said, "It's just easier to buy what I know works."

However, while it appears from the interviews that college student consumers are often brand loyal, they are still open to new products occasionally if they come highly recommended by friends. Information from the interviews pointed to word-of-mouth as being the best way in which students hear about new products and brands. An interesting point about trying new products was brought up in two of the interviews: "Trying new items that are cheap is less of a risk—if it doesn't work; it was just a few bucks." So it seems that students are more likely to try a new toothpaste or shampoo, but trying a new company that sells jeans would pose a larger risk.

Many people listed Apple as the one brand or product they couldn't live without. All interviewees admitted that their tastes in shopping have changed since coming to college—more name brand focused. "It seems like when every girl gets to Ole Miss she has to have a Patagonia jacket and a pair of Hunter rain boots," said one student interviewee. However, data from the interviews suggests that this pressure to conform to popular styles decreases during a student's time in college. As one student put it, "when I was younger I was worried about what people thought of me, but now I don't care." As students progress in academic classification, quality and price begin to take the stage from popularity and style.

High quality and affordability--just as in the quantitative survey--are very important factors in a student's decision to purchase. "The more expensive an item is the better quality it has to be for me to buy it," says Cassidy, a sophomore exercise science major. However, most interviewees indicated that when they need something, they just go get it. This group of students doesn't just throw money around, but they also aren't too cheap to buy good quality items and venture out occasionally. Price and quality are most important. When talking about purchases he's made in the past, Joe said, "I bought them because they are products I know will last me a long time; they are worth investing in."

Customer service was never mentioned until the interviewer asked specifically if it was important (aided). The researcher posits that this could be because customer service is considered a given, or that so many transactions today don't require much face-to-face.

The researcher expected to hear a lot about the impact of companies' mission statements and level of environmental responsibility, but only one student brought up the topic. "Especially when someone is producing the same good, their environmental mission statement, how they treat their workers, how friendly their workers are is really important." It appears as though company mission statements and ethical standards are a secondary consideration in choosing a company, product, or brand.

"I think it is one thing I've thought about a lot as a consumer and as an advocate for locally made products and locally produced good, for US produced goods, for sustainably produced goods…regardless of whether or not I have those values (which I do), I have no interest in sacrificing quality for them. I am almost always more than willing to spend more on products that are more sustainable, nationally made, or locally

made. But I'm only willing to spend more if I know that it is just as good or better product than what I could get elsewhere…I have no desire to sacrifice quality. Quality trumps all."

ADVERTISEMENTS

Interviewees expressed that they are best reached friends, but after that, TV and online had the most impact. A few of the interviewees mentioned that they specifically pay attention to funny commercials or very serious ones, such as anti-smoking commercials. It wasn't just content, though, that students brought up in the interview. One student said, "If I'm in-store it's going to be more of an impulse buy and if it's online it's going to be more of a thought out decision." Another student said something similar about ads being more effective when you can take advantage of them immediately.

One student, a senior integrated marketing communications major had some insightful things to say about how she is best reached. "Guerilla marketing is huge— where you see something that doesn't belong on the wall you are more likely to pay attention to it. Blogs are also good, especially if I see a post about a product."

Perhaps the most insightful response about what kind of advertising works best was from the freshman interviewee. He said, "What people wear and what you see is the best advertising. What other consumers are doing has a big effect."

ONLINE SHOPPING

Nearly all respondents reported that they shop online very often. Taylor, a senior communication sciences and disorders major explained that she shops online "all of the time. That's pretty much where I buy all of my stuff from." All interviewees said that they were fully comfortable paying with credit card online.

CAMPUS REPRESENTATIVES AND PROMOTIONAL EVENTS

Campus representatives are fairly effective and kind of "cool", but the individual has to do a good job in order to be affective. Student consumers like that it is more personal. Marquita, a sophomore biology major said, "I'd rather buy make up from a friend than have to go to Belk to purchase it." Another interviewee said, "I think it's very effective as long as they get their name without being annoying." But while some interviewees had positive views on campus and brand representatives, a few students pointed out reasons why they are not effective. Josh, a junior international studies major said, "I think it's terribly ineffective for companies…they're not picking people who are actually reaching out for the company, so they are most likely not actually increasing the company's following…it's a wasted resource…a campus representative is going to hang out with a likeminded group of people who are most likely already purchasing that item." Yet another interviewee talked about the success of brand representatives, saying that she thought it "depends a lot on the availability of the product," citing Advocare and ItWorks as products that are widely available.

Most interviewees thought that campus promotional events were fun and fairly effective ways for a brand or product to reach current and new customers. Many of the

students used the term "hands-on" to describe why they liked promotional events. Many interviewees brought up the day last semester when Coca Cola made cans with students' names on them in front of the student union. When discussing Coca Cola's visit to Ole Miss, Joe said, "Coca Cola is a great example of such a brand name and you're letting people personalize it. It's such a sweet touch. It's so genius." However, some students took a different perspective. Sophomore Cassidy said "I think a lot of people just do what have to do to get the free stuff—I know I do." She did, however, agree that her view of Coca Cola was strengthened.

At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher asked if the participant had anything he or she would like to add about themselves as consumers or about college student consumers as a whole. A few students had some interesting things to say.

"I think we want to feel that we are wearing something unique, doing something unique, and eating something unique... Our generation loves feeling like we're pushing boundaries or discovering something new."

CHAPTER IV: IMPLICATIONS

The researcher has determined that most college student consumers undergo a transition during their college years—a shift from chasing popular, in-style name brands to valuing high quality products that will last and hold true to the consumer's values. This is likely because students have more discretionary spending money when they first enter college, coupled with the social pressures to conform to campus styles. As students age, they receive less support from their parents, they have a better concept of the value of money, or a combination of both. Also, it seems that students eventually get over the pressure to have all of the right stuff. With this new knowledge of college student consumers, marketers focused on this specific target market should focus on aligning their company, brand, or product with the values of college students. Marketers looking to create strong brand loyalty with their college student customers should keep in mind how much college students value good quality and affordability in a product or brand. Similarly, if it is the goal of marketers to entice college students to try a new brand or product, they must place emphasis on the popularity and style of the item while reducing the perceived risk to potential customers. Companies that desire to connect more with their college student target market should consider the social media that those students are consuming most—Facebook and Instagram, for example.

LIMITATIONS

As with every research project, this thesis had limitations. First and foremost, time was a very limited resource. The researcher switched topics in early February, and worked tirelessly to complete the work within the time allotted. More time would have allowed for an improved research design, more respondents and interviewees, and further analysis of data.

Another significant limitation was scope. On a local level, the researcher could have had more survey respondents and interviewees from which to draw data. On a broader level, one can be certain that University of Mississippi students do not perfectly represent all college student consumers. The demographics of the student population at the university are probably very different from a small, private university in Idaho or Illinois, for example. If time had allowed, another round of surveys and interviews would have been conducted to see how well the data matched up.

As with all research projects, additional research would prove valuable. Further research conducted at other colleges and universities would be informative and interesting. The researcher would like to know if the trends spotted in college student consumers at the University of Mississippi are unique to the region, or if college student consumers are quite similar across the nation. It would also be interesting to design a survey to be taken for the first time by students in their freshman year, and then taken a second time upon graduation to see a more accurate tracking of how each student's consumer habits and behavior changes throughout the duration of their undergraduate years.

CONCLUSION
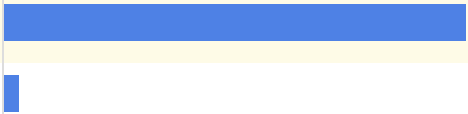
The purpose of this research was to discover the trends and patterns in college student consumer behaviors during their years as undergraduate students. In order to accomplish this, the researcher designed a two-pronged research plan that included quantitative research in the form of an Internet survey, and qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviewees with a diverse pool of participants. The survey data collected served as easily measurable information about college student consumers, and the in-depth interviews conducted were excellent exploratory conversations that lead to wonderful insights. The researcher was pleased with the data collected from the quantitative and qualitative portions of the research project. Results from the survey indicated that many students are still using social media regularly, but brand and product interactions on social media are decreasing, and seem to be less effective as a whole. The survey also found that college students are still reached by television advertising, and most students report that they recall visual advertisements more than anything else. Even post and social media advertisements appeared to be effective, with nearly 60% of students responding that they had made a purchase as a direct result of such an advertisement or post. The survey data also suggested that college student consumers are brand loyal when it comes to bigger and riskier purchases. For a college student to try a new brand or product, it generally has to come highly recommended from a few friends. The qualitative research results indicated that college student consumers complete a transition during their years at the university. Responses suggest that students come to college under a heavy social influence to have all of the right name brands and products, and they gradually care less about having the right things as their academic classification

progresses. It also appears that the more college students age, the more they value high quality and affordability over style and popularity. Another valuable insight from the interviews and survey responses makes it clear that today's college students are completely comfortable shopping online and making purchases outside of brick-and-mortar stores. Furthermore, non-traditional forms of marketing such as campus brand representatives, promotional events on campus, and guerilla marketing approaches seem to catch the attention of college student consumers. From the insights mined using both types of data, marketers looking to focus on the segment of college students should consider the results of this research in their efforts—namely, they should focus on the correct forms of social media, understand how to best reach the consumer, and recognize what the consumer values.
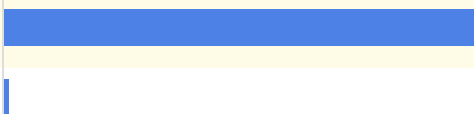
QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DATA RESULTS

Figure A-1.

Are you 18 years of age or older?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		93	97%
2	No		3	3%
	Total		96	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.03
Variance	0.03
Standard Deviation	0.17
Total Responses	96

Figure A-2.

Are you a student at the University of Mississippi?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		92	99%
2	No		1	1%
	Total		93	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.01
Variance	0.01
Standard Deviation	0.10
Total Responses	93

Figure A-3.

What is your academic classification?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Freshman		11	12%
2	Sophomore		15	16%
3	Junior		26	28%
4	Senior		41	44%
5	Graduate Student		1	1%
	Total		94	100%
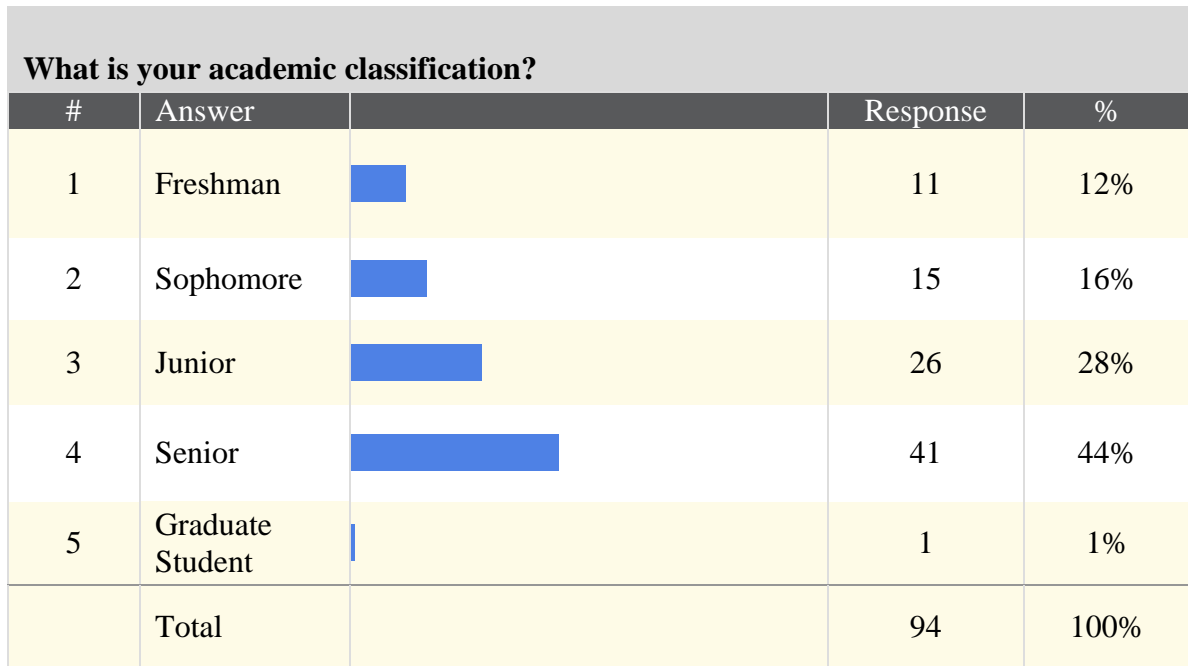
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	5
Mean	3.06
Variance	1.11
Standard Deviation	1.06
Total Responses	94

Figure A-4.

What is your gender?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Male		25	27%
2	Female		68	73%
	Total		93	100%
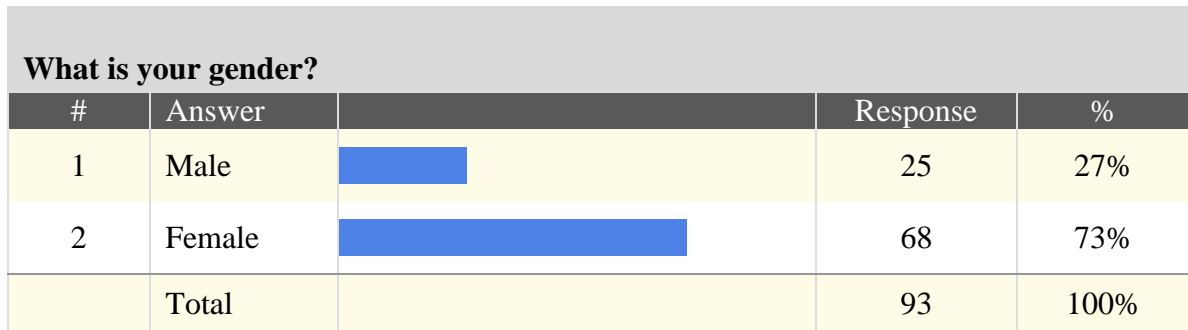
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.73
Variance	0.20
Standard Deviation	0.45
Total Responses	93

Figure A-5.

Are you currently employed?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	No		57	61%
2	Yes, less than 10 hours per week		16	17%
3	Yes, between 10-20 hours per week		14	15%
4	More than 20 hours per week		7	7%
	Total		94	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	4
Mean	1.69
Variance	0.97
Standard Deviation	0.98
Total Responses	94

Figure A-6.

Excluding groceries, about how much money do you spend on shopping each month?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	$0-$50		32	34%
2	$51-$100		22	24%
3	$101-$150		20	22%
4	$151-$200		9	10%
5	More than $200		10	11%
	Total		93	100%
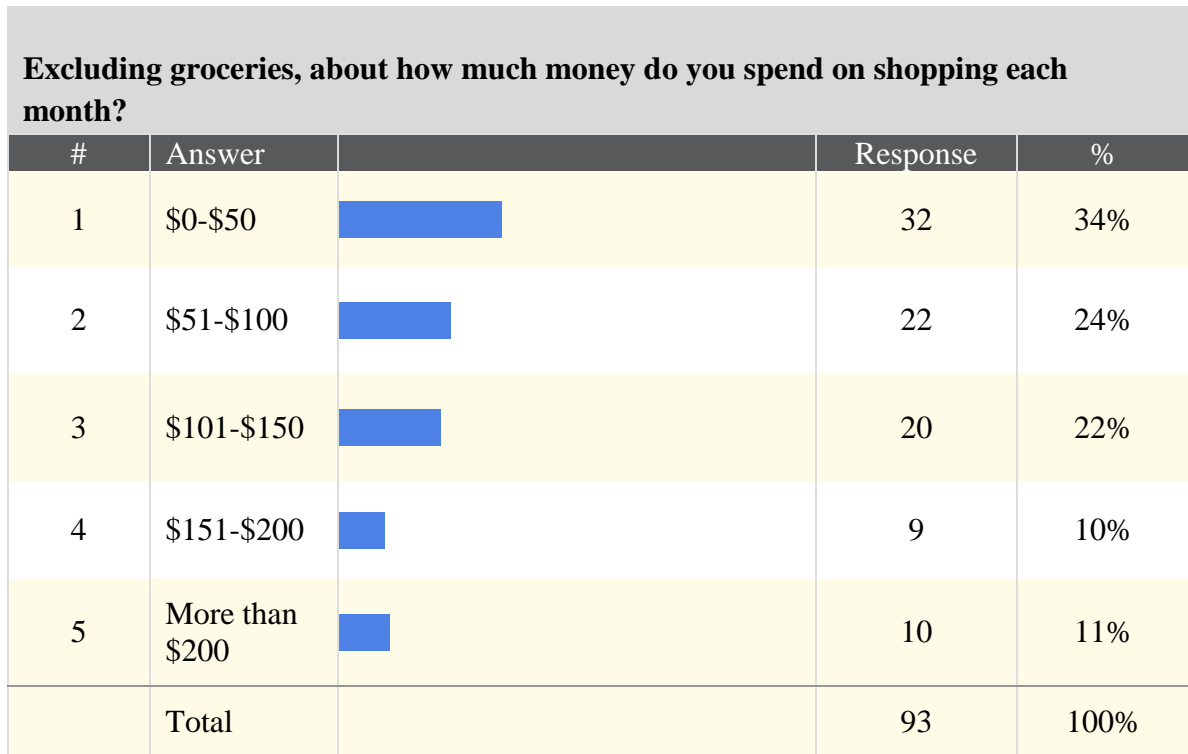
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	5
Mean	2.39
Variance	1.78
Standard Deviation	1.34
Total Responses	93

Figure A-7.

How often do you use each type of social media?

#	Question	Many times a day	Once a day	Once a Week	Never	Total Responses	Mean
1	Facebook	69	16	5	3	93	1.38
2	Twitter	36	10	17	30	93	2.44
3	Instagram	59	10	5	18	92	1.80
4	LinkedIn	3	5	24	60	92	3.53
5	YouTube	16	27	37	14	94	2.52
6	Pinterest	17	11	27	38	93	2.92
7	Google+	12	9	6	65	92	3.35
8	Foursquare	0	1	1	90	92	3.97

Min Value	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2
Max Value	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Mean	1.38	2.44	1.80	3.53	2.52	2.92	3.35	3.97
Variance	0.54	1.68	1.46	0.56	0.90	1.27	1.22	0.05
Standard Deviation	0.74	1.30	1.21	0.75	0.95	1.13	1.10	0.23
Total Responses	93	93	92	92	94	93	92	92

Figure A-8.

How often do you post a status, picture, or tweet on social media about a product, brand, or company?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Never		23	25%
2	Rarely		44	48%
3	Occasionally		23	25%
4	Frequently		1	1%
	Total		91	100%
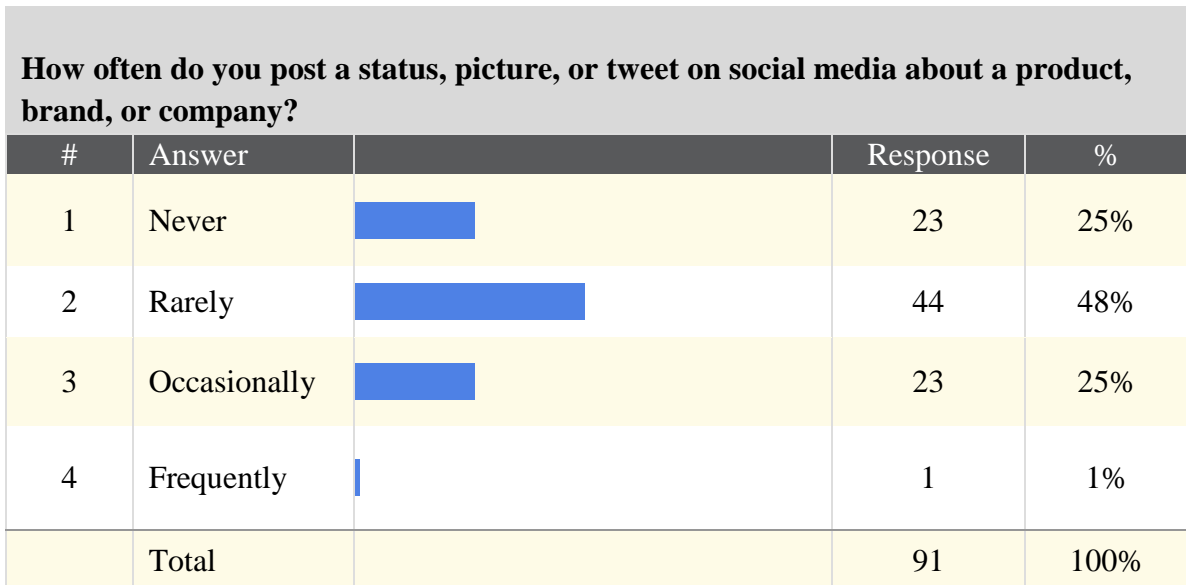
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	4
Mean	2.02
Variance	0.56
Standard Deviation	0.75
Total Responses	91

Figure A-9.

Take a moment to think of your favorite brands or products. How easy is it to think of those brands or products?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Difficult		4	4%
2	Somewhat Difficult		11	12%
3	Neutral		13	14%
4	Somewhat Easy		32	36%
5	Easy		30	33%
	Total		90	100%
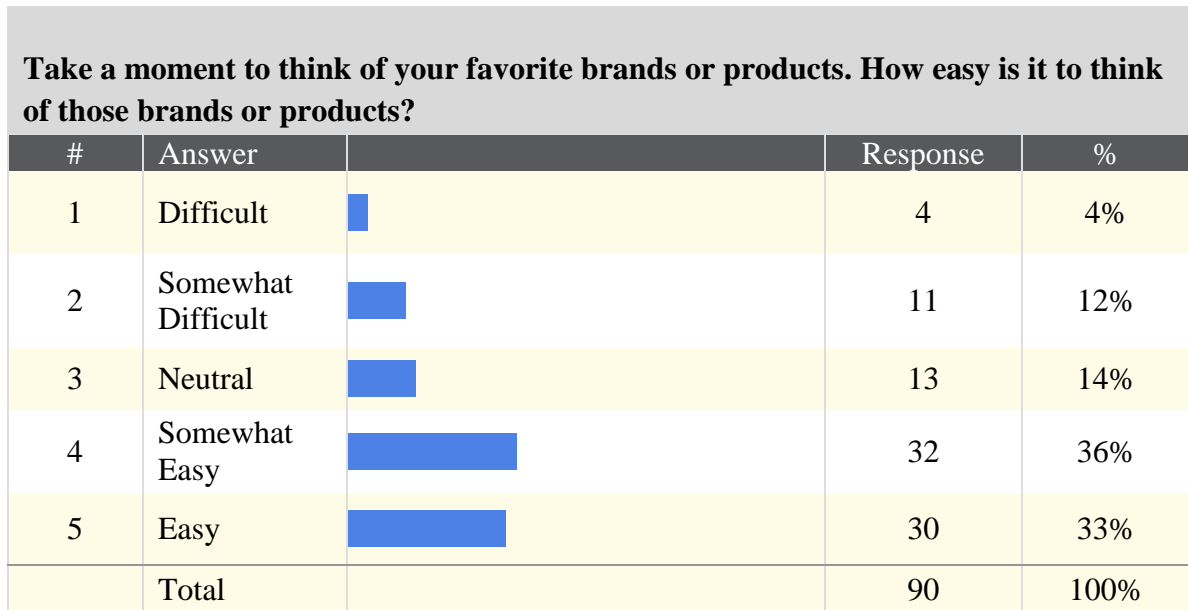
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	5
Mean	3.81
Variance	1.35
Standard Deviation	1.16
Total Responses	90

Figure A-10.

Please select the statement that best describes your purchasing behavior.

#	Answer		Response	%
1	"I always buy the same brands--why mess with a good thing?"		7	8%
2	"I usually buy the same brands, but I'm willing to try new things occasionally."		66	74%
3	"I buy whatever is on sale. It's all the same, right?"		15	17%
4	"I almost never buy the same brands. I like finding new brands and products!"		1	1%
	Total		89	100%
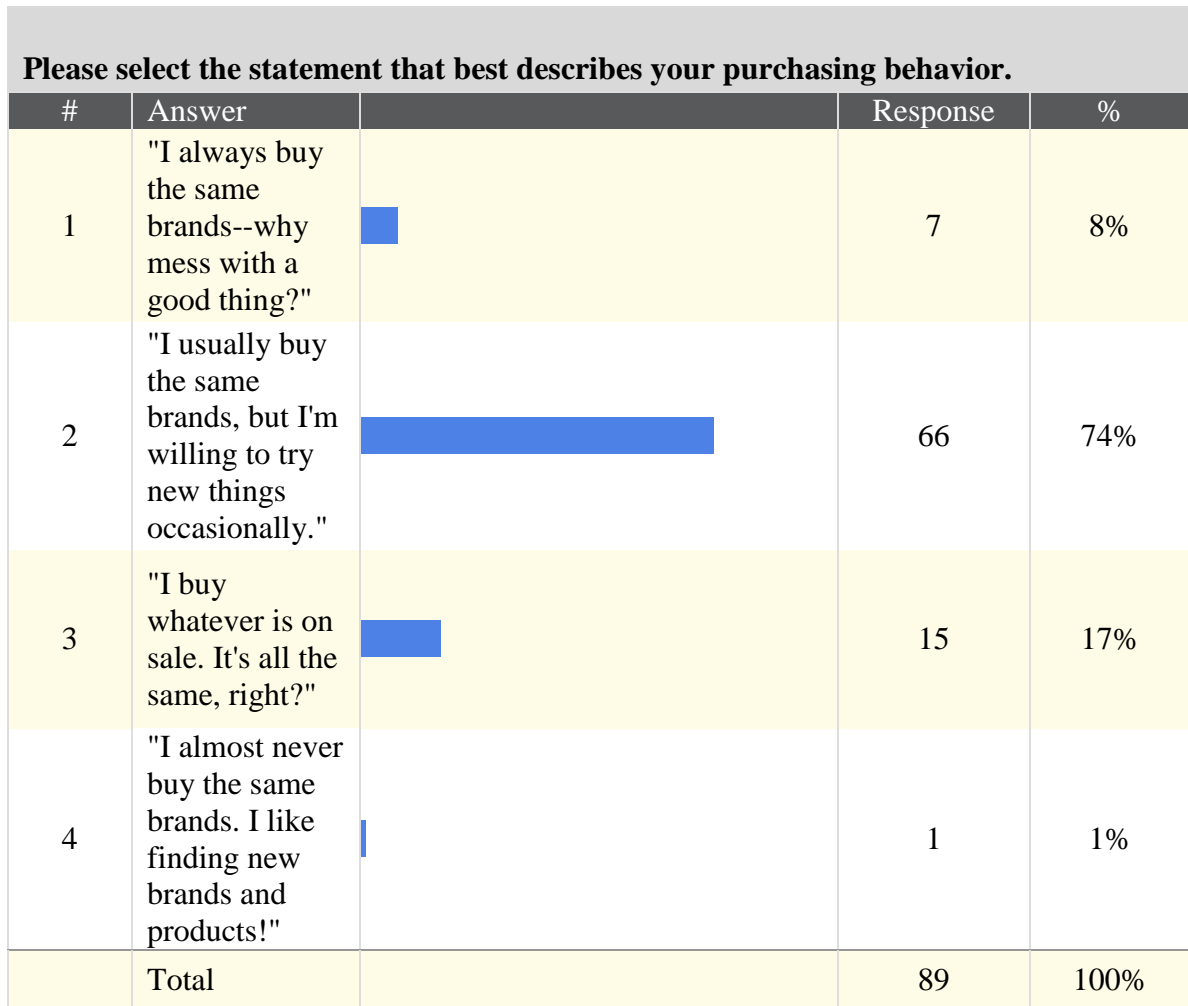
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	4
Mean	2.11
Variance	0.28
Standard Deviation	0.53
Total Responses	89

Figure A-11.

What are the things about your favorite brand or product that appeal to you? Please select all that apply.

#	Answer		Response	%
1	High quality		74	82%
2	Good customer service		37	41%
3	In-style		40	44%
4	Environmentally friendly		5	6%
5	Affordable		67	74%
6	Entertaining		19	21%
7	Popular		27	30%
8	Mission Statement		6	7%
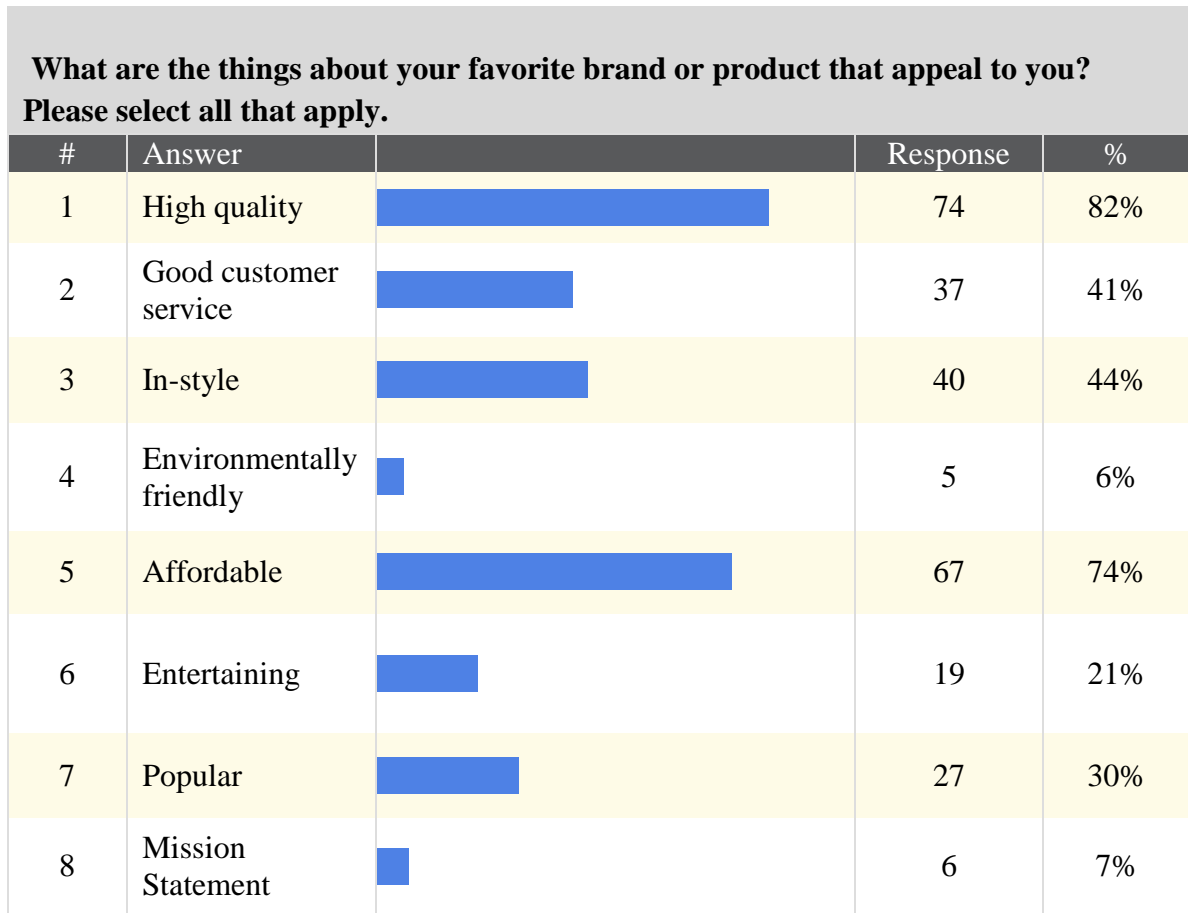
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	8
Total Responses	90

Figure A-12.

Some people follow or like some of their favorite products, brands, or companies on social media. How many of your favorite products, brands, or companies do you follow on social media?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	0		16	18%
2	1-10		58	64%
3	11-20		7	8%
4	More than 20		9	10%
	Total		90	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	4
Mean	2.10
Variance	0.65
Standard Deviation	0.81
Total Responses	90

Figure A-13.

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Brand/Product Fan		37	47%
2	Contests and Giveaways		14	18%
3	Good Deals		25	32%
4	Suggested by Friends		2	3%
	Total		78	100%

What are your reasons for following your favorite products, brands, and companies on social media? Please select all that apply.
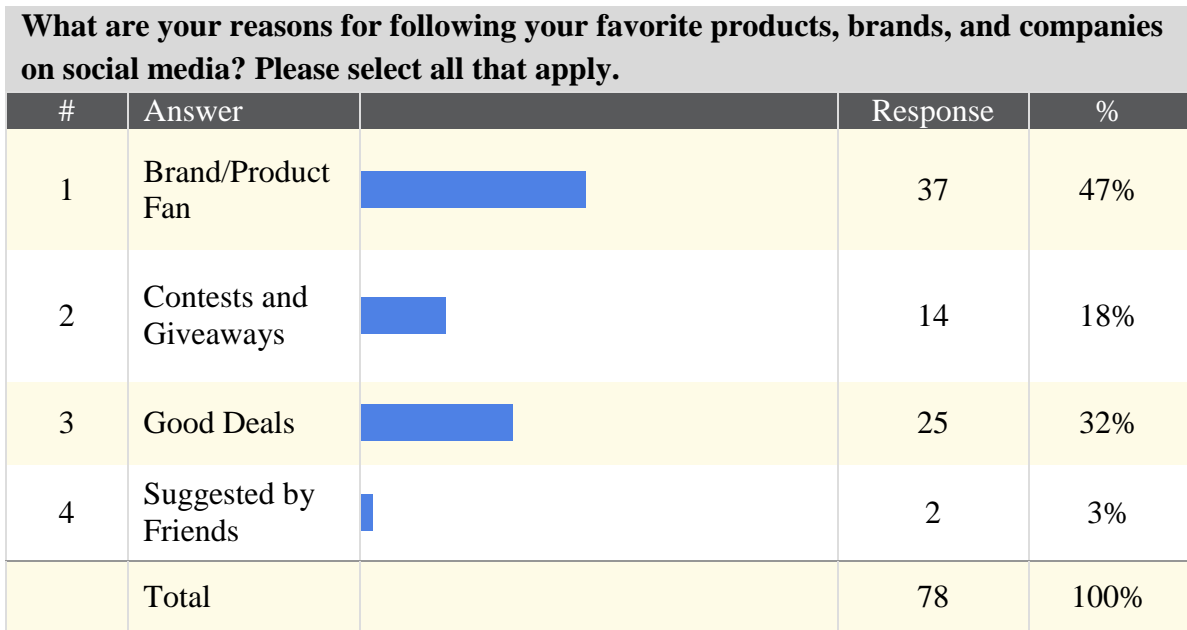
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	4
Mean	1.90
Variance	0.90
Standard Deviation	0.95
Total Responses	78

Figure A-14.

How do you usually find out about new brands or products? Select all that apply.

#	Answer		Response	%
1	TV		49	54%
2	Social Media		59	66%
3	Friends		75	83%
4	Newspapers		3	3%
5	Email		21	23%
6	Magazine		31	34%
7	Mail		6	7%
8	Radio		6	7%
9	Billboards		6	7%
10	Online		65	72%
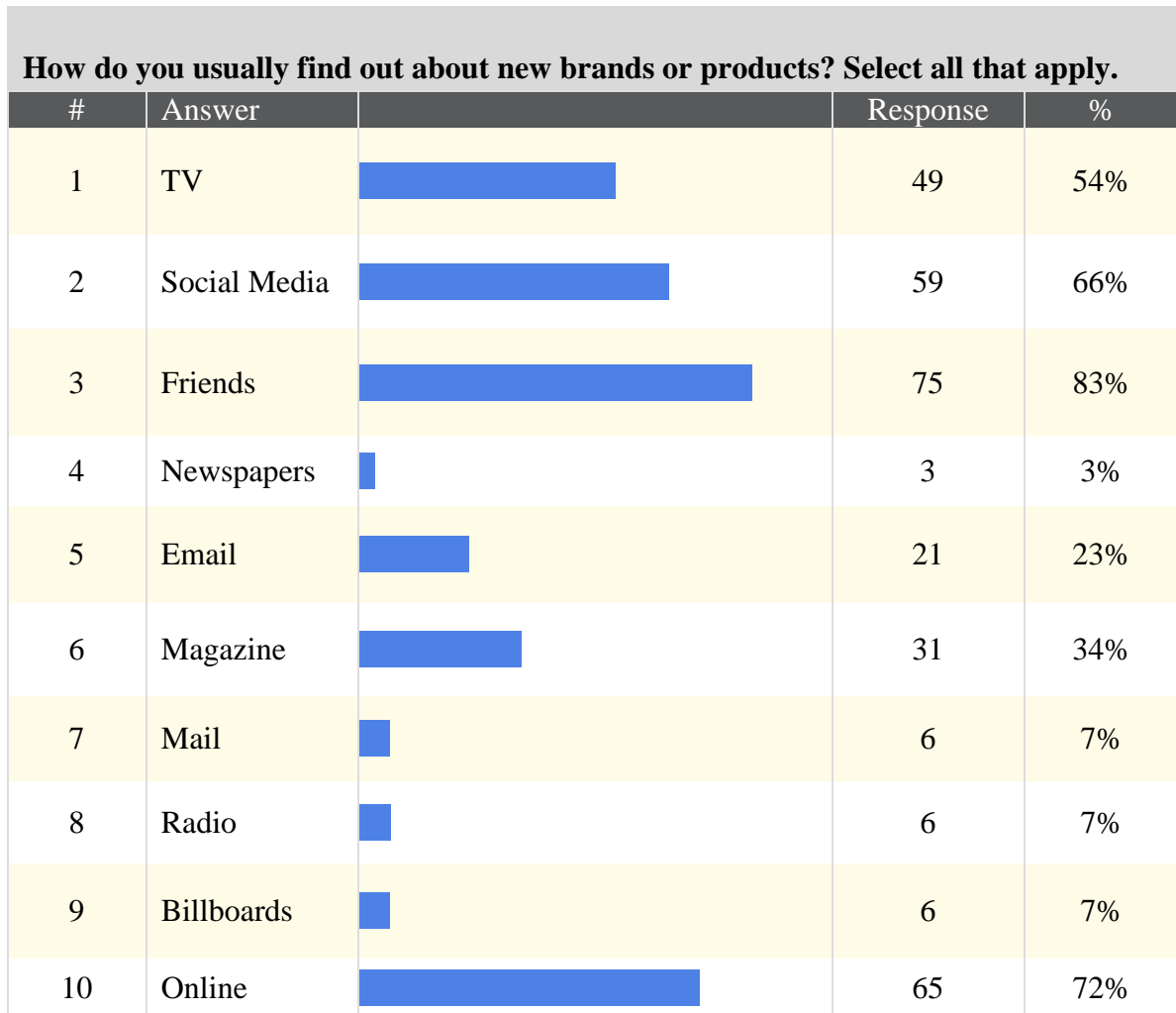
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	10
Total Responses	90

Figure A-15.

How often do you think your friends influence your preferences in items?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Not At All		5	6%
2	Occasionally		62	70%
3	Frequently		21	24%
	Total		88	100%
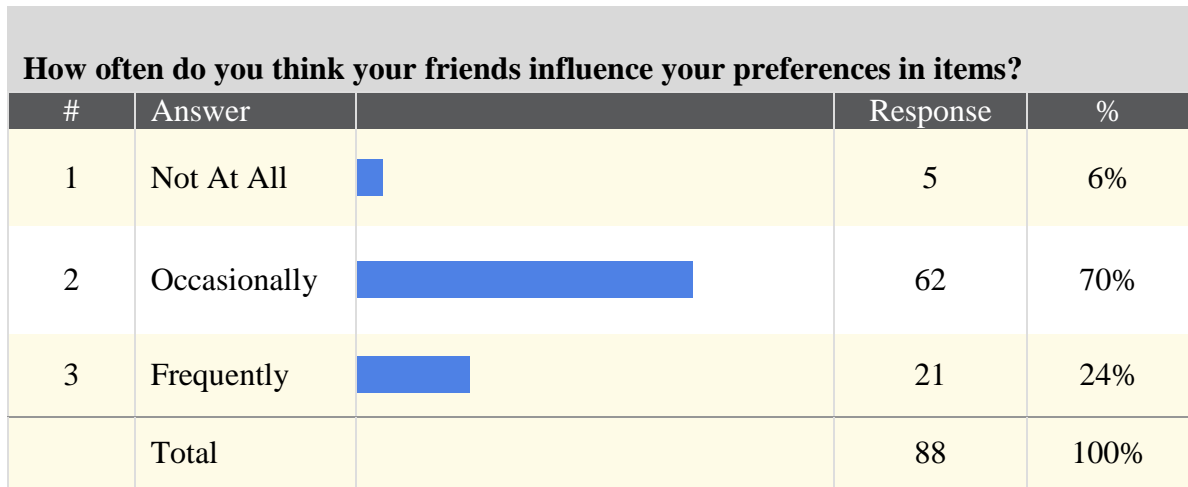
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	3
Mean	2.18
Variance	0.27
Standard Deviation	0.52
Total Responses	88

Figure A-16.

Has there ever been a time when you really liked an item, but did not purchase it solely because you were worried what other people would think of the brand or product type?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		35	40%
2	No		52	60%
	Total		87	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.60
Variance	0.24
Standard Deviation	0.49
Total Responses	87

Figure A-17.

When it comes to new ideas or products, _____ .

#	Answer		Response	%
1	I am the first to try it out!		18	20%
2	I wait for others to see if they like it before I purchase it.		57	64%
3	I am usually the last one of my friends to try it out.		14	16%
	Total		89	100%
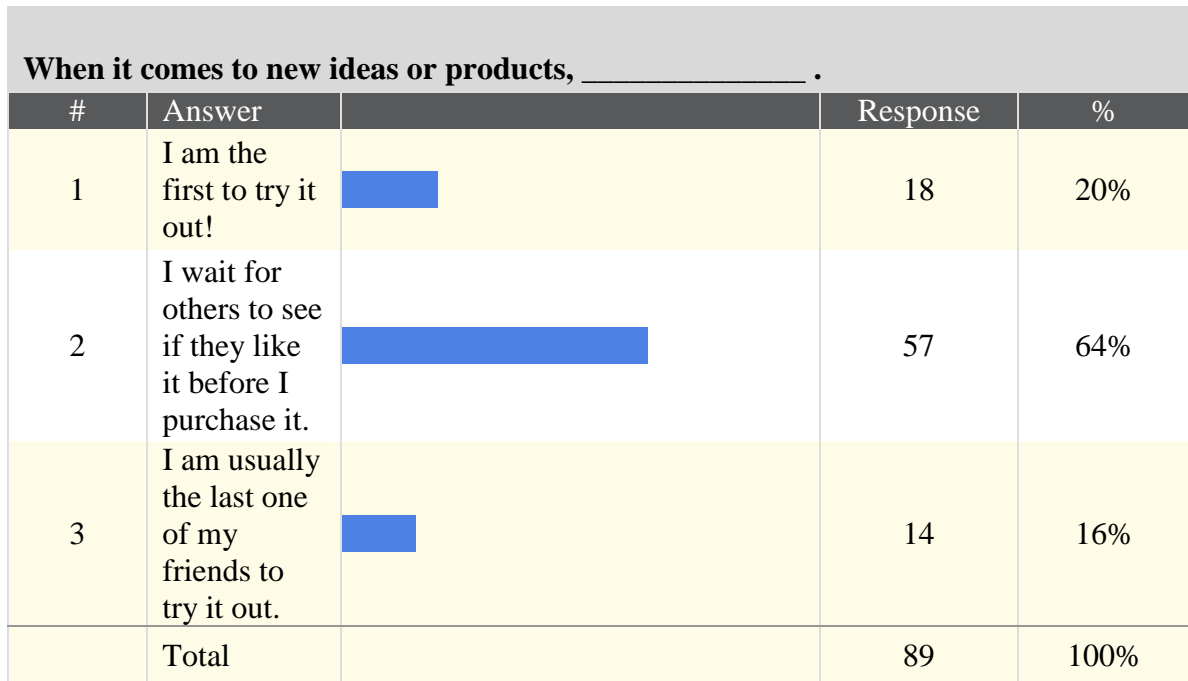
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	3
Mean	1.96
Variance	0.36
Standard Deviation	0.60
Total Responses	89

Figure A-18.

#	Answer		Response	%
1	True		60	68%
2	False		28	32%
	Total		88	100%

"I prefer buying the best-selling brands and products."

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.32
Variance	0.22
Standard Deviation	0.47
Total Responses	88

Figure A-19.

How often do you shop for and buy a product online?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Never		7	8%
2	Less than Once a Month		31	36%
3	Once a Month		16	18%
4	2-3 Times a Month		21	24%
5	Once a Week		8	9%
6	2-3 Times a Week		1	1%
7	Daily		3	3%
	Total		87	100%
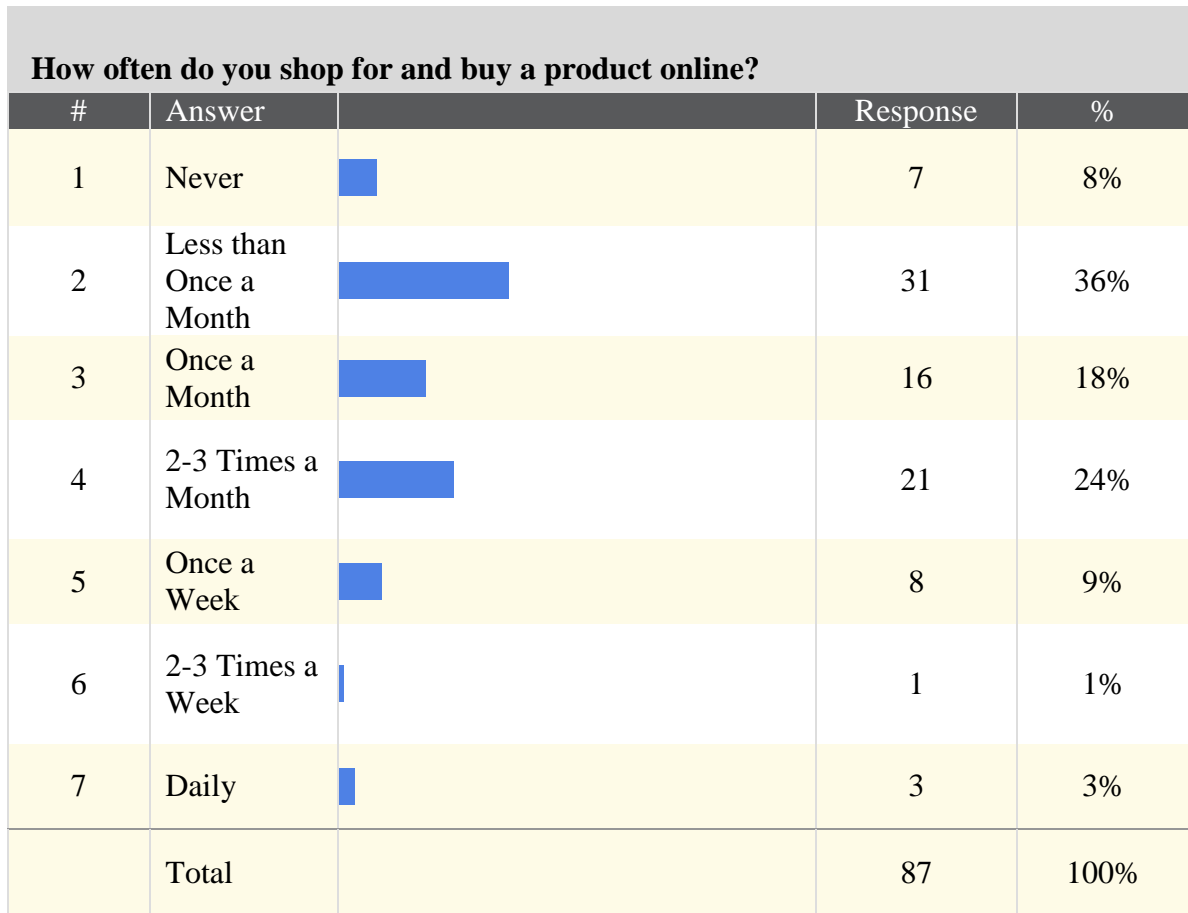
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	7
Mean	3.08
Variance	1.96
Standard Deviation	1.40
Total Responses	87

Figure A-20.

When you shop, what are you generally shopping for?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Clothing		76	87%
2	Shoes		45	52%
3	Books		29	33%
4	Technology		24	28%
5	Music		23	26%
6	Art		8	9%
7	Movies/DVDs		15	17%
8	Car accessories		3	3%
9	Make up		30	34%
10	Furniture		8	9%
11	Jewelry		21	24%
12	Pet stuff		4	5%
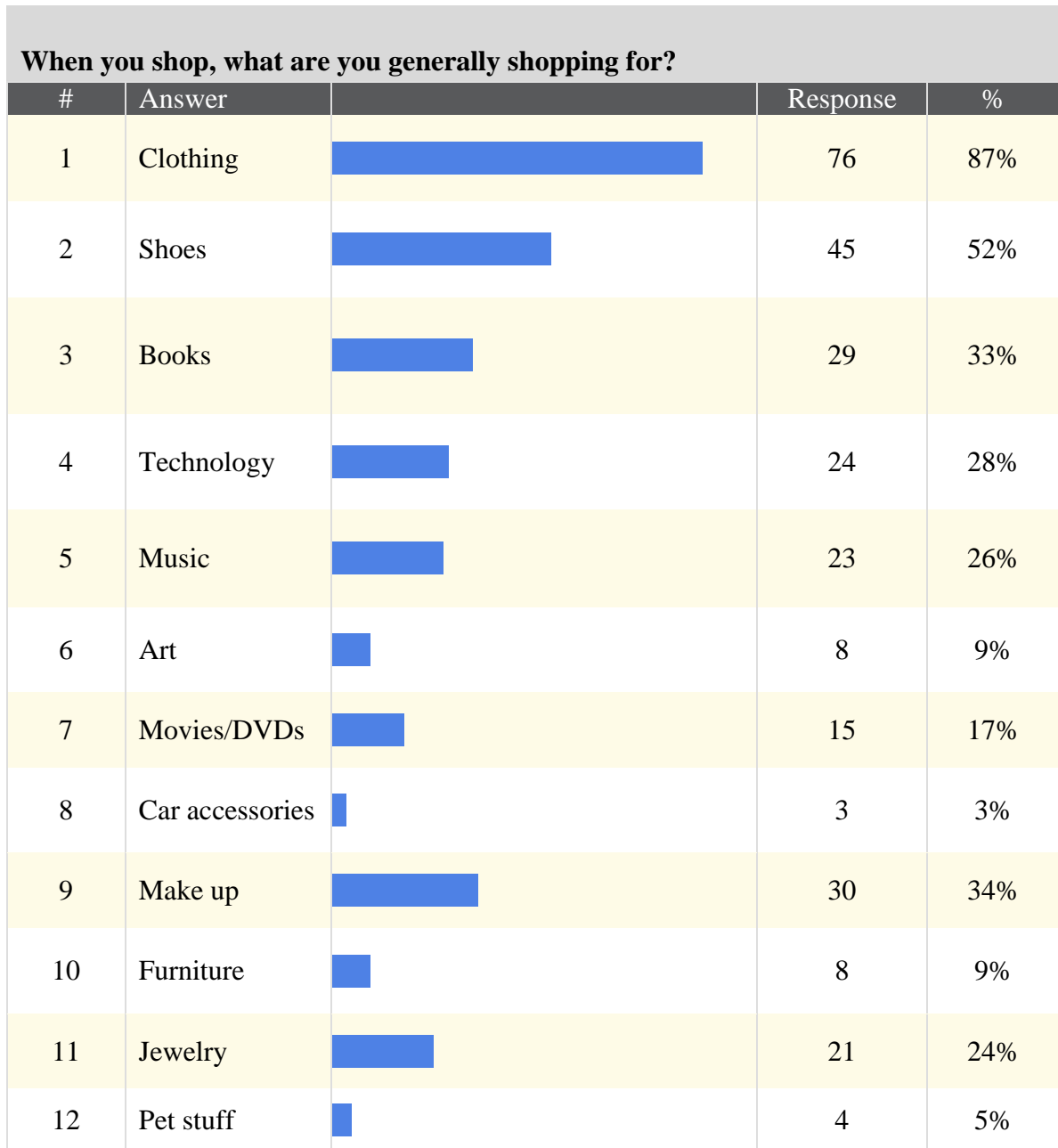
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	12
Total Responses	87

Figure A-21.

#	Answer		Response	%
	Have you ever made an online purchase as a result of an advertisement or post you saw on social media?			
1	Yes		49	57%
2	No		37	43%
	Total		86	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.43
Variance	0.25
Standard Deviation	0.50
Total Responses	86

Figure A-22.

Read the statement below and then select the view that you most identify with." I don't mind when I see ads online that are personalized using information from my previous internet searches."

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Strongly Disagree		14	16%
2	Disagree		24	28%
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree		25	29%
4	Agree		22	25%
5	Strongly Agree		2	2%
	Total		87	100%
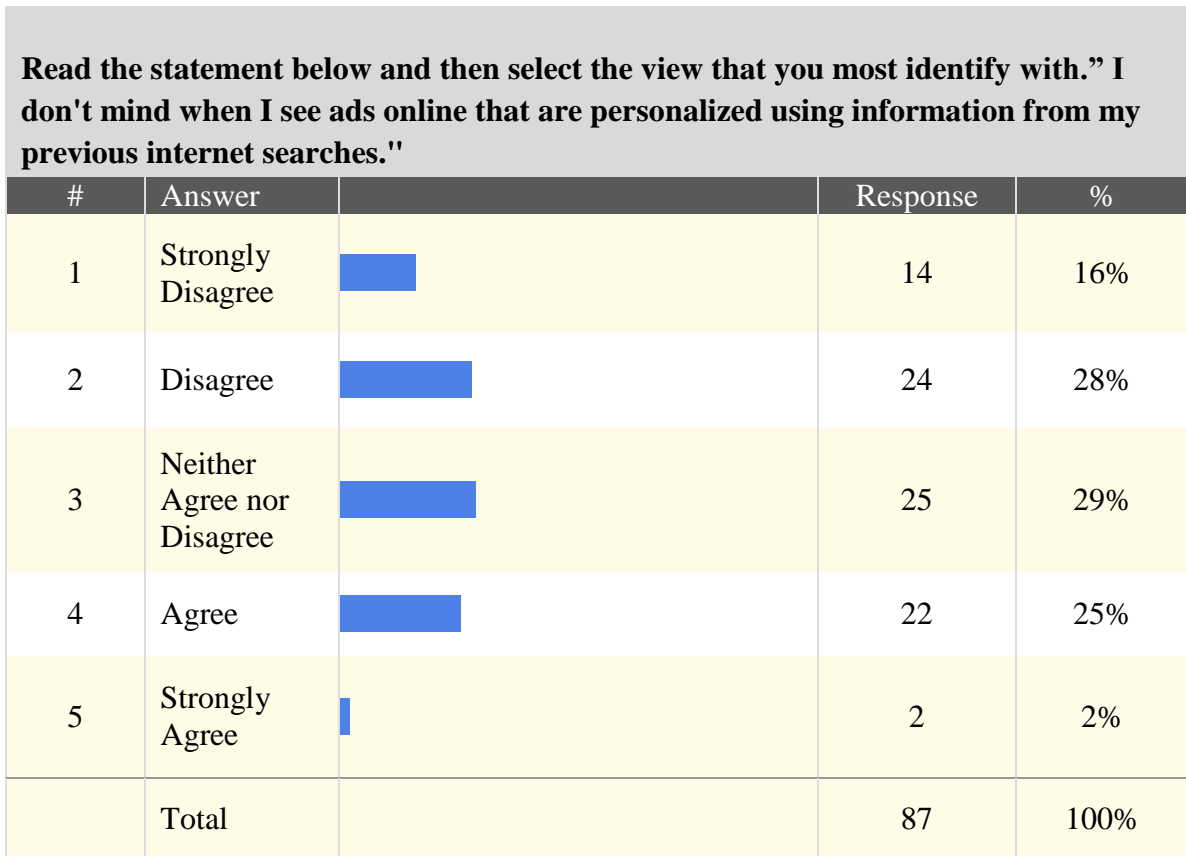
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	5
Mean	2.70
Variance	1.19
Standard Deviation	1.09
Total Responses	87

Figure A-23.

How often do you use coupons or promotions?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Never		8	9%
2	Less than Once a Month		34	39%
3	Once a Month		22	25%
4	2-3 Times a Month		18	21%
5	Once a Week		3	3%
6	2-3 Times a Week		2	2%
	Total		87	100%
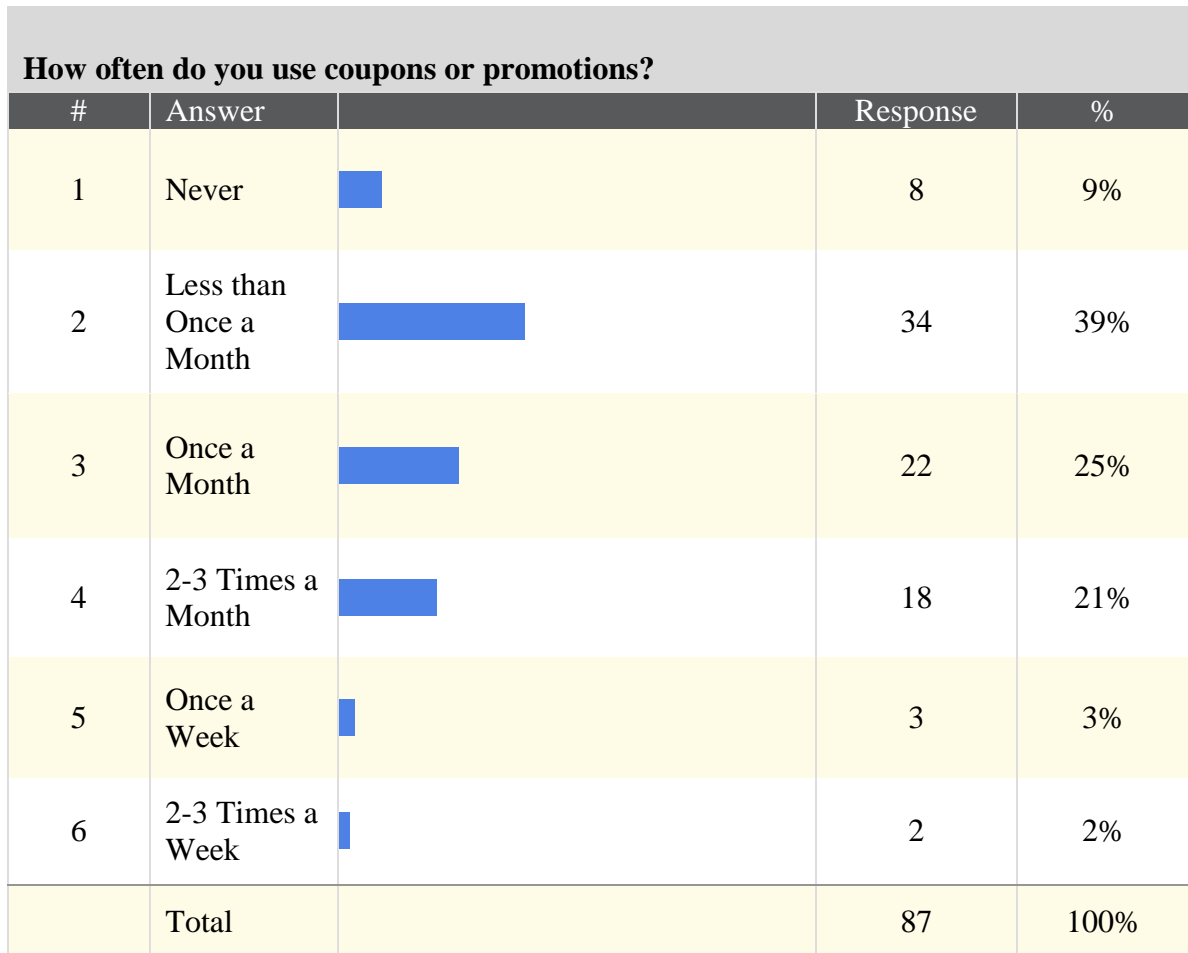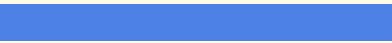
Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	6
Mean	2.77
Variance	1.27
Standard Deviation	1.13
Total Responses	87

Figure A-24.

"I spend little time deciding what products to buy."

#	Answer		Response	%
1	True		24	29%
2	False		60	71%
	Total		84	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.71
Variance	0.21
Standard Deviation	0.45
Total Responses	84

Figure A-25.

From the two statements below, please select the one that best describes you.

#	Answer		Response	%
1	I make purchases whenever I want or need something		72	83%
2	I wait until the item I want is on sale before I purchase it		15	17%
	Total		87	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.17
Variance	0.14
Standard Deviation	0.38
Total Responses	87

APPENDIX B

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is your name?

2. What is your academic classification?

3. About how much money do you spend each month on non-necessity purchases?

4. What types of social media do you regularly use?

5. On your social media accounts, do you follow or like any of your favorite

   companies, products, or brands? Can you name a few of them?

6. Have you ever posted tweeted, instagrammed, etc. about a brand or product?

7. What is the one brand or product that you just cannot live without?

8. Why do you think you like these brands and products?

9. How did you first discover these brands or products? Please give examples.

10. Have your shopping tastes changed since coming to college? Explain.

11. When making purchases, do you usually stick to brands or products you already know and like?

12. How often do you try a new brand or product?

13. Have you ever liked an item but decided not to purchase it because you were worried about what others would think of you? Please Explain.

14. Have you ever disliked an item, but you purchased it anyways because you thought others would see it as "cool"?

15. When making purchases, what are some of the things that are important to you in a purchasing experience?

16. How much do you think your friends influence you in your product or brand preferences?

17. How often do you shop online?

18. Have you ever made an online purchase as a result of an advertisement or post on social media? Tell me about it.

19. Have you ever interacted with a campus representative for a product, brand, or company? Explain.

20. Have you ever participated in a promotional event outside of the Student Union? Describe it.

21. Take a moment to think about the times you most notice advertisements. When and where are you best reached by advertising messages?

22. If you had to describe yourself as a consumer, what would you say?

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