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# The Effects of Social Media on Fashion Consumption

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THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON FASHION CONSUMPTION

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.

Oxford  
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Approved by

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ABSTRACT  
SYDNEY ROSE MCCARTHY: The Effects of Social Media on Fashion  
Consumption  
(Under the direction of Dr. Christopher Newman)

The fashion industry, like most business in general, has been heavily impacted in recent years by the introduction of online social media. Social media has changed the way in which people not only communicate, but also how firms advertise and reach their consumer. The purpose of this research was to explore the ways social media impacts fashion consumption, specifically among the female, college-age demographic. Secondary research was used in the initial stages of the process to gather information prior to conducting primary research. Both qualitative and quantitative research was then conducted. The primary method for collecting qualitative data was personal interviews with the target demographic. Next, quantitative data was administered through surveys distributed via convenience sample to approximately 100 participants. Results indicated that nearly all college students are active on social media. The primary motivator for using social media is to stay in touch with friends. Therefore, positioning a business as a friend on these sites, rather than solely a professional company, is beneficial. Additionally, there are four critical social media outlets currently dominating the market: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram. It would largely benefit businesses to focus on creating a presence on these sites. While Facebook and

Twitter have been mainstays for quite some time now, Pinterest and Instagram allow significant opportunity for business growth and innovation. Implementing Pinterest to a marketing strategy perhaps permits the greatest opportunity to increase sales due to its complete visual nature and direct linkage to purchase sites. Exploring how social media is impacting business and noting its significance is crucial for a company to stay at the forefront of competition. The implications of this research provide fashion retailers with a guideline for mastering social media usage.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, social media has redefined the world we are living in. What began as a means to communicate, maintain contact, or reconnect with old friends, has slowly but surely evolved into a crucial part of our daily lives; severely altering the way business is done. One specific area of business that has been particularly affected by the social media revolution is the fashion industry. Through the institution of social media, what was once only available to elite insiders is now accessible by the masses. For example, because of a designer's Facebook page, Twitter feed, or Instagram account, those previously unconnected to high fashion can now watch live footage from Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week taking place in New York City, an opportunity that was once only limited to industry insiders, celebrities, and socialites.

Before the existence of these social media outlets, sales, store traffic, and financial records were conceivably the only way to gauge consumers' opinions. Today though, "the cliché that 'the customer is king' has taken on a whole new definition. Customer feedback today not only reaches the companies much faster, but can also spread out to a much broader audience through 'friends' of the customer commenting on social media" (Savitz). Companies are now forced to listen and pay attention to customer opinions because failure to do so could cause a demise of their reputation by means of social media slander.



This being said, there is no way to communicate that is more cost effective or time efficient than social media. In order to remain a market fixture, bricks and mortar retailers must adapt and begin utilizing social media as a cornerstone in their business structure.

While the adaptation to changing technologies is vital to all types of retailers, Fashion retailers should take special notice. In some sense, fashion is a product of our environment. That is to say, trends constantly come and go and fashion is largely ever changing. From the consumer's perspective, it is easy to see how social media could be a vehicle to expedite communication of these trends. However, from a retailer's perspective it is vital to remain not only completely informed, but also very connected, in order to better serve customers' needs.

Oxford, Mississippi is unique to the fashion industry in that there is a highly concentrated female population, ages 18-22, which possesses a high level of disposable income to spend on fashion. The University of Mississippi is notorious for this element of its' student body and it becomes exceptionally obvious after spending only a short amount of time in The Grove or The Square on any given weekend. One undergraduate posted, "The typical Ole Miss female student is attractive, wears good-looking clothes, and usually has her daddy's credit card in her back pocket" (Urban Dictionary). While many may view this stereotype as negative, the reality is the demographic exists. This being said, it would be strategic for local, high-end, retailers to take advantage of the opportunities social media outlets present.

Even more, it is no secret that the role of social media in a college town would be magnified. Today's college demographic is conceivably the first generation to grow up

utilizing social media from an early age and to have the Web serve as an integral part of their social lives. More precisely, it seems as though females are more active on these social media outlets and coincidentally are the ones most likely to follow fashion trends religiously.

## CHAPTER I: SOCIAL MEDIA

It is no secret that social media dominates many facets of life as we know it. As stated prior, in the past decade particularly, social networking has grown exponentially. To say that the industry has skyrocketed would be an understatement—it has completely revolutionized the world we live in. While there are a number of different media sites, Facebook, Twitter, and most recently Instagram and Pinterest have soared and become part of the day-to-day life for many. One could say these four sites dominate the market and embody the ideas and things one associates with “social media” in conversation.

In less than ten years, Facebook evolved from a “fledgling startup to a \$114 billion giant” (Reporter, IBTimes Staff). Because of its early introduction, Facebook dominates the social media world today and encapsulates all that the industry entails. It is a place to keep in touch with friends, share content, and even obtain news and information.

Although social media sites did exist prior to Facebook, they were quickly dethroned as Facebook picked up momentum. For example, in 2006, MySpace was the center of the social media universe. However by 2009 Facebook had more accounts open and was growing rapidly (Robertson). Perhaps people were so drawn to Facebook in its’ early years because of the newness and excitement surrounding the innovation. However, unlike many of its opponents, Facebook does not seem to be going anywhere and what has kept devotees loyal for so many years is something much more complex than a new layout, status bar, or photo feature.

According to recent research “two new studies have found that the social network satisfies basic human desires, both body and soul.” (Mehta). The network may owe some of its success to the positive, feel-good state it invokes in its users. Research findings also revealed that two primary social needs might be responsible for people repeatedly visiting the site. The first need is the central desire to belong. Humans are wired to connect with other humans, as well to feel accepted by them. Facebook encourages these connections in two steps. (Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2008). Feeling detached initially motivates individuals to use the site (essentially as a coping mechanism), and in turn, the more frequently someone uses the site, the more connections they gain. “The second social motivation Facebook responds to is self-presentation, in which users fashion ideal — rather than accurate — versions of themselves through their profiles” (Mehta). This is manifest in, for example, the number of ‘friends’ in their network and photographs. Subsequently, Facebook personas that are presented online may be a more socially appealing ‘self’ that is aspired to in reality, but one that is not yet realized (Zhao & Zhao, 2008)” (Mehta).

Via this research, it is easy to grasp the reality of why Facebook has become such a staple to daily life. People enjoy feeling in control of their own worlds and Facebook is precisely the place to do so. In May 2012, Facebook’s Initial Public Offering was exceedingly underwhelming. However, in the grand scheme of things, this so-called “flop” has not seemed to slow down the site’s success. Because of users’ almost religious habit, the site is still flourishing and it seems only natural that more and more businesses would eventually hop on the bandwagon and utilize the site to their advantage.

While Facebook currently governs the arena, Twitter is another outlet that quickly garnered impetus. Jack Dorsey, then an undergraduate student at New York University, formed Twitter on the brink of the social media cusp in 2006 (Godarzi). The idea was sparked through Dorsey's interest of a potential instant messenger for groups. It began when Dorsey was working at DMS, one of the biggest courier services in the country. He was a software developer writing dispatch software but "became fascinated by the fact that all of the users of the software- taxi drivers, limo drivers, couriers- were really just reporting what they were doing, baring down essential facts only, thus the idea for Twitter was envisioned." (Carlson). Through a long series of events, Dorsey eventually became connected with a tech-start up company and made his idea of a status broadcasting system a reality. Known then as "twtr", it was a system where one could send a text to a single number and it be broadcasted to a multitude of friends. Dorsey said, "we came across the word 'twitter', and it was just perfect. The definition was a short burst of inconsequential information', and 'chirps from birds.' And that's exactly what the product was" (Carlson).

A common complaint regarding Facebook is often that it is simply "too much." Some people do not care to be bombarded with photos and long-winded status updates and Twitter largely eliminated this facet. Since only 140 characters are allowed per tweet, account holders can scroll the site easily via computer, tablet, or smart-phone and consume immense amounts of information in a relatively short time period. Another perk Twitter offers is the fact that one does not have to "tweet" or create a page in order to have access--whereas it is impossible to peruse Facebook without setting up a page of your own prior.

While many may view Twitter as merely a spin-off of Facebook, its' differing qualities may be partially responsible for its' growing success. "Pew Research Center's figures suggest it will be difficult for Twitter to reach Facebook's billion-member plateau. However, in the last nine months of 2012, Twitter users increased by more than 40%". (Berman). Twitter's major profits lie in advertisements in which companies are fundamentally paying to be talked or "tweeted" about. Berman elaborates and writes, "it remarkable because Twitter has been in the money-making game for only three years, primarily selling "sponsored tweets" to advertisers whose come-ons pop up in the message streams of the service's 200 million-plus active users" and revenues are pushing the billion-dollar mark. (Berman)

As stated prior, overall, the beauty of businesses employing social media is that there is relatively zero overhead cost. Unlike paying for space in a newspaper, purchasing time on television for a commercial, or leasing a billboard, access to social media is free. Berman said it best when he stated, "That magic is the value of free labor. The company doesn't have to pay a cent for the 400 million messages sent each day. As with Facebook, the users willingly, voraciously, do the work gratis" (Berman).

While Facebook and Twitter now seem like almost basic commodities, Instagram is the latest craze to indulge in the spotlight. Recently acquired by Facebook, "Instagram is an online photo-sharing and social networking service that enables its users to take pictures, apply digital filters to them, and share them on a variety of social networking services, such as media sites including Facebook or Twitter" (What is Instagram?). To some, it can be considered the Polaroid of our generation; images are even specifically formatted for iPhone compatibility. Whereas Twitter took the status-

update aspect of Facebook and capitalized on it, Instagram has effectively done the same with the photo-sharing component and announced on February 26, 2013 that it reached 100 million monthly users, “meaning 100 million people are using Instagram at least once a month and many are probably using it more often” (Tinari). In addition, approximately 40 million photos are posted each day, along with site traffic translating to 8500 “likes” per second, and 1000 comments per second (Instagram Press).

According to Douglas Rushkoff, a contributor to CNN, “Instagram has risen to the level of a Twitter as far as the culture around it is concerned. It has spawned a new visual language, a new etiquette of sharing and an outpouring of creativity in the form of contests, collaborative art exhibits and personal expression. Instagram got so popular so fast that Facebook took notice and purchased the company for a billion dollars -- (yes, \$1 billion) -- to bolster its own smart phone presence shortly before its IPO.” (Rushkoff).

Statistics like these are what prove Instagram is the new “it” thing and businesses are quickly taking notice. Instagram provides a platform for businesses to give customers a behind the scenes look and exclusive access to their company—thus making the consumer feel more connected and hopefully more likely to continue supporting the brand. In the retail world, many firms are utilizing Instagram as a type of e-catalog, however this may not be the best approach. “When it comes to Instagram, followers want to see behind-the-scenes images from their favorite companies that they wouldn't normally be able to through traditional media. For example, Burberry, unlike its high-end competitors, uses its account to post cool images of London, where the company is based, along with backstage pictures from photo shoots. It posts the occasional merchandise

image, but does not flood its account with boring pictures of clothing” (Austin). The premise of using Instagram as a means to promote business is to give consumer’s something they normally would not experience from walking into a store or even cruising a website. The goal is to make patrons feel as if they are part of the company and are “in the loop” with any major happenings before something goes mainstream.

Pinterest, a social bookmarking site where users collect and share photos of their favorite interests, events, hobbies, and more. It is one of the latest and fastest growing social networks online; the third largest networking site behind only Facebook and Twitter and businesses are quickly gaining a presence on the site (Pinterest). Founded by Ben Silberman in 2010, the site began as an exclusive, invitation only community, however with the implementation of an iPod and iPad app, has grown to over 12 million users- making it the fastest site in history to break through the 10 million unique visitor mark (Hinseth). Primarily dominated by female users, Pinterest allows each account holder to curate their own boards and categorize them. Typical categories include travel, fashion, cooking, interior design, quotes, and artwork.

It is only recently though that businesses have begun taking notice of the opportunities Pinterest presents from a marketing standpoint. In a Forbes article written in June of 2012, Scott Gillum states, “Despite the hype and the record-breaking growth rates, Pinterest is not ready for business marketers; the demographics are wrong, the categories are too consumer focused, and there are significant copyright and measurement issues to overcome” (Gillum). This fact was stated nearly 1 year ago exactly and Gillum stood correct in saying 2013 would be Pinterest’s year. In many ways, Pinterest’s platform has the potential to offer far more value than Facebook and Twitter



because of its ability to aggregate and naturally curate content. Gillum claimed there were five major areas to watch:

1. “Traffic”- Pinterest’s ability to drive referral surpasses any other social media outlet. This traffic generated from pinning and repining is extremely beneficial to small business owners, especially retailers.
2. “Scannability”- Pinterest is tremendously visual and easy to access. Shockingly, many corporate websites are being redesigned to look more like Pinterest and share the same inviting and accessible qualities.
3. “Speed”- Once again Pinterest’s visual nature allows for nearly light speed processing. It only takes 1/20<sup>th</sup> of a second to process an image versus the 200 to 300 words per minute that reading requires. It is often said a picture is worth a thousand words and Pinterest delivers.
4. “Natural Content Curation”- Users organization of boards and categories may provide deeper insights into consumer behavior. “Marketers may find that business audiences within Pinterest organize and consume content by categories or by a pinboard defined as “applications,” i.e., how they intend to use the product and not how they will buy it. This insight could help define the real purchase path and key influencers (pinners) along that journey.”
5. “Affinity Data”- Information from Facebook on user “interests” is nothing compared to the affinity data that could be mined from Pinterest. Scott Brave, CTO of Baynote software, wrote: “Individual pinning choices are interesting, but there is even greater opportunity to analyze segments of

people who express an affinity for a product or category in aggregate.” If available, this information could enable marketers to create new segmentation clusters based on common interests, which could help improve messaging and targeting. ‘Clustering’ could identify brand advocates, key influencers and connectors, local ‘hot spots’ and new ideas for reaching them” (Gillum).

Through the analysis of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest, it is very apparent why businesses are hopping on board. These social media outlets dictate the day-to-day life of many company’s prime demographic, therefore to maintain contact with consumers, they must position themselves at an angle to do so; by creating an accessible, yet professional presence on these sites.

More specifically, social media holds a noteworthy place in the lives of college students. Young adults, ages 18-24, are the first generation to grow up with social media playing a constant role. Sure older generations are catching on, however many of these young adults have been utilizing Facebook since elementary school. Social media has become a normal part of their day to day lives, in the fact that the first thing many do when they wake up is check their Facebook account or see what’s happening via Twitter. In the past, to obtain news meant turning on a television or reading a newspaper. However in today’s society, Twitter can be considered a primary news source.

Oxford, Mississippi is interesting in that it is a college town-- home to thousands of adolescents who are constantly connected via their iPhones or smartphones. At this age, it seems that many people are living their lives and partaking in experiences solely to broadcast it later on their Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Facebook has even further

facilitated this phenomenon by making one's profile into a sort of social media "hub"; linking all three sites so when someone tweets, posts a photo to Instagram, or Pins an item, it automatically syncs with their Facebook profile. It is easy to grasp this idea after spending only a short time on campus at Ole Miss or even off-campus at a restaurant or store. Just by looking around, one can observe that students are literally glued to their phones; constantly updating their pages, letting their network know what they are doing-step-by-step. Furthermore, after posting a photo, writing a status, or sending a tweet, the psychological component begins as the author waits to see how many "likes" or comments he or she receives. It is this sense of validation obtained through social media discussed earlier that creates loyal users and keeps people coming back for more.

Oxford is also interesting in that it is a tremendously appearance-oriented town. It is known for not only a beautiful campus, but also beautiful people and students are certainly aware. There is definitely a notion among female students to dress the best and flaunt designer clothing, jewelry, and accessories. Whether it is a certain handbag, line of jewelry, shoe, or general "look", when something is "in" at Ole Miss, it is not uncommon for the vast majority of girls to own it.

## CHAPTER II: THE FASHION INDUSTRY

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, “ the fashion industry is a multibillion-dollar global enterprise devoted to the business of making and selling clothes. Some observers distinguish between the fashion industry (which makes ‘high fashion’) and the apparel industry (which makes ordinary clothes or ‘mass fashion’), but by the 1970s the boundaries between them had blurred. Fashion is best defined simply as the style or styles of clothing and accessories worn at any given time by groups of people.” (Steel and Major). It is evident today that the fashion industry plays a large role in society. People use fashion as a mean’s of expression and a source of self-identity. There may seem to be a substantial gap between the expensive, exclusive high fashion of New York and Paris and the mass-produced casual wear sold in shopping centers of suburbia however, all spectrums of the fashion industry incorporate the same concepts of “design, manufacturing, distribution, marketing, retailing, advertising, and promotion of all types of apparel (men’s, women’s, and children’s) from the most rarefied and expensive *haute couture* (literally, ‘high sewing’) and designer fashions to ordinary everyday clothing— from couture ball gowns to Juicy Couture-brand sweatpants” (Steel and Major).

To demonstrate the weight the fashion industry holds in today’s realm, in 2010, the world clothing and textile industry reached almost \$2,560 trillion and the women’s wear sector alone is expected to pass \$621 billion by 2014 (Breyer). In solely one year, the United States spent \$250 Billion on fashion consumption (Fashion Industry

Statistics). These massive dollar amounts express how big of a role the fashion industry plays into the consumption patterns of people around the world.

If thinking logically, it only makes sense to assume the fashion industry will always exist. There are over 7 billion people in the world and clothing- whether considered fashionable or not- will always be a necessity, therefore some demand will always exist. Many might argue that fashion is a luxury and critics wonder why it's even significant, being as the majority of the world cannot even afford authentic couture. However, in a recent interview on *The Colbert Report*, Anna Wintour, editor in chief of Vogue magazine, defended the industry. She said, "In the same way that most people who admire a Picasso will never be able to buy one, the majority of people who pine for an iconic Chanel suit will never feel that wool against their skin. Nevertheless, much as one can still appreciate Picasso's pieces and his invaluable contributions to the art world as co-founder of the cubist movement, one can still look at early Chanel designs and see how themes of women's empowerment and activity were manifested in the designs" (LaGrave). What Wintour is arguing is that a deeper appreciation for fashion encompasses an understanding of its trends, influences, messages, and history- much like fine art- and perhaps this greater significance is what keeps buyers captivated.

Also akin to fine arts, it cannot be denied that high fashion is certainly a luxury. Because most people cannot afford to indulge, the desire to experience the "look" of high fashion is further intensified. Thanks to stores such as H&M, Forever 21, and even Target, even the most price-conscious consumer can position themselves as aware trendsetters. Therefore, the psychological aspects of the industry not only can justify the elite, high-end shoppers, but also the bargain hunters. Unlike in the past, today's

designers function in a global marketplace, constantly expanded by television, film, and popular culture—but even further accelerated by the Internet and social media. No longer limited to the upper class, trendsetters come from various social factions, and most trends have short trajectories. In a clinical analysis of New York Fashion week, psychologist Dr. Jennifer Baumgartner noted that the brain loves new things, especially trends because they are quick flashes of novelty. Much like repainting a room, or buying new furniture, the purchase of a new, trendy item allows for reinvention and the purchase of a wearable trendy item allows for self-reinvention (Baumgartner). Also, as stated earlier, fashion is constantly being influenced by its' surrounding environment- be historical events, technological advancements, or changing social roles and sporting this fashion is a means of expression. Personal stylist Jill Marinelli states, “All dress choices are internally motivated and can be analyzed to reveal the inner self. Trends chasing is often motivated from a desire to fit in, feel current, and masks insecurities. These ever-changing fashion dictates never allow for a concrete identification of your look, your preference, and ultimately the message you want to put forth in the world” (Baumgartner). In essence, the way one chooses to dress is a reflection of their truest self.

Much like fashion, social media is another outlet to express oneself. However, this means of expression occurs in cyberspace. There are many underlying threads that link the two together. For example, the psychological aspect to present oneself in a certain way exists in both outlets. People dress a particular way to present themselves to the world in that manner, analogous to the way users may arrange his or her Facebook page, Twitter account or Instagram. Additionally, the desire to fit in and be included presents itself via fashion and social media. Consumers of fashion want to be a part of the

latest trend and receive accolades from peers, much like users of social media want their “friends” or “followers” to like and comment on their posts. Finally, the idea of appealing to the masses is also something the two outlets hold in common. Today, there are over 1 billion users of social media and minority gaps are virtually non-existent. Surprisingly enough, not using social media now typically equates to an heir of elitism, not the inability to access it, as in the past. “Many Facebook refusers actually revel in their difference from the mainstream, seeing it as a mark of distinction, superior taste, and identification with an elite social stratum,” said New York University Professor Laura Portwood-Stacer. “Hipsters find it too mainstream and others find their privacy policies troublesome. In other words, not using social media is likely a product of *more* education, not a lack of access” (Ferenstein).

Since the economic downturn of 2008, the fashion industry has had to reposition itself and shift gears away from appealing solely to the upper class. Many designers are teaming up with lower end retailers to give the price-conscious consumer an option to still enjoy fashion on a budget. Major designers such as Isaac Mizrahi, Jean Paul Gaultier, Sonia Rykiel, Zac Posen, Proenza Schouler, and Erin Fetherston have joined forces with Target and Vera Wang has even created a separate label for Kohl’s. Providing the masses with “right-priced” fashion has become the name of the game (Nalls). New York Fashion week is no longer limited to the press and buyers, but now more of a spectacle and source of promotion for designers. Apple launched a fashion app called “Fashion: Apps for the Clothes-Minded” and connected the world’s biggest global fast-fashion retailers like Zara, Gap and H&M, with high-fashion houses like Chanel, Gucci, Fendi, Donna Karan, Diane von Furstenberg, and Dolce Gabana to name a few. These

fashion week apps allow for shopping, sharing, fashion news, and access to videos. In addition, anyone with web access and a credit card is able to buy the clothes as the models on the runway are presenting the collections (Nalls). This phenomenon of instant access to fashion and a constant relationship to companies with consumers via social media is further evidence of a growing global economy and the power of technology to connect the world.

In regards to fashion consumption and social media in Oxford, Mississippi, it seems as if Oxford may perhaps be an outlier. Demographically speaking, Oxford is a small, southern, college town; therefore it does not appropriately represent the greater United States so any conclusions reached may not be applicable to the entire fashion retail spectrum. Of the approximate 16,000 students, 55% are female and nearly 37% of the student body is out-of-state (The Princeton Review). A large percentage of the University is Greek affiliated, and as stated in the introduction, students are very appearance oriented; many with high levels of disposable income. It seems as though this highly communal lifestyle, coupled with young people reliant on social media with the ability to shop, would certainly affect local retailer's marketing strategies. Emphasizing a presence on social media would be very lucrative.



## CHAPTER III: QUALITATIVE DATA

### METHODOLOGY

In the primary stages of data collection, it was determined that qualitative research regarding the effects of social media on fashion consumption would be a beneficial tool to extract information valuable for survey design. Because of the broad nature of social media upon consumer behavior, interviewing representatives of the target market helped narrow down survey topics to focus on. A total of 8 interviews were administered via convenience sample. All interviewees held accounts with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest. Some held accounts but weren't active users, while others also held accounts on LinkedIn, Google Plus, and the latest video application known as "Vine". They were asked identical questions and their responses were recorded then transcribed. Interviews typically lasted 8-15 minutes and respondents were female students, ranging in age from 20 to 22 years old. Pseudonyms were given to protect the identity of respondents.

### DEPENDENCE ON TECHNOLOGY

While speaking to undergraduate women at The University of Mississippi regarding the effects of social media and fashion consumption, it became clear that there is somewhat of a dependence on social media and technology in general. All interviewees stated they check social media every single day- some admitting to checking it every hour or virtually any time they became bored; times included walking on campus, waiting in

cafeteria lines, or even before class starting. Corey Beth, junior liberal arts major noted her uses for social media included, “Just keeping up with what’s going on throughout the day or if I’m bored or in an awkward situation or walking to and from class I’ll go on it [social media].” Some even claimed checking social media was the first component of their daily routine after waking up each morning. Carrie, a senior education major at the University stated, “I use social media every hour of the day -most definitely.”

## SOCIAL VALIDATION

There seems to be a pattern in which people who post desired or recent purchases expect to obtain feedback from them. Nearly all interviewees agreed that if they were to share a recent retail purchase online with others in their social network- and nobody commented positively on it- that they would feel embarrassed. Not receiving “likes” would be a negative, even embarrassing experience. Corey Beth, a junior, stated, “It’s kind of awkward if you put something up and nobody likes it.” While interviewees themselves did not typically post items they desired to purchase, or items recently bought, they were fully aware of the materialistic culture The University of Mississippi embodies and personally knew users who frequently overloaded their social media feeds with pictures and/or posts regarding material goods. Senior marketing major, Lucy, stated, “I don’t have the personality where I need to show everything I have. I do notice though, it’s very common. Especially, I’d say here because we’re in a very income driven environment. Which is ironic because the students aren’t actually producing the income they’re bragging about, for instance. And I believe there’s just a stigma to keep up and be perceived as having that higher income. Showing off what you have seems to be the best way to do that. Social media definitely gives those who want to show another outlet or

platform to brag about it if they want to if word of mouth isn't enough—it's very common here.”

#### EFFECTS OF COMMUNAL LIVING ON CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

Overall, communal living seems to influence consumption patterns. Females living among other females often mimic each other's style and are constantly trying to stay on top of the leading trends. Interviewees noted a sense of obligation to stay in the know regarding fashion trends, especially in such a competitive environment like Ole Miss. In Oxford, there seems to be great pressure to pledge the best Greek organization, drive the nicest car, have the perfect boyfriend, all while sporting the most expensive designer brands. Sally, a senior journalism major said, “I feel like even with your friends it's a competitive thing. In a friendly competition you're always trying to stay involved and up to par.... being around a bunch of girls and your roommates—you're definitely more inclined to be in tune with what they're buying and wearing.” Jennifer elaborated on this point when she said, “You act like the people you hang out with and you're going to dress like the people around you so you can borrow clothes and things like that which will affect future purchases.” Just through speaking with this handful of college age females, it became evident that communal living certainly has an affect on consumption patterns. Lucy, a senior marketing major said it best when she noted, “Because of my age, demographic, living environment, the more my friends post, the more I see and the more I try to keep up with.”

#### PREFERENCE OF SITES

Most users said they enjoyed using sites based off the users they interact with on each site. For example, Facebook seems to be the primary outlet because it attracts the

most users and is utilized as a springboard and linkage to other social media sites. Sally\* described this situation when she said, “The main reason I use certain sites over others is because I tend to go where I have the most friends. The newer ones I’m not always likely to go there because there aren’t as many friends on it yet because they are so new. So I tend to stick with the originals- Twitter Facebook, Instagram.” Carrie, an education major followed up in saying, I use Facebook the most because I have more friends on that site and it’s easier to connect with them.” Lucy explained that certain sites are better for different things. She said, I use Twitter a lot more for news but Facebook to keep in touch with friends.” The consensus was social media is utilized predominantly as a way to stay connected with friends. In addition though, it is a viable new source and means to be connected with not only friends, but also the rest of the world whether it be regarding sports, popular culture fashion, or entertainment in general.

#### INCREASE IN SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

All users claim to use social media more now than ever. This may be attributed to three main reasons. The first being that these newer social media outlets did not exist previously, therefore in order to be active on all sites, it requires more time. Secondly, in high school, students were in class all day. College allows for far more free time, therefore a majority of this free time is spent consuming social media. Finally, coming to college expands one’s network, consequently there is an exponentially larger group of people to follow and keep up with. In addition, the entire photo-sharing element of social media has taken off. Many users even utilize social media as a sort of virtual yearbook.

All interviewees came to consensus when noting the connection between having more friends and being more active on social media sites.

## RETAILERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Perhaps all of the previously discussed content leads to a very important conclusion- There may be opportunities for retailers to boost business via social media. The prior proves that social media has not only become a significant outlet for advertising, but possibly replaced television and print advertisements for some consumers. Sally even said, “I definitely take advantages of sales and promotions posted on social media....You’re more likely to follow a business if they’re great at social media”, meaning businesses who are creative in reaching their consumers via social media could have an opportunity to be more successful. Katie expressed her enjoyment of the convenience factor of social media. She said, “If I saw something on social media that I liked I would click on the hyperlink and try to buy it from the website. I follow different designers on Instagram and some of their fashion I like that you can click right there and order that. And I’ve actually done that. It motivates you (to make the purchase). I’ve done that for Urban Outfitters. They ship to Mississippi for free because they don’t have a location in this state so living here I’ve done that.” When asked about sharing purchases or desired purchases on social media, Julie stated, Pinterest and Instagram are definitely the “it” place to post things and college-aged females do this often. When asked, “Do you “like” or “follow” businesses or designers to stay in the know?”, Sally continued in saying, “Locally, but not on a national scale. I definitely take advantage of sales and promotions posted on social media.” This is especially important since Oxford, MS is

a town that thrives on local retailers. Therefore, it is important to note that consumers are indeed paying attention to these promotions being posted on social media. Some, like Cathy, an accounting major, though, claimed they disliked businesses on social media for this exact reason- and noted that they preferred social media where an overload of advertisements and random acquaintances were not flooding their newsfeed. Cathy bluntly stated, “No. I purposely don’t [follow businesses via social media]. Because I don’t want to see their ads. I want to stalk my friends, not look at ads.” This information should serve as a cautionary sign to retailers. There is a fine line between effective advertising and connecting with consumers versus overflowing their newsfeeds with promotions.

## CHAPTER IV: QUANTITATIVE DATA

### METHODOLOGY

In the data collection process, a convenience sample was used consisting of peers at the University of Mississippi, as well as family members, and friends at other universities during the spring semester 2013. A survey created using Qualtrics was administered to over 148 people. 4.7% of the sample was male and 95.3% was female, with an approximate 72% response rate. Participants were asked questions about their social media usage, their habits towards fashion consumption, and their beliefs regarding advertising and promotions via social media. No variables were manipulated.

### GENERAL SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE STATISTICS

One of the primary objectives of this study was to determine why people used social media outlets in order to explore better ways for retailers to utilize social media from a business standpoint. When asked the question, “Why do you use an online social network?” participants were directed to “Select all that apply” in regards to their motives. 99.9% stated they used it to stay in touch with friends, 80.2% claimed they used it as a source for news updates, 32.1% used social media to receive sales and promotions, and 32.1% declared keeping in touch with celebrities and popular culture was a motive behind social media usage. 6.6% of participants selected “other” and wrote-in responses including “connect with family, to keep in touch with different groups (Facebook groups,

messages, etc.), to be connected on a global wide basis, and to promote their business.”

*See A-1.*

Another chief objective of this study was to conclude which social media sites are most advantageous for retailers to be present on. It was determined that 99.1% of participants held Facebook accounts, 82.1% were on Twitter, 77.4% were active on Pinterest, and 72.60% were on Instagram. 9.4% of participants also stated they were members of other sites such as LinkedIn, Reddit, Vine, Keek, and Wanelo. It is obviously imperative for retailers to be present on the most popular sites. *See A-2.*

#### MOTIVATION TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Respondents were asked questions to gain a deeper understanding of their motivation to use social media. When given the multiple-choice question, “Why do you use an online social network?” *Select all that apply*, 32.10% of respondents indicated “To receive specials and promotions”. 45.3% agreed to “I often use social media to learn about fashion trends”, and when asked, “Have you ever shared a product through social media that you wanted to purchase?”, a majority of respondents said yes (56.6%). Conversely though, when asked, “Have you ever shared a product through social media that you actually purchased?”, only 44.3% claimed to have done so. *See A-3.*

#### CONSUMER ATTITUDES TOWARDS ADVERTISING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Attitudes toward advertising on social media were assessed through two seven-point bipolar adjective scales. The endpoints were “bad/good” and “unfavorable/favorable” (i.e., “My overall attitude toward advertising on social media is:”). The mean score was 5.0, indicating a slightly positive overall attitude among



respondents. More specifically, 27.3% of respondents answered negatively (average score was 3 or less) and 54.8% answered positively (average score was 5 or more). *See A-4.*

Attitudes towards the effectiveness of advertising on social media and retailers using social media were also assessed using two seven-point bipolar adjective scales. Regarding the effectiveness of advertising, endpoints used were “not very convincing/convincing” and “not very persuasive/persuasive”. The mean score was 3.81, indicating a somewhat negative perception of advertising on social media. However, only 41.5% leaned towards negative (averaging 3 or less), and 54.7% answered towards the “convincing/persuasive” end of the scale. Participants were asked later in the survey about their opinions towards the information they see about products posted on social media. Opinions were assessed through two seven-point bipolar adjective scales with endpoints of “Not at all Believable/Highly Believable” and “Not at all Credible/Very Credible.” The mean score was 4.38, indicating a fairly neutral attitude. 24.5% answered negatively, indicating skepticism, while 49.1% indicated they found this information credible. *See A-5.*

Participants overall opinion towards retailers who use social media to promote themselves was fairly neutral with a mean of 4.70. A seven point bipolar adjective scale was used again with end points of “bad/good” and “unfavorable/favorable”. 19.8% of respondents answered negatively, but more importantly 54.7% held retailers who used social media in a positive light. *See A-6.*

## EFFECTIVENESS OF ADVERTISING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

To better assess the likelihood of social media usage actually leading to a purchase, participants were asked a series of questions. Intentions were assessed using bipolar, seven-point adjective scales. The endpoints were “Not likely/Likely”. When asked, “How likely are you to buy a product advertised by a company on social media?”, respondents indicated a fairly negative response with a mean score of 3.86. They were evenly divided with 35% claiming “Likely”, while 34.8% leaning towards “Not Likely.” *See A-7.* More specifically though, respondents were asked about their likelihood to purchase dependent on location: online store vs. bricks and mortar store. Regarding social media leading consumers to a retail store to make a purchase, the mean response was 4.40 on a scale of 1-7, 1 being not likely and 7 being very likely. 22.6% said they would not be very likely to make the trip to the store, while 59.5% said they would be likely. Interestingly, consumers seemed far more likely to visit a website based upon something they saw via social media. When asked, “How likely are you to visit a retailer’s website because of a product it advertised on social media?”, the mean score was 5.31. 12.3% answered negatively, while a substantial 77.3% stated they would most likely visit a website due to social media. *See A-8.*

Later in the survey participants were asked, “Have you ever purchased a product or service based on an advertisement or post on a social network?” 49.1% said they had, and were asked to provide further explanation through an open-ended response option in the survey. In addition to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, sites such as Groupon and Living Social seemed to be effective. Pinterest seemed most effective. One respondent

even wrote in, “Pinterest is the best because it provides a direct link to where you can buy something.”

Finally, to further assess the effectiveness of advertising on social media and ensure consistency among responses, participants were simply asked “Yes” or “No” questions regarding if they had ever purchased a product online or in a store because of something they saw on social media. When asked, “Have you ever purchased a product ONLINE because of something you saw on social media?”, 59.4% selected “Yes”, while 40.6% selected “No.” *See A-9*. When asked, “Have you ever purchased a product IN A STORE because of something you saw on social media?”, 60.4% of respondents said “Yes”, and 39.6% said “No.” *See A-10*.

## CHAPTER V: IMPLICATIONS

### GENERAL

Regarding statistics concerning general social media usage, it seems as though the primary reason to use social media is to keep in touch with friends (99.9% of respondents indicated so). Therefore, in order to have an effective presence on social media, businesses should position themselves somewhat like a friend. This means providing friends and followers with inside information, fashion tips, and behind the scenes looks into their world- much like a real friend would. Diminishing this corporate barrier between business and consumer can help a business establish a relationship with consumers and consequently benefit from a professional perspective.

Also important, 32.1% of respondents indicated they utilize social media to receive sales and promotions. That is nearly a third of users; therefore businesses should capitalize on this free advertising and keep their followers in the know about any upcoming specials or deals. Ideally, this connection and inside knowledge will attract customers to a website or store to make a purchase.

Fashion retailers should work to establish a presence where they can reach the largest target audience. Respondents indicated via the survey that 99.1% were present on Facebook, 82.1% on Twitter, 77.4% on Pinterest, and 72.6% on Instagram. Because these four outlets primarily dominate the social media playing

field, businesses should most heavily focus on these channels. They should master Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram because they are linked so easily and carefully curate their Pinterest account. Having a Pinterest account and allowing patrons to “follow” their boards, businesses (especially fashion retailers) can give consumers an “in” on their personal style and persona of the store; emphasizing the connection factor many consumers appreciate. More importantly, Pinterest allows businesses to provide a direct link to their store website and allow followers to purchase a product immediately. While interviewing respondents, one person stated Pinterest was the best social media outlet solely because she could make a purchase directly from clicking on a picture. If a boutique currently is lacking a store website, it might be something worth investing in because of the ease in which consumers can purchase via social media.

#### MOTIVATION

45.3% of respondents denoted they use social media to learn about fashion trends. In addition to posting about their own products and promotions, fashion retailers should also post about the latest trends and showcase their offerings of these major trends. Also, more than half of respondents (56.6%) have admitted to sharing their desired purchases on social media. Due to research performed, it was evident that sharing of products is more often happening before a purchase is made. Perhaps businesses should offer followers the choice to share a certain item to their followers in exchange for a chance to win a discount on that specific item. This simple arrangement would allow a retailer to significantly expand their coverage on social media and lead to more followers.

## ATTITUDES

Boosting the effectiveness of social media advertising is certainly an area of opportunity. Respondents indicated an overall positive attitude towards advertising on social media. However, they indicated that this advertising might not be very effective; meaning consumers are not particularly opposed to social media advertising, yet it might not always lead to a purchase. In regards to credibility of advertisements posted on social media, respondents possessed fairly neutral attitudes and demonstrated credibility is not a major issue and they believe what they see. 54.7% indicated that they hold retailers who use social media in a positive light. Therefore, any worry that being present on social media could diminish a store's business or reputation should not be a source of apprehension.

## EFFECTIVENESS

As stated prior, the effectiveness of social media seems to be the biggest area for opportunity. Only 35% of respondents said they were likely to make a purchase because of something they saw on social media. Additionally, it became clear that a store website is key. 77.3% of participants said they would be more likely to purchase an item online vs. 59.5% in a store after seeing something on social media. There is a bit of contradiction, however. When asked, "Have you ever purchased a product due to social media?" nearly half of respondents said yes (49.1%), a proportion suggestively higher than the 35% who said they would be likely to make a purchase. Furthermore, 59.4% said they had purchased online due to social media and 60.4% said social media had prompted them to purchase in a store. These percentages are nearly equal and demonstrate thus far, consumers have been

equally likely to purchase in a store and online. In regards to implications for retailers, management should focus on truly knowing their demographic, its purchasing patterns, and figure out if online or in-store purchases are more lucrative. Once determined, they can direct traffic from social media more appropriately.

#### OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

The most significant conclusions drawn from this study include that Pinterest might be the latest tool to promote businesses and a store website is certainly beneficial. The convenience of being able to make a purchase from the comfort behind one's laptop or smartphone fits the busy lifestyle that many consumers engage in today. The ability to link Pinterest to a store website so easily facilitates purchasing. A customer perusing Pinterest is able to click on a picture that attracts him or her, and be led directly to a place where they can purchase the item from the picture. In other words, Pinterest eliminates a lot of the legwork that traveling to a store or finding the store website on one's own entails. Although it sounds cliché, a picture truly is worth a thousand words. Another element of the success Pinterest can bring from a marketing perspective is its extreme visual nature. Like Instagram, Pinterest operates almost entirely on images. It takes virtually no time for a customer to process an image; therefore promoting business visually can be very effective. When using Pinterest as a marketing tool, businesses should "pin" strategically and curate their boards in a way that appeals to their core demographic. The following details the makings of an effective Pinterest strategy:

- *Represent the brand:* Use the logo in the profile and include a short description of the boutique and its' offerings
- *Appeal to the audience:* In addition to curating boards of merchandise the store carries, build boards that appeal to shared interests and trends. For example, creating a board of fashion trends or celebrity style. The business should be wary of staying in focus though; a clothing boutique probably should not have a board dedicated to recipes or architecture.
- *Be clear:* Use simple and concise language when naming boards so the account is searchable.
- *Set up a business account:* Pinterest is now offering a business account that analyzes consumer behavior. It provides insight into how many pins are coming from a store website, how many people are “repinning” from the account, and other valuable data.
- *Be “Pinnable”:* Create a store website that is very visual so it is as easy as possible for consumers to pin from it. Also, keep the website current and ensure it is representative of the merchandise currently in stock.
- *Be effective:* Certify that the images or pins are actually linking to the correct location of the website and correctly directing consumers. The goal is to make things as easy as possible for a customer to purchase something.

As discussed throughout, Pinterest is very effective. However, it is important to note that the success of Pinterest cannot exist alone. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are still the more conventional outlets. This being said, it is important to link the three, but not overwhelm consumers with redundant information. A



highlight from interviewing consumers included the annoyance that following businesses on social media can bring. The primary reason to utilize social media is still to stay connected with friends and family. Businesses should be mindful of this and tread carefully, avoiding overflowing followers newsfeeds and homepages.

The same basics of Pinterest detailed prior should be kept in mind while creating an online persona via Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Some key elements overlap, such as, utilizing a store logo, representing the brand's personality, and keep things simple. For example, the most successful posts are usually short and include something visual. Consumers do not want to spend time reading a paragraph about an item. Simply posting an image of the item with a short description is guaranteed to garner more attention. Like Pinterest, Facebook, which recently purchased Instagram, offers a business account that provides detailed insights and demographic insight regarding activity on the page. Twitter also includes an advertising and analytic feature. Some more important features of posts to include on social media include shots of current products, sneak peeks of incoming products, merchandise in action, behind the scenes shots, and photos and posts that relate to the lifestyle the brand represents. The premise behind using social media as an advertising vehicle entails connecting with consumers and creating a relationship that allows them to feel like they have gained insider access to the brand or store.

In respect to other findings, it is important to achieve a presence on social media from the perspective of a friend or equal. 99.9% of respondents indicated this is their primary use for social media. This could be difficult because retailers might

want to maintain a professional, businesslike aura. However, it is also important to appeal to consumers in a way that fits the realm of social media. In addition, being that nearly a third of survey respondents indicated they utilize social media to receive sales and promotions, retailers certainly could benefit from taking advantage of this simple advertising opportunity. It is important though to sustain a healthy balance between posting discounts and promotions, while not bombarding consumers. As stated prior, many consumers utilize social media to stay in touch with friends. There is certainly something to be said for sharing inside information and appealing to consumers as an acquaintance, rather than a pushy salesperson.

Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram are certainly the “Big 4” social media giants at the moment. It is important to maintain a presence on these sites. However, as technology is constantly changing, it is valuable for retailers to stay in the know of current trends. As new platforms emerge, it will be necessary to adapt and use these new outlets as well.

Another noteworthy point is that 77.3% of participants said they would be more likely to purchase an item online vs. 59.5% in a store after seeing something on social media. Considering this fact, retailers should work to incorporate a store website into their sales strategies. While this is certainly a large investment to a business, allowing customers to purchase items online not only allows opportunity for making more sales at a relatively low cost, but also expands a store’s geographical reach significantly. Social media is more likely to drive online purchase intentions than store purchase intentions. It is extremely convenient for consumers to be browsing social media and click a link to purchase a good. It also lowers the

opportunity cost of shopping considerably. The time it takes to drive to a store, try on or look at a good, purchase it, and return home, far exceeds making a purchase online and having a good delivered to the doorstep. This premise is beneficial for retailers because it expands their market and allows for growth. However, it could be dangerous for the retailer because many policies may have to be adjusted, such as returns and exchanges, and the amount of in-store traffic could diminish.

## CHAPTER VI: LIMITATIONS

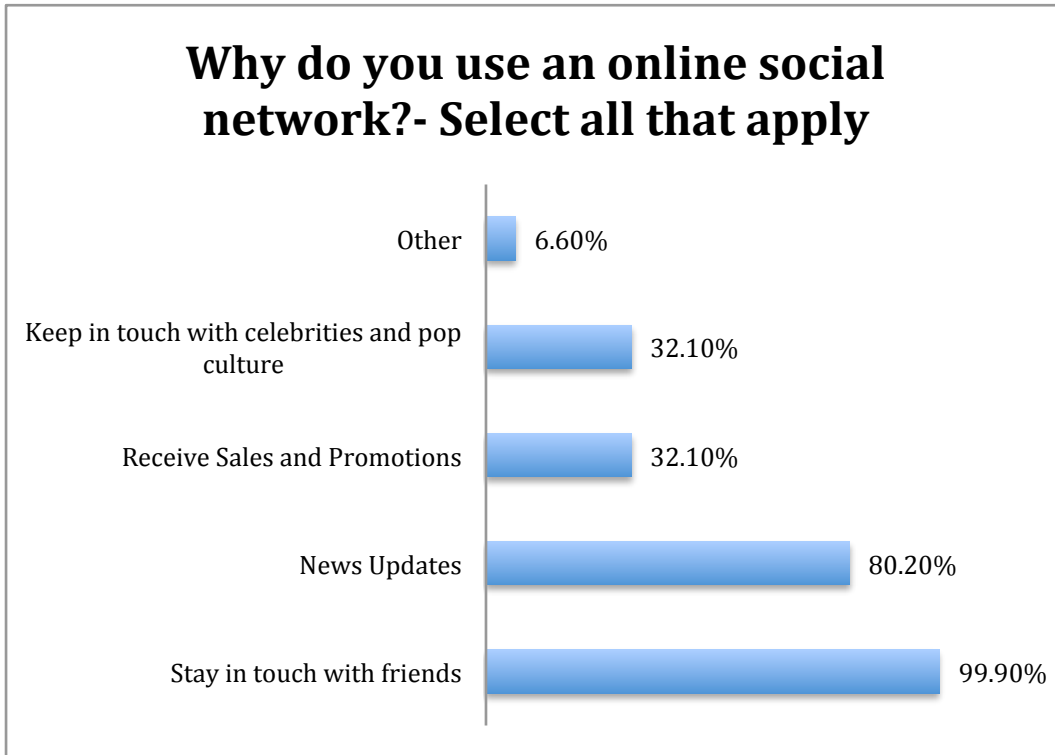
Following analysis, it was determined that several aspects of research methodology were limited. One of the major limitations can be attributed to the bias that often comes with utilizing a convenience sample. While the goal was to interview and survey consumers exemplary of the college-age demographic, it was difficult to ensure that this sample properly represented the population. Also, interviewer bias may have been present. The interviewees may have responded in a ways that were not completely truthful, in order to please the interviewer. Being that most subjects were selected because of personal connection, often times, interviewees responded in a way that suggested they were not being completely truthful in order to please the interviewer. Concerning survey administration, nonresponse bias was present in a small percentage of surveys and consequently these results had to be eliminated. If the experiment were to be repeated again, utilizing focus groups rather than individual interviews could prove more successful. Spontaneous discussion encourages participants to talk more freely and in greater depth, than they would if they were responding to questions alone. An opportunity for additional analysis regarding the effectiveness of Pinterest and more visual-centric advertising exists and could be an excellent follow-up to elaborate further upon this research.

## CONCLUSION

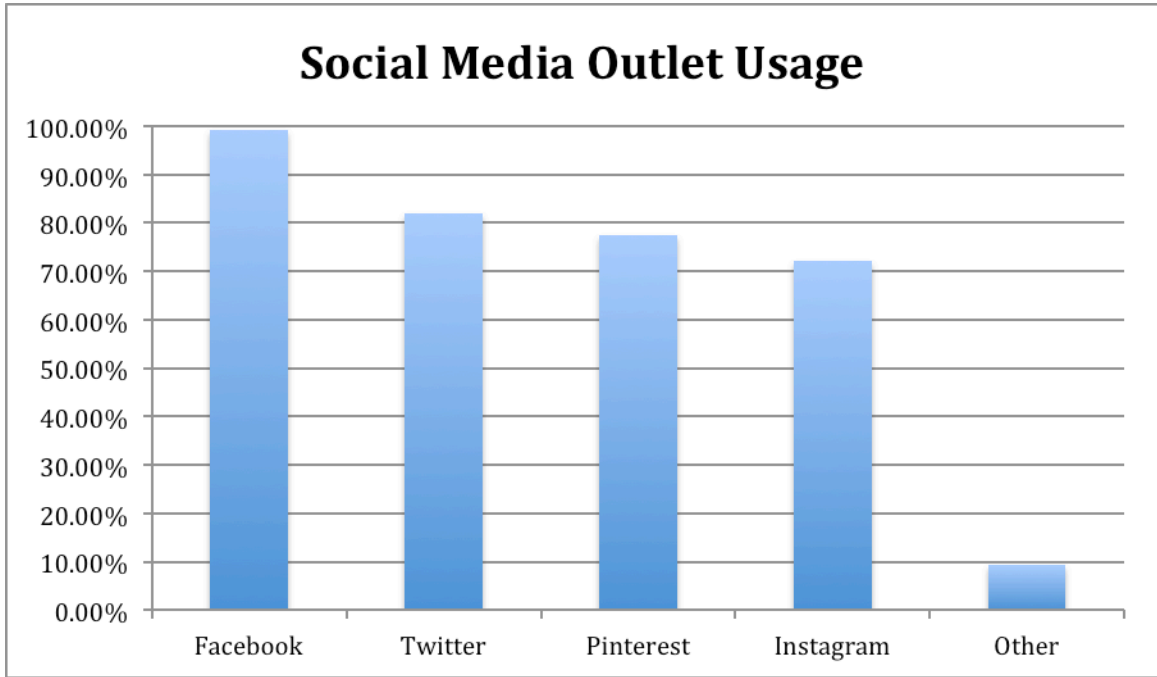
The purpose of this research was to explore the ways social media affects fashion consumption, specifically in an area dominated by the college-age demographic and small boutique vendors. In order to accomplish this, I performed general exploratory research regarding fashion consumption and social media usage. I used my findings to tailor interview questions to gain further understanding regarding how the two are connected through qualitative measures. Finally, I administered a survey to achieve quantitative statistics and draw significant conclusions regarding the effects of social media on fashion consumption. Results indicate that social media certainly impacts fashion consumption. Not only through trend setting and disseminating ideas and styles, but also in a business manner. Retailers should focus on achieving a presence on major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram). They also should utilize these platforms to not only share discounts and promotions, but also stay in touch with consumers and build a connection with their prime demographic. Based on research, it seems as though Pinterest might be the latest and most effective way to utilize social media to drive fashion purchases in a retail environment.

APPENDIX

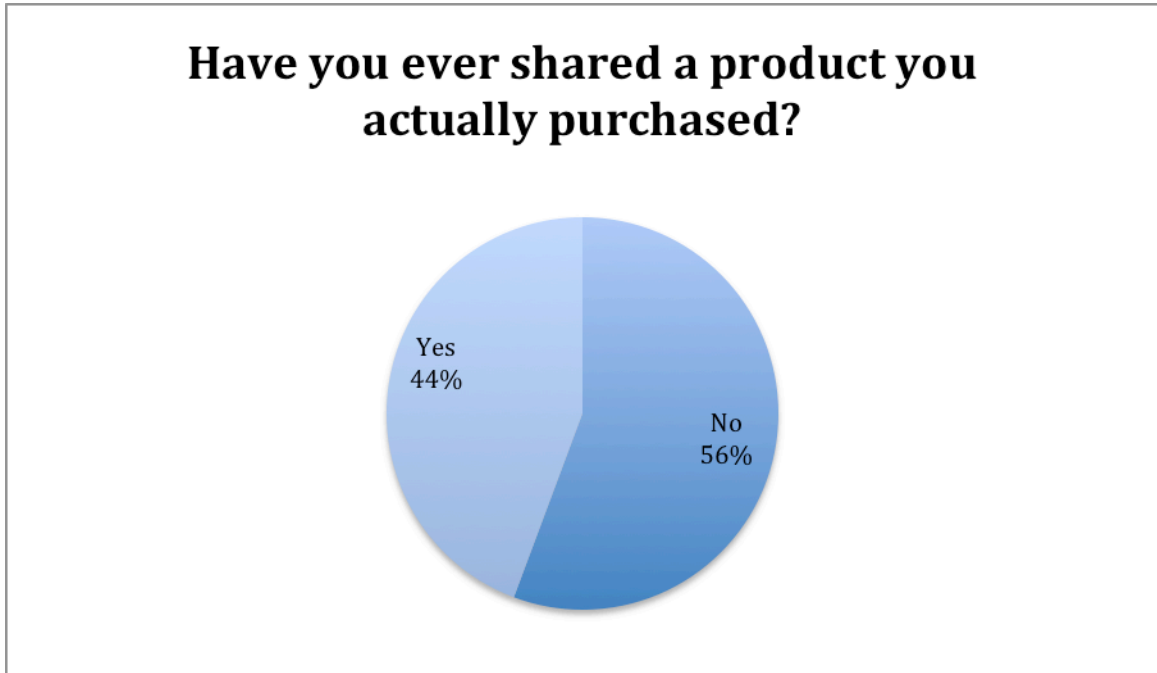
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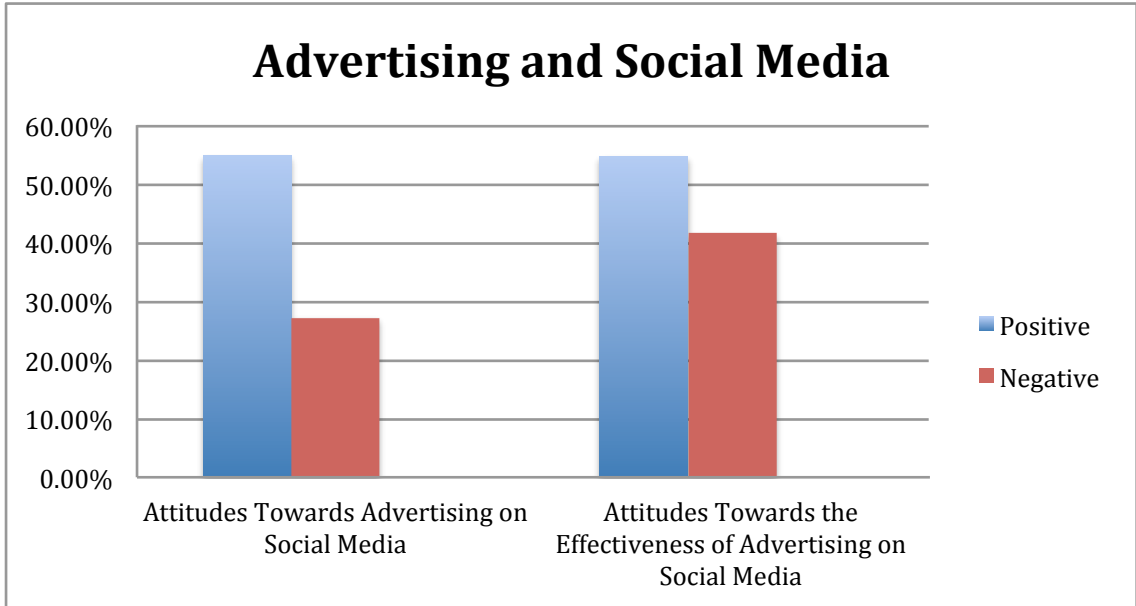
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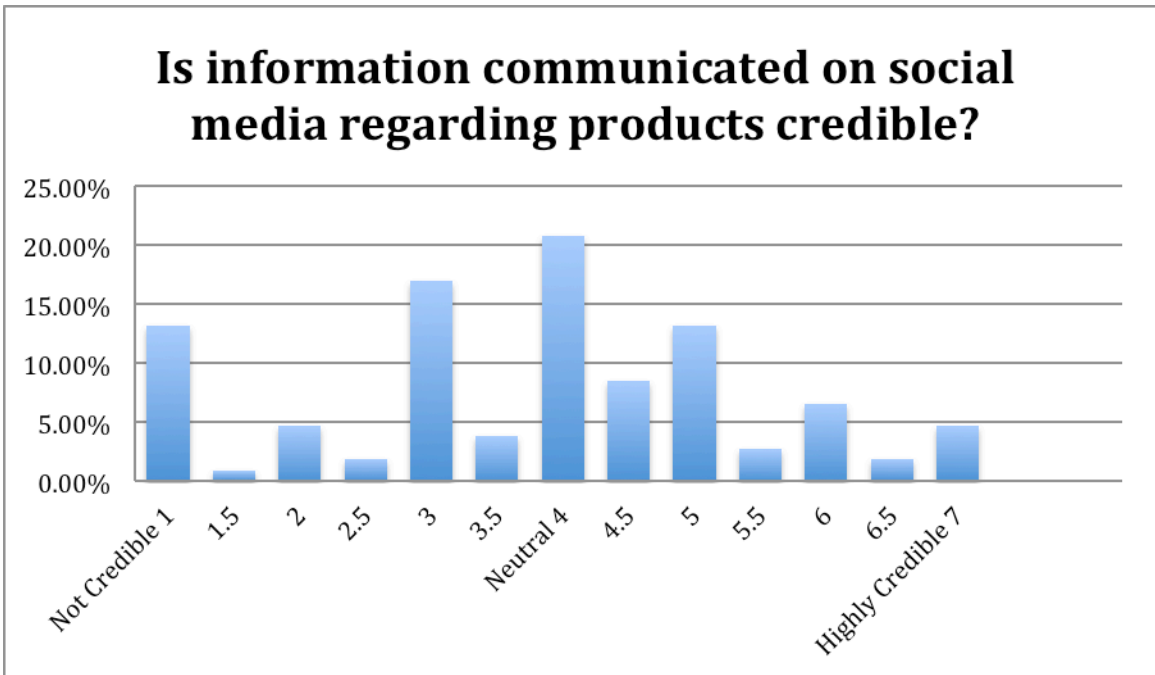
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A-4

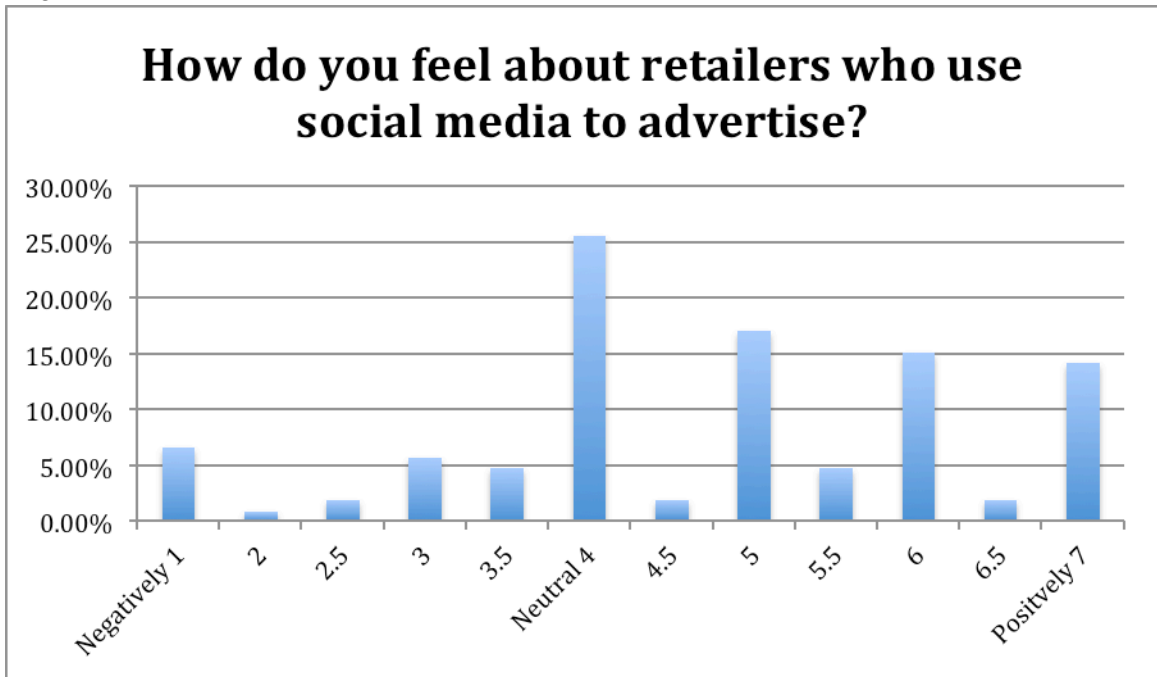


A-5

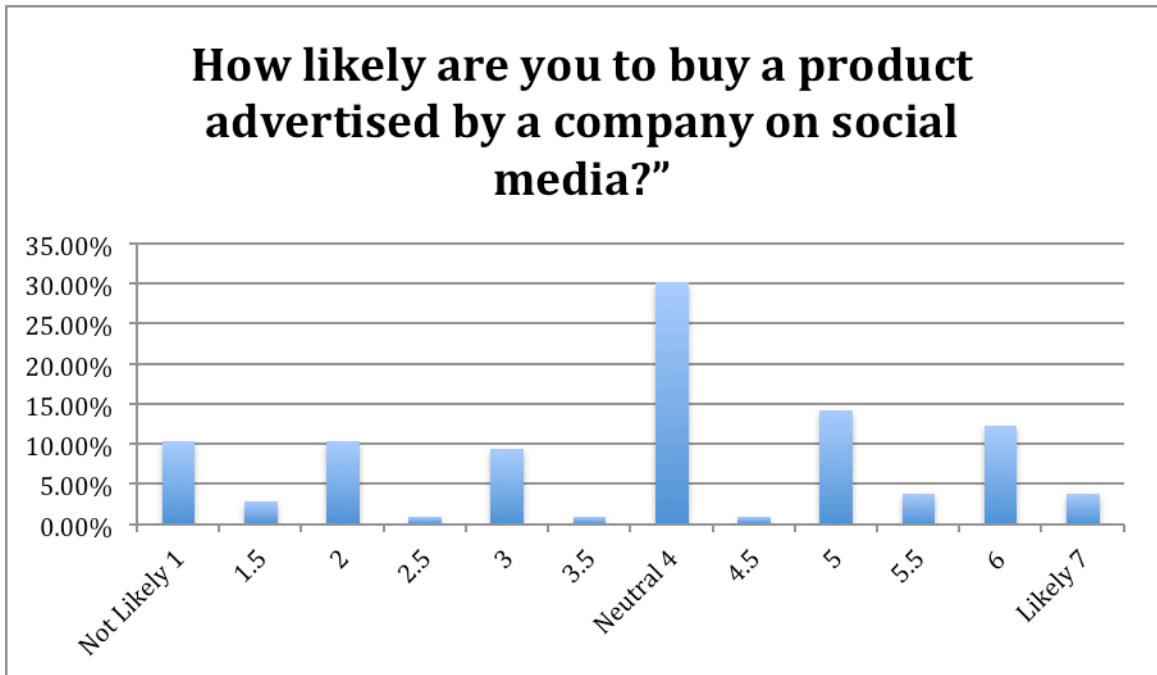




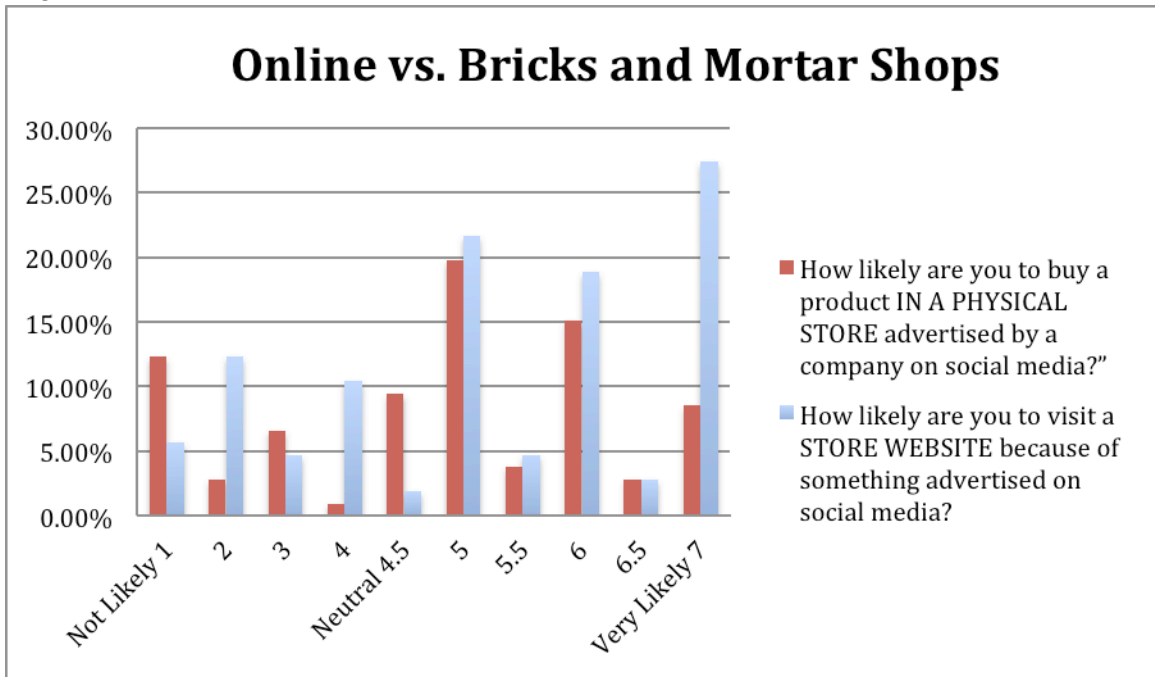
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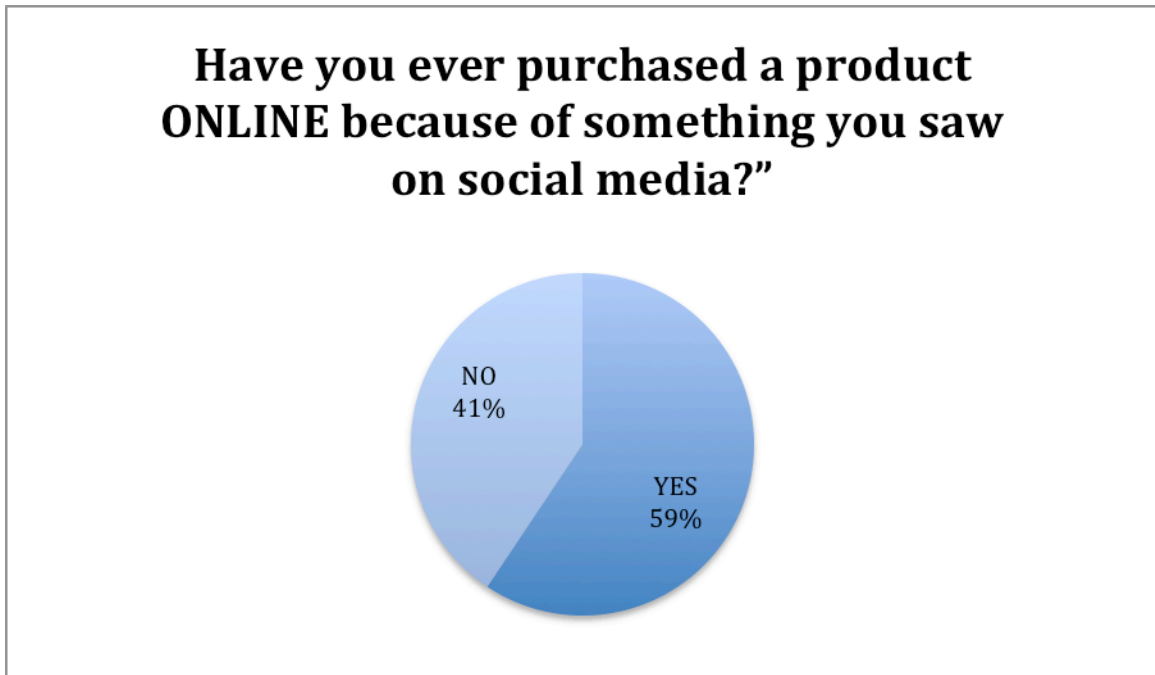
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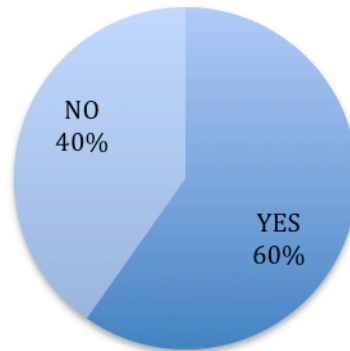
A-8



A-9



**Have you ever purchased a product IN A STORE because of something you saw on social media?"**



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