

VISUAL SOCIAL MARKETING OF NEW BRANDS: AN  
EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE ROLE OF PHOTOBLOGS  
FOR NEW FASHION BRANDS

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By:

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September 2014

Thesis Presented to the Higher Degree Committee  
of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master Of Business Administration

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my research supervisor Dr. Rian Beise-Zee. I appreciate his deep knowledge in marketing and persistent guidance throughout the time of research and writing of this thesis. He provided me with an abundance of valuable insights and advice far above what was expected. Without his support and patience this thesis would have not been possible.

I owe special thanks to my parents who raised me to think critically and freely. Only through the encouraging environment was I able to pursue further studies in Japan and turn my thoughts into reality.

Moreover, special thanks go to my boyfriend, Tomoya, who gave me motivation to continue through the chaos. He has inspired me in many ways through his patience, kindness, and intellect.

My gratitude goes out to my friends who have given me their undivided support and have at many times, reminded me to stay optimistic and to stay myself.

## **Declaration**

I hereby certify that the contents of this paper are the results of my own research under the supervision of Professor Rian Beise-Zee and that no part of this thesis has been submitted or published for production. I certify that to the best of my knowledge, my thesis has been properly acknowledged and properly referenced in accordance with standard referencing practices. I declare my complete responsibility for the contents of this work, and that this has not been submitted to any other Institution or University

## Table of Contents

	<b>Page</b>
Acknowledgements.....	i
Declaration.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Tables.....	v
List of Figures.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.2 Research objectives.....	2
1.3 Significance.....	3
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
2.1 Conceptualizing fashion.....	4
2.2 Fashion brand marketing.....	9
2.3 Social media.....	11
2.4 Blogs.....	14
2.5 Microblogs.....	16
2.6 Photoblogs.....	20
2.7 Visual social marketing.....	22
2.8 Coolhunting.....	24
2.9 Performance measures of a blog.....	26
3. RESEARCH METHOD.....	28
3.1 Research questions.....	28
3.2 Data collection methods.....	30
3.2.1 Content analysis.....	30
3.2.2 Netnography.....	31
3.3 Sampling.....	33
3.4 Coding.....	35
3.5 Reliability and Validity.....	39
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	41
4.1 Role of photoblogs for new brands.....	42
4.1.1 Photoblogs as an extension of social media marketing practices.....	43
4.1.2 Photoblogs as a seamless visual catalogue.....	46
4.2 Function of photoblogs.....	49

	<b>Page</b>
4.2.1 A link to opinion leaders.....	50
4.2.1.1 Diffusion of innovations.....	50
4.2.1.2 Brand and blogger reciprocal relationship.....	52
4.2.2 Create buzz through electronic word-of-mouth branding.....	55
4.2.2.1 Abundance of positive buzz.....	56
4.2.2.2 Sharing.....	57
4.2.3 Build brand equity.....	62
4.2.4 Advertisement and promotion.....	64
4.3 Brand management strategies.....	69
4.3.1 Promote a lifestyle.....	70
4.3.2 Customer collaboration and community building.....	74
4.3.3 Direct marketing.....	78
4.4 Summary of results.....	85
5. LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH.....	88
6. IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	90
7. CONCLUSION.....	92
 LIST OF REFERENCES.....	 95

## List of Tables

	<b>Page</b>
Table 1. Initial codes from photoblog comments and derived themes.....	38
Table 2. Summary of results.....	42

## List of Figures

	<b>Page</b>
Figure 2.1. Categories of social media.....	13
Figure 4.1. The photoblog stream: visual catalogues of two different brands.....	48
Figure 4.2. Brand and blogger exchange.....	54
Figure 4.3. Oh love, need, perfection.....	58
Figure 4.4. Check their website.....	60
Figure 4.5. Negative comments have something positive to show.....	61
Figure 4.6. Inspiration and advertisement.....	67
Figure 4.7. Photo irrelevant to fashion with comments.....	71
Figure 4.8. Celebrity inspiration photo with comments.....	72
Figure 4.9. Customer submitted photo with comments.....	75
Figure 4.10. Obvious advertisements in photo and caption.....	80
Figure 4.11. Summer sale advertisement.....	81

## **Abstract**

Social media is crucial for businesses seeking to connect with their customers. It has gained remarkable popularity in recent years for its dynamic marketing and public relation capabilities. Visual social marketing, or marketing through images and videos on social media, is an extremely recent and very popular phenomenon. The purpose of this paper is to explore this new form in social media marketing in terms of how new fashion brands use photoblogs. Through content analysis and netnography, this study extends previous social media marketing research to show implications and provide insight by observing and analyzing four new independent apparel brands and the comments and reactions given by their followers. Data is used to answer questions about the role of photoblogs, function of photoblogs, and brand management strategies of new brands. This paper found that photoblogs are an extension of established social media marketing practices and are a catalogue of visuals that instantaneously portray brand image. For new brands, photoblogs are used to interact with fashion opinion leaders, create positive buzz, build much needed brand equity, and for advertising and promotion. The brand management characteristics identified in this study are promoting

lifestyle and brand image, encourage customer collaboration to build a community, and direct marketing. Social media provides a fair opportunity for small businesses and entrepreneurs to grow their name. For new brands, gone are the days of trying to compete with an established brand that have the funds for advertising space. New brands can build a space for themselves through social media with relatively low start-up costs. All it requires is an internet connection and compelling content. The uses of photos on social media *show* the viewer a message instead of trying to convince them. It is fast, easy, and interesting for both businesses and consumers.

**Key words:** Social media, visual social marketing, photoblogs, new brands

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**Language:** English

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

A new form of social media marketing is gaining reign over the internet. Visual social marketing, or marketing through images and videos, is popular with visual dominant social platforms like Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest coming out. The emergence of social media has altered the landscape of business communication because it is a dynamic platform for businesses and consumers. It is now possible to relay information from one source to thousands of consumers promptly, globally, and inexpensively. Because of those merits, social media is increasingly becoming popular in the marketing sector as a source for market information and consumer feedback.

Emerging in roughly 2006 (Oulavirta et.al, 2009), a microblog, as its name implies, is a type of social media representing a compressed form of the traditional text-based blog counterpart that allows users to publish content in smaller chunks, Microblogs are either word-based or photo-based. Commercial microblogs exist to promote products and services and maintain a dialogue with consumers. This research focuses on exploring visual social marketing through the photo-based microblogs, fittingly called photoblogs, of new fashion apparel brands. The internet transformed the fashion industry because localized and emerging fashion could now be global and targeted (Easey, 2009). For emerging brands, the opportunities that visual social marketing

brings are vast.

## **1.2 Research objectives**

The objectives of this research are the following:

1. To find out how new brands use photoblogs
2. To compare and contrast photoblogs and other social media
3. To identify features of photoblogs that contribute to brand marketing
4. To understand the interactions on photoblogs

The purpose of this study is to explore a new phenomenon in social media marketing in the realm of new brands and their utilization of photoblogs. Through content analysis and netnography, visual social marketing in emerging brands will be analyzed to show implications and provide insight. Instagram is the photoblogging platform that was observed in this study. Sites like Facebook and Twitter have always been the backbone of social media marketing discussions, but posts on those sites with images are gaining more attention and clicks than normal texts posts. Furthermore, with the popularity of visual social networks arising, the trend towards aesthetically dominant media and the preference of images is eminent. This trend is increasingly recognized in businesses.

### **1.3 Significance**

The significance of this research can be explained in two aspects. Firstly, it seeks to extend previous social media marketing research by examining visual social marketing. Although there has been research on about luxury brands and fast fashion chains, little to no research have been conducted about the impact that microblogging has, specifically, on new brands and small businesses. Previous studies have supported word-based microblogging such as Twitter as a feasible approach to marketing (Narayanan et. al, 2012), but there is little empirical research on photoblogs because it is still developing. Secondly, this research opens development of this study by providing a deeper understanding of marketing through microblogs. Despite the prevalence in the practice of visual social marketing, research is still extremely limited.

This study links photoblogs with new brands for a few reasons. First, photoblogs are fast like the fashion industry. Consumers constantly want to see new and unique apparel and fashion feasts on change. Second, fashion is largely image and aesthetically driven and a photoblog provides those imagery for consumers. Brand image is used in fashion marketing to allow clothing to communicate to others visually. Third, emerging brands are utilizing visual social media to grow their brand equity and this non-traditional way of marketing leaves room for exploration.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Conceptualizing fashion**

Historically, fashion was a privilege deemed only for the aristocrats. The early conceptualization of fashion was that it promoted class distinction. According to the classic study of fashion by Simmel (1957), fashion is a product of class and thus segregates and unites social stratum as a result. At first glance, clothing gives immediate evidence of the indication of financial standing compared to other types of material consumption. People have the desire to both imitate and differentiate from each other through the clothes they present themselves in. The higher class for example, differentiated themselves from lower classes through intricate styles and fabric, while the lower class emulated similar styles to achieve a high class look. Simmel states that the cycle of fashion is due to the initiating of fashion by the elite, the imitation of the mass—only to be abandoned by the elite for a newer way of dressing. The process quickens with an increase of wealth (Simmel, 1957).

Blumer (1969) understood that fashion is eminently connected to how the elite classes used distinctive apparel to differentiate themselves. However in contrast to Simmel, Blumer believes that when conceptualizing fashion, fashion in contemporary

society is more about collective selection than class distinction. Collective selection comes from selections made by innovators, followers, and other fashion participants that respond to the changes of tastes to simply be in fashion. The desire to be in fashion is connected to “express[ing] new tastes which are emerging in a changing world” (Blumer, 1969, p.282).

An example of collective selection comes from observations made by Blumer. Fashion buyers who make choices independently of each other due to the competitiveness of the industry, often end up picking identical designs at fashion houses. Another observation of dress designers, another competitive and secretive group, was that they produce similar designs albeit operating apart from each other. Individual participants of fashion are attuned to the same cues and develop common appreciations as a result, even though they seem to behave randomly. Among the vast styles that compete to be in fashion, those that happen to match developing tastes of the people become fashionable. Thus, fashion does not come from class emulating and differentiating, but from the retiring of old fashion to pave way for new fashion that appeals to developing tastes.

The movement of fashion represents the pursuit of “new models which will answer to as yet indistinct and inarticulate newer tastes” (Blumer, 1969, p.282). Fashion

comes from history and seeks to keep up with the times. It is born from and die from “their immediate predecessors” (Blumer, 1969, p.283) and uphold a line of continuity. Fads on the other hand are frivolous and represent a sudden change in tastes and interest. They disappear as quickly as they appear. If a fad becomes a trend, the duration of that style is longer. Fashion literature categorizes trends into two types: cyclical and classic (Miller, McIntyre & Mantrala, 1993). Cyclical trends are adopted into society and turn more and more extreme with time (i.e. shorter dress lengths) until that particular style reaches functional constraints. That is when fashion turns to the opposite direction until the most extreme is reached there. Classic trends are cyclical trends in the long run, as they are stable over time. Blue jeans are an example of a classic style with a long lifetime.

The mass-market theory (Sproles, 1981) suggests that mass communication and mass production propel new styles that are made available to individuals of any socioeconomic background. Sproles states that mass-market theory comes from the principle that influence in fashion comes from one’s own peer group and social class. In other words, consumers can choose among a plethora of existing styles spread between one’s own social circles, not a random glamorous person in the media. Personal influence and fashion information is now able to flow freely between groups because of

online social networks. From this perspective, the mass market theory is also referred to as the trickle-across theory or horizontal flow.

Although class fashion is less emphasized in postmodern culture, the desire to conform and attain group membership often overpowers the desire to express too much individuality. For example, it is deemed inappropriate to wear casual clothing in a business setting, yet wearing ones best formal wear on casual Fridays is also ill-suited. Even when a style is accepted into society, humans have an evident desire to express their individuality (Miller, McIntyre & Mantrala, 1993). At the individual level, choosing fashion comes from the strength of preferences and desire to be current. Then according to one's self-identity, the fashion is filtered through what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable, and one's attitude towards change until a style is selected (Miller, McIntyre & Mantrala, 1993).

All members are assumed to go through the individual decision process, but each person is interdependent to another in society (Miller, McIntyre & Mantrala, 1993). An individual who wishes to appear more fashionable for example, will check the current styles of others more frequently. Individuals reference others when they adopt styles and find symbolic meanings that have a value to them personally (Miller, McIntyre & Mantrala, 1993). That style is then transmitted to other members in society

where they pick what is appropriate to their tastes and the cycle continues. In this perspective, social significance was always rooted in fashion, but fashion develops through individual choice and self-expression. Fashion is an interdependent and dynamic process.

Another aspect in conceptualizing fashion is self-presentation and identity.

In postmodern times, fashion consumption is progressively becoming known as a process where consumers seek to showcase their identity (Pihl, 2011). Fashion visually communicates to others one's identity, values, attitudes and moods. Crane and Bovone (2006) found that fashion is the creation of symbolic values to material culture because clothing expresses the individual's perception of themselves through material goods. Symbolic value placed in clothing is fueled by promotion in communication media. Mediums such as fashion magazines, online web logs, and images in catalogs, shown in media transmit "values that imply an ideology and specific life styles" (Crane & Bovone, 2006, p.322). In this context, class fashion made a shift to consumer fashion—incorporating tastes of all social classes which allows for a diverse mix of styles to choose from.



## **2.2 Fashion brand marketing**

Fashion marketing is focused on consumers and potential consumers of clothing or related apparel. This includes but is not limited to fashion research, brand management, fashion promotion, and fashion product positioning. Easey (2009) states that fashion marketing is different than other types of marketing because the nature of fashion is constantly changing, giving emphasis on divergent techniques. The bare survival of the industry relies on changes. Understanding design details such as fabric, color, and pattern and their role in the season-to-season framework of fashion can benefit marketers (Sproles, 1981).

The American Marketing Association defines a brand as “A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers”. Evans (1989) believed that branding along with understanding the self-concept theory was crucial for marketing fashion. It is suggested that even though fashion feasts on change, the long-term brand image should be consistent. That is, the overall brand should maintain a stable image albeit changes in product style. According to Evans, a contributing factor to a strong brand strategy is self-concept; the combination of mental and physical self. Self-concept theory implies that individuals have an ideal “self” to achieve and show (Evans, 1989). Brand image used in marketing

allow clothing to symbolize ones belief in “self” and communicate to others visually.

Thus, Evans suggests that fashion marketers would find it more beneficial to focus on brand image.

A conceptual shift occurred in marketing from product-centric marketing to consumer-centric marketing. The concept of consumer centricity was perhaps first introduced by Levitt (1960), who suggested that firms should sell products based on consumer needs instead of just selling. In terms of marketing, consumer centricity is shown by focusing on satisfying individual consumers’ needs and wants as opposed to the mass (Sheth, Sisodia & Sharma, 2000). Mass customization was replacing mass production, and more emphasis was put on getting the right message to the right people than on mass advertisement. The customer-centric approach in terms of fashion brand marketing meant that the larger goal is customer loyalty (Rust, Zeithaml, & Lemon, 2004). However, the implication is that the value that a brand holds is highly individualized. For example, some people may view Uniqlo as innovative, while others may view it as cheap and fast.

With a rise in digital technology in recent decades, fashion marketers faced issues related to gauging consumer behaviors. Fashion information is disbursed through myriad of sources and media creating a decentralized system. Original gatekeepers like

fashion journalists faced competition from emerging actors like those who actually used fashion and thrived on digital technology (Pihl, 2011).

### **2.3 Social Media**

Although the term has many definitions between academia and managers, social media draws the line between two related concepts: Web 2.0 and User Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). In contrast to a traditional web page which limits viewers by simply reading uploaded content from one source, Web 2.0 allows for the instantaneous contributions from myriad of sources (O'reilly, 2007). Social networking sites, content communities, weblogs (blog), and video sharing sites fall into the Web 2.0 category. User Generated Content are types of unique media content created by end-users outside of professional practices and routines (O'reilly, 2007). Therefore, according to Kaplan & Haenlein (2009), social media can be defined as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p.61).

Social media is said to have two components: the media and self-presentation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). In the media aspect of social media, media richness

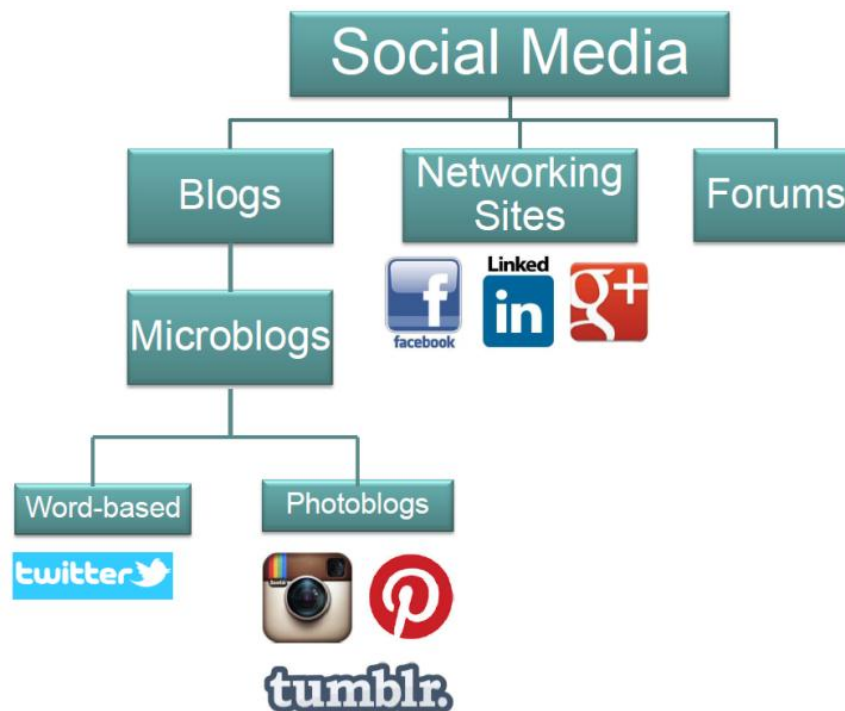
theory suggests that certain media are better at communicating (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009) because of the degree in richness they possess (Daft & Lengel, 1983). The richness in media depends on the amount of social presence which is influenced by immediacy (e.g. chat versus e-mail communication) and intimacy (e.g. online newspaper versus personal blogs). Communication tools that can give timely clarification are considered to be rich. Face-to-face is considered the richest medium as it gives instant feedback. Social media, particularly Facebook, ranks just under face-to-face interaction in the hierarchy of richness. Daft & Lengel (1983) suggest that communication that is more personal are richer, and thus are more practical than media with lesser richness.

As for the social component of social media, it is said that people are driven to impress others in any given social interaction according to the concept of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). This means that users of social media are fueled with the desire to create an image of themselves online that is consistent with their personal identity (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). For example, one who wants to be recognized as hip and trendy may choose to display their daily fashion on an online weblog. In this context, social media is related to the self-concept theory in fashion proposed by Evans. Crane and Bovone's belief that clothing expresses the individual's perception of

themselves is also relevant here, since people who create personal websites or engage in social media often do so to present themselves online (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Social media very expansive and Figure 2.1 below illustrate categories like blogs, networking sites and forums for example. Networking sites include sites like Facebook, Linked in, and Google Plus. Forums act like online messages boards. The area this research focuses on is under the social media category of blogs and specifically, photoblogs. The following sections of this report will elaborate on each type of blog and discuss its implications.

Figure 2.1 Categories of social media



In this age where individuals can transfer and access information freely, a highly competitive environment online is constructed where content creators contend with each other for the attention of the viewers (Narayanan et. al, 2012). Anything that is popular can contribute to the public awareness of a topic through their online visibility. Thus, individuals and companies promote their content by taking advantage of social media.

## **2.4 Blogs**

Blog is a contraction of the words web and log, and a blogger refers to someone who writes blogs. To follow a blog is to subscribe to the posts thereby allowing automatic updates or news made by bloggers. Around the mid 1990's blogs appeared (Tredinnick, 2006) as a type of social media that represent a modern form of personal web pages and are often seen as a communication tool that shapes opinion beyond the reach of mass media as a type of grassroots journalism (Nardi et. al, 2004). Lichtenstein's 2009 study (as cited in Sedeke & Arora, 2013) state that because of a blog's grassroots association, critics are skeptical about a fashion blogger's credibility in reporting.

However, that is not to say that fashion blogs lack influence in the fashion

industry or mainstream media. The motivations behind blogging are to document one's life, share opinion and commentary, express emotion, and form communities based on shared interests (Nardi et. al, 2004). Although blogs have been centered on self-presentation of an individual, recent times have shown an influx in corporate blogs to develop close relationships with consumers because there is a high amount of self-disclosure on blogs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2009), state that the rising “digital natives” and “screenager” generation are fully equipped with the technical know-how and eagerness to participate online in the form of weblogs, social networking sites, and content communities. Data suggest that although the majority of bloggers are from the United States (Herring et al., 2005), the pastime is gaining popularity internationally especially among urban dwelling youth (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008).

Schau and Gilly's (2003) research on the motivations behind making a personal webpage found that the need to communicate and explore their selves was the universal intent. Delving in deeper, the study found three initial motivators: a triggering event, a desire for personal growth, and advocacy (p.392). The study further revealed that consumers are continuously motivated to improve their online space as their technological skills advances. Thus, motivations can change over time. Similarly, in a

study done by Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz, the motivations behind blogging are to “document one’s life, provide commentary and opinions, expressing deep emotions, articulating ideas through writing, and maintaining community forums” (2004, p.43).

Research done by Guadagno, Okdie, and Eno (2008) using the Big Five personality inventory indicates that people who rank high in neuroticism and openness are likely to be bloggers. Openness includes characteristics such as intelligence, artistic talent, imagination, and diversity in interests. Results suggested that individuals high in neuroticism which is characterized by emotional outbursts, worry, and anxiety tend to blog for social connection or deflect loneliness. Based on neuroticism, women who were high in that characteristic are more likely to maintain a blog than woman who are low in neuroticism. There is no difference based on neuroticism for men however.

## **2.5 Microblogs**

Microblogs, becoming an established category in the social media family (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011), emerged in around 2006, when followers of influential personalities became content contributors themselves (Howard, 2010). Unlike blogging, microblogging is unique with its brevity, and thus allowed users to publish succinct



bursts of information through the web or smartphones. In other words, a microblog allows users to “exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011, p.106).

This phenomenon emulates word of mouth branding electronically, as social networking services and online communications have an increasing influence on consumer purchasing decisions (Jansen et al., 2009). The word-of-mouth (WOM) process is the conveying of information from one person to another by oral communication. In business, WOM marketing involves consumers that share information with each other about products and businesses. Jansen et al. (2009) compares WOM branding to microblogging because microblogs are formed through trust and social networking, the fundamental elements of WOM marketing. The research found that 80 percent of tweets from consumers using the Twitter microblogging site expressed no sentiment towards a brand. Instead, consumers were using Twitter for information sharing and seeking, asking questions, and general information. 33 percent of the tweets expressed negativity towards a brand while more than 52 percent were positive sentiments. The results assert that customers with moderate experiences are less likely to provide information compared to those that are extremely negative or extremely positive.

By lowering the time it takes for publishing content through shorter posts, a microblog “fulfills a need for an even faster mode of communication” (Java et al., 2007). Java et al. (2007) found that the motivations behind microblogging are for reporting news, sharing information, daily chatter, and conversing with others. A similar study done by Zhao & Rosson (2009) suggests that the reasons why people participate in microblogging taking Twitter as an example are for personal and relational benefits. A relational benefit is personal perception; knowing what others are going and the things that are happening around an individual. Other relational benefits are connectedness and finding common ground. The personal benefit is gaining access to informal communication which can lead to acquiring valuable information instantly. For example, a business may tweet about upcoming products long before it is printed in the next month’s magazine. In contrast to blogging, the study showed that users frequently turn to microblogging because it is briefer, based on real-time and people-based and thus making it more credible or “real”.

The main users of microblogs fall into three categories: information seeker, friends, and information sources. According to Java et al. (2007), most relationships fall into the friend category. An information source has a large number of followers and acts as a hub. Information seekers follow others regularly but may post infrequently. Users

relevant to the fashion industry include apparel companies (such as Nike, H&M, and Uniqlo) and fashion publishing houses (Vogue and Elle).

One feature that is dominant in microblogging is the use of hashtags. Hashtags are characterized by the number sign (#) followed by a word or phrase and were popularized by microblogging platforms to sort posts. Twitter was the first to embrace this categorizing style in 2009, followed by Tumblr and Instagram respectively. Facebook adopted hashtagging in 2013. If a brand has a “sale” on their post (#sale), all users who search for that term will find that brand’s post. Hashtags are measurable, clickable, and searchable.

From the social media marketing perspective, hashtags are used for branding, campaign management, and organization. When conducting a contest for example, hashtags can be used to search for activity relevant to the brand and distinguish contest participants from regular users. They can brand the hashtag #companycontest and ask their followers to post something with that specific hashtag for a chance to win. However, a hashtag should ideally be unique to the brand or the post may get lost in a stream of posts from the rest of the microblog users. A generic hashtag like #fashion may get thousands of posts a day from brands, designers, consumers or anyone involved with fashion.

## **2.6 Photoblogs**

A photoblog is a microblog that is predominantly updated with photos. In other words, writing is for blogs and photography is for photoblogs. Photoblogs appeared in the early 2000s once digital photography took its reign (Nystrom, 2009) it allowed photographers take many photos without the extra hassle of film processing. The low cost of digital photography as Cohen describes, let photobloggers garner more freedom of expression by taking and sharing as many photos as they want (2005). Humans have documented their lives for years, and a photoblog is the most modern form of that practice.

In interviews conducted by Cohen (2005) with 30 self-proclaimed photobloggers, it was identified that the reason why photobloggers choose to run a photoblog is because they want to portray real life as real life. Photoblogging is more about showcasing how life happens naturally in everyday settings, than in fancy studios with preordained poses. Cohen found that the act of photoblogging is as important as simply having a photoblog. In other words, not only do photobloggers like to have photographs, but they also like the acts of looking for subjects, taking, showing, and reviewing photos for the photoblog. Photobloggers tend to take a large amount of photographs and the photoblog showcases the most appealing images. There is always a

selection process in deciding what to publish.

Besides photoblogging being a creative outlet for photographers, there are other reasons why photoblogs are gaining popularity. Photoblogs are easy to share (Nystrom, 2009). A photoblog allows one to share something with a large group of people in a single upload without having to send things individually. Photoblogs do not clog up the feed or inboxes (Nystrom, 2009). Unlike traditional communication like e-mail, a photoblog does not flood the inbox's of others with content they are not interested in. Instead, users can view the photoblog at their leisure or follow the blog if they are interested enough to receive updates. Photoblogs are shareable with anyone (Nystrom, 2009) because photos are easily interpreted by people from all over the world regardless of language barrier.

Instagram, a photoblog platform acquired by Facebook in 2012, is the leading photo sharing social media and thereby tool where visual social marketing flourishes. Recently, the photoblog has added video sharing capabilities to their platform, but photos are still the dominant content. Instagram users relating to fashion consists of influencers, publishers, established brands, and emerging brands. Other prominent photoblogs are Tumblr, acquired by Yahoo in 2013, and Pintrest.

## **2.7 Visual social marketing**

Marketing through images and videos on social media is called visual social marketing. Visual social marketing, also known as visual content marketing, is a new practice and research has yet to agree on a single name. The basis for visual social marketing started when images were getting more reactions, clicks and shares on social media than typical word posts. Consumers are exposed to a great deal of advertisements in magazines, television, newspapers, internet sites, and billboards which lead to information overload. Visual aspects are an integral part of marketing because images break through the clutter of advertising. Marketers can communicate more information through images than text (Neher, 2014) because “text requires more eye fixations” (Pieters & Wedel, 2004, p.39) to be understood.

Visual marketing is used in advertising. The three key elements in an advertisement are brand, text, and pictorial (Wedel & Pieters, 2000). Wedel and Pieters define the brand component of an advertisement as textual and visual references to a brand. This includes elements like symbols, name, and logo. The textual components are all other words in an advertisement excluding brand name references, whereas the pictorial component includes design and illustrations that are implicit to the brand. An experiment of eye fixation monitored through infrared eye-tracking technology shows

that both text and pictorial components have a longer fixation frequency than the brand component on advertisements (Wedel & Pieters, 2000). However, the brand component receives the most fixations per surface unit. This finding supports the traditional marketing emphasis on the brand in advertising. The study further tested for memory in relation to imagery and discovered that the memory for pictorial information is more than that for textual information. Visual cues build brand memory.

A follow-up analysis of the attention to print advertisements relevant to size through the same infrared eye-tracking technology by Pieters and Wedel (2004) found that text attention is low while pictorial attention is significantly high. It was then observed that pictures capture more attention the brand component and text component. Furthermore, the study shows that images get substantially more attention whether or not it has a large or small surface area. The other two advertisement elements lack this characteristic. Nonetheless, a text increase by 1% leads to a .85% increase in the duration of gaze (Pieters & Wedel, 2004). On advertising platforms with a smaller surface size, established brands capture more text attention than emerging brands.

News articles and blog posts about visual social marketing never fail to mention Instagram. Brands partake in visual social marketing on Instagram to engage with their audiences by showing instead of telling, taking viewers behind the scenes,

and humanizing the brand (Kuenn, 2014). Photoblogs show viewers a brand's product offerings in addition to describing them. Since Instagram is able to host images and videos, viewers can make a more informed buying decision when brands showcase their product in action and use. Businesses may also use photoblogs to publish photos that give sneak peeks into upcoming releases to create hype. Instagram allows brands to show followers the inner workings of their business which provides people a unique perspective about the brand. For example, fashion brands may publish a photo on the set of a photo shoot that depicts models and photographers having fun. This portrays positive feelings that viewers can associate with the brand. By participating on a photoblog where consumers are active, brands can humanize themselves by connecting with people.

## **2.8 Coolhunting**

A term coined by Malcolm Gladwell, coolhunting is a “research approach...attempting to understand better the world of consumption through an immersion of daily occurrences with particular frequency in certain parts of the population (mostly young) with techniques in line with anthropology and qualitative sociology, in which the quantitative approach of the market studies leaves in place an



ethnographic observation driven by the intuition of the researchers.” (Perdoni, 2010, p.1). In other words, a coolhunter are emerging marketing professionals with the goal of collecting trends which stem from the youth. They find cool before it is cool.

Coolhunting then, is comparable trend forecasting.

Youth are emphasized in coolhunting because in contrast to other consumers, they actively engage in trying to find new symbolic values to their styles, often combing items in innovative ways or altering clothing (Crane & Bovone, 2006). Crane and Bovone (2006) observed that the youth are “more likely to participate in the niche marketing of their identity” (p.323) as they are highly interested in displaying their status as “cool”.

Southgate (2003) states that only cool people understand what is cool, and bloggers have become prominent at the center of cool hunting (Lieu Thi, 2009). This is because bloggers (“The Cool” are always creating themselves through self-expression. The benefit of having a blog for the individual is that they “raise the profiles of lesser-known artists or designers” (Lieu Thi, 2009, pg.90). On the other hand, companies can gain free insight about their market. However, some professionals argue that coolhunting is not accurate trend forecasting. Brands that have hired coolhunters are Nike, Levi’s, Adidas, Gap, and Converse (Southgate, 2003)

According to the sociology of collective behavior suggested by Blumer (1969), the most prominent fashion leader can be nearly anyone. Especially those who can make innovative choices that coincide with the lifestyle of the times.

## **2.9 Performance measurements of a blog**

While blogging has virtually no material costs, a successful blog is dependent upon time and effort in providing interesting content that is valuable enough to captivate audiences. Of the millions of blogs, the majority of them fail. Academia has yet to establish a definite measure on gauging success and influence of a blog (Gill, 2004). However, Gill claims that solution is to count the number of hypertext links to the blog, much like counting the amount of citations back to an article in academia to show prestige (2004, p.6).

Similarly, Kaushik (2010) suggests four components to measure the success social media which can be applied to blogs: conversation rate, amplification rate, applause rate, and economic value. The conversation rate is the number of audience comments per post. This component is evident and all social media and shows feedback from followers. The amplification rate is equal to the number of shares per post and shows what type of content the audience considers valuable enough to show others. The

applause rate indicates what the audience likes and reacts to in the form of “likes” or “favorite” clicks. Economic value shows the bottom-line impact of social media efforts and thus only companies or individuals that run blogs themselves have the information to calculate this. This component can be found through Google Analytics, by factoring the sum of long and short term revenue and cost savings. Sedeke’s (2012) research on effective fashion blogs found that the top ranked blogs are simple and clear in layout, personalized, dominant in visual content, and rich in interaction.

### **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the new visual content marketing phenomena through photoblogs. This chapter explains the research methods undertaken in the study and why it is applicable to the research questions presented earlier. The research will use qualitative content analysis and netnography to analyze the photoblogs of emerging brands in order to provide insight on visual social marketing. Three research questions were proposed as the empirical part of this thesis based on the theoretical framework.

#### **3.1 Research questions**

After an initial review of social media used business as a tool for marketing and the role of blogs for fashion branding, the clear trend towards the preference of visuals on dominant social media, and visually dominant social platforms gaining popularity, the exploration of visual social marketing through photoblogs was determined as the objective of this thesis. This is expressed by the research question; What is the role of photoblogs in promoting new brands (1)? The social media landscape has tools like social networking sites, forums, blogs, word-based microblogs and this opens questions

as to what purpose a photoblog holds.

The term “new brand” must be defined in detail in order to explore that subject.

This study uses defines a new brand as fashion apparel brands that are five years old from inception and are independently owned. This means that the brands are not part of a major fashion label and operate without funding from outside organizations. For the purposes of this study, the term fashion brands refer to brands that sell apparel.

Another facet of this thesis was to explore the reactions that new brands obtain on their photoblogs versus their other social media, and the interactions that take place on a photoblog. After clarifying the role of a photoblog from Question 1, the question; What are the functions of a photoblog (2)? was determined as the second research question to broaden the understanding. In order to provide an understanding of how new brands use photoblogs to conduct visual social marketing, insight about what new brands choose to publish, nature of engagement through comments, subject matter of photos, and photo descriptions were explored in order to answer the last question of this study; What are the brand management strategies of new brands with photoblogs (3)?

## **3.2 Data collection methods**

### 3.2.1 Content Analysis

Content analysis is an empirical and systematic method used on communication content (Berelson as cited in Kim & Kuljis, 2010), also known as the method of analyzing written material. Similar to a netnography, content analysis is useful for identifying trends, patterns, and preferences of users' without being intrusive and is also used in consumer marketing. In relation to photoblogs, content analysis differs from netnography in that allows for the examination of text and images used in communication instead of the individuals' (Krippendorff as cited in Kim & Kuljis, 2010).

The internet gave forth a plethora of information, which gave many opportunities to apply content analysis on web-based material. New media such as video, audio and animation emerged for example. Other features that transpired were decentralized information sharing, interactivity, and the evolving nature of the internet. The procedures of content analysis is selecting a population of documents to be studied, determine the unit of measurement, categorize the content, and analyze the data (Kassarjian, 1977). Units of measurement can be words, themes, characters, items, and space-and-time measures.

Using the framework described in the Handbook of Visual Analysis (Bell, 2001), the content (or ‘items’) used for analysis are the photos and images published by emerging brands, the text that supplement those images, and the text posts from brand followers. This addresses the research question of brand management and promotional practices.

In content analysis, a variable is how something is expressed (Bell, 2001). Variables for images are subject matter of the photos like clothing, sneak-peaks, or customer submitted photos. Reactions are expressed through amount of ‘likes’ and comments. The content analysis part of the study seeks to find out what brands are posting on their photoblogs to search for insight on brand management strategies. By studying the content on photoblogs, the roles and function can also be identified.

### 3.2.2 Netnography

A netnographic method was chosen to complement content analysis because a deeper understanding of how consumers respond to fashion photoblogs was desired.

Netnography which comes from *internet* and *ethnography*, is an unobtrusive approach in analyzing primarily text-based content on Web 2.0 sites. Developed around 1995 as a response to changes in interactions taking place online (Kozinets, 2012), netnography is

a popular method strongly associated with scholar Kozinets (1998;2002). Because of the rich insights on consumption patterns and symbolism the netnography method provides, it is often applied in marketing research in digital communities (Kozinets, 2002). Data collected through a netnographic study is comprised of field notes from cyber-cultural experiences (Kozinets, 1998). Content analysis and netnography are interrelated techniques.

The basis for netnography started when consumers went online to express product, lifestyle, and brand information. When corporate websites flocked to the internet, groups of consumers also formed in support or revolt of those brands and formed communities. This allowed market researchers to absorb information obtain insight from the consumers themselves in a naturalistic way. Furthermore, individuals who participated in expressing their thoughts online revealed the motive behind their consumer choices and lifestyle decisions. A major factor influencing positive brand equity is consumer advocacy (Almquist and Roberts as cited in Kozinets, 2002).

Using the suggested method of Kozinets (2002, p.63), this research chooses emerging brands that fit a certain criteria. The criteria chosen to properly answer the research questions are new brands that have an active and updated photoblog, large numbers of posters or followers which provide descriptively rich data, and shows



interaction and a substantial level of communication between members. The findings from doing a netnography of emerging brands are assumed to be practiced by the general population of small businesses that thrive because of social media. The researcher must be able to contextualize online data and determine the significance of cues and themes in relation to research questions (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography is used to distinguish characteristics of communities formed by the users' following emerging brands' photoblogs. Data collected through a netnographic study is comprised of field notes from cyber-cultural experiences (Kozinets, 1998).

### **3.3 Sampling**

Sampling for qualitative research focuses on subjects that provide depth because the natures of qualitative investigations are usually small and the whole population is unknown. For this reason, judgment sampling (also known as purposeful sampling) was utilized since the researcher purposefully selected the most information-rich samples. The approach to judgment sampling differs according to the study.

An exploration of the fashion-related part of the blog world was done initially. One problem identified in conducting a content analysis on web-based content is vast

size and chaotic structure of the internet (Kim & Kuljis, 2010). When faced with the immense amount of fashion blogs, microblogs stood out as an interesting medium to narrow the research to because it gained prominence with businesses and consumers despite being a new form of communication. Photoblogs were then chosen as an appropriate media for this study because fashion is a fast and image-driven industry. It is also possible for brands to supplement their photo posts with a textual description.

The researcher found very scarce articles that acknowledged emerging brands in fashion. Samples were collected through the internet search with the keywords “new independent label fashion brands”. The top result was an online marketplace called ASOS which serves as an online boutique for small brands. By refining the search on the ASOS website with criteria of “independent label”, “new”, to “most followed of all time”, the researcher was able to obtain a list of samples that fit the desired benchmarks. Changing the search to “top rated independent label” showed a couple of brands with more fruitful numbers for observation.

The researcher sought out brands that have active photoblogs online; Tumblr and Instagram respectively. The Tumblr website was found to be less transparent about interaction. Tumblr does not differentiate between comments and likes in the note count, nor does it show the number of followers a brand has. Instagram proved to be the

strongest medium for research as it shows photos, number of reactions (likes), number of followers, and replies. The researcher determined that reviewing all the photos in the past few months would provide a sufficient sample of information for analysis. The numbers of followers were noted for each brand, assuming that more followers meant that consumers felt the brand had something valuable to offer. Since Facebook and Twitter are the most dominant social media for business, those were also explored to determine the role of photoblogs versus a social network site for fashion. Finally, the users that interacted with the brands through the commenting system were observed.

### **3.4 Coding**

Coding is part of the analysis in a research and it safeguards against bias. Miles & Huberman (1994) describe coding as a step in analysis in which a researcher combines and differentiates data that's collected and the reflections made about that information. Coding is largely the backbone of a grounded theory method, which is a research method that starts from data collection through a variety of methods rather than beginning with a hypothesis. Codes are drawn from the data collected and grouped into similar categories, and then serves as bases for a theory. Therefore the exploratory research is sometimes referred to as grounded theory because the both seek to find a

theory from data rather than testing a hypothesis.

The framework provided by Kassirjian (1977) and Bell (2001) suggests that after choosing the population comes specifying what kind of measurements and data would be analyzed. In this part of the research, coding was used to conceptualize themes found in doing the content analysis. The comments left under photos were analyzed to understand the interactions and how the followers were reacting to the images that brand's post . Words, phrases, and interactions were coded. Here, it is important to note that it is not the word itself that matters, but the meanings given to words.

Codes are labels for assigning meaning to a specific piece of information obtained in the study and are attached to clusters of phrases, words, or a setting. Coding is useful for organizing pieces of information so the researcher can efficiently distinguish the clusters and relate them to a particular theme, hypothesis, or research question (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A theme represents response patterns and is an idea that tells something significant about the data. They are made up of initial codes. Themes that were reoccurring are assigned a name and marked with a code, then clustered into theories. So a theory is a collection of themes that gives structure to the subject of the research.

The first step in the coding process was to skim the content as a whole on new

brands' photoblogs to see what kinds of images were being published and what kinds of things people are writing under those photos. Notes about the first impressions were made. The second step was to reexamine photo posts one by one, reread comments line by line. During this stage, initial codes were compiled manually by reading through the comments, writing down the data, and highlighting patterns. Relevant codes were chosen by how frequent the word or phrase appeared in the comments. Third, codes were clustered into themes and then conceptualized into theories. Table 1 on the next page shows the list of initial codes and the theory that comes from them. The themes identified in the coding process will be elaborated on in the results and discussion portion of this research.

Table 1. Initial codes from photoblog comments and derived themes

Initial Codes	Theme	Theory
1. Beautiful	Observations Positive adjectives Shows interest Often short, one-worded	Positive Buzz
2. Cute		
3. Cool		
4. Divine		
5. Dope		
6. Gorgeous		
7. Nice		
8. Sweet		
9. Perfect		
10. Pretty		
11. Can't wait	Positive verbs Shows feelings about subject pictures	Emotion
12. Like		
13. Love		
14. Must have		
15. Need		
16. Obsessed		
17. Want		
18. Damn	Positive Reaction No substance	Entertainment
19. Oh my god		
20. Wow		
21. Yes		
22. Emotion icon (i.e. 😍, ❤️)	Shows ownership of product pictured	Self-esteem
23. Have these		
24. Just bought		
25. My favorite	About another individual, builds community	Value for others Electronic word-of-mouth
26. (shared) Perfect for you		
27. (shared) So you		
28. (shared) Thought of you		
29. (shared) You		
30. (shared) You need these	Shared positive verbs Show identity, perception, tastes	Self-esteem Electronic word-of-mouth
31. (shared) Love		
32. (shared) Need		
33. (shared) Want		

### **3.5 Reliability and Validity**

Content analysis alone is unable to provide statements regarding significance (Bell, 2001). It is descriptive, not revealing. Conducting a content analysis can for example; show that a particular fashion blogger of some characteristic is highly adored by readers, but that by itself does not show that readers are affected (either by copying styles or by becoming a blogger themselves). Kim & Kuljis (2010) suggest that content analysis should be combined with another method to avoid that limitation. Therefore, the netnographic research technique was chosen to further examine the interactions that take place between brands and consumers.

One of the discussions regarding netnography relates to ethics. Specifically, what is considered a public or private site and what constitutes consent online (Kozinets, 2002). Researchers have not derived a consensus on the proper procedures for netnography so this study has opted to follow an observational approach instead of a participative approach to strengthen the aspect of unobtrusiveness. Furthermore, no personal information about individuals is revealed in this study. If a user wishes to remain private, they have options on the photoblogs to lock their posts. Thus, this research assumes that all posts which can be observed are open for interpretation. Emerging brands that participate in social media and have a photoblog are assumed to

want to attract consumers and thereby also assumed to be open for examination.

The limitations of the netnographic technique come from the need for interpretative skills from the researcher, or lack of informant identifiers (Kozinets, 2002). A major concern about material posted online is the honesty in responses in which the conclusions are drawn from (Kozinets, 1998). These constraints were taken into account during data collection and interpretation to maintain a high level of validity and reliability.



## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

After collecting the data, the inductive content analysis discovered a few fundamental commonalities between the photoblogs of new brands. However, the analysis showed that new brands generally operate their photoblogs and engage with their audience in different ways from each other. Furthermore, the netnography found similar features in the interaction of brand followers across all brand photoblogs. The goal of this study was to explore the role of photoblogs in promoting new brands (1), function of a photoblog (2), and brand management strategies (3). This chapter demonstrates the key findings and patterns regarding topics expressed in Question 1, 2, and 3. The results of this study can be summarized in Table 2 on the next page.

Table 2. Summary of results

Research Question	Findings
1. What is the role of photoblogs in promoting new brands?	Photoblogs are an extension of established social media marketing practices  Photoblogs are seamless visual catalogues of brand products and brand image
2. What are the functions of a photoblog for a new brand?	To link with fashion bloggers and facilitate a reciprocal relationship with opinion leaders  To create positive buzz through electronic word-of-mouth branding and allow customers to share content  To build brand equity  For advertising and promotion
3. What are the brand management strategies of new brands with photoblogs?	Promotion of lifestyle and brand image  Encourage community collaboration  Direct marketing

#### 4.1 Role of photoblogs for new brands

The first part of the research seeks to provide an adequate answer to address Question 1; what is the role of photoblogs in promoting new brands? To adequately answer this question, the photoblogs of new brands and their Facebook and Twitter were compared to gauge where photoblogs fit in the social media marketing scheme. It was found that photoblogs play a central role in a brand's online social media presence in

which photoblogs are an extension of a brand's social media marketing activities.

#### 4.1.1 Photoblogs as an extension of social media marketing practices

All new brands have an active photoblog along with other social media. The photoblog is not just an optional platform for brand's to use for pure entertainment. Rather, brands have embraced the new media and have made it an integral part of a brand's social media marketing activities. For instance, updates on Facebook and Twitter tend to include Instagram posts, but it may not apply vice versa. This is because photos are shareable on any social media platform, whereas links and text information are not. Some platforms even enforce a character limit for word posts. In social media terms, publishing the same message in multiple places is called cross-posting.

Cross-posting is popular for message consistency and time efficiency. However, many articles suggest that cross-posting is detrimental to social media marketing if done too much because each channel has different communities. For example, Twitter may be excellent at nurturing consumer relationships but Facebook might contain more customer testimonials. Different platforms are used for different marketing activities, yet photos transcend boundaries and are cross-posted more even though other media may be more descriptive. To illustrate, street wear brand Educate Elevate's Facebook

provides in-depth information about brand news, yet receives less attention. A post on Educate Elevates Facebook includes a photo and notifies readers of an upcoming collection and its value, stating:

*This is our first fully designed collection and everything has been manufactured in the U.K, something we know was important to you guys and that was also close to our hearts, especially considering the unfair working conditions being reported in factories in the far east.*

The same photo was posted onto Instagram with a much shorter caption encouraging viewers to preorder of their upcoming collection. This obtained more reactions than their Facebook post. It should be noted that no other photoblogging platform was cross-posed onto Facebook and Twitter in all brands observed. Instagram was the single photoblog that all brands use and share.

To further illustrate, Black Milk Clothing , also known as Black Milk, conducts most of their social media activities on Facebook while still maintaining a very active Instagram with over 860,000 followers. Black Milk started as a blog called TooManyTights where James Lillis made and sold leggings and has since blossomed into a multi-million dollar brand renowned for its daring legging designs amongst the blogosphere. The Black Milk Facebook is updated daily with notifications of new items

and collections, restocks, upcoming designs, and sales information. For Black Milk, Instagram is used as a supplement to their social media marketing that contains strictly consumer-submitted photos. These photos depict customers in brand apparel. Despite having only reposted content on the Black Milk Instagram, each photo attracts thousands of likes and sometimes hundreds of comments. Sometimes customer questions are answered there too. While Black Milk is equally active and has a large following on both social media, Instagram receives legions more of reactions. The brand additionally cross-posts all customer submitted Instagram photos on their online shop. When a customer fills out the order form, they can also browse through a collection of submitted photos.

In contrast to the social media marketing practices of Black Milk, The Whitepepper uses Instagram as their main platform for branding and communication, not Facebook or Twitter. Whitepepper began its entry into the fashion business on photoblogging site Tumblr in 2011 and has grown to cater consumers on their own online store. Almost all photos on The Whitepepper's Instagram feed are original brand content depicting their own models, styling of outfits, and advertisements of sales and upcoming collections. Interestingly, Whitepepper seldom features any bloggers or customer-submitted reposts on their photoblog despite having a following of over

24,000 people. Photos that appear on Whitepepper's social media are solely taken from the brand photo-shoots and carefully chosen to fit an aesthetic. This allows the brand more control over their image as opposed to reposting content from others.

Nevertheless, much like Black Milk and other brands observed in this study, the photoblog undoubtedly attracts more attention. Photoblogs are captivating enough to direct the audience to its photos compared to any other social media platform. This evidence coincides with the rise of visual social marketing.

#### 4.1.2 Photoblogs as a seamless visual catalogue

Brands generally post photos that emphasize their clothing so the role of the photoblog is like a visual catalogue for brand apparel. Even brands that post other things like scenery or quotes can portray a certain lifestyle they want viewers to associate with the brand. Instagram and other popular microblogs have a web design feature called infinite scroll that allows viewers to soak in all the photos in a glance.

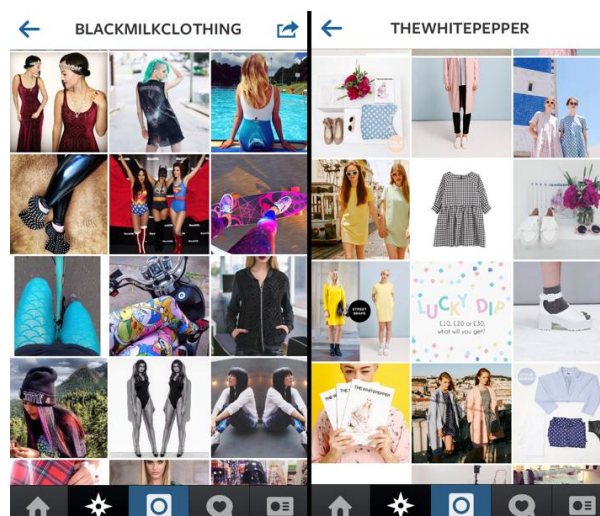
The function of an infinite scrolling webpage allows content to be loaded automatically as a user scrolls down a page. In other words, the page grows with content as a user scrolls down without ever seemingly reaching the bottom of the page. Rather than waiting for pages to load on a brand's photoblog, the user can experience a

seamless stream of images. Because brands upload photos that emphasize their apparel and aesthetics, viewers can quickly identify the product itself through the photoblog without having to click through links and search through wordy comments. The layout of the photoblog and its infinite scroll feature provides a catalogue of endless visuals for the viewer.

When a certain photo piques enough interest to click on, a separate page opens where the description, reaction, and comments lay. The visual catalogue is enhanced with descriptions and hashtags along with the photo. Black Milk utilizes hashtags with their brand name and the name of the clothing piece. For example, a pair of leggings that portray a space motif are uniquely hashtagged with the terms #purplegalaxies, #blackmilk, and #blackmilkclothing. If one were to conduct a Google search with the keywords “purple galaxies”, the BM online shop is the first result. For searches pertaining to the Instagram platform exclusively, users that conduct a search for the posts with the hashtag #purplegalaxies will find over 3,000 customer-uploaded photos of the space printed leggings. Most users that upload themselves in the brand apparel will also include positive feedback expressing their support of the brand. Viewers who are interested in a certain product can easily see the product on other customers and read what others’ thoughts are through the hashtagging system a photoblog has.

In a study of atmosphere in virtual settings, a 2003 study concluded that online atmosphere has an effect on shopper response (Eroglu, Machleit, Davis, 2003). Eroglu, Machleit & Davis understood that online atmospheric stimuli like graphics and colors can provide information about the retailer (e.g., target audience) and influence visitor responses. Relating this finding to a photoblog where visual cues are predominant, individuals that access a brand's Instagram will be able to decipher their offerings. The graphic depicted in Figure 4.1 illustrates the photoblogs of Black Milk and The Whitepepper, and how images are shown to the viewer. The content from Black Milk consists of bright colors and bold patterns, while The Whitepepper exhibits minimalist lines and light colors. These visual cues portray different impressions of the brand without the clutter of words and links.

Figure 4.1. The photoblog stream: visual catalogues of two different brands



The Instagram comparison of Black Milk Clothing and The Whitepepper depict



different atmospheres through a seamless stream of visuals.

To conclude, the photoblog has two roles for new brands; as an extension of traditional social media marketing and as a seamless visual catalogue. Actively updating Instagram as a new brand may increase viewership because the photoblog invites substantially more attention and interaction than all other social media. By the same token, photoblog content is more shareable on other media. From this analysis, it is clear that visual social marketing through photoblogs is part of the whole social media marketing scheme. The infinite scrolling feature allows a brand's photoblog to act as a visual catalogue that presents their apparel in a consistent stream free from distraction. Hashtagging allows viewers to browse through another stream of customer-uploaded photos.

#### **4.2 Function of photoblogs**

After identifying the role of a photoblog for new brands, the second part of this study was to provide a satisfactory answer to Question 2; What are the functions of a photoblog? Or, the performance of the roles discussed in the first part of the research. Here patterns found in photos, photo descriptions, and comment interactions are presented and discussed.

#### 4.2.1 A link to opinion leaders

This section of the analysis found that new brands and fashion bloggers maintain a relationship on the photoblog and links the theory diffusion of innovations coined by Everett Rogers to compare fashion bloggers to early adopters. Fashion bloggers are individuals of influence that write and post about fashion on their blogs actively, and has in recent times, trickled into other social media like photoblogs.

##### 4.2.1.1 The diffusion of innovations

The diffusion of innovations theory seeks to articulate why and how new ideas spread through the social system. Diffusion is the process which an innovation is transmitted through channels. An innovation is defined as a new practice, idea, or object. Rogers classifies individuals on the basis of innovativeness as adopter categories. There are the innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 1995), each representing the rate in which they adopt an innovation. Innovators are on the start of the spectrum and represent the first to take risks. Laggards are at the end of the spectrum and are the last to adopt an innovation.

The early adopter which is the second fastest category of people after the innovators is comparable to popular fashion bloggers. “The early adopter is considered

by many as ‘the individual to check with’ before using a new idea” (Rogers, 1995, p.264). Thus, early adopters tend to also be opinion leaders because people go to these individuals for information and advice. By definition, opinion leadership is “the degree to which an individual can informally influence other individual’s attitudes or overt behavior in a desired way” (Rogers, 1995, p. 354). Although the term opinion leader is often misunderstood with innovators, an opinion leader has followers while an innovator is just the first to adopt something. In other words, an innovator does not convince others to follow their pursuit. Often, an innovator’s ideas are too new and daring to appeal to the majority and are an even smaller group than opinion leaders.

The description of an opinion leader as written by Rogers (1995, p.92) include but are not limited to; more mass media exposure, communicative, young and innovative, and increase network connectedness. Interestingly, these are the same characteristics observed in bloggers, who are writing about their lives and showcasing their fashion on every social media platform.

Sedeke (2012) understood that fashion blogs are tools that enable the self-presentation and high interaction with little barriers. Practically anyone can express their fashion tastes online. Bloggers who manage to reach an audience and provide valuable content became part of the privileged few that bridge the gap between the

fashion industry and its consumers. The presence of bloggers in a new brand's visual social marketing practices is found to be constant in all brands observed in this study.

#### 4.2.1.2 Brand and blogger reciprocal relationship

Brands and bloggers have a reciprocal relationship. A fashion blogger normally publishes photos of themselves in brand clothing and are usually willing to share what they are wearing with their followers. In doing so, bloggers will link or hashtag the brand's name in the description of their posts, giving viewers access to the brand's photoblog. Some days later, the new brand will publish the same photo with a link back to the blogger. Interestingly, while Sedeke (2003, p.45) found no presence of brand management or marketing in successful fashion blogs because popular bloggers tend to avoid naming brands, this research shows that new brands and growing bloggers are willing to promote each other. This is especially beneficial for the new brand when the blogger has a larger following.

For example, Never Fully Dressed, a new womenswear brand headed by designer Lucy Tighe conducts the majority of their social media activity through Instagram and features bloggers in their posts. One of these bloggers is Charlotte Fisher. Once Fisher posts a photo of herself wearing Never Fully Dressed clothing, she links the brand

along with a several relevant hashtags. Days later, the brand then reposts the photo of the blogger and includes a link back. Reactions to these two posts are always positive, yet more interaction takes place under the blogger's photo compared to the one posted under Never Fully Dressed. Because a large part of a fashion blogger's activities is giving advice and answering questions about outfits, people generally gravitate to them for answers.

Even more, Fisher actually posts a few photos of the same outfit from different angles and takes time to answer most questions. In this sense, fashion bloggers have opinion leadership and can promote new brands just by doing their normal blogging activities. In return, bloggers obtain clothing not yet released by the brand and can continue their blogging activities by offering their audience something fresh. Some bloggers will post in a new brand's Instagram asking if they need any promoters in exchange for clothing. Those who are not bloggers will go as far as to ask the new brand if they need promoters. The exchange of new brand and blogger as exemplified with Never Fully Dressed and Charlotte Fisher is shown on the next page in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2. Brand and blogger exchange



For new brands, bloggers with an Instagram is the fastest tool for promotion to the largest number of people. This is because microblog updates of bloggers are made before their blog posts and more people can maintain a microblog as opposed to a blog. Continuing with the example of Never Fully Dressed and Charlotte Fisher, an extensive entry on her fashion blog promotes the brand's clothing in a short paragraph describing her affinity for the brand. She writes that the featured outfit will be released within the week and also directs readers to the brand's Instagram. Following the written portion of

the entry are at least ten photos of the blogger in the outfit. Photos show Never Fully Dressed apparel from different angles and details of a clothing piece.

The comments left under that post are of support and admiration from other bloggers. No comments come from non-blogging followers. Interaction does exist on the blog, but the photoblog attracts substantially more attention and is where questions are answered by the blogger. Generally only fashion opinion leaders have blogs so they can express their opinion, while the rest of the people who place along the innovation spectrum use photoblogs. A photoblog requires less work to maintain as it does not call for lengthy descriptions or well thought-out entries. In other words, only bloggers have blogs, where as anyone can have a photoblog.

#### 4.2.2 Create buzz through electronic word-of-mouth branding

Brands usually update their photoblogs a few times a day being careful not to post the same image twice. New brands can sustain brand relevance with their followers this way. In other words, when the brand's posts show up on a follower's feed throughout the day, people are reminded about the brand and can connect to the brand more because of the visibility a photoblog provides. An updated photoblog makes the new brand look current and lively. Publishing photos with different content a several

times a day on a photoblog is different than traditional advertising where a single image or commercial is shown over and over. Even if purple galaxy print leggings are already so popular that they are always associated with the Black Milk brand, they can be shown with different outfits. This allows consumers to see the many ways a single item can be used with their own personal style.

#### 4.2.2.1 Abundance of positive buzz

A deep look into the comment section under the photos was done to assess the interactions made by brand followers. Unlike Twitter, where it was found that the culture of users was of brand related information seeking and question asking (Jansen et al., 2009), users of Instagram typically create buzz on the brand's photoblog through their interactions. Question asking does occur, but not as frequently as positive buzz. The term 'buzz' is used in marketing to define the interaction between consumers which amplifies a message about a product or service. Because photos are published so frequently, photoblogs contain a lot of buzz.

Upon first glance, the buzz generated by brand followers seemed to lack substance; at times mindless. In some cases individuals who reply do not even use words to comment. Some leave an emoticon as a reply instead. Emoticons, a contraction



of emotion icons, are little picture representations of moods and facial expression used online or text messaging. Commonly used icons are ones depicting hearts or facial expressions with hearts.

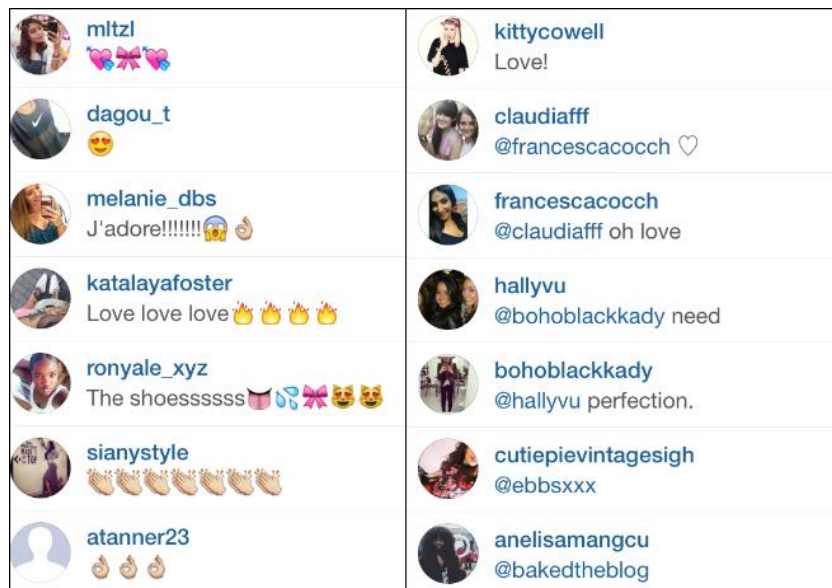
Most comments under posts made by the new brands are characterized by short, often one-worded positive reactions. Examples of the most frequent expressions found in the comment section are words such as: like, love, need, and want. Despite the brevity of comments, to consider the interaction on photoblogs as frivolous and fickle would be imprudent. For one thing, emoticons and short comments are left without elaboration giving an impression of meaningless impulsivity. Even when photos are shared with another, there is no deep explanation about why a user decided to so. Some users will share a photo and include the word “need”, signifying interest in the apparel shown. Although comments on photoblogs lacked substance compared to other social media, the majority of comments left are positive sentiments.

#### 4.2.2.2 Sharing

Even more, users that like a photo enough will share it with another user. This is done by tagging the recipient with their username with an At sign (@), which will notify them that someone wants to show them the photo. Taking Educate Elevate and

Never Fully Dressed as an example, Figure 4.3 below shows a screenshot of typical interactions under new brands' photoblogs.

Figure 4.3. Oh love, need, perfection



On the left, the reactions under Educate Elevate's Instagram show users replying with emoticons. The comments on the right depict Never Fully Dressed followers tagging others to show them the post. Figure 4.3 show that with both brands, all comments that were left were positive sentiments.

When user claudiafff leaves a comment with a heart symbol and tags user francescacocch, it is shown that francescacocch later replies 'oh love'. Sharing a photo through tagging on Instagram allows for specific people to see the photo unlike Twitter

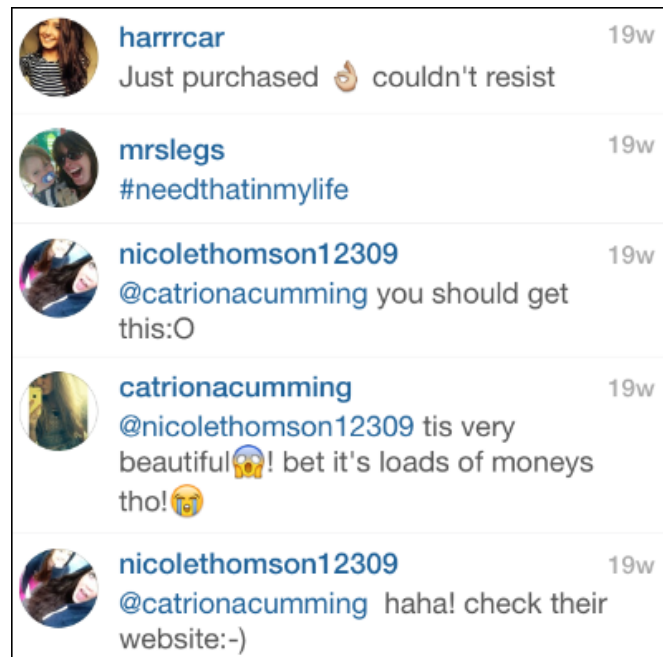
or Facebook, where content that is shared can be seen by everyone via live feed.

Because of this, sharing through tagging on a photoblog may not garner as many views as compared to other social media. However, the content is very targeted and personal.

It is similar to word of mouth branding in real life. For instance, one may recommend a close friend to watch a horror movie because they know their friend's preferences. They may not recommend the same movie to their whole address book of friends and acquaintances.

Positive buzz and consumer opinions found in photoblogs are the similar to interactions which was studied on Twitter. It emulates electronic word-of-mouth branding. When an individual shares a photo, they are advocating for a brand. New brands may find this aspect of photoblogs beneficial because they need advocacy from consumers to grow their name. Figure 4.4 on the next page depicts interactions after a photo was posted. One user bought the apparel pictured, while another user recommends the post to a friend and encourages them to check the website if they are interested in purchasing.

Figure 4.4. Check their website



Although hard to identify whether or not people end up purchasing the clothes that were shared with them, there is a tendency to show interest. Once in a while, customers will comment that they have made a purchase.

Up until this point, it has been emphasized that most of the comments in photoblogs are positive buzz. However, that is not to say that negative comments do not exist. Black Milk Clothing's products seem to be so sought out that people start complaining in the photoblog about how fast things sell. The graphic on the next page depicts such reactions about a t-shirt. Interestingly, negative comments provide more depth than comments of positivity. Instead of posting one-worded gripes like 'upset' or 'ridiculous', users who feel dissatisfied tend to elaborate why they think so.

Figure 4.5. Negative comments have something positive to show

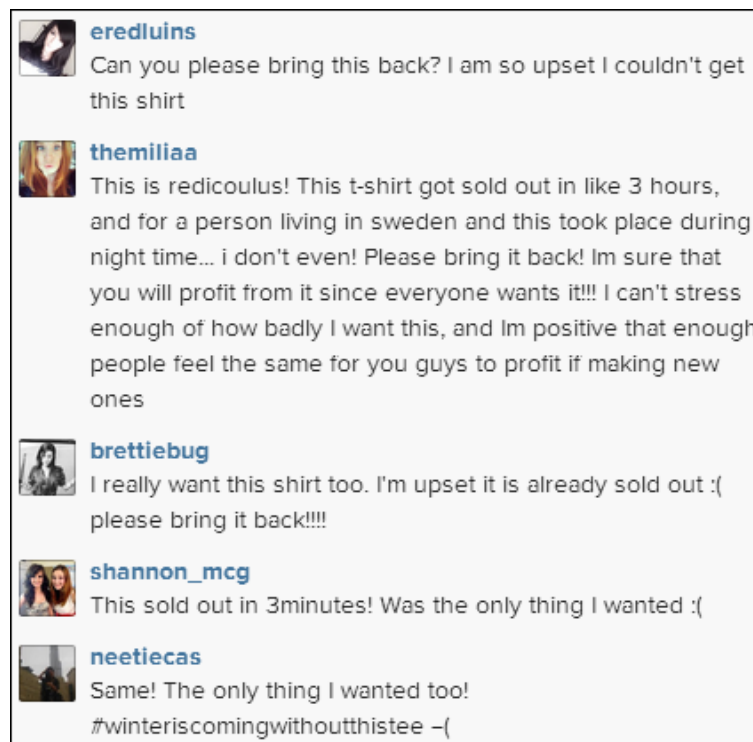


Figure 4.5 above shows people literally begging for Black Milk to restock a certain t-shirt that was posted. From this example, the photoblog is not a mere catalogue for entertainment, but it displays the intention people have in purchasing from new brands. It shows personal interest and excitement about the product pictured. It also shows how the brand fails to maintain enough stock for demand.

Evidence from both Figure 4.4 and Figure 4.5 further suggests that photos are captivating enough to make people want to try buy the items that are featured and make an outcry when they cannot obtain it. Furthermore, if something is pictured that is not in

stock, some few users have requested the brand not to post things that cannot be obtained. Not only are people captivated by the product that is featured, but they have tried buying them after seeing the photo. They have seen the photo, clicked out of the photoblog, visited the online shop in search of the item, and came back to remark about the stock. This suggests the power of visual social marketing. Black Milk combats these negative replies about stock by explaining that they have been doing their best at restocking. Then they ask followers to sign up for email notifications on restocks.

#### 4.2.3 Build brand equity

Photoblogs are part of a new brand's marketing communications that function as a tool for brand equity. A photoblog builds brand equity because people can form a community around the brand by interacting with each other on Instagram. The last sections covered functions of a photoblog as a link to opinion leaders and to create buzz through electronic word-of-mouth branding. This ultimately contributes to building brand equity. Bloggers are a source to promote brand equity because they are opinion leaders. Even customers, when featured in a post, have the ability to endorse a brand to their own peer groups through electronic word-of-mouth marketing.

Brand equity is the extent which consumers can recognize a brand name. When there is positive brand equity, a new brand can increase its chances that a customer will purchase their apparel. Research has not yet agreed on a universal way to measure and quantify brand equity, yet it includes components like preference, loyalty, awareness, and familiarity, image, and associations. An example of brand equity is the extra money a customer is willing to purchase an Apple MacBook rather than another brand of laptop.

Black Milk's photoblog showcased strong brand equity because there is a community for the brand. Even though the new brands do not answer every question received on a photoblog, the comments section act as a meeting place for discussion between followers. If there is a strong community around a certain brand, followers will reply to each other's comments and address questions. An interesting post in a Black Milk discussion on an online forum made by user surrealexistence (2014) states, "I don't know if you'd label me as a sharkie, but the community in general is a really lovely one. Girls really get on harmoniously within it, which is nice to see." The fact that a community can form in support of a brand shows consumer's dedication to and may also add to brand equity. Black Milk's case was exceptional, as other new brands in this study did not typically feature a close-knit community. Blog posts and other sources to

mention other brands in positive light, but spoke nothing of a community like Black Milk.

Outside of Instagram, forums and blogs have detailed posts chronicling impressions of new brands. As detailed in the last section, a photoblog is not a common place for lengthy discussions. For Black Milk, there is a large consensus that their apparel is pricey, but is made of quality and tends to sell out fast. An issue that is often brought up within the community is about the weight of customers that get reposted by Black Milk since the brand usually features their customers in Black Milk clothing. Specifically, there have been backlashes about Black Milk only featuring customers that are slim, instead of customers of all sizes. It should be noted that this problem is not unique to Black Milk in the realm of fashion. Backlash and criticism are more likely to take place on Facebook, not Instagram. When one looks at the Black Milk photoblog, positive comments outnumber the negative ones by a great margin. The consumers' positive perception of Black Milk's apparel through the photoblog adds to their brand equity.

#### 4.2.4 Advertisement and promotion

Advertisements are used in marketing communication to encourage and



persuade a specific group to take action. The photoblog is quick and easy enough to allow for multiple posts a day and most new brands take advantage of that. Images on photoblogs act like advertisements throughout the day because users tend to show interest in whatever is pictured even if there are no outright connections to the brand (i.e. the puppy photo from Figure 4.7, or the denim vest shown on a celebrity from Figure 4.8, shown in a later section).

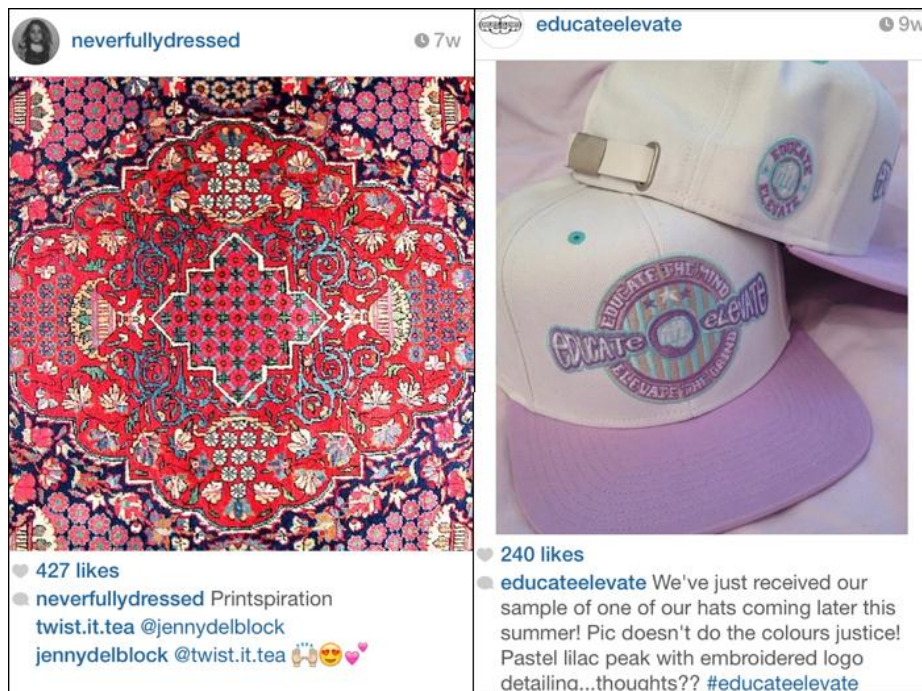
Photoblog advertisements are usually subtle, in the sense that they blend in with images as if they were uploaded by a friend. Photos published are typically of people wearing apparel, so it is not easy to decipher what exactly the brand is trying to sell sometimes. It could be the top, bottoms, shoes, accessories, or the whole look. Because images are published so frequently, it would be beneficial for brands to post compelling images of their product or things that their followers may be interested in. Remember, a customer does not follow one brand and can see all their posts. Rather, they are following a mix of brands they are interested in, personal contacts, or opinion leaders. The photoblog feed moves very quickly with each update, quicker the more photoblogs one follows.

Just like any other media, advertising on social media works when done right. For most new brands, effective advertising on a photoblog generates positive buzz

which builds up brand equity and ultimately awareness. Because brands tend to post a mix of models in brand clothing, customers, and other images associated with their brand throughout the day, it gives the audience new visuals to take in. This characteristic is different than traditional advertising where one image is played over and over. A photoblog feeds users new content daily, without the risk of people skimming over in boredom or tuning out the message.

An earlier section of this paper discussed the three key elements of advertising proposed by Wedel & Pieters (2000) which are brand, text, and pictorial. Another reason why photoblog images are advertisements for brands is because they contain all three elements. The main page for any brand is always a seamless stream of visuals, but more information is shown on the feed of followers or if a photo is clicked on. Figure 4.6 shows how images from Never Fully Dressed (left) and Educate Elevate (right) would show up on the feed of someone that is following the brands. The content shown on the left promote brand image, while the content on the right is an advertisement for a product.

Figure 4.6. Inspiration and advertisement?



From Figure 4.6, the brand element is shown at the top of the post with the brand's name. The text component is the caption shown under the number of likes. And the image, the pièce de résistance, is the pictorial. Even an image as obscure as a pattern, which serves as 'printspiration' (an inspirational print) for Never Fully Dressed received a share and a positive reaction. Although it does not call for followers to buy any specific product, it has certainly drawn interest as shown with 427 likes. Even more, since the brand's name is clearly at the top of the post, one may view the brand's apparel as intricate or feminine by the way a photoblog presents where inspiration for their clothing originates.

A more concrete example of a more obvious advertisement through a photoblog is the image of Educate Elevate hats pictured on the right of Figure 4.6. It depicts the brand name, the item which has the brand name, and a short caption about the upcoming release asking followers for their thoughts. These sorts of posts tend not to get as many comments.

The interactions left on photoblogs are characterized by short and positive sentiments, also known as positive buzz. Electronic word of mouth branding occurs when a user will share the photo with someone else through tagging. Sharing on a photoblog is more personal because it is tailored to a specific person, rather than sharing information with one's vast group of friends. During the course of this study, it seems that negative comments are seldom posted to photoblogs and left for other social media like Facebook. Because positive sentiments exceed negative ones on a photoblog, positive brand equity can be attributed to a new brand through a photoblog. Most brands publish content on their photoblog a few times a day. It is chance to promote their brand image and advertise their clothing in a dynamic way that is different than the older stagnant advertising style of displaying the same images over and over.

To conclude, the functions of a photoblog for a new brand are to foster meaningful relationships with opinion leaders, to generate positive buzz through

electronic word-of-mouth branding, to promote brand equity, and for advertising and promotion. All are important to developing a brand name in the vast fashion marketplace. Fashion bloggers are seen as opinion leaders; the people to go to for fashion information and advice. Brands that have an exchange with fashion bloggers can spread their name to more consumers because bloggers have large followings on their photoblogs. Usually, the brand gives clothing to a blogger free of charge in exchange for a promotion on their social media.

#### **4.3 Brand management strategies**

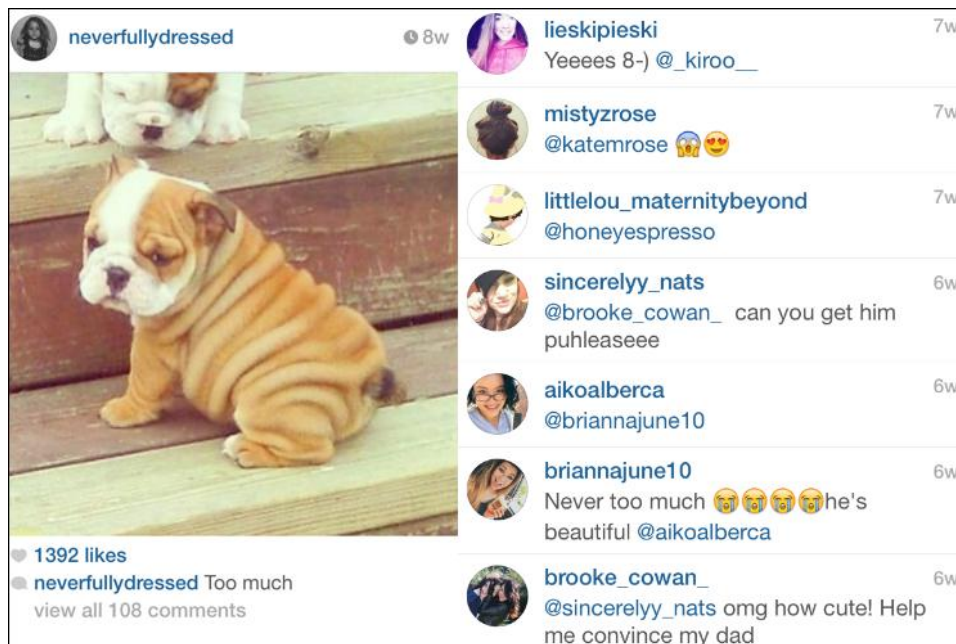
The last part of the analysis was to provide a satisfactory answer for Question 3: What are the brand management strategies of new brands with photoblogs? Here, the general types of photos published and the way captions are written were analyzed. This part of the study required a holistic view of the way new brand's run their photoblogs. The analysis of the photos chosen to be posted and how brands use their photoblog differed between all new brands studied. The only key similarity was that photos of bloggers wearing a certain brand's apparel are essential. All brands featured bloggers in their images at some point or another in their photoblog. Some brands do it more often than others. Nevertheless, this section documents a few ways new brands promote their

clothing through visual social marketing.

#### 4.3.1 Promote a lifestyle

From the content analysis, Never Fully Dressed promotes a lifestyle through their photoblog with a several updates throughout the day. There is a balanced mix of reposts from bloggers and original content. It is apparent that Never Fully Dressed demonstrates a lifestyle through their Instagram as some photos contain things irrelevant to fashion such as quotes, food, and scenery. These posts seem to reflect what the brand represents and where the brand draws inspiration from. Interestingly, photos that have nothing to do with the brand still get about the same amount of reactions (likes), comments, and shares from their followers. Images on the brand's Instagram are entirely just photos. There are no photo advertisements that say words like 'sale', 'coming soon', or other forms of marketing. Figure 4.7 illustrates a case in which a photo of a puppy was published by NFD which got 1,392 likes and 108 comments. The same type of short commenting style and sharing from followers was found here as well. Users who the photo was tagged with came to join the conversation with positive remarks.

Figure 4.7. Photo irrelevant to fashion with comments



Posts from Never Fully Dressed also tend to emulate the perspective of a consumer instead of a company. For example, photos of sandals were published asking “Anyone...??? Where are these from???” To which followers replied and speculated they were from prominent brands like Zara or Topshop. New brands are willing to incorporate aspects of other brands in their social media posts. Even bloggers, that are reposted to a new brand’s Instagram because they are wearing that brand’s dress, may choose to pair the outfit with another brand’s shoes. This is different than traditional marketing and advertising, where solely one brand’s logos and symbols are presented. For instance, there are no photos of Nike apparel on the New Balance Instagram and

vice versa.

Sometimes images of celebrities are posted despite having no relation to the brand. A photo of actress Sarah Jessica Parker known for her role as the fashionable Carrie Bradshaw from the series Sex and the City are published along with a photo of actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt. This is another difference than traditional marketing.

Instead of emptying pockets to have a celebrity endorsement for a brand, a photoblog allows new brands to publish photos of them for free. Figure 4.8 captures the comments users write under a photo published by Never Fully Dressed of Jennifer Aniston as Rachel Green from the popular comedy Friends.

Figure 4.8. Celebrity inspiration photo with comments





Never Fully Dressed captions the photo with “denim-spiration” suggesting inspiration from the denim vest worn by Jennifer Aniston. Celebrity presence on a photoblog does not tell consumers to buy a brand’s products so straightforwardly like traditional advertising. Celebrity photos also get shared and commented on the same way as other photos. The comments under Fig. 4.8 show people reacting positively and sharing with each other. One comment goes as far as to wanting the denim vest that, again, is not made by Never Fully Dressed.

Educate Elevate has also posted photos of celebrities, yet less frequent than Never Fully Dressed. One photo displays a past photo of singer Jennifer Lopez with the caption ‘00’s J.Lo’. Obviously during the 2000’s, Educate Elevate was not established yet so Jennifer Lopez is not endorsing the brand. Reactions and comments still continue to be positive, and the photo is shared. Other photos may include references to popular television shows that align with the brand’s image.

It is difficult to label this as a celebrity endorsement marketing strategy. For one thing, traditional businesses pay celebrities to use their fame to sell or promote a product. In both Never Fully Dressed and Educate Elevate’s case, photos of celebrities tend to serve as inspiration; the brand’s image personified as someone famous. The photos show that if the brand were big enough, these are the people who would be

chosen to represent them. So while posting photos of celebrities on a photoblog cannot be called a celebrity endorsement in the traditional marketing sense because celebrities are not promoting brand apparel, there may be other benefits derived from these posts.

Users are still sharing celebrity photos with each other. As a result, it attracts new followers, builds awareness, and positions a brand. People who like the characters played by Sarah Jessica Parker and Jennifer Aniston and the lifestyles they portray may find interest in the brand. Similarly, fans of Jennifer Lopez who is famous for R&B and hip-hop music may connect with a street-wear brand like Educate Elevate.

#### 4.3.2 Customer collaboration and community building

An earlier section of this report chronicles that people maintain photoblogs to portray real life as real life. Black Milk's photoblog shows consistency to that statement because the majority of the images posted depict real customers in Black Milk apparel, not models or bloggers. That is not to say models or bloggers are not real people.

Models are chosen for their image and are photographed in carefully constructed studios and settings, and a large part of a blogger's job is to promote the clothes they wear.

Customers that are neither models nor bloggers have fewer stakes so they can potentially be more transparent. In this aspect the photoblog is used to show customer

opinion, much like other social media. The opinion portrayed is that many customers are buying brand apparel and are satisfied with it enough to photograph themselves in it. The image given off through those photos is that all customers are satisfied so this is highly one-sided. Yet, Black Milk builds a community through this by regularly featuring their customers instead of only select models and bloggers.

The same process of reposting a blogger's photo is done with customer photos when reposted onto a new brand's photoblog. The brand will link the customers' photoblog and add relevant hashtags. Figure 4.9 shows a customer (stephanieo546) submitted photo highlighting a strawberry printed dress that Black Milk published to their photoblog.

Figure 4.9. Customer submitted photo with comments



The photo obtained many comments towards the Black Milk dress and the customer herself. Customers depicted receive compliments and questions from other users, much like posts featuring bloggers. The interaction depicted in Figure 4.9 show stephanieo546's replies in answering other followers' questions about the dress about size and recommended another favorable print. Referring back to the exchange that new brands have with bloggers in an earlier section, Black Milk has a similar exchange through featuring customers without having to give away free clothing for a promotion. Customers can promote the brand through their replies to other people's questions. From this example, the customer promotes the brand in positive light stating "...I can't wait to get it and it is really flattering". She furthermore writes "they [Black Milk] have made the new styles more roomie", providing information about new styles to others.

In addition to promoting the brand through customer photos, regularly featuring customers may remind future customers to share the brand experience. Posting customer photos encourages others to join. Under the hashtag #blackmilk, there are over 250,000 posts of customers that tagged their photos with the brand's name. The bulk of these photos are customers wearing Black Milk apparel. People post things about themselves that they would like to share, so this may create more brand equity for Black

Milk. The sheer number of Black Milk customer posts found through the hashtagging system and on the Black Milk photoblog suggests that Black Milk is a popular brand.

This strategy is not specific to new brands. Prominent brands also share photos of their followers along with other marketing content, but Black Milk's Instagram is noteworthy because it consists of mainly customer photos and a few images of models and bloggers. There are no mentions of sales, contests, new releases in photos published. The clothes and the comments that follow do the talking. Their Facebook is where the more straightforward social media marketing takes place as it contains details of sales and other product information. Nevertheless, they can show appreciation to their customers by acknowledging their photos through sharing. By posting images of proud customers, BM goes beyond posting a photo of a mere product.

The popularity of a photoblog is built around collaboration and reciprocation between the new brands, bloggers, and customers. New brands tend to have a close-knit relationship with their customers. So close, that the customer's personal photoblog is linked and credited when a photo is chosen for repost. It places the customer on a pedestal, in a good sense, as opposed to just stating 'a photo from our dear customer'. In fact customers that take photos of themselves in brand clothing, upload it online, and hashtag the brand so the brand can find their post, usually enjoy the attention they

receive if the photo gets reposted. This is evidenced by customers that then go make a post on their personal photoblogs of the screenshot of the brand that used their photo. Usually a happy description is written that expresses excitement or gratitude. Brands can foster this exchange by encouraging customers to hashtag their photos with the brand's name so that it can be catalogued and searched for.

Customer collaboration by new brands has popularized the once blogger-exclusive term OOTD. OOTD is an acronym of the words 'outfit of the day'. The term was originally used on fashion blogs where bloggers showed their viewers what they have worn. They typically also list the brands of each other. Nowadays, because new brands like Black Milk encourage their customers to show themselves in brand clothing, anyone can post an OOTD. A concept that was only reserved for bloggers now includes proud customers that want to show off their personal tastes.

#### 4.3.3 Direct marketing

Photoblogs provide great opportunity for direct marketing, a type of advertising where information is communicated directly to consumers. In this case, all followers of a brand's photoblog are subject to direct marketing because updates from brands are automatically displayed in a follower's personal feed when followed. Choosing to

unfollow a brand means opting not to receive direct updates. Direct marketing is used often with small companies because it is cheaper than other types of advertisements. In the past, one of the ways direct marketing was done online was to compile customer e-mail lists to distribute an advertisement to each person. A photoblog does the same thing and the message has a better chance of being seen than e-mail. E-mail requires clicking and reading, whereas images on photoblogs come in a flow of content that is automatically refreshed.

The Whitepepper's photoblog is used to convey brand image and is more straightforward with their marketing and advertising than other brands observed in this study. It is also the least interactive because replies to comments are rare on Instagram and other social media. There is no rapport with commenters. Even so, every platform is updated at least three times a day and the brand has a following of over 24,000 people. Sometimes photos are published as many as ten times a day. The interaction on The White Pepper's Instagram is different to that of previously observed brands. Due to The White Pepper's lack of interaction, there are fewer comments under their photos; some even have zero comments.

Perhaps this is also because the brand is more blatant with their marketing. For example, photos never fail to include a detailed caption, often encouraging followers to

take action. There are frequent sales, competitions, and new items being posted. On top of that, The Whitepepper posts images much like advertisements in a magazine. In other words, the word ‘sale’ would be written across a photo of a model in brand clothing. The message of clothing going on sale is made more explicit with the word ‘sale’ directly on the image, as opposed to writing it in the description. This is different than posting photos exclusively like Never Fully Dressed or Black Milk. Shown below in Figure 4.10 are common captions under photos posted in the brand’s Instagram along with advertisements. The captions are underlined for emphasis and to diverge from the hashtags.

Figure 4.10. Obvious advertisements in photo and description

		<p><b>thewhitepepper</b> 11 hours ago <u>Free Standard Delivery Worldwide ends Midnight Tonight! Entre code 'BUNNY' at checkout :) #free #delivery #ends #tonight #thewhitepepper #bunny #easter #promo</u></p>
		<p><b>thewhitepepper</b> 16 hours ago <u>Perfect jumper for the transitional weather. TWP Beehive Jumper comes in cute pink, yellow or lilac :) Free Standard Delivery Worldwide ends tonight!! Don't miss out! #free #delivery #thewhitepepper #Easter #weekend #jumper #beehive</u></p>
		<p><b>thewhitepepper</b> 5 days ago <u>Looking for an all-purpose coat? Our Oversized Trench would be perfect :) thewhitepepper.com #trench #coat #oversized #rain #or #shine #black #grey #long #outerwear #womenswear #indie #designer #style #trendy #lookbook</u></p>
		<p><b>thewhitepepper</b> 6 days ago <u>Our Back Open Check Midi Dress would love to join your wardrobe :) thewhitepepper.com #dress #casual #party #styledup #styleddown #styling #style #versatile #ootd #wardrobe #fashion #eastlondon #thewhitepepper #twp</u></p>



The advertisements consist of notification of an upcoming Whitepepper tradeshow, a student discount, a hiring ad, and a summer sale. A previous section noted that the function of a photoblog is for new brands to post advertisements. This already happens by default because brand, text, and pictorial elements are already included in the layout of a photoblog. As a result, the brand is actually repeating the same message in a single post as shown in Figure 4.11. It is an image of the brand's summer sale campaign.

Figure 4.11. Summer sale advertisement



From that image alone, the brand 'The Whitepepper' is shown five times, and the word 'sale' is shown three times. Comments under such straightforward advertisements are positive, but extremely minimal. The post in Figure 4.11 received 333 likes and two comments in which two users share the image with other users. Those other users did not comment back. A sale post made the week before that received 304 likes, and two comments. In fact, all posts about sales tend to get a couple of comments or less.

The analysis found that content on the Whitepepper's photoblog is interesting enough to react and click the like button, but not engaging enough to leave a comment. Images about sales and discounts tend to occur once a day, every day of the week. Upon further inspection, each month contains various posts promoting a certain sale or discount. The Whitepepper makes use of the hashtagging system as well, but does not give their clothing specific names. General hashtags are used, such as #style, #fashion, and #grey. The specific brand tags are #thewhiteppper and #twp. Under these hashtags, some customer uploaded photos do exist but are not posted to brand Instagram.

The risk of posting too many sales and discounts is that it erodes the brand. Too much promotion may discourage customers from buying a brand's offering because the clothing seems to eternally be on sale. There is no sense of haste in needing to make a

purchase when the customer knows another sale is around the corner. A successful promotion will encourage customers to purchase in a short time, because promotions generally do not last long. Granted, there is no definitive way to gauge whether or not customers are buying a brand's apparel when it is advertised so much. However, the lack of comments does suggest that the connection is low between brand and followers.

So Whitepepper's example shows that followers shun obvious advertisements especially when they are done almost daily. Educate Elevate, usually featuring bloggers, customers, and pop culture references in their photoblog, had made a blatant advertisement once that notified followers of a new collection. Because it was so rare for the brand to do so, the post received over ten comments in favor of the upcoming apparel in addition to some hundreds of likes. Never Fully Dressed also posted an advertisement on one occasion with a close up of a t-shirt that would be releasing within the next week of the post. The caption read a short, 'New Ts. Dropping next week' and managed to get a bundle of comments showcasing typical photoblog hype.

Bloggers are seldom featured on The Whitepeppers photoblog because the brand already dedicates a section on their shop website called "Who's Wearing The Whitepepper?" that showcases customers in brand clothing. Each photo gives proper credit to the blogger or customer and links viewers to the checkout page on the online

shop for item worn. Therefore, The Whitepepper does want its viewers to know that people are wearing their clothing despite the lack of blogger and customer recognition on their photoblog. Once in a while, a blogger is shown on Instagram however. In fact, more recent posts depict bloggers, but does not link accounts like what was observed with other brands.

However weak this strategy is in producing interaction or buzz, The Whitepepper does a strong job in showing their brand image through visuals. Images are all chosen to fit The Whitepepper's minimalist, yet retro aesthetics. Photos include some form of pastel and white space is used frequently for a polished feel.

To summarize, although no dominant strategy was identified, some new brands shared the same characteristics with each other. While there is a slight difference in the style and attitude of their photoblog posts, nothing was prominent enough to call a definite brand strategy. All brands have featured bloggers on their photoblogs, again emphasizing their importance in the online fashion world. If a brand wants to highly control the images that are posted on a photoblog, it comes at a cost of alienating customers and bloggers. The photoblogging experience is a very collaborative one, after all. Some patterns that were found between how new brands run their photoblogs are to promote a lifestyle, to encourage customer collaboration, and to direct market their

clothing. Promoting a lifestyle and encouraging customer collaboration are the two strategies that attract the most interaction between followers. Direct marketing does not invite any dialogue between followers, yet is still reacted to and 'liked'. The more obvious the advertisement is, the less interaction there will be.

#### **4.4 Summary of results**

This research focused on three aspects; the role of photoblogs, the function of photoblogs, and the brand management strategies of new brands with photoblogs. The first part of the analysis which sought to provide a satisfactory answer for Question 1, showed exactly how integral a photoblog is to a new brand's social media marketing scheme. One role of the photoblog is that it is an extension of a brand's social media marketing activities. Images on photoblogs are more shareable compared to the content on other social media platforms and get more reactions. Another role of the photoblog is that they are a seamless catalogue of attractive visuals that represent the brand's image upon first glance. Viewers do not have to weed through posts to find something.

After understanding the role of photoblogs, the second part of the study was about identifying the functions to answer Question 2. The analysis found that photoblogs serve as a link with fashion bloggers who are opinion leaders in the fashion

world and to foster positive buzz through electronic word-of-mouth branding by sharing content. This ultimately builds brand equity and can be used for advertising and promotion. Bloggers and new brands have a reciprocal relationship in supporting each other. Most of the interactions that take place on photoblogs are in favor of the brand. Common words that people commented under photos were: like, love, need, and want. Even in the rare event that a negative comment is posted, it is most likely due to frustration about not being able to obtain clothing that is pictured. This perspective shows that customers have actually tried to purchase what they have seen on the photoblog. Furthermore, it shows photoblogs are not just catalogues for mindless browsing and window shopping, but they work as advertisements in that it encourages followers to make a purchase.

The third and final part was to provide insight about the brand management strategies of new brands with photoblogs to answer Question 3 of this research. Each brand has featured a blogger at one point or another on their photoblog. Bloggers' importance aside, new brands that regularly feature their customers in posts can obtain tremendous positive reactions and interactions as it builds a community and encourages participation. Although the brands did not show a distinct strategy from one another besides one brand and their customer integration efforts, some shared characteristics

were found amongst others. The promotion of a lifestyle with brand image and direct marketing approaches were taken on photoblogs. New brands can post things unrelated to fashion like scenery and quotes and still gain likes, comments and shares.

Furthermore, photos of celebrities are posted as inspiration and show the kind of image a brand wants to portray. The direct marketing approach does not stimulate interaction, but still receives likes.

## **5. LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH**

As mentioned in the section about reliability and validity, a limitation of content analysis and netnography is that it relies heavily on the interpretational skills of the researcher. All the data was compiled, organized, and analyzed by one researcher. Although concrete evidence like the number of likes, number of followers, types of reactions, and subject of photo posts were used to make educated inferences, and coding was possible subjective data interpretation could have influenced the meaning the researcher gave these features. The validity of findings would have increased with more researcher participation.

The aim of this research was to explore a new phenomenon in social media marketing, visual social marketing, and provide insight on the role and function of a photoblog for new brands. It also aimed to understand the brand management strategies of new brands with photoblogs. Although this study presents conclusive findings, such an inductive research is not enough to understand the whole phenomenon. Data collection, organization, and analysis spanned over a time constraint of three months to which a more extensive look of all platforms was not manageable. So the first few months of a brand's photoblog content were analyzed, but perhaps the whole timeline of



posts would have given a deeper narrative of the brands and their followers. Qualitative techniques and statistical data combined with content analysis and netnography would provide another perspective, like a survey of new brands with photoblogs or an interview with brand followers.

Nevertheless, the research did show patterns and common features of the new brands and enough data was collected from media rich photoblogs to make valid inferences despite the limitations. The explorative approach to this study was consistent with procedures in new marketing research, especially with visual social marketing being a very recent trend. Furthermore, only brands that were active on social media and had photoblogs with a large following that were updated frequently were chosen because it provided the researcher with more information.

## **6. IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Visual social marketing is an area where little prior research has been done.

This research is based off of qualitative data and the interpretations derived from said data. The exploratory research confirms a fundamental trend in using social media for marketing and relates this to new brands. It certainly opens various options for further research.

New fashion brands were the focus of this study. First, future research would benefit from understanding not only the visual social marketing of new fashion brands, but other types of small businesses the like food, independent publications, and other entrepreneurship. This study looked at four fashion brands which provided a sufficient amount of data for conclusions, but a research across different businesses would undoubtedly provide a holistic perspective of photoblogs.

Second, a more qualitative study is needed to address the impact of social media on consumers. For instance, purchase intention. It was found that followers react positively to photoblogs by commenting about how they ‘need’ or ‘love’ a product that is pictured. Positivity towards a photo can be further observed from the amount of likes a photo obtains. There is also evidence that some people do try to buy what they see.

But the point in which positive buzz turns into purchase intention would show the true power of visual social marketing. The different motivations between liking, commenting, sharing, and actually purchasing could be expanded upon to provide a clearer understanding about the impact of social media for small businesses.

Third, it was discussed that the new brands did not show any particular strategy for managing brand image through a photoblog. They shared some characteristics that provided fruitful discussion and insight, but nothing so obvious as to call a strategy. Despite so, qualitative research like a survey of a bigger sample of businesses could show the best strategies. Or, further prove that there is no one correct way to use social media, and that businesses use social media tools for different reasons depending on how they want to interact with their customers.

Fourth, one of the key features of a photoblog is its speed. In fact, there is a trend towards all things short and quick like the movement from blog to microblog. An area that the researcher would have liked to explore more if not for the time constraint is advertising message retention on photoblogs. Photos stopped receiving comments from people a couple of days to a week it is posted. This opens questions as to whether or not it is actually counterintuitive for new brands to update so much in a day, or provide answers to strategies.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The Web 2.0 era contributes to a more dynamic way of communication, information sharing, and information seeking for its users. It is instant, fast, and always changing. Accessible to anyone with an internet connection, social media brought forth interactivity and allows more self-disclosure than traditional webpages. Naturally, businesses sought to be where the people are. The lines between business and consumer merged gracefully together on social media.

Contrary to visual social media being a newbie in the social media marketing scene, it is popular. Social media sites that focused solely on photos and images started to come up. The use of images and photos cut down the time it took to process information. It required no lengthy descriptions or wordy sales pitches. A single photo post required had the power to communicate many messages. The popular saying ‘a photo is worth a thousand words’ is very appropriate here. A photo does not try hard to convince its viewers of something. Instead, it shows and captivates while breaking through the clutter of words. Images *show*, words try to convince.

Photoblogs, a platform that is predominantly updated with photos, became a prominent type of social media. Fashion brands and anyone interested in fashion mix

and mingle there more than they did on any other social media platform. Fashion and photoblogs are both very visually oriented, giving perfect opportunity for growing fashion brands to promote their apparel, communicate brand image, and build a following. However, the photoblog demographic also includes other small businesses and entrepreneurs. Any business that is just starting out that needs brand equity and brand awareness would find it very beneficial to have a photoblog, given that they post captivating content.

The first thing for any business wanting to start a photoblog is to simply sign up for the free service and start posting content that the target market would be interested in. There is a lot of room to be creative with content published on a photoblog, and a brand should strive to be creative if they want to gain viewership. This study found that the more a brand can include their customers in their content, the more sense of community it builds, and the more interactions and buzz take place. As a result, when users find something interesting, they tend to share it and that increases a new brand's much-needed exposure. Post things that people want to talk about and share to bring traffic to the photoblog. In terms of frequency of posts, users are usually tolerant about brands posting content multiple times a day on as long as it is interesting enough. Each photo should be different. There is no need to repeat images over and over like

traditional advertising.

The biggest advantage in having a photoblog is its wide reach and little to no startup and maintenance costs. Photoblogs are now of high importance as other social media despite being a new platform because of the strong engagement it has with its users. People are attracted to visuals. Now there is fair opportunity for small businesses and entrepreneurs to grow their name in a world where bigger companies can pay for advertising space. For new brands, a photoblog levels the playing field as a space of their own to get their name out. Most importantly, startups and entrepreneurs now have more chances because of social media. To confirm this fundamental trend, it is crucial to study social media's impact on small business.

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