

# The Choice of Image Aesthetic in Social Media and its Impact on Consumers

“should brands use snapshot images, studio images or a mix between them?”

## *Abstract*

Social Network Sites (SNS) has emerged as the premier communication-tool for consumers, but also as an important channel for finding product and brand information. In SNS, user-generated content is the norm and bloggers and so called “influencers” (influential SNS-users) have played an important part in developing the networks to commercial platforms. Brands have however had problems adapting to the platforms. An important differentiating factor from legacy media channels is the increasing use of images. This paper specifically addresses the dilemma of *how to design the aesthetic profile* in these images for commercial brands. Since brands promoting products on SNS through influencers have seen a lot of bang for the buck, other scholars have promoted that brands should mimic the aesthetic profile of SNS-users, which most often is amateuristic and personal, rather than professionally looking.

The authors hypothesized that such a strategy might not be beneficial for marketers who seek to build strong brands on SNS. Instead it was hypothesized that a mix of legacy professional images and amateuristic images create a better impact on consumers. To test this, an experiment was conducted in April 2018 including 526 US respondents. Dressed men’s fashion was chosen as the product category. In total, 40 images, of two different aesthetic profiles defined as “snapshot images” and “professional studio images” were used as stimuli and the respondents were asked to scroll through 20 images and then fill in a questionnaire. As an open research question, the authors wanted further to understand if there was a difference in response between budget and luxury brands. Accordingly six survey groups were formed and exposed to two different brand descriptions and 20 different images (2\*20 snapshots, 2\*10/10 snapshots/studio images, 2\*20 studio images).

The results indicated no significant differences on the dependent variables running ANOVA-tests. The authors concluded in the discussion that three factors may have caused this. First, the chosen stimuli of snapshot images may not have been of enough aesthetic difference to the studio images, thereby resulting in no perceived difference between the stimuli. Secondly, the duration of the study may have been too short, consequently respondents may have made simple inferences of the brand from only a couple of images, shortcutting into a general conclusion. Finally, if assumed the method proved enough validity, the authors discussed that the dressed men’s fashion category is too solidly grounded from its history of impersonality, gentlemanship and strictness, and thus triumph the rules of aesthetic decorum. Further research should thus look into these three possibilities.

**Keywords:** Social media advertising, Instagram, aesthetics, snapshots, men’s fashion

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# 1. Introduction

One late Thursday evening, in the final days of March 2018, I returned to my office after another long day on the road. I had taken the helm of Terrazzo Cozzolino's communication activities six months ago and the efforts since had been tremendously successful. Recent development had however become somewhat concerning. As I sank down in my brown leather chair I started to contemplate on the hectic weeks leading up to this day. We had just released a completely new collection of beautiful Italian-made garments to the US-market and promoted the products in a multi-channel communication campaign consisting of Billboards, SEMs, Facebook PPC, TV, Influencers and organic social media channels. All content had been produced by a famous fashion photographer in her very own studio, aside from the content created by influencers. While the traditional marketing channels showed fantastic results, website traffic from organic image based social media channels were terrible, and conversion low. Terrazzo Cozzolino's personal Instagram account barely generated any engagement whatsoever. The marketing department had tried several approaches in terms of content, and sure, the influencer pictures had generated better results than the studio ones, but nothing revolutionary.

Suddenly William Vångell, my old friend from John's Apparel, walked into the office. Like me, he was pensive about low conversion rate from organic social media channels. We started to discuss the issue and when morning was breaking, we hit a revelation. It must have something to do with the aesthetic decorum of the media! Since image uploading had become so important and widespread online, we had to study and test what aesthetic style we should employ to create the most effective campaigns.

Organic social media channels have grown more important to marketers and scholars, and the issue that these gentlemen pondered on has been of great concern to many. In spring 2018 we, the authors of this paper, were reading a newly published study by social media researchers Colliander and Marder discussing that the preferred aesthetic style of images differs between legacy marketing channels and social media channels. The findings were reasonable, but we were still concerned with the question; What is the *optimal* aesthetic style for building successful brands in image based social media, and further, is the preferred style *generalizable* for all brands?

## 1.1 Background

### 1.1.1 Social Media

During the last decade the user base in social network sites (SNS) has annually experienced double-digit growth (Statista 2018a). Given this large user-base, the platforms have generated large interest by marketers and scholars, and are currently an integral parts of brands' media mixes (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011). But not only have social media networks built their own marketing platforms, but “influential Social Network Sites-users”, most commonly denoted only as “influencers”, have built large audiences to whom they market products directly (Abidin, 2016; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). As a benchmark, the global Instagram influencer market is projected to grow by 45 % in 2019 (Statista 2018b).

To map the effects of influencer advertising, Colliander & Dahlén (2011) conducted an experiment to investigate the differences in effect on brand attitude and purchase intention from having bloggers promoting the brand's products, visavi buying advertising space in popular online magazines. Bloggers were proven to be superior. The main finding was that people perceive the blogger to have a positive relationship with the brand which creates a spill-over to the relationship between the reader and the brand. Further that the credibility of the message was higher, but most importantly, that the blogger created a high parasocial interaction (PSI) with readers. Horton & Richard Wohl (1956) describe PSI as “the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with a media performer”. Colliander and Dahlén argued that since PSI has been identified as a driver of popularity for social media personalities, legacy media companies should develop methods to reach similar effects.

PSI being a mediator of brand attitude and purchase intention verifies the idea, that personal relationship and dialogue with followers, create higher advertising effectiveness. This claim is strengthened by research conducted in the Twitter-setting showing that a two-way communication has higher effectiveness than one-way communication in terms of brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Cognitively, this is conveyed through a higher perceived expense and perceived caring. In the twitter-setting, using dialogue by companies indicates a high spending of resources, but also a high level of caring for followers by responding to their concerns (Colliander, Dahlén & Modig, 2015). The importance of this relationship was found in a study by Chang, Chen & Tan (2012) which showed that brands promoting hedonic products were much more successful if mimicking influencers than brands promoting

utilitarian products. Since utilitarian products does not create such personal meaning to the consumer in general, and hedonic products thrives on affection and caring, the authors concluded that social media is all about creating a social relationship.

In conclusion, during the last decade, social media has developed into a platform where dialogue, authenticity and personality is privileged. Influencers are likely to be one of the driving factors of this development as they have continuously focused on developing authentic, rather than generic and superficial online personalities. Hence, they have been able to attract a high level of advertising spending from companies who want to generate spill-over effects from the influencer to their brand. It is in the interest of both practitioners and scholars to further understand the nature of the influencer's relationship with their followers in order to translate that insight into marketing strategy for their own organic social media channels. For brands, navigating correctly on image based social media (e.g. Instagram and Pinterest) is considered to be of central importance. As these mediums are image focused, the aesthetic style of images is likely to be of central importance in creating brand-follower relationships. This leaves practitioners with a relevant concern; *What aesthetic style should be employed in image based social media to create positive cognitive reactions among followers?*

### 1.1.2 Aesthetic in Social Media

By observing today's social media environment from an exploratory perspective it can be concluded that companies diverge in their practical answer to the final question of the previous section. Some marketers deploy similar aesthetic as in other mediums, such as magazines and TV (e.g. Eton Shirts, Mason's Official and Morris Stockholm). It is likely that this strategy stems from a willingness to convey consistency in all channels (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2015). This is an old truth and promoted in the theorization of the discourse *Integrated marketing* in the 1990's. While scholars present different definitions of the theory (e.g. Betts et al. 1995; Duncan, 2002; Kotler & Armstrong, 1999; Schultz, 1993; Shimp, 2003) they collectively suggest that it concerns the optimization of marketing activities between different mediums using clear and consistent messages and communication. In its simplest form Broderick & Pickton (2005) defines it as:

... the management process of integrating all marketing communications activities across relevant audience points to achieve greater brand coherence. (Broderick & Pickton, 2005 p.26)

While some brands adhere to the theory of integrated marketing, others have been observed to deploy a larger variety of aesthetics with respect to the channel of communication, not fully complying to the theory. In image based social media these brands adapt to the premise of the medium as a social forum, rather than a commercial, moving away from such a marketing focus when conducting campaigns in the environment. These companies (e.g. Daniel Wellington and NakdFashion) have been observed to employ a different aesthetic style than in other marketing mediums such as magazines or TV. The same phenomenon is observed on Twitter where otherwise formal individuals have proven to be more informal (Park, 2013). Efforts by brands to engage in an informal aesthetic rather than professional is likely to stem from a need to adapt to a context where selfies taken on smartphones are the norm (Chae, 2017; Chua & Chang, 2016). Colliander & Marder (2018) defined this type of “phatic” (Miller, 2008) and “lightweight” (Zhao & Rosson, 2009) aesthetic as “snapshot aesthetic” and conducted an experimental study investigating the effects of using snapshot aesthetics for a female fashion brand. They hypothesized that given the premise of image based social media as a social rather than commercial forum, snapshot images are more in line with the decorum of the medium and are therefore more likely to create positive perceptions among followers. Though the study was conducted in an Instagram setting it is likely that their reasoning stretches into the environment of multiple image based social media as a number of them share traits. The inference was made by showing a significant positive relationship between deploying snapshot aesthetic and a higher perceived *attitude towards the brand* and higher likelihood to *recommend the brand to the users’ peers*. *Liking of the image* and *perceived source credibility* were established as mediators to this effect. The method of study was through an experiment in which an experimental group was exposed to 21 snapshot images during one week (i.e three posts per day). A control group was exposed to 21 traditional studio images during the same period. Responses were measured via questionnaire and showed significant differences in responses between the two groups. The snapshot stimuli were characterized by amateur composition and low quality resolution. The images also projected a sense of personality and authenticity as they were taken in an everyday, informal setting, and defined by the authors as *personal in nature*. The traditional studio stimuli were oppositely characterized by professional studio composition. The person in the picture were likely to be a professional model and the pictures projected neither personality nor authenticity. The main discussion to the results was that snapshots were more congruent with image based social media, and therefore increased the fluency and liking of the images via increased believability to the brand’s claims. Colliander

& Marder (2018), suggested that fashion brands should promote this aesthetic style and denoted those who do as “Snap happy brands”.

## 1.2 Problem Area and Research Gaps

Colliander & Marder (2018) rendered valuable, but somewhat limited, insights for practitioners and scholars being the first study on this particular topic. They further suggested that studies should look into if all brands could benefit from snapshot aesthetic, thus become “snap-happy”. The authors were particularly ambiguous about whether a more dressed, “haute couture” fashion style, really benefits from a snapshot aesthetic. Further suggestion was to study if there are possible synergy effects from a mix of different aesthetic styles. There is also a gap of insights if these implications are generalizable for all brand classes, from budget to luxury. New findings within these areas would provide further constructive recommendations for practitioners in the execution of choosing aesthetic profile in social media strategies.

## 1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

In the light of the research gap presented in the previous section this paper aims to contribute to the field of aesthetics in image based social media. The purpose is to investigate the effects of aesthetic style, specifically within the category of dressed men’s fashion. Fashion is an established category for conducting experiments, since everyone has some sort of personal connection to clothing. In turn we will make the same assumption as did Colliander & Marder (2018), that the fashion category share traits with more hedonic product categories, and consequently, the results should prove valid for more product categories. Thus the first purpose is to investigate if the results from Colliander & Marder (2018), that brands in social media are snap-happy, are transferable to men’s fashion. However, the main purpose is to test if using a mix feed of aesthetic styles is preferable, thus benefiting from the best of both worlds, as compared to using exclusively a snapshot or a studio aesthetic. Consequently, the main research question constitutes:

*Is the mix of aesthetic styles preferable, for brands communicating in image based social media?*

In order to understand if the results from this study are generalizable between different brands classes, a further sub research question is presented:

*Is there a difference in preferred aesthetic style for budget and luxury brands respectively?*

In order to establish a relationship between aesthetic style and customer based equity, the effects are recorded using the measures of liking of the images, source credibility, brand attitude, word-of-mouth intention and purchase intention. A rationale behind these measurements will be provided further.

## 1.4 Delimitations

The effect of different image aesthetics in social media could be studied from a number of different perspectives. This paper is however delimited to consider two factors that are probable to affect consumer perceptions, image aesthetic and a brand's level of exclusivity.

Stimuli for the study could have been chosen from a number of different sources, but in order to create a realistic setting for the experiment, an ecological validity, stimuli were restricted to include pictures from presently active influencers and brands on Instagram and Pinterest.

Amazon Mturk (AMT) was used to collect the answers. Consequently, the study was delimited to include individuals who are connected to AMT, so called "workers". The United States was chosen as the geographic area of study. A more extensive presentation of AMT is found in the method section.

## 1.5 Expected Contribution

By studying the effects of image aesthetics in combination with a brand's level of exclusivity the authors expect to contribute to the field of social media advertising. Further, the authors expect this paper to provide insights not only to the final consequence of employing a certain aesthetic, but also to provide an understanding for the factors mediating these effects. This paper will also further contribute to the awareness of social media research and hopefully spark enthusiasm into others to pursue further research.

By itself, this paper will not provide a holistic framework for aesthetics, but is expected to provide guidance. An increased interest among scholars might induce a larger amount of

research on the topic which might, in the long run, affect how brands conduct social media marketing.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In this section we take inspiration from the explanatory framework used by Colliander & Marder (2018). They showed significant positive relationship in a series of mediation tests between independent variables *Liking of the image* and *Perceived source credibility* with dependent variables *Brand attitude* and *Word-of-mouth intentions*, measured with a seven-point Likert-scale in a questionnaire. We pay homage to this framework and aim to develop a similar framework for testing further questions in the defined research gap. However, we will further discuss and develop the framework of Colliander & Marder (2018) to try to explain even more about the factors affecting any positive relationship between aesthetic choice and factors leading up to differences in customer-based brand equity.

### 2.1 Consumer Behaviour - What We Know

The study of consumer behaviour has emerged as one of the most important research fields at business schools. Most often, it is a cross-subject experimental field, trying to *predict* consumer behaviour rather than to explain it. However, this approach is rather new, why it is important to also understand how the *legacy approach* still influences and sometimes mislead practitioners. The legacy approach stems from the first large research methods in the 1950's where the new TV-medium enhanced the access to mass observation data (Pope, 1983).. The focal point for measuring advertising effectiveness was then ad attention, measured as ad recall (Heath & Feldwick, 2008). However, when the correlation between recall and purchase intention was tested in a series of large-scale data manipulation tests, this assumption showed no significant impact for practitioners (Honomichl, 1986). Attention was accordingly not enough to change attitudes or behaviour.

The legacy approach was critically denoted in retrospect by Heath & Feldwick (2008) as the *Information-Processing model*. The impact of the model was overwhelming, influencing the classic and commonly cited AIDA-framework. The common denominator of the legacy approach is the assumption that persuasion is a *rational, linear process*, where cognition and understanding precedes affection and desire to intent. This is also present if looking into popular business school literature commonly explaining the behavioural process for purchase

in a linear step by step approach. For example, Engel, Blackwell & Miniard (1995), recommends marketers to understand the persuasion process in five steps (chronologically); *Motivation or Need formation, Information Search, Attitude forming, Actual purchase* and finally *Post-Purchase Attitude forming*.

However, in the present age of social constructivism and relativism, the epistemological glasses of how consumers think and behave have diverged into a variety of explanatory frameworks. As a result, an understanding of how advertising (and consequently persuasion) works depends on which assumptions about human activities and processes a researcher proceeds from (Heath & Feldwick, 2008). Reviews of these positivist frameworks (e.g. Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999) points out that no hierarchy of effects into persuasion and purchase behaviour can be generalized into a practical implication. The persuasion process will instead depend on the individual consumer, product class and context. In turn recent studies into e.g. social media advertising most often leave out a theoretical framework, and are more case-specific (e.g. Knoll, 2016). This is not beneficial for the advertising community, since in the fast-changing environment of social media, practical implications may be very limited only after a short period of time.

However, the delimitation most consumer behaviour researchers do nowadays is to first and foremost measure attitudes as the focal point. Methodologically, with a large sample, this may be done through measuring the difference between a control group and an experimental group. In turn we cannot denote that a specific advertisement is effective, but rather more effective than another alternative. Analogically (in the terminology of the legacy linear persuasion process), the most important role of advertising and communication is to influence or change attitudes in the *Attitude formation*-phase. This leads us to a first delimitation in what can be explained for measuring aesthetic influence on persuasion, and should guide the reader in this paper. We will however try to create a framework with a higher explanatory value by combining both legacy models of persuasion and a more relativistic approach to persuasion.

The given model for explaining the relationship between attitude and behavioural intention is the Fishbein and Ajzen sociological framework of reasoned-action. For a persuasion process, the reasoning in the framework explains purchase intention from partly *personal attitudes* towards the purchase, partly beliefs about *other important peoples' attitudes* towards the purchase and the agent's *motivation to comply* with these others (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). We

will analogically to the legacy model, *assume* that attitude is a precursor for behaviour. In essence, we will argue that attitudes can form *customer-based* equity i.e the intangible properties that creates value beyond the utilitarian values for customers (e.g. Lemon, Rust & Zeithaml, 2011).

In the different subsections, more support will be provided as to why this relationship exist, and more importantly, how different aesthetic properties can explain variability in attitude. Thus we want to measure differences in ad attitude, implied by using different styles of aesthetic, but also understand the specific mediators that might infer the differences. A rationale behind choosing the specific independent variables, leading up to predicative components of attitude (intention) will be discussed in detail further.

## 2.2 Understanding the Impact of Image Aesthetic on Attitude and Intention

### 2.2.1 Image Aesthetic and Liking of the Images

In the context of social media, image uploading and sharing has become the norm for fast and expressive mass-communication. Since “A picture is worth a thousand words” (idiom), advertising communication in social media is more than ever dependent on image properties rather than verbal messages. We therefore, in line with previous research in the forming of ad attitude, propose that ad attitude in this context should be mediated through liking of the actual images. Liking is proved to be of utter importance for brands, through e.g. the evolutionary process of likeability bias and the peripheral process of higher motivation to comply and encourage with things humans like (Ye & Van Raaij, 2004).

The academic study of image characteristic, aesthetics, is an experimental field within subjects such as psychology, sociology and biology. The most cited ontological approach of understanding aesthetic properties and aesthetic appreciation in the 20th century, was the modelling of *aesthetic arousal* as a function of its *visual complexity* (the *Collative-Motivational model* by Berlyne, 1971). Berlyne spearheaded the ontological field from some assumptions and modelled the so called visual complexity as a function of three inherent properties of an image. First, the *psychophysical properties*, i.e. the intensity of the stimuli, e.g. colour and light intensity. Second, the *ecological properties*, i.e. the biological, affective reaction to the stimuli, e.g. pleasing, threatening or pain, or in other words, affective quality (also denoted by

Axelsson, 2011). Lastly, the *collative properties*, i.e. the amount of new information (the perceived entropy and uncertainty of the visuals). These three factors were argued to form a linear relationship to the amount of *aesthetic arousal*.

Berlyne proposed that the collative properties explained most of the difference in aesthetic arousal, (i.e. the more chaos, the more arousal). In turn, the relationship between aesthetic arousal and *aesthetic appeal* (in this context; liking of the images) formed an Inverted U-curve, implicating that there is an optimal level of aesthetic arousal. Berlyne's theory has since been an important starting point for arguments and research into aesthetic properties and aesthetic appeal. And further Sun, Yamasaki & Aizawa (2015) validated the argumentation behind the model in a two-way simulation, with the intention of predicting liking from more of a technical perspective such as curvature, object number, object size, pattern regularity and pattern compositions, for practical use. However the findings lacked the explanatory value of understanding the correlation between semantic properties, such as personal meaning and fluency of the aesthetic and its effect of appreciation (Sun, Yamasaki & Aizawa, 2015) .

Semantic properties had already been found to be especially true for certain classes of visuals, such as portraits of people, pictures of furniture and other familiar objects. In a paper published by Whitfield (1983) the model, *Preference-for-Prototype of aesthetic appreciation*, was elaborated, which argued that the similarity of visuals or prototypes to its best practices (e.g. the visual similarity of a human body to its subjective best in practice representation) will cause preference for that visual, independent of its visual complexity (a higher decision-order). Martindale, Moore & Borkum (1990) supported this notion in an experiment, which only proved significant for semantic variables, deriving from the observer's subjective similarity, meaning and familiarity to the prototypes. Similarly, Reber, Schwarz & Winkielman (2004) argued that there was a *Preference-for-fluency* (again higher order), and motivated differences in aesthetic appreciation in terms of expectations and experience in the fluency for processing peripheral cues (see also James et al., 2000). The peripheral cues are the small things that guides attention and motivation for persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). These two model (especially the Preference-for-prototype model) are the most used ontological model for psychological aesthetic today. A study by Pieters, Wedel & Batra (2010) added something important to these model, by finding that design complexity is the winning creative strategy for brands trying to create high ad attitude from visual complexity. Design complexity, as distinguished from

feature complexity is the complexity deriving from designing the image in a complex way, but still letting the viewer process the image easily.

In the main inspirational study to this paper, conducted by Colliander & Marder (2018), the authors argued that snapshot aesthetic creates a better semantic fluency, as it is the norm of image based social media. As was mentioned in the introduction, influencers and users of social media may have affected the preferred prototype for aesthetic and representations of human interaction in image-based social media, thereby setting the preferred prototype for representation of human bodies, clothing etc. Analogically the phenomena of prototypes can be viewed in the legacy media advertising as well, as to why magazines still use a traditional studio aesthetic, since this was adapted from luxury and fashion style magazines (e.g. Vogue) starting this trend in the Roaring twenties.

We support the argument of congruence with the medium, but however, we will argue that using a mix feed of snapshot images and traditional studio images can benefit brands trying to reach large audiences. By also adapting to the legacy preferred prototype for the certain product class i.e. men's fashion wear, a brand should see higher average liking since a larger span of preferred prototypes and fluency will be included in the feed. Further if a brand can create more creative studio images, with a higher design complexity than the ones used as stimuli in the experiment by Colliander & Marder (2018), ad creativity can add to creating a higher average liking of the images.

Our main argument draws from the theorization of the importance of different processing capabilities among humans. Axelsson (2011) in his dissertation thesis, combined the several ontological models (elaborated above) to prove that semantic value may be highly correlated with collative properties. He conducted experiments with the assumption of a ladder for aesthetic semantics, i.e. the popular term, "A trained eye". Axelsson created a model called the *Information-Load model*, which combines the existing theories of what complexity constitutes, but uses the factor *information-load* as causing the other components. Information-load is the inherent process of resistance towards new information (complexity). The result of information-load's effect on aesthetic appreciation is therefore determined by the subject's information-processing capacity. An implication of this is that e.g. an experienced video gamer which has been exposed to visuals of high complexity for a long time, should appreciate the visuals of video games more than an inexperienced gamer.

Again, for the population as a whole, the authors hypothesize that since image-based social media platforms are used by a large audience, with varying information-processing capacities, deploying a mix aesthetic will create a more inclusive feed, attracting both the experienced and inexperienced social media users (across ages and users with different information-processing capabilities). Therefore, in a large sample, we propose that the average liking of the images will be higher using a combination of snapshot and traditional studio images, than using a single aesthetic style in the feed.

**H1:** *A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher liking of the images compared to using exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic.*

### 2.2.2 Image Aesthetic and Perceived Source Credibility

Liking of the images is not a precursor of attitude towards the aesthetic itself. In this paper we will draw from the theory of *cognitive-response* (Greenwald, 1968; Olson, Toy & Dover, 1978) and assume that ad attitude is constituted by both the liking of the ad, and the perceived sender credibility behind the ad in a *dual reciprocal process*. Similarly, Petty & Cacioppo (1986) argued that the motivation and need for influencing attitudes and beliefs stems from peripheral cues indicating that the sender behind an argument has some sort of relevance and should be listened to. For brands, credibility is important since a brand is a reflection of a human personality containing symbolic and intangible value for its target audience (e.g. Keller, 1993). Interestingly, Sun, Yamasaki & Aizawa (2015) found that technical features of aesthetic will explain more of the differences in aesthetic appreciation for contexts containing *animals* or *landscapes* than *portraits* including human beings. Credibility is therefore more important for an aesthetic including a human-related object, and should be of importance for explaining aesthetic appreciation in brand-related communication. Credibility research (the communication field: *Source Credibility Theory, SCT*) most often defines source credibility as the perception of having expertise, trustworthiness and authority (McGinnies & Ward, 1980), and therefore becoming more believable and further also vindicated in its claims, sometimes called the *amelioration effect*.

Cognitively, high credibility is important since it creates a higher *subjective certainty for attitude* in the mind of the receiver (Pelham, 1991). The reason for this is the inherent nature

of humans making interpretation about other humans' intention behind a behaviour. As an example Greenwald (1968) conducted an experiment about advertising argumentation and perception, in which the receiver of an advertising argument better remembered the cognitive-response of the argument, than the factual argument itself. This is denoted as the amount (or quality) of *Self-Talk* experienced by the receiver and is a psychological mechanism of avoiding *Cognitive Dissonance*, also an argument proposed in the *Reciprocal Mediation Hypothesis* (Heider, 1946). See also Burke & Edell (1984).

Analogically, from the theory of cognitive-response, if the images and texts in an Instagram feed persuades the receiver to create her own thoughts (self-talk), the persisting attitude is that sender of that argument must have some kind of expertise and authority in their field; *why would the receiver otherwise have put efforts into self-talk?* A human's own thoughts seems further more authentic for the human self. A high perceived source credibility is increasingly important for non-digital borne product categories in the online context, because of the lack of tangible cues (Biswas & Biswas 2004)

Advocates of a more spontaneous and amateuristic aesthetic, often argue that consumers now have become savvier and possess marketing and advertising literacy, and therefore should the dominant precursor of source credibility be the perceived authenticity of the sender's argument (Macdonald & Uncles 2007).

This was also the main argument presented in this paper's inspirational study conducted by Colliander & Marder (2018) , that since a snapshot aesthetic is more authentic per definition, snapshot images should produce higher authenticity through the mechanism of a larger amount of self-talk. However alternative theories into ad attitude and analogically, the *self-talk of ad execution* by e.g Modig, Dahlén & Colliander (2014) showed that ad attitude was higher when perceived effort and expense of the ad was higher. This draws from economic theory of *costly signalling*. Costly signaling creates higher trust and may also be mediated through self-talk as the receiver views the message as something important (Kirmani, 1990). Analogically, why would a brand otherwise put in so much expense and effort? A mix aesthetic will per definition create more effort and expense from the sender side. And also since influencers and bloggers are using more of a snapshot aesthetic, and the consumer have learnt that communication through organic channels on social media platforms are free-for-anyone, a full adoption to snapshot aesthetic, we argue, will be perceived as using less effort and expense.

**H2:** *A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher credibility compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic.*

### 2.2.3 Image Aesthetic and Brand Attitude

The mechanism how advertising can change a consumers' attitude to a specific brand rather than the product category in general has been studied extensively. For brands in established categories, brand attitude is important since attitude can mediate favorability to a specific brand rather than the category (Keller, 1993). Several scholars have supported that high ad attitude indeed can mediate brand attitude (Laczniak & Carlson, 1989; Mitchell & Olson, 2000; Shimp, 1981). Brand attitude is increasingly important in the online context, since shoppers are exposed to brand communication everywhere and anywhere.

Therefore, if H1 and H2 holds true we hypothesise that using a mix feed will create a higher attitude to the fictional brands than using a single aesthetic.

**H3:** *A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher brand attitude compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic.*

### 2.2.4 Image Aesthetic and Intention to Recommend the Account to Others (Word-of-Mouth Intentions)

The characteristics of social media is however also the social component of the platform. The word of mouth intention is an important precursor of relationship equity and brand equity since consumers tend to trust advice of fellow customers more than the source, for the simple reason that fellow customers are not perceived to deliberately mislead other customers (Fong & Burton, 2006). Also, to further increase credibility through having the possibility of mirroring other people's consumption dilemma (Wirtz & Chew, 2002).

Again if H1 and H2 holds true, using a mix feed of aesthetic, should create higher word of mouth intentions than using a single aesthetic.

**H4:** *A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher intentions to recommend the brand, and the account, compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic.*

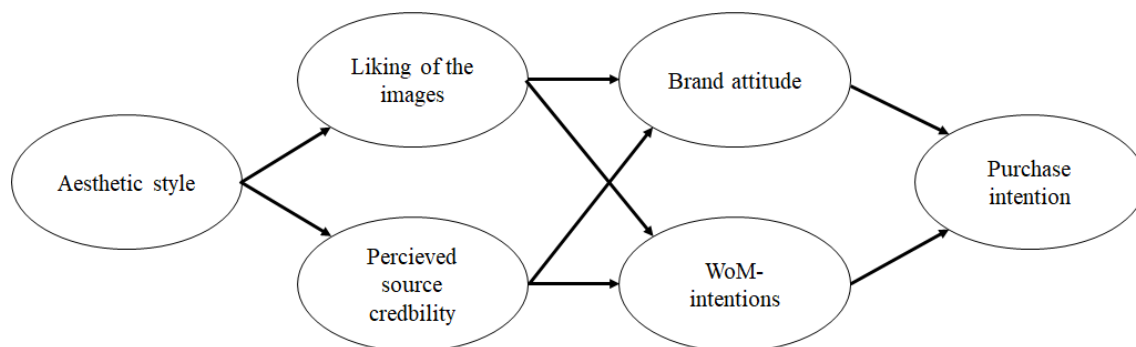
### 2.2.5 Image Aesthetic and Purchase Intention

Finally, as was mentioned in the introduction, we assume that there is a correlation between attitudes, intentions and actual behaviour, in line with the reasoning of Fishbein & Ajzen (1975). Hence, apart from a user having a more favourable brand attitude and intentions to recommend the brand to its peers, a higher purchase intention should benefit the brand. However, Marchand (2010) showed in a social media experiment that ad attitude per say, was not a precursor to purchase behavior. She concluded:

The individual might love (or hate) the ad, but this has no direct influence on his or her behavior. Only respondent's attitude toward the topic of the ad has a real impact on his or her intention in this model. (p. 120)

In the model of aesthetic influence on persuasion affecting customer-based equity elaborated in this paper (Figure 1), we therefore propose that purchase intention mostly is mediated by brand attitude and WOM-intentions. Therefore, if H3 and H4 holds true we hypothesize that, using a mix aesthetic, should create a higher purchase intention than using a single aesthetic.

**H5:** *A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher purchase intentions compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic.*



*Figure 1. A framework for explaining aesthetic influence, through Ad attitude to purchase intention*

We have now developed a framework for testing and explaining aesthetic influence on factors forming customer-based brand equity in the era of social media. As was mentioned in the introduction of this section, Colliander & Marder (2018) tested the positive relationships between these components (but *Purchase intention*). We therefore recommend readers to also

look in to their framework if having doubt about the validity of the relationships in the framework.

### 2.2.6 Choice of Image Aesthetic for Different Brands

Finally, we are interested in assessing the influence of aesthetic choice for different brand classes. Budget brands in fashion most commonly focuses on an accepted utilitarian level of product quality, but has through cost-optimization in recent years also developed strong brands. More interestingly we have a notion that the inherent nature of luxury brands, the foundation to why consumers value expensive brands may be threatened by adopting a more SNS-user aesthetic style. The intangible values of a brand (see Keller, 1993) may be formed by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as was reviewed by Vigneron (1999) in their classic matrix for prestige consumption. People keen to consume exclusive customized products, “snobs”, may see an adoption to snapshot as a dilution of the exclusiveness, whereas people consuming prestige products as a mean of following others, the bandwagon effect, may see an adoption as positive since it makes the brand more socially accepted. In a review of how luxury brands are formed in terms of reciprocity with the consumer, Tynan (2010) however finds that luxury brands are formed in a state of co-value creation with consumers and other luxury products, making it up to a lifestyle. Therefore, the answer to this question may be formed again in the preferred prototype (see section 2.2.1) for how luxury (prestige) products are represented in terms of aesthetic properties. Again it can be argued that a mix aesthetic will benefit most brands, but due to lack of insight into this, we will use this parameter as an exploratory question.

***Open research question:*** *Is there a difference in preferred aesthetic style for budget- and luxury brands respectively?*

Summary of hypothesis	
<b>H1</b>	A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher liking of the images compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic
<b>H2</b>	A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher credibility compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic
<b>H3</b>	A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher brand attitude compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic
<b>H4</b>	A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher intentions to recommend the brand, and the account, compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic
<b>H5</b>	A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher purchase intentions compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic
<b>Open Research Question</b>	Is there a difference in preferred aesthetic style for budget and luxury brands respectively?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Choice of Approach and Research Method

Measuring customer perceptions is hard, since it is close to impossible to simulate a real situation without real products. An experimental result may not replicate what the result would be in the real behavioural situation. However, in order to create the most realistic setting possible in the limited time of conducting this study, a simulation of an Instagram account with pictures and feeds was developed using editing software, Sketch. Three separate simulated Instagram feeds of photos with respectively snapshot aesthetic style, traditional studio aesthetic style and a mix of the two, were created. To shed light on the open research question related to the effect of a brand's level of exclusiveness on consumer perceptions, two fictional brands (denoted *Terrazzo Cozzolino* and *John's Apparel*) were created, in total making up to six different research groups.

Groups of respondents (1-6)		
	Luxurious	Affordable
Traditional Studio Aesthetics	1.	2.
Snapshot Aesthetics	3.	4.
Mix Aesthetics	5.	6.

An experimental method was chosen to conduct the study, making it possible to evaluate the effects of the different stimuli in a contained setting, free of disturbing elements. Dressed men's fashion was chosen as the product category of study in order to ensure validity of the experiment. The fashion category has been used in previous research as it is an established category where behavioural intention has sufficient dependency on attitudes (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Peña & Pan, 2016). Further, Instagram is often used by fashion brands such as Daniel Wellington and Axel Arigato as a premier online marketing tool.

### 3.2 Survey Design

The surveys for the six research groups were distributed separately and consisted of five sections. They all started off with a set of questions related to demographics. Thereafter, an introduction was presented where respondents were told that they would be exposed to a set of Instagram pictures related to one of the fictitious brands, *Terrazzo Cozzolino* or *John's Apparel*. Aside from the brand name, the introduction was identical across the experiment. The third section consisted of a short brand description, containing recommended retail price (Terrazzo Cozzolino: 500 - 1000\$, John's Apparel: 25 - 200\$), target group, production process etc., given the affordable or luxurious nature of the brand in the specific survey group.

In the fourth section, each survey group were exposed to one of the three sets of Instagram images. As researchers suggest using a large number of stimuli to increase generalizability of the results (Vaux, Fidler & Cumming, 2012), 20 stimuli were used in each survey. The respondents were initially exposed to each of the images separately, and then together in an Instagram profile feed (see appendix 2 and 3). To ensure that respondents actually engaged into observing the images, the minimum time of exposure was 45 (separate stimuli) and 15 seconds (combined feed).

The questionnaire was presented in the fifth section and consisted of five separate parts, each containing 3-4 statements related to the recorded factors (appendix 4). An uneven numbered 7-point Likert interval scale enabled the gathering of neutral responses, as opposed to the 10-point scale, while also providing enhanced precision to the 5-point scale (Bryman & Bell, 2014).

### 3.3 Stimuli Development and Preparatory Study

#### 3.3.1 Stimuli Development

As stated in previous sections, to avoid any effects from brand recognition, two fictitious brand names were created and used in connection to the main study; *Terrazzo Cozzolino* and *John's Apparel*. *Terrazzo Cozzolino* was chosen as the brand name for the luxury brand as it resembles an Italian brand name. Italy is associated with craftsmanship and luxury, and consumers are therefore hypothesized to make a cognitive connection between *Terrazzo Cozzolino* and a high level of exclusivity. *John's Apparel* is hypothesised to create affordable consumer associations as it lacks any connection to craftsmanship and exclusivity, and is relatively generic. Three descriptions for each brand was composed by the authors, and one for each brand was included in the main study.

Active Instagram profiles and brands was chosen as the source of stimuli as it best suits the recommendation of Bryman & Bell (2014) to design experiments that imitates reality. The stimuli were then imported into the Sketch Software and edited to an Instagram template that resembled actual picture and feed pages. To avoid any confounding effects, the meta-information of likes, followers or comments, was blacked out.

A clear distinction was made between snapshot aesthetic and traditional studio aesthetic in choosing the stimuli. Snapshot aesthetic were considered to contain more contrasts in its figurative language (i.e. containing a relatively large number of object and taken in an everyday setting) and project a sense of personality and authenticity. As opposed to the stimuli chosen by Colliander & Marder (2018), the resolution quality was not necessarily poor and amateuristic. The reasoning behind this choice was that these characteristics are the ones usually found in influencer and brand accounts employing a snapshot aesthetic (e.g. justusf\_hansen, roseandborn and DanielWellington). Traditional studio aesthetic was chosen to include similar characteristics as the stimuli used by Colliander & Marder (2018) with

professional studio composition and high quality resolution where the person in the picture were likely to be a professional model. The pictures projected neither authenticity nor a sense of personality.

### 3.3.2 Pre-study

In order to determine the fit of the brand descriptions and stimuli, a pre-study was conducted in March 2018. It was distributed using Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), (an in-depth discussion of AMT and its pros and cons will be provided later, in the main study section of the method chapter). In the so called marketplace of AMT, the task of the pre-study was presented as to “evaluate brands & pictures on social media”. In the further subsection, after having pushed the view-more-about-assignment-button, the task of the HIT was additionally presented as:

A men's fashion company want's[sic] your opinion on how to get better at social media. The following study is an experiment and you will have to answer all the question chronologically. Thank you and Good luck!

The pre-study was sectioned in two parts, the first to evaluate the brand descriptions and the second to evaluate the stimuli. A seven-point Likert scale was used as measurement for all variables. 25 individuals participated in the pre-study and respondents were nearly equally divided gender wise, with 12 men and 13 women. The median age of the respondents was 29 years.

#### *Pre study section 1: Brand description*

The first section contained a set of six brand descriptions, three for each category of luxurious and affordable. Two descriptions were concluded to provide the highest mean values and consequently chosen for the main study ( $M_{luxurious} = 6.04$ ,  $M_{affordable} = 5.56$ ). These are presented in table 1 below.

**Table 1**  
**Table displaying Mean Values for Brand**  
**Descriptions**

	Mean values (n=25)	
	Luxurious	Affordable
<b>Brand Description 1</b>	5.80	3.48
<b>Brand Description 2</b>	3.72	5.48
<b>Brand Description 3</b>	5.52	4.28
<b>Brand Description 4</b>	4.60	5.32
<b>Brand Description 5</b>	6.04	3.32
<b>Brand Description 5</b>	4.20	5.56

*Pre study section 2: Stimuli*

The second section contained a set of 60 pictures, equally divided between snapshot aesthetic and a more traditional studio aesthetic. In order to avoid any confounding effects from previous exposure to the stimuli, a manipulation check was done after each stimuli. None of the respondents had been previously exposed to the stimuli. Respondents were asked to what degree they perceived the pictures to be a) personal in nature and b) professional. The 40 images with the highest mean values for a) and b) respectively were chosen as stimuli for the main study, representing snapshot and studio aesthetic stimuli.

For these 40 images, the ones using a snapshot aesthetic were perceived as significantly more personal in nature than the ones using a traditional studio aesthetic ( $M_{snap.pers.} = 4.47$ ,  $M_{trad.pers.} = 3.37$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The reverse pattern, traditional studio aesthetic being perceived as significantly more professional than snapshot aesthetic, was not true. See table 2 below.

**Table 2**  
**Independent Sample *t*-test Results Displaying a Comparison Between Snapshot and Studio Images with Respect to the Ratings of Professionality and Personal in Nature**

	Mean values		Difference	Sig.	n
	Snapshot Aesthetic	Traditional Studio Aesthetic			
<b>Personal in nature</b>	4.48	3.37	1.11	.002	25
<b>Professional</b>	4.63	5.79	1.16	.831	25

The pictures using a traditional studio aesthetic were however perceived as significantly more professional than personal in nature ( $M_{trad.prof.} = 5.79$ ,  $M_{trad.pers.} = 3.37$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), the 40 pictures were considered to fit the purpose of the study and the design of the main study continued. See table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Independent Sample *t*-test Results Displaying a Comparison Between the Ratings of Professionality and Personal in Nature for Snapshot and Studio Images Respectively**

	Mean values		Difference	Sig.	n
	Personal in nature	Professional			
<b>Snapshot Aesthetics</b>	4.48	4.63	0.15	.071	25
<b>Traditional Studio Aesthetics</b>	3.37	5.79	2.42	.000	25

Analysing these result, it can be observed that studio images were not perceived as more *professional* than snapshot images. Additionally, snapshot images were not perceived to be more *personal* than *professional*. This may be argued by some to hurt the validity of the study. However, the authors of this paper argue that the choice of stimuli provides sufficient validity and fits the purpose of the study. The non-significant relationships are likely a consequence from defining snapshot aesthetic slightly differently from this paper's reference study (see Colliander & Marder (2018)). We argue that even though the proposed snapshot images were not significantly less professional, the significant difference in conveying the important

personal nature of the stimuli outweighs this problem. Snapshot images can hold both the characteristics of personal in nature and professional. We argue that the social illusion of two-way communication is what makes snapshot images different and professionalism has no correlation with that. Influencers and popular social media profiles in 2018 thrive on making the followers experience the previously discussed Para-Social Interaction. Analogically, it is *not* likely the level of professionally that has the higher order effect on consumer perceptions but rather the context or setting in which the image is taken.

### 3.3.3 Results from Pre-study

The results from the pre-study concluded which brand descriptions would fit the purpose of the study and which stimuli to include. Statistical analysis confirmed the underlying assumption that pictures using a snapshot aesthetic were perceived to be significantly more personal in nature than the ones using a traditional studio aesthetic ( $p < 0.01$ ).

## 3.4 Main Study

### 3.4.1 Parameters of the Main Study

All responses in the main study questionnaire were recorded using 7-point multiple-item interval Likert scales were the endpoints indicated Strongly disagree - Strongly agree.

#### *Liking of the Images*

In order to measure the respondents' *liking of the images* four items from Pham & Avnet (2004) were used; "The pictures are interesting", "The pictures are appealing", "The pictures are pleasant" and "The pictures are enjoyable". In order to compute the average of the items, an index was formed. Cronbach's alpha = 0.915.

#### *Credibility*

To measure respondents' perceived *credibility* of the respective brands Terrazzo Cozzolino and John's Apparel, three items from Andrews, Burton & Netemeyer (2000) were used; "The brand is trustworthy", "The brand is credible", "The brand is believable". An index was formed to compute an average index of the items. Cronbach's alpha = 0.874.

### *Brand Attitude*

To measure respondents' *attitude* towards the *brand*, three items from Spears & Singh (2004) was used; "My impression of the brand is good", "The brand is appealing", "My impression of the brand is favourable". In order to compute the average of the items an index was formed. Cronbach's alpha = 0.924.

### *Word-of-Mouth Intention*

Respondents' *WOM-intention* to recommend the brand and its associated Instagram account was measured with three item from Eisingerich et al. (2015); "It is likely that I would recommend others to follow the brand's Instagram feed", "It is likely that I will say positive things about the brand to others", "It is likely that I will recommend the brand to others". An index was formed to compute an average index of the items. Cronbach's alpha = 0.935.

### *Purchase Intentions*

In order to measure the respondent purchase intentions three items from Lepkowska-White, Brashear & Weinberger (2003) were used; "If I were looking for these types of products my likelihood of purchasing from the brand would be high", "If I were to buy these types of products, the probability that I would consider buying from the brand would be high", "If I had to buy these types of products, my willingness to buy from the brand would be high". In order to compute the average of the items an index was formed. Cronbach's alpha = 0.944.

## 3.4.2 Procedure and Survey Launch

The six main surveys were distributed during April 2018. They were designed in the survey tool Qualtrics, and distributed and collected using Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT). AMT is a tool in which so called "requesters", in this case the authors of this paper, post work assignments, or "HITs". "Workers" approved by Amazon, choose from a variety of HITs and are then compensated according to a pay-per-task structure for each participation. The level of compensation is set by the requester. In the marketplace of AMT, the six surveys distributed in the main study contained similar descriptions. They were presented to workers as "Survey Experiment about Instagram Photography (5 minutes)". In the further subsection, after having pushed the view-more-about-assignment-button, the task of the HIT was additionally presented as:

A men's fashion company want's[sic] your opinion on how to get better at social media. The following study is an experiment and you will have to answer all the question chronologically. Thank you and Good luck!

The ambiguous formulation of these descriptions hindered workers from doing any prior research on the research field of this paper, but still generating interest in the topic.

AMT is used extensively by researchers world-wide and provides an efficient way to collect large amounts of data. Previous research indicates that the data collected through AMT holds sufficient quality and compares well to laboratory studies, college student samples and surveys distributed through social medias (e.g. Facebook and Twitter). AMT data also appears to include a larger socio-economic and ethnic diversity between respondents (Buhrmester, Kwang & Gosling, 2011; Casler, Bickel & Hackett, 2013; Dupuis, Endicott-Popovsky & Crossler, 2013). These claims are strengthened by data in the collected sample where household income spans between 10.000\$ and 80.000\$, and age between 20 and 76 years.

While most studies on the use of AMT as a survey tool are positive, scholars present limitations and concerns that researchers should keep in mind when using the service (Dupuis, Endicott-Popovsky & Crossler, 2013; Landers & Behrend, 2015; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). These regard workers completing multiple surveys (i.e. the same worker completing forms for a large number of studies), payment affecting data quality, selection bias, and the relevance of the sample to the general population. These problems are argued by some to hurt the validity of the research. The authors of this paper are aware of these concerns. However, as scholars and researchers support the use of AMT, we have no concerns that it will damage the validity of the study. See Dupuis, Endicott-Popovsky & Crossler (2013), Landers & Behrend (2015) and Paolacci & Chandler (2014) for a further discussion about AMT.

A soft-launch of two surveys was done on April 3rd, 2018. When functionality had been secured, the remaining four surveys were released on April 5th, 2018. Due to the use of AMT, all answers were collected in 2-4 hours from the release of the surveys. Average response time was five minutes. All workers were paid in line with US minimum wage (\$7.25 per hour) for both the pre-study and the main study, as suggested by Dupuis, Endicott-Popovsky & Crossler (2013).

### 3.4.3 Sampling of Respondents

While the purpose of this study was to establish the effects of aesthetic in a setting of dressed *men's* fashion, *women* were chosen to be included as respondents. The fundamental reasoning underlying this decision is the fact that women are known to influence men's purchase patterns, but also conduct the actual purchase even though a man is the end consumer (Alreck & Settle, 2002; Chu, Lee & Kim, 2016; Garcia, 2008; Moss, 2013; Roy Dholakia, 1999). The authors consequently argue that as both men and women are potential customers, and the study aims to record the effects of aesthetic properties of an image, consumer perceptions should be recorded for both men and women.

Manipulation check was done through two control questions. 227 respondents were consequently removed from the initial data set of 753 submissions and the final dataset contained 526 observations. The distribution between genders in the final sample was fairly equal, including 273 men (51.9%) and 253 women (48.1%). Ages spanned between 20 and 76 years with a median of 33 years.

The final distribution of respondents between the respective samples is presented below.

Distribution of respondents (n)			
	Luxury	Budget	Total
Traditional Studio Images	92	88	180
Snapshot Images	85	90	175
Mix Images	89	82	171
<b>Total</b>	266	260	526

### 3.5 Data Analysis, Tools and Tests

When all surveys had been completed they were each downloaded from the Qualtrics online software into IBM statistical software SPSS v. 25. In SPSS, the separate data sets were compiled into one to make statistical analysis possible.

As all sample sizes were larger than 30 ( $n > 30$ ) a normal distribution was statistically assumed, according to the central limit theorem (LaMorte, 2016). In order to compare mean values between the six groups, one-way ANOVA-tests were conducted. As custom, a 95 % one-way confidence interval were tested for difference among the survey groups.

### 3.6 Reliability and Validity

#### 3.6.1 Reliability

The large size of the data sample contributes to the reliability of the study. Further, all items used in Likert scales in connection to the multi-item statements have been used in previous research. To ensure internal reliability indexes were computed for the correlated items, where Cronbach's alphas in each case exceeded 0.85.

#### 3.6.2 Validity

##### *Internal*

The pre-study provided confirmation that the stimuli and brand descriptions used in the main study fit its purpose, and that it would be perceived by respondents as intended by the authors. A large number of stimuli were used to decrease any confounding effects, and to ensure that results in the dependent variables could be directly derived from the aesthetic of the stimuli images.

##### *External*

The construction of two fictitious brand names reduced the risk of systematic errors due to previous brand exposure or recognition of the stimuli image or brand. The choice of fashion as the product category of study further strengthened external validity of the study as it has been used in previous research to isolate similar effects (Colliander & Marder, 2018; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Peña & Pan, 2016). The survey sample contains responses from individuals across the United States, with varying demographic properties, eliminating the risk of local

biases and contributing to external validity. The study was conducted on desktops and mobile devices in a format completely isolated from the Instagram application which could pose as a validity concern. To counteract any confounding effects from this, all stimuli were designed using replicated Instagram templates, to make the respondent feel as though they were exposed to a realistic Instagram setting. Further, there was a minimum total time of exposure of the stimuli of 60 seconds to reduce the risk of respondents skipping content.

## 4. Results

This section presents the results from the main study and the hypotheses from the theoretical framework are either accepted or rejected.

### 4.1 No Aesthetic Effects

The main research question for this paper aimed to shed light on the effects from using a mix between a snapshot and a studio aesthetic in image based social media. The means for the factors *liking of the images*, *source credibility*, *WOM*, *brand attitude* and *purchase intention* are presented below in table 4 with respect to the use of the different image aesthetic:

**Table 4**  
**Table Displaying Mean Values for the Recorded Factors with Respect to**  
**the Different Types of Aesthetic Styles Tested**

	Mean values		
	Traditional Studio Aesthetic (n=180)	Snapshot Aesthetic (n=175)	Mix Aesthetics (n=171)
<b>Liking of the images</b>	5.44	5.54	5.52
<b>Source credibility</b>	5.29	5.45	5.42
<b>Brand attitude</b>	5.44	5.59	5.58
<b>WOM-intention</b>	4.58	4.59	4.51
<b>Purchase intention</b>	5.02	5.02	5.05

To test hypotheses 1-5, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted. The test aimed to try the main effect of using a snapshot, studio or mix aesthetic, and therefore no difference was made

between luxurious and affordable brands. No significant results were found, and therefore **H1-H5** were **rejected**. See table 5 below:

**Table 5**  
**One-way ANOVA-test Results Displaying Mean Comparison Between the Three Main Groups of Aesthetic Styles with Respect to the Recorded Factors**

	Degree of Freedom (df)	Sum Square (SS)	Mean Square (MS)	F-ratio	Sig.
<b>Liking of the images</b>	2	.896	.448	.355	.701
<b>Source credibility</b>	2	2.400	1.200	1.245	.289
<b>Brand attitude</b>	2	2.564	1.282	.913	.402
<b>WOM-intention</b>	2	.596	.298	.128	.881
<b>Purchase intention</b>	2	.114	.057	.027	.973

As no significant differences could be identified for any of the aesthetic groups, no post-hoc tests were conducted.

## 4.2 No Difference between Budget and Luxury Brands

The study also include an open research question, “*Is there a difference in preferred aesthetic style for budget and luxury brands respectively?*” A mean table for the six test groups is presented below.

**Table 6**

**Table Displaying Mean Values for the Recorded Factors with Respect to the Different Types of Aesthetic Styles and Level of Brand Exclusivity**

<b>Mean values</b>						
	<i>Luxurious</i> Traditional Studio Aesthetic	<i>Affordable</i> Traditional Studio Aesthetic	<i>Luxurious</i> Snapshot Aesthetic	<i>Affordable</i> Snapshot Aesthetic	<i>Luxurious</i> Mix Aesthetic	<i>Affordable</i> Mix Aesthetic
<b>Liking of the images</b>	5.48	5.41	5.70	5.38	5.49	5.55
<b>Source credibility</b>	5.42	5.15	5.47	5.43	5.36	5.48
<b>Brand attitude</b>	5.52	5.36	5.82	5.38	5.58	5.59
<b>WOM-intention</b>	4.57	4.58	4.75	4.43	4.40	4.63
<b>Purchase intention</b>	4.95	5.09	5.06	4.97	4.97	5.14

A one-way ANOVA test was conducted to compare the means presented above. No significant between groups differences were found for any of the five factors *liking of the images*, *credibility*, *WOM*, *brand attitude* and *purchase intention*. Therefore, the answer to the open research question is no, there is no difference in preferred aesthetic style for budget and luxury brands respectively. See table 7 below:

**Table 7**  
**One-way ANOVA-test Results Displaying Mean Comparison Between the Six**  
**Experimental Groups with Respect to the Recorded Factors**

	<b>Degree of Freedom (df)</b>	<b>Sum Square (SS)</b>	<b>Mean Square (MS)</b>	<b>F-ratio</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Liking of the images</b>	5	5.720	1.144	.909	.475
<b>Source credibility</b>	5	6.271	1.254	1.304	.261
<b>Brand attitude</b>	5	12.041	2.408	1.727	.127
<b>WOM-intention</b>	5	7.415	1.483	.630	.677
<b>Purchase intention</b>	5	2.746	.549	.258	.936

As no significant differences could be identified for any of the aesthetic groups, no post-hoc tests were conducted.

## 4.3 Summary of Results

Summary of hypotheses and results		
<b>H1</b>	A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher liking of the images compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic	<b>Rejected</b>
<b>H2</b>	A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher credibility compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic	<b>Rejected</b>
<b>H3</b>	A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher brand attitude compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic	<b>Rejected</b>
<b>H4</b>	A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher intentions to recommend the brand, and the account, compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic	<b>Rejected</b>
<b>H5</b>	A mix feed of snapshot and studio images will generate higher purchase intentions compared to exclusively using a studio or snapshot aesthetic	<b>Rejected</b>
<b>Open Research Question</b>	Is there a difference in preferred aesthetic style for budget and luxury brands respectively?	<b>No</b>

## 5. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis and discussion chapter starts with two sections reflecting on the methodology applied in the study and how it might have affected results. Further, it continues to discuss other factors possibly influencing the outcome of the study.

### 5.1 Critique Towards the Definition of Snapshot Aesthetic

The results from Colliander & Marder (2018) was not replicated in this study, in the setting of dressed men's fashion. This result might originate from the authors choice to alter the definition of snapshot aesthetic. Colliander and Marder defined snapshot aesthetic as communication that is phatic and lightweight. In practice, based on their stimuli, they elaborated the definition to include images in a user-generated/amateur aesthetic most commonly snapped and uploaded through a smartphone. One can also conclude a low resolution quality. The authors of this paper

concluded that these images and this definition does not fully represent the actual image aesthetic used by successful brands and influencers in the dressed fashion men's wear category in image based social media. Therefore, the definition of snapshot aesthetic was changed to include pictures that contains higher levels of contrast in its figurative language and projected a sense of personality. Also, the resolution quality was not necessarily poor and amateuristic, but focus was rather put on the characteristics of authenticity and everyday setting. This may have been the reason to why the stimuli were perceived to be more professional.

The stimuli chosen on the basis of this new definition was, as confirmed by the pre-study, not significantly less professional than its studio counterpart. In retrospect, the use of snapshot stimuli with characteristics more similar to the ones used by Colliander and Marder might have provided a better basis for comparison. For such images pre-study results for the snapshot stimuli are likely to have indicated a lower level of professionalism and a higher level of personality. In developing the snapshot definition, the authors hypothesized that the professional level of the images to consumer perceptions was relatively insignificant. It was rather the level of personality of the image that would have the higher order of effect. Given that such an assumption is *false*, a pre-study outcome similar to that of Colliander and Marder would have been more in line with the purpose of the study and potentially produced other results.

However, even though stimuli characterized by the definition developed by Colliander & Marder (2018) would be more fitting to the purpose of the study, we argue that such stimuli would produce misleading results. The argument underlying this reasoning is that high-resolution pictures are the norm for popular influencers and successful brands in image-based social media. Therefore, using stimuli in this experiment that does not reflect reality would be misleading for both practitioners and scholars. In a sense we therefore criticize the ecological validity of the findings by Colliander and Marder.

## 5.2 Critique towards the Main Study Method

Another important difference to the paper by Colliander & Marder (2018) was the duration of exposure to the stimuli. In terms of cognitive-response, the effect of the aesthetic properties may not have affected the amount or quality of self-talk (Greenwald, 1968), moderating perceived source credibility and liking. The respondents in this experiment was exposed 20

images and a summary feed for about 120 seconds, and therefore the cognitive effect may not have arisen. The mixing of aesthetic styles may consequently not have been noted. Respondents may have gotten a “gut-feeling” from viewing the first pictures and so, and then evaluated the feed as merely one picture.

Comparing the recorded mean values on the variables measured by Colliander & Marder (2018) it can further be concluded that mean values are higher for all variables in this paper. In their study, the mean values spanned between 2.88 and 4.28 for snapshot aesthetic and 2.12 and 3.27 for studio aesthetic (seven-point Likert-scale). In this paper, the recorded mean values spanned between 4.59 and 5.59 for snapshot aesthetic and 4.58 and 5.44 for studio aesthetic (seven-point Likert-scales). The choice of methodology may have caused a confusing situation when comparing the two results. However, Colliander and Marder cannot advocate that using a snapshot aesthetic is beneficial in general for brand equity, only better than a studio aesthetic in that very specific context. In this paper the results instead indicate a neutral to positive response to all recorded factors. Critics of this paper may therefore argue that the duration of exposure have significant effect on the possibility of comparing this paper with the study by Colliander and Marder. A better understanding of how duration influences consumer perception in this kind of context is therefore needed.

### 5.3 Snappy dynamics - A lack of aesthetic effect

If assumed that the methodology related issues discussed above, have minor effect on the validity of the study, and the same results would have been reached using the same methodology as Colliander & Marder (2018), other factors might have affected the outcome of results. These are discussed below.

The first ever examination of the effects of different aesthetic styles in social media conducted by Colliander & Marder (2018) supported the notion that using a snapshot aesthetic is preferential to a traditional studio aesthetic. While the study by Colliander and Marder, was conducted in a setting of women’s street style fashion, the authors of this paper chose to control the generalization of their results in a setting of dressed men’s fashion. The findings by Colliander and Marder was proved not to be replicable in this setting.

There are other possible antecedents of the lack of generalizability of the results discussed by Colliander and Marder. To start with, the style norm within dressed men’s fashion is stricter

than that of women's street style. That is likely to impact the level of acceptance of a more formal aesthetic and consequently not produce significant cognitive differences between the two aesthetic styles. The higher level of formality can potentially triumph the norm of image based social media as a social rather than commercial forum, and consequently create a niche where a stricter and impersonal studio aesthetic is more accepted than in general (as discussed by Chang, Chen & Tan (2012)). In such an environment both a snapshot and a studio aesthetic could be perceived positively by consumers and the effects of aesthetics erased. This contradicts the recommendation by Colliander and Marder that all fashion brands should employ a snapshot aesthetic. Rather, for brands within dressed men's fashion it is likely more important to create a clear and coherent aesthetic profile that is in line with other marketing material, following the theory of *Integrated Marketing*. Essentially, a lightweight and phatic aesthetic may not produce positive cognitive responses for all brands. The authors further suggest that this reasoning is transferable to other contexts in which a high level of formality is the norm. Clothing related examples are dressed women's fashion and haute couture, but the dynamics are likely to stretch beyond the border of fashion and into areas such as real estate brokerage, interior design and architecture. These areas usually depict a formal and studio inspired aesthetic style in marketing content and therefore, like in the case of dressed men's fashion, such an aesthetic is likely to be more accepted than general in image based social media setting.

While Colliander & Marder (2018) proved the superiority of a snapshot aesthetic over traditional studio aesthetic they did not investigate the effect of using a mix between the two. Based on the notion that this would create a "best-of-both-worlds-effect" the authors of this paper hypothesized in the theoretical framework that a mix aesthetic would prove to have a more positive effect on the factors of ad attitude (*liking of the images* and *credibility*) than a snapshot or studio aesthetic. As presented in the results-section the findings of the study contradicted this hypothesis. The combination of the snapshot images' adaptation to the decorum of the medium and preferred prototype of aesthetic appreciation in image based social media, with the studio images' preferred prototype of aesthetic in traditional mediums, was argued to produce the highest level of *liking*. This argument was backed up by the population's variation in processing capabilities. In term of credibility a mix aesthetic was also argued to be preferential due to its combination of *costly signaling* and adaptation to the medium, projecting effort, trustworthiness and authority. However, the result indicates that the effects of combining the aesthetic styles took the role of a zero-sum-game leaving insignificant results as a whole.

These results, where no hierarchy of aesthetic preference could be established (irrespective of the level of exclusiveness of the brand), could indicate that in a setting of dressed men's fashion the resolution quality of the picture is more important to the observer than other aesthetic properties. This effect might stem from the more formal style norm discussed in previous sections. The contradiction between the formality of the style, and the authenticity and personality of image based social media, can potentially create a situation in which the effect of image aesthetic is erased and both a snapshot and a studio aesthetic are acceptable. Our main finding is thus that matching the preferred-prototype of formal style (Whitfield, 1983) for dressed men's fashion wear is the most important factor for aesthetic appeal and acceptance of communication.

## 6. Conclusions and Implications

### 6.1 Conclusions

This study's purpose was to answer the question: "Is the mix of aesthetic styles preferable, for brands communicating in image based social media?". After careful statistical analysis of the collected data it can be concluded that a mix aesthetic has no significant effect compared to the use of only a snapshot or traditional studio aesthetic. It can also be concluded that there is no hierarchy of effects between the three aesthetic styles. I.e. in the domain of dressed men's fashion a mix aesthetic is not more effective than either a snapshot nor a traditional studio aesthetic, and vice versa.

Aside from the main research question, the study also aimed to answer a sub research question: "Is there a difference in preferred aesthetic style for budget and luxury brands respectively?" It was concluded that no significant differences between budget and luxury brands could be identified.

## 6.2 Implications

### 6.2.1 Practical

Given a more ecological validity from this paper's reference study, the findings of Colliander & Marder (2018) does not stretch into the domain of dressed men's fashion as snapshot aesthetic was proven not to have any hierarchical effect over traditional studio aesthetic. Consequently, the recommendation of using a snapshot aesthetic in image based social media is not applicable to this category. In the main research question it was also concluded that there is no preferential effect of a mix aesthetic. Due to the non-hierarchical order of aesthetic it is likely more important for these brands to use an aesthetic that communicates a coherent prototype to the formal and inherent style of dressed menswear. Fashion brands should therefore measure all media communication as an integrated part of the marketing strategy. Since this category is so entrenched in a historic context, marketers must therefore be fast to understand when or if the preferred prototype shifts. It might be correlated to ideals about masculinity and the stereotype of the gentlemen for instance.

### 6.2.2 Theoretical

The findings in this paper have two main theoretical implications for practitioners and scholars. These theoretical implications tell us that there is no prescribed aesthetic that is applicable to all brands when conducting marketing in image based social media as insinuated by previous research. Within fashion, the effects of different kinds of aesthetic varies between styles. While a snapshot aesthetic was proven Colliander & Marder (2018) to induce positive brand effects within women street style fashion, the same phenomenon was not confirmed and replicated in this study within dressed men's fashion. Further that there is probably a hierarchy of effects when evaluating aesthetics, as proposed by various researchers, we conclude that the preferred prototype is the most important theoretical starting point for conducting aesthetic research within strict categories of products, and thus these prototypes should be very sensitively taken into account before conducting similar research.

## 6.3 Future Research

This paper has provided further understanding of the mechanisms involved in image based social media marketing, and specifically the effects of using different image aesthetic. The

findings are however limited to an Instagram setting. Even though the findings could arguably be translated into similar social medias, they are not likely to apply to all. Therefore, future research should strive to understand the differences in aesthetic norms between different kinds of social medias to determine proper marketing practises. E.g. as LinkedIn is ruled by contrasting norms to that of Instagram, the aesthetic profile is likely to differ. Researchers should also investigate the effects of aesthetic for other types of brands than the ones used in this and Colliander & Marder (2018). This would provide a more holistic approach to image based social media advertising.

As highlighted in previous sections the methodology applied to this study differ from that of Colliander & Marder (2018). Therefore, future research should control the findings of this study by conducting a similar experiment but using the same methodology as applied by Colliander and Marder. Using such a method respondents are exposed to the stimuli inside the Instagram application over a longer period of time increasing the realistic aspect of the experiment.

Finally, a general model for the motivation to follow an influencer is needed, what are the drivers, and for whom? A better understanding of this would generate insightful knowledge for the social media marketing strategy and overcome some of the research gap we hit, namely maybe aesthetic does not matter that much, but personality and good-looks may be of higher order for “follower-based influencer equity”.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Description of fictional brands used in the main study

### **About Terrazzo Cozzolino:**

Founded in 1912, the company sets out to make some of the most renowned menswear. Fabrics and cloth are selected by experienced artisans from world-class suppliers and carefully put together in Naples, Italy. Each garment takes 2-4 weeks to make and during the process it passes through over 70 different pair of hands.

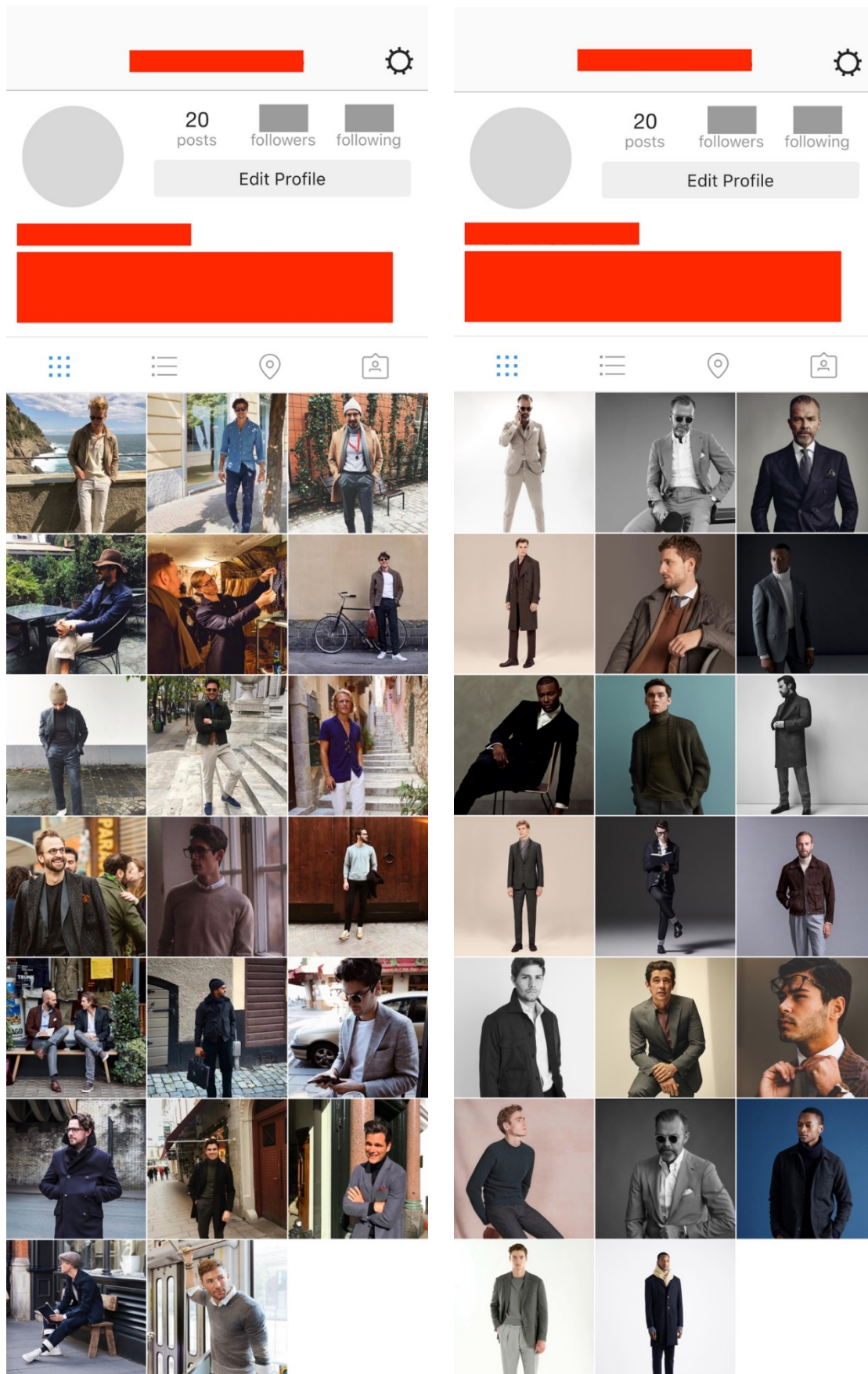
**Recommended retail price: 500 - 1.000\$**

### **About John's Apparel:**

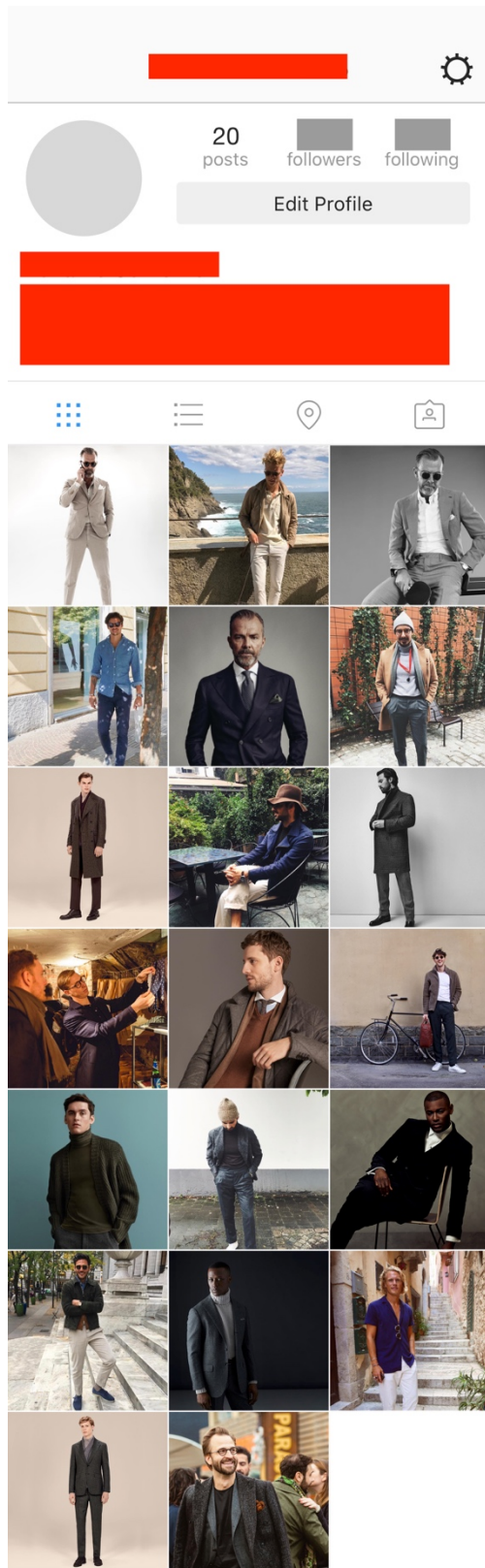
The company's mission is to bridge the gap between good-looking menswear and price. Urban men come here to find their basic wardrobe essentials. The bread-and-butter of the company stems from its never-out-of-stock assortment rather than seasonal garments. The company promises to deliver the clothes fast and convenient.

**Recommended retail price: 25-200\$**

## Appendix 2. Stimuli images (control groups)



### Appendix 3. Stimuli images (experimental group)



## Appendix 4. Main study: Questionnaire (example for John's Apparel)

**Great!**

**Below, John's Apparel wants to know how you position yourself to some statements. Please answer truthfully.**

**Target variable: LIKING OF THE IMAGES** – *(not disclosed for the respondent)*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
The pictures are interesting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The pictures are appealing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The pictures are pleasant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The pictures are enjoyable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Target variable: SOURCE CREDIBILITY** – *(not disclosed for the respondent)*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
John's Apparel is trustworthy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
John's Apparel is credible	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
John's Apparel is believable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Target variable: BRAND ATTITUDE** – *(not disclosed for the respondent)*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
My impression of John's Apparel is good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
John's Apparel is appealing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My impression of John's Apparel is favorable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Target variable: WOM-INTENTIONS** – *(not disclosed for the respondent)*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
It is likely that I would recommend others to follow John's Apparel's Instagram feed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is likely that I will say positive things about John's Apparel to others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is likely that I will recommend John's Apparel to others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Target variable: PURCHASE INTENTION** – *(not disclosed for the respondent)*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
If I were looking for these types of products my likelihood of purchasing John's Apparel would be high	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I were to buy these types of products, the probability that I would consider buying John's Apparel would be high	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If had to buy these types of products, my willingness to buy John's Apparel would be high	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>