Marketing on Instagram
Social influence and image quality on perception of quality and purchase intention

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Abstract

Purpose – Social network sites are becoming more visual-centric. The purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of visual social network sites as a marketing platform.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper comprises two experiments. The first experiment sought to examine the effect of social influence; while the second experiment examined the effect of image quality on the perception of quality and purchase intention.

Findings – The first experiment showed that social influence did not affect perceived quality or purchase intention. In the second experiment, a one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) adjusting for sport involvement showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Respondents in the experimental group reported higher levels of perceived quality (adjusted \( M = 3.68 \)) and purchase intention (adjusted \( M = 3.23 \)) when compared to the control group’s perceived quality (adjusted \( M = 3.12 \)) and purchase intention (adjusted \( M = 2.17 \)).

Research limitations/implications – One of the limitations of this study is that it only examined the effects through a single social network site, i.e. Instagram. As there are other visual-centric social network sites, such as Tumblr and Pinterest, which operate slightly different from Instagram, it remains to be established how such effects vary across these social network sites.

Practical implications – The results suggest that social influence on Instagram is limited and marketers should invest in images of high quality when marketing on visual social network sites.

Originality/value – While there are many studies examining the effectiveness of marketing on social network sites, these studies have primarily focussed on earlier social network sites, such as Facebook. Newer social network sites that are more visual-centric, such as Instagram, are different from earlier social network sites and studied to a lesser extent. This study adds insights on the marketing effectiveness of visual-centric social network sites and deepens the understanding on marketing in general on social media.

Keywords – Social influence, Purchase intention, Social network sites, Image quality, Perception of quality

Paper type – Research paper

Social networking sites have emerged as a major form of communication. The first social network site Six Degrees.com was launched in 1997. Since then, many social network sites have been launched and the number of members on such sites have grown exponentially (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). In 2015, approximately two-thirds of North American adults used at least one social network site, a large increase from only 7 per cent in 2005 (Perrin, 2015). The popularity of social network sites is most clearly observed among young adults with many of them having at least one social network account and logging on to them at least once a day (Duffett, 2015; Gangadharbatla, 2008; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ting et al., 2015).

Social networking sites are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). On social network sites, members are able to share information with each other. As such, many commercial organisations believed that it will be possible to conduct marketing activities on social network sites as members will share information of their products and services with each other (Barczyk and Duncan, 2011). As members of a social network site have a relationship with each other in a virtual community, it is also more likely that members trust recommendations on social networks sites (Phua and Ahn, 2016; Ridings et al., 2002).
However, marketing on social network sites is different from traditional marketing. Members on social network sites are not only receivers of marketing messages but can also create shared meaning of the brand (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009; Kozinets et al., 2010). As such, there have been many studies conducted to examine how such characteristics of social network sites can be leveraged into more effective marketing tools. These studies have primarily focused on earlier social network sites, such as Facebook, which was started in 2004 and subsequently opened to the public in 2006 (Abeza et al., 2015; Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Duffett, 2015; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015).

Over time, technological advancements have allowed social network sites to become more visual-centric. In 2010, Instagram was founded primarily for members to share photos and images (Ting et al., 2015). Members also use Instagram to search for information about other people, document their life, demonstrate to other members their coolness and creativity and share their interests with others (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). Since its inception, the number of members on Instagram has grown exponentially with approximately 700m registered users in 2017 (Dogtiev, 2018). This growth is likely to be attributed to the growing number of mobile devices including tablets and smartphones which are capable of capturing high quality images for sharing. Consequently, many commercial organisations are also leveraging on Instagram in addition to Facebook for their marketing activities.

However, there exist a smaller number of studies examining marketing on a visually centred social network site, such as Instagram, when compared to studies on other social network sites (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). Recent studies have found that there were differences in how members use Instagram when compared to other social network sites (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016; Ting et al., 2015). In particular, users of Instagram were more likely to have stronger social interaction motives in using the social network site (Blight et al., 2017; Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). As such, this suggests that it will be illuminating to examine the effectiveness of marketing on Instagram and whether it differs from the marketing on other social network sites.

**Literature review**

Studies have shown that members of social network sites are not merely passive receivers of marketing messages, but can also actively create shared meaning of the brand with other members (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009; Geurin and Burch, 2017; Kozinets et al., 2010). Social network sites allow members to raise brand awareness, influence brand image and state their preferences for specific brands. As such, these websites can be a source of social influence as members may rely on the perception and judgment of others in consumer decision making (Ruiz-Mafe et al., 2018).

Individuals are susceptible to social influence because humans learn to rely on others’ perceptions and judgments as sources of evidence. This susceptibility to social influence arises from the tendency to learn about products through seeking information from others, conforming to others’ expectations to receive rewards or avoid punishments, and identifying one’s image with others through the acquisition of certain products or brands (Bearden et al., 1989; Deutsch and Gerard, 1955).

However, susceptibility to social influence varies across individuals. Consumers who are highly involved in the purchase situation or product category possess high levels of motivation to acquire and process information (Wang et al., 2016; Zaichkowsky, 1985). They are, thus, more likely to be persuaded by the content of the message instead of peripheral cues (Petty et al., 1983). Consequently, they are less susceptible to social influence than consumers who are less involved (Chew and Leng, 2014).

The effect of social influence on consumer behaviour have been established in earlier studies before the founding of social network sites (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975;
Pincus and Waters, 1977). While studies examining social influence specifically on social network sites are fewer in number, it is evident that social influence can affect consumer behaviour on these platforms including the perception of quality and purchase intention (Chew and Leng, 2014; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Duffett, 2015; Phua and Ahn, 2016; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015). In particular, high levels of interaction with posts including “like” votes and shares can positively influence purchase intention (Beukeboom et al., 2015; Phua and Ahn, 2016; Richard and Guppy, 2014). While ratings may not solely have an effect on purchase intention, the conversational human “voice” including comments on social network sites can positively affect purchase intention through social influence (Beukeboom et al., 2015; Chew and Leng, 2014; Duan et al., 2008). It may even mitigate the negative impact of negative comments (Sandes and Urdan, 2013). As such, it is expected from the above review that social influence on social network sites can have an effect on the perception of quality and purchase intention of products.

The majority of these studies have focussed predominately on earlier social network sites, such as Facebook and Twitter (Abeza et al., 2015). Over time, social network sites have evolved to become more visual-centric and focussed on the sharing of images, photographs and videos. Instagram, which was founded in 2010, is one such social network site. As its number of members grew, it attracted the attention of commercial organisations and marketing campaigns were launched on the platform. According to Instagram’s internal data, 50 per cent of their users follow at least one business, 60 per cent claim they learn about a product or service on the platform and 75 per cent visit the product’s website or tell their friends, after looking at an Instagram advertising post (Instagram Business Team, 2016).

Recent studies have attempted to make comparisons across the platforms. They have found that attitude towards word-of-mouth communication can differ across various digital channels due to the presence of images and videos (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Gvili and Levy, 2016; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015). The nature of social network sites favours a quick emotive response rather than a prolonged, conscious and cognitive response (Leng, 2013). Visual content on social network sites leverages on this nature and allow information to be transmitted to members quickly and in an entertaining manner (Gvili and Levy, 2016). Jensen et al. (2015) cited market research that has found that visual images are more likely to be tweeted when compared to text messages. As such, a visual-centric social network site like Instagram may be even more effective as a marketing platform in influencing perception of quality and purchase intention. This leads to the first research question for this study:

**RQ1.** What is the effect of social influence on consumers’ perception of product quality and purchase intention on Instagram?

Consumers are unable to physically examine products on digital platforms. Besides word-of-mouth communications on social network sites, consumers will need to rely on other informational cues for their decision making. Product presentation on the digital platform is one of such cues.

It has been shown in earlier research that images can potentially draw consumers’ attention away from textual information (Kroeber-Riel, 1984; Rossiter, 1982). In addition, the properties of images used in marketing communications can affect consumers’ attitude towards the advertised product. Some studies suggest that when images on social network sites are of high quality, they are more likely to produce positive affective experiences for members (Colliander and Marder, 2018; Jeong et al., 2009). Consumers are also more likely to draw positive inferences on product quality when the images are of high quality (Mavlanova and Benbunan-Fich, 2010; Wang et al., 2016; Wells et al., 2011; Yoo and Kim, 2014). Even by simply manipulating the size of the image, consumers are more likely to
notice the image and have more favourable attitudes towards the products (Kim and Lennon, 2008; Krooer-Riel, 1984; Rossiter, 1982). However, while the quality of an image is important, the image must abide by the rules of the medium to remain likeable and credible. Specifically, social network sites are informal platforms for communications and as such, informal snapshots may work better than formal studio shots (Colliander and Marder, 2018). This leads to the second research question for this study:

**RQ2.** What is the effect of image quality on consumers’ perception of product quality and purchase intention on Instagram?

**Method**

There had been calls to use experimental research design in sports management research (O’Reilly, 2011). Experimental methods allow for the evaluation of stimuli in a controlled setting (Colliander and Marder, 2018). Given the research objectives of this study, it was deemed appropriate to adopt an experimental research design for this study.

The product category selected for this study was sports shoes. As a fashion product, it was an appropriate choice for this study as Instagram is a common advertising platform for the industry (Colliander and Marder, 2018). In addition, there are few studies examining Instagram in the sports industry. A couple of recent studies had focussed on athletes and self-presentation on Instagram (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016; Smith and Sanderson, 2015). Specific to examining marketing of sports products on Instagram, a recent study examined branding strategies of sports shoes on Instagram (Geurin and Burch, 2017). As such, this study by examining social influence and image quality can add to the literature on the marketing of sports apparels on Instagram.

Sports apparels are purchased for different purposes including as everyday wear or for enhancing sporting performance. As such, purchase decision can be based on a variety of product attributes including fit, aesthetics, design and the material used (Bae, 2011; Chae et al., 2006; Dickson and Pollack, 2000; Scheerder et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2018). This also implies that consumers of sports apparels may differ in their level of involvement.

Consumers who purchase sports apparels for enhancing sporting performance are likely to be high in involvement. They tend to have some experience with sports products and possess some knowledge of the product category. In contrast, consumers who purchase sports apparels as everyday wear are more likely to be low in involvement and tend to have less product-related knowledge. This group of consumers may be more susceptible to social influence when making a purchase decision (Chew and Leng, 2014). This suggests that the level of involvement will need to be controlled when examining effects on perception of quality and purchase intention.

Sports involvement is measured using a three-item, seven-point Likert scale. These items are adapted from an earlier study and was found to be reliable with Cronbach’s α coefficient reported at 0.87 (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). For this study, the scale was also found to be reliable with a Cronbach’s α coefficient of 0.86 in Experiment 1 and 0.91 in Experiment 2:

1. Sports is very important to me;
2. I think about sports all of the time; and
3. I watch sporting events whenever I can.

Two separate experiments were conducted. In both experiments, an Instagram account for a fictitious brand of sports shoes Ludere Lite was created. Using a fictitious brand can eliminate potentially confounding effects from respondents’ pre-existing beliefs and attitudes towards a specific sports brand (Colliander and Marder, 2018; Phua and Ahn, 2016).
Respondents were solicited through convenience sampling from the student population in a tertiary institution in Singapore and randomly assigned to a control and an experimental group in both experiments.

In this study, the dependent variables under investigation are perception of product quality and purchase intention. There is a positive relationship between perceived quality and purchase intention. Consumers who perceive products to be of higher quality are more likely to report higher levels of purchase intention (Shaharudin et al., 2011; Wells et al., 2011; Yoo and Kim, 2014). However, the two terms are conceptually different. Perceived quality is only one factor that determines purchase intention. When other factors are more important in determining purchase intention, the relationship between perceived quality and purchase intention weakens.

Perception of quality of a product was tested using a five-item instrument with a seven-point Likert Scale adapted from previous research (Teas and Agarwal, 2000; Wang et al., 2016). In this study, the scale was found to be reliable with a Cronbach’s α coefficient of 0.91 in Experiment 1 and 0.93 in Experiment 2. The items in the instrument are as follows:

(1) I perceive Ludere Lite to be durable;
(2) I perceive Ludere Lite to be well crafted (i.e. good workmanship);
(3) I perceive Ludere Lite to be of high quality;
(4) I perceive Ludere Lite to consistently perform well (i.e. dependable); and
(5) I feel safe to buy Ludere Lite through this seller on Instagram.

Purchase intention was measured using a four-item instrument with a seven-point Likert Scale adapted from earlier studies. This scale was found to be reliable with Cronbach’s α coefficient reported above 0.80 (Coyle and Thorson, 2001; Prendergast et al., 2010). For this study, the scale was also found to be reliable, with a Cronbach’s α coefficient of 0.92 for both experiments. The items in the instrument are as follows:

(1) It is very likely that I will buy Ludere Lite.
(2) I will purchase Ludere Lite the next time I need a pair of running shoes.
(3) I will definitely try Ludere Lite.
(4) Suppose that a friend called you last night to get your advice in his/her search for a pair of running shoes. Would you have recommended him/her to purchase Ludere Lite?

**Experiment 1**

In this experiment to examine the effect of social influence on perceived quality and purchase intention, respondents in both control and experimental groups were exposed to the fictitious Instagram account of Ludere Lite. For the experimental group, the Instagram account was shown with additional members’ comments on usage and product experience. These include comments like “perfect for your marathon”, “you will love the design!” and “Totally getting it!” After viewing the Instagram, respondents completed the survey instrument via a laptop.

**Experiment 2**

Respondents in both control and experimental groups were exposed to an Instagram post with a visual image of a pair of Ludere Lite sports shoes. The visual image in experimental group was the same as the visual image in the control group except that the size of the
image was two times larger than the control group. As such, the manipulation was expected to expose the experimental group to an image that had better photographic detail and image quality than the control group (Kim and Lennon, 2008). In other words, the respondents in the experimental group were presented with an image with a higher level of information richness. After being exposed to the Instagram post, respondents from both groups completed a survey.

To test for product presentation richness, a three-item instrument with a seven-point Likert Scale was adapted from an earlier study (Wang et al., 2016). For this study, the scale was found to be reliable with a Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) coefficient of 0.84. The items in the instrument are as follows:

1. the Instagram post is sufficiently detailed;
2. the Instagram post is visually pleasing; and
3. the Instagram post is well organised.

**Results**

*Experiment 1*

A total of 99 respondents agreed to participate in the study with 50 respondents in the control group and 49 respondents in the experimental group. In the control group, there were 39 female respondents (78 per cent) and 11 male respondents (22 per cent). In the experimental group, there were 31 female respondents (63 per cent) and 18 male respondents (37 per cent).

A one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed to investigate the differences in perceived quality and purchase intention between the control and experimental groups with sport involvement as the covariate. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient showed a strong, positive correlation between the perceived quality and purchase intention, \( r = 0.68, n = 99, p < 0.01 \). While the correlation between the perceived quality and purchase intention was strong, it was considered acceptable as it was below 0.80 (Pallant, 2010). Preliminary assumption testing showed that the number of cases in each cell was more than 20 and as such, was sufficiently robust for modest violations of normality (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2014). Box’s test of equality of covariance matrices did not indicate any violation on the assumption of homogeneity of variance–covariance matrices.

After adjusting for sport involvement, there was no statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups on the combined dependent variables, \( F(2, 95) = 1.46, p > 0.05 \); Wilks’ \( \lambda = 0.97 \). Further analysis showed that there was no significant relationship between sport involvement and the two dependents, perception of quality and purchase intention. The means and standard deviations of the dependent variables are found in Table I.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unadjusted mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Partial ( \eta^2 )</th>
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<td>0.67</td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Purchase intention</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Control( ^a )</td>
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<td>1.19</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>Experimental( ^b )</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>1.37</td>
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Notes: \( ^a n = 50; ^b n = 49 \)
Experiment 2
A total of 159 respondents agreed to participate in the study with 75 respondents in the control group and 84 respondents in the experimental group. In the control group, there were 39 female respondents (52 per cent) and 36 male respondents (48 per cent). In the experimental group, there were 37 female respondents (44 per cent) and 47 male respondents (56 per cent).

An independent-samples t-test was conducted as a manipulation check to determine whether there was any difference in the visual quality of the image presented to the control and experimental groups. The results showed a significant difference between the control group \(M = 3.26, SD = 1.02\) and the experimental group \(M = 3.80, SD = 1.26; t(157) = 2.92, p < 0.01\) in Table II. This confirmed that the manipulation in visual quality by increasing the size of the image in the experimental group was successful. This allowed the research to proceed with examining whether visual quality of the image on social network sites had an effect on perception of quality and purchase intention.

A one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed to investigate the differences in the control and experimental groups with sport involvement as the covariate. The two dependent variables used were perceived quality and purchase intention. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient showed a strong, positive correlation between the two variables, \(r = 0.79, n = 159, p < 0.01\). While the correlation between the perceived quality and purchase intention was strong, it was considered acceptable as it was below 0.80 (Pallant, 2010).

Preliminary assumption testing was conducted. As the number of cases in each cell is more than 20, it is sufficiently robust for modest violations of normality (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2014). The calculated Mahalanobis distance did not indicate the presence of multivariate outliers. In addition, Box’s test of equality of covariance matrices did not indicate any violation on the assumption of homogeneity of variance–covariance matrices.

After adjusting for sport involvement, there was a statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups on the combined dependent variables, \(F(2, 155) = 18.51, p < 0.01\); Wilks’ \(\lambda = 0.81\); partial \(\eta^2 = 0.19\). The results for the dependent variables were considered separately, using a Bonferroni adjusted \(\alpha\) level of 0.03. Both the perception of quality \(F(1, 156) = 8.62, p < 0.01,\) partial \(\eta^2 = 0.05\) and purchase intention reached statistical significance \(F(1, 156) = 32.00, p < 0.01,\) partial \(\eta^2 = 0.17\). This indicated that the quality of visual content on social network sites has a small effect size on perception of quality but a moderately large effect size on purchase intention (Cohen, 1988). Respondents in the experimental group reported higher levels of perceived quality (adjusted \(M = 3.68\)) and purchase intention (adjusted \(M = 3.23\)) when compared to the control group’s perceived quality (adjusted \(M = 3.12\)) and purchase intention (adjusted \(M = 2.17\)). Details are reported in Table III.

Further analysis showed that there was a significant relationship between sport involvement and the two dependents, perception of quality \((p < 0.01,\) partial \(\eta^2 = 0.09\), and purchase intention \((p < 0.01,\) partial \(\eta^2 = 0.08)\).

Table II. Visual quality of product image

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<tr>
<td>Control(^a)</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>2.92*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experimental(^b)</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>1.26</td>
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Notes: \(^a\)\(n = 75;\) \(^b\)\(n = 84.\) *\(p < 0.01\)

Discussion
Many commercial organisations use social network sites to market their products and services. While there are many studies examining the effectiveness of such a strategy, these
studies have predominately focussed on the earlier social network sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. As social network sites evolve to become more visual-centric, it is necessary to examine whether such strategies can still be applied effectively.

One of the main findings on marketing on social network sites is that social influence can affect perception of quality and purchase intention, especially for consumers who are less involved in the product category or purchase situation (Chew and Leng, 2014). In Experiment 1, it was found that on a visual-centric social network site, such as Instagram, social influence in the form of members’ comment did not affect perceived quality or purchase intention when compared to the control group. In addition, the findings did not find any relationship between the level of sport involvement with perceived quality and purchase intention.

This is unexpected and contrary to earlier studies. Images can draw consumers’ attention away from textual information. In print advertisements, it has been found that consumers tend to focus on the image before the text (Kroeber-Riel, 1984; Rossiter, 1982). In this study, social influence was represented as text within the post. As such, respondents may be focusing their attention on the image instead of the text on Instagram. Compared to other social network sites, such as Facebook, where the text is given more attention, the effect of social influence may have become limited.

While there is a need to examine this further, the findings suggest that commercial organisation need to consider using more than one social network site as their roles in the marketing campaign may differ (Gvili and Levy, 2016; Ting et al., 2015). Facebook and other social network sites may be able to influence perception of quality and purchase intention through social influence, but Instagram is more likely to provide entertainment and provide information to members quickly (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Gvili and Levy, 2016). As such, commercial organisations cannot simply replicate their strategies across the different social network sites but must learn to leverage on the strengths of the individual platform.

In Experiment 2, the findings suggest that an image quality on social network sites can affect consumers’ perception of product quality and purchase intention. When the image is of high visual quality, consumers are more likely to perceive that the products presented are of high quality and report a higher level of purchase intention. These findings concur with the existing literature, further emphasising the importance of high quality images when marketing products on social network sites. In this study, a simple manipulation of having a larger image resulted in higher levels of perceived quality and purchase intention. Commercial organisations on social network sites thus need to invest in high quality visual images and yet ensure that it remains authentic and relevant to the medium (Collander and Marder, 2018).

The findings from Experiment 2 also provided further empirical support that sport involvement has a significant relationship with perception of quality and purchase intention.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tr>
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<td>3.21</td>
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<td>8.62*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
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<td>1.28</td>
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Table III. MANCOVA with perceived quality and purchase intention as dependent variables in Experiment 2

Notes: *n = 75, ^n = 84. *Significant difference using a Bonferroni adjusted α = 0.03
of sport products. Sports apparels are purchased by both serious athletes to enhance their performance and consumers to make a fashion statement (Chae et al., 2006; Dickson and Pollack, 2000; Zhou et al., 2018). As such, depending on the level of involvement, consumers differ in their susceptibility to social influence. This suggests that in future studies involving sports products, it is important to consider the effect of sport involvement as a variable.

Conclusion
This study examined the effect of social influence and quality of visual image on respondents’ perception of quality and purchase intention on the marketing of sports shoes on a visual-centric social network site. Due to the nature of visual-centric social network sites, it was found that social influence in the form of members’ word-of-mouth did not affect perceived quality and purchase intention significantly. However, higher quality images in the form of larger image size resulted in higher levels of perceived quality and purchase intention.

One of the limitations of this study is that it only examined the effects through a single social network site, i.e. Instagram. As there are other visual-centric social network sites, such as Tumblr and Pinterest, which operate slightly different from Instagram, it remains to be established how such effects vary across these social network sites. Future studies should also investigate the effects of other product presentation strategies including product coordination, product customization, three-dimensional views and the use of video clips on perception of quality and purchase intention (Yoo and Kim, 2014).

References


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