Imagery makes social media captivating! Aesthetic value in a consumer-as-value-maximizer framework

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Abstract

Purpose – Social media bring about the imagery of people, places and products. Showing particular success in attracting women and millennials, these media (e.g. Instagram, Snapchat and Pinterest) are built around imagery consumption. This paper follows a qualitative theory building approach to extend the theory of consumption values and develop a framework based on the values social media deliver to consumers that explain their use outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – The framework was analytically developed based on a review of the literature. In contrast to frameworks such as stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R), the framework proposes that people consume social media to maximize relevant values, namely, the aesthetic, social and learning value. Then, a study based on semi-structured interviews is performed to elaborate on the values and their undertakings.

Findings – The paper defines the consumption's aesthetic value and underscores it as a focal driver of social media use and a key concept in social commerce. Data analysis suggests that aesthetic value engenders such responses as consumer's inspiration, infinity sensation and habitual entertainment. Additional drivers of social media users are social and learning values. The social value engenders self-expression and social privacy, whereas the learning value engenders resourcefulness and parallel shopping.

Originality/value – This paper stipulates that people consume (i.e. use) social media to maximize relevant values, which, in turn, result in two groups of responses (inner and outer responses). The framework indicates that the relevant values mediate the relation between a stimulus (e.g. social media use) and response (e.g. entertainment, inspiration and behavioral intent). It highlights the centrality of aesthetic value in digital marketing and social commerce environments. The framework, thus, contrary to S-O-R, views the consumer as a maximizer of values rather than (a) processor of emotional and cognitive rejoinders.

Keywords Social media marketing, Online consumer behavior, Qualitative research, Customer value, Social networking sites, Visual merchandising

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Web applications play a significant role in the life of consumers, shaping the knowledge they acquire and directing the decisions they make. They allow people to create, share and acquire knowledge in multiple domains. They contribute to collective intelligence and help guide people's actions. Over the past decade, firms have been exploiting the features of web

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interactivity and connectivity for commercial purposes by such means as the integration of social media into their marketing strategy. Firms implement social media marketing given the relation between a firm's social media performance and its marketing performance. A breed of social media was integrated within Web 3.0. These media primarily feature the visual dimension of people and the products they use and are led by such sites as Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat, Etsy and Wanelo.

Social media networks (SM hereafter) are gaining popularity. About 30% of US adults use Pinterest (93% of pinners declared using it to plan for purchase while 50% have made a purchase after seeing a promoted pin; SproutSocial, 2018). Polyvore is another example that displays 130 million unique products, with women comprising 84% of its consumers (DMR Business Statistics, 2018). These figures reflect the commercial potential of SM and lure retailers to focus on the visual aspect of products and people using them. They also reflect the potential of SM to help companies gain visibility and increase the proportion of their revenue attributable to social commerce activities. The quote in the opening vignette provides a clear-cut example. SM signifies a major trend bearing significant impacts for retailers, advertisers and other e-commerce participants. These participants strive to understand how and why individuals are involved in consuming these media.

SM comprises an important addition to the growing phenomenon of social commerce, i.e. the exchange activities that take place in the social network of an individual, ranging from need recognition to the purchase steps that follow (Yadav *et al.*, 2013). Social interaction, involvement, credibility and user contributions to the creation of content are important ingredients in this process (Liang and Turban, 2011). Several models have been developed to characterize the features of different social media (Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). The literature describes SM as a tool that supports social commerce activities (for a review of SM research see Ngai *et al.*, 2015). Accordingly, different types of communities can be used for commercial leverage on these platforms (Arsel and Bean, 2013). Little work, however, has been dedicated to understanding the values a consumer derives from SM consumption and their undertakings (Aral *et al.*, 2013).

From a consumer perspective, the literature has focused on online information search and its effect on purchase decisions, a process directly related to trading activities and social commerce (Yadav *et al.*, 2013). The relations between buyers and sellers and the impact of different types of products and services have also been addressed (Huang *et al.*, 2009). The theory related to "virtual reality" in a consumption context helps fathom the impact of SM on purchase decisions (Klein, 2003). Nevertheless, there is still a need to understand the drivers of SM consumption. A female shopper for instance might appreciate looking at images showing what is new about her favorite brand or having a glimpse of the content shared by acquaintances. While a consumer would be searching for a product with specific characteristics, another would simply want to pass the time (goal-oriented vs experiential browser). In all scenarios, SM consumption relates to the functionality of their interfaces. Consumers who use them usually have the freedom to customize their accounts, follow different people and upload visual content from their computer and peripherals as they wish. Consequently, a research question is why people consume SM and become profoundly attached to them. The literature review has revealed that little work has been undertaken with this objective (Alsaleh *et al.*, 2019). From a managerial perspective, understanding the drivers and responses of SM consumers helps developers optimize their interfaces to improve user experience. An advertiser can increase effectiveness by segmenting SM users according to their consumption driver and accordingly customize the advertisements. The next section observes the SM characteristics and synthesizes the literature to develop a framework that underlines the values SM delivers to users. The framework outlines the

theory underpinning each value. The qualitative study, comprising semi-structured interviews with SM consumers to elaborate on the values and the responses they engender, is reported next. Finally, the results are summarized, and a discussion of how they expound the impact of SM on interactive marketing is provided.

Conceptual framework

SM emergence is vastly contributing to social commerce as they closely associate with e-commerce activities. Social commerce integrates social interaction and user contributions with the creation of content and produces a combination of social and business activities (Liang and Turban, 2011). While it does not necessarily involve financial transactions, it enables a business model supported by SM that can facilitate the advertisement, purchase and sale of various products and services (Kim and Park, 2013). SM does not necessarily enable financial transactions yet allows the acquisition and sharing of information on products and services in a social environment (Barger *et al.*, 2016). A user of Instagram for instance would post a selfie while trying on a product and would diligently respond to a follower's question about where to buy it. Social commerce thus refers to the exchange activities that include transactions, but are not limited only to transactions because it plays a role at different stages of a consumer's buying process. At the need recognition stage, social commerce platforms usually act as a point of reference because of the consumer pressing need to conform to a reference group (examples of associated functionalities, namely, wish list, like button, checked-in status and bought by a friend). At the pre-purchase stage, social commerce platforms represent a source of product information and e-word-of-mouth as they help to reduce social and financial risk (examples of associated functionalities, namely, posted opinions, recommendations, discussion forums and trending on Twitter). At the decision-making stage, social commerce platforms provide information on where, when and which product to purchase, helping a consumer receive assistance to make a decision (examples of associated functionalities, namely, post a status, message, buy now and filter results). In general, to qualify as a social commerce platform, the SM must bring together social and business functions (Liang and Turban, 2011). Social commerce, therefore, encompasses forums, communities and other grouping techniques that allow the viewing and sharing of product references, feedback and recommendations (Hajli, 2013). By integrating these features, social shopping platforms can be leveraged by practitioners.

To appreciate the characteristics of the current SM, we first identified the platforms widely used and observed their interfaces and business models. We noted that SM shares several characteristics such as the requirement to create a personal account and the ability to follow anyone and to be followed. We noted that SM interfaces (e.g. Pinterest, Instagram and Snapchat) are geared toward the creation and management of visual content such as the facility to upload/edit personal and product images, organize, tag and provide a textual description or a hyperlink for each image. We noted that the interface of several SM facilitates the creation, viewing, editing and sharing of visual content. In general, SM allows consumers to co-create, share, discuss, organize and edit visual and textual content (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). However, not all users are similarly involved in the SM ecosystem. The personal experience of each consumer is at the heart of this ecosystem (Hanna *et al.*, 2011). Understanding the drivers and responses of SM consumers, as attempted next, is thus necessary.

Building on utility theory (Fishburn, 1970), consumers should derive value from SM consumption to continue to visit them. The literature suggests three distinct values, namely,

aesthetic, social and learning. Triantafillidou and Siomkos (2018) indicate that to study SM motives and influences, researchers should go beyond the uses and gratification framework; these authors reviewed the literature and deduced seven dimensions of the experience derived from SM consumption (entertainment, flow, escapism, challenge, learning, socializing and communitas). These dimensions can be themed under a few distinct values, which shape consumer responses and behaviors. That is, the framework conceptualizes the SM consumer as a maximizer of a set of values (Figure 1). In contrast to extant models, the framework views the consumer as a conscious value-maximizer rather than a processor of emotional and cognitive responses. While certain frameworks such as Roger's diffusion of Innovation, postulate a process system (knowledge, persuasion, decision and then confirmation), the suggested framework diverges in that it allows for parallel processing and assessment of the different values. Values such as social expression have been shown to mediate the relation between consumer characteristics and SM consumption (Pagani *et al.*, 2013). Compared to models that allow for parallel processing such as the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R), the suggested framework differs in that it views the organism – the consumer's black box – to be structured around anticipated values, and discerns the hierarchy in consumer responses. Specifically, it theorizes the existence of first-order or inner responses that are prerequisite to the formation of the second-order or outer responses (Figure 1).

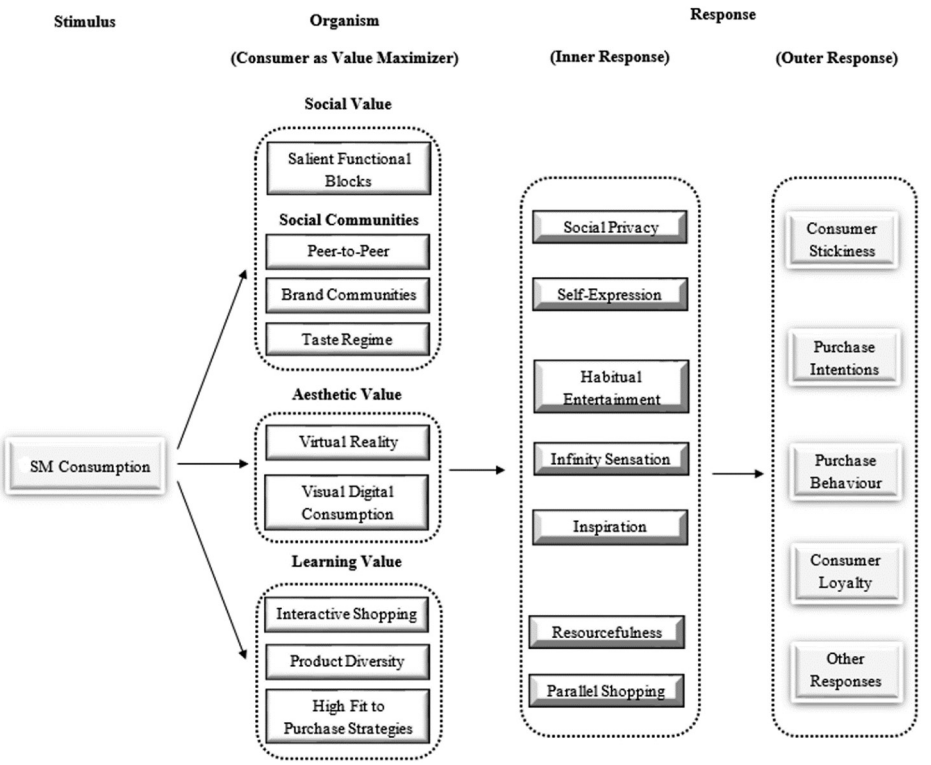

Figure 1.
Conceptual framework showing the values a consumer derives from social media consumption and their undertakings (i.e. consumer inner and outer response)

S-O-R is one of the influential models aiming to explain the effect of the physical environment or stimuli on behavior (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). In its early development, S-O-R posits that emotional response acts as a mediator in the relationship between environmental stimuli and behavior. The stimuli alter the individual's emotional state, which, in turn, elicits the individual's approach or avoidance behavior (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). S-O-R has been validated in various consumption settings, including retail stores and hotels. Most of the work adopting or extending S-O-R indicated that environmental cues/stimuli lead to affective and cognitive internal states, which then result in a myriad of behaviors. Attempts have been made to enhance S-O-R and make it pertinent to studying social commerce. A notable attempt was performed by Zhang and Benyoucef (2016), who associated S-O-R to the decision-making five stages (need recognition, information search, etc.), considering them as the response. While their view of the organism – the consumer's black box – is meticulous, it is rather complex and hard to apply. The inspector of their framework would question how effective components such as brand love form part of the organism rather than the response. Another major critique of S-O-R is that it underrates the role of cognition (Heide and GrØnhaug, 2006). Further, atmospherics as the case with SM simultaneously serves both as a tangible cue to quality and as a product component. Indeed, atmospherics would shape indirectly *and* directly the consumer response (e.g. continue to use the SM platform and recommend it to others).

The set of values represent the linkage – the consumer's black box – in a distinct fashion (Figure 1). Product perceived value has been viewed as "the overall assessment of the utility of a product based on the perceptions of what is received and what is given" (Zeithaml, 1988). Stated generally, value is the outcome of a subjective and cognitive comparison focusing on both benefit and sacrifice. The theory of consumption values stipulates that a group of values govern consumer decisions (Sheth *et al.*, 1991). Value has also been identified as a critical construct for developing lasting relationships with customers. The goal of obtaining value is a fundamental purchase goal, pivotal to successful exchange transactions (Kumar and Reinartz, 2016). Brand consumption in the SM community was characterized by five consumption values called the five sources model, namely, functional, emotional, self-oriented, social and relational (Davis *et al.*, 2014). These authors indicate that identifying consumption values is important to understand the structure and purpose of consumption in people's lives and experiences. Following a mixed-method approach, and focusing on brand-consumer interactions on SM, Rohm *et al.* (2013) found that this use is characterized by five motives or values (entertainment, brand engagement, timeliness, information and incentives). Applying the Uses and Gratifications theory, Pelletier *et al.* (2020) deduced three major motives to consume SM (informational, social and entertainment). They suggest that the informational motive is more relevant for Twitter consumption, the social motive is relevant for both Instagram and Twitter, and the entertainment motive is more relevant for SM such as Instagram. The theory summarized in this paragraph provides the backdrop for our framework.

A relevant discourse, however, is the relationship between emotional response and value; Chung and Koo (2015) suggest that value should mediate the link between benefit/sacrifice and SM consumption. There is no agreement on the type of relation between value and emotion: some work considered emotion an integral part of a value, whereas others considered emotion distinctive and a precursor of value. Our framework stipulates that, under the umbrella of the consumer's black box, emotion and cognition form an integral part of the value. For one, research has identified several dimensions of perceived value, consisting of hedonic values and functional values (e.g. product offerings, product information, monetary savings; Chiu *et al.*, 2014). Emotional rejoinder thus forms an aspect

of value. Yüksel (2007) examined the effects of shopping environment on emotions and value, showing that emotions such as pleasure and arousal mediate the relation (i.e. emotional rejoinder is a main determinant of value). Emotions determine the process by which value is created (negative emotions lengthen perceived waiting time for service and create a desire to withdraw; Liu and Jang, 2009). Therefore, our framework views the consumer as a conscious value maximizer, who consume SM to conserve a group of values, namely, the aesthetic value, social value and learning value discussed next.

Aesthetic value

The visual, artistic value delivered by SM interfaces is prominent. Images on Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram act as a stimulus, text or representation that drives consumer cognition and shapes their preferences. As their inception, websites have relied on imagery (for a review of aesthetics in e-tail environments see Wang *et al.*, 2011 and of aesthetic value see Apaolaza *et al.*, 2020). Web and App design comes down to the challenge of making navigation a visual experience. Schroeder (2002 p. 3) designates that "We live in a digital electronic world, based on images designed to capture eyeballs and build brand names, create mindshare and design successful products and services." This scholar discussed visual consumption and underlined how it is overlooked, viewing it as a system of meaning production via language and emphasizing the need to put photography (encompassing still photography and video and representing a key communication tool in the SM age) at the center of consumer behavior. Aesthetic value delineates a relevant marketing concept in SM age because it fosters consumer desire, a concept viewed by Belk *et al.* (2013) as the product of a market economy and social milieu that stimulates fantasies using such channels as advertising and retail displays. Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010) noted, "more recently, there has been a further project to free consumer desire from the need for material actualization" through virtual spaces "to sustain complex and unending wants." Aesthetic value renders SM captivating in part because it helps enact desire. While scholars have focused on images as stimulus material within experimental research or used photos to collect data or conduct semiotic analysis, they have not given a holistic look at imagery and their impact. Coining the "image economy" term, Schroeder (2002 p.10) highlighted the potential of the aesthetic value produced by images: "images are like fetishes – they are worshipped for their almost magical ability to conjure desire and delight." Research indicates that viewing product pictures leads to similar behavioral consequences as interacting with the product because the mind mentally simulates the experience (Elder and Krishna, 2011).

While people enjoy beauty and art, they seek aesthetics in almost everything conceivable to derive the value needed to safeguard the quality of their lives and the integrity of their sensibility (Mandoki, 2007). Recently, Apaolaza *et al.* (2020) reviewed the literature on aesthetic value and studied it in the context of customer satisfaction toward restaurants, showing the mediating role for aesthetic value and its detrimental influence on various consumer responses. The construct thus goes beyond the philosophical realm and the current metaphors characterizing it by fetishes, fears and even myths to a more practical, concrete span. The interplay between two phenomena helps elaborate aesthetic value:

(1) "Virtual reality," supported by the abundance of visual content and the ability to freely interact with this content and

(2) "Digital virtual consumption," which elucidates the impact of images on the delivered aesthetic value thus on behavior.

The intricate nature of "fragmented" ownership in the context of digital virtual goods helps cognize the consumer's response. Besides, the facility of interacting with product images increases vividness, immediacy and presence (Klein, 2003). Research associates virtual reality with interfaces that contain high-quality images and three-dimensional imagery. SM interfaces help consumers experience products and services virtually by viewing and manipulating their images. Pinterest consumers for instance can construct "boards" of images and manipulate them. Polyvore consumers can assemble various images to create professional, handy montages. SM interfaces thus encompass virtual reality because of their rich media and interactivity. Virtual reality indicates presence and interactivity, not solely three-dimensional functionality. The aesthetic value relates to the amount and quality of visual content and level of interactivity i.e. the ease of manipulating and customizing visual content. Such factors heighten the presence and promote engagement. The "mix and match" image interactivity feature was linked to hedonic value, pleasure and arousal, thus to store appraisal and purchase intent (Fiore *et al.*, 2005). Visual stimuli enhance consumer response and knowledge of product assortments, as well as purchase intent (Elder and Krishna, 2011). Therefore, the aesthetic value provided by SM facilitates the learning of a consumer searching for a product and enhances behavioral intent.

The theory of digital virtual consumption, introduced by Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010), clarifies how SM virtual reality affects aesthetic value. This theory was based on the premise that the digital virtual world of an individual lies somewhere between imagination and materiality, reducing materiality (Shields, 2005). Virtual digital spaces open the door to a multitude of forms of fun and experiences, conducive to an environment of material consumption. SM consumption provides aesthetic value through a stimulus to the imagination of a consumer produced by the digital visual content abundant in their spaces. Unlike theories of consumer imagination, this theory can be extended to SM use because the stimulating objects exist on a screen outside the consumer's mind. Due to the visual orientation of SM, the extension is termed "visual digital consumption" herein. SM gives a sense of pleasure to consumers during their search for information, and provide a sense of "being there." The theory stipulates four functions of virtual consumption embraced by SM elaborated next: *the stimulation of consumers' desires*. This function refers to the use of virtual resources and experiences to stimulate desires for material or virtual possessions. SM entail lots of "window shopping," which actuates this function. Much of the aesthetic value and pleasure the SM consumer derives relates to the abundance of images. Besides, SM such as Pinterest and WeHeartIt recurrently provides new, exclusive items through a customized newsfeed. The visual content is frequently renewed because it is user- and/or retailer-generated (our repeated search for handcrafted earrings on Etsy always gave new results). SM stimulates desire because of aesthetic window-shopping enhanced by renewed visual content. *The enactment of consumers' dreams*. This function implies that shoppers realize their dreams through owning virtual objects (i.e. by developing and saving personalized wish lists). SM enables consumers to view favorite product images but also puts them in a personal place. This function does not specify whether the product will be owned someday by the consumer or continue to be envy. Yet, the virtual product embodied by its images now *belongs* to the consumer, which helps enact his or her dreams. *The realization of consumers' fantasies*. This function describes consumers that use digital features to materialize fantasies or imaginary desires. This function diverges from the stimulation of material consumption because it comprises abstract fantasies. SM such as Wanelo helps a consumer materialize fantasies through "visualizing" the possession of luxurious goods or services. While luxurious goods exist, some consumers cannot readily purchase them because of limited resources. A Pinterest board entitled "dream trips" made

up of images of upscale hotels, fine dining, and beachside villas create aesthetic value for a consumer by helping materialize their own fantasy. A board entitled "dream clothes" made up of images of extra-small-sized suits helps a consumer materializes own fantasy of looking like a model. *Experimentation*. Experimentation is not enabled in many social environments: SM interfaces do not allow consumers to put themselves in the shoes of other characters or to represent themselves virtually. An example would be Lululemon acquisition of Mirror, which offers a tech-enabled mirror with a preinstalled camera and speakers enabling customers to vividly participate in fitness classes at home in COVID-19 times (see also MyVirtualModel and SecondLife sites). The addition of features enabling this function should enhance visual digital consumption, thus improve SM aesthetic value.

Social value

To elaborate on the social value provided by SM, we adopt the functional building blocks' theory advanced by Kietzmann *et al.* (2011). These authors advanced a framework that defines SM using their building blocks, namely, identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups. SM interfaces focus on sharing. The shared content usually leads to conversations and the creation of groups. Three functional blocks – sharing, conversations and groups – are thus highly related to SM consumption. Sharing provides value to consumers as it helps them upload, organize, tag, describe and share images of the product they shop for, wear and use. Conversations and group creation usually result from sharing visual content on SM. Conversations take place in the form of comments on the shared images. These comments come in the form of opinions and reflections on the visual content. On SM such as Etsy, conversations take place using private messages as well. In terms of grouping, consumers organize the visual content they follow based on content, source or style. Moreover, SM enables grouping by a newsfeed, personalized based on consumer history, preference and interests (fashion, home decoration, travel, etc.). Such actions result in the creation and enlargement of brand communities (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017). Identity and reputation yet create value for a segment of consumers. Consumers have the choice of building a complete SM account by providing personal information, personal photos and hyperlinks to own sites and/or other SM accounts. While many consumers provide only a user name upon starting an SM account, as the qualitative study showed, some build a complete account. The latter segment perceptibly derives social value from the identity block. Reputation helps create social value for some. For one, a consumer would readily follow the accounts enjoying many followers. Conversely, a consumer is encouraged to use certain SM when more users follow his/her account or like the images/boards the consumer shared. The functional blocks encompass the formation and preservation of communities, and these create value for consumers. The social value strengthens the utility value of products (Park and Kim, 2014). Our literature review suggests that three types of communities provide social value:

Peer-to-peer virtual communities. SM such as Pinterest and Etsy enable the identification of solutions and the exchange of expertise through comments and images' descriptions. Consumers would provide advice to improve a recipe published by Nutella or Campbell Soup. Consumers can exchange tips to enhance the look of a decorative item. SM empowers consumers by enabling them to open-endedly exchange comments on shared content. The resulting communities are analogous to a widespread type of online community that aims to find solutions and results in the exchange of expertise while promoting social bonding through conversations and reciprocity. These communities are termed "Peer-to-Peer" because they mainly allow for the resolution of peers' problems (De Almeida *et al.*, 2014). This community coexists with and nurtures the brand community. It is nevertheless distinct

because the main purpose of its existence is the resolution of peers' problems based on the exchange of experience and preferences without emphasizing a specific brand or manufacturer. Such communities create social capital (an intangible resource in a social structure characterized by volunteerism, reciprocity and trust; Mathwick *et al.*, 2007). The social capital brings benefits at the individual and collective level. The response to a consumer's question can benefit the consumer and the wider community (e.g. a tip to enhance the look of a decorative item). Participants in these communities are proactive – commit to make an effort and provide their time to benefit another person, group or organization. Reciprocity is central to the creation of social value; SM consumers usually cooperate and empathize with each other. Creating value would be less feasible (a better recipe cannot be achieved) if consumers exchanged information in a climate of competition. Consumers in general place trust in other consumers of the SM platform, as they are willing to interact openly with people they know little about, listen to their ideas and review their comments to take advantage of the emanating social capital.

Brand communities. These communities are based on a structured set of social relationships among the admirers of a brand and are not restricted by geographic barriers (Park and Kim, 2014). Brand communities, which exist in SM, are social entities that reflect the integration of brands in consumers' everyday lives and the ways in which brands and consumers communicate with each other. Consumers become curators of brand culture through the construction of self, relationships, storytelling and rituals. SM should allow consumers to meticulously express lifestyles and preferences. A blogger who usually shares content related to own vacations and trips would upload personal pictures from around the world to express their own lifestyle on SM. A brand gains visibility depending on the way the blogger expresses commitment to it. Brands can be easily linked to the product images shared on SM. This link is more evident in SM that enables the purchase of products such as Etsy and Wanelo. Alternately, the tags and descriptions attached to images allow brand-community members to readily locate and share the content associated with their beloved brand. Consumers use SM functions to interact with a brand and share its news. SM such as Instagram and Snapchat can thus be viewed as a social commerce tool that contributes to the creation and evolvement of brand communities.

Taste regime *communities.* SM facilitates the dissemination of tastes across consumers. The SM visual orientation is conducive to the dissemination of "taste regime," which contributes to social value. Arsel and Bean (2013) define taste regimes as normative systems that determine the aesthetics of practice within consumer culture. The regimes may be determined by some authority such as a magazine, blog or influencer and correspond to an alignment between objects, practices and meanings. A taste regime allows for the alignment between the visual nature of an object and its materiality in several aesthetic areas of consumption such as gastronomy, fashion, travel and interior decoration. The inherent visual orientation of SM facilitates this alignment. Further, consumers can easily follow or "like" the taste regime of others (consumers, magazine editors, bloggers or another influencer). Arsel and Bean (2013) examined the case of a blog "apartment therapy," which guides the consumption of decorative items, dictates how they should be used and highlights their significance in everyday life. This blog has created an account on Pinterest; hence, its tastes became available to Pinterest users.

Learning value

Learning affords an immaculate value for humans. Constructing knowledge of the world and its marketplace, including products and trends, through the continuous acquisition of

information is a customary consumer practice (Zhao *et al.*, 2013). Information search is a process by which a person seeks information related to a problem, situation or artifact. This process is characterized by divergent thinking modes and acquisition routes (for a review of consumer learning at an e-commerce context see Lu *et al.*, 2014). Consumers are flexible in their search for information and, while doing so, are ready to be entertained. The observed SM fit the latter condition: They help consumers learn about recent products and tastes while enriching their experiences. Consumers habitually amass information from different routes with two main objectives – increase their product knowledge and experience pleasure (Mathwick *et al.*, 2007). Looking for product information helps a consumer feel pleasure and escape; moreover, it helps define the self and relation to others (Compeau *et al.*, 2016). Our literature review indicates that SM delivers learning value through their interactive shopping, product diversity and the fit with various purchasing strategies.

First, SM allows for interactive shopping. SM can be non-transactional (do not allow for product purchasing directly on the platform such as Facebook, Pinterest and WeHeartIt) and transactional (e.g. Etsy and Wanelo). Seeking information on the Web has been studied, suggesting that consumers are increasing their dependence on digital media when taking their purchase decisions (Huang *et al.*, 2009). The literature survey allows us to situate SM consumption within an interactive shopping realm for three reasons. First, SM enables for incessant interaction between buyers and sellers characterized by two-way communication. SM users are constantly in touch with sellers either directly (e.g. Etsy) or via comments and hyperlinks (e.g. Facebook and Pinterest). Second, because SM comprises a multitude of visual content, they help minimize the cost of information search – a fundamental value of interactive shopping (Chung and Koo, 2015). SM offers consumers a wide range of product information but also a customized newsfeed. These integrated recommendations reduce information overload and enhance decision quality. Third, several SM is built around visual interactivity (e.g. when a consumer manipulates the image of a product, the interface provides the opportunity to effortlessly find the images of similar and complementary products). Making comparisons and finding products is facilitated, which helps make a decision while minimizing search costs.

Second, SM ensures product diversity. Product type shapes online information search. The nature of the information sought, the way search is done and the process of decision-making vary according to the product. Peck *et al.* (2013) suggest that, because some consumers have a high need to touch and manipulate a product before purchase, multiple high-quality images of the product should be available – which SM facilitates. These researchers indicate that haptic imagery (imagining touching an object) has a similar effect as physical touch, thus creates a feeling of ownership and control. Producing quality images for services is a challenge though. Aljukhadar and Senecal (2015) propose that when selling an intangible product such as vacation packages, this challenge can be overcome by enhancing the SM interactive features along with the aesthetic features. In sum, SM provides consumers with apposite information for intangible and tangible products. The literature has alternately categorized products as experience and search products. Huang *et al.* (2009) indicate that the gap between the perceived ability to judge the quality of experience versus search products crumbles on the web. These researchers nevertheless noted the difference in consumers' online behaviors (e.g. in the case of experience products, consumers view fewer pages but spend more time on each before making a purchase). They noted that consumers interested in experience products are more likely to buy from the same site that offered them the information. This likelihood highlights the potential of SM in

relationship and distribution strategy for both product types (e.g. a travel agency using Pinterest, Instagram or Polyvore to crowdsource and inform clients).

Finally, SM affords high fit with various purchase strategies. A social commerce tool does not need to encompass transactions as long as it facilitates the purchase of goods (Kim and Park, 2013). Most SM comprises a step or more in an interactive shopping process, though they might encompass the whole process when allowing for on-site transactions such as Etsy. Information search on SM is not usually initiated by a clear intent to purchase but rather by an aspiration to collect information and learn about the marketplace on a regular basis. Information search behavior can be goal-oriented or exploratory (Scarpi *et al.*, 2014). In goal-oriented information search, the consumer has planned to make a purchase and the task is to gather relevant information sufficient to make a quality decision. This type of search is concentrated and directed, thus frequent in transactional SM. In exploratory information search, where the goal is either blurred or nonexistent, the interaction with the platform becomes a goal by itself. This search prevails when the consumer has limited knowledge of a product class. It also prevails when the consumer is window shopping or browsing for leisure, thus would occur more in non-transactional SM such as Facebook, Pinterest and WeHeartIt. In exploratory search, learning value is obtained from the shopping experience itself and not the search results. SM creates learning value because their interfaces afford appropriate fit with a variety of purchasing strategies. The available features augment the consumer hedonic experience, which involves pleasure, curiosity, escapism and entertainment (Scarpi, 2012). Alternately, the features allow for a utilitarian experience based on efficiency, rationality and goal-oriented information search (Scarpi *et al.*, 2014). SM, hence, allows for hedonic and utilitarian experience, which help shape the learning value.

Based on this backdrop, the framework conceptualizes the consumer as a maximizer of the aesthetic, social and learning value (Figure 1). Aesthetic value has a central role as it contributes to social and learning value. For instance, the aesthetics of the IT artifact enhance its ease of use and learning (Aljukhadar and Senecal, 2015). The values contribute to each other. SM communities such as Peer-to-Peer communities facilitate consumer learning – one example of social value influencing learning value (De Almeida *et al.*, 2014). The next section reports the qualitative study conducted to elaborate on the values and deduce their undertakings. The results of the study, underlining consumer responses to the attainment of these values, are depicted in the framework (the right side in Figure 1).

Qualitative study

Purpose

Viewing SM as a social commerce pillar that affords users a set of values, we found the literature to offer no similar views (Yadav *et al.*, 2013). A qualitative study was thus conducted in Canada to analyze how SM deliver these values to consumers and how SM shapes consumer responses (i.e. to elaborate on the literature-derived values and their outcomes).

Method and sample

We followed an in-depth, semi-structured interview method. Participants in the interviews were 11 women and 4 men (3 aged 30 and higher; 10 were single). The participants belonged to a convenience sample recruited using an advertisement at the campus of a major university in Montreal after obtaining the ethics committee permission. The participants either were full-time workers, graduate students or retired. An additional participant responded to certain questions rather than all interview questions.

Interview guide

The interviews took place at the classroom or meeting room at the university library. Each of the 15 audiotaped interviews lasted 45 to 60 min. They, hence, took place in a relaxed atmosphere, allowing the respondents to express themselves and their views. Participants were familiarized with the format of the interview, which first included the task of navigating one SM platform. Two trained interviewers participated in data collection (one conducted 10 and the other conducted 5 interviews). Given the bilingual nature of the study milieu, participants were allowed to conduct the interview in their native language (English or French); all but one participant elected to perform the interview in French, indicating that the sample consisted mainly of French Canadians inhabiting the province of Quebec. The interviewer oriented the discussion by asking the interviewee first to check their own SM account, describe the behavior and habits when using it, indicate reactions and responses and finally report demographic factors. The exploratory nature of the study favored the semi-structured interview; this method helps deduce up-date-date motives, beliefs, responses and behaviors of interest (Belk *et al.*, 2013). The interviewers followed the interview guide to cover the discussion themes for each participant (contact the corresponding author for interview guide), while their order was occasionally adapted to a participant answer to unleash their own reflections. While these interviews are structured to a certain degree, they still allow a thorough understanding of a phenomenon given that informants are able to speak freely (Belk *et al.*, 2013).

Data analysis

The verbatim of the interviews was transcribed and annotated. Subsequently, categorization was done to code data following the procedure of Spiggle (1994), which allows the identification of data groups constituting an example of a general phenomenon. The categorization was first made deductively to identify the ideas brought by the participants, and an inductive categorization was made for the remaining passages according to the key concepts under study (e.g. social aspect of the site, online shopping, responses, etc.). Second, variations in the discourse of participants about their responses while using SM were analyzed to highlight the contrasts and similarities between the interviewees according to the themes identified in the first step (Belk *et al.*, 2013). Following this analysis, redundant themes were identified in various sections of the interviews. The two coders who performed this step had a high rate of agreement. The next section summarizes a consumer's responses to SM consumption as embodied in seven factors (Inner Response in Figure 1), then underlines their relation with delivered values.

Results

As consumers, the participants provided various views on SM content and consumption habits. Information on each participant's shopping and navigation behavior was obtained. While the majority conduct online shopping, few indicated that they use the web mainly to search for product information. SM consumption (i.e. use) was a common practice, with many participants reporting that they access more than one platform on a regular basis. Data analysis resulted in the following responses attained by the SM consumer. The following defines the responses ensuing from the analysis and lists key quotes of interviewees.

Inspiration

This factor shows that SM consumption inspires a consumer to do something creative about a product now or in the future. Most participants indicated that seeking inspiration is at the

heart of SM consumption, partially due to visual content: "they are the images that I find pretty like they probably inspire me in a certain way, especially on how to wear things. It doesn't inspire me to buy things but on how to wear things, like clothes." They linked inspiration with goal-oriented search behavior, with aesthetics and with "being-there." They indicated that to inspire, the SM visual content should not be tedious or boring.

Infinity sensation

The profusion of visual content and the presence of updated, extendable newsfeed on most SM provide a stimulating feeling of infinity; the numerous possible combinations of products and the divergent ways of using them provide excitement, thrill and satisfaction. The interviewees did not recognize an end for the SM feed nor visual content, describing their navigation using verbs such as let myself go, roam and wander: "the advantage is that you can access multiple images. It is infinite. However, you have to be careful because you see a picture, you click it and it brings many. It is infinite. You can spend hours." The notion thus has a risky side, delineated with terms such as wasting time and addiction. Nonetheless, the sensation derived from a volume of quality images provides a tenacious reward: "It [the newsfeed pictures] is always new. It is always infinite. Yet again, there are other things and other things [. . .] you click on something and you arrive on someone's board and [begin] from there, it's always exponential!" Participants alluded to the need to visit the SM site more often to keep up with updates.

Habitual entertainment

Habitual entertainment reflects that SM consumption allows consumers to have fun, relax and pass the time. The interviewees underscored the consumption hedonic aspect, associating it with their handheld devices. The time (morning, evening or weekend) and the type of device used (mobile, tablet or PC) vary when the SM platform is consumed at a recreational context: "it is fun to go see anything. It can be recipes. It can be decoration, pretty pictures and sometimes to kill time. It's like looking at a magazine you know [. . .] Pinterest is for fun but it's at night." The interviewees highlighted the hedonic aspect of navigating pictures on SM.

Resourcefulness

This factor conceptualizes SM consumption as capable of providing the consumers with quick yet ingenious ways to solve the problems they face in daily life. All interviewees indicated the utilitarian, informative aspect ensuing from SM consumption: "while I was preparing for my wedding, I searched on Pinterest [for wedding shoes, decorative items of tables, etc.] almost every day." They indicated that SM virtual communities relate to this aspect, that SM offers an alternate for news outlets and that SM is more user-friendly when exploring products. They also indicate that they use SM to organize their product ideas and save them.

Self-expression

This factor delineates that an individual, by consuming SM, becomes able to express one's feelings, thoughts and ideas about products, services and lifestyle. Because they allow choosing, manipulating and arranging visual and other content, these media facilitate self-expression. Participants alluded to this concept: "It's like a journal. It is as if you were doing a scrapbook of things you love, and I have a lot. My Pinterest is really full. Did you see it? Me, it is as if I created a

lot of boards you see, websites, fashion, gardening, children, design [. . .] what describes me. What I am. That is it. It is a journal and a scrapbook."

Social privacy

SM consumption is molded by an aptitude for concealing one's own information and preferences to express oneself selectively and confidentially. The social features do not necessarily drive people to consume SM; several interviewees follow few people and do not actively seek to increase the number of their followers, "Pinterest, I see it more as a personal thing [. . .] I would tell you that I simply visit it for myself, to have fun. I do not really follow people and I do not leave comments or anything. The way I use it, it's really for me." They do not show particular interest in the comments other consumers leave at the product images they share: "on Instagram, I'm very passive so I have a few friends that are my Instagram; but people that just come and look at your account that I don't know, I don't accept them. I block them. It's not my objective to be followed; I like to be followed by friends to share things like you know what I do like my crafts, I like showing it to them." These interviewees also reflect that a common trend was to consume SM in a personal context: the social impact is felt in the immediate social circle outside the web rather than on the web.

Parallel shopping

Participants consume SM to learn about marketplace trends and modes, to get informed about products, their specifications and ways to use them. Parallel shopping does not generally encompass a complete decision-making process: "my last visit (to Pinterest) was yesterday for clothes. I think it is because I was looking for a white shirt and before going to the store I wanted to see what was out there already, and in the end, I did not buy it online because I really want to see the material. I really wanted something fluid, not transparent and not too tight. So I spotted things online before going to the store to see what existed." Yet the influence on the final decision-making was prominent for several interviewees, who delineated the power of SM imagery on a purchase decision.

Discussion and implications

Our results delineate the power of imagery on the SM consumer attitude and behavior. They show that people consume SM in the pursuit of maximizing relevant values. These values (aesthetic, social and learning value) engender a group of undertakings. The aesthetic value created by SM consumption primarily associates with states of inspiration, infinity sensation and habitual entertainment. Alternately, the social value created by SM consumption associates with normative social expectations (primarily self-expression and social privacy). The learning value created by SM consumption associates with their resourcefulness and parallel shopping. Recent work lends support to our results. Building on the theory of consumption values, Omigie *et al.* (2017) showed that a group of values (such as aesthetic, convenience and self-gratification) determines consumer responses (such as satisfaction and loyalty) in the context of using a mobile financial service. Content creation and consumer engagement on SM are better performed taking into consideration consumer preferences. The framework elaborates on why people consume SM and consumption outcomes. It deviates from S-O-R by viewing the consumer as a maximizer of values rather than a processor of emotional and cognitive rejoinders. It further deviates in that it views a hierarchy in a consumer's response, divided into an inner and outer response. The inner response affords a necessary pretext for an outer response. The derived factors (inspiration, infinity sensation, habitual entertainment, resourcefulness, self-expression, social privacy

and parallel shopping) are inner responses that facilitate the outer or observed responses such as stickiness, purchase behavior and loyalty.

SM consumption delivers social value to many consumers in an opaque way. The qualitative study showed that building a reputation and a follower-base are not important for many. Alternately, the social value engenders consumer self-expression (e.g. by creating and sharing boards and auspicious images with spouse, family and friends on Pinterest). The interviewees consider SM a space to express personality and preferences via a process shaped by intimate reflection i.e. social privacy. SM consumption delivers aesthetic value through the profusion of beautiful, quality images of people and products, helping consumers generate consumption ideas that are easy to save and retrieve. The aesthetic nature of SM interfaces likened to an online personal journal, actuates a state of "habitual entertainment" that helps stimulate the desires and realize the fantasies of consumers. SM consumption delivers learning value due to their resourcefulness and as they enact a parallel shopping process. The interviewees regarded the images they see/save as ideas. Accordingly, SM can be viewed as tools geared to help consumers solve the problems they face in daily life and to provide them with consumption ideas.

The current research provides the grounded theory needed to study people's consumption of SM, helping stimulate future work. Following a qualitative approach, it contributes by contending that consumers are conscious maximizers of values. SM consumers attain aesthetic, social and learning value. Attaining these values results in a cluster of inner responses (inspiration, infinity sensation, parallel shopping, etc.) that shapes a consumer's outer responses (attitude, intent and behavior, etc.). The factors representing consumer inner response to SM consumption warrants further investigation. The divergent and discriminant validity of the responses should be investigated. Furthermore, the relationship between the values and these responses should be confirmed for various SM. The framework postulates that the inner responses mediate the impact of the values (aesthetic, social and learning value) on the outer response such as stickiness, shopping intent and behavior. This mediation should be tested in various settings. SM design draws from dated practices. SM interfaces support static visual content (i.e. pictures) but also motion pictures. Reviewing the past 30 years of videography research and its impact on marketing, Belk *et al.* (2018) conclude that the most difficult issue facing this research line is making a compelling theoretical contributions. The aesthetic value, hence, calls for the collaboration of scholars from various fields, including those specializing in visuals such as advertisers and art historians. In sum, the framework outlines research opportunities to understand people's consumption of SM and its undertakings.

The results have implications for practitioners. Retailers use SM such as Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram and WeHeartIt to promote their products and brands by disseminating images of them, as well as for crowdsourcing. Retailers planning to improve their SM presence should benefit from the framework, particularly the factors that denote the values and their undertakings. Practitioners for instance should devise methods to improve resourcefulness and social expression while maintaining social privacy on the SM platform. The available features in SM allow for less-immersive virtual reality, characterized by rich media and high interactivity. Practitioners should explore methods to enhance virtual reality (e.g. by allowing for experimentation). Developers, acknowledging the importance of aesthetic value, should deliver quality and updated visuals on the platform regardless of the used peripheral (PC versus smartphones versus tablets). Developers can increase the aesthetic value by focusing on features that allow for immersive virtual reality, for instance by developing glasses or helmets that place the consumer in a three-dimensional

environment (Scholz and Smith, 2016). The integration of three-dimensional printing within SM should increase value as it creates reality out of virtual reality.

Limitation and future research

"Social media are fundamentally changing the way we communicate, collaborate, consume and create. They represent one of the most transformative impacts of information technology on business, both within and outside firm boundaries" (Aral *et al.*, 2013 p. 3). Enhancing consumer engagement on SM is relevant to scholars and practitioners (Barger *et al.*, 2016). Grounded on the visual aspect, SM plays a significant role in marketing for they help inspire shoppers and serve as accessible memory for their product ideas. The current research fills a research gap by asserting that the consumption of these media depends on the aesthetic, social and learning value they provide to consumers. The qualitative study derived consumer responses to attain these values. One limitation is that the sample is disproportionally comprising younger and educated consumers, thus the results should be generalized to other segments with caution. The results were summarized in a research framework to stimulate future work that fathoms the impact of social media on social commerce, retail and society in general.

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