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## The Role of Consumer Affect on Visual Social Networking Sites: How Consumers Build Brand Relationships

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### ABSTRACT

Visual social networking sites, such as Instagram, have become increasingly attractive for engaging consumers and building brand relationships. Despite this growing popularity, little is known about how visuals help consumers build brand relationships. Therefore, this study examines how consumers' perceptions of brand engagement on Instagram influence their affective response and build brand commitment with regard to consumers' three-dimensional emotional response—appeal, engagement, and empowerment. Findings suggest that consumers' emotional responses each contribute to consumers' brand commitment. Additionally, perceived entertainment and aesthetic values of brand posts were positively related to appeal; perceived belongingness to brands with engagement; and perceived mutuality with empowerment.

Instagram is a popular mobile application launched in 2010 and acquired by Facebook in 2012. Since its introduction, Instagram has grown to 400 million active users (Kharpal 2015) and 0.2 million active advertisers (Boorstin 2016). Instagram was one of the first applications that allowed users to take edit, upload, and share photos and videos on social networking sites (SNSs) (Instagram.com 2016; Heine 2013). According to Instagram reports (March 2016), more than 40 billion photos have been shared. On average, 80 million photos are posted per day, along with approximately 3.5 billion daily likes. Instagram has evolved into a unique social media platform where users can document their lives through visual content such as photos and videos. Furthermore, as a visual-based social media platform, Instagram provides a venue where communication can take place among its users with a richer graphic conversation via the exchange of photos and videos (Heffernan 2013).

Brands are increasingly jumping on the Instagram bandwagon and using the platform to show their presence and communicate with their consumers. Though these brands post images and short videos of their latest products and events, they also share inspiring and entertaining content to create a positive and enjoyable experience among Instagram users. To stimulate interactivity, brands encourage consumers to post pictures related to their campaigns (e.g., Nike's #justdoit). Consumers who post their own pictures (e.g., selfies), in addition to brand-related images, and share them with other consumers, may find such social interaction on SNSs an engaging experience. This can help them develop a meaningful, emotional attachment and commitment to the brands via their respective Instagram pages. Furthermore, it is evident that marketers are striving to build a sense of belongingness among consumers on their Instagram brand pages, just as they have done on other SNSs, to connect with consumers through feelings of bonding and engagement with the community (Yan 2011). For example, Nike reposted photos from their fans' profiles on their Instagram page to show their appreciation and to

strengthen emotional connections with their consumers. Such brand activities on Instagram may help consumers develop a sense of commitment to the brand through feelings of empowerment.

Despite the growing attention to Instagram, there is a dearth of research on its commercial use, as an effective venue for building emotional relationships with consumers, and its role in creating consumer affective response as a predictor of key consumer-brand relationship outcomes. Indeed, very few researchers have explored the area of consumer-brand relationships on Instagram (e.g., De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012; Bakhshi, Shamma, and Gilbert 2014; Highfield and Leaver 2014; Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati 2014). Previous research explored certain key aspects of factors that facilitate consumer interaction with brands on other SNS platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter). For example, some studies have explored the perceived value of consumers' sense of belonging (Cheung, Chiu, and Lee 2011; Marwick and boyd 2011; Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, and Pihlström 2012; Page 2012; Stevens 2012) and brand post characteristics (De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012). Given the growing importance of visuals in inspiring consumers and building emotional connections with them, it is vital to examine an important set of affective responses that an individual consumer experiences during his or her interaction with brands on Instagram.

The purpose of this study is to examine how consumers' perceptions of brand activities they engage in on Instagram influence their brand commitment via affective response. More specifically, the current research (1) identifies consumers' perceptions of aesthetic value, entertainment value, belongingness, and mutuality as antecedents of their emotional response to brand activities on Instagram (i.e., appeal, engagement, and empowerment) and (2) examines how the affective response leads to brand commitment. This study provides useful insights into how to design and implement brand communication and marketing strategies on Instagram by exploring the psychological mechanism by which consumers generate affective response in their interaction with brands on Instagram, which ultimately leads to commitment to the brands. This study explores the commercial value of Instagram as a platform to build brand-fan relationships, given the significance of branding on a graphic-rich SNS. This study aims to highlight the potential of a vivid and interactive interface of SNSs (De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012) as it offers an opportunity of branded social media entertainment to marketers and advertisers by integrating brands into highly engaging media content that benefits their brand followers, which leads them to respond emotionally to the brands.

## Literature review

### *Promoting brand commitment via Instagram*

Brand commitment, defined as a persistent longing to sustain a valued relationship with a brand (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992; Lacy 2007), can be established at the economic, emotional, and psychological levels of attachments that individuals have toward a brand (Evanschitzky Iyer, Plassmann, Niessing, and Meffert 2006). According to Bevins (2014), consumers who have had a positive experience with brands will continue to support that brand. Such committed consumers are willing to remain in their relationship with the brand, and consequently wish to strengthen the bond. One of the primary goals of using Instagram is to facilitate strong brand commitment, which ultimately leads to brand loyalty (Kim, Morris, and Swait 2008), support of the brand vision, and advocacy for the brand (Turri, Smith, and Kemp 2013). Because commitment is a result of emotional attachment toward brands they interact with on Instagram, the current study examines consumers' emotional commitment to the brands as the likely key outcome of consumers' emotional response on Instagram.

Number of brand followers, while considered an important indicator of brand engagement, does not necessarily determine the effectiveness of brand communication on SNSs (DeMers 2014). Rather, the success of marketing communication on Instagram is greatly dependent on the active participation of the brand's followers, who interact with the brand through liking, commenting, and sharing visual content (Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011; Carah and Shaul 2015). Consumer interaction with brands on Instagram elicits some form of affective response from participation in a variety of brand activities, such as the consumption of enjoyable brand posts and sharing consumer-generated content (e.g., Hearn

2008; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008; Banet-Weiser 2012), which may ultimately lead to commitment toward the brands. Furthermore, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communications via visual-based brand content can facilitate consumer reception of information about the brand (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006) and promote their emotional attachment and commitment to the brand (Dholakia and Durham 2010).

### **Three dimensions of consumer emotion response**

Previous research has investigated various types of distinct consumer emotions, such as anger, sadness, joy, and surprise in response to advertising images (e.g., Teixeira, Wedel, and Pieters 2012; Kim and Niederdeppe 2014). While consumers' affective response to brands can be examined through a list of discrete measures or as a multidimensional construct (Poels and Dewitte 2006), several researchers have organized a wide array of emotions by grouping them along the three-factor theory of emotions originally created by Osgood, Suci, and Tannebaum (1957): specifically, appeal, engagement, and empowerment (AEE) (Jang, Chun, Ko, and Morris 2014; Wen and Morris 2015). *Appeal* is the measure of positive or negative reaction that constitutes a range from extreme happiness to extreme unhappiness. For instance, feelings of happiness indicate feelings of positive appeal whereas feelings of sadness indicate feelings of negative appeal. Feelings of *engagement* determine the level of stimulation and involvement, which ranges on a physiological continuum indicating some level of physical activity, mental alertness, or frenzied excitement at the arousal end of the continuum, with inactivity, mental dullness, or sleep at the opposite end. Emotional engagement refers to the strength of emotional involvement and bonding, with the likelihood of subsequently identifying with the brands. Feelings of appeal may not necessarily accompany the same level of feeling as engagement. For example, a feeling of excitement indicates the feeling of positive appeal and high engagement, whereas a feeling of happiness indicates the feeling of positive appeal and low engagement.

Finally, *empowerment* is a sense of control after being exposed to a stimulus, such as an advertisement. It refers to the feeling of control or influence one experiences versus the feeling of a lack of control or being unable to influence a situation (Mehrabian and de Wetter 1987; Morris, Woo, Geason, and Kim 2002). With regard to the two aforementioned emotions, feeling victorious indicates a feeling of positive appeal, high engagement, and high empowerment, while a feeling of happiness indicates feeling positive appeal, but low engagement and low empowerment (Morris 1995). This three-factor theory of emotions is also evident in multiple studies that have classified the emotions based on AEE (e.g., Mehrabian and Russell 1974; Morris 1995; Morris et al. 2002; Bellman 2007). The three-factor theory of emotions, specifically—that is, the AEE measure—has been extensively employed and studied in consumer psychology and advertising research (e.g., Christ 1985; Christ and Biggers 1984; Morris et al. 2002; Morris, Woo, and Cho 2003) as a concrete theoretical framework of emotional response that measures advertising effectiveness (Holbrook and Batra 1987).

Given the efficiency of these three dimensions of emotions, this study utilizes the appeal, engagement, and empowerment spectrum to provide a broader range of consumer reactions. This should be especially useful in understanding the consumers' unique emotional experiences while interacting on Instagram (Morris 1995). While emotional responses have been extensively investigated using verbal or visual measures (e.g., Edell and Burke 1987; Mehrabian and Russell 1974), this study employed the Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM) scale (Lang 1980) and its derivative, the Attitude Self-Assessment Manikin (AdSAM) scale (Morris 1995), a widely used visual-based measure in the literature on emotional response. The AdSAM scales are measured with a set of figures representing three different dimensions of emotion—appeal, engagement, and empowerment (Morris 1995; Poels and Dewitte 2006; Jang et al. 2014); see Figure 1. One major advantage of AdSAM is that the graphic nature helps eliminate the cognitive processing for semantic judgment, an inherent problem in all verbal measures of emotion (Morris 1995). It is important to point out that AdSAM, though a self-report technique, is an integral component of physiological research on emotion, particularly in the investigation of physiological responses.

To explore the psychological mechanism of how Instagram can help marketers build relationships with consumers, this study intends to investigate the effects of consumer emotional dimensions. The

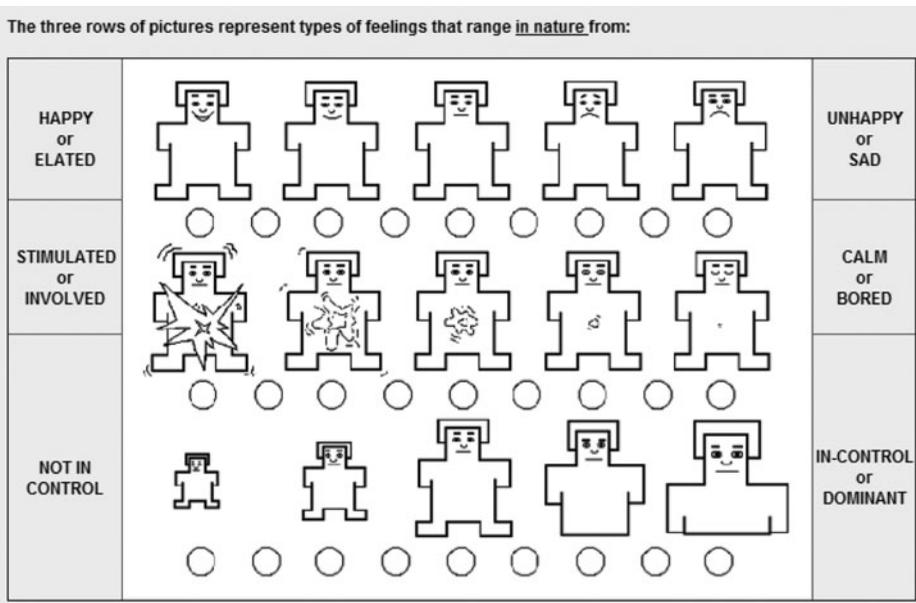


Figure 1. AdSAM (attitude self-assessment manikin).

present study examines the AEE dimensions on the AdSAM scale to test consumer affective response to brand activities on Instagram and its consequent effects on brand commitment. Therefore, the following hypotheses are formulated as follows:

- H1: Increases in brand commitment are positively related to consumer emotional appeal on Instagram.
- H2: Increases in brand commitment are positively related to consumer emotional engagement on Instagram.
- H3: Increases in brand commitment are positively related to consumer emotional empowerment on Instagram.

**Antecedents of consumer emotional response on Instagram**

It is proposed that the emotional dimensions of AEE play a significant role in building brand commitment on Instagram. Following the review of literature, the current study presents four key antecedents of consumer affective response—perceived aesthetic value, perceived entertainment value, perceived belongingness, and perceived mutuality. The following section reviews each of the antecedents with regard to their role as a predictor of the AEE dimensions of consumer emotional response.

**Antecedents of positive appeal: Perceived aesthetic and entertainment value of brand interaction**

While interaction with consumers is a key goal of marketing strategy on Instagram, a mere presence on the platform is not enough. Brands seek to present themselves in an attractive way on this graphic-rich, visual-based SNS in order to provide aesthetic value to their consumers. Consumers derive values from their interactions with brand content on Instagram, that is, aesthetic value, in response to visual attractiveness of those brand posts (Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon 2001; Olson 1981; Veryzer 1993). Attractive visual elements or design in brand posts on Instagram can capture consumer attention while driving a desirable consumption experience (Schmid 1998). When consumers perceive aesthetic value from their interaction with brands on Instagram based on their visual appeal, they generate positive feelings toward the posts and the brand itself (Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon 2001). Since the aesthetic

value of brand posts on Instagram may lead to positive consumer reaction, this study suggests that a perceived aesthetic value positively predicts the appeal dimension (or pleasure) of consumer affective response. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Higher consumer levels of perceived aesthetic value of brands on Instagram will result in increased positive emotional appeal.

Previous research has consistently suggested that the entertainment value of a SNS is a significant factor in predicting its use (Park, Kee, and Valenzuela 2009, Zhang, Sung, and Lee 2010; Cheung, Chiu, and Lee 2011; Lin and Lu 2011; McCune 2011; Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo 2004; ). Furthermore, the perception of entertainment value, often considered as a stronger driver of consumer engagement than informativeness (Luo 2002), produces intrinsic enjoyment and pleasure that offers an escape from day-to-day mundaneness (Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon 2001; Cheung, Chiu, and Lee 2011). This in turn leads consumers to engage in a variety of SNS brand-related activities (Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011; De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012). Perceived entertainment value refers to the perception of fun and enjoyment, which is a feeling closely related to the appeal dimension (or pleasure) of emotional response (Taylor, Lewin, and Strutton 2011). In the current context, the following hypothesis is proposed in order to examine the relationship between the perceived entertainment value of brand interaction and consumer emotional appeal:

H5: Higher perceived entertainment value on Instagram will result in more positive appeal toward brands.

#### ***Antecedent of engagement: Perceived belongingness***

Research has shown that brand–community belongingness plays a significant role in brand satisfaction (e.g., Leigh et al. 2006; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), which in turn helps build strong brand loyalty (Grzeskowiak and Sirgy 2007). The growing use of Instagram has provided ample opportunities for brands to build brand communities on SNSs via a variety of visual-based brand content such as photos or videos. With the growth of mobile technologies and ease of sharing visual content, consumers who interact with brands or other consumers on the brand pages on Instagram may feel a strong sense of belongingness—defined as the feeling of being part of a group that shares the same emotions and values— toward the brand community (Grzeskowiak and Sirgy 2007).

Perceived belongingness has been extensively studied in online community research in relation to the level of involvement and feeling of arousal—the degree to which individuals feel engaged to the community (e.g., Shang, Chen, and Liao 2006). Individuals engage in online activities in order to fulfill their needs for belongingness as part of a community, and higher levels of engagement in online activities often foster a sense of belongingness (Shang, Chen, and Liao 2006). In line with this, the current study examines the influence of perceived belongingness on engagement. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Consumers’ exhibition of stronger perceived belongingness toward their interaction with brands on Instagram will result in higher engagement scores toward brands.

#### ***Antecedent of empowerment: Perceived mutuality***

Mutuality is defined by Hon and Grunig (1999) as the degree to which various parties influence each other in the communication practice and process of decision making. The concept of mutuality has been studied in physical retail settings (Hon and Grunig 1999; Kurnia and Johnston 2001), as well as in online forums (Briones, Kuch, Liu, and Jin 2011; Kelleher 2009). The visual aspects of Instagram, including its video format, graphic images, and short messages, allow it to function as an interactive platform that fosters a positive two-way communication between brands and their followers, and between other brand followers. This two-way communication changes the power structure of brands and consumers to create a more balanced relationship between the two parties (Grunig and Hunt 1984) and, by extension, to generate perceived mutuality. Consumers feel that they are easily able to influence and interact with the brands on Instagram by liking, commenting, and sharing the visual posts of various brands. In this way,

consumers' perceived mutuality is proposed as an influential factor in consumer–brand relationships on Instagram. Mutual interactions and exchanges within brand pages on Instagram may help build trust, establish a strong commitment, and eventually lead to customer satisfaction (Hon and Grunig 1999).

This perceived mutuality stemming from two-way communication on Instagram further builds a sense of empowerment between the consumers and the brands due to the nature of influence each party has over the other. In other words, consumers feel in control over their relationship with the brands, as they now have the power to influence the brand as well. Following this, this study examines how consumer perception of mutuality influences the empowerment dimension of affective response.

H7: Consumers with higher perceived mutuality towards their interaction with brands on Instagram will report higher levels of emotional empowerment.

## Method

### *Sample and procedure*

This study conducted an online survey on a sample of 510 participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a Web-based platform for recruiting subjects. Previous studies showed that the sample recruited from MTurk is in many ways comparable to the representative of the general population as used in traditional survey research ((Mason and Suri 2012; Buhrmster, Kwang, and Gosling 2011; Marge, Banerjee, and Rudnicky 2010).

The survey began with an introduction where participants learned that the study was interested in their experiences interacting with brands on Instagram. The survey explicitly defined “interacting with brands” as one or all of the following: liking, commenting, or sharing content posted on brand pages on Instagram. Participants were then asked about their activities on Instagram. Only those who indicated they were following and had interacted with brands on Instagram could proceed to the main questionnaire ( $N = 399$ ), as they were considered qualified to participate in the study. Next, participants were asked to indicate the brands they were following on Instagram. Finally, they answered a series of questions on emotional response to the brand activities they engaged in on Instagram, perceptions on the four antecedents, and brand commitment.

To ensure the generalizability of the findings, only responses from individuals who indicated they followed at least one of the top 10 most-followed brands on Instagram (based on the number of followers as of March 2016: that is, Nike, H&M, Adidas, Louis Vuitton, ZARA, Starbucks, Gucci, Prada, Burberry, and BMW) and had ever liked/commented/shared a brand post were retained for further analyses ( $N = 304$ ). The details of the participants' demographics (i.e., age, gender, education, and ethnicity) are presented in Table 1.

### *Pilot study: Content analysis*

This study aims to investigate how consumers' perceptions of brand activities in which they engage on Instagram influence their brand commitment via three emotional responses—appeal, engagement, and empowerment (AEE). Prior to the main online survey, the researchers conducted a content analysis on Instagram posts from the top 10 brands that had the most followers on Instagram as a pilot study. The purpose of the content analysis was to obtain preliminary knowledge concerning current marketing communication strategies adopted by brands on Instagram and ensure that the four proposed antecedents in this study were fairly and frequently reflected in the brand posts. Two graduate students coded a total of 200 posts, 20 each from the top 10 brands. The unit of analysis used was one Instagram brand post. The results of the content analysis demonstrated that the four antecedents were well represented in the top 10 brands' posts, indicating that the brands intended to offer aesthetic and entertainment values to their consumers, elicit a sense of belongingness with the brand community, and trigger mutuality between the brand and consumers.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of participants ( $N = 304$ ).

	Total (%)		Total (%)
Gender:		Education:	
Male	39.1	Less than high school degree	0.0
Female	60.5	High school degree or equivalent	6.3
Other	0.3	Some college but no degree	32.6
Race:		Associate's degree	9.5
Caucasian/White	72.7	Bachelor's degree	39.8
African American	8.9	Graduate degree	9.9
Asian/Asian American	6.3	Some post graduate work	2.0
Hispanic/Latino(a)	7.9	Household income:	
Pacific Islander	.0	Less than \$24,999	18.1
Native American	.7	\$25,000 to \$49,999	30.6
Multiracial	3.6	\$50,000 to \$74,999	25.3
Other	.0	\$75,000 to \$99,999	14.1
Age		\$100,000 and more	11.8
		(years): $M = 30.23$ , Median = 29, $SD = 7.21$	
		Minimum = 19, Maximum = 57	

## Measures

### Emotional response

AdSAM is based on the Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM; Lang 1980) and was developed to measure emotional response to advertising and marketing communications stimuli (See Figure 1). AdSAM captures the three dimensions of emotional response, respectively—appeal, engagement, and empowerment (Morris 1995; Jang et al. 2014; Wen and Morris 2015). AdSAM is a research tool that employs a database of 232 emotional adjectives, scored with SAM, to diagnose responses on specific feelings without exposing those adjectives to the respondents (Morris 1995; Ju, Jun, Doodoo, and Morris 2015).

### Perceived aesthetic values

Participants' perceived aesthetic values of brand posts on Instagram were assessed on a three-item, 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) adapted from previous research (Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon 2001; Kim, Gupta, and Koh 2011). Examples of items included "The brands' posts on Instagram are aesthetically appealing" ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### Perceived entertainment values

Perceived entertainment values of Instagram brand posts were measured with a three-item, 7-point scale adopted from previous research (Chandon, Wansink, and Laurent 2000). The statements included items such as "Brands I interact with on Instagram are entertaining" ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

### Perceived belongingness

Perceived belongingness was measured on a six-item, 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) adapted from Lee, Kim, and Kim (2011). Examples of items included "I feel I belong to the brand community on Instagram." Items were averaged to form a single reliable index ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

### Perceived mutuality

Participants were asked to indicate their perceived mutuality pertaining to their brand interaction experiences on Instagram. This was measured using a three-item, 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) adapted from Hon and Grunig (1999). Examples of items included "The brands I am interacting with on Instagram and consumers like me are attentive to what each other say" ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

### Brand commitment

Brand commitment was assessed on a four-item, 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) adapted from previous research (Garbarino and Johnson 1999). Items included "I am proud of belonging to the group of followers of the brands I am interacting with on Instagram" ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

**Table 2.** Measures, factor loadings, and reliabilities.

Factors	Indicators	Factor loadings
Aesthetic value ( $M = 5.50$ , $SD = 1.04$ , $\alpha = .86$ )	I find the way brands display their products on Instagram is attractive.	.90***
	The brands' posts on Instagram are aesthetically appealing.	.84***
	The images posted on Instagram brand pages reflect beauty.	.73***
Entertainment value ( $M = 5.39$ , $SD = 1.09$ , $\alpha = .90$ )	Brands I interact with on Instagram are entertaining.	.81***
	Brands I interact with on Instagram are enjoyable.	.94***
	Brands I interact with on Instagram are pleasing.	.85***
Perceived belongingness ( $M = 4.37$ , $SD = 1.50$ , $\alpha = .93$ )	I identify myself with the brand community on Instagram.	.87***
	I see myself as a part of the brand community on Instagram.	.92***
	I feel I am related with the brand community on Instagram.	.91***
Perceived mutuality ( $M = 4.77$ , $SD = 1.09$ , $\alpha = .81$ )	The brands I am interacting with on Instagram and consumers like me are attentive to what each other say.	.82***
	The brands I am interacting with on Instagram believe the opinions of consumers like me are legitimate.	.79***
	The brands I am interacting with on Instagram really listen to what consumers like me have to say.	.68***
Appeal ( $M = 6.85$ , $SD = 1.46$ )	The AdSAM manikin	
Engagement ( $M = 4.87$ , $SD = 1.98$ )	The AdSAM manikin	
Empowerment ( $M = 5.51$ , $SD = 1.70$ )	The AdSAM manikin	
Brand commitment ( $M = 4.80$ , $SD = 1.18$ , $\alpha = .84$ )	I am proud of belonging to the group of followers of the brands I am interacting with on Instagram.	.86***
	I feel a sense of belonging to the group of followers of the brands I am interacting with on Instagram.	.87***
	I care about the long-term success of the brands I am interacting with on Instagram.	.67***

Note. Factor loadings are based on standardized estimates. Significance: \* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Results

To examine the hypothesized relationships, the two-step model-building approach (Anderson and Gerbing 1988) was adopted by using AMOS 24.0. The measurement model, including latent constructs and their respective observed variables, was first analyzed, and the structural model with the hypothesized relationships was tested afterward.

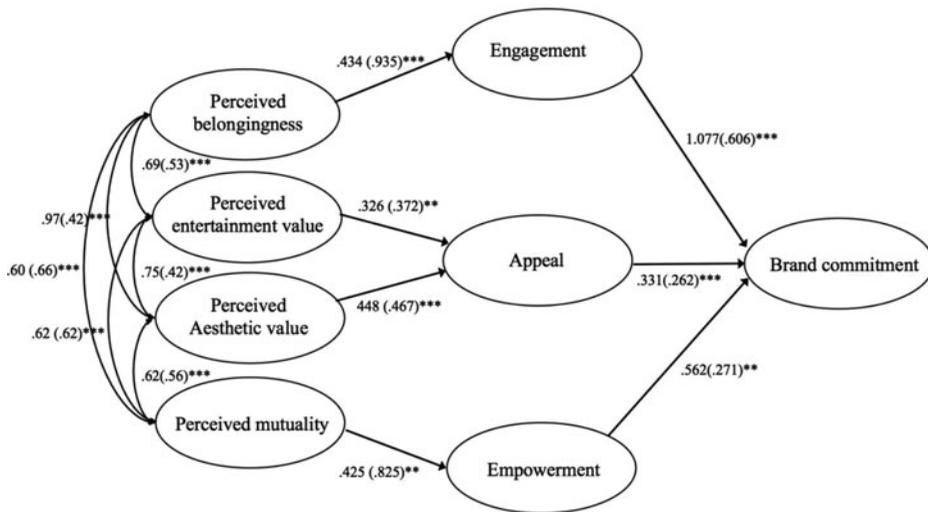
### Measurement model evaluation

A confirmatory factor analysis of the full measurement model showed all of the indicators significantly loaded on their corresponding latent constructs ( $p < .001$ ) (see Table 2). Standardized factor loadings exceeded the .6 thresholds as recommended by Hair et al. (2006). Because the three emotional responses were assessed with single indicators using the AdSAM measures (i.e., appeal, engagement, and empowerment), the error variance of each indicator was fixed to a nonzero value on the basis of the indicator's variance and reliability estimate (Brown 2006). Reliability estimates for the AdSAM scale were adopted from prior studies (e.g., Morris 1995; Morris et al. 2002; Morris, Woo, and Cho 2003; Kim, Morris, and Swait 2008).

With the use of existing scale items adapted from the literature for measuring latent variables, the observed variables in the model were hypothesized to load on only one factor, and the error terms were not permitted to covary. Due to cross-loading indicators between factors, three perceived belongingness items and one brand commitment item were deleted. The goodness-of-fit indices suggested that the model fit the data well:  $\chi^2 = 251.17$ ,  $df = 110$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .96, GFI = .92, TLI = .94, and RMSEA = .04.

### Structural model evaluation

The structural model and hypotheses were evaluated after attaining a validated measurement model. When the structural model was tested, results showed that, of the seven hypothesized relationships



**Figure 2.** Model of visual affective value. All path values are unstandardized coefficients (standardized coefficients are reported in parentheses); \* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

between the latent constructs, all were statistically significant in the expected direction ( $p < 0.01$ ). Overall, the fit indices showed that the model exhibited good fit:  $\chi^2 = 277.16$ ,  $df = 122$ ,  $p < .001$ , confirmatory fit index [CFI] = .96, goodness of fit index [GFI] = .91, Tucker–Lewis index [TLI] = .94, and root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .05.

Specifically, appeal was found to be positively related to brand commitment ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .001$ ), such that the more positive consumers felt about their experiences in brand interaction on Instagram, the more likely they were to be committed to the brands. Similarly, both engagement ( $\beta = .61$ ,  $SE = .23$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and empowerment ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ) had a significantly positive impact on brand commitment. The more consumers felt engaged and empowered when they interacted with brands on Instagram, the more likely they would be committed to the brands. Thus, H1 through H3 were supported.

As predicted in H4, higher consumer levels of perceived aesthetic value of brands on Instagram would lead to an increase in positive emotional appeal ( $\beta = .47$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, H4 was confirmed. Furthermore, consumers' perceived entertainment value was found to exert a positive influence on the appeal dimension of emotional response, confirming H5 ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ ). H6, which assumed that stronger perceived belongingness toward brand interactions on Instagram would result in higher engagement scores toward brands, was supported as well ( $\beta = .94$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In support of H7, perceived mutuality was found to have a significant, positive effect on empowerment ( $\beta = .83$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that the stronger the perceived mutuality consumers had toward their brand interaction on Instagram, the stronger was the sense of empowerment consumers experienced during their interaction with the brands. Both unstandardized and standardized path coefficients of the model of visual affective value are reported in Figure 2.

## Discussion

Over the past few years, Instagram has received growing attention from advertising researchers and practitioners regarding its potential for making emotional connections with consumers and building brands via posting and/or sharing brand-related visual content on the social media platform (e.g., Bakhshi, Shamma, and Gilbert 2014; Highfield and Leaver 2014; Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampati 2014). Since visuals have a strong emotional impact, it was expected that Instagram would have a strong effect on consumer affective response—appeal, engagement, and empowerment (AEE) toward a brand. To advance our current understanding of how consumers' brand interactions on Instagram could influence their relationships with the brands via affective response, this study examines the relationship between

perception of brand activities in which they engage on Instagram and its influence on commitment. The results reveal that higher levels of appeal, engagement, and empowerment positively influenced consumers' commitment to the brands on Instagram. These findings confirm prior findings on consumer psychology and advertising research and highlight the importance of consumer emotional response on positive long-term consumer–brand relationships (Russell and Mehrabian 1977; Morris et al. 2002; Jang et al. 2014; Ju et al. 2015). In the context of Instagram, where consumers engage in visual interactions with brands through branded images and experiences, advertisers should understand the significant influence that visuals have for creating emotional connection and enhancing the commercial value for brands.

The findings of this study reveal a positive relationship between consumers' perceptions of brand activities on Instagram and their affective response—appeal, engagement, and empowerment. Specifically, a significant positive relationship was observed between perceived aesthetic and entertainment value, and appeal. From these findings, brand fans derive intrinsic enjoyment and pleasure from interacting with the brands on Instagram, especially through a variety of brand activities around visual-based brand content that are visually appealing and aesthetically attractive. Previous literature has demonstrated that interaction with brands creates a sense of enjoyment (McCune 2011), and the degree of attractiveness and aesthetic value aids this brand–fan interaction (Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon 2001). Findings in the current study further show that consumers' perceived belongingness toward interactions with brands on Instagram in turn boosts a sense of engagement. Previous studies on visual brand communities showed that consumers engage in online activities to feel a part of that community (e.g., Shang, Chen, and Liao 2006). The more a consumer feels a sense of belonging with the brand and the community on Instagram, the more likely the consumer is to feel as though he or she is engaged with the brand.

Lastly, the findings in this study show a significant relationship between consumers' perceived mutuality and the empowerment dimension of emotion. Due to the mutual characteristics of SNSs (Kelleher 2009), consumers have control over what they read and share, as well as the extent to which they interact within the social media environment. Mutuality is a major characteristic of social media environments, in the current era of Web 2.0, but it is more likely to take place in visual SNSs such as Instagram. The widespread use of mobile technology has permitted consumers to post and share visual content more fluidly; therefore, consumers may perceive they have a great deal of control and ability to interact with brands on Instagram. As such, consumers' brand interactions on Instagram may contribute to their perceived empowerment.

### ***Theoretical and practical implications***

This study found that all of the three dimensions of consumer affect—appeal, engagement, and empowerment—have a positive impact on the key brand outcome, and brand commitment (see the model of visual affective value). The research offers some important theoretical implications. First, the study advances the theoretical understanding of the three-factor theory of emotions (AEE) in the context of consumer–brand relationship building in social media environments. This study examines the dimensionality of AEE emotions and provides empirical evidence that high levels of consumer affective response—positive appeal, high engagement, and high empowerment—influence long-term affective brand commitment. In particular, this study provides an initial step toward the application of the nonverbal scale (Morris 1995) to understanding consumer emotion in the context of image-based social media platforms such as Instagram.

This study further contributes to digital brand management literature by demonstrating the significant role of affective response in establishing brand–fan commitment (Evanschitzky et al. 2006) and building long-term brand loyalty and consumer–brand relationship on SNSs (Dholakis and Durham 2010). Future SNS research could build on the findings of this study and further examine the role of these three consumer emotional dimensions. Second, the findings of this study offer a theoretical model depicting how consumers establish emotional attachment with and commitment to the brands they follow on Instagram by addressing the relationships among four specific antecedents and affective response. The findings also contribute to understanding the psychological mechanism of consumer perceptions of

brand activities on SNSs that lead to brand relationship building by shedding light on the role of consumer affective response.

Additionally, findings of this study hold some significant practical applications for understanding brand building on visual SNSs. This study suggests that positive appeal, high engagement, and high empowerment are desired affective states which brands should introduce and maintain while interacting with consumers to develop brand commitment. By doing so, they will offer insights into how to use visual SNSs to generate such consumer affective response and help to understand the role of Instagram in establishing brand-fan commitment (Evanschitzky et al. 2006),

Initially, brands should aim to appeal to their fans by creating aesthetically appealing and entertaining content and posting it to Instagram to share among consumers. Instagram has established itself as a successful graphic-rich media where brands seek to boost their fan base and build relationships with them. Given the nature of the visual-based medium, brands can best utilize the SNS by providing aesthetic and entertainment value to their fans through emotionally impactful, visualized brand posts or interactive brand activities. This form of branded entertainment will diminish consumers' perception of intrusiveness toward online marketing activities (McCoy, Everard, Polak, and Galletta 2008) and lead to positive affective response. As prior research indicated, and this study has shown, visual metaphors have a significant impact on consumer learning by enhancing their affect response and brand commitment (Jeong 2008). Because Instagram successfully supports graphic-rich posts, brands can integrate visual metaphors into their social media marketing content to create a lasting emotional impact and form a set of associations with the brand in consumer memory (Keller 2009). To do this, we developed the model of visual affective value for brands to follow when developing affective ad strategies. This model provides a tool for assessing aesthetic, entertainment, belongingness, and mutuality value.

Second, brands should aim to build a sense of community among their fans. They should put significant efforts into sparking consumers' interests and conversation about the brands. For example, brand marketers could host competitions to create engagement through sharing brand-related photos. Third, brands on such visual SNSs should be attentive to and value their followers' opinions. One way to foster the feeling of empowerment, and to generate a greater perception of brand mutuality, for new or existing products, is to reply promptly to conversations with the brand follower. Additionally, perceived mutuality can be boosted through reposting fan-generated content on the brand pages. Because SNSs provide a two-way communication strategy, brands need to be vigilant about listening to their fans, rather than just posting their product and brand information.

### **Limitations and future research**

Although this research revealed some important findings and implications, a few limitations of the study are acknowledged. First, this study relied on participants' self-reported data about their previous experiences interacting with brands on Instagram. That is, the results could vary depending upon a variety of factors—for example, the types of brands that consumers followed on Instagram could have influenced the level of emotional attachment and involvement. Second, the study was conducted on brand followers who reported they engaged in a wide array of brand-related activities on Instagram in general; however, future research ought to replicate the study and test whether the findings of the study are applicable to understanding different types of brand-related activities. For example, incentive-based brand-related activities (e.g., liking a brand page in return for receiving discounts or coupons), which are driven by extrinsic factors, might lead to different levels of commitment (i.e., calculative commitment) to that brand. Follow-up research might also incorporate consumer motivational differences to examine the effects on emotional response and brand commitment.

Based on the findings of the current study, we conclude that Instagram helps strengthen the relationship between consumers and brands by fostering a stronger emotional attachment to the brand. The social media application offers a well-established visual platform to engage consumers with brands through the availability of graphic-rich content that is capable of delivering high aesthetic and entertainment value to consumers, while also inducing high levels of belongingness and mutuality.

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