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Perceptions of Online photos – a focus group study with young consumers

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to identify young consumers' (18-26 years of age) perceptions of product photos on online platforms such as Instagram. In this thesis, the main focus is to identify what are the elements of a product photo that attract young consumers the most and to find out the differences in male and female perceptions of the photos. The product photos are within cosmetics, specifically skincare products. A qualitative method is used to collect data, using two online semi-structured focus group interviews with 24 young consumers. Three levels of a photo were used, Esthetical, Referential and Communicative, to study the visual stimuli on Instagram. According to the results, the highlighted elements by the participants are colors, photo composition and so-called props. Some minor differences in perceptions between male and female participants were also noted.

Keywords:	Visual communication, consumer perception, product image, online platform, Instagram, young people, social media
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background

With the development of the internet today, it is not surprising that a large amount of information is consumed and shared by consumers every day. However, with today's fast pace of life, consumers are becoming increasingly busy, and they do not have enough time to read through and consume vast amounts of information. People received up to six times more advertising information today than 30 years ago (Solomon, M., 2016). According to a study from Microsoft Corp., people now generally lose concentration after eight seconds, the average attention span has dropped from twelve seconds to eight (McSpadden, K., 2015). The way people communicate, shop, work, and entertain mainly rely on the foundation of the internet and new applications has dramatically changed the way companies operate nowadays. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the opportunities and challenges of this, marketers need to seize opportunities to find a way of creating information that's interesting enough to gain consumer attention, especially young people. In other words, to create information that can help them in rapidly comprehending the messages and values that an organization wishes to deliver. To fulfill this need visual content is a critical solution in modern marketing to adapt to the mentioned phenomenon (Gamble, S., 2016).

A study showed that 90% of what the brain processes is visual information (Hyerle, D., 2000), meanwhile 80 to 90% of information absorbed by the brain is visual in nature (Jensen, E., 2008). Moreover, the brain processes visual information 60,000 times faster than texts (Holden, J., 2015). Eye-tracking studies conducted by Nielsen Norman Group stated that users pay more attention to information-carrying images, and they purely ignore decorative irrelevant-information-carrying images (Nielsen, J., 2010). Based on the data mentioned above, the importance of visual content is highlighted.

The technology era has led to the development of social media, along with its convenience, people can collect, share and digest a tremendous amount of information in just one click. People use social media to share their stories, keep in touch with their relationships, and update the latest trends. Moreover, social media can partly influence consumer

perceptions. This can be seen as a stepping stone for brands and retailers to reach out and communicate with their potential customer segments. Social media and visual content are becoming the new future for online shopping and e-commerce markets. Visual contents, especially photos, help improve online shopping for consumers and impact their shopping behavior with 67% of online users making purchasing decisions by looking at the product images (Siu, E., 2017).

With all that said, product photography plays an essential role in online marketing campaigns. Consumers nowadays have limited time to read text-only product descriptions plus they are overwhelmed with the amount of advertisements online, leading to the distraction of consumers. As Schaffer (2013) stated:

"*The use of imagery, specifically photography and illustrations, should be a part of any strategic plan, because it is an effective way to engage with social media users.*"

1.2 Research aim and research questions

This study aims to examine the characteristics of product photographs that gain young consumers' attention and increase their engagement or interest in the product, especially on online platforms. There are a variety of ways to construct a photograph that is able to stimulate consumer attention and emotion. Still, an attractive product photograph that is used for marketing purposes should be able to uncover the brand story behind it and deliver value to consumers. And from that change the consumer perceptions positively and make them want to engage with the product.

The following two research questions will be addressed:

(1) What are the elements of a product photography that young consumers highlight on Instagram?

(2) Are there differences in male and female perceptions?

1.3   Delimitations

In this thesis only product photography is studied, different types of visual contents such as illustrations, infographics, videos, etc. will not be mentioned. Moreover, this thesis will be written based on the marketing perspective of how pictures of products online are created to meet marketing goals. The technical part from photographers and designers is not covered. The study is only targeting a specific group of people (young people from 18 to 26 years old). Further, the study only focuses on photographs and consumer perception on Instagram (different platforms such as photographs from magazines, billboards, leaflets, Facebook, etc., are excluded). Instagram is one of the most popular social media channels nowadays with 500 million users (Tran, K., 2017). Instagram was also highlighted as the most popular information source for cosmetic items of millennial students (Binwani, K. and Ho, J., 2019). The focus product category in this thesis is cosmetics, the skincare segment. Other product categories are not covered.

1.4   Structure of the thesis

The thesis is written based on the ITMRD structure for scientific reports – *Introduction, Theoretical Background, Methodology, Results* and *Discussion*.

Chapter 1. *Introduction* presents the background of the topic, aim of research and research questions.

Chapter 2. *Theoretical Background* presents the literature review, knowledge about Product Photography and Consumer Perceptions.

Chapter 3. *Methodology* explains the method used to conduct the research, to gather and analyze the data.

Chapter 4. *Results* shows the outcome of the research process.

Chapter 5. *Discussion and Conclusion* presents, evaluates and summarizes the research process.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Consumer perception

The consumer perception process starts when a piece of information is exposed to consumers (selected), then it is processed by consumers' sensation (organized) and finally it is perceived in a specific way of interpretation by the consumer (interpreted). Each person has their own set of perceptions, knowledge, and interests, resulting in differences in preferences, mindsets, and how they view the same thing, resulting in very different outcomes. (Solomon, M., 2016). See figure 1 for a visual description of the process.

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   Selected            Organized            Interpreted

 Stimuli  →  Exposure  →  Attention  →  Interpretation  →  Perception
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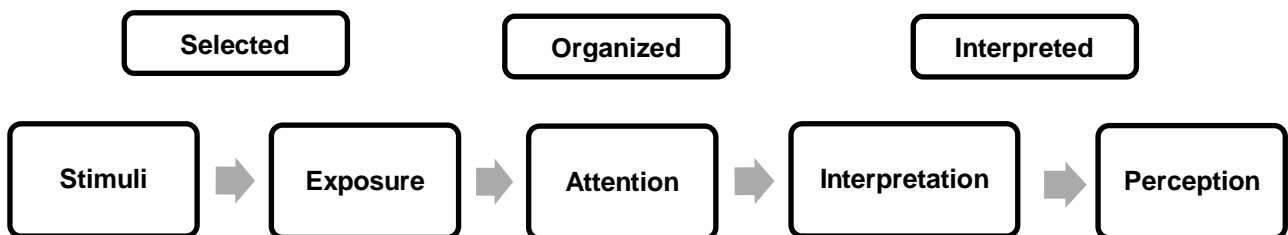
Figure 1: The Perceptual Process (Own elaboration based on Solomon, M., 2016, p. 125)

Within the information era, consumers are easily fed up with different types of visual contents and pictures on online platforms. This leads to perceptual selectivity – where consumers are selective about what they pay attention to because the brain's capacity to process information is limited. Consumers tend to focus to the visual stimulus that came from a trustworthy source; those came from unfamiliar sources are sometimes rejected by the consumers, by doing this, consumers can avoid being overwhelmed by advertising clutter. On the other hand, people only attend to a small portion of stimuli to which they are exposed. (Solomon, M., 2006)

2.1.1 Exposure

Exposure is the process by which the consumers come in physical contact with a stimulus. One aspect that decides how much exposure to a specific stimulus a person accepts is experience, which is the outcome of acquiring stimulation. This is called the Selective exposure. Consumers' past experiences and their current needs influence stimulus awareness (Solomon, M., 2006). For example, an image of a bed, or different interior products, will be attractive to a consumer in need of changing his/her interiors. Or a photo of a destination exposed to a consumer that has been to that place, is more easily accepted by the consumer. There are many ways that a consumer is exposed to stimuli, but not all of it gets noticed. And consumers' perceptions of a photo could vary from what the marketer wanted to convey. As a result, brands must be able to control and track how their communications are received by thoroughly knowing their target audiences and the factors that influence their interpretation. (Do, P., 2018)

2.1.2 Attention

The amount of notice that a stimulus receives by consumers within the exposure scope is referred to as attention. It is the crucial factor that all marketers want to obtain and monitor. Since consumers nowadays cannot pay attention to all of the thousands of messages and photos they are subjected to on a regular basis, they prefer to focus on details that they believe will meet their needs and interests. (Solomon, M., 2016)

In order to understand better the attention of consumers, there are three stages of attention according to Parr, B. (2015):

1. Immediate attention: the immediate and automatic reaction people have to certain visual stimuli. People tend to notice, for example, the bright, red-colored sign unconsciously since red refers to the sign of danger.
2. Short attention: Consumers consciously focus on the stimuli. They have an interest in focusing on the stimuli for a fixed amount of time. A unique photo with a unique perspective tends to trigger consumers' curiosity, and it often stands out because it is unfamiliar to them. This attention will stop once the consumers get adapted to the stimuli.

3. Long attention: this third stage of attention explains that the more experience consumers have had with the stimuli, the lengthier the attention ought to be. Consumers tend to pay attention to the stimuli related to their knowledge and experiences. Different from the short attention, long attention needs familiarity. In order to transform short attention to long attention, marketers must know how to balance the uniqueness and the familiarity of the stimuli.

2.1.3 Interpretation

Although the selection and organization of incoming stimuli occur rapidly and without much conscious thought, interpretation is a more deliberate and conscious phase in the perceptual process. This is the third stage of the perceptual process, in which the consumer assigns the meaning of their experiences to the stimuli they have been exposed to. (Solomon, M., 2006)

Solomon (2006) stated: "*Our brains tend to relate incoming sensations to the imagery of other events or sensations already in memory based on some fundamental organizational principles*". This means, the stimuli are easier to perceive when the consumer has already had experiences with it. In other words, consumers tend to prefer a familiar figure that they have seen before. The process of perceiving and organizing visual stimuli is described based on the perceptual principles derived from the Gestalt school of psychology research. According to Gestalt research, people tend to receive meaning from the complete set of stimuli than from individual stimuli. There are three principles described in the Gestalt study, which are called the Law of Pragnanz: *Closure*, *Similarity* and *Figure-Ground*.

- *Principles of Closure*: People tend to perceive an incomplete picture as a whole. This is because of people's prior experience and knowledge – the human brain has a tendency to automatically fill in the missing parts of an incomplete message or a familiar song. Using this principle in marketing can help increase consumers' attention and perception. (Solomon, M., 2016)

- *Principles of Similarity:* Physically related objects are often grouped together in people's minds. To put it another way, consumers classify objects of the same color or form as belonging to the same category. When it comes to social media,

brands usually keep their product photos have a similar colors and tones. (Solomon, M., 2016)

- *Figure-Ground Principle:* this principle is normally used when comes to product photography. The Figure-ground principle states that one part of a stimulus (the figure) will take precedence while the rest fades into the background (the ground). Depending on the consumer's perspective, the elements of the object that will be viewed as figure or ground. When developing a product photography plan, it is critical to eliminate distracting elements and focus on the main figures. (Solomon, M., 2016).
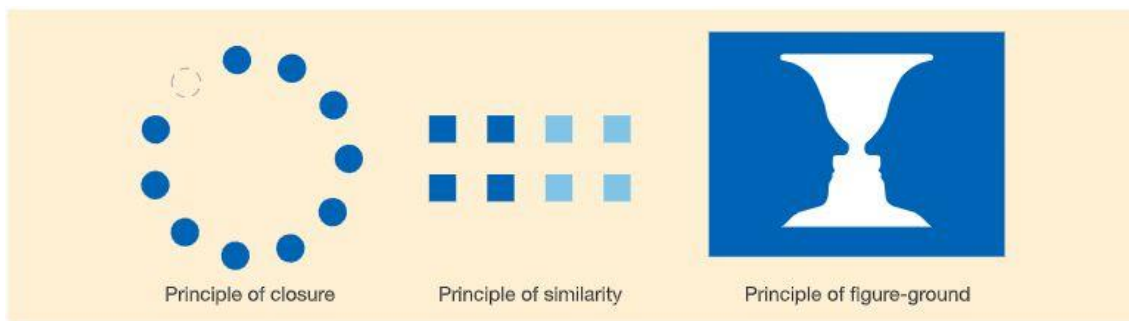
Figure 2: The Law of Pragnanz (Solomon, 2016, p.146)

2.2 Elements of product photographs

There are three categories that a photo is leveled in order to understand the cognitive process in consumers' perception of the product photo: Syntax, Semantics and Pragmatics. These are the terms in Semiotics. But for visual communications, they can be referred as Esthetical level (form), Referential level (content) and Communicative level (interpretation) (Sharma, A., Bhosle, A. & Chaudhary, B., 2012). When consumers approach a product photograph, they perceive its given information and then understand and try to interpret the whole image. It is sometimes hard to understand the image's meaning, but once the consumer recognizes a specific element, the picture can then be explored further.

2.2.1 Esthetical level (Syntax)

The Esthetical level of a photo is a form of a photo. This term focuses on the image's rough material. The arrangement and construction of various elements provide a form of hierarchy to the viewer, allowing them to highlight the crucial elements in the image from others less important ones.

In the form of a photo, the two most prominent factors can be mentioned are Colors and Light. Color is the fundamental element and also the important ones. Each color has its own significance and value in photography and semantics. Color is a key factor to consider when influencing the success of a photo since it is where first impressions of consumers are based, and also it reflects different values, experiences and emotions of consumers in different cultures around the world. For example, red in China and other Asian countries signifies luck while it represents the mourning air for the South African people (Lundberg, A., 2019).

Color is everywhere and is one of the most remarkable attributes of the world around us. People connect with the world of colors visually. The human eyes are exposed to uncountable colors in a day. As mentioned above, color psychology and color meaning may significantly affect people's attitudes and decision-making. Within seconds or minutes, people make subconscious decisions about an individual, atmosphere, or product. This first experience is influenced by color. Brands and marketers are aware of this fact. They understand that certain colors, tints, hues, and shades can evoke emotion and motivate consumers to act. This is a subtle yet effective impact. Each person has a unique visual experience, color can elicit both positive and negative memories and emotions. But in general, females have a diverse taste of colors than males do and are easily attracted to brighter tones; also, they are more sensitive to subtle shadings (Solomon, M., 2016). Despite this fact, there are specific colors that are often associated with a particular concept, for example:
- Red as an arousing, thrilling, and powerful color, it can be linked with excitement and danger.
- Orange is considered as lively, energetic, extroverted and sociable color.
- Yellow also has the quality of arousal and excitement, cheerful, happiness.

- Green symbolizes health and nature. It creates feelings of security and the connection of outdoor.

- Blue offers trustworthiness, loyalty, intelligence, efficiency and responsibility. Most of the banks and institutions use this color.

- Purple is associated with royalty and stateliness. It encourages both problem-solving and innovation. It is often seen in beauty products.

- Pink is often associated with softness and romantic due to its gentle and feminine nature.

- Black is a color of sophistication and glamour. It is a powerful color that stands for dignity, stateliness and control.

- White can be linked with cleanliness, purity and peace.

- Brown is a color of security, reliability and support.

(Labrecque, L. & Milne G., 2012)

Figure 3: Psychology of Colors in Logo Design (CreativeAlys)

It is important to understand the color wheel theory when conducting a product photograph since human brain seeks for harmony or neutrality in colors (Alves, A., 2015). As a result, certain color combinations will give the impression that the photo is harmonized and balanced. This is called the Color schemes and there are six possible ways according to Alscher, D. (2019) to apply in conducting a product photo:

- Monochromatic: these colors share the hues and tones of the base color. The monochrome color scheme is both minimalistic and brings high value to the photo. This color scheme is very eye-catching and pleasant to the viewer, bringing in high concentration, viewers are not distracted but only focus on the focal elements.

- Analogous: A similar color is a group of usually three colors standing next to each other in the color wheel (irrespective of hot and cold colors), creating exquisite and attractive color combinations. This color harmony is pleasant to human eyes and it is common in nature.

- Complementary: This is the most common color scheme, using two colors that are opposite on the color wheel. These colors look naturally beautiful when together because they impact the viewer strongly due to the sharp contrast. This color scheme can draw attention to the focal points of the photo and express the boldness, also motivating consumers to take action.

- Triadic: This color scheme uses three evenly spaced colors on the color wheel to create a high-contrast color gamut, but less than Complementary. This combination produces bold, vibrant color bands. The three colors are located at three different angles on the color wheel, so they combine and complement each other to create a balance for this color scheme. This scheme creates an energetic and somehow childish color combination. It can be seen in children's products and tropical-themed advertisements.

- Split-complementary: Similar to the complementary color scheme, in this scheme, one color is selected against the other and then divided into more colors. This is useful in expanding the palette when two colors are not enough or there is a need to create a more playful theme for the product photo.

- Tetradic: This color scheme uses four colors evenly spaced on the color wheel. Tetradic color schemes work best when one dominant color is selected and the other colors are used as accents.
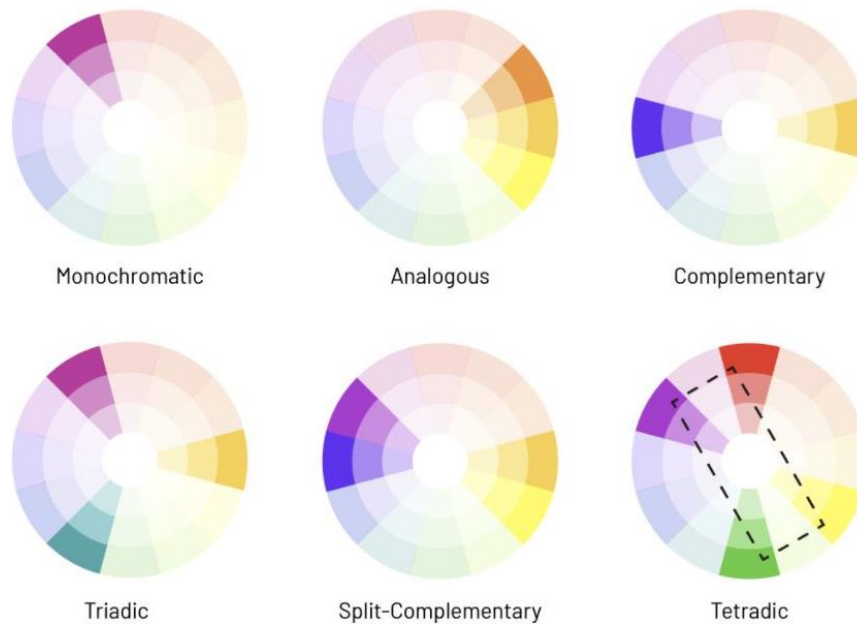
Figure 4: Six common Colors Schemes (Alscher, D., 2019)

Young consumers nowadays are the largest audience of different social media and online shopping sites. Today's product photos are designed in colors based on young people's tastes. Young consumers are exposed to many different colors, so color preference is vast, which is primarily bright colors such as yellow, orange, pink and neutral colors like white, black and grey. Different color combinations are also applied. Black and white is another common color combination that strongly influences the audience because it creates an aesthetic, emotional effect while still leaving room for the imagination. (Lee, W., 2013)

Figure 5: Younger adults (18-30 years old) color preferences (Lee, W., 2013, p.5)

Besides colors, lighting is also a fundamental element that needs to be considered when talking about product images. Using light sources in different ways produces different results and mastering this can significantly affect customers' visual focus. A better choice of lighting sources will bring out the image's unique characteristics. (Do, P., 2018).

2.2.2 Referential level (Semantics)

The abstract meaning conveyed by the elements of sign is known as Semantics. Semantics and syntax work together to organize the meaning pattern of signs so that it can be interpreted. But from a photography perspective, it expresses what the image represents, showing what a photo contains. The signifier and signified are the two components made up symbols in a photo. The signified is the concept behind the signifier, while the signifier represents the sign observed by the viewer. (Sharma, A., 2012)

The content of a photo can be divided into two elements: Composition and Focal point(s). The arrangement of the elements in a photograph is known as Composition. A composition may contain a large number of elements or just a few. Composition is the way elements are arranged inside a frame that determines whether the picture is more or less attractive to the viewer. (Gintaras, 2021)

To create an eye-catching effect for the image, several composition guidelines can be applied. The most used guideline is the Rule of Third. According to this rule, the image is divided into nine equal parts by two horizontal lines and two vertical lines. These four intersections of these horizontal and vertical lines are used for composition in photography. This rule states that the subject placement of the image at these four points draws the viewer's attention and makes the subject stand out rather than placing the subject in the center of the frame, by this the focal subject and the surrounding scene are exposed, creating the balance of the photo. Human brains are likely to see subjects in order, harmony and symmetry. (Ingledew, J., 2013) Rule of Symmetry and Rule of Odds are also common when conducting a product photograph. Rule of Symmetry in photography composition is simply a composition that divides the image into two symmetrical parts. This method helps create a strong statement for the focal element and creates a balanced and powerful linear structure in the photo that can effectively catch the viewer's eye (Canon,

2018). Rule of Odds is the composition method that includes an odd number of elements in a photo. The human brain tends to group the subjects into pairs (Food Photography Academy, 2018). But when applying the Rule of Odds, viewer's eyes will naturally fall into the middle subjects, giving the photo a focal point. Despite all the mentioned composition rules, a photo can be created with no composition. A product photo can be deliberately unsettling and unstable depending on the photographer's concept and creativity. But the human brain likes order, harmony and symmetry, as mentioned above, but sometimes disharmony and disorder can create a strong impact because of the uniqueness (Ingledew, J., 2013). See figures 6, 7 and 8 for examples of the Rule of Third, the Rule of Symmetry and the Rule of Odds.

Figure 6: Example of Rule of Third (CandleScience)

Figure 7: Example of Rule of Odds (Mamabear, 2019)

Figure 8: Example of Rule of Symmetry (blond, 2015)

2.2.3 Communicative level (Pragmatics)

In this level, the content of a photo changes over into an argument or statement. Customers' attention spans are limited, so a well-composed image with attractive elements will capture their attention quickly. Since people see a picture differently, a product image alone is not always an excellent way to convey accurate facts. At the same time, in the case of verbal content, responses will be more consistent because consumers think more about the product's utility. A mixture of both verbal and visual content would be suitable for product photography marketing. Advertisers can save a lot of money by creating the right image with the right message instead of repeatedly repeating the message. (Solomon, M., 2006)

Choosing the right font for visual content is critical because it directly relates to the brand's visual identity and the consumer's visual impression. Fonts can elicit a variety of emotions and can be manipulated by marketers to instill positive feelings in consumers about the product. According to Fussell, G., (2020), there are five categories of fonts and each of them has different concepts:

- Serif: elicit an immediate sense of establishment, tradition and formality. Commonly used in newspaper, research paper, etc.
- Slab Serifs: evokes the feelings of enduring, strong, powerful and masculine. Often seen in car logo designs, etc.
- Sans Serif: is friendly fonts that bring informal, openness and modern feelings. Most social media sites use this font.
- Modern Sans Serif: elegant and chic font. Typical used in fashion brands, architecture firms, etc. This font easily attracts the attention of young consumer segment.
- Scripts: brings the creativity, amusing and funny impressions.

Props is also a powerful vehicle that can deliver messages to consumers without using a single text. In photography, props are objects that are employed in photographs to help support and add meaning to the main subject. Having props in a product photo is a creative way to highlight the main product. They can help to evoke emotions and give consumers perspective. Props should be positioned in the background as a guideline for consumers, rationally and distinctively drawing their attention to the primary subject. Most product photos on social media are using props to tell the story. (Mudgal, A., 2019)

3 METHOD

This chapter is going to introduce and explain the research approach. In this study, a qualitative research method is used.

3.1 Qualitative research

When it is challenging to develop concrete and actionable problem statements or study objectives, a qualitative research method is often used. Qualitative research methods may reveal human intentions, and their recording of actions is generally comprehensive. Typically, these research goals necessitate a detailed and in-depth understanding of a certain phenomenon. A qualitative research method requires an exploratory orientation and can clear up uncertainty and generate innovate ideas (Zikmund, W., Babin, B., Carr, J. & Griffin, M., 2010).

There are different kinds of techniques. Focus groups, In-depth discussion and Observations are the main ones (Hague, P., 2006). Focus Groups is the main technique conducted in this study, since the purpose of this research is to understand the perceptions of a quite homogenous group of young consumers.

3.1.1 Focus group

A focus group is a technique for gathering qualitative data from a small group of people, ideally consisting of 8 to 12 people (Walle, H., 2014), discussing a specific subject. Focus groups offer researchers a relatively "natural" context for interviews (Neuman, L., 2006), participants can freely exchange and discuss with each other as well as with the interviewer. The moderator has to stimulate interaction between participants, so that participants discuss, debate, agree and disagree with each other, in order to produce a lively and interactive encounter between participants (Callaghan, J., 2014). A permissive and nurturing environment is created by a moderator or interviewer that encourages different perceptions and points of view, without pressuring participants to vote, plan or reach consensus (Krueger, R., 1988). The focus group aims to strengthen, clarify and gain a deeper understanding of a particular research topic and therefore it is highly suitable for the purpose of this study. Moreover, data and information are gathered more efficiently in focus group interviews since a large number of people are questioned at the same time.

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Participants

Two focus group interviews were used to compile the findings for this study. The participants are acquaintances with the author and were asked to take part in the interview. The participants are male and females living in different countries (Finland, Vietnam, USA, Malaysia, China and United Kingdom), from the age of 18 to 26. Their nationalities include Vietnamese, Malaysian, American, Chinese, etc. and they have different occupations. The author believes that participants with different backgrounds can bring different perceptions to the study. There were in total 24 participants, 12 in both focus groups.

3.2.2 Focus group interview implementation

A list of prepared questions was asked throughout the interview and the same photos were shown to the participants in both focus groups. See the photos in chapter 3.2.3. All participants in the discussion were asked for permission to use the data for this thesis.

Interview questions for the Focus groups.

General questions:

1. Among these photos, which photo(s) catch your attention first?
2. Would you likely purchase the product by looking at the photo?
3. How does the photo make you feel?
4. Choose 3-4 photos that make you want to purchase the product the most.

Esthetical level questions:

5. What do you think about the colors in the photos?
6. Do you think lighting plays a crucial part in product photography? By looking at these photos, how do you feel?

Referential level questions:

7. What do you find most attractive in the pictures at first glance?
8. Which of the photos that you think is the most attractive to you?
9. What do you think about the composition of the photos? Are they soothing for you to look at?

Communicative level questions:

10. What do you think about the fonts in the photos?
11. Is the photo informative? By looking at it, can you understand the message that it wants to deliver?

Since the interviewees are living in different countries and with the current Covid-19 epidemic situation, the interviews were conducted online, in the form of interviews via Zoom Meeting. The participants were asked for permission to be recorded during the meeting. The interview was moderated by the author (the interviewer). Male and female responses were transcribed separately.

3.2.3 Visual stimuli demonstration

The criteria in choosing the visual stimuli were based on the theoretical part. The chosen visual stimuli were demonstrated based on the three levels of a photo, as presented earlier in the literature review (chapter 2): Esthetical level, Referential level and Communicative level. The visual stimuli were captured from Instagram from different brands within cosmetics.

3.2.3.1 Esthetical level

Visual stimuli in figure 9, 10 and 11 represent colors that young consumers ought to like according to Lee, W. (2013), as mentioned in chapter 2:

Figure 9: Youth To The People brand (Youth To The People Instagram profile)

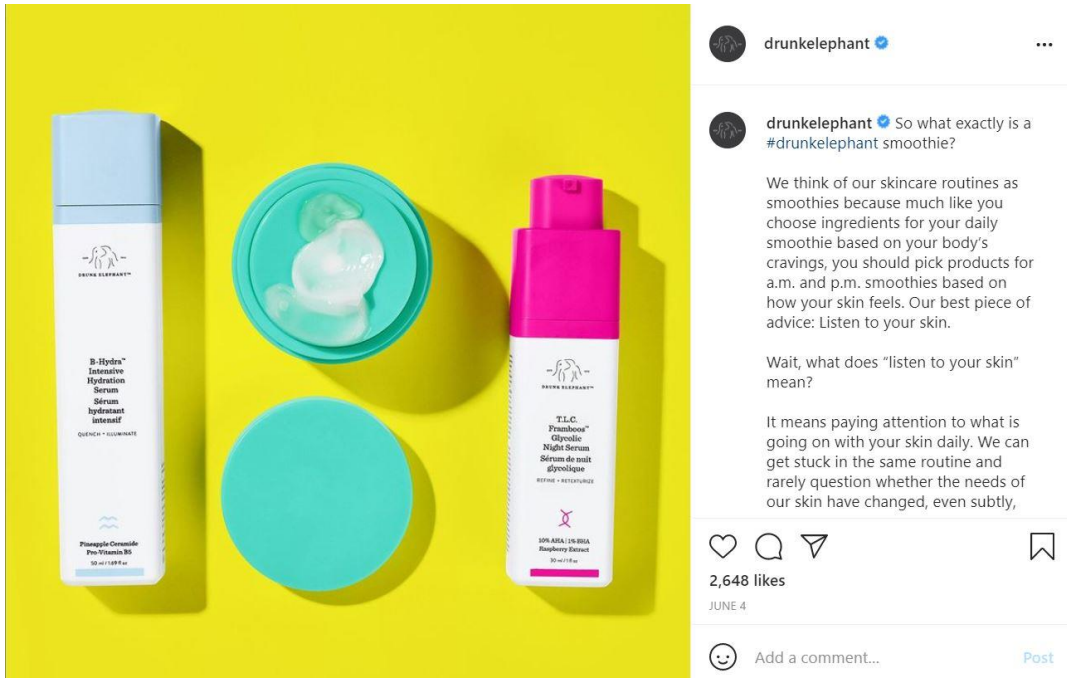*Figure 10: Noto Botanics brand (Noto Botanics Instagram profile)*

Figure 11: Drunk Elephant brand (Drunk Elephant Instagram profile)

Figures 12 and 13 represent colors that young consumers ought to dislike according to Lee, W. (2013), as mentioned in chapter 2:

Figure 12: Aesop brand (Aesop Skincare Instagram profile)

Figure 13: Ursa Major brand (Ursa Major Instagram profile)

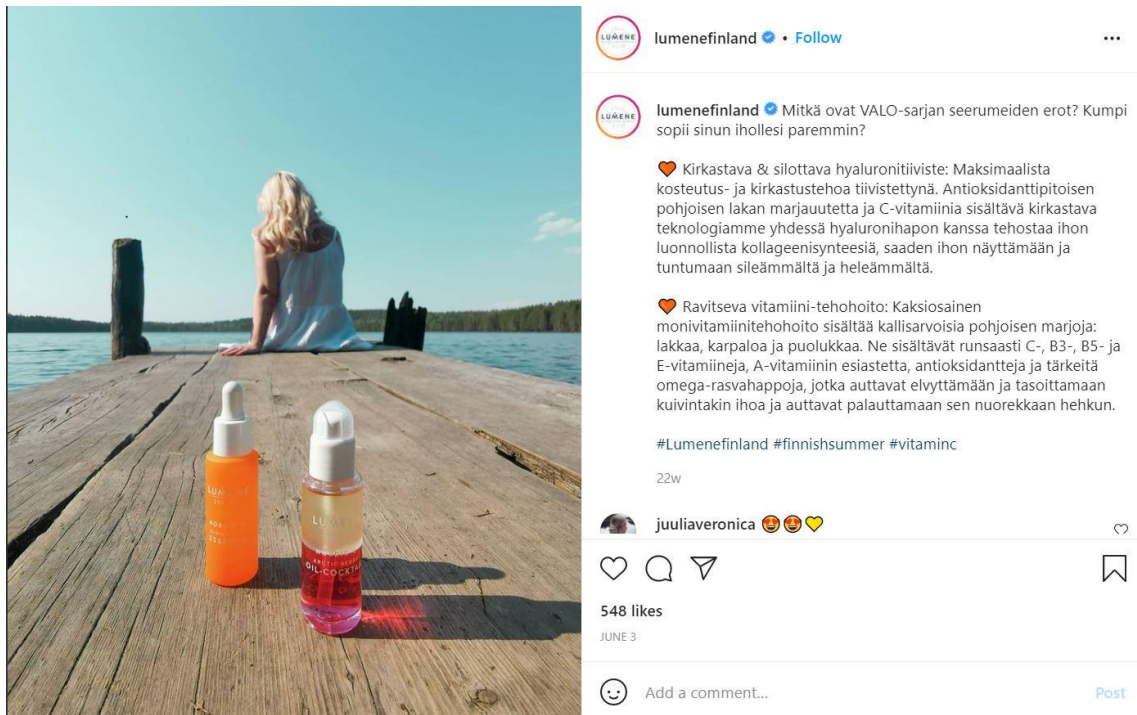Figure 14 represents a bad lighting product image.

Figure 14: Lumene brand (Lumene Instagram profile)

3.2.3.2 Referential level

Figures 15 – 19 represent photos of products that placed in order (symmetrical photo). These photos have soothing composition and colors that young consumers ought to like:

Figure 15: Farmacy Beauty brand (Farmacy Beauty Instagram profile)

Figure 16: Farmacy Beauty brand (Farmacy Beauty Instagram profile)

Figure 17: Kiehl's brand (Kiehl's Instagram profile)
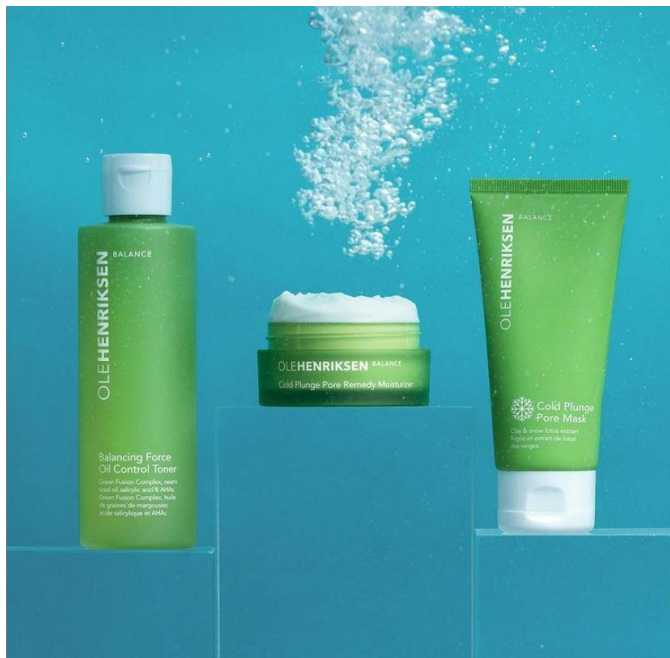
Figure 18: Ole Henriksen brand (Ole Henriksen Instagram profile)

Figure 19: Kiehl's brand (Kiehl's Instagram profile)

Figures 20 and 21 represent photos that do not follow any composition rules.

Figure 20: Lumene brand (Lumene Instagram profile)
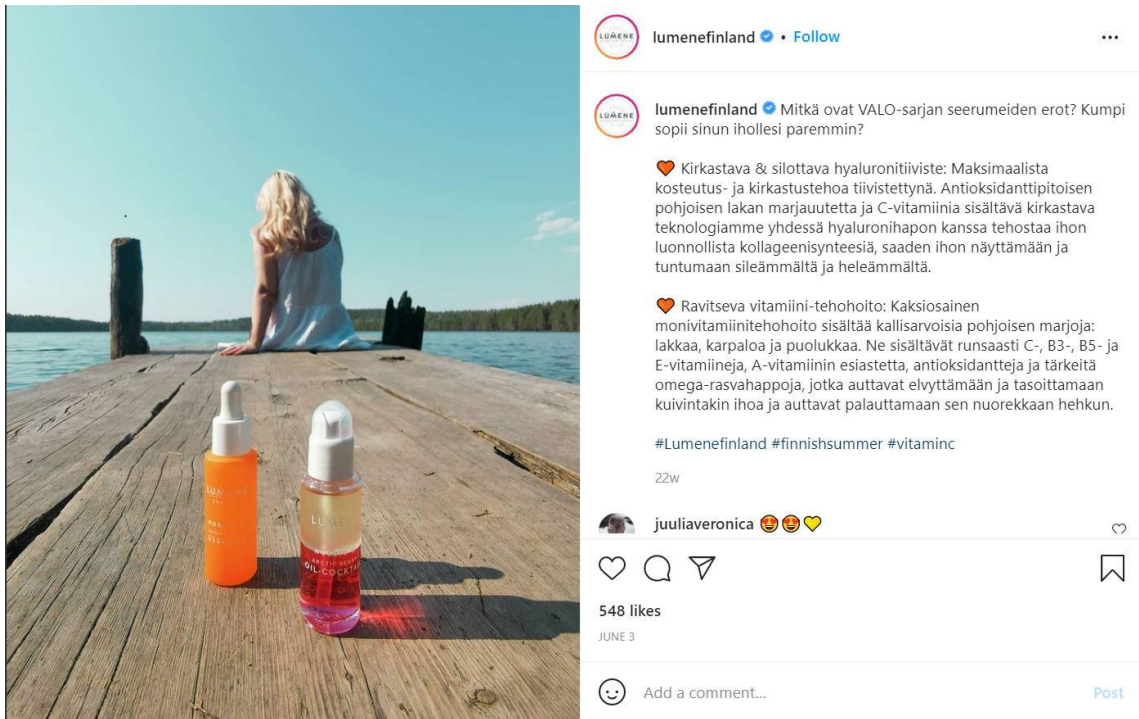
Figure 21: Lumene brand (Lumene Instagram profile)

3.2.3.3 Communicative level

Figures 22 - 27 represent photos of products with different fonts, see chapter 2.

Figure 22: Fresh Beauty brand (Fresh Beauty Instagram profile)

Figure 23: The Inkey List brand (The Inkey List Instagram profile)
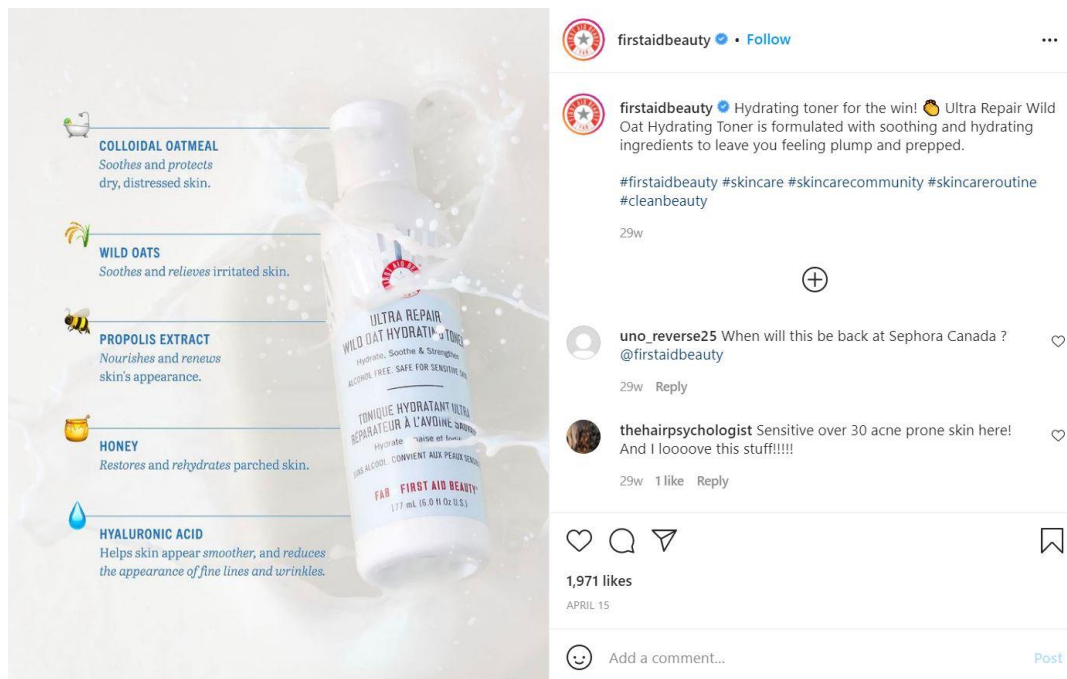
Figure 24: First Aid Beauty brand (First Aid Beauty Instagram profile)

Products with props:
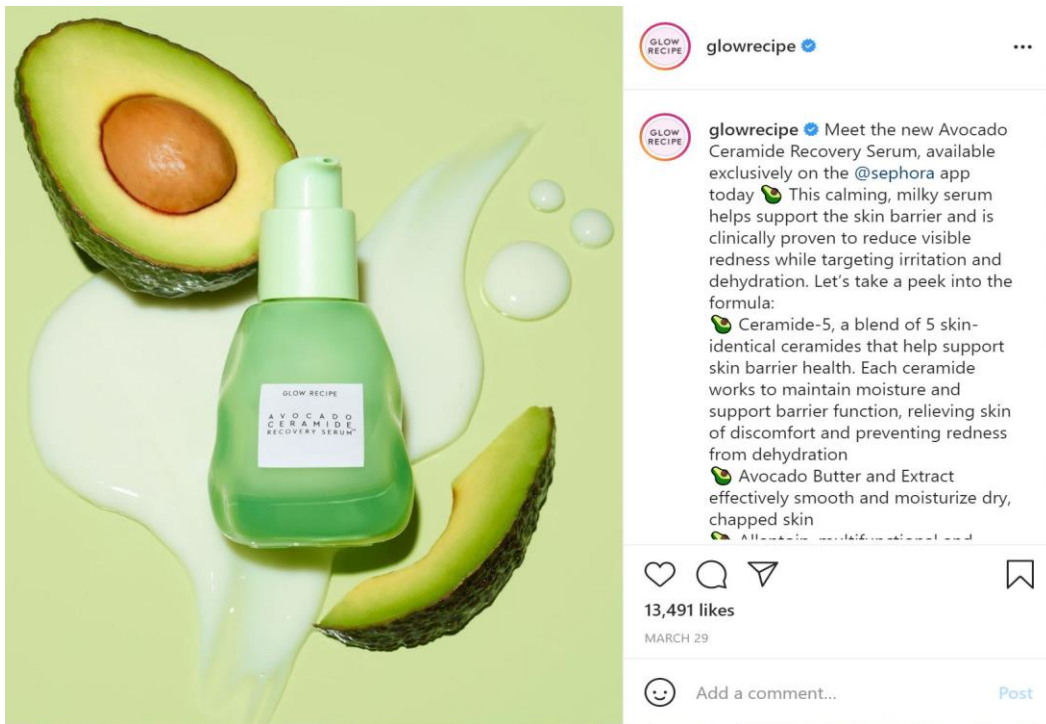
Figure 25: Glow Recipe brand (Glow Recipe Instagram profile)

Figure 26: Fresh Beauty brand (Fresh Beauty Instagram profile)

Figure 27: Glow Recipe brand (Glow Recipe Instagram profile)

4   RESULTS

This chapter presents the results from the focus group interviews.

4.1   Highlighted elements in product photography

4.1.1   Esthetical level – Colors

Participants who showed interest in figures 9, 10 and 15, stated that the colors caught their attention and brought positive feelings by looking at them. As seen from the quotations, the color of white and yellow seem to be the most favorite colors of the participants.

"The color looks basic but nice and classy. The packaging color may not be eye-catching, but it matches my personal taste" – a female participant expressed her opinion on figure 9.

"*The transparent background helps outshine the product. The product's color is well-displayed in the picture.*" – a female interviewee commented on figure 10.

"*This photo gives me a vintage vibe, cream-white background and a brown-red product in the middle just look so warm!*" – a male participant said about figure 10.

A female respondent replied to figure 15: *"Everything is yellow gave me a sweet, warm, and honey-feeling. I am definitely going to purchase this product!"*

And response to the dislike color combinations (figures 12 and 13), the majority of respondents said that they feel uncomfortable with the colors used in the photos - *"too dark"*, *"looks heavy"*, *"boring"*. On the other hand, color perceptions can be more diverse: dark colors and contrasting color combinations as shown in figures 12 and 13 can be perceived as giving the product image a certain elegancy and mystery feeling. For example, one female participant expressed: "*Even though the picture looks quite dark to me but somehow I feel elegant. Brown is not my favorite color but I can smell wood scent around when looking at this photo*". But on the contrary, some male respondents said they do not like this color and they think the photo is "*secretive, stuffy and dark*".

4.1.2 Referential level – Composition

At the referential level, it was apparent to see that the participants focused on the composition of the photos. Figures 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 were shown during the discussion, and the respondents were asked to compare between the figures. Most of the participants responded that they feel pleasant when looking at figures 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and agree to the fact that figures 20 and 21 look uncomfortable to them:

"*The thing I find most attracted to at first glance is how the corporate of different colors in the picture as well as including water in the shoot, which gives another level of perspective*" – a male participant commented on figure 16.

"That is also the concept and background. It can show me a lot of information about the products. I can easily compare function, colors and the smell I want." – a female respondent showed her perception on figure 15.

For photos that do not follow a specific composition (figures 20 and 21), female participants tend to, in some way, accept it and understand it differently than males. For example, a female participant commented: *"It is quite fine for me. It just brings out different vibes of skincare products maybe close to nature and easy-to-go product".* The male respondents seemed more uncomfortable with these two compositions. For example, one male participant expressed: *"It looks weird and confusing, I can barely see the products".* But all participants agreed that they do not feel comfortable looking at product photos with no specific composition. Here are three examples of perceptions by the participants:

"I am confused because this photo does not follow a particular composition. And I do not like this style, it makes me pay more attention to others, not the products."

"Yes, the composition is quite inconvenient for me to read the brand name and to understand what the product was about. I do not like this type of composition, it may be only suitable for posts with a purpose of product reviewing, instead of marketing."

"Am I confused? Yes, totally. And I am not a fan of this composition. I know the focus should be on the products, but the woman also took a big ratio in the picture. So it is confusing to identify which one is the dominant here in the photo."

4.1.3 Communication level – Props and lighting

The third element that the participants focus on is the props in the photos. When showing the picture (figure 26) that has both factors in communicative level (Textual information and Props), participants were more likely to focus on the lychee props behind the product than the text. They did find the font informative and 'professional', but they were more interesting to look at the Props. This seemed to be because the participants believe that it is easier for them to understand the message that the product wants to deliver by looking at the props instead of reading the texts. Figures 15, 25 and 27 demonstrate products with props. Here are four examples of perceptions of the photos:

"I like the way they use props in this case. Highly informative without texts needed in the photo."

"The product photo is informative and I can easily understand the message that it wants to deliver. The product looks nature-oriented to me."

"No texts needed but still the photos convey the message well."

"I think it is not highly informative, but it shows the main components that made up the product. I think the message trying to give here is the product made up of natural fruits."

During the focus group interviews, all the interviewees agreed with the idea that lighting plays a crucial role in product images. The interviewer showed them figure 14 and asked them what they thought of the photos compared to the others:

"Lighting contributes a vital role in an image, especially for marketing. The products could be sold more thanks to the images which gain customers interest and motivation to have it".

"Lighting is important because it helps the product stands out and customers can easily see it".

"It adds depth and credibility to the picture".

4.2 Buying likelihood

After giving their thoughts on the photos, the participants inquired about the likeliness of purchasing the products seen in the photos.

The likeliness of purchasing the products seen on an online platform, here on Instagram, seem somehow different between the male and female respondents. Most of the male participants said that they tend to buy when looking at eye-catching product images. For example: *"Looking at these (figures 15, 16, 17), I feel very impressed, and it urges me to buy it"*. This indicates that they are easily attracted by images with harmonious colors and simple layouts that are easy to see. They shared the same idea that they are easily moti-

vated to buy the products on Instagram by looking at the visuals and photos of the products. According to the interview, the male participants chose figures 15, 19 and 26 that would possibly get them to buy the most. Here is one response by a male respondent:

"To be honest, I am easily motivated to purchase the products on Instagram because in my opinion, the product photos on Instagram look high-class to me and they drive me to my buying decision."

Meanwhile, several female participants commented that the product image is not enough to motivate them to buy the product. They mainly focus on the brand and features of the product rather than the product image. Women are often very interested in Skincare-related products, so they are careful in considering whether this product is worth buying based on many factors such as ingredients, functions, etc. The participants prefer doing some research or reading reviews about the product before purchasing it. But besides that, the results obtained from the interviews indicated that the majority of female interviewees admitted that they give a lot of attention to eye-catching product photos. They also agreed that product images play an essential role in their purchasing decisions. Meaning that if there is a product photo that looks attractive to them, they will learn and read reviews about the product's brand as well as the function of that product before making a purchase decision. They also stated that depending on the product segment, they will decide to buy the product or not when a product photo catches their attention. For example:

"Yes I would likely purchase the product by looking at its picture, mostly when I intend to buy clothes or accessories or skincare/cosmetics. However, I would not prefer only photos when it comes to phone/home appliances/technology products."

All the participants agreed that they tend to give their attention to the product photos that are based on their current needs:

"Instagram often based on my needs so sometimes I could see myself draw attention to a product photo that I really need at the moment."

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the results of the study will be discussed and concluded. In order to answer the research questions, the results will be addressed according to them. The first question was to figure out what are the elements of a product photograph that young consumers highlight on Instagram and the second question was to know the difference between the male and female perceptions.

5.1 The important elements that young consumers highlighted in a product photo

Colors were shown to be a very important factor influencing the participants perceptions of the photos. According to the literature, each color has a distinct significance and is associated with a particular meaning (Lundberg, A., 2019). As a result, it can have a significant influence on the emotions and feelings of young consumers. It is also one of the most essential factors in the development of a brand's identity (Martin, L.). For example, Innisfree - a Korean skincare brand, uses green, white and brown as their primary color tone.

Based on the young adults (18-30 years old) color preferences research by Lee, W. (2013), white is the most favorite color among young consumers and yellow. According to the interviews in this study, this is true: most of the participants were attracted to the product images that have bright colors like white and yellow. The results also indicate that female respondents had a slightly different way of perceiving colors than males, which supports Solomon's (2016) statements of gender differences in color perceptions.

The second factor that the participants highlighted was photo composition. The composition can influence consumers' feelings about the products. Because the human brain automatically selects specific compositions that are more attractive than others. For the skincare product photos, the respondents preferred the Rule of Symmetry to the Rule of Third. Since human brains are likely to see subjects in order, harmony and symmetry (Ingledew, J., 2013), it seemed clear from the interviews that young consumers are likely to focus on photos that follow the Rule of Symmetry. According to the results, females tend to have

a slightly different perception from males: female respondents tended to find meanings in photos that have a complicated composition. Sometimes disharmony and disorder can create a strong impact because of the uniqueness (Ingledew, J., 2013).

The third factor that was highlighted by the participants was Props. Participants favored props over textual information because photographs with props are more engaging and informative. Using props is an excellent method to add context to a photograph. As mentioned, nowadays people process visual information more than before (Hyerle, D., 2000), young consumers do not really focus too much on textual information on a product photograph. Using props can excellently deliver the meaning of a photo to the viewers without using any textual information.

5.2 Buying likelihood

When it comes to purchasing, there seemed to be some minor differences between the participants. Female participants stated that the product image alone is insufficient to entice them to purchase the goods. They are more concerned with the product's brand and features than with its appearance. Physical product assessment, or seeing and experiencing a thing before purchasing it, is preferred and enjoyed by females (Lim, Cheng, Cham, Ng, & Tan, 2019). Women are particularly interested in skincare products, therefore they may carefully assess whether or not a product is worth purchasing based on a variety of criteria such as ingredients, purposes, and so on.

When looking at eye-catching product photos, some male participants claimed they are more likely to buy. Images with harmonious colors and basic layouts that are easy to view are attractive to them. They all agreed that looking at the images and photographs of the items on Instagram already motivates them to purchase them. Nevertheless, all agreed that they prefer to focus on product photographs that are relevant to their current needs.

5.3 Summary and limitations for future research

To summarize, the study identified that colors, composition, props and lighting in online photos, here in Instagram, are key components for successful marketing of products to young consumers. Some minor differences between perception of males and females could be recognized, which could be interesting to study further.

The results cannot be generalized to a wider population as it focused on a limited sample with young consumers. The idea was to gain some insights to young adults' perceptions of online photos. Future research with the same topic could be made using with eye-tracking technology and experimental studies, to test consumers attention to certain photos. Moreover, the sample could be more presentative for a larger population.

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