Perceived Attractiveness and Hedonic Fashion Content as Drivers of Undergraduate Students' Brand Attachment

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Abstract

This study explores the effects of Perceived Hedonic Content (PHC) and Perceived Attractiveness (PA) on Brand Attachment (BA) among students at Ignatius Ajuru University in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. A stratified sampling approach was utilized across the university's fifty departments, resulting in a high response rate with 327 completed questionnaires out of 330 distributed. The study's instrument underwent rigorous validity testing through expert reviews and factor analysis respectively which ensured that the constructs aligned with the survey items. Data analysis was conducted using multiple regression techniques via SPSS. It revealed the existence of a significant positive correlation between PHC and BA (R = 0.859; R² = 0.738), demonstrating that emotionally resonant content enhances consumer attachment. Likewise, PA showed a robust correlation with BA (R = 0.947; R² = 0.897). It indicated that influencers perceived as attractive significantly enhance brand attachment. Based on these findings, the study recommends that brands develop relatable stories and content that reflect consumer values and collaborate with influencers whose images align with their brand identity to strengthen stronger emotional connections with their audiences.

1.1 Introduction

The rapid advancement of the Internet and technology has fundamentally transformed communication and information dissemination, leading to the emergence of social media as a dominant global force. This transformation is characterized by the shift from traditional media to digital platforms, significantly altering how individuals interact, share information, and consume content. The digital revolution, initiated in the late 20th century, has facilitated the rise of social media, enabling unprecedented connectivity and engagement among users worldwide (Xiao, 2024). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become integral to daily life, particularly for younger demographics. Research indicates that many youths spend substantial amounts of time on these platforms, with some studies reporting daily usage ranging from several hours to more than six hours (El-Badawy & Hashem, 2014). This extensive engagement underscores the role of social media in shaping social interactions and cultural trends.

According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), social media allows for the rapid dissemination of information, and the creation of virtual communities where people express opinions, influence others, and participate in global conversations. The ability of these platforms to foster community and facilitate discussions on various topics has made them vital tools for communication and expression, particularly among the youth (Rabia et al., 2020). One of the most notable effects of social media on the fashion industry. The revenue in the fashion sector in Nigeria is projected to reach US$9.23bn in 2024 and it is expected to grow annually by 7.47% (CAGR 2024-2029, Statista, 2024). Customers in Nigeria have shown a growing interest in influencer advertising as a means to discover new products and make purchasing decisions. Influencers are seen as trustworthy sources of information, and their recommendations hold significant weight among consumers. According to Statista (2014), Ad spending in the Influencer Advertising market in Nigeria is forecasted to reach US$4.75m in 2024 and the expected annual growth rate (CAGR 2024-2029) for ad spending is 8.46%, leading to a projected market volume of US$7.13m by 2029. This trend illustrates how influencers can create a sense of urgency and desirability around fashion items, leading to increased sales and brand loyalty.

Research shows that platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become essential for fashion marketing, as they allow brands to showcase their products visually and engage with consumers in real-time (Arabi, 2021). The phenomenon of "fast fashion" is particularly pronounced in this context, where trends can emerge and fade quickly, driven by social media exposure and the endorsement of public figures (Widari, 2023). This immediacy heightens consumer desire and encourages impulsive buying behavior, as users are often influenced by what they see online (Aragoncillo & Orús, 2018). Furthermore, the accessibility of fashion information through social media democratizes the industry, allowing consumers to participate actively in trend creation rather than being passive recipients of marketing messages (Ghosh & Sriram, 2023).

Existing literature extensively investigates social media's influence on fashion consumption and trends, particularly in driving fast fashion and shaping consumer behavior (Aragoncillo & Orús, 2018; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Ghosh & Sriram, 2023). While research has demonstrated positive impacts of product attributes on purchase intention (utilitarian values and hedonic values), theoretical and empirical research on how product attributes affect brand attachment remains scarce, especially in the social media context (Park et al. 2010, Huang et al. 2018, Dwivedi, 2015). Campbell and Marks (2015) argued that when brands overly rely on hedonic content without aligning with core values, they risk being perceived as manipulative or disingenuous. Also, the literature lacks a nuanced exploration of how prolonged exposure to influencer-promoted fast fashion impacts young consumers' sustainable consumption habits and brand attachment. Current studies, such as Marwick (2015), focus on short-term consumer behaviors, like increased purchasing and trend-following but do not thoroughly analyze how sustained exposure to influencer content may affect attitudes toward consumption, self-image, and brand attachment over time.

Drawing on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973), influencer marketing can be understood through the ways individuals evaluate themselves about others, especially those perceived as more successful or knowledgeable (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Influencers often serve as relatable points of comparison, motivating audiences to adopt a particular behavioral pattern or lifestyle similar to theirs. Also, Signaling Theory posits that influencer endorsements act as signals of product quality and social value. The trust and perceived authenticity that influencers convey can make these signals more persuasive than traditional advertising forms, enhancing the impact of their endorsements on consumer behavior (Jin et al., 2019). Therefore, this study aims to explore how perceived attractiveness and hedonic fashion content drive undergraduate students' brand attachment in Nigeria. Moreover, the study will examine how influencers might effectively integrate sustainability messages into their content without compromising engagement, reach, and attachment. Hence, this study seeks to contribute to the evolving discourse on social media's influence on brand attachment.

2.1 Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

2.1.1 Brand Attachment

Brand attachment is defined as "the strength of the cognitive and affective bond connecting the brand with the self" (Park et al., 2010, p. 2). It is the cognitive and affective bond connecting the brand with the self. This bond goes beyond surface-level consumer interactions. It involves deep-seated thoughts, feelings, and personal connections that influence how individuals relate to a brand. It is a rich and mental representation that involves thoughts and feelings about the brand and the brand's relationship to the self (Huang et al., 2018; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Park et al., 2010) formed through consistent brand-related experiences, interactions, and emotional ties. The development of brand attachment is a gradual process shaped by evolving relationships between the consumer and the brand. The more consumers interact with and derive meaning from brand experiences, the stronger their attachment becomes (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). Park et al. (2010) classified these attachments into three: experiential, functional, and symbolic consumption. Experiential consumption focuses on the sensory pleasure or emotional satisfaction a consumer derives from a brand, while, functional consumption relates to how the brand enables the consumer to achieve practical goals. Symbolic consumption, on the other hand, connects to how the brand reflects and enriches the consumer's self-concept and social identity.

Brand attachment has been identified as a key driver for behaviors that underpin brand profitability and customer lifetime value (CLV). Thomson et al. (2005) underline that consumers who develop strong emotional bonds with a brand are more likely to engage in brand advocacy, repeat purchases, and demonstrate loyalty. According to Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2020), emotional attachment serves as the foundation for enduring consumer-brand relationships. With the rise of digital marketing and social media, brand attachment has taken on new dimensions. Thomson et al. (2005) argue that consumers who project their self-concept onto brands through social media engagement often form stronger attachments. The interactive nature of social platforms allows for continuous brand-related dialogues and the long-run development of emotional ties. Muniz and

O'Guinn (2011) further illustrate that brand-related content shared on social media strengthens community bonds among consumers, which enhances a sense of belonging and attachment. However, despite the positive effects of brand attachment on consumer loyalty and engagement, caution against manipulative marketing strategies that exploit emotional attachment has been identified as a major ethical concern (Levin & Krenn, 2019).

2.1.2 Influencer Advertising

Influencer advertising, often referred to as influencer marketing, has experienced rapid growth since the early 2010s, largely due to the rise of social media and the shift toward digital marketing strategies (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Influencer marketing involves partnerships between brands and individuals trusted by their audiences and substantial online followings. These influencers create content that promotes products, services, or brands in ways that appear authentic and relatable to their followers (De Veirman et al., 2017). The roots of influencer advertising can be traceable to celebrity endorsements which have been in existence for several decades. Traditional celebrity endorsements involve well-known public figures endorsing products to leverage their fame to influence consumers (Chung & Cho, 2017). However, with the proliferation of social media, the concept of influence expanded beyond celebrities to include regular individuals who cultivated substantial followings. This evolution allowed brands to target specific audiences through partnerships with "micro" and "nano" influencers, who often have closer, more personal relationships with their followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Influencer advertising is generally defined as a strategy in which brands partner with individuals who can impact the purchasing decisions of others due to their authority, knowledge, or relationship with their audience (Khamis et al., 2017). Influencer content often includes sponsored posts, product placements, and affiliate marketing. The success of influencer advertising lies in the influencer's perceived authenticity, relatability, and the trust they inspire among followers, which traditional advertising may lack (De Jans et al., 2020).

2.2 Perceived Hedonic Content and Brand Attachment

The concept of hedonic value, first proposed by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), has since been integral to understanding consumer behavior, particularly regarding consumption's emotional and experiential aspects. Hedonic value refers to the intrinsic pleasure or satisfaction derived from a product or service, driven by subjective experiences of fun, enjoyment, and emotional fulfillment (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). This concept has evolved in the digital age due to the rise of social media, where user-generated content often emphasizes hedonic elements to enhance engagement and emotional connectivity with audiences. In digital marketing, hedonic content is important in shaping user attachment and attitudes toward brands. For example, Babin, Darden, and Griffin (1994) argued that consumers seek both functional benefits and also, emotional gratification, which drives their engagement with hedonic content. This content, characterized by its capacity to evoke pleasure, significantly influences brand loyalty and customer satisfaction.

More recently, studies by Roux et al. (2020), Tulipa (2023), Batra et al., (2012), and Fournier, 1998). have explored the relationship between digital content and hedonic brand image and found

that enjoyable content enhances consumer perceptions and brand attachment. Furthermore, the duality of hedonic and utilitarian motivations remains a significant factor in consumer decision-making. Khan and Dhar (2010) emphasize that consumers often rationalize hedonic purchases by framing them as utilitarian savings, suggesting that the emotional appeal of a product can be amplified when presented alongside functional benefits. This interplay suggests that marketers must balance hedonic content with practical value propositions to optimize consumer satisfaction and reduce impulsive buying behaviors (Zhang et al., 2018).

The rise of personalized and interactive digital platforms has further reinforced the importance of hedonic content. Danckwerts et al. (2019) argue that personalization in conversational agents and hedonic digital services can significantly enhance user experience. The study demonstrated that emotional engagement is key to maintaining user loyalty in competitive markets. In other words, businesses that prioritize this emotional connection through hedonic content are more likely to influence the perception of their audience and create sustainable brand attachments. However, hedonic content is not without challenges. While the benefits of hedonic content in advertising such as boosting engagement and brand attachment are well-documented, its ethical application, especially among Generation Z and Generation Alpha, presents growing concerns. These generations, are deeply immersed in digital ecosystems and are increasingly vulnerable to manipulation, cognitive overload, and impulsive decision-making, which can undermine their long-term well-being. Tulipa (2023) argues that hedonic content can deepen emotional ties between consumers and brands, thereby ensuring enduring relationships, especially for Generation Z and Generation Alpha who consume vast amounts of digital content (Alden, et al. 2019). Hence, the inundation with short-term pleasure may lead to disengagement or negative emotional effects if poorly managed. Further, Zhang et al. (2018) found that such content amplifies impulsive buying tendencies which raises concerns about its impact on younger consumers' decision-making processes. Over time, reliance on hedonic content for immediate emotional gratification can erode consumer trust and harm brand reputation. Hence, a balanced perspective that maximizes emotional engagement without encouraging negative consumer outcomes must be employed (Griffiths, 2018). Hence, this study hypothesizes that:

H₁: There is no significant relationship between Hedonic Content and Brand Attachment.

2.3 Perceived Attractiveness and Brand Attachment

Perceived attractiveness which refers to the physical appeal, charisma, authenticity, and trustworthiness perceived by audiences has become a key factor in digital marketing effectiveness. Chung and Cho (2017) identify that credibility and trustworthiness play crucial roles in establishing this attractiveness, which influences a consumer's attachment to a brand. Grounded in the Source Attractiveness Model, McGuire et al. (1985) proposed that an attractive source significantly enhances persuasion by affecting personal attitudes, and these attributes are the basic foundation that connects influencer attractiveness with consumer attitudes. Research suggests that attractiveness enhances a strong emotional attachment to brands, and reinforces loyalty and advocacy. Hermanda et al. (2019) demonstrate how social media influencers improve brand image,

while Torres et al. (2019) emphasize the effect of influencer attractiveness on consumers' purchase intentions. Jin et al. (2019) and Lamberton & Stephen (2016) show that influencers, particularly Instagram celebrities, heighten followers' brand attachment. This attachment often leads to behavioral intentions favoring the brand (Aboulnasr & Tran, 2019; Japutra et al., 2014).

In the fashion industry where aesthetic appeal is dominant, the impact of influencer attractiveness is beneficial to a brand. Studies (Abdullah, 2023; Gürşen, 2023) confirm that high attractiveness ratings among influencers positively influence purchase intentions and brand attachment. This finding supports the idea that consumers' attraction to influencers can result in direct purchase behavior, further driving brand loyalty. Brand attachment, while beneficial for creating brand attachment, and brand loyalty, also brings risks. Jain and Sharma (2019) highlight that strong attachments can lead to intense feelings of betrayal and vulnerability if a brand fails to deliver the intended value to the consumers This vulnerability emphasizes that while influencer attractiveness can strengthen brand attachment, it also heightens emotional risk for consumers, making ethical considerations essential for brands engaging in such marketing strategies. Based on the foregoing, this study hypothesizes that:

H₂: There is no significant relationship between Perceived Attractiveness and Brand Attachment.

3.0 Methodology

This study involved students in the fifty (50) departments of Ignatius Ajuru University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. To ensure a representative sample, a stratified sampling method was employed taking into account the distribution of students across the university's 50 departments. Proportional representation was calculated for each department, which ensured that smaller departments in the school contributed a minimum of six respondents (three females and three males), while larger departments provided samples reflective of their size. This approach facilitated a balanced gender representation, which is essential for capturing diverse perspectives. Participants were also asked to confirm their age in the questionnaire to be sure of the targeted Gen-Z and Alpha demography. A five-point Likert scale was employed to measure responses. For Perceived Hedonic Content (PHC), statement items were adapted from existing literature, including Ryu et al. (2010), Adetunji et al. (2019), and Yoo et al. (2020). Example items included, "The content provided by the influencer makes me feel happy and entertained." Perceived Attractiveness (PA) items were derived from Parry and Kawakami (2014) and Iqbal (2023), with statements such as, "I find the influencer visually appealing." Brand Attachment (BA) statements were modified from Chen et al. (2022) and Ugalde et al. (2022), including, "I feel a strong emotional connection to the brands endorsed by the influencer."

The questionnaire was distributed via SurveyMonkey to course representatives in each class through their respective departmental heads. Out of 330 questionnaires, 327 were completed and returned, yielding an exceptionally high response rate. This strong participation underscores the effectiveness of the distribution strategy and the survey's relevance to students. Additionally, the

instrument's validity was thoroughly assessed, ensuring the reliability of the results for analysis. Content validity was established through expert review, certifying that the items accurately reflect the constructs being measured. To confirm that the questionnaire accurately measured the intended constructs, factor analysis was applied to analyze the responses. Factor loadings were reviewed to determine how well each survey item corresponded with its assigned construct. High loadings supported the idea that items were valid indicators of the constructs they were designed to measure. Further, the dimensionality of the data was examined and responses aligned with the hypothesized number of factors in the survey instrument. Reliability on the other hand was confirmed with Test-Retest Reliability and all the items exceeded the 0.7 benchmark (Cronbach, 1951). Regarding data analysis, the study employed multiple regression analysis using SPSS to examine the relationships between the variables. Multiple regression enabled the examination of the specific contribution of PA and PHC on BA. This quantifies the strength and direction of these relationships and offers a nuanced understanding of how PHC and PA influence BA (Field, 2018).

4.1 Analyses and Results

H₁: There is no significant relationship between Hedonic Content and Brand Attachment

Table 4.1: Model Summary

Model Summary[b]					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.859[a]	.738	.726	4.3032	1.921
a. Predictors: (Constant), Hedonic Content					
b. Dependent Variable: Brand Attachment					

The analysis of Hypothesis 1 (H1) reveals a strong positive relationship between hedonic content and brand attachment, as shown by a high correlation coefficient (R = 0.859). This suggests that as hedonic content (emotional and aesthetic appeal) increases, brand attachment also rises, aligning with findings that emotionally engaging brands enhance deeper consumer connections. The coefficient of determination (R^2 = 0.738) shows that hedonic content explains 73.8% of the variance in brand attachment, indicating its substantial predictive power. Adjusted R^2 (0.726) reinforces this, suggesting that the model remains robust. The low standard error (4.3032) signifies close alignment between observed and predicted values, validating hedonic content's role as an effective predictor of brand attachment.

The findings indicate that brands aiming to build strong attachments with consumers should prioritize hedonic content in their strategies, as it accounts for a significant proportion of brand attachment. The strong positive relationship implies that brands can leverage emotions and aesthetics to create deeper, more meaningful connections with their audiences. This aligns with

research on emotional branding, where brands that engage consumers' sensory and emotional responses through hedonic content can differentiate themselves effectively in competitive markets through brand attachment (Roux et al., 2020; Tulipa, 2023; Batra et al., 2012; Fournier, 1998; Khan & Dhar, 2010).

H₂: There is no significant relationship between Perceived Attractiveness and Brand Attachment

Table 4.2: Model Summary

Model Summaryᵇ					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.947ᵃ	.897	.606	3.0032	1.211
a. Predictors: (Constant), Perceived Attractiveness					
b. Dependent Variable: Brand Attachment					

The analysis of H2 reveals a significant positive relationship between perceived attractiveness and brand attachment, with a high correlation coefficient (R = 0.947) and an R^2 of 0.897, suggesting that perceived attractiveness accounts for approximately 89.7% of the variance in brand attachment. This indicates that brands perceived as visually appealing strongly enhance consumer attachment. The adjusted R^2 of 0.606 further supports the model's robustness across consumer groups, with a low standard error (3.0032). This confirms the fit between observed and predicted values, thus validating the model's predictive power. The Durbin-Watson statistic (1.211) suggests minimal autocorrelation, upholding model reliability.

Recent research has emphasized the impact of aesthetic appeal and influencer attractiveness on consumer attachment. For example, Hermanda et al. (2019) demonstrate that social media influencers significantly enhance brand image, especially when they embody high perceived attractiveness. This attractiveness can positively impact followers' purchase intentions and attachment to the brand, a connection that Torres et al. (2019) reinforce in their study on influencer influence over consumer behavior. Moreover, Jin et al. (2019) and Lamberton & Stephen (2016) find that influencers, particularly those on Instagram, effectively enhance brand attachment among followers, which often leads to increased behavioral intentions toward a brand (Aboulnasr & Tran, 2019; Japutra et al., 2014). This suggests that brands emphasizing aesthetic elements through product design and the use of attractive influencers are more likely to build lasting emotional connections with consumers, further strengthening brand attachment and potentially boosting loyalty (Schmitt, 2012; Thomson et al., 2005).

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal significant positive relationships between Perceived Hedonic Content (PHC) and Perceived Attractiveness (PA) on Brand Attachment (BA) The strong correlation between PHC (R = 0.859) indicates that emotionally engaging and aesthetically appealing brand experiences are of immense importance in cultivating deeper consumer attachment. Similarly, the even stronger correlation with PA (R = 0.947) suggests that influencers perceived as attractive significantly enhance consumer attachment. Together, these findings emphasize the importance of both emotional and visual appeal in building brand attachment.

5.2 Recommendations

i. Brands should create relatable narratives that reflect consumers' values, aspirations, and experiences, by employing professional photography and videography to enhance visual appeal. This approach should include crafting emotional stories that capture attention, build tension, and provide satisfying resolutions. Such strategies can evoke strong emotional connections and deepen brand attachment among consumers (Holt, 2002; Berger, 2013).

ii. Organizations should collaborate with social media influencers who possess high perceived attractiveness to enhance brand visibility and attachment. To implement this strategy effectively, brands should identify influencers whose values and image align with their brand identity. This will enhance authenticity and trust with their audience (Freberg et al., 2011).

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