Perceptions of Apparel Retailers' Culture Based on Employees' Style of Dress Featured on
Corporate Recruitment Websites

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The Internet is used by most U.S. companies to recruit potential employees (Braddy, Meade, Michael, & Fleenor, 2009). For current college students and recent graduates searching for internships and entry-level positions, the Internet has become a vital tool in their job search efforts (Tipograph, 2018). As fewer companies visit campus for recruiting purposes (Tipograph, 2018), students are choosing to forego the assistance of their institutions' career services centers (Fadulu, 2018) and are performing their own employment searches on the Internet.

One of the most important factors students use for selecting a company to work for is the company's corporate culture (Abbot, 2016). Therefore, companies must try to convey this information to undergraduates on their recruiting websites. Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) suggests that people use available cues to draw inferences. When job seekers have little knowledge about the organization, they may rely on cues, such as photos (Braddy et al., 2009) from the website to form perceptions about the company (Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991). Although retailing is one of the four parts of the marketing mix, many marketing students lack a thorough understanding of the various positions available in apparel retail corporations. Marketing students' understanding of these organizations tends to be limited to their interactions with salespeople in the stores (Circosta, 2016; Tornos, 2019), which may not be representative of the culture of the wider organization.

As a result of their incomplete awareness, marketing students may rely on photos of individuals representing employees on apparel retailers' recruiting websites. Employees' style of dress has been shown to have an impact on viewers' perceptions of the company associated with the employees (Yan, Yurchisin, & Watchravesringkan, 2011). Hence, when marketing students see photos of individuals dressed in formal business attire, they may infer that the apparel retailer has a different culture than when they see photos of individuals dressed casually. However, the relationship between formality of dress of employees in photos on apparel retailers' recruiting websites and students' perceptions of the culture of those retail organizations has not been examined. Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study is to examine if images of employees' dress on apparel retailers' recruitment webpages have an impact on undergraduates' perceptions of the companies, especially when little is known about the companies' corporate cultures.

To address the research purpose, the student recruitment landing webpages for 15 US-based apparel retail organizations were content analyzed. The 15 retailers were selected from *Stores: NRF's Magazine*'s listing of top retailers in three categories: Mass Apparel, Premium Apparel, and Luxury Apparel ("2018 Top 100 Retailers," 2018). The companies selected sold apparel for men and women, were based in the US and had locations all over the US, and had a specific recruiting section for college students and graduates. The dress style of the models in the

static photos (if available) on the landing pages were categorized as formal business style (e.g., suits and ties for men, blouses or jackets with skirts or pants for women), business casual style (e.g., shirts with khaki pants for men and shirts with pants for women), or casual style (e.g., t-shirts or sweatshirts with pants or jeans for men and women). Three of the recruiting website landing pages had no photos of individuals. Interrater reliability for the assessment of dress style in the photos was, and disagreements were negotiated until agreement was achieved.

Students' perceptions of the cultures associated with these 15 apparel retailers were assessed by asking 38 undergraduates (male=, female=) enrolled in an introductory marketing course to respond to two items as a part of an assignment. Students were assigned by the first letter of their last name to one of five groups composed of three of the 15 apparel retailers. The retailers were randomly assigned to each of the five groups. Students first were asked to rate their level of familiarity with the three retailers in their assigned group of retailers using a five-point, Likert-type scale (1=not familiar at all; 5=extremely familiar). Next, students were directed to visit the recruitment landing pages of the three apparel retailers in their group and then, using an open-ended question, list adjectives they would use to describe each retail organization's culture after examining the photos on the landing page.

Students' responses to the open-ended question were content analyzed and categorized using Braddy et al.'s (2009) taxonomy of cultural attributes. Braddy et al.'s (2009) framework consists of nine categories. These are aggressiveness (e.g., competitive, full of opportunities), attention-to-detail (e.g., analytical, precise), decisiveness (e.g., predictable, little conflict), diversity (e.g., promotes and values diversity), emphasis on rewards (e.g., compensation tied to performance), innovation (e.g., promotes risk taking and experimentation), outcome-orientation (e.g., focuses on achievement, action, and results), supportiveness (e.g., praises performance, encourages community involvement), and team-orientation (e.g., promotes collaboration). Interrater reliability for the categorization of students' responses was, and disagreements were negotiated until agreement was achieved.

Students' level of familiarity with the apparel retail companies was 3.5 with a range of 1.5 to 5. Overall, they seemed to feel that they had a moderate level of familiarity with the companies. Patterns emerged in students' responses related to the type of apparel featured in the photos on the landing pages. When the landing pages featured individuals wearing formal business attire, students perceived the companies to have an aggressive culture (100%). The words these students used to describe these apparel retailers were hardworking, ambitious, strong, and dynamic. On landing pages that showed employees wearing business casual attire, the students' responses indicated that they felt that the apparel retailers were either a) supportive (50%) and characterized by a focus on employees and training programs to advance careers, or b) innovative (50%) and were described using the term "innovative." When the photos on the landing page featured employees wearing casual attire, students predominantly indicated that the apparel retailers were supportive (83%). The terms used to describe these retailers included caring, trustworthy, fun, friendly, employee-dedicated, and involved in the community. On landing pages that did not contain any photos of individuals, students perceived that the apparel retailers were mostly outcome-oriented (67%). The students described these retailers as being

strategic and focused on achievements and success.

The results of this exploratory study lend support to signaling theory (Spence, 1973) in the context of Internet recruitment of undergraduates by apparel retail organizations. Marketing undergraduates who are moderately familiar with apparel retailers do seem to use the style of dress featured on the models in the photographs on the recruitment landing pages as a cue related to the retailers' culture. The majority of recent college graduates are searching for jobs in companies that promote communication and collaboration (Holly, 2017), which are aspects of a company's culture that are related to Braddy et al.'s (2009) supportiveness category. When apparel retailers want to emphasize their cultures' supportiveness attributes, photos of individuals wearing casual or business casual clothing should be used to convey that message. Further research on undergraduates' intentions to apply for positions with apparel retail corporations with different types of cultures and values could be conducted. Additionally, the perceptions of apparel undergraduates who presumably have more knowledge of apparel retail organizations' cultures could be compared to the perceptions of undergraduates majoring in other fields to examine the relative impact of photo-based inferences.

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