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**DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC MARKETING COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK  
FOR FASHION BRAND BUILDING IN EMERGING MARKETS: A CASE STUDY  
OF GHANA**

**BY**

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STRATEGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGEMENT**

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**DECEMBER 2025**

## DECLARATION


I hereby declare that this research is a result of my own original research and that no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or any other higher education institute.

I further declare that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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## CERTIFICATION BY SUPERVISOR

This Dissertation has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of Dissertation laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC).

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Date

## **DEDICATION**

This research is dedicated to myself for rising above all life's curve balls to pursue this degree, and also to my husband, Larry Lowe, and my son, Jayden Jidula Lowe, for your unconditional love, unwavering support, and endless encouragement. Your sacrifices and belief in my dreams have shaped the person I am today. This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined strategic marketing communication practices among Ghanaian fashion SMEs within an emerging market context. It focused on how communication choices, resource constraints, and cultural narratives shape brand building outcomes. The study further integrated practitioner insights to address contextual gaps in existing theory, with the aim of developing a culturally grounded strategic marketing communication framework for fashion brand building in Ghana. The study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design and was conducted among fashion SMEs operating in the Greater Accra Region. A total population of fashion SME actors and PR professionals was identified, from which a purposive sample of 20 participants was selected using non-probability sampling techniques. Data were collected using a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with fashion SME actors and fashion PR experts. The study revealed that marketing communication practices among Ghanaian fashion SMEs were largely digital driven, informal, and intuition led, with heavy reliance on social media platforms, limited integration, and weak performance measurement, while PR expert insights highlighted gaps in consistency, strategic coordination, and brand equity focus. The study recommended that fashion SMEs adopt a simplified, culturally responsive strategic communication framework that formalises planning, integrates low-cost tools, and aligns internal capabilities with long-term brand equity objectives.

**Keywords:** Strategic marketing communication, fashion SMEs, emerging markets, brand building, cultural narratives, framework.

## Table of Contents

<b>DECLARATION</b> .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>DEDICATION</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Background of the Study</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 Problem Statement</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>1.3 Research Aim and Objectives</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>1.4 Research Questions</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>1.5 Significance of the Study</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>1.6 Scope of the Study</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>1.7 Limitations of the Study</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>1.8 Organization of the Study</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>1.9 Operational Definitions</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>1.10 Chapter Summary</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1 Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1.1 Brand Equity Theory</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1.2 Resource Based View (RBV)</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>2.1.3 Integrating the Theories</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>2.2 Strategic Marketing Communication and Fashion Branding</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>2.2.1 Strategic Marketing Communication</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>2.2.2 Fashion Branding</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>2.2.3 Fashion Branding as Identity and Culture</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>2.3 Global Fashion Communication</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>2.4 Fashion Branding in Emerging Markets and Africa</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>2.5 Ghana’s Fashion Industry and Communication Landscape</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>2.6 Empirical Studies Review</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>2.7 Research Gaps and Study Justification</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>2.8 Chapter Summary</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>3.0 Introduction</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>3.1 Research Philosophy and Approach</b> .....	<b>31</b>

<b>3.2 Research Design</b> .....	32
<b>3.3 Profile of Study Area</b> .....	33
<b>3.4 Sample Population and Unit of Analysis</b> .....	33
<b>3.5 Sampling Strategy and Size</b> .....	34
<b>3.6 Data Collection Methods</b> .....	37
<b>3.7 Data Analysis Procedure</b> .....	38
<b>3.8 Trustworthiness Criteria</b> .....	39
3.8 Data Analysis .....	40
<b>3.9 Ethical Considerations</b> .....	40
<b>3.10 Chapter Summary</b> .....	41
<b>CHAPTER FOUR</b> .....	41
<b>RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS</b> .....	41
<b>4.1 Introduction</b> .....	41
<b>4.2 Demographics of participants</b> .....	42
<b>4.3 Theme: Current marketing communication practices within Ghana's fashion SMEs and challenges that constrain brand equity development.</b> .....	44
4.....	50
<b>4.4Theme: Applicability of established Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and brand equity theories within Ghana's emerging market context, identifying adaptation requirements.</b> .....	51
<b>4.5theme: Participant-identified needs for Ghana-context communication support</b> ..	59
<b>4.6 Proposed Strategic Communication Framework</b> .....	63
<b>4.7 Explanation of the Proposed Framework</b> .....	64
<b>4.8 Summary</b> .....	69
<b>CHAPTER FIVE</b> .....	69
<b>SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b> .....	69
<b>5.1 Introduction</b> .....	69
<b>5.2 Summary of Findings</b> .....	70
<b>5.3 Conclusion</b> .....	71
<b>5.4 Recommendations</b> .....	73
<b>5.5 Implications for Policy and Future Research</b> .....	74
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	76
<b>APPENDIX 1</b> .....	84
<b>Interview Guide for Fashion PR / Marketing Communication Consultants</b> .....	86

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

The global fashion landscape has undergone a fundamental transformation in how brands communicate with consumers, driven by the convergence of digital technologies and shifting consumer behaviors. Traditional fashion communication, once dominated by print media, runway shows, and celebrity endorsements, has evolved into a complex ecosystem of digital platforms, user-generated content, and real-time engagement (Huggard & Cope, 2020). The digital media landscape is continuously adapting to how consumers find, share, and engage with information (Moore, 2021). This shift has led to fashion promotion becoming a more dynamic and multifaceted discipline.

This digital revolution has been further accelerated by the emergence of the creator economy, where fashion brands increasingly collaborate with micro-influencers and content creators to reach fragmented audiences (The Business of Fashion & McKinsey & Company, 2024). As the fashion industry has become more global and the market more competitive, the communication channels have also become more varied and complex. Fashion brands must now navigate a less predictable environment where consumer knowledge of fashion and manufacturing has increased, and smaller designers compete directly with larger, established organizations (Moore, 2021). However, while these digital transformation trends offer unprecedented opportunities for brand engagement, they have also created new challenges around message consistency and audience fragmentation, making strategic marketing communication integration more critical than ever.

In response to this increasingly fragmented communication landscape, Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) has emerged as a vital framework for ensuring brand coherence across multiple touchpoints. IMC, which emphasizes the strategic coordination of all marketing communications to deliver consistent brand messages, becomes particularly crucial when fashion brands must navigate

the myriads of digital and traditional channels to build strong brand equity (Comiche & Gonçalves, 2024). The IMC framework is essential for fostering brand value co-creation and ensuring that all communication efforts work together seamlessly to build a unified brand identity and a competitive market presence (Comiche & Gonçalves, 2024). While IMC principles offer valuable guidance for brand consistency, their practical application faces distinct challenges in emerging market contexts where infrastructure limitations and economic constraints create different operational realities.

Emerging markets present unique structural conditions that significantly influence how fashion brands can implement communication strategies. These markets are typically characterized by limited digital infrastructure, constrained marketing budgets, predominantly informal commerce networks, and mobile-first consumer behaviors that differ markedly from developed market assumptions (Sestino et al., 2022). For example, a study on fashion SMEs in emerging markets highlights how they leverage digital communication strategies to foster brand engagement and enhance consumer loyalty despite these challenges (Citrawijaya et al., 2024). These conditions necessitate a different approach to marketing and brand communication than what is traditionally theorized in developed markets, which often have a more established digital and economic infrastructure. Within the broader emerging market context, Ghana's fashion industry exemplifies both the opportunities and constraints that define this landscape, while also presenting its own distinctive characteristics that shape fashion SME operations.

Ghana's fashion industry represents a vibrant but structurally complex ecosystem where traditional craft production intersects with contemporary design aspirations. The sector comprises predominantly Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (fashion SMEs) operating across a spectrum from informal tailoring businesses to emerging contemporary fashion brands seeking international recognition (Osei & Bosro, 2024). The growth of the Ghanaian fashion industry is a compelling narrative of creativity and resilience, with designers increasingly using local materials and designs to build brands that resonate with both local and international consumers (Oyanibi, 2022). These fashion SMEs are a critical component of the national economy and require effective marketing strategies to thrive.

Despite this creative energy and market potential, Ghanaian fashion SMEs face significant capability constraints that directly impact their communication effectiveness. Research indicates persistent skills gaps in areas such as digital marketing, brand management, and strategic marketing communication planning. A study on challenges facing fashion businesses in Ghana found that many struggle with a lack of access to effective communication strategies, which are crucial for building brand equity and a competitive market presence (Danso et al., 2018). These structural and capability limitations manifest in specific communication challenges that prevent many Ghanaian fashion SMEs from building coherent brand identities and sustainable market positions.

The communication challenges facing Ghanaian fashion SMEs reflect both resource constraints and the inadequate fit of conventional marketing approaches to local contexts. Common issues include inconsistent brand messaging across different platforms, limited investment in communication measurement and analytics, and the uncritical adoption of Western communication models that fail to account for Ghanaian consumer behaviors and cultural nuances (Osei & Bosro, 2024). The dynamics of brand communication in developing countries like Ghana are complex, and the uncritical application of theories from developed economies can be problematic (Prayudi et al., 2025). The challenges of digital marketing in the Ghanaian fashion industry, for example, are a significant barrier to growth and sustainability (Yaro, 2022). Yet these challenges also reveal significant untapped opportunities for developing more contextually appropriate and resource-efficient communication approaches.

The gap between current practice and potential effectiveness suggests considerable scope for developing communication strategies that are both culturally resonant and operationally feasible for Ghanaian fashion SMEs. Key opportunities include leveraging Ghana's rich cultural heritage for authentic brand storytelling, developing cost-effective channel combinations that maximize limited budgets, and establishing practical performance indicators that align with fashion SME capabilities

and market realities (Osei & Bosro, 2024). A systematic approach to communication strategy development, specifically adapted to the Ghanaian context, is needed to address these opportunities.

Therefore, despite the evident creative potential of Ghana's fashion industry and the proven importance of strategic marketing communication for brand building, Ghanaian fashion SMEs continue to lack access to contextually grounded communication frameworks that address their specific operational constraints and market opportunities. While existing literature provides valuable insights into fashion marketing and IMC principles, there remains a critical gap in understanding how these concepts can be effectively adapted and implemented within the resource-constrained, culturally distinct environment of Ghana's emerging fashion sector. This study will bridge this gap by examining the specific communication practices of Ghanaian fashion SMEs and developing a strategic marketing communication framework tailored to their unique needs.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

Although Ghana's fashion sector shows considerable creativity and growth potential, many Fashion Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (fashion SMEs) struggle to translate brand ambition into coherent, culturally resonant communication. Current practices are typically ad-hoc and platform-led, characterized by limited audience insight, inconsistent messaging, and minimal performance measurement (Danso et al., 2018). This reactive approach produces fragmented brand experiences and constrains brand equity-building potential (Osei & Bosro, 2024).

Existing communication guidance, while theoretically sound, derives primarily from large-budget Western contexts and fails to address the operational realities of Ghana's mobile-first, resource-constrained environment (Amankwah et al., 2023). While Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and brand equity literature explain the principles of effective brand building (Huggard & Cope, 2020), the contextual adaptation of these frameworks for emerging market fashion SMEs remains

theoretically and practically underdeveloped (Prayudi et al., 2025). This creates a critical gap in practical knowledge that prevents Ghanaian fashion SMEs from achieving sustainable business growth.

his study addresses this gap by empirically examining existing IMC practices among Ghanaian fashion SMEs and synthesising these insights into a Ghana-tailored strategic marketing communication framework. The proposed framework enables fashion SMEs to systematically align their communication investments with brand-building objectives within local resource and cultural constraints. The research moves beyond generic advice to deliver a bespoke, actionable model specifically adapted to the unique challenges and opportunities of the Ghanaian fashion industry.

### **1.3 Research Aim and Objectives**

#### **1.3.1 Research Aim:**

To develop a culturally relevant strategic marketing communication framework for fashion brands in Ghana, to enhance brand equity and market position.

#### **1.3.2 Research Objectives:**

1. To analyze current marketing communication practices within Ghana's fashion SMEs and identify the specific challenges that constrain brand equity development.
2. To examine the relevance and limitations of established IMC and brand equity theories within the Ghanaian fashion SME context.

To provide evidence-based strategic marketing communication guidelines for Ghanaian fashion SMEs, informed by empirical findings.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

1. What are the current marketing communication practices used by fashion SMEs in Ghana, and what challenges do they face in developing brand equity?

2. How relevant are established Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and brand equity theories to the marketing communication practices of Ghanaian fashion SMEs, and what limitations emerge within this context?
3. What evidence-based strategic marketing communication recommendations can be derived to strengthen brand equity development among fashion SMEs in Ghana?

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This research holds considerable value for multiple stakeholders. Academically, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge by exploring the under-researched area of strategic marketing communication within emerging African fashion markets. It goes beyond descriptive analysis to theoretically advance communication and brand management theory by developing a contextually adapted framework.

The research will demonstrate how established Western-centric theories, such as IMC and brand equity models, can be applied, modified, and enriched to fit the unique cultural and operational realities of a developing market like Ghana. By doing so, it provides a crucial new perspective on how brand-building principles function outside of traditional, developed economies.

For practitioners, particularly fashion SMEs in Ghana, the proposed framework will serve as a practical and evidence-based tool to guide their brand communication efforts and achieve sustainable growth. It will provide a clear, actionable roadmap for developing coherent messaging, selecting appropriate channels, and measuring effectiveness within resource constraints. Furthermore, the findings from this research have the potential to provide policymakers with insights to inform the development of supportive training programs and fashion SME support schemes aimed at fostering a more robust and globally competitive local fashion industry. Ultimately, this work seeks to empower Ghanaian fashion brands to build authentic connections with their audiences and thrive in an increasingly competitive landscape.

## **1.6 Scope of the Study**

The scope of this research is limited to the fashion industry in Ghana, with a specific focus on small and medium-sized enterprises (fashion SMEs) that design and market ready-to-wear clothing and accessories. For the purpose of this study, a fashion SME will be defined based on the Ghana Statistical Service's criteria, which typically includes businesses with fewer than 100 employees and a specific annual turnover threshold. The study's geographic reach will be delimited to a specific region, such as Greater Accra, to ensure a manageable and in-depth analysis of the local fashion ecosystem.

The study will not include an in-depth analysis of large-scale international fashion houses or haute couture, as their operational models, resources, and communication strategies differ significantly from those of local fashion SMEs. The research is further delimited to an analysis of marketing communication strategies and will not extend to other business functions such as supply chain management, financial management, or human resources.

## **1.7 Limitations of the Study**

This study, like all research, has certain limitations. The qualitative approach, while providing depth, means the findings are not statistically generalizable to the entire Ghanaian fashion industry. The small, purposively selected sample size may not represent the full diversity of all fashion businesses in Ghana. Furthermore, as the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, there is a potential for researcher bias. This will be mitigated through reflexivity, with the researcher continually reflecting on their own assumptions and how they might influence the research process.

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## **1.8 Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One provides an introduction, outlining the background, problem statement, research questions, and the significance of the study.

Chapter Two will consist of a comprehensive review of relevant literature on strategic marketing communication, fashion marketing, and emerging markets.

Chapter Three will detail the research methodology.

Chapter Four will present the analysis and discussion of the findings.

Chapter Five will conclude the study with a summary, recommendations, and suggestions for future research.

## **1.9 Operational Definitions**

The following terms are defined for the purpose of this study to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency.

**Strategic Marketing Communication Framework:** A structured and goal-oriented set of guidelines, principles, and components designed to provide a systematic approach to brand communication within Ghana's fashion industry. This is not a rigid model, but a flexible architecture tailored to the specific operational and cultural realities of Ghanaian fashion SMEs.

**Brand Equity:** The commercial value that a brand name adds to a product or service. This study will lean on Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which encompasses consumer perceptions, associations, and the loyalty a brand commands in the marketplace.

**Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC):** The strategic coordination of all brand messaging and promotional tools to ensure a consistent, unified brand message across all channels.

This is a key practice for avoiding audience fragmentation and building brand coherence.

**Brand Identity / Positioning:** The unique set of brand associations that a marketer aspires to create and maintain. This includes the intended brand image, its core values, and its unique selling proposition (USP) in the marketplace.

**Audience Insight (Personas/Segments):** A deep understanding of the target consumer, including their motivations, behaviors, and cultural context. This research will utilize audience personas and segmentation to create a more effective and targeted communication strategy.

**Owned/Paid/Earned/Shared Media:** A classification of communication channels. Owned media are channels controlled by the brand (e.g., a website, social media profile). Paid media includes advertising and other promotional efforts where the brand pays for placement (e.g., sponsored posts). Earned media is organic exposure gained through public relations or word-of-mouth (e.g., a news article). Shared media refers to content shared on social media platforms, often by the audience.

**Content Pillars and Message Architecture:** A strategic approach to organizing and structuring brand content. Content pillars are a few key topics or themes that the brand consistently communicates about. Message architecture is the hierarchical structure that ensures all messages support the overall brand identity and strategic goals.

**Engagement (e.g., interactions per follower, CTR):** The level of interaction between a brand and its audience on various communication platforms. This can be measured through various metrics, such as interactions per follower, which indicates how a brand's content resonates with its audience, or Click-Through Rate (CTR), which measures the effectiveness of a call-to-action.

## 1.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter established the foundational level of the study by providing background information, defining the gap the study aims to bridge. It clearly outlined the scope of study, objectives and significance of the study. The chapter highlights the need for developing a strategic marketing

communication framework for Fashion SME Brand Building in Emerging Markets such as Ghana. The study provides justifications and outlines potential contributions to academic knowledge, policymaking, everyday industry applications, stakeholder benefits and future research guidance.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

##### **2.1.1 Brand Equity Theory**

Brand equity theory explains how communication builds brand value and shapes consumer perceptions. Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand name and symbol, adding to or subtracting from the value a product provides. These assets include brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and proprietary assets, which together shape marketplace advantage. Keller (1993) extends this thinking by framing customer-based brand equity as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response, emphasizing the mental structures of awareness and image that guide judgment and choice. The theory therefore views equity as residing both in consumer memory and in strategically cultivated brand assets.

Marketing communication strengthens these components by influencing how consumers perceive and interact with the brand. Keller (1993) notes that planned communication activities such as advertising, public relations and consistent messaging reinforce awareness and meaning. Appel et al. (2020) show that social media interactions, influencer collaborations, and digital storytelling stimulate co-creation, strengthen associations, and deepen loyalty. Aaker (1991) emphasises that perceived quality is enhanced when communication repeatedly signals craftsmanship, credibility and differentiation. For

fashion brands, this means that consistent visual identity, cultural storytelling and frequent social media engagement translate communication inputs into recognizable and valued brand meanings.

The theory is especially relevant for emerging markets and fashion SMEs that operate with limited communication budgets but significant cultural capital and creativity. Mijan (2021) finds that SMEs that apply deliberate brand development strategies improve brand awareness, loyalty and associations despite resource constraints. Appel et al. (2020) highlight that digital platforms help small firms compensate for limited advertising budgets by enabling high-engagement, low-cost communication. This study therefore uses brand equity theory to analyse how fashion SMEs in Ghana build value through communication by strengthening awareness, associations, perceived quality and loyalty within the constraints of an emerging-market context.

### **2.1.2 Resource Based View (RBV)**

Resource based view explains why internal capabilities and resources determine a firm's ability to implement effective strategic communication. Wernerfelt (1984) introduced the idea that firms should be analysed from the resource side rather than the product side, emphasising that resources form the basis of strategic options and profitability. Barney (1991) refined this into a theory of sustained competitive advantage, arguing that only resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non substitutable can generate long term advantage. Grant (1991) further highlighted that strategy formulation should start with identifying a firm's unique resource base and the capabilities that arise when these resources are combined and deployed effectively. In this view, communication strength is not just a set of activities, but an organisational capability grounded in the resources the firm owns and controls.

Internal resources that matter for fashion SMEs include creative design skills, cultural and symbolic assets, human capital and relational capital. Grant (1991) explains that capabilities emerge when

individual resources such as skills, knowledge and technology are integrated into coordinated routines that support functions like planning and execution. Oduro and Mensah Williams (2023) show in a Ghanaian SME context that marketing and communication capabilities act as critical strategic resources that translate into stronger competitive performance. In fashion, creative design skills, cultural and symbolic assets like kente, storytelling and local aesthetics, together with human capital in craftsmanship and brand management know how, provide the raw material for compelling visual identity and narrative. Relational capital such as networks, influencer ties and customer loyalty then enables these stories to be diffused through planned and integrated communication activities.

Constraints faced by fashion SMEs in emerging markets, particularly financial and technological limitations, do not remove the relevance of RBV but shape how resources are combined for communication. Oduro and Mensah Williams (2023) note that SMEs in resource constrained economies can still achieve superior performance when they develop specific marketing communication capabilities that leverage their distinctive internal strengths. Barney (1991) stresses that when such resources are difficult for competitors to imitate, they underpin sustained competitive advantage even in turbulent environments. For Ghanaian fashion SMEs, rich cultural symbolism, close community ties and flexible design skills can offset limited budgets when channeled into strategic communication capability. This study therefore links RBV to brand equity theory by treating these internal resources and communication capabilities as the foundation for building brand awareness, associations, perceived quality and loyalty in Ghana's fashion market.

### **2.1.3 Integrating the Theories**

Integrating resource-based view and brand equity theory clarifies how internal capabilities translate into external brand value. Barney (1991) frames resources and capabilities as the foundation of sustainable competitive advantage, while Wernerfelt (1984) shows that the strategic position of the

firm depends on how these resources are combined and deployed. Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) then conceptualise brand equity as the set of awareness, associations, perceived quality and loyalty that exist in consumers' minds as a result of sustained brand activity. Communication capability sits at the intersection of these perspectives as a strategic resource that allows firms to mobilise creative design skills, cultural symbolism and relational networks into coherent messages that build and reinforce equity outcomes in the marketplace.

The study therefore treats communication capabilities as the operational bridge between internal resource strength and external brand equity. Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) provide the outcome lens by specifying the dimensions through which equity will be interpreted in Ghanaian fashion brands. Barney (1991) and Wernerfelt (1984) provide the input lens by directing attention to valuable, rare and hard to imitate resources such as cultural narratives, craftsmanship know how and influencer relationships that underpin strategic communication. The conceptual linkage is expressed in the mini framework: Resources and Capabilities (RBV) → Strategic Marketing Communication Practices → Brand Equity Outcomes (Aaker/Keller). This integrated lens guides data collection by focusing interviews on both the internal communication capabilities of fashion SMEs and the external signals of brand equity, and it structures analysis by linking emergent themes to resource categories on one side and equity dimensions on the other.

## **2.2 Strategic Marketing Communication and Fashion Branding**

### **2.2.1 Strategic Marketing Communication**

Strategic marketing communication refers to the purposeful, planned and integrated use of multiple communication tools to achieve long term brand goals rather than short-term promotion. Fill and Turnbull (2016) define marketing communications as a managed process that coordinates tools, media and messages so that every contact with the audience reinforces a coherent brand proposition, stressing

consistency, audience focus and alignment with organisational objectives. Rehman (2022) extends this view by arguing that integration must also generate synergy, where the combined effect of channels and messages is greater than individual activities, and questions whether traditional planning alone can deliver this without explicit attention to cross channel coherence and shared metrics. These perspectives together underline that strategic communication is different from tactical actions because it links every creative and media decision to brand positioning, relational outcomes and continuous evaluation rather than isolated campaigns.

Fashion SMEs in emerging markets need this disciplined strategic approach to turn small budgets and rich cultural stories into cohesive digital presence and durable brand value. Chaffey (2023) presents the RACE planning framework of Plan, Reach, Act, Convert and Engage as a practical structure for managing the customer journey and highlights that many small firms still lack a clear roadmap for digital activities, which raises questions about how consistently they connect content, channels and objectives over time. Smith (2008) in strategic planning for public relations complements this with the ROPES style logic of research, objectives, programming, evaluation and stewardship, pressing for deeper audience insight and long term relationship management and implicitly challenging purely funnel based models that underplay ongoing stakeholder care. For this study, strategic marketing communication is therefore treated as a capability that depends on internal resources and skills identified by the resource based view, especially the ability of Ghanaian fashion SMEs to plan, integrate and evaluate culturally grounded storytelling across Instagram, WhatsApp and other touchpoints in a way that systematically builds brand equity.

### **2.2.2 Fashion Branding**

Fashion branding refers to the way fashion products are transformed into meaningful brands that embody identity, lifestyle, and aspiration rather than mere garments. Okonkwo (2007) defines luxury

fashion branding as the art of turning functional products into objects of desire, stressing that design, store experience and communication must work together to stage a coherent brand universe rather than isolated marketing actions. Jackson and Shaw (2009) frame fashion branding within the wider fashion marketing system, arguing that branding decisions about product, price, place and promotion must be integrated with creative design and trend dynamics, which questions any view that branding is only about logos or advertising. Hines and Bruce (2007) add that fashion brands operate in highly volatile markets where rapid trend diffusion and global competition require continuous alignment between brand identity and operational decisions, suggesting that branding is as much a strategic management task as a creative exercise. Tungate (2012) emphasises how marketers and branding experts use media, retail environments and celebrity culture to sell dreams and illusions, which reinforces the idea that fashion branding is a composite of design, storytelling, communication and identity used to differentiate products in crowded markets.

The dual nature of fashion branding emerges in the way it simultaneously creates symbolic identity and secures commercial positioning. Okonkwo (2007) highlights heritage, aesthetics and values as pillars of luxury fashion identity, yet also insists that these symbolic elements must translate into premium pricing power and market share, revealing the constant tension between artistic expression and commercial goals. Jackson and Shaw (2009) view fashion brands as narratives that consumers use for self expression, but they also stress segmentation and positioning, which raises the question of how far identity work can be stretched before it dilutes strategic focus. Bua (2021) finds that storytelling in fashion events creates unique and authentic experiences for consumers, deepening emotional connection, yet notes that the literature has only recently begun to examine how such storytelling contributes directly to measurable brand performance. Hines and Bruce (2007) argue that brand image and equity depend on consistent communication across channels, while Tungate (2012) shows that media saturation can sometimes erode authenticity, prompting reflection on how brands balance visibility with meaning. In this study, fashion branding is therefore understood as a process in which

design, cultural storytelling and strategic communication build symbolic identities that resonate with consumers and, at the same time, secure competitive differentiation for fashion brands in markets such as Ghana.

### **2.2.3 Fashion Branding as Identity and Culture**

Brand identity in fashion refers to the organised set of visual and symbolic elements that make a brand recognisable and meaningful, including logos, colours, style codes, tone of voice and consistent visual systems across touchpoints. Kapferer (2012) conceptualises brand identity as six linked facets of physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection and self image, which stresses that visual elements such as logos and colours cannot be treated as isolated signs but must express an underlying cultural core. Kawamura (2023) approaches fashion as a manufactured cultural symbol rather than just a managerial construct, which questions identity models that assume brands fully control meaning and instead shows how fashion identity is produced within social and institutional structures. Boateng (2014) demonstrates this cultural grounding in Ghana by showing how Adinkra and kente have been appropriated into nationalist projects and everyday life, so their use in fashion branding carries layered historical and political meanings beyond surface decoration.

In Ghana and across Africa, fashion functions as a visible expression of identity, heritage and contemporary lifestyle, which makes culture central to how brands communicate who they are. Boateng (2014) shows that Adinkra and kente textiles encode proverbs, status and beliefs, which raises important questions about how commercial fashion brands can mobilise these symbols in collections, campaigns and local events without trivialising or commodifying their deeper significance. Kawamura (2023) views fashion as a belief system produced by designers, media and consumers, suggesting that when Ghanaian brands use digital storytelling, influencers or community shows they are not only promoting garments but also negotiating cultural positions between local tradition and global fashion

circuits. Kapferer (2012) implies that communication should consistently express the cultural facet of identity across channels, yet the fluid mix of traditional patterns, urban streetwear and social media aesthetics in Ghana pushes brands to adapt their visual and narrative codes for different audiences while still claiming authenticity. In this study, identity and culture are therefore treated as core inputs to strategic marketing communication, shaping how Ghanaian fashion brands design visual systems, craft digital stories, work with influencers and stage local events in order to express their cultural roots and build emotional bonds with consumers.

## **2.3 Global Fashion Communication**

### **2.3.1 Evolution of Fashion Marketing Communication**

Fashion marketing communication has shifted from a model dominated by print magazines, television campaigns and theatrical catwalk shows to a landscape structured around digital environments, social platforms and data driven targeting. Castillo-Abdul et al. (2021) trace this evolution and argue that luxury fashion communication moved from one way mass media display toward more participatory, networked formats, yet they still treat digital as an extension of traditional branding logics rather than a complete break. Faria et al. (2019) complicate this view by showing, through interviews with industry professionals, that fashion houses now design communication with digital first considerations in mind, which suggests that catwalk shows, print coverage and television spots are increasingly repositioned as content sources for online circulation instead of the primary communication end points. These perspectives together indicate that the historical sequence from print and broadcast media to digital storytelling is not a simple replacement but a layering process where older formats survive as raw material for new communication ecosystems.

The rise of direct-to-consumer brands and Instagram-based boutiques illustrates how digital transformation has reconfigured audience engagement and communication strategies by collapsing the

distance between fashion producers and consumers. Bonilla-Quijada et al. (2024) show that fast fashion brands on Instagram design posts, stories and interactive features to stimulate different forms of engagement, questioning earlier assumptions that consumer response could be adequately captured only through exposure or recall metrics. Liu and Liu (2025) map digital transformation across the fashion industry and argue that social media, e-commerce, and influencer marketing have shifted communication from campaign-based pushes to continuous, data-informed dialogue, yet they caution that many brands still struggle to integrate these tools strategically across channels and internal functions. Read together, these studies suggest that digital fashion communication is characterised by always on interaction, direct brand consumer relationships and platform specific storytelling, while also exposing gaps in how brands adapt their strategies to the demands of direct to consumer models and social media driven discovery.

### **2.3.2 Contemporary Global Fashion Communication Strategies**

Contemporary global fashion communication is organised around digital storytelling, brand communities and always on interaction. Ashley and Tuten (2015) show that creative strategies in branded social content, such as narrative posts, entertainment appeals and calls for user generated content, strengthen engagement and help platforms function as communities rather than one way display channels, although their work still assumes brands can largely script the interaction. Appel et al. (2020) argue that the future of social media marketing lies in algorithmic curation, social commerce and conversational interfaces, which shifts attention from creative tactics alone to the data-driven infrastructures that shape who actually sees brand stories and when, and this raises questions about how far community building remains under brand control. These perspectives together suggest that digital storytelling and brand communities now sustain fashion brand equity and identity when content design and platform logics are managed together.

Alongside community building, omnichannel integration, sustainability narratives and influencer collaborations define many current fashion strategies. Tam and Lung (2025) review digital marketing strategies for luxury fashion brands and find that effective omnichannel practice links websites, social platforms and stores into coherent journeys that preserve brand symbolism and exclusivity, which highlights a challenge for mass and fast fashion brands that rely more on volume and speed yet still seek consistent identity. Vladimirova et al. (2024) show in a systematic review of social media and sustainable fashion that most studies focus on how brand and influencer collaborations encourage more responsible consumption, but they criticise the assumption that high engagement equals real ethical impact and call for closer examination of how sustainability themes reshape brand meaning over time. Taken together, these studies indicate that contemporary fashion communication strategies support brand equity and identity when omnichannel design, ethical storytelling and influencer co-creation are treated as integrated, long term practices instead of isolated campaigns.

### **2.3.3 Implications for Emerging Markets**

Emerging market contexts such as Ghana require selective adaptation of global fashion communication insights to resource constrained, mobile first environments where informal commerce and cultural proximity shape behaviour more than formal retail systems. Ashley and Tuten (2015) show that branded social content can build engagement and community, yet their work assumes ready access to professional content production and analytics, which raises questions about how far such prescriptions transfer to small fashion SMEs with limited budgets and skills. Appel et al. (2020) argue that social media's future lies in data driven targeting and social commerce, but in many African settings patchy infrastructure, device constraints and digital literacy gaps mean that simpler tools like WhatsApp broadcasts and status updates often carry more practical weight than sophisticated ad funnels. Sestino et al. (2022) highlight that fashion brands in emerging markets must navigate fragmented channels and infrastructural limits, suggesting that adaptations such as informal marketing,

platform-led discovery, and strong reliance on cultural storytelling are not optional add-ons but core strategic responses. Osei and Bosro (2024) further emphasise that Ghanaian fashion designers rely heavily on local symbolism, community ties and low cost digital tactics to compensate for financial and technological constraints, underscoring the need to reinterpret global strategy templates so that omnichannel integration, influencer collaboration and sustainability narratives are grounded in the everyday realities of WhatsApp commerce, informal networks and culturally resonant storytelling that characterise fashion branding in Ghana.

## **2.4 Fashion Branding in Emerging Markets and Africa**

### **2.4.1 Emerging Market Communication Challenges**

Citrawijaya et al. (2024) show that SMEs in emerging markets typically design digital communication under severe resource constraints, which leads to adhoc use of cheap tools, limited content quality and weak integration across platforms. Their analysis suggests that, although social media and basic SEO are accessible, many firms lack the strategic planning and coordination needed to turn these tools into coherent brand building systems. Deku et al. (2024) confirm this picture across several emerging economies, arguing that financial limitations, low technology adoption and weak analytics capabilities restrict SMEs' ability to align digital campaigns with broader business objectives and to maintain consistent branding. Read together, these studies point to a structural pattern where resource limitations, skill shortages and fragmented tool use produce inconsistent brand identities and fragile digital strategies in many emerging market contexts.

Mtjilibe et al. (2024) add a communication focused lens by reviewing how SMEs use social media for organisational engagement and finding recurring challenges around content planning, audience targeting, measurement and management of negative feedback, which questions optimistic claims that social platforms automatically level the playing field for smaller firms. Boadee (2024) narrows the

lens to Ghanaian SMEs and identifies unreliable internet infrastructure, limited technical expertise, time constraints and reluctance to invest in professional support as key barriers to effective social media adoption, even when owners recognise its importance. These findings together highlight that, in emerging markets and in Ghana in particular, many SMEs fall back on low cost, informal and often reactive social media activity that lacks integration with offline efforts, leaving branding inconsistent and strategic communication capabilities underdeveloped.

#### **2.4.2 African Fashion Industry**

The African fashion industry has entered what many commentators describe as a renaissance, marked by the rise of luxury and ready to wear brands that translate local aesthetics into globally legible styles. UNESCO (2023) frames this growth largely in economic and developmental terms, highlighting youth demographics, digital expansion and export potential, yet gives less attention to how individual designers construct brand narratives that travel between Lagos, Johannesburg, Accra and global capitals. England et al. (2021) respond to this gap by conceptualising “Africa Fashion Futures” as a creative economy built on dense networks of designers, artisans and cultural intermediaries, suggesting that the renaissance is as much about symbolic power and narratives of Africanness as it is about GDP or jobs. This tension becomes visible in branding approaches of labels such as Lisa Folawiyo, MaXhosa Africa and Orange Culture, whose practices are often cited in policy reports as export success stories but whose day to day brand work revolves around crafting distinctive visual identities, colour palettes and silhouettes that remix Ankara, Xhosa knit symbolism and gender fluid tailoring for both local and global audiences.

Comunian et al. (2025) argue that African designers are actively re defining the geography of fashion by positioning cities such as Lagos and Nairobi as nodal fashion hubs, which challenges UNESCO’s more top down narrative that sees African fashion mainly as an emerging sector waiting to be scaled

up through investment and infrastructure. Murray (2025) complicates this further in her interview with Adebayo Oke Lawal of Orange Culture, showing how a single Nigerian brand uses storytelling around Black masculinity, queer visibility and emotional vulnerability to build a pan African and diasporic community, rather than simply chasing Western markets. Placed alongside England et al. (2021), who stress local development and creative agency, these accounts suggest that Africa's fashion renaissance is driven less by anonymous "Made in Africa" demand and more by designers who mobilise dress as a language of identity and resistance, using social media campaigns, fashion weeks and cross border collaborations to blend local heritage with cosmopolitan aspirations and to brand Africa not as a trend, but as a plural cultural project.

### **2.4.3 Hybrid Communication Approaches**

Hybrid communication in African fashion branding combines long standing practices of word of mouth, community networks and cultural symbolism with an increasingly dense layer of digital channels such as Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp. UNESCO (2023) notes that African fashion growth is driven both by local ecosystems of tailors, markets and fashion weeks and by social media visibility, which suggests that offline reputation and cultural capital still anchor brand meaning even as online reach expands. Nhuvira and Dorasamy (2021) show that South African fashion SMEs rely on retail shops and face to face selling while simultaneously using WhatsApp to send product images and prices to customer lists, indicating a pragmatic blend of interpersonal trust and low cost digital broadcasting rather than a full shift to e commerce. Otoo et al. (2023) find that Ghanaian SMEs integrate Instagram and WhatsApp not only for promotion but also for coordination and relationship management, which implies that messaging platforms extend existing community logics into digital spaces instead of replacing them. Opoku and Baiden (2023) report that small fashion businesses in Sunyani use Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp to showcase designs and maintain contact with clients, yet their success still depends on repeat customers, referrals and culturally resonant storytelling, illustrating how local influencers, kinship ties and symbolic use of textiles such as kente

are woven together with social media content in hybrid communication strategies that sustain brand identity and loyalty.

## **2.5 Ghana's Fashion Industry and Communication Landscape**

### **2.5.1 Industry Context and Cultural Heritage**

Ghana's fashion industry is anchored in a long history of textile production in which kente, Adinkra and related fabrics operate as visual archives of social values, spirituality and historical memory. Daitey, Takyi and Bonnah (2025) argue that indigenous textiles such as kente, kete, Adinkra and fugu remain central to Ghana's cultural heritage because they symbolise identity and continuity even as designers adapt them for contemporary fashion, yet their study focuses more on preservation and design innovation than on everyday livelihoods. Doragia (2022) shifts the lens by examining the socio economic impact of weaving in the Upper East Region and shows that textile craft underpins local employment, skills transfer and cultural tourism, which suggests that heritage textiles are not only symbolic assets but also economic safety nets for communities. Pardie (2023) then highlights how the textile printing industry extends this legacy into modern printed fabrics, arguing that changing design concepts in Ghanaian prints shape both cultural identity and economic development, and implicitly questioning any narrative that treats tradition and industrial innovation as separate spheres.

Within this context, contemporary Ghanaian fashion brands demonstrate how cultural heritage is translated into branded identities that speak to local and global markets. Pardie (2023) notes that designers increasingly rework traditional motifs and colour codes into marketable printed fabrics, which opens space for labels that frame kente and other symbols as part of a modern lifestyle rather than occasional ceremonial wear. AAE Africa (2020) profiles brands such as Christie Brown and presents them as examples of businesses that blend neo-African aesthetics with sustainability and social media visibility, yet its emphasis on success stories leaves less explored how mid-sized brands like Pistis and Chocolate Clothing navigate the same terrain with more limited resources. Reading these accounts together suggests that Ghana's fashion industry contributes to GDP, employment and

export potential while simultaneously carrying the burden of representing national culture, and that leading brands such as Christie Brown, Pistis and Chocolate Clothing operate at the intersection of heritage textiles, aspirational branding and the broader creative economy.

### **2.5.2 Current Communication Practices and Challenges**

Ghanaian fashion SMEs rely heavily on low cost digital tools and face to face interactions to communicate with customers, typically combining Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp with pop up events, church programmes, weddings and local fairs. Opoku and Baiden (2023) show that small scale fashion brands in Sunyani use social media primarily for showcasing designs, promotions and basic interaction, and they note that designers understand the importance of these platforms but still treat them more as advertising noticeboards than as spaces for systematic brand building and relationship management. Adamu (2023) finds high levels of e commerce adoption among small fashion design enterprises in Kumasi and reports that many firms integrate digital catalogues and messaging into sales processes, which suggests that a segment of the industry is moving beyond simple display posts toward transactional and service oriented online communication. Read together, these studies indicate that current practices are dominated by visual posts, direct messaging and occasional influencer or brand ambassador collaborations, but tend to lack formal planning, consistent brand narratives and professional public relations support.

Communication challenges for Ghanaian fashion SMEs reflect both structural constraints and gaps in strategic capability. Yaro (2022) identifies unreliable internet connectivity, inadequate digital skills, limited access to devices and difficulties with online payment systems as major obstacles to digital marketing for fashion designers in Bolgatanga, which reinforces the picture of fragmented and reactive communication rather than integrated campaigns. Hanif et al. (2024) show at the wider SME level that social media marketing is seen as important for performance, yet many managers are reluctant to

commit financial and human resources to market oriented activities, leading to inconsistent branding, irregular posting and weak analytics. From a resource based view, these findings imply that strategic communication capability, including planning, content integration, visual identity management and basic PR functions, is not yet a well developed internal resource for many Ghanaian fashion SMEs, and that building such communication capabilities is essential if social media, influencer partnerships and local events are to translate into sustained brand equity rather than short term visibility.

## **2.6 Empirical Studies Review**

Empirical work on marketing communication in fashion and related SMEs has focused mainly on social media activities, engagement metrics and performance outcomes, with less attention to strategic communication capability and brand equity. Ananda et al. (2017) used case studies and Facebook content analysis of six European fashion SMEs and reported that social media marketing was dominated by promotional posts and influencer collaborations aimed at short term awareness, while systematic brand building and integrated planning were largely absent. Anand (2020) synthesised studies on fashion brands and social media and concluded that research is fragmented across platforms and countries, with limited examination of how internal capabilities and resource constraints shape communication strategy choices. Together, these studies show that the literature has established the importance of social media visibility for fashion brands, but has not sufficiently explored how SMEs configure their overall communication system to support brand equity in a sustained and resource conscious way.

Evidence from other fashion SME contexts reinforces the emphasis on social media engagement while hinting at an underdeveloped discussion of communication capability. Arjang et al. (2024) examined fashion SMEs in Bali using a survey and social media analytics and found that firms relied heavily on Instagram and online marketplaces to stimulate customer engagement and inquiries, yet success was measured mainly through likes, comments and direct messages rather than brand equity indicators such as associations, perceived quality or loyalty. Senanu et al. (2023) used survey data from over

1,100 young consumers in an emerging market context and showed that sales campaigns, user generated content and high quality visuals are key drivers of engagement with non luxury fashion SME adverts, but they also concluded that most firms adopt a tactical, campaign based approach rather than embedding these tools in a long term strategic communication programme. These studies suggest that while content quality and campaign design clearly shape engagement, there is still limited empirical insight into how fashion SMEs orchestrate multiple online and offline tools under budget and skill constraints to build coherent brand equity.

Studies focusing explicitly on African and Ghanaian fashion SMEs highlight the importance of social media for visibility and customer reach, yet they rarely analyse brand equity or communication capability in depth. Opoku and Baiden (2023) used a case study approach in Sunyani and found that small fashion businesses benefit from using Facebook and Instagram to showcase designs and promote products, but they observed inconsistent posting, weak visual identity and limited strategic planning, which undermined the development of a strong and recognisable brand. Hanif et al. (2024) surveyed 200 Ghanaian SMEs across sectors and reported that social media marketing has a positive effect on firm performance, although the study treated communication as a broad construct and did not unpack sector specific issues such as cultural storytelling or hybrid online offline practices in fashion. Boafo et al. (2025) further showed that marketing strategies improve SME marketing performance in Ghana through the mediating role of marketing knowledge, implying that capability building is crucial, yet they did not examine how these strategies translate into concrete communication activities such as channel integration, message consistency or brand equity management for creative industries. These Ghanaian studies collectively indicate that digital tools are widely recognised as important for SME growth, but they leave open questions about how fashion SMEs can transform ad hoc social media use into a structured strategic communication capability that supports brand equity development.

Empirical research on integrated marketing communications and brand equity in other sectors provides additional insight into how coordinated communication can shape brand value, although many studies

assume relatively resource rich environments. Rahayu et al. (2021) used quantitative analysis of Gojek users in Indonesia and found that integrated use of mobile advertising, promotions and in app communication strengthens customer based brand equity, supporting the theoretical assumptions of Aaker and Keller that consistent and interactive communication enhances awareness, associations, perceived quality and loyalty. Qi (2024) surveyed tourists and reported that digital IMC consistency and interactivity significantly improve all dimensions of destination brand equity, suggesting that a coordinated message structure can be treated as a transferable performance driver across contexts, yet the study did not consider contexts where firms depend heavily on informal or low cost channels. These findings show that IMC can have a strong positive effect on brand equity, but they are based on digital platforms and destinations that often operate with sophisticated technology and analytics, raising questions about how far these models can be applied in resource constrained fashion SME environments such as Ghana.

Ghanaian and broader African empirical work on IMC and brand outcomes confirms the positive role of integrated communication, but tends to focus on services such as finance and telecommunications rather than fashion. Anabila (2019) applied PLS SEM to survey data from microfinance institutions in Ghana and found that integrated marketing communications improve both brand equity and business performance, yet the operationalisation of IMC was generic and did not include cultural symbolism or informal word of mouth channels that are central to creative sectors. Amoako et al. (2019) analysed social media marketing in the Ghanaian telecommunications industry and demonstrated that activities on platforms like Facebook enhance brand association, loyalty and perceived quality, effectively validating customer based brand equity logic, although they treated social media campaigns as isolated tools rather than as elements of a fully integrated strategic communication system. Quayson et al. (2023) examined the banking sector and found that direct marketing, public relations and sales promotion are important drivers of brand loyalty, which suggests that some IMC dimensions may be more influential than others in emerging market services, but they did not address how these insights

translate to SMEs with tight budgets or to industries where visual identity, cultural narratives and hybrid online offline communication are critical, such as fashion. These studies collectively support the view that integration and consistency in communication enhance brand related outcomes, but they leave theoretical and practical gaps concerning how IMC and brand equity models should be adapted for Ghanaian fashion SMEs facing resource and infrastructural constraints.

Empirical work on SMEs in emerging economies more generally highlights the role of IMC as a dynamic capability linking market orientation and performance, although specific guidance on communication design for creative sectors remains limited. Butkouskaya et al. (2024) used structural equation modelling on data from Spain and Belarus and showed that IMC mediates the effect of market orientation on SME performance, with stronger mediation in the developing economy sample, which indicates that structured communication capabilities are especially important in less developed markets. Sharma (2024) similarly argued that combining market orientation with IMC improves SME outcomes, yet the roadmap proposed is generic and does not address sector specific practices such as storytelling, visual branding or use of informal networks. In Ghana, Owusu Forfie (2022) reviewed digital marketing strategies and concluded that SMEs tend to adopt social media and other tools in a piecemeal way without coherent strategy, and that global frameworks do not adequately reflect infrastructural limitations, skills gaps and local customer journeys. Karikari et al. (2025) found that digital transformation capabilities and aligned green practices improve sustainable SME performance in Ghana, reinforcing the idea that structured capabilities, rather than isolated tools, drive long term outcomes, but their model was not specific to marketing communication design. These studies reinforce the argument that IMC should be seen as a capability embedded in the resource base of SMEs, while also underlining the need for context specific frameworks that reflect emerging market realities and sector characteristics.

Taken together, the empirical literature shows that social media and integrated communication activities can enhance engagement, brand equity and performance across diverse settings, including

some work on Ghanaian SMEs and limited research on fashion businesses. Ananda et al. (2017), Arjang et al. (2024) and Senanu et al. (2023) highlight the dominance of tactical social media campaigns in fashion SMEs, with focus on short term engagement rather than coherent brand equity building. Opoku and Baiden (2023), Hanif et al. (2024) and Boafo et al. (2025) show that Ghanaian SMEs benefit from digital marketing but often lack strategic communication planning and capability. Anabila (2019), Amoako et al. (2019), Quayson et al. (2023), Rahayu et al. (2021) and Qi (2024) provide evidence that integrated communication can strengthen brand equity and performance, yet their models are either generic, service sector oriented or located in relatively well resourced digital environments. Across these studies, there is limited qualitative exploration of how internal resources such as creative design skills, cultural and symbolic assets, human capital and relational networks are translated into integrated communication practices in fashion SMEs, and little guidance on how IMC and brand equity theories can be reworked for Ghana's hybrid offline online fashion ecosystem. The present study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on Ghanaian fashion SMEs, examining how they currently combine online and offline tools, how resource constraints and cultural storytelling shape their communication capabilities, and how these patterns can inform the design of a strategic marketing communication framework that realistically builds brand equity in an emerging market context.

## **2.7 Research Gaps and Study Justification**

Existing empirical work on integrated marketing communication, brand equity and SME performance shows that coordinated communication activities can improve awareness, associations, loyalty and financial outcomes in both developed and emerging markets, including Ghana. Anabila (2019) and Butkouskaya et al. (2024) report that IMC strengthens brand equity and mediates the impact of market orientation on SME performance, yet they largely treat communication as an outward facing activity rather than as a capability grounded in creative, cultural and relational resources. Ghanaian and African

studies, such as Amoako et al. (2019) and Senanu et al. (2023), further indicate that social media marketing and visually rich, authentic content support engagement and brand related outcomes, but they focus on generic sectors or isolated digital tactics and pay limited attention to fashion, informal channels or hybrid online offline practices. Current evidence therefore suggests that while IMC and social media are important drivers of SME performance, there is little qualitative insight into how internal resources, cultural symbolism and communication practices interact to build brand equity in Ghanaian fashion SMEs under resource constraints. This study addresses that gap by using an interpretivist qualitative design to examine how fashion SMEs in Ghana deploy creative design skills, cultural and symbolic assets, human capital and relational networks as communication capabilities, and by developing a strategic marketing communication framework that links these internal resources to realistic brand equity building in the country's fashion industry.

## **2.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has outlined the theoretical and empirical foundations necessary for developing a strategic marketing communication framework for Ghana's fashion SMEs by integrating Brand Equity Theory, the Resource Based View and contemporary IMC scholarship. The discussion traced how global fashion communication has evolved, highlighted how African and Ghanaian designers mix cultural symbolism with digital tools, and reviewed empirical studies showing that while integrated communication strengthens brand equity, most existing research is Western based, platform specific and rarely grounded in emerging market or fashion SME realities. The review also identified key gaps, including limited studies that combine RBV and brand equity in fashion communication, scarce qualitative work on Ghanaian SMEs and insufficient models that account for resource constraints, cultural narratives and hybrid communication practices, thereby justifying the need for a contextually adapted framework that helps Ghanaian fashion SMEs leverage internal creative and cultural resources to build coherent, strategic communication systems suited to their operating environments.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

This chapter details the research methodology employed to address the research questions and objectives outlined in Chapter One. It provided a comprehensive explanation of the research design, population, sampling strategy, data collection methods, data analysis procedure, and the ethical considerations that guided the study. The methodology was designed to be rigorous and systematic, ensuring that the findings are credible, trustworthy, and directly relevant to developing a Strategic Marketing Communication Framework for fashion SMEs in Ghana. The choice of a qualitative approach was justified by the need to explore and understand the complex, nuanced experiences and perspectives of fashion entrepreneurs in an emerging market context.

#### **3.1 Research Philosophy and Approach**

This study was firmly anchored in the Interpretivism research philosophy. This philosophical stance is fundamentally grounded in the belief that reality is not an objective, external entity but rather a

social construct, meaning it can only be truly understood through the subjective experiences and interpretations of the people involved. By adopting this perspective, the research acknowledges the complexity and context-specific nature of human experiences, emphasizing that knowledge is generated through deep engagement with and interpretation of participants' perspectives, as opposed to measuring detached, universal laws (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Interpretivism was essential for this study because the effectiveness and meaning of strategic marketing communication are not objective, measurable facts; rather, they are co-created through the interactions, perceptions, and cultural perspectives of the fashion entrepreneurs and their audience in the Ghanaian context. Ontologically, the study assumed that multiple, subjective realities exist, shaped by the unique operational and cultural contexts of fashion SMEs in Ghana.

Epistemologically, knowledge was not merely discovered but was instead constructed by the researcher's interpretation of these subjective realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Consequently, a Qualitative Exploratory Design was adopted. This inductive approach was required because the ultimate objective was not to measure pre-existing variables but to develop a Strategic Marketing Communication Framework. This theory-building goal demanded that rich, contextual insights emerged from the real-world experiences of the entrepreneurs rather than being imposed by predefined theoretical models.

### **3.2 Research Design**

This section outlines the blueprint for the study, detailing the overall approach, the logic of inquiry, and the methods used to generate robust findings that directly address the research questions. The study adopted an exploratory qualitative design. This approach was essential because the research aimed to uncover and deeply understand the complex, context-specific process through which integrated marketing communications (IMC) shape customer-based brand equity (CBBE) within the under-researched setting of Ghanaian fashion SMEs. The exploratory nature of the design is

appropriate for generating rich, descriptive, and interpretive insights into phenomena where existing theoretical knowledge is scarce or limited in specific local contexts.

The core logic of inquiry involved generating knowledge through the interpretation of subjective meanings and experiences, which aligns with the interpretivist philosophy previously discussed. The primary analytic strategy employed was Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke 2006). RTA was chosen for its flexibility and ability to capture nuanced, patterned meanings across the data set, allowing for the deep theoretical development required to illuminate the multifaceted relationship between IMC practices and brand equity outcomes in this specific market.

### **3.3 Profile of Study Area**

Greater Accra was selected as the study area due to its status as Ghana's primary commercial and creative hub. With a population of over 5.4 million and high population density (GSS, 2021), the region offers a concentrated urban market ideal for examining fashion marketing. Its superior logistical infrastructure including Tema Port and Kotoka International Airport combined with high mobile data and mobile money penetration, creates a unique omnichannel environment where formal and informal fashion commerce thrive (NCA, 2025; Bank of Ghana, 2025). This intersection of dense consumer demand, established creative arts frameworks, and digital readiness provides a robust setting for analysing how fashion SMEs build brand equity.

### **3.4 Sample Population and Unit of Analysis**

#### **3.4.1 Sample Population**

The target population comprised owners and key decision-makers of fashion small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating within the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. The study focused on businesses engaged in clothing, accessories, footwear, or textile-based design and production.

Consistent with the Ghana Enterprise Agency (2022), a fashion SME is operationally defined as an independently owned brand employing fewer than 100 staff and actively marketing its products

through online and/or offline channels. The population therefore included founders, owners, managers, or communication leads responsible for strategic marketing and brand-related decision-making within their firms.

In addition to SME decision-makers, three fashion public relations experts were included as key informants to provide industry-level insight and contextual interpretation of strategic marketing communication practices.

### **3.4.2 Unit of Analysis**

The study employed two interview based units of analysis. First, fashion SME decision makers were analysed as strategic actors responsible for planning and implementing marketing communication activities within their firms. Second, fashion public relations experts were analysed as key informants whose interview data provided an external professional perspective to support contextual interpretation and strengthen analytical depth.

Using these two participant groups enabled the study to examine how strategic intent, communication choices, resource constraints, and culturally embedded narratives shape marketing communication practices and brand building outcomes among Ghanaian fashion SMEs.

### **3.5 Sampling Strategy and Size**

Sampling is a central component of qualitative research because it determines the relevance, richness, and depth of evidence that can be generated to address the research objectives (Patton, 2015). In interpretivist studies, sampling is concerned with identifying participants who can provide meaningful, experience based insights rather than statistically representative data. Probability sampling techniques, such as simple random sampling or stratified sampling, are typically used when generalisability is the primary goal, since they give every member of the population an equal chance of selection (Lohr, 2021). In contrast, non probability sampling is more suitable for exploratory studies because

participants are selected based on their relevance, accessibility, and knowledge of the phenomenon being investigated (Palinkas et al., 2015).

This study adopted a non probability approach because the aim was not to estimate population parameters but to understand how communication practices operated within Ghanaian fashion SMEs and how these actors interpreted their branding challenges. Within the non probability category, the study employed purposive sampling, which enabled the deliberate selection of information rich cases that possessed characteristics and experience aligned with the research objectives (Patton, 2015). This choice was justified because the units of interest extended beyond the general SME population to include actors who made or influenced brand communication decisions, as well as external experts who provided strategic context (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The sampling frame was generated through a structured industry mapping process and network based identification of relevant participants. Fashion SMEs were identified through fashion trade association lists, professional networks, and referrals, supported by publicly available directories and brand contact points. Participant recruitment proceeded through direct outreach via formal email or official direct messages, followed by a formal invitation letter that outlined the study's purpose and assured confidentiality. The sample comprised two participant categories: Fashion SME Actors, including owners, creative directors, communication leads, and digital marketing managers who shaped internal communication decisions, and Fashion PR and Communication Experts, comprising consultants and agency leads with demonstrable experience advising fashion brands in Ghana. Including the expert group supported external contextual interpretation and strengthened the analytical depth of the interview evidence (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Sampling size in qualitative research reflects the need for thematic depth rather than numeric representation (Wutich et al., 2024). A sample is considered sufficient when it allows the researcher to reach data saturation, meaning no new patterns or insights emerge from additional data (Guest et

al., 2006). Guided by this principle, the study targeted 20 participants (n = 20), distributed across Fashion SME Actors and Fashion PR and Communication Experts, to ensure coverage of both internal practice and external professional perspective (Wutich et al., 2024). The fashion SME participants represented a range of product and brand categories, including ready to wear, accessories, modest wear, bridal couture, streetwear, footwear, children's wear, and upcycled fashion, ensuring diversity in communication experiences and operational contexts.

### **3.5.1 Inclusion Criteria**

The inclusion criteria ensured that all selected participants were directly relevant to the study's strategic communication focus. Eligible fashion SMEs had to be Ghana based, locally owned, and operating within the Greater Accra Region, with at least two years of active business operations and consistent use of digital marketing platforms, to ensure participants could meaningfully discuss their marketing communication practices and brand building experiences. Participants had to be founders, owners, creative directors, marketing managers, or individuals responsible for brand communication decisions so that they could provide rich strategic insight into planning, implementation, and perceived outcomes.

In addition to SME actors, the study included fashion PR and communication experts. These experts qualified for inclusion if they possessed demonstrable industry experience advising or managing communication for multiple Ghanaian fashion brands. Their expertise provided a broader professional perspective that strengthened contextual interpretation of the fashion SME narratives.

### **3.3.2 Exclusion Criteria**

The study excluded brands and individuals that did not meet the core requirements for informational richness and relevance. Brands that were purely retail outlets and were not involved in the design and production of fashion items were excluded, since the focus was on SME brand building efforts. Brands under two years of age were excluded because they were less likely to have stable marketing

communication routines and sufficient experience to reflect on strategic choices and outcomes. Brands that operated solely offline with no active digital presence were excluded because the study examined contemporary marketing communication practices where digital platforms commonly shape planning, execution, and audience engagement in the fashion sector.

Furthermore, employees who held positions with no final decision-making authority over marketing strategy were excluded to ensure the collection of strategic level insights from those directly responsible for communication decisions.

### **3.6 Data Collection Methods**

#### **3.6.1 Primary Data: Semi-Structured Interviews**

The study collected primary data through in depth semi structured interviews, which are well suited to interpretivist research because they enable detailed exploration of participants' lived experiences, strategic reasoning, and perceptions regarding marketing communication practices. Semi structured interviewing supports both consistency and flexibility, because it allows the researcher to maintain thematic focus while probing for context specific detail and clarification (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). An interview guide was used to align discussions with the research objectives, while allowing participants to expand on issues they considered most relevant.

The interview sample included two participant groups. The first group comprised owners, founders, creative directors, and communication leads of fashion SMEs in Greater Accra, who provided insight into internal resource constraints, strategic choices, branding challenges, and everyday communication routines. The second group comprised fashion PR and communication experts, including publicists, brand strategists, and digital marketing consultants with experience supporting multiple Ghanaian fashion brands. Their perspectives strengthened contextual interpretation by providing sector level reflections on IMC adaptation, brand equity building, culturally resonant storytelling, and practical coordination challenges (Bowen, 2009).

Interviews were conducted virtually or in person, depending on participant availability. With informed consent, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy and meaning. This approach supported analytical depth by capturing both internal organisational accounts and external professional interpretations of communication practice.

### **3.6.2 Interview Documentation and Data Management**

Interview files, transcripts, and supporting analytic notes were organised systematically to support traceability and secure handling. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely, access was restricted to the researcher, and file naming and version control were applied to reduce errors and support an auditable workflow. These procedures ensured that the dataset remained complete, consistent, and suitable for rigorous thematic analysis.

### **3.7 Data Analysis Procedure**

This study employed thematic analysis as the primary technique for interpreting the interview data, using the six phase approach of familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report writing (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Analysis began with verbatim transcription and repeated reading of transcripts to build familiarity with participants' meanings and recurring patterns. Initial codes were then generated by systematically labelling segments relevant to strategic marketing communication practices, communication choices, resource constraints, cultural narratives, and perceived brand building outcomes.

Codes were grouped into broader categories to develop themes that captured patterned meanings across participants. Themes were reviewed and refined for coherence and distinction, then defined and named to clarify what each theme represented and how it informed the framework. The report was produced by weaving themes into a coherent narrative supported by illustrative interview excerpts from both fashion SME actors and PR experts. Analysis continued until saturation was indicated by

repetition of dominant patterns and limited emergence of new interpretive insights (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

SRQR and COREQ informed transparent reporting of context, sampling, data collection, and researcher reflexivity (O'Brien et al., 2014). Trustworthiness was supported through analytic memos, peer debriefing, an auditable decision trail, and thick description (Nowell et al., 2017). NVivo supported coding and retrieval, while matrix displays in a spreadsheet supported cross case comparison and structured reporting.

### **3.8 Trustworthiness Criteria**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research ensured that findings were credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable, reflecting the accuracy and integrity of the data collected and analysed (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was strengthened through sustained engagement with respondents and iterative member reflections that enabled participants to validate interpretations, clarify meaning, and reduce misrepresentation of their views (O'Brien et al., 2014). The use of two interview participant groups, fashion SME actors and fashion PR and communication experts, strengthened contextual interpretation by enabling systematic comparison between internal accounts of practice and external professional perspectives within the same sector. Reflexive journaling was maintained to document biases, analytic decisions, and shifts in interpretation to enhance transparency and alignment between the data and its meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Peer debriefing with academic supervisors further strengthened analytic rigour by challenging assumptions and checking the internal consistency of emerging themes.

Dependability was reinforced through an audit trail comprising interview guides, coded transcripts, analytic memos, and data management logs, allowing the study process to be examined and followed under similar conditions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Confirmability and transferability were supported through systematic documentation and rich contextual description of the study setting and participants'

business environments, enabling readers to judge applicability to comparable contexts (Tong, Sainsbury and Craig, 2007). Thick description of strategic communication routines, brand decision processes, customer engagement practices, and operational constraints was used to ground interpretations in participants' accounts. Data were stored securely on encrypted drives with version control to preserve the chain of evidence and support ethical compliance. These measures ensured that the findings represented participants' lived experiences and could inform research and practice in integrated marketing communication within Ghana's fashion SME sector.

### **3.8 Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using thematic analysis guided by the six phase approach of familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report writing (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Interviews were audio recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and repeatedly reviewed to build familiarity with participants' meanings and recurring patterns. Coding was conducted systematically to label segments related to communication choices, resource constraints, cultural narratives, and perceived brand building outcomes, after which codes were clustered into broader categories to generate themes that captured patterned meanings across fashion SME actors and fashion PR experts. Themes were refined for coherence and distinctiveness, then defined to explain how they informed the culturally grounded strategic marketing communication framework. NVivo supported coding and retrieval, while matrix summaries in a spreadsheet aided cross case comparison and structured reporting, with analysis continuing until saturation was indicated by repetition of dominant patterns and limited emergence of new interpretive insights (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

Throughout the entire research process, the highest ethical standards were rigorously maintained to ensure the rights, privacy and well being of all participants (Orb et al., 2001). Formal approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee prior to any data collection. Key ethical

principles included informed consent, where all participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, voluntary nature and right to withdraw without penalty, with documentation secured through written or recorded agreement. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms for participants in the final report. The use of brand names for contextual insight was explicitly discussed and negotiated with each participant on a case by case basis to balance the need for practical examples with the priority of protecting their strategic information. All collected data were secured on a password protected device, accessible only to the research team.

### **3.10 Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined the methodological approach used to examine strategic marketing communication practices among Ghanaian fashion SMEs. It justified the qualitative exploratory design and the use of purposive sampling to select fashion SME actors and fashion PR and communication experts with relevant experience. It described the interview based data collection process and explained the ethical safeguards applied to protect confidentiality and informed consent. It explained how thematic analysis was used to code transcripts, develop themes, and interpret patterned meanings across participants. It also presented the trustworthiness measures used to strengthen credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents, analyzes, and discusses the findings derived from interviews conducted with selected fashion SMEs in Ghana. It interprets the results in relation to the study's objectives, linking them with existing theories of Integrated Marketing Communication and brand equity. The discussion highlights how global practices intersect with Ghana's unique cultural and operational realities.

## **4.2 Demographics of participants**

The demographic profile presents a deliberately diverse sample comprising 17 fashion SME owners and 3 PR public relations experts operating within Ghana's fashion communication ecosystem. The SME owners form the dominant group and represent an active cross section of the local fashion sector with experience levels ranging from three to twelve years. Their age distribution is centred within the 30 to 39 and 40 to 49 brackets which aligns with typical entrepreneurship patterns where individuals build expertise before launching independent brands. Several participants fall within the 25 to 34 group, which reflects the growing presence of digitally native designers who depend heavily on social platforms for visibility. The SME founders also reflect a balanced mix of creative designers, production-focused owners, tailoring specialists, and brand managers, which allows for varied insights into communication behaviour, branding challenges, and audience engagement realities.

The three PR experts provide complementary professional perspectives drawn from fashion communications, digital strategy, influencer management, and corporate brand building. Their experience ranges from 7 to 18 years, which is typical of practitioners who have progressed through agency, consulting, or corporate roles. Their inclusion strengthens the study by introducing voices that can critique SME communication practices and compare them with IMC and brand equity principles. The small but experienced PR group provides strategic depth while allowing SME perspectives to remain dominant and contextually grounded. This blend ensures that findings integrate practical experiences from entrepreneurs with interpretive insights from communication professionals which supports a richer understanding of how communication practices shape brand development in the Ghanaian fashion landscape.

### **Table 4.2: Demographics of participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Years Experience</b>	<b>of Sector</b>	<b>Position Level</b>
R1	Female	30–39	6	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Creative Designer)
R2	Male	40–49	10	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Production Lead)
R3	Female	25–34	4	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Brand Manager)
R4	Male	25–34	3	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Creative Designer)
R5	Female	30–39	7	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Brand Manager)
R6	Male	40–49	12	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Tailoring Specialist)
R7	Female	30–39	8	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Production Lead)
R8	Male	30–39	5	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Creative Designer)
R9	Female	40–49	11	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Brand Manager)
R10	Male	30–39	9	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Production Lead)
R11	Female	25–34	4	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Creative Designer)
R12	Male	40–49	10	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Tailoring Specialist)
R13	Female	30–39	7	PR/Comms (Fashion)	Senior PR Expert (Digital Strategy/Agency)
R14	Male	40–49	18	PR/Comms (Fashion)	Senior PR Expert (Corporate Brand Building)
R15	Female	30–39	6	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Creative Designer)
R16	Male	30–39	8	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Tailoring Specialist)
R17	Female	30–39	12	PR/Comms (Fashion)	PR Expert (Influencer Management/Consulting)
R18	Male	40–49	9	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Production Lead)
R19	Female	30–39	7	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Tailoring Specialist)

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Years Experience	of Sector	Position Level
R20	Male	25–34	5	Fashion SME	Owner/Founder (Creative Designer)

(Source: Field Survey, 2025)

### 4.3 Objective One: Current marketing communication practices within Ghana's fashion SMEs and challenges that constrain brand equity development.

#### 4.3.1 Heavy Digital Reliance and Platform-driven Communication Behaviour

SME owners described a marketing landscape dominated by Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok, reflecting an environment where cost efficiency, visual appeal and ease of use shape channel choice. Their digital communication practices appear to be guided more by habit and peer influence than by formal IMC strategy. SME participants repeatedly noted that Instagram functions as a digital storefront, while WhatsApp serves as the primary conversion point because customers feel safer completing purchases through personalised contact. Comments by some participants reflect this:

*“Instagram brings them in but WhatsApp is where people actually decide to buy.”* (R1, SME)

*“TikTok helps with attention. After that customers come to WhatsApp for clarity.”* (R11, SME)

a Fashion PR expert also noted that, *“Most SMEs use platforms in isolation which affects message flow and weakens brand memory.”* (R13, PR expert)

The literature explains that digital SMEs often select channels based on affordability and familiarity rather than strategic coherence, thereby limiting opportunities for effective message integration (Abbasi et al., 2022). Research on brand equity also states that consistent exposure across touchpoints strengthens brand associations and memory structures (Keller, 1993). The combined insights show

that while digital presence is strong, strategic alignment across platforms is limited which affects the long-term development of brand equity.

#### **4.3.2 Audience Fragmentation and Context-based Segmentation Practices**

Participants described customer segmentation as a process shaped by platform cultures rather than demographic profiling. SME owners often targeted consumer groups by observing where those groups naturally spend time online. For example, corporate wear brands relied heavily on LinkedIn because customers expected professionalism there, while youth and streetwear brands used TikTok to match the fast paced, trend driven preferences of younger audiences.

*“LinkedIn works better because corporate men trust what they see there.” (R9, SME)*

*“Gen Z is on TikTok so my drops and trends work better there.” (R4, SME)*

PR experts confirmed this behavioural segmentation pattern and noted that it reflects an emerging market adaptation of IMC where platform credibility becomes a proxy for trust.

*“The platform itself sends a signal. Customers judge the brand depending on where they meet it.” (R17, PR expert)*

Studies on digital consumer behaviour in emerging markets show that trust formation is strongly influenced by context, peer norms, and platform identity, particularly where formal brand structures are still forming (Cao and Weerawardena, 2023). This creates opportunities for targeted communication but poses risks for brand equity if meaning becomes fragmented across platforms. The mixed voices indicate that SMEs intuitively segment well but lack the systems needed to harmonise messaging across different audience clusters.

### 4.3.3 Visual Authenticity and Social Proof as Core Persuasion Tools

SME owners consistently reported that their most effective content focuses on real life usage, behind the scenes processes and customer generated visuals. Try on videos, styling clips and user generated content were seen as essential tools for convincing customers of product quality. Many owners explained that these formats help reduce purchase anxiety, particularly for sizing and fabric issues.

*“Try on videos reduce doubt. Customers feel safer when they see the clothes on a real person.”*

(R15, SME)

*“Reposting customers builds trust because it looks more genuine than our own posts.”* (R19,

SME)

PR experts emphasised that reliance on authenticity cues reflects global trends in fashion communication where credibility and relatability shape consumer engagement.

*“Authentic content creates emotional closeness which small brands need to stand out.”* (R14,

PR expert)

Literature supports this emphasis on authenticity. Research on user generated content shows that consumers perceive peer visuals as more trustworthy than brand crafted images, leading to higher emotional engagement and stronger purchase intention (Sang et al., 2024). This suggests that while SMEs may lack professional production capabilities, their use of authenticity driven content provides a strategic advantage for equity building. However, both SMEs and PR experts noted that inconsistency in content quality can dilute the overall brand image which limits the long term value of these tactics.

### 4.3.4 Inventory-driven Planning Cycles and Reactive Communication Patterns

Participants described planning processes that respond directly to operational realities such as stock readiness, seasonal peaks, and the availability of time for content creation. Posting schedules often intensified during payday periods, product launches, and pop-up events, but became irregular during low production phases.

*“We plan around payday weekends or when new stock is ready. If we have nothing new, posting slows down.”* (R2, SME)

*“Before fairs, we batch shoot content then push daily during the event.”* (R18, SME)

PR experts acknowledged the necessity of these reactive cycles but cautioned that irregular posting weakens message persistence.

*“When posting depends on stock levels, the brand voice becomes unstable and customers forget the brand.”* (R17, PR expert)

Brand equity literature emphasises the importance of continuity, repetition and consistent exposure for strengthening mental availability (Keller, 1993). Studies on SME digital marketing similarly indicate that reactive communication produces short term sales spikes but undermines long term positioning because content flows follow operational pressure rather than strategic objectives (Cao and Weerawardena, 2023). The mixed insights show that SMEs prioritise immediate revenue generating opportunities but require structured planning tools to support sustained brand building.

#### **4.3.5 Informal Consistency Controls and Founder-led Brand Guardianship**

SME owners described brand consistency as a responsibility they manage personally. Their communication tone, colour selection and content style are guided by intuition rather than documented standards. Many founders noted that their brand’s identity “lives in their head,” which makes the brand feel authentic but also introduces vulnerability when they become busy or delegate tasks.

*“I handle all captions myself because I know the voice the brand should have.” (R5, SME)*

*“If I am not the one choosing photos, the page starts to feel disorganised.” (R12, SME)*

PR experts observed that while founder-led guardianship protects authenticity, it restricts scalability. They emphasised that brands without codified guidelines struggle to maintain coherence when content output grows or when multiple people create materials.

*“SMEs depend too much on the founder’s intuition, which prevents a consistent visual narrative.” (R14, PR expert)*

Literature supports this concern since Keller (1993) argues that coherent brand associations require stable identifiers across touchpoints. Research on SME branding further notes that reliance on tacit knowledge weakens message integration and introduces inconsistency in audience perception (Cao and Weerawardena, 2023). The combined voices indicate that SMEs possess strong personal branding instincts but lack structured systems to carry this identity reliably across channels.

#### **4.3.5 Shallow Metrics Orientation and Visibility-focused Evaluation Practices**

Participants across both groups explained that their evaluation practices rely heavily on visible metrics such as likes, comments, follower numbers, views and direct message enquiries. These metrics provide immediate feedback and influence decisions on what to post next. SME owners expressed difficulty interpreting deeper insights because advanced tools and analytics knowledge are limited.

*“If engagement drops I know something is wrong, but I do not know how to read deeper analytics.” (R3, SME)*

*“We use views and saves to judge if a message worked.” (R11, SME)*

PR experts confirmed that small brands rarely track metrics that speak to long-term brand health such as recall, loyalty indicators or message consistency.

*“SMEs look at numbers that appear on the screen but not at how customers actually perceive the brand.” (R17, PR expert)*

This aligns with research showing that surface-level metrics encourage content strategies optimised for visibility rather than sustainable brand equity (Abbasi et al., 2022). Keller’s framework highlights that true brand strength depends on awareness depth, imagery association and customer relationship development rather than short-term engagement spikes. The insights suggest that while SMEs are active in monitoring activity, their measurement practices limit the ability to understand or manage brand building trajectories.

#### **4.3.7 Structural and Market-driven Barriers to Awareness and Loyalty**

Participants identified several challenges that limit their ability to build strong and enduring brands. Algorithm shifts, rising advertising costs, audience fatigue, imitation by competitors and inconsistent customer behaviour were frequently cited. SME owners described a competitive environment where viral moments are unpredictable and often difficult to sustain.

*“You can be visible today and invisible tomorrow because the platform changes who sees you.” (R4, SME)*

*“Customers follow many brands so loyalty is not easy unless you keep reminding them.” (R7, SME)*

PR experts emphasised additional structural issues such as limited budgets, absence of professional communication systems and weak differentiation among brands in similar categories.

*“Many fashion SMEs look alike. Without a clear story customers move on quickly.” (R13, PR expert)*

Literature from emerging market settings notes that SMEs often face capability gaps that make consistent brand building difficult, especially where technological shifts and economic constraints affect communication reach (Cao and Weerawardena, 2023). Brand equity creation becomes fragile when brands cannot maintain continuity or distinctive identity cues (Keller, 1993). The combined responses reveal an ecosystem where digital noise, resource limitations and platform dynamics hinder the formation of stable brand relationships.

#### **4.3.6 Campaign Learning through Trial and Error and the Limits of Informal Evaluation**

Participants reflected on campaign experiences that shaped their communication decisions. Successful outcomes usually involved relatable content, trend alignment, accessible participation formats or strong storytelling. Campaign failures were associated with poor timing, insufficient visibility, or misalignment with audience expectations.

*“Our TikTok challenge worked because people could join without effort and it spread fast.”*

(R11, SME)

*“A Valentine promo flopped because we launched too late and people had already shopped.”*

(R8, SME)

PR experts observed that SMEs rarely document campaign insights which limits their ability to refine strategies.

*“Most SMEs learn in the moment but do not capture lessons for use in the next campaign.”*

(R17, PR expert)

Literature supports the importance of structured learning cycles in IMC where message testing, feedback loops and planned evaluations improve future communication outcomes (Keller, 1993). Studies on SME marketing show that without formal evaluation routines, brands continue relying on

intuition even after repeated campaigns which restricts strategic growth (Abbasi et al., 2022). The mixed perspectives reveal a learning environment rich in experimentation but lacking the systems that translate experiences into sustainable brand-building practices.

#### **4.4 Objective Two: Applicability of established Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and brand equity theories within Ghana's emerging market context, identifying adaptation requirements.**

##### **4.4.1 Practical Familiarity with IMC Despite Limited Formal Exposure**

Participants demonstrated that their understanding of IMC is grounded in practice rather than theory. SME owners explained that coordinating messages across multiple platforms is something they learned through experience, mistakes and customer feedback. Their starting point is not academic language but a recognition that inconsistent messaging confuses customers and weakens trust. This reveals an implicit awareness that integration matters for maintaining clarity in a crowded digital space. SME owners repeatedly highlighted that while they do not use formal IMC vocabulary, they try to maintain a single voice, aesthetic and story across Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp to avoid giving customers mixed signals.

*“We do not know the IMC terms but we know customers get confused when the message looks different on each platform.” (R3, SME)*

*“Keeping the same tone everywhere helps customers know it is us.” (R9, SME)*

PR experts expanded on this point by explaining that SMEs often discover IMC principles through trial and observation. They noted that many Ghanaian fashion owners follow competitor behaviour, learn from influencers and adopt integration practices simply because they see the benefits of consistency.

*“Even without training they repeat key visuals and tone. It is an instinctive integration.”* (R14, PR Expert)

This dynamic exemplifies the concept that integration can develop organically through repeated brand interactions rather than structured planning (Fill and Turnbull, 2016). The findings suggest that IMC concepts are not absent; they exist in an embryonic form shaped by daily realities, intuitive learning and the need for recognisable brand presence. The challenge is that this practical familiarity remains shallow and cannot fully support long-term strategic coordination unless SMEs gain more structured guidance on how integration functions within a wider brand-building system.

#### **4.4.2 Habit-driven Coordination Across Channels Instead of Structured IMC Systems**

Participants described their coordination practices as largely habit-based. Their efforts to maintain consistent messaging across platforms stem from convenience and familiarity rather than formal strategy. SME owners noted that they reuse specific images, captions, colour schemes and slogans to save time and maintain recognisable cues. They expressed that when content has worked well on one platform, they replicate it across others because it reduces creative workload and reinforces brand familiarity among customers. This habitual repetition becomes the main mechanism for consistency, especially in small businesses where time is limited and communication is usually handled by one person.

*“Once a message works on Instagram, I simply repeat it on WhatsApp and TikTok.”* (R2, SME)

*“We use the same key visuals everywhere so customers can quickly connect it to us.”* (R7, SME)

PR experts supported this view and described such habits as a form of rudimentary integration. While they acknowledged that repetition definitely strengthens recognition, they observed that unstructured

duplication does not create true IMC synergy because the communication lacks sequencing, planning and alignment with objectives.

*“It is not planned integration but repetition, and that still helps with recognition.”* (R17, PR Expert)

This pattern aligns with Rehman’s (2022) argument that IMC in emerging markets often begins with operational repetition rather than strategy-based coordination. What emerges is a partial form of integration that supports short-term brand clarity but lacks the depth required for long-term synergy across platforms. The insight reveals that although SMEs coordinate messages, the absence of structured IMC frameworks limits their ability to maximise the reinforcing power of multichannel communication.

#### **4.3.3 Capability and Resource Constraints as Core Barriers to IMC Implementation**

Participants emphasised that their difficulty applying IMC in a structured way stems from resource shortages and capability gaps rather than conceptual resistance. SME owners explained that coordinating messages across channels requires time, technology, skilled staff and financial flexibility. Most reported that one person is responsible for content creation, posting and customer engagement which makes strategic planning nearly impossible. The realities of managing production, sales and communication simultaneously force SMEs into reactive communication patterns that hinder coordination.

*“One person handles everything, from sewing to posting. That makes planned coordination difficult.”* (R8, SME)

*“We do not have the resources to create different content for every platform, so things become inconsistent.”* (R11, SME)

PR experts added that capability constraints include the absence of planning tools such as content calendars, standard templates or analytic dashboards. They noted that SMEs often rely on immediate needs rather than long-term communication cycles.

*“They depend heavily on spontaneity because they do not have systems to coordinate campaigns.” (R14, PR Expert)*

Oduro and Mensah Williams (2023) similarly argue that resource-based constraints make IMC adoption difficult for many Ghanaian SMEs who lack organisational structures to support cross-channel planning. The combined insights reveal that the challenge is not that SMEs reject IMC but that the enabling mechanisms for systematic integration are missing. Strategic IMC adoption in this context therefore requires lightweight, accessible tools adapted to the operational rhythms of small creative businesses.

#### **4.4.4 Brand Identity as the Practical Anchor for Integrating Messages Across Touchpoints**

Participants described brand identity as the strongest and most reliable tool for maintaining consistency across their communications. SME owners emphasised that their identity must show clearly in every message regardless of platform because customers rely on visual and cultural cues to recognise the brand. They explained that keeping colours, tone, motifs and storytelling consistent helps customers create a mental link between the brand and its values. Some expressed that identity coherence becomes even more important when communication is not formally planned since it prevents confusion and reinforces recognition.

*“Our brand identity is Ghana inspired so it must show in every message to help people connect with us.” (R5, SME)*

*“Whether on WhatsApp or TikTok, the colours and tone must reflect our story so customers do not mistake us for others.” (R2, SME)*

PR experts confirmed that identity functions as the de facto integration mechanism in fashion SMEs. Because SMEs lack structured systems, identity provides a stable reference point for all messaging decisions. PR practitioners noted that identity consistency also protects the brand from dilution in an environment where trends shift quickly and many brands imitate one another.

*“Identity holds everything together and becomes their guide even when there is no formal IMC structure.” (R13, PR Expert)*

Keller (1993) explains that identity consistency across touchpoints strengthens brand associations and reinforces memory structures, which is essential for brand equity in competitive markets. The insights show that in Ghana’s fashion industry, brand identity is not just aesthetic expression but a strategic tool that compensates for the absence of formal IMC processes. This adaptation improves message alignment and helps build equity, even within an environment where resources and technical skills are limited.

#### **4.4.5 Gradual Movement from Awareness to Loyalty through Personalisation and Repetition**

Participants described brand loyalty not as a formalised strategy but as a gradual process built through repeated exposure, personalised communication and reliable customer experience. SME owners explained that moving customers from awareness to loyalty involves nurturing relationships through WhatsApp engagement, prompt responses, consistent tone and making customers feel valued. Their strategies rely heavily on interpersonal connections, which mirrors traditional Ghanaian retail culture where familiarity strengthens trust. SME owners noted that frequent restyling videos, behind the scenes updates and thank you messages help customers remember the brand and return after their first purchase.

*“When customers see us often and we chat with them regularly, they feel connected and return.”* (R6, SME)

*“Most loyal customers started from WhatsApp conversations that built a relationship over time.”* (R11, SME)

PR experts reinforced that loyalty in emerging fashion markets grows through emotional attachment and personalised brand experiences rather than structured loyalty programmes. They emphasised that SMEs excel at interpersonal branding even without formal CRM systems because founders often handle interactions personally.

*“Loyalty grows from emotional closeness here. Customers stay because the brand feels human and familiar.”* (R17, PR Expert)

Aaker (1991) highlights the role of consistent interactions and perceived value in strengthening brand loyalty. The findings show that SMEs build loyalty through personalised, culturally resonant engagement instead of formal retention systems. This approach is effective in Ghana’s relational market context, although it limits scalability until SMEs develop lightweight tools for structured follow-up and ongoing customer relationship management.

#### **4.4.6 Selective Use of Brand Equity Indicators Rooted in Visibility and Customer Response**

Participants described their brand equity indicators as primarily digital and visibility driven. SME owners often monitor engagement rates, customer feedback, repeat purchases and brand mentions as proxy measures of brand strength. They explained that these indicators feel tangible and easy to interpret compared to abstract measures like brand associations or perceived value. Their assessment of equity remains connected to customer behaviour on social media, reflecting the centrality of digital presence for fashion SMEs.

*“If people save, share and comment, it shows the brand is becoming strong in their minds.”*

(R10, SME)

*“Repeat buyers are our biggest indicator that the brand is working.”* (R5, SME)

PR experts observed that SMEs use indicators that reflect short term visibility rather than long term brand building. They highlighted that few SMEs track sentiment, association strength or customer meaning-making, despite these being core elements of brand equity theory.

*“Most SMEs equate popularity with equity even though equity is deeper than visibility.”* (R13,

PR Expert)

Keller (1993) explains that true brand equity reflects not only awareness but also the strength, favourability and uniqueness of customer associations. The findings indicate that SMEs rely on actionable, surface-level indicators due to limited analytic skills and practical constraints. While this provides useful operational feedback, it also restricts deeper understanding of how customers internalise and interpret the brand over time, signalling a need for simplified measurement tools tailored to SME capacity.

#### **4.4.7 Adaptation of Global Branding Practices that Align with Local Consumer Behaviour**

Participants highlighted several global branding practices that work well in Ghana’s fashion industry when adapted to local norms. SME owners explained that techniques such as visual storytelling, influencer partnerships, seasonal drops and curated brand aesthetics resonate with Ghanaian audiences who value aspirational imagery and fashionable presentation. They found that global tactics succeed when they retain authenticity and connect to cultural preferences around beauty, lifestyle and self-expression.

*“Influencer styling works because people trust how clothes look on someone they admire.”*

(R4, SME)

*“Global ideas work here when they are blended with our culture and not copied directly.”*

(R1, SME)

PR experts added that practices such as storytelling, brand communities and experiential content translate effectively because they tap into shared cultural values of identity, belonging and social validation. They stressed that the success of global branding tools depends on how well brands localise the message to match Ghanaian tastes.

*“A global idea gains power when shaped to fit our cultural identity and communication rhythms.”* (R17, PR Expert)

Appel et al. (2020) note that global branding tools can perform effectively in emerging markets when adapted to local cultural signals and social media behaviours. The findings show that Ghanaian SMEs embrace global branding practices but succeed most when they modify them to reflect local aesthetic values, social norms and consumer motivations.

#### **4.4.8 Rejection or Modification of Global Practices that Clash with Local Realities**

Participants explained that some global branding practices are difficult to apply without significant adjustment. SME owners described how high budget campaigns, large scale influencer deals, premium western aesthetic standards and complex loyalty programmes do not match their operational context or customer expectations. They highlighted that Ghanaian consumers value relatability and cultural relevance, making certain global visual styles or communication approaches feel distant or ineffective.

*“Flashy global campaigns do not work for us because customers here want something they can relate to.”* (R12, SME)

*“Complicated loyalty systems do not fit our customers. They prefer simple discounts or personal attention.”* (R8, SME)

PR experts added that practices requiring high technological infrastructure, advanced analytics or paid media saturation are often incompatible with SME budgets and local media behaviour. They noted that messaging strategies copied directly from Western markets often fail because they ignore local humour, communication tone and fashion sensibilities.

*“A message that works in Europe can fall flat here because the cultural rhythm is different.”*  
(R14, PR Expert)

Sestino et al. (2022) argue that global branding practices often need contextual recalibration in emerging markets where cultural expectations, economic conditions and digital habits shape brand reception. The findings indicate that Ghanaian SMEs succeed when they modify global ideas to fit local realities rather than adopt them wholesale. This reinforces the importance of culturally grounded adaptation for sustaining relevance and building long-term equity.

#### **4.5 Objective Three: Participant-identified needs for Ghana-context communication support**

##### **4.5.1 Practitioners need for simple, low-cost communication tools**

Participants repeatedly described a need for tools that work under tight budgets, limited time, and small teams. Owner-managers and communication practitioners framed “what works” as tactics that convert quickly, are easy to repeat, and do not require sophisticated ad infrastructure. They stressed that any practical support must help them use the channels they already rely on, especially chat-led selling and social proof, rather than pushing high-cost media plans that are difficult to sustain.

*R5, Studio Lead, shared, “We grew followers faster when clients shared selfies in our dresses than when we boosted posts.”*

*R11, Marketing Lead, stated, “Our live try-ons bring instant orders because customers can ask questions in real time without pressure.”*

Across accounts, participants positioned WhatsApp broadcasts, UGC reposting, and live demonstrations as “high-return” practices because they combine discovery, trust-building, and conversion in one flow. Several respondents also linked low-cost visibility to small nudges such as countdowns and referrals, which they saw as manageable ways to maintain momentum without heavy spend. The overall pattern points to a practical need for reusable prompts, scripts, and simple playbooks that protect authenticity while scaling participation (Ashley and Tuten, 2015).

#### **4.5.2 Desire for message consistency support**

Participants reported that brand growth often creates coordination strain before it creates marketing sophistication. Owners, brand managers, and PR practitioners described inconsistency as a routine risk when multiple hands post, when interns support social media, or when a key staff member is absent. They described the need as operational rather than conceptual, meaning they want quick controls that keep tone, visuals, and replies aligned without slowing the business.

*R6, Brand Manager, observed, “A ready-made caption bank and tone guide would stop us from repeating mistakes or sounding off-brand when I’m away.”*

*R9, Managing Partner, noted, “A shared content checklist would keep interns aligned without daily supervision.”*

Participants described concrete governance aids they believe would prevent “tone drift,” including a short style guide, caption voice rules, approval gates, and crisis reply scripts. They framed these supports as safeguards that preserve brand identity while keeping day-to-day execution simple and fast, especially during team changes or peak workload periods. This theme aligns with evidence that

brand identity and sales strategy in the digital era benefit from clear identity codification and repeatable cues that keep execution consistent across touchpoints (Shams et al., 2024).

### **4.5.3 Importance of cultural authenticity**

Participants emphasized cultural authenticity as a differentiator they want preserved and expressed more deliberately, but without forcing tradition into every message. Owners and creative leads connected authenticity to familiar visuals and stories, such as textiles, market life, and local language, because these cues communicate “home,” belonging, and credibility. Several also indicated that cultural elements work best when they are woven into everyday content naturally, rather than presented as a promotional performance.

*R8, Creative Director, explained, “Our customers smile when they see models wearing Kente at real markets, it feels like home and reminds them of their mothers’ tailoring days.”*

*R14, Studio Manager, added, “A simple proverb in Twi or Ga on our captions gets shared more than any foreign quote because it sounds like us.”*

The pattern is that participants want cultural storytelling to remain sincere, recognisable, and moderated. They described authenticity as a competitive advantage when it strengthens emotional connection and signals Ghanaian ownership, yet they also implied that overuse can feel artificial. This aligns with evidence that perceived authenticity can materially shape consumer responses and purchase intentions, especially when cultural cues are credible rather than decorative (Wang and Lin, 2021).

### **4.5.4 Need for lightweight planning and coordination systems**

Participants stressed a need for simple planning systems that support consistency without becoming bureaucratic. Owners and partnerships leads described planning as necessary for discipline, but they

want it to remain flexible because trends, inventory shifts, and customer requests can change quickly. They framed the ideal planning support as a “light structure” that reduces decision fatigue and helps teams coordinate content and service touchpoints without overengineering.

*R1, Owner, described, “We keep Mondays for mood boards, Wednesdays for product drops, and Fridays for customer highlights. It keeps us disciplined but not boring.”*

*R16, Partnerships Lead, said, “A weekly frame with placeholders helps us plug in new content quickly when trends pop.”*

Operational constraints were also made explicit, especially the tension between production and content creation, and the difficulty of tracking customer journeys once conversations move into private chat. Participants’ descriptions suggest that coordination support must match SME rhythm: short cycles, few channels, and simple handoff routines. Empirical work on IMC within SMEs similarly highlights that integration often emerges through practical coordination rather than formal systems, making lightweight processes more usable for small firms (Pisicchio and Toaldo, 2021).

#### **4.5.5 Practitioner preference for gradual, learn-as-you-go approaches**

Participants described a strong preference for learning loops that fit limited resources. They presented improvement as incremental, not transformational, and described a pattern of testing small campaigns, observing audience signals, and adjusting quickly. Communication practitioners and founders framed this as a way to avoid wasted spend and reduce the risk of producing large volumes of content that does not convert.

*R12, Creative Director, shared, “If we plan, prove, and then tweak using what people save or ask about, our communication improves every month.”*

*R18, Founder, added, “We test one message across two channels first before investing money, learning fast is better than posting a lot.”*

This theme also reflects the types of feedback participants trust. They emphasized saves, chats, enquiries, and sell-through as practical learning signals, especially because attribution becomes difficult once selling shifts into WhatsApp or offline points. Their preference indicates a need for support that reinforces experimentation habits, fast interpretation of simple metrics, and controlled scaling of what proves effective, which aligns with evidence on growth hacking capability as an iterative, data-guided approach to market traction (Schellong et al., 2025).

#### **4.6 Proposed Strategic Communication Framework**

The study culminates in the development of a practical, Ghana-context strategic communication framework that translates the interview insights into an actionable guide for fashion SMEs to build brand equity more deliberately. This framework is grounded in three connected findings across the objectives: marketing is largely digital-first and informal but effective for reach; integration and brand equity principles are understood in practice but applied in ad hoc ways; and participants want low-cost, simple tools that protect brand consistency, leverage Ghanaian cultural authenticity, and support continuous learning. In this sense, the framework is not a “perfect-world” model. It is designed to work under common SME realities such as limited budgets, founder-led execution, and fast-changing platform dynamics.

The framework is structured as a repeatable cycle that helps SMEs move from awareness to trust, trust to conversion, and conversion to loyalty, while keeping messaging coherent across channels. It prioritizes role clarity for each channel, lightweight planning, brand governance tools (templates and checklists), relationship-centered engagement (especially through WhatsApp), and a learn-and-

improve loop using simple qualitative indicators and basic platform metrics. The overall intention is to support consistent brand meaning over time, rather than only short bursts of promotion around product drops or events.



**Figure 1: A conceptual marketing communication framework for fashion brand building**

## 4.7 Explanation of the Proposed Framework

### 4.7.1 Contextual Brand Identity

The framework begins with *Contextual Brand Identity* because interview evidence shows that Ghanaian fashion SMEs treat identity as the main “anchor” that keeps communication recognizable across platforms, even when formal planning is weak. Participants described identity as a practical system made visible through repeatable cues, including colour presets, recurring motifs, consistent voice, and simple layout rules that make the brand instantly familiar. One participant explained that “our identity is built on our craft and culture, so we use recurring colours, motifs, and a consistent

voice,” while another added that “our presets and three poses make a grid that is recognisably us even at thumbnail size.” This indicates that brand equity formation is driven by recognisability and trust built through repetition, not through complex brand manuals. In addition, participants emphasised that cultural narratives should feel natural rather than performative, noting that “we speak about craft and care in plain language so the cultural story does not feel forced.”

The identity element is also framed as a protective mechanism in a competitive market where imitation is common and attention is unstable. SMEs reported that consistent identity reduces customer confusion and strengthens associations over time, especially because audiences often encounter the brand in fragmented micro-moments (scrolling, short videos, quick WhatsApp checks). This finding aligns with the study’s results that identity coherence becomes even more important when communication is not formally planned, because it prevents message drift and reinforces recognition across touchpoints.

#### **4.7.2 Channel Led Message Integration**

The second element, *Channel Led Message Integration*, explains how SMEs move customers through an informal funnel from awareness to conversion using platform specific roles. The data indicates that brands already operate a functional journey logic where Instagram and TikTok create discovery, while WhatsApp finalizes decisions and supports reassurance. A participant summarized this clearly: “Instagram brings them in but WhatsApp is where people actually decide to buy.” This is reinforced in the chapter findings, where SME respondents described Instagram as a digital storefront and WhatsApp as the main conversion space, with TikTok driving attention and traffic.

However, the interviews also show that integration is frequently executed as repetition rather than coordination. One participant stated, “once a message works on Instagram, I simply repeat it on WhatsApp and TikTok,” while another described a slightly more disciplined version, “we keep one

caption set and adapt it slightly per channel so the promise stays the same.” PR input further cautioned that platform use in isolation weakens message flow and brand memory, meaning SMEs may achieve visibility without building stable equity. The framework therefore clarifies channel roles and message handoffs so that integration becomes intentional (awareness, discovery, conversion), while preserving a single brand promise across all platforms.

### **4.7.3 Culturally Resonant Content System**

The *Culturally Resonant Content System* reflects the finding that cultural familiarity is a major route to brand meaning and emotional connection in Ghana’s fashion market. Participants repeatedly positioned cultural storytelling as a differentiator that strengthens brand attachment and makes the brand feel locally “owned” by the audience. One participant noted, “our customers connect deeply with the vibrant prints of Ankara and market day stories; these cultural stories make our brand feel like home,” while another emphasized local urban references, stating that “our customers connect deeply with street art, local slang, and independence day stories.” These statements indicate that the brand equity pathway is not only functional (quality, price, convenience) but also symbolic, rooted in identity affirmation, nostalgia, and social belonging.

In addition, culturally resonant content is strengthened when it is tied to transparency and process. Participants indicated that behind the scenes communication increases perceived authenticity and trust by showing effort and craft, for example, “behind-the-scenes sewing videos make people feel part of the journey.” In practical terms, the framework treats culturally grounded content as a repeatable system, not a one off campaign. It supports SMEs to develop content pillars that consistently translate culture into relatable narratives (craft, local spaces, everyday language, heritage cues) while avoiding forced cultural signalling. In this way, cultural resonance becomes a stable driver of awareness, positive associations, and loyalty, rather than a sporadic creative choice.

#### **4.7.4 Customer Relationship and Community Loop**

The *Customer Relationship and Community Loop* captures the strongest loyalty mechanism described in the interviews: relationship driven engagement. SMEs do not primarily build loyalty through formal programmes; instead, they cultivate repeat purchase and advocacy through direct communication, follow ups, and community signals. One participant explained, “we move people from awareness to loyalty through direct chats and follow-ups after a purchase,” while another stated, “WhatsApp is where relationships are built, not just sales.” This is consistent with the chapter results, which show loyalty as a gradual process built through repeated exposure, personalised communication, and reliable customer experience, often driven by founder led interactions.

The framework formalizes these relationship routines into a repeatable loop so that loyalty building becomes scalable. Participants gave concrete examples of retention behaviour that can be standardized, such as post purchase care messages, delivery day check ins, and service recovery communication. A participant noted, “after a fitting, we check in on delivery day with a care note and it brings them back.” In equity terms, this loop strengthens trust, emotional attachment, and word of mouth, which reduces dependence on paid promotion as the customer becomes a communication channel through recommendations and shared content. This is why the framework positions relationship and community as a core equity engine, not a support activity.

#### **4.7.5 Lean Campaign and Resource System**

The Lean Campaign and Resource System addresses the operational reality that most SMEs cannot sustain high-frequency, high-budget, multi-platform campaigns, even when they understand the logic of integration. Participants openly described limitations in budget and manpower, for example, “limited budget and small team make it hard to stay visible all the time.” This constraint is echoed in

the main findings, where SMEs and PR experts stressed that one person often manages production and communication, making coordinated planning difficult and increasing inconsistency risks.

As a result, the framework proposes lean execution tools that convert informal effort into consistent routines. Participants specifically requested practical coordination aids, noting that “simple tools like caption banks and shared templates would help us coordinate messaging better.” The system therefore emphasizes reusable assets (templates, caption banks, content pillars), lightweight planning (weekly themes and launch checklists), and low-cost tactics that SMEs already trust, such as user-generated content, live try-ons, micro influencer seeding, and customer testimonials. In this model, equity improves because the brand stays present, coherent, and recognisable even outside peak periods, while the SME avoids burnout and reduces waste from random posting. The lean system is therefore the operational engine that makes the rest of the framework executable within resource constraints.

#### **4.7.6 Adaptive Learning Loop**

The outer ring, the **Adaptive Learning Loop**, ensures the framework remains responsive to platform volatility, trend cycles, and changing consumer preferences. Participants described learning as a continuous trial and adjustment, and they expressed a preference for simple feedback-driven improvement rather than complex analytics systems. One participant stated, “I would like a framework with three steps: plan the message, launch and monitor, then iterate using feedback,” while another clarified the key signals they rely on: “we watch likes, saves, and direct messages to see what resonates and adjust based on those signals.”

This loop is essential because the study findings show that SMEs often judge success using visible engagement proxies and immediate inquiries, with limited capability for deeper analytics, meaning learning must be structured in a practical way that fits their operating rhythm. The framework therefore institutionalizes a simple cycle: plan (set message and objective), launch (deploy content through

defined channel roles), monitor (track a small set of indicators such as saves, DMs, repeat buyers, and sell through), and iterate (adjust message, timing, or format). Over time, this strengthens equity by improving message market fit, reducing repeated mistakes, and helping SMEs remain resilient to algorithm changes while keeping identity stable.

#### **4.8 Summary**

A thematic analysis of interviews with twenty participants revealed that Ghanaian fashion SMEs rely heavily on intuitive, experience driven communication practices that prioritise digital visibility, authenticity, and informal coordination. The findings showed strong practical awareness of IMC principles but limited structured systems due to capability and resource constraints. Evidence also indicated that brand identity, cultural resonance, and relationship based engagement remain central mechanisms through which SMEs build awareness and loyalty. PR experts highlighted gaps in consistency, planning, evaluation, and integration, which shape the need for lightweight communication tools adapted to local realities. The chapter demonstrated how global branding ideas are selectively adopted, modified, or rejected as SMEs navigate Ghana's cultural, economic, and operational environment.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a synthesis of the key findings of the study, drawing together insights from the analysis of marketing communication practices among Ghanaian fashion SMEs and PR representatives. This chapter also highlights the main conclusions derived from the findings and

outlines practical recommendations based on the study objectives. This chapter concludes by reflecting on the implications of the study for policy and future research.

## **5.2 Summary of Findings**

The findings show that marketing communication practices among Ghanaian fashion SMEs are highly digital, informal, and resource driven. Most participants rely heavily on Instagram for visibility and WhatsApp for direct engagement and sales, with TikTok used mainly for awareness among younger audiences. Communication activities are largely reactive and event based, intensifying around product drops, paydays, or fashion events rather than following structured plans. Brand consistency is maintained through founder oversight rather than formal guidelines, and success is measured using basic engagement indicators such as likes, comments, inquiries, and repeat purchases.

However, several constraints limit brand equity development, including algorithm instability, limited marketing budgets, intense competition, imitation by other brands, and short customer attention spans. These challenges make it difficult for SMEs to sustain consistent brand awareness and long-term loyalty despite their creativity and effort.

Additionally, the findings indicate that while established IMC and brand equity theories are conceptually relevant, their application in the Ghanaian fashion SME context is largely informal and intuitive. Most participants are unfamiliar with academic IMC terminology but demonstrate practical understanding through efforts to maintain consistent messages across platforms. Integration often takes the form of content repetition rather than strategic coordination, largely due to time, staffing, and resource constraints. Brand identity serves as the main unifying element across channels, compensating for the absence of formal IMC systems. Brand equity is built primarily through personal

relationships, responsiveness, and emotional connection rather than structured loyalty programmes or formal brand metrics. Global branding practices such as influencer marketing and storytelling are adopted selectively and adapted to local culture, while high budget campaigns and complex systems are viewed as unsuitable for the local market.

Furthermore, the results revealed that participants desire a strategic marketing communication framework that is simple, affordable, and tailored to Ghanaian realities. Respondents emphasized the need for low cost, high engagement tactics, lightweight planning tools, and practical supports such as templates, checklists, and message banks to maintain consistency as brands grow. Strong emphasis was placed on integrating authentic Ghanaian cultural elements into brand storytelling to enhance relatability and differentiation. Participants also expressed preference for flexible planning structures and iterative learning approaches that allow for experimentation, quick feedback, and continuous adjustment. Overall, the findings suggest that an effective framework for Ghanaian fashion SMEs should formalize existing informal practices in a simplified manner, enabling consistency, cultural relevance, and sustainable brand building without imposing excessive operational burden.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

The study concludes that marketing communication practices among Ghanaian fashion SMEs are predominantly digital, intuitive, and adaptive, shaped by everyday operational realities rather than formal strategic planning. Evidence from SME owners shows a strong dependence on social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok for visibility, engagement, and sales conversion, driven by affordability and accessibility. However, insights from PR experts reveals that heavy platform reliance often results in fragmented and short term communication efforts, with limited

coordination across channels. While SMEs demonstrate creativity and resilience in navigating competitive pressures and resource constraints, the synthesis of findings indicates that brand building is frequently reactive and event driven, prioritizing immediate engagement and sales outcomes over sustained brand equity development, thereby constraining long term recognition, differentiation, and customer loyalty.

Furthermore, the combined evidence from SME interviews, PR experts confirms that established IMC and brand equity theories are relevant but only partially operationalized within the Ghanaian fashion SME context. SME owners exhibit an intuitive understanding of integration and consistency, while PR experts highlight gaps in strategic coordination, measurement depth, and scalability. Brand identity emerges as the central coordinating mechanism that compensates for the absence of formal IMC systems. Loyalty is built primarily through relational engagement, trust, and personalized interaction, reflecting Ghana's relationship oriented market structure. This synthesis suggests that traditional IMC and brand equity models, which assume organizational capacity and formal infrastructure, must be simplified and adapted to align with the operational scale, cultural context, and relational dynamics of small fashion enterprises.

Overall, the study concludes that an effective strategic marketing communication framework for Ghanaian fashion SMEs must bridge the gap between informal practice and strategic intent by integrating insights from practitioners, and communication experts. The findings collectively support a framework that formalizes existing grassroots practices into a structured yet flexible system emphasizing cultural authenticity, message consistency, relationship management, and continuous learning. By incorporating low cost tools, lightweight planning mechanisms, and practical safeguards

identified across the three analytical lenses, the proposed framework enables SMEs to coordinate communication more deliberately without undermining agility. In essence, the synthesis of findings affirms that sustainable fashion brand development in emerging markets is achieved not through complex or resource intensive strategies, but through context sensitive frameworks that align theory with lived practice, strengthen brand coherence, and support long term brand value creation.

#### **5.4 Recommendations**

The study recommends that Ghanaian fashion SMEs adopt a simple but structured weekly marketing communication planning routine to improve consistency and coordination. Specifically, brands should commit to a minimum weekly schedule of at least three planned content categories such as product features, customer proof, and brand storytelling, documented in a one page planning template reviewed every Sunday. This approach is achievable within existing resource constraints and can be measured through regular posting consistency and engagement stability over a three month period. By formalizing planning without adding complexity, SMEs can reduce reactive communication gaps and steadily build recognizable brand presence across platforms.

It is further recommended that fashion SMEs develop lightweight brand governance tools to safeguard message consistency as operations grow. Each brand should create a concise brand reference sheet within one month, outlining approved tone, color palette, key phrases, and visual standards, alongside a small caption bank of ten to fifteen reusable examples. This recommendation is relevant to SMEs that rely on founders for brand control and becomes measurable through reduced inconsistencies in

captions and visuals across platforms over time. Such tools are achievable without external consultants and allow delegation to interns or staff while protecting brand identity.

The study also recommends that SMEs intentionally integrate Ghanaian cultural elements into their communication strategy in a consistent and authentic manner. Brands should identify two to three core cultural cues aligned with their identity, such as local fabrics, language expressions, or community narratives, and incorporate them into at least one content piece per week for a six month period. Effectiveness can be measured through engagement indicators such as saves, shares, and customer feedback referencing cultural connection. This recommendation is achievable using existing resources and strengthens emotional resonance, differentiation, and long term brand equity within the local market.

Finally, the study recommends that fashion SMEs adopt a simple learn and adjust performance review cycle to guide communication decisions. Brands should track three core metrics, such as weekly inquiries, engagement per post, and repeat customer interactions, and conduct a brief monthly review to identify what content or messages perform best. This time-bound approach enables SMEs to make evidence-based adjustments without advanced analytics tools. By embedding this routine into monthly operations, brands can gradually shift from intuition driven decisions to more deliberate brand building, improving communication effectiveness and sustainability over time.

### **5.5 Implications for Policy and Future Research**

The findings of the study have important implications for policy aimed at supporting small and medium sized enterprises within the creative and fashion sectors in Ghana. Policymakers and industry

support institutions, such as trade associations, creative hubs, and SME development agencies, should prioritize capacity building initiatives that focus on practical marketing communication skills rather than abstract theory. Training programmes should emphasize affordable digital communication planning, brand consistency tools, and culturally grounded storytelling that reflect the realities of micro and small fashion enterprises. In addition, policy frameworks that support access to basic digital tools, shared creative resources, and mentorship from communication professionals can strengthen the ability of fashion SMEs to build sustainable brands. Such targeted support would contribute to job creation, export readiness, and the overall competitiveness of Ghana's fashion industry within regional and global markets.

For future research, the study highlights opportunities to deepen understanding of strategic communication and brand building in emerging market contexts. Subsequent studies could expand the sample size across different regions of Ghana or compare fashion SMEs with other creative industries to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal research tracking communication practices and brand performance over time would also provide richer insights into how informal strategies evolve into more structured systems. In addition, future studies could integrate quantitative measures of brand equity alongside qualitative insights to examine the relationship between communication consistency and financial or market outcomes. Such research would further inform context sensitive frameworks and contribute to theory development that reflects the operational realities of SMEs in emerging economies.

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## APPENDIX 1

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview guide seeks to explore the communication practices, strategic approaches, and contextual realities of Ghanaian fashion SMEs to inform the development of a practical and culturally relevant Strategic Marketing Communication Framework. It is designed for business owners, founders, or managers directly responsible for brand communication and marketing decisions. The questions are open-ended but concise to allow respondents to express their experiences and insights freely without taking much of their time. The guide covers background information, current marketing communication practices, the relevance and applicability of IMC and brand equity theories, and perspectives that will support the design of a framework suited to Ghana's unique fashion industry environment.

#### **Background of Respondents**

1. When did your brand start, what products do you make, and where do you sell most often
2. Who are your main customers in Ghana and how would you describe their typical preferences
3. What marketing channels have you used since launch and which ones have shaped your growth the most

**Objective One: To analyze current marketing communication practices within Ghana's fashion SMEs and identify the specific challenges that constrain brand equity development.**

1. What are your main marketing communication channels right now
2. Who are your primary customer segments and how do you reach each one
3. What types of content do you post most often and why
4. How do you plan your messages across the month or season
5. How do you keep your brand look and tone consistent across platforms
6. What metrics do you track to judge communication success
7. What are the biggest obstacles you face in building brand awareness and loyalty
8. Which past campaign worked best or worst, and what did you learn

**Objective Two: To evaluate the applicability of established Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and brand equity theories within Ghana's emerging market context, identifying adaptation requirements.**

1. How familiar are you with IMC ideas like coordinating messages across channels
2. In your daily work, where do you already apply IMC, even informally
3. What parts of IMC feel hard to use in your context and why
4. How do you define your brand identity and key associations
5. How do you try to move customers from awareness to loyalty
6. Which brand equity indicators matter most to you and how do you measure them
7. Which global branding practices translate well to your audience
8. Which practices do not translate well and need changes

**Objective Three: To design a strategic marketing communication framework that integrates global best practices with Ghana-specific cultural, economic, and operational realities.**

1. What local cultural cues or stories resonate most with your customers
2. What low cost tactics have given you the best results

3. What support or tools would help you coordinate messaging better
4. How should a simple weekly planning template be structured for you
5. What two or three metrics would you want on a one page dashboard
6. What partnerships or communities could amplify your brand voice
7. What safeguards would help you keep messages consistent as you grow
8. If a framework had three steps, what would you want those steps to be

## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview Guide for Fashion PR / Marketing Communication Consultants**

#### **Section A: Background and Professional Context**

1. Can you briefly describe your role and how long you have worked in PR, marketing, or branding within the fashion or lifestyle sector?

2. What types of clients do you typically work with (e.g., SMEs, emerging brands, established labels)?
3. What kinds of communication services do you usually provide to fashion brands (e.g., social media strategy, PR campaigns, events, branding consultation)?

### **Section B: Observations on SME Communication Practices**

4. Based on your experience, what are the most common marketing communication challenges that fashion SMEs in Ghana face?
5. What do you think prevents many SMEs from building strong or consistent brand visibility (e.g. budget limitations, planning gaps, lack of skills, or something else?)
6. When SMEs struggle with marketing and communication, what mistakes do you commonly observe?

### **Section C: Perceptions of Consistency, Integration, and Strategy**

7. From your observation, do most fashion SMEs communicate in a structured and coordinated way, or is communication mostly reactive and informal? How does this affect their brand image?
8. Do you see SMEs combining online and offline promotion effectively, or do their efforts feel disconnected? Can you share examples?
9. Are there marketing communication strategies that SMEs try to copy from global or big African brands but fail to execute successfully? Why do those strategies not translate well at the SME level?
10. When SMEs do succeed in marketing communication, what do you think they are doing right?

### **Section D: Inputs for Framework Design**

11. If you were to design a practical marketing communication toolkit or template for fashion SMEs, what essential tools or guidelines should be included?
12. What cultural or local factors must be considered when designing marketing communication strategies for Ghanaian fashion brands?
13. Do you believe collaboration (e.g., between SMEs and influencers, media, consultants) should be part of such a framework? If so, in what form?

### **Section E: Closing**

Is there anything fashion SMEs in Ghana urgently need to understand about marketing?



# Stephen Akpaloo

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