

Azer, J., Blasco-Arcas, L. and Alexander, M. (2022) Engaging the eye: the role of visual modality of engagement (VME) in social media. 12th AMA SERVSIG Conference, Glasgow, UK, 16-18 June 2022.

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Deposited on 4 August 2022

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Engaging the eye: the role of visual modality of engagement (VME) in social media

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Introduction & Literature Review

A plethora of new media channels provides consumers with numerous opportunities for engagement (Azer & Alexander, 2020; Blasco-Arcas et al., 2016). Photo-based social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram receive 200% more attention and interaction than textual posts. Despite the acknowledged influence of visual compared to textual manifestations in online contexts (cf. Akpinar & Berger, 2017; Villarroel et al., 2019), research investigating other forms of communication in social media beyond text and numerical rating remains rare (Babić Rosario et al., 2020). Although VME is likely to create value for the brands, existing literature has been restricted to articulating forms of textual modality of engagement, focusing on what customers write about a product, brand, or service and identifying different typologies of textual behavioral manifestations (e.g., Azer et al., 2021; Bowden et al., 2017; Brodie et al., 2013). However, behavioral manifestations of engagement using visual modality has been overlooked in literature although they are likely to differ in their impact on brands and other actors within a network. However,

Methodology/approach

Netnography is selected as an appropriate method to guide this study (Kozinets, 2010). To ensure the diversity of contexts and the robustness of findings, Instagram and Facebook were selected. 30,000 Facebook and Instagram pictorial posts created by customers on the official pages of top four brands (identified based on their total analytics scores across social visibility, web visibility, sentiments, growth, and search visibility according to Brandwatch.com): Amazon, Apple, American Airlines, and Nike. Pictorial analysis was conducted following the theory of visual rhetoric (Bakri et al., 2020).

Findings

This study introduces a typology of seven forms of VME classified as positive or negative. The positive forms of VME are *evidential*, *experiential*, *inspirational*, and *devotional*, while the negative forms are *disparaging*, *mocking*, and *dissuasive*.

Implications

This research contributes to the CE literature by providing an exposition of VME thus far overlooked. The concept captures CEB on social media using visual modality. While

customer-to-customer sharing of brand images is pivotal for effective social media marketing (Akpinar & Berger, 2017), research on CEB using visual content remains elusive despite calls for more research in this area (Babić Rosario et al., 2020). Second, we contribute by providing the first typology of seven forms of VME. Thus, this paper offers a unique new insight into behavioral manifestations of engagement which differ by modality and contributes to the broad e-WOM research by providing a more nuanced view of customer-generated visual content in social media. Our study offers important managerial implications for social media practitioners in a range of industries (e.g., services, retailing, technology, and fashion). Specifically, leveraging VME in their engagement marketing activities, making use of their customers' VME to show their value potential to new customers, and demonstrating how to use VME to create/stimulate influential posts that increase customer engagement.

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