Why Instagram? The Role of Telepresence and Transportation in Visual Content Marketing

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Purpose/Rationale: A popular phenomenon among social media is the rise of information exchanges in an imagery form (Phillips, Miller, & McQuarries, 2014). That is, visually-driven social media platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat are increasingly garnering consumer and brand attention. While some studies have examined the effects of pictorial information in advertisements (Miniard et al., 2004), little to no research has investigated psychological mechanism that elucidates the effects of images on consumers' perception of the brand in social media. To address this research gap, this experimental study focuses on the effects of a type of image on story construction and how consumers are transported to a branded photo narrative, which is expected to engender attitudinal change and relational outcomes. In addition, we aim to discover the mediating role of telepresence, the extent to which a consumer feels present in the mediated environment, on the relationship between a brand's photo-type and the level of consumers' transportation.

Conceptual Framework/Hypotheses Development: A picture's narrativity (i.e., an image's story), "the representation of any kind of action in a picture, as opposed to static, descriptive images" (Wolf, 2003, p. 180) provides more vivid imagery. This allows viewers to decipher dynamic and temporal settings in the image, such as facial expression, gestures, and a background that offer viewers a feeling of the here-and-now. In contrast, product-focused images provide a lack of sequential events and temporality, which inhibit consumers' feelings of transportation into the photo's narrative. Thus, we hypothesize that exposure to a story-focused image with narrative elements will result in higher levels of viewers' transportation than exposure to a product-focused image in a brand's postings on Instagram (H1). When a consumer experiences telepresence, they have a strong sense of being transported to a mediated environment created by technology (Seuter, 1992). This occurs because in this case, consumers have control over how to interact with the content created by the brand. Social media is expected to facilitate a user's sense of being present, which in turn, increases consumers' likelihood of becoming immersed into a presented photo narrative. Thus, we hypothesize that a viewer's sense of telepresence on Instagram will mediate the effect of a photo type (story vs. product focused) on the viewer's transportation to photo narrative (H2). Being transported into a brand's story can improve consumers' perception of the brand. When consumers immerse themselves into a branded story narrative, it creates meaning for the consumers, which can enhance their opinion and feelings of connection with the brand. Thus, we hypothesize that a viewer's sense of transportation will positively influence consumers' a) change in brand attitude and b) self-brand connection (H3a-b).

Research Design/Procedure: Following qualifying questions (i.e., have you purchased a product from any athletic brands in the previous 12 months?, do you currently have a personal account on Instagram?), college students were randomly assigned to experimental conditions, story-focused (n=39) and product-focused (n=39). Based on a pre-test of the 12 highest selling global athletic brands' Instagram account, the Adidas UK account was selected for the story-focused stimuli and the Adidas US account was selected for the product-focused stimuli. Before and after the stimuli, brand attitude was measured and the difference between the two represented brand attitude change. Following exposure to the stimuli, participants also responded to measures for transportation, telepresence, self-brand connection and demographic variables. All items were based on previous research and were measured on 7-point likert-type scales. The manipulation check was conducted through a text analysis on respondents' pictorial image recall of the stimuli images.

Findings: ANOVA results indicated that respondents who were exposed to the story-focused stimuli reported greater levels of transportation (M=4.855) compared to respondents exposed to the product-focused stimuli (M=4.239) (F=5.054, p=.027*). Thus, providing support for H1. PROCESS mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013) was used to test H2. Results demonstrate that telepresence mediates the relationship between photo-type (story vs. product-focused) and transportation (effect =.2727, SE=.090, 95% CI = .075, .470) significantly. Thus, supporting H2. Lastly, regression analysis was used to test H3a-b. Results indicate that transportation predicts consumers' positive change in attitude towards the brand (F=3.246, p=.002**) and self-brand connection (F=9.494, p=.000***). Thus, providing support for H3a and H3b.

Discussion: Despite the popularity of visually driven social media platforms, there was not a clear understanding of a brand's image-type on consumers' perception of the brand, and the role of telepresence in the social-media environment. This study highlights the importance of imagery information and found that story-focused images are likely to increase consumers' level of transportation and that consumers' telepresence to the mediated environment, Instagram, mediates this relationship, which highlights the effectiveness of the platform to deliver branded-storytelling in a visual format. Particularly important for brands, consumers' transportation experience to branded-photo narrative enhances consumers' attitude towards the brand and feelings of connection with the brand. Theoretical and managerial implications will be presented based on findings of this study.

References:

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