

## Is usage of visual images in online marketing effective?

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of visual images in online marketing communication such as on Facebook. Because of noise in online communication channels it is becoming more and more difficult for marketing messages to be noticed. Visual images are now common on social media and can attract target audience and consumers and draw their attention in the online environment. This paper presents a study that selected 37 companies' photos posted on Facebook. Four of these companies were highlighted owing to the high popularity and acceptance of their photos. Qualitative research was performed to investigate what kinds of photos these companies posted from Feb 2018 to Jan 2019. The results of this study show that there are diverse types of photos (of food, children, sports, animals, landscape, automobile, portraits, architecture, macros, quotes, events, aerial, street, and documentary) used for various marketing purposes. We concluded that visual images are effective in online marketing.

### Contribution/ Originality

This is a qualitative study that researches several types of photos used on Facebook for marketing communication. The reasons for using these photos are elaborated on with examples. The results can be used as a guideline for marketing professionals to select suitable photos for effective marketing communication online.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Today our lives are overloaded with information offline and online. People are constantly receiving advertising messages that attempt to draw their attention (Hanna *et al.*, 2011). It becomes more important for marketers to be noticeable in communication channels with noise. Recent technologies introduced social media on which their target audience can communicate and interact with marketers. There are various platforms within social media (Walter and Gioglio, 2014). The top three platforms used by marketers are Facebook (used by 94% of companies), Instagram (66%), and Twitter (62%). With an increase from 42% in 2017, 49% of marketers think their Facebook marketing campaigns worked in 2018 (Stelzner, 2018).

Social media play a decisive role in online marketing. Noteworthy 87% of marketers claim that their social media marketing campaigns can generate more exposure for the brands and 78% of marketers indicate that increased traffic is one of the major benefits. More than 50% of marketers have been using social media for years and claim that social media help to improve sales (Stelzner, 2018). Now almost all companies use social media to convey their messages for promotion of products. There are more than 1.5 billion pieces of content in the online environment and this makes it hard for marketing content to stand out in the crowded market (Harman, 2017). Photographs add a personal touch and humanized photos are helpful for the audience to relate to the genuine meaning behind the posts on social media. Inspirational quotes motivate followers and build a connection between the company and consumers. This is the reason why visual content is important for a successful marketing campaign on social media.

People are usually visually oriented and our brains are only able to process limited information at any given time. Information associated with visual content can be retained to 65% while online customers can retain 10 to 20% of textual information. Thus visual information can be processed faster and draws consumers' attention more easily. Users of social media are more likely to be engaged by visual content. For example, tweets with photos get 150% more retweets than those without photos (Harman, 2017). A large block of text is now replaced by visuals like static images, videos, infographics, animations, or graphs for effectiveness of communication. For example, content with photos on Facebook can generate 53% more likes than content without photos (Ahmad, 2017). Visual content generates more comments, shares, and likes than textual message. In addition it is more likely for engaging visual content to go viral. Online users share the message with others in the online communities and help the audience to better appreciate and understand the message conveyed by marketers.

To share images is common practice among all social media. People use visual communication to tell their stories and share their everyday lives in photos (Instagram 2015; Walter and Gioglio, 2014). A picture tells more than a thousand words and it is anticipated that the use of visuals in marketing communication is increasing. Pictures tell more about a brand story than textual information because images give the messages a background and elicit viewers' emotions (Forrester, 2014). The visual focus and clean outlook of the social media attract millions of users and create image sharing marketing. Companies are naturally following this growing trend that brands post on social media to advertise explicitly (Walter and Gioglio, 2014).

Research shows that brand marketing on social media has higher success in customer engagement (Forrester, 2014; Kohli *et al.*, 2015). When consumers are moving toward these social media platforms, companies have to follow and communicate in these new online environments. Visuals are central to social media and daily life. Textual information like tweets offers just one way of presenting information and may be different from how visuals present information. With continuous transformation of social media and other online communication platforms it is worth studying visual communication and consumers' engagement. Social media offer a platform in which visuals and brand communication are combined and this paper aims to study what kind of visual brand communication companies use and why.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Visual communication is studied in many areas of research including psychology, art, science, and communication (Smith *et al.*, 2005; Sojka and Giese, 2006). It is because an individual can be affected logically and emotionally by visual communication that stimulates his reaction instantaneously. Visual communication conveys information through a selected medium and the receiver interprets and comprehends the meaning based on his/her attitudes, social and cultural backgrounds, and personal experience (Jamieson, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2005). Through profile photos and daily snapshots visuals become key means for showing online identities and support a number of social media tools such as dating and hookup apps (Blackwell *et al.*, 2014; Miller, 2015). Pictures have strong political and social influences that drive protests and political acts (Novak and Khazraee, 2014). Visuals also introduce a new way for reporting news and commentary and are artefacts on social media and also associated with discussions and debates (Matias, 2015; Penney, 2015; Vie, 2014).

A picture is worth a thousand words. 30% of neurons in the cerebral cortex of the human brain are for visual processing, 3% for hearing processing. Consumers process marketing messages much faster visually through images for brand communication than through textual messages. The human brain manages visual information 60,000-times faster than textual one (Ahmad, 2017). The right and left hemispheres of the brain manage information in different manners. The right hemisphere is more affective and visual, the left one is more verbal, analytical, and logical (Jamieson, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2005). Even though people use both hemispheres, a particular hemisphere will become more dominant based on the type of stimulus presented to the individual. The right hemisphere processes information more instantly and holistically, the left one deals with information step by step. Furthermore, to view visual advertising may influence audience's attitudes to a brand and promptly turns visual messages into beliefs about the product (Mitchell and Olson, 1981).

Social media are changing to be multimodal because they present text, emoji, hashtags, photos, and videos. These visuals can be filtered, framed, and edited on social media before being disseminated. Marketers recognize several types of content used in social media marketing. 80% of marketers use images in brand marketing on social media. 63% of companies use videos. The majority of companies (32%) also make images the most important form of their marketing content while 24% select videos (Stelzner, 2018).

With the popularity of Instagram and YouTube most social media have been changing the focus on visuals such as images and videos. For example, as a ubiquitous platform Facebook follows and highlights pictures in its services. To share photos is now a vital part of the experience of social media. This transformation relates to how people perceive the world. Images are usually understood as an additional communication mode that complements textual information. Visuals carry their meaning (Hand, 2017). Images can encourage interaction and establish causal relationships (Fahmy *et al.*, 2014).

Denotation and connotation are involved in interpreting and understanding images. Denotation refers to explicit interpretable messages while connotation refers to implicit associations in the viewer's mind (Fahmy *et al.*, 2014). For instance, McDonald's may post an image of someone eating a hamburger with the captions "I'm loving it". The denoted feature of the photo is the product and the brand slogan while the connoted feature takes the audience's mind to happy memories of chatting with friends in the restaurant. Although it is not certain how a viewer will receive and interpret posts and what feeling and thoughts may be evoked, images evoking such connected thoughts are recommended in marketing. Search-hedonic services and products (clothes and food) and experience benefit from visual communication because this visualizes how the products can be used (Lin *et al.*, 2012). It is because the image will activate more senses and this may lead to brand recall (Lin *et al.*, 2012). When using visual brand communication it is relevant to understand how visuals influence

audience and how their meaning is culturally and individually bound. There is an implication that the same image will be interpreted by people in different manners (Phillips *et al.*, 2014).

There are three major types of visual content suitable for social media marketing (Williams, 2017). The first type is for engaging (like games and polls) that creates an experience for users. This type is usually shareable because these posts are interactive and attractive. For example, followers are asked to vote with like in the post to tell what they prefer. The second type is informative and tells something people do not know. These posts are suitable for service industries that do not have a visual element like a product that can be shared in photos. Followers are engaged and educated by an image. The third type is promotional, like a post with photos of products. This attracts more attention to users. Each company may have its own approach and this paper studied what visual communication companies prefer to use on social media.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

As mentioned before, images or photos are the most preferred visual objects used in social media and Facebook is the top social media platform adopted by marketers. This paper studied how companies used photos in their posts on Facebook for marketing purposes. This research consisted of two major steps. In the first step, the timeline photos posted by the selected companies in the 12 months (from Feb 2018 to Jan 2019) were investigated. The number of photos posted in this period was counted and the average number of likes for these photos was calculated. For fair comparison among photos posted by various brands with different numbers of likes for the whole brands (see Figure 1), the Average Like per Million (AL/M) is defined as follows and was calculated for photos of the selected companies. Finally, outstanding companies with the highest AL/M were recognized.

$$AL/M = [the\ average\ number\ of\ likes\ for\ the\ photos / (the\ total\ number\ of\ likes\ for\ the\ brand / 1\ M)]$$

For example, for a particular company, if the average number of likes for the timeline photos is 400 and the number of likes for the whole company is 10M, the value of AL/M is  $[400 / (10M/1M)] = 40$ .

In the second step, content analysis was performed qualitatively to study these outstanding companies' images. Types and purpose of these images would be the major focus in this research. These companies might use photos for social media marketing in a manner quite different from others.

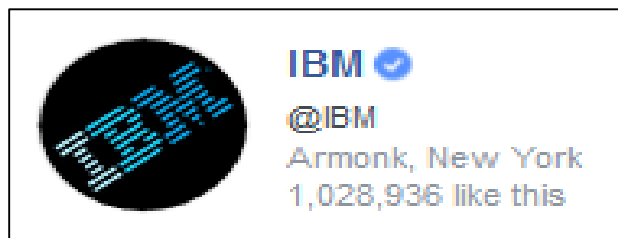


Figure 1: The number of likes for IBM as a whole brand

### 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A total of 37 companies were selected and their AL/M values were calculated and presented in Table 1. These companies were considered for selection because they were active in the online environment empirically. The brand values of these companies are also presented for reference. These brand values are based on the official websites of the companies and some public databases (Brandz, 2019; Forbes, 2019). It was found that there was no obvious correlation between the use of

photo images and the brand values. Promotion is one possible way to the success of a brand but it is not the necessary way because product, pricing and place strategies are important as well.

It was found that the following four companies had the highest AL/M values. The content analysis of their recent timeline photos on Facebook was studied and presented below. Some examples of the photos are illustrated for discussion.

- Heinz Ketchup
- Mercedes-Benz
- IBM
- New York Times

**Table 1: Average like per million and brand values of various companies on Facebook**

Companies	Average Like per Million (AL/M)	Brand values (in Billion US dollars)
1. Heinz Ketchup	623	15.4
2. Mercedes-Benz	421	33.2
3. IBM	392	31.5
4. New York Times	281	5.3
5. Google	154	167.7
6. IKEA	151	15.3
7. Domino's Pizza	150	7.1
8. Pizza Hut	145	8.3
9. Samsung	143	53.1
10. Sony	129	11.3
11. Starbucks	125	17
12. Motorola	124	6.2
13. McDonald's	123	43.8
14. BBC News	123	6.3
15. Burger King	116	3.7
16. Disney	111	52.2
17. Adidas	98	11.2
18. H&M	97	11.5
19. Coca Cola	78	59.2
20. Cathay Pacific	67	5.3
21. Microsoft	65	125.3
22. Xbox	65	16.7
23. Pepsi	56	18.8
24. Ford	54	13
25. Mannings	54	3.57
26. Nike	53	36.8
27. Pocari Sweat	51	5.1
28. Yamaha	50	6.8
29. Fender	45	29.1
30. KFC	43	8.5
31. Nokia	43	48.2
32. Subway	34	17.1
33. Bonaqua	24	3.8
34. Apple	23	205.5
35. HP	21	12.5
36. Louis Vuitton	19	39.3
37. Chevrolet	18	10.7

#### 4.1. Timeline photos of Heinz ketchup

Heinz Ketchup is a kind of daily necessities. Most of its timeline photos on Facebook shows food with ketchup (see the leftmost photo of Figure 2). Food photography is interesting because they display very ordinary objects in an emotional manner. It can be artistic and used as advertising. Taking food photos may be more pressured than other products because usually there is a time constraint when capturing ideal images of food once it is prepared and served. The company also integrates various elements into the photo to create awareness and increase attractiveness. For example, babies and children are one of their common picture topics (see the second leftmost photo of Figure 2). These babies and children make people connect to the life's most wonderful and amazing moments. Sweet details of the photos lead to the brand image established and connected to these happy memories. Furthermore, sports photos are often charged emotionally (see the second rightmost photo in Figure 2). Sports photos can be used for advertising objectives to build and maintain brands and promote sponsored sports activities. These photos capture the emotion and passion on fields and turn athletic events into iconic ones. Animals and pets are also commonly found in the timeline photos of the company (see the rightmost photo in Figure 2). A pet photo usually shows an empathy with animals. Pets can become an important part of people's life and cherish their memories. These photos bring a lot of joy into our lives.



Figure 2: Photo exemplars of Heinz ketchup

#### 4.2. Timeline photos of Mercedes-Benzes

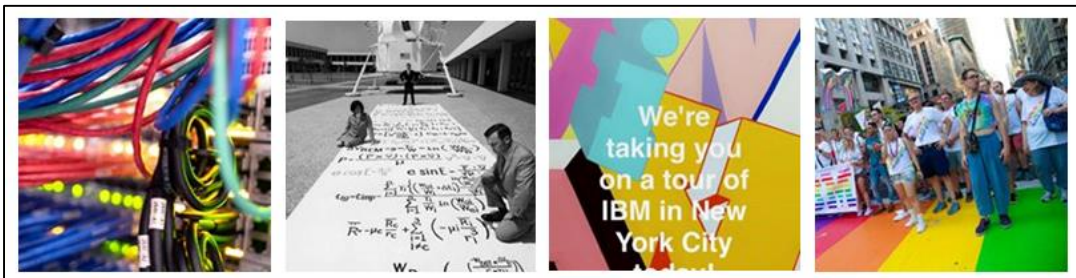
An automobile is usually considered a luxury product that represents the current culture and is an important part of modern life. Automobile photos are usually used in advertisements selling new car models (see the leftmost photo in Figure 3). These photos usually capture the finer details of both exterior and interior of the automobile and highlight its feature from various angles. Landscape photography is also commonly used for advertising (see the second leftmost photo in Figure 3). Landscape photos are kind of the traditional photography style and put a stronger emphasis on the aesthetic value. They can also motivate people to pursue an outdoor lifestyle especially when people in modern cities like to escape from the technological and artificial worlds. Furthermore, portrait photos can be used in a commercial environment (see the second rightmost photo in Figure 3). They include full body shoots and headshots, and they are able to encompass several emotions and imagery because a portrait can highlight the person as well as clothing, the background and the atmosphere. The company also includes architectural photos (see the rightmost photo in Figure 3) that show buildings and similar structure in an aesthetical pleasing manner. These photos usually tell more about the design than the building itself and highlight the details that look aesthetically pleasing. Architectural photos show the beauty in the mundane and discover perspectives hidden to people. They can also demonstrate how people work in the building that fills with human interaction.



**Figure 3: Photo exemplars of Mercedes-Benz**

**4.3. Timeline photos of IBM**

Unlike many companies that display their products directly, IBM rarely presents its product photos on Facebook. The company’s photos show a high degree of diversity. The first type of photos commonly found on Facebook is macro (see the leftmost photo in Figure 4). Macro photography takes close-up pictures and discovers details that usually do not draw the attention of viewers or cannot be seen with unaided eyes. This photographic style retains the audience’s interest and facilitates consumers to remember this advertising. Although the company sells advanced technological products, it shows many black and white photos for documentary purposes (see the second leftmost photo in Figure 4). People feel black and white photos are more reliable and equate them to honest because they are often used by professionals and journalists. Moreover, photo quotes are used frequently by the company (see the second rightmost photo in Figure 4). The quotes may be inspirational, motivational, serious and funny. A short quote with easily digestible words is preferable and the font should be readable on smaller screens because viewers may use mobile devices nowadays. Event photography is also common on Facebook webpage of the company (see the rightmost photo in Figure 4). These photos create buzz for the event and grab reviewers’ interest, and encourage them to keep tabs on other upcoming events. These photos also give the event a sense of credibility and establish great reputations.



**Figure 4: Photo exemplars of IBM**

**4.4. Timeline photos of New York Times**

Although the New York Times is a newspaper that shows various types of photos for news reporting, there are also pictures of the newspaper itself for advertising purpose (see the leftmost photo in Figure 5). This may be the most common type of photos for social media marketing. The purpose is to present commercial items in the most appealing manner that motivates and encourages consumers to take actions like purchases and requests for further information. Aerial photography is a kind of attractive and documentary photos commonly found in newspapers (see the second leftmost photo in Figure 5). Aerial photos are those taken from aircraft and flying objects like drones. These photos may give audience an even better mood because these views are not obtainable at the ground level. Moreover, street photography is also an important element in newspapers (see the second rightmost photo in Figure 5). Street photos document society and everyday life, and capture humanity, emotion and soul. These photos may be taken artistically to resonate people with

various lifestyles due to its ability to tell stories in social media. The photos may change and expand how people see humanity and society. In addition, they may simply touch people and open a way to their memories, feelings and imagination. Furthermore, documentary photos are normally found in the newspaper and they follow a story or a topic thoroughly over time (see the rightmost photo in Figure 5). They deepen audience's understanding and emotional connection to the stories. They capture the visual representation of a story. Everything that is interesting may become documentary photos that are authentic and not artificially forged to suit the untrue narrative.



**Figure 5: Photo exemplars of New York Times**

From photo exemplars of the four companies on Facebook, the diversity of photos is found to be high. There are several types of photography possible to be used on social media for marketing purposes. With the huge volume of information on the Internet and social media like Facebook, marketers have to grab the attention of the target consumers. At a given time, a brain is able to process a limited amount of information. Photos are easier to consume than textual information. Compelling photos can be processed much faster and will usually take precedence. Photos are able to increase people's interest to read content. One photo may not be able to keep the audience surprised but a collection of photos does. Marketers on social media have to grab and keep attention unceasingly (Krishna *et al.*, 2016).

The choice of photos should be consistent and align with the brand and the mission of the company. They should be supporting images instead of distracting ones (King, 2018). Most of people's communication is non-verbal. To combine visual components with text is a good way for marketers to capture the attention of their consumers. Photos should stand out and be so memorable that consumers associate the brand with the photography styles. When audience likes photos well enough, visual content can go viral. After people have seen photos attractive, they may share with others on social media. When these photos circulate enough, the company may see substantial increase in visitors (Manic, 2015).

Excellent photography helps to add credibility of a brand. It shows consumers that the company cares about all the details. Photos strengthen messages and connect the target audience. A sensible company should have great aesthetics to build a strong brand that is emotional and dynamic. Photos explain brand messages that help the audience better appreciate and understand the message (Gallopel-Morvan *et al.*, 2011).

Photos may evoke emotions from the audience. Responses of consumers to the appeal of the photos are vital in marketing. Captivating photos drive response that triggers a buying decision. A photo automatically generates more engagement. People are conditioned to make impulsive judgments on a subconscious level. Well-taken photos displaying products in context show a professional appearance that builds trust. A few great photos are not enough. Photos should be consistent and strive for coherence in social media. When people are interested in these photos, they will follow



and check the products. When high quality photos are organized and coherent, there will be a growth in sales. Successful photos help people visualize products and services (Shin *et al.*, 2014).

## 5. CONCLUSION

One challenge for marketers is that social media are becoming more and more cluttered. How can they stand out and be noticed? How can marketers draw attention and drive consumers to see them. Visual social marketing may overcome this key challenge of clutter on social media. Visual social marketing is a great way to grow business presence on the Internet. It is because visual content provides advantages for business including communicating faster, increasing the credibility of products, and building deeper relationships with consumers (Pieters *et al.*, 2010). Visual content generates remarkable results on social networks. It is found that on Facebook images generate 50% more interaction than other types of content. Pictures on Facebook generate seven times more likes (Ahmad, 2017). Images are now playing an essential role in social media marketing strategies.

Images offer opportunities to connect people on all social media and generate more likes, views, and clicks on social media than only textual information. Social media like Facebook is a great place to post visual content. Visual social media are the most frequently discussed and fastest-growing networks. Ideas communicated with images can be distilled into key points for sharing more concisely and help to overcome the challenge of removing clutter (Pavel, 2014). Consumers overwhelmed online like to skim content to find important information. Good photos usually stand out and grab viewers' attention.

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