Full length article

'Snap happy' brands: Increasing publicity effectiveness through a snapshot aesthetic when marketing a brand on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of a company publishing photos of their products using either (a) snapshot aesthetics, where pictures portray average situations and appear as if though they could have been taken by the average consumer, or (b) traditional studio aesthetics in image based social media. In an experiment where respondents followed an Instagram account of a fashion brand using one of the two aesthetic styles over a period of one week, we demonstrate that in social media, photos with a snapshot aesthetic produce higher brand attitudes and intentions to recommend others to follow the Instagram account. These effects where mediated by higher liking of the images and an increase in source credibility when publishing photos with a snapshot aesthetic.

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1. Introduction

Snapping photos to your 'followers', 'fans', and 'friends' is daily practice for both general social media users and brands. Photo sharing is the raison d'être for many social media technologies (e.g. Instagram, Flickr, Pinterest), and an integral gratification for more general sites such as Facebook (Joinson, 2008; Lang & Barton, 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). The premise that these technologies are 'social' rather than 'commercial' media has instilled and subsequently socialized a decorum of "phatic" (Miller, 2008, p. 387) and "lightweight" (Zhao & Rosson, 2009, p. 243) communication, wherein otherwise formal public figures appear more informal (Park, 2013). Following this, the posting of studio quality professional photos by brands is somewhat juxtaposed to an arena where filtered landscapes and gratuitously amateur selfies taken on phones are the norm (Chae, 2017; Chua & Chang, 2016). It has been discussed that to be seen as more personal, brands have begun to post photos in a user-generated/amateur aesthetic, in line with the

general etiquette of social media technologies (Mojca, 2015). Indeed, a number of well-known fashion brands are already using a more amateur aesthetic when engaging their social media following (e.g. Alexander Wang, ASOS and Topshop). This aesthetic is herein referred to as a 'snapshot aesthetic', as photos of this type are most commonly 'snapped' and uploaded through phone cameras.

It is understood that social media presents a novel challenge for brands and they must adapt their practices to keep up (Colliander at al, 2015; Dehghani & Tumer, 2015). Following this, snapshot aesthetics has gained recognition in later years in marketing literature (Schroeder, 2010) as it has gained mainstream traction thanks to photographers like Terry Richardson. Researchers have, for example, sought to explain the motivations for the postings of images of this kind (such as so called selfies) on social media (Gannon & Prothero, 2016; Kedzior, Allen, & Schroeder, 2016). At present however there is no empirical validation as to whether consumers respond better to a snapshot aesthetic compared to a traditional studio quality aesthetic when it comes to images from companies in their social media feeds, though it is generally accepted within the marketing literature that high quality images perform best (Lohse & Rosen, 2001; Lombard & Snyder-Duch, 2001; Pollay, 1986). Existing studies into consumer reactions to marketing images, however, have all been performed in a non-social media

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setting. Taking into account the nature of social media as a forum for mostly user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and the strong influence of communal norms on the responses to marketing in this sphere (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010), we see reasons to believe that consumers should play by a different set of rules when judging marketing images in social media.

We will contribute knowledge to this gap by empirically testing the effect of a snapshot aesthetic versus a traditional studio aesthetic in brand photo posts on Instagram. As social media is being increasingly used by corporations to get their messages across to consumers, studies into the effects of various communication tactics in these media on consumers ought to be of critical importance to both those who design and those who run these tools within organizations. In addition, as photos are becoming the norm in these media and investigating the effects of various kinds of image styles should be especially useful to both researchers and practitioners. The choice of Instagram as the focal technology is consequently due to it being the world's leading photo sharing social media platform (Chua & Chang, 2016). We draw from the theory of aesthetics (Berlyne, 1971; Schroeder, 2010), which is more commonly used within the study of computer human behavior to understand the usability, appearance and appeal of web technologies (Li & Yeh, 2010; Seckler, Opwis, & Tuch, 2015; Tuch, Bargas-Avila, & Opwis, 2010). Through a between-subjects longitudinal experiment with Instagram users, we will contribute valuable knowledge on the impact of using a snapshot aesthetic versus a studio aesthetic on social media, on brand credibility and on users' attitudes towards the brand. Implications for managers will be provided.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Snapshot aesthetics

Authors have discussed aesthetic influences to be essential in users' satisfaction with technologies or facets of these technologies (Hartmann, Sutcliffe, & De Angeli, 2007; Schenkman & Jonsson, 2000). Berlyne (1971) proposed that positive reactions to aesthetic stimuli hinged upon the arousal properties of an object. This in turn was determined by its collative properties (e.g. novelty, incongruity), psychophysical properties (e.g. intensity, color) and ecological properties (signal value or meaningfulness). Testing this theory, Martindale, Moore, and Borkum (1990) found that "meaningfulness seems to be the main determinant of aesthetic preference" (p. 129). This finding seems particularly pertinent in the context of a snapshot aesthetic in social media, since snapshots are the norm in social photo sharing and therefore hold greater congruence with the custom of the medium (see Miller, 2008; Park, 2013; Zhao & Rosson, 2009). This is especially true for Instagram, the core existence of which is built on the sharing of user-generated photos with a snap aesthetic (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

Further supporting the advantage of a snap aesthetic within social media are the findings of Reber, Schwartz, and Winkelman (2004) who concluded that the more fluently an observer can process an object, the more positive the aesthetic evaluation. Again, since a snapshot aesthetic is more congruent and meaningful in a social media setting, an observer should be able to process it more fluently, leading to more favorable responses to the images. In another study of aesthetic judgments, Leder, Belke, Oeberst, and Augustin (2004) concluded that successful classification of style should lead to self-rewarding cognitive experiences, which in turn is likely to positively influence the aesthetic appreciation of an object.

We propose that in addition to the snapshot aesthetic carrying more meaning for social media users, users are more "fluent" in this aesthetic as they are more frequently exposed to it in social media, and thus are more likely to classify the snapshot style as something congruent with the norm of the platforms. This, in turn, should lead to positive cognitive effects and thereby to an increased liking for images with a snapshot aesthetic. Liking is discussed as an instrumental human emotion that motivates and coincides with the development of relationships with other individuals or brands (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Ye & Van Raaij, 2004). Thus we propose the following.

H1. Using pictures with a snapshot aesthetic in image based social media will result in higher levels of liking of the images than using pictures with a traditional studio aesthetic.

2.2. Snapshots and credibility

We also expect that using a snapshot aesthetic will result in higher perceived credibility of the brand's Instagram account. The credibility of a source is most commonly defined as consisting of expertise and trustworthiness (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Selnes, 1998; Smith, Young, & Gibson, 1999). Thus a source (e.g. a person, a brand) is perceived as more credible if they have relevant expertise to the assertions they are making and these assertions are deemed valid, or in other words trustworthy. If a brand manages to create meaningful images that fit into the overall aesthetic landscape of the medium (as was argued for images with a snapshot aesthetic leading up to H1), then this should signal to users that the brand has expertise in understanding the media landscape in which it operates. Wells, Valacich, and Hess (2011) have demonstrated the importance of such signals in an online environment where physical cues are absent. We argue that as consumers grow increasingly savvy (Macdonald & Uncles, 2007) these signals of expertise become even more important. Granted, the use of professional photography also signals that the company possesses expertise. Pollay (1986), in his seminal article, in fact attributes part of the effectiveness of advertising to ads being "professionally developed, with all the attendant research sophistications" (p. 21). However, we argue that in the context of social media, signaling that you grasp the decorum of the medium would outweigh the expertise signaled by the use of a professional studio aesthetic.

In addition, research also shows that trustworthiness is an equally important part of source credibility (McGinnies & Ward, 1980), in particular when it comes to affecting evaluations of the brand (Yoon, Kim, & Kim, 1998) and especially when affecting the brand in a social media context (Bilgihan, 2016; Colliander & Erlandsson, 2013; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). This is key since Schroeder (2010) has demonstrated that a central aspect of the snapshot style is the appearance of authenticity, as the snapshots could seemingly have been taken by anyone. Authenticity, a key component of contemporary life (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), has in turn been explicitly linked to an increase in trust (Gilmore & Pine II, 2007). We therefore propose that by using snapshot-like images on Instagram a brand will appear more authentic, and therefore more trustworthy as a source within users' Instagram feeds. Combined with the signaling of media expertise, using a snapshot aesthetic should therefore result in higher perceived source credibility than using a traditional studio aesthetic. Hence, we hypothesize:

H2. Using pictures with a snapshot aesthetic in image based social media will result in higher levels of perceived source credibility than using pictures with a traditional studio aesthetic.