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BRAND COMMUNICATION ON INSTAGRAM

Abstract

Businesses are slowly changing their communication strategies, especially smaller businesses with limited marketing budgets. Social media are emerging as an alternative channel for communication given that they enable targeted marketing campaigns at affordable prices.

Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms among the younger generation. If the brands want to target millennials and build effective communication with them, they must discover and understand what the millennials preferences on this social media are.

The purpose of this research is focused on determining the type of visual brand communication that millennials prefer the most as well to discover the type of content that the millennials are most found of in order to increase the likelihood of their engagement with the brand.

Key words: Instagram, Brand communication, Customer engagement, Social media

JEL Classification: (M370, M310, M300)

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Introduction

Businesses, particularly smaller ones with limited marketing budgets, are shifting their communication strategies away from standard Above the Line (ATL) campaigns. Social media offers a cost-effective alternative, with profiles serving as ATL while ads become Below the Line (BTL), allowing precise targeting without significant costs. Such campaigns can reach a wide audience, tailored to specific demographics, for less than \$100.

This research aims to gain insights into Generation Y's behavior on Instagram, valuable for brands seeking to boost customer engagement on social platforms, especially Instagram. Instagram, highly popular among Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), holds substantial importance for brand communication due to this demographic's growing purchasing power.

Despite the significance, limited research exists on effective communication with Millennials on Instagram and the importance of social media advertising. While a previous study by Hellberg (2015) explored visual brand communication on Instagram in Finland among females aged 20 to 30, this research seeks to address gaps in academic literature by providing fresh insights into consumer engagement on Instagram. It is important to note that this research does not involve activities violating the platform's policies, such as buying likes, followers, or employing automated bots. The findings will be particularly beneficial for small and micro businesses.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1.Brand, awareness, and loyalty

The marketing practice of creating a name, symbol or design that identifies and differentiates a product from other products is called branding. An effective brand strategy allows the business to have an advantage in competitive markets. According to Davis & Baldwin (2005), brands help the consumer to “select one product over another in a complex world of increased choice”. Brands help consumers to identify and choose products that they perceive as superior in comparison to the alternatives.

A brand is one of the most valuable assets a company can have. It is company identification. Brand loyalty is the center of all marketing activities. With increased market fragmentation and intensified market competition, traditional brands are forced to focus more on developing and maintaining long-term

relationships with their consumers and therefore seeking to adopt relationship marketing (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Rust et al., 2004). Brands have to think about their customer relationship in the long run, otherwise they will quickly lose ground to companies who are more focused on their consumers.

1.2.Social media and communication

In the past decade, advertising has evolved beyond traditional platforms to include online and social media ads. The saturation of these digital spaces poses challenges for brand recognition.

The rise of Web 2.0, especially through social networks (Chen et al., 2012), has reshaped media consumption (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Consumers now prefer social media over traditional channels like TV, radio, and magazines for information (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Millennials spend about 30% of their daily 18 hours of media consumption on user-generated content and social networking (Ipsos MediaCT, 2014), highlighting their visual sophistication (Bolton et al., 2013). Social media's societal impact now rivals traditional media, with a significant presence among those aged 15 to 64, particularly in developed countries (Jokien, 2016).

Social media offers cost-effective opportunities, especially for small businesses (Jokien, 2016). It excels in targeting specific demographic markets (Turban et al., 2008), making it an attractive advertising platform.

1.3.Instagram

Instagram is a social media network founded in 2010. Unlike other social networks such as Facebook that focuses on pictures and large texts and Twitter that is a text-based platform, Instagram focuses on visuals (images and videos). One image is worth a thousand words because looking at an image, usually takes less time than reading a whole paragraph of text.

Visual communication is a subject of study by several sciences such as communication, psychology, art and more (Smith, et al., 2005). People can be affected by visual communication emotionally or logically, or both (Sojka and Giese, 2006). It seems that visual brand communication could be a very effective form of communication when it is done adequately. In accordance with Hellberg (2015) study, consumers prefer visual brand communication on Instagram since this kind of communication has much stronger emotional effect.

Instagram offers brands a more personal approach to communication. This type of approach is well accepted by users, regardless whether the brands are followed for practical reasons like receiving new information or simply for the aesthetic reasons. The aim of this paper is to provide valuable insights and guidelines how the brands can effectively communicate their message to millennials.

1.4. Social media in Republic of North Macedonia

There are 1.2 million social media users in Republic of North Macedonia (DataReportal, 2023) and the younger generation widely use various social media. The first social network that gained mass popularity was Facebook in 2009. According to the latest research, Meta's Facebook had 914 thousand users in early 2023 (Statista, 2023) which yields a high penetration rate of almost 50% of the total population in early 2023.

In the last several years, Instagram has gained much more popularity among the younger generation compared with Facebook and other social media platforms. In accordance with the Meta's Advertising tools (DataReportal, 2023), Instagram in Macedonia had around 711 thousand (seven hundred and eleven thousand) users in early 2023, which is 39.1% of the local internet user base. According to the DataReportal on Instagram users, stats, data and trends (2023) Instagram users base is mainly younger population, as 69.7% are aged between 13 and 34, and 15% are aged over 45. Although, Instagram penetration rate in Macedonia is smaller than the one the Facebook is having, bearing in mind that only 30,000 (thirty thousand) out of 1.1 million Facebook users are aged between 13 to 18 according to Meta's advertising tools (DataReportal, 2023), which can lead us to a conclusion that the younger generations slowly are replacing Facebook with Instagram.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured in-depth interview was used as a method for providing findings about the research topic, because via discussion and open-ended questions the responders can more easily explain their behavior on Instagram and their views about brand engagement on this social media. Semi-structured interview was also chosen as a research method in order to determine and better understand the type of visual brand communication that millennial prefer on Instagram.

2.1. Sample

For the purpose of the study, urban male and female Instagram users, classified as millennials or generation Y were used as homogenous sample. The sample size for this study was 30 (thirty) responders aged between 22 (twenty-two) and 38 (thirty-eight). In order to have results that are more realistic, beside the age and Instagram account criteria, brand following was introduced as another additional criteria for selecting the responders. The type of the brand didn't matter, because the aim of the research was to investigate the general awareness about visual brand communication posts on Instagram.

2.2. Interview process and guide

The research methodology involved conducting interviews with respondents to collect data for answering research questions. A structured interview guide (Patton, 2002) was used to cover various topics. Some interviews followed the guide closely, while others were more discussion-oriented and varied in duration. The interviewer improved techniques over time, gaining deeper insights. All interview topics were covered, with probing used for detailed clarification (Patton, 2002). Respondents were encouraged to open Instagram during the discussion to provide specific examples, but not all chose to do so. The interviews began with descriptive questions to ease respondents into the topic, followed by general questions about their Instagram use, favorite content, followed brands, and preferred visual communication styles. The final set of questions focused on factors influencing consumer engagement with brand content on Instagram.

3. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Brand communication on Instagram is accepted and welcomed by all respondents. Many of the respondents perceived brand communication on Instagram as more personal in comparison with brand communication on other social media. The two main elements that come from this research as findings were related to Visual brand communication preferences and Engagement preferences. The visual brand communication part covers the image/video and content preferences. Liking, commenting, sharing, lurking, and following will be presented as part of the engagement preferences. As a key topic in this study, personal engagement will be discussed as well. The conclusion will provide summarized findings and will also provide further insight

3.1. Visual communication preferences

Instagram offers the brands a type of communication that practically did not non-exist before this social platform was invented. The study found that the Y generation prefer visual brand communication on Instagram, because this type of communication enables effective transfer of information through images and videos. The respondents followed the brands for different reasons: inspiration, information about promotions or just for the aesthetically pleasing content. The frequency of posting content and up to date information was found as one of the factors that affects respondents' perception about the brand. Posting frequently may be found displeasing by many users, but on other hand, posting rarely can make the brand irrelevant

Findings related to visual brand communication preferences on Instagram will be presented in the following section.

3.1.1. Images

One of the key aspects of this research was aimed at revealing the preferences of users when it comes to posting images. Images and interpretations are not equally favorable by everyone. However, in the study, some common preferences were found. The inspiration and the good feeling that the brand content provided (aesthetical experience) was the preferred feature. Colorful images and Framing were also commonly preferred.

3.1.1.1. Aesthetical experience

Image aesthetic is an extremely important preference in visual communication or as the famous quote states "A picture is worth a thousand words". The emotions that an aesthetical image stimulates are on subconscious level. Every viewer analyses the image in their own way comparing it with images, shapes and patterns from their previous life experiences. The study found that some of the things that users want to get from a brand image is inspiration and good feeling. Product focused images were not so successful and inspirational. It was also found out that the images do not only inspire people and create good feelings, but they also spark the imagination of the users. People like to dream about flying or being super strong, but also, they dream about expensive jewelry. The findings also support the argument that images help individuals in visualizing the ways a certain product can be used.

3.1.1.2. Colorful images

Colors and colorful images were also something to which most of the respondents reacted positively. Although the colorful images were found to be an attention grabber, they were not a guarantee for a visual engagement. However, it can be argued that by initially attracting the user's attention, if other aspects of the image are of interest to the potential customer, the likelihood of visible engagement increases.

3.1.1.3. Composition or framing

The way a potential customer perceives certain brand visual communication is subjective and is based on experiences. Framing of the image was also found to be an important factor for customers. Robert et al. (1982) argues that framing the product into an image of how the product is used in practice will increase the value of the brand and the product because it plays with connotative responses in the user's mind. Each customer has a different opinion on what is a well-composed or well-framed picture. People with similar backgrounds and societal norms have similar opinions on the framing and composition of images, and within a certain group, the image will be interpreted very similarly or the same. However, our research shows that not all users prefer products framed in a situation of use, but some of the customers prefer to see only the product, without taking into account the aesthetics. Those customers are only interested in what the brand offers and what the product looks like. They are not interested in framing and colorful images; they are purely product focused when it comes to brands and their communication on Instagram.

3.1.2. Videos

There are divided opinions about the use of videos as a tool for visual communication of the brand. Walter & Gioglio (2014) argue that videos are important and useful in brand storytelling since they have extra components like sound and movement, something that images lack. Many responders believe that the videos are tools that provides good value, however there was a significant group of responders who thought that videos were a waste of time because they almost never watched a video on Instagram. It is worth noticing here, that one of the arguments of the opponents of the idea of using videos for visual communication on Instagram was the lack of creativity in videos made by the brands. The research showed that the respondents who believe that

videos are a good tool for visual communication mainly dealt with cycling, fitness, skiing, or other activities which is very difficult to explain or express using a static picture. These customers wanted to see and experience how someone else does such an activity in motion, for example cycling or a specific fitness exercise.

3.2 Engagement preferences

Customer's engagement with the brand content can be an indicator for success or failure of the brand communication efforts on Instagram. Content should always be created in a manner that will increase the possibility for customer engagement, which in the end will not only improve the brand communication endeavor but the brand itself. The study found that different responders preferred different types of engagement. Hellberg (2015) argues that in the earlier days of Instagram, lurking was mostly used by the respondents, but as Instagram cements its place in our daily life, people seem to favor other types of engagement as well. In this section, all concepts of engagement identified in the research will be presented.

3.2.1 Liking

Liking is the most common and freely used form of engagement. This might also be connected to the amount of effort that user needs to put into 'liking' a post. While most of the respondents valued their 'like' as a preferred method of engaging with a brand, some of the respondents, in an effort to preserve their privacy, were not supportive of this type of engagement.

3.2.2 Commenting and Sharing

Instagram does not allow simple sharing of the post in a feed without using third-party software. Easier forms of sharing are tagging in the comments section, direct message sharing and sharing on the user story. Given that one of the most used ways to share on Instagram is based on sharing through the commenting section, these two activities (commenting and sharing) will be considered in conjunction.

Commenting on brand posts was found to be quite uncommon. Some of the respondents only commented when a brand was having some sort of giveaway. Similarly, with 'liking', avoiding comments also came as a result of the need for preserving privacy and anonymity.

The most used feature that somehow combines sharing and commenting is tagging a friend in the comment section. Another alternative that might be even more common is direct message sharing. A later approach creates engagement that is not visible. The respondents stated that elected type of sharing depended mostly on how they felt at the moment and whether they wanted someone else to see the post that was intended for their friends. Another way to share posts is sharing the post on the user stories. This type of sharing was the least used way, and only a few of respondents used it.

3.2.3 Following

Following a brand was quite common for all the respondents. Followed brands varied from personal brands, celebrities, influencers up to traditional brands. Although this type of engagement was common, responders stated they had some criteria that needed to be met to follow a certain brand. Respondents discussed that post content is important, but also post frequency was a factor that had an impact on whether they would continue following the brand.

Some of the respondents followed brands even thru they had no intention to purchase from them. They follow the brand because of the well-made posts or for inspirational purposes. This further proves that aesthetics has a great role in attracting new followers and more followers always means better business.

3.2.4 Lurking

Lurking emerged as the predominant way users view Instagram posts, with a significant portion of respondents admitting to primarily lurking during their time on the platform. The study revealed that individual mood and availability play crucial roles in determining the level of engagement on Instagram. Busy schedules, fatigue, or time constraints often hinder users from transitioning beyond lurking to visible engagement. However, some respondents mentioned revisiting previously scrolled content in search of interesting posts, indicating a latent level of engagement even when not visibly interacting. This suggests that users pay attention to posts, even when not actively engaging with them.

Furthermore, all respondents reported changes in their Instagram behavior over time. Most now focus on posting their own content and engaging more visually with brand posts, aligning with Helberg's (2015) observation that users initially tend to lurk but gradually become more inclined to engage visibly as they familiarize themselves with the platform's visual style. Notably,

two outliers mentioned reduced Instagram usage over time, primarily due to time constraints.

In conclusion, lurking emerged as the favored form of user engagement on Instagram, with the level of visual engagement primarily influenced by factors such as timing, mood, and the user's familiarity with the platform.

3.2.5 Personal Engagement

As it was stated before, aesthetics in visual brand communication on Instagram is very important. But inspiring content might not always result in a visible engagement, although it was found that it still had effect on the users.

Users with lurking behavior, are more likely to change their behavior and start visible engagement with a brand if they feel that they have on some level a personal connection with the brand post. The study showed that the engagement that the user has with the content of the brand would be much stronger when the brand post contains a certain aspect that connects the user with his background or with his beliefs. If the content of the post is personally attractive to the user, then it creates a stronger emotional reaction. Emotional reaction means that the likelihood of visible engagement by the user is much higher.

Conclusion

In the last several years, Instagram has gained much more popularity among the younger generation compared with Facebook and other social media platforms. If the brands want to target millennials and build effective communication with them, they must discover and understand what the millennials preferences on this social media are. In accordance with this study, millennials or generation Y engage with visual brand content on Instagram mostly by liking the posts. Some of them share the content in a few different ways, like sharing it on their stories, by tagging their friends in the comment section and most notably by sending it to their friends via the direct message option. Sharing and commenting can sometimes overlap due to the Instagram tagging option. Millennials in Macedonia rarely comment on brand posts.

When it comes to their preferences for the type of visual content they would like to engage with, most of the respondents prefer images over videos. Millennials have divided opinions about the content of the image. While some of them enjoyed a more aesthetically pleasing image, others are more satisfied with a product-focused image. Regardless of the content of the image, the interviews have shown that users from generation Y are most likely to engage with an image that affects them emotionally. Some responders prefer videos over images due to their hobbies and work. For example, people who liked biking and sports mostly preferred videos because images could not illustrate what they were looking for.

There were still some respondents with predominantly lurking behavior. Although these respondents were not visibly engaging with the brand, the posts served them as springboard for future action.

Due to the narrow nature of the study, this research is limited to only millennials that are on Instagram and that live in the Republic of Macedonia. The current study of engagement with visual brand communication on Instagram, was conducted on a sample of both male and female respondents, who were in the millennial age group or gen Y in Macedonia, thus making wider generalization based on the findings is impossible. In the future, a study where the interviewed respondents are within a different age group could be something that yields interesting results.

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