

Rhetoric of crisis

Retoryka kryzysu

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VARIA

GULNARA Z. KARIMOVA

SP JAIN SCHOOL OF GLOBAL MANAGEMENT, DUBAI

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1808-8373>

gulnara.z.karimova@gmail.com

Exploring Visual Framing Strategies, Sentiment, and Product Presentation Modality in Instagram Posts of Fashion Influencers

Analiza strategii kadrowania wizualnego, emocji i sposobów prezentacji produktu w postach influencerów modowych na Instagramie

Abstract

A highly visual social media platform such as Instagram is incorporated by many companies in their marketing communications strategies to advertise their products and services employing digital visual rhetoric. The purpose of this study is to extend the current understanding of visual framing strategies, sentiment, and product presentation modality in the multicultural context by examining social media practices of influencers belonging to two cultural backgrounds, namely the United Kingdom of Great Britain and the United Arab Emirates. Using content analysis, this study reveals visual rhetorical strategies practiced by Instagram influencers that can equip digital marketing practitioners with effective devices of persuasion. The study provides a useful contribution to the theory of digital visual rhetoric.

Wiele firm używa Instagrama – wizualną platformę społecznościową, w swoich strategiach komunikacji marketingowej do reklamowania produktów i usług, wykorzystując cyfrową retorykę wizualną. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest poszerzenie wiedzy na temat strategii kadrowania wizualnego, emocji i sposobów prezentacji produktów w kontekście wielokulturowym, poprzez zbadanie praktyk influencerów należących do dwóch środowisk kulturowych, mianowicie Zjednoczonego Królestwa Wielkiej Brytanii i Zjednoczonych Emiratów Arabskich. Analiza treści przedstawia wizualne strategie retoryczne stosowane przez influencerów, które mogą służyć praktykom marketingu cyfrowego jako skuteczne narzędzia perswazji. Badanie stanowi wkład w dyskusję na temat cyfrowej retoryki wizualnej.

Key words

visual rhetoric, Instagram, influencer, influencer marketing, product presentation modality
retoryka wizualna, Instagram, influencer, influencer marketing, sposoby prezentacji produktu

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GULNARA Z. KARIMOVA

SP JAIN SCHOOL OF GLOBAL MANAGEMENT, DUBAI

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1808-8373>

gulnara.z.karimova@gmail.com

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Introduction

Companies have always been trying to adapt to the constant changes in the media landscape, from the decline of traditional media to the rise of social media influencers. The inception of the Internet brought new possibilities to marketers to disseminate information to potential customers. The necessity to meet the usual criteria of being memorable, attractive, and relevant to the target audience remained, although the advertising landscape has gradually changed from newspapers, television, and celebrities to smartphones, social media, and influencers.

In the last years, influencers – modern social media celebrities – have gained the close attention of companies keen to have an edge in their digital marketing activities in different regions, especially in Europe and North America. “More than two-thirds of North American retailers use some form of influencer marketing. And almost half of US and UK digital marketers spend at least 10 percent of their marketing communication budget on influencer marketing” (Newberry 2019, § 7).

In the Middle East and Africa (MENA region), the development of these tendencies has a slower rate. As a result, differences in influencer marketing can be traced in these regions, for example, based on the penetration level of different social media platforms among the population. Many social media platforms deployed by advertisers and influencers (such as Instagram and Facebook) are highly visual yet, there is little theory for adequately accounting for the role of the digital visual rhetoric in a global context and the explanation of variations in the visual techniques and elements used in the social media.

Many scholars have contributed insights into visual rhetoric in the so-called “traditional” advertising (e.g., Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver 2006; Mick & Buhl 1992; McQuarrie 1989; McQuarrie & Mick 1992, 1996, 1999; Phillips 1996, 2000; Phillips and McQuarrie 2004; Scott 1994; Stern 1989) as well as in the digital world (e.g., Tiidenberg 2018; Smith 2019; Kusumasondjaja 2019). This

study continues developing the theory of digital visual rhetoric by investigating Instagram accounts of fashion and lifestyle influencers focusing on visual framing strategies such as shot/frame, the position of the product in the photo, and the sentiment expressed by the influencers as these visual elements of persuasion have been overlooked in the literature. This omission is crucial, considering a large number of fashion influencers, posts containing their own images along with the promoted products. By selecting a pictorial element from the palette of visual rhetorical devices and defining the location of a pictorial element within this structure, influencers aim at creating a desirable impact on their followers.

Besides, using the two examples of the countries that score differently on the cultural dimensions may enrich our understanding of advertising imagery and persuasive techniques in the cultural context. The significance of highlighting the cultural differences of visual rhetoric in social media is apparent as it enables us to choose an execution that suits an international audience with different cultural backgrounds. Two countries in which influencer marketing is a popular trend, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United Kingdom of Great Britain (UK), countries with different culture, were selected to find if the cultural dimension affects the visual rhetoric employed by influencers who try to create an argument persuasive enough to move a specific audience.

Literature Review

Using a celebrity to endorse a brand is a strategy that has been practiced for centuries. The word celebrity can be traced back to the Latin word *celeber*, which means “frequented” or “famous person”. In the 1800s, Queen Victoria’s laundress was used to endorse Greenfield Patent. As the decades passed, actors, actresses, singers, and athletes were hired by companies to become brand ambassadors. In recent decades, consumers gained the ability to expand their knowledge about products with the rise of the Internet. With the development of social media, companies soon discovered that they could advertise their products on such digital social networking platforms as Facebook, Myspace, and Friendster, which started emerging in the early 2000s.

Social media – an open platform in which people can share their memories and experiences – have allowed people to become small celebrities or influencers. A person is considered an influencer when he or she is an avid social media user that has a community that follows his or her content on such platforms as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as they have tools that help to promote their content (Yodel 2017). An influencer’s type can be determined by the number of followers and the category of the shared content.

Influencers have been categorized into different groups according to the number of followers that they have. An influencer who has over one million of followers could be considered a celebrity (Nachum 2016). This type of influencer could be charging high rates for their services. In the next level, there are influencers whose followers range from five hundred thousand to one million, and they are known as macro-influencers (Nachum 2016). As the number of followers decreases there is another category known as a middle influencer that has one hundred thousand to five hundred thousand followers, and in the last category, there are micro-influencers, known as niche influencers, with one thousand to one hundred thousand followers (Nachum 2016).

A celebrity	Over one million
A macro-influencer	Five hundred thousand to one million
A middle influencer	One hundred thousand to five hundred thousand
A micro-influencer/niche influencer	One thousand to one hundred thousand

Table 1: Influencer typology based on the number of followers

Interestingly, it has been found that as the number of followers increases, the levels of engagement (likes and comments) decrease, as can be observed in Figure 1 and Figure 2 (Fitzpatrick 2017). As a result, companies often hire micro-influencers, as they show a better level of engagement and charge a lower fee.

Instagram Comment Rate vs. Followership

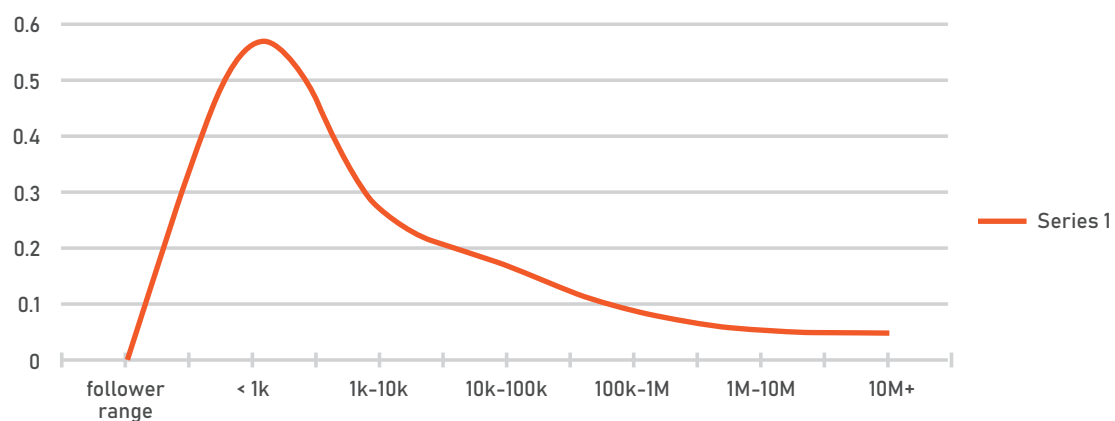


Figure 1: Instagram comment rate vs. followership

Instagram Like Rate vs. Followership

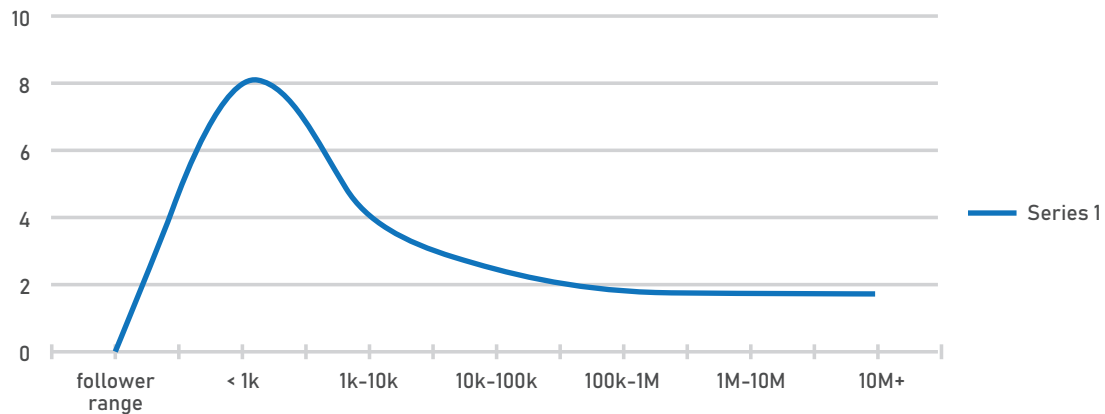


Figure 2: Instagram like rate vs. followership

Another typology is based on the themes appearing in the posts. Typically, influencers' dominant themes revolve around food, lifestyle, fashion, technology, sports, and entertainment. Some of the most prominent types of influencers are: the icon (e.g., pop stars, athletes, movie stars, and socialites); the adventurer (e.g., travelers, adventure photographers, and extreme sports enthusiasts); the instructor (e.g., life hackers, food bloggers, and how-to experts); the guru (e.g., beauty, lifestyle, fitness, and fashion influencers); the creator (e.g., short filmmakers and pranksters); and the entertainer (e.g., comedians and confessional personalities) (Mediakix 2017).

Cautious of their brand image, some companies try to have high control over the ways the influencer promotes the product by giving specific instructions to the influencer. However, this is not a firm practice, and some companies, paying tribute to the rising importance of authenticity and an organic image of the influencer, allow influencers to exercise their creativity in promoting the product. By selecting a pictorial element from the palette of visual rhetorical devices and defining the location of a pictorial element within this structure, influencers aim at creating a desirable impact on their followers.

Visual rhetoric can be defined as the visual representation of an object created by the author for purposes of communication using pictorial strategies. Linda Scott suggested that visuals do not simply assist in a verbal message but are an inherently persuasive device. She has introduced the notion of visual rhetoric to the consumer research literature ascribing to imagery a significant role to “pose arguments, raise questions, create fictions, [and] present metaphors” (1994, 260).

Digital visual rhetoric is a way of informing, persuading, and encouraging an audience to act using pictorial strategies, visual images, typography, and text through digital media produced and distributed through multimedia platforms.

The use of visual images, pictorial elements, and visual framing strategies in influencers' posts have been examined in different contexts, for example, luxury fashion brands (Kusumasondjaja 2019), the food industry (Young 2019), and traveling (Smith 2019). Studies have looked at the visual aesthetics of the fashion luxury brand content posted on Instagram in terms of expressive vs. classical aesthetic images and video vs. static content (Kusumasondjaja 2019). Visual framing strategies have been investigated considering the type of presented food, colors, framing type, and camera angle (Young 2019). Some studies focused on identifying the prevailing themes in the content of travel bloggers (Smith 2019) and Instagram accounts of women over 40 and 50 (Tiidenberg 2018). It is known that culture impacts the perception of these pictorial strategies and visual communications (McCracken 1986). Therefore, it is necessary to examine if these perceptions differ across different cultures to appeal to a global audience. Thus, this study focuses on visual framing strategies, sentiment, and product presentation modality adopted by Instagram fashion influencers operating in the UAE and the UK.

Methodology

For inspecting visual rhetorical devices and product presentation modalities employed by influencers in promotional messages, content analysis has been applied. Content analysis is a research technique utilized to make replicable and valid inferences by interpreting and coding textual material. By systematically evaluating texts (e.g., documents, oral communication, graphics, and images), this method enables the researcher to transform qualitative data into quantitative data. This methodology has been chosen to analyze visual elements in photos posted by influencers on their Instagram accounts.

Sampling

To gain insight into influencer marketing, we have targeted two areas: one of the top regions for influencer marketing – Europe and the Middle East countries. Since these regions are too broad, we narrowed the focus to countries that represent cultures set at opposite poles in terms of the dimensions developed by Hofstede (1986) and Hall (1989), namely the UK and the UAE. If the UAE culture can be characterized as collectivistic, with high-power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, and high-context, the UK culture can be described as individualistic with low power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, and low-context (Table 2).

Cultural Dimensions	UAE Score	UK Score
Power Distance High/Low	High Power Distance	Low Power Distance
Individualism/Collectivism	Collectivism	Individualism
Uncertainty Avoidance High/Low	High Uncertainty Avoidance	Low Uncertainty Avoidance

Table 2: Cultural dimensions

Source: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/the-united-arab-emirates>

In their work, Rodney McAdam et al. (2013, 426) explain the UAE culture as defined by “high power-distance: predominance of a caste or tribal system that limits upward mobility; inequalities in power and wealth; leaders have ultimate power and are relatively unquestioned and an expectation that leaders will separate themselves from the group; high uncertainty avoidance: low acceptance of uncertainty at any level; strict rules, laws, policies, and regulations; change-averse and risk-averse; [...] and low individualism: collectivist society; loyalty to the ruling group or family overriding individual preference.”

The sponsored content has been collected from thirty influencers. The target population was the so-called guru-influencers, whose main post themes are related mainly to fashion (Mediakix 2017). We have retained the identical type of industry to ease the comparison of the posts produced by influencers within different cultural contexts. The data obtained from specific target groups – the type of sampling design called purposive sampling – has been derived from the population of the sponsored content posted by UK- and UAE-based influencers. The objective was to assure that the different population subgroups were represented in the sample in the same way (i.e., similar percentage) as they are present in the population in terms of location and gender. As there are less male fashion influencers due to the lack of interest in fashion among male population or the difficulty of becoming a popular influencer in the field, especially in the UAE (Times 2018), the sample included seven male and twenty-three female guru-influencers to fairly represent the composition of the influencer population in terms of gender.

Although this study was conducted in 2018, Facebook was then in control of the social landscape, while Instagram dominated interactions per one thousand followers (Chaffey 2018). Instagram is a popular choice among followers and micro-influencers. Eighty percent of influencers have commented that they “use Instagram to post original content” and fifty-nine percent have reported it “to be the most effective medium for engaging their audiences” (Barker 2018). That is why this study focused on the Instagram platform to collect the data.

The analyzed photos can be found on the Instagram accounts of the thirty influencers who have been purposefully selected according to the number of followers they acquired, a country where their main activities are performed, and the type of the industry in which they operate. The photos have been categorized based on

the photograph shot/frame, the product position in the photo, and the sentiment expressed by the influencer.

The first set of criteria is developed on the basis of the shot/frame (Felici 2004). Largely grounded on the typology generated by Felici (2004), the product picture category has been added as the posts of influencers contained the display of the mare product.

- American shot: Here, American shot or $\frac{3}{4}$ portrait means the subject is positioned in the photo from the top of his/her head to somewhere between mid-thigh and just above the knees or, in other words, the upper three-fourths of the model's body is depicted in the photograph.
- Upper body – from the waist up: In this picture, a person appears from the waist up.
- Head and shoulders portrait: Here, it refers to the picture of a person that captures the frontal part of the upper body – head and shoulders.
- Facial shot: Here, it refers to the picture of a person that displays his/her face, from the neck up.
- Close up: Here, close up implies a picture is taken with the subject close to the camera with the purpose of getting a close and detailed view of an object.
- Full body: Here, it refers to the picture that includes the entire body.
- Product photo: Here, it refers to the depiction of the product alone.

The second criterion used to analyze the posts refers to the product presentation modality or the way the product is showcased in the photo:

- Imposing: Here, it refers to the product that is displayed in a direct way.
- Subtle: Here, it means that the product is presented in an indirect way.
- Present: Here, it implies that the product is physically visible in the picture.
- Absent: Here, it connotes that the product is not physically visible in the picture.

The third criterion employed to study the sponsored content is the sentiment displayed by the influencer. Sentiment includes facial expressions related to feelings and emotions such as sadness, contempt, happiness, and nostalgia exhibited by the influencer while promoting the product or service.

Thus, the research has employed the content analysis of one hundred eighty photos labeled as sponsored of fifteen UK and fifteen UAE-based influencers (six posts derived from each influencer's public account) posted in the period from August 31, 2017, to March 30, 2018.

Influencers have been categorized into three groups based on the number of followers: micro-level, middle-level, and macro-level. Each category has been represented by five influencers. Further, six posts labeled as sponsored content have been selected from the Instagram page of each influencer.

List of Influencers				
Name	User Name	Nationality	Followers	Gender
Cara Delahoyde	cara_delahoyde	UK	920 K	Female
Rosie Fortescue	rosiefortescue		529 K	Female
Victoria Magrath	inthefrow		827 K	Female
Jim Chapman	jim_chapman		2,2 M	Male
Fleur de Force	fleurdeforce		841 K	Female
Carl Thompson	hawkinsandshepherd	UK	51.3 K	Male
Chloe Plumstead	Chloeplumstead		58.5 K	Female
Atosa Nikkhah	mybubbaandme		67.2 K	Female
Sinead Crowe	Sineadcrowe		68.1 K	Female
Charlie Irons	charlieirons		77.8 K	Male
Jess Hunt	Jesshunt2	UK	242 K	Female
Joelle Mardinian	gallucks		123 K	Male
Carrie Santana da Silva	wishwishwish		169 K	Female
Sophie fashionslave.co.uk	sophiemilner_fs		121 K	Female
Lucy Williams	lucywilliams02		318 K	Female
Joelle Mardinian	Jollembc1	UAE	7.5 M	Female
Sheida	sheidafashionista		638 K	Female
Mariam Alyassi	mim_design		525 K	Female
Alanoud Badr	Fozaza		576 K	Female
Hadia Ghaleb	hadiaghaleb		1 M	Female
Mahmoud	mrmoudz	UAE	110 K	Male
AIReem Saif	alreemsaif		162 K	Female
Saufeeya Goodson	feeeeya		359 K	Female
Nadya Hasan	thefierce_nay		159 K	Female
Ieena Ha	leenalghouti		204 K	Female
Zahrlyla	Zahra Khalil	UAE	96.2 K	Female
Ahmed El Sayed	twistedcurlz		83.5 K	Male
shahad_Al Khattab	shahad_alkhattab		65.4 K	Female
Teresa Karpinska	realdanadee		89.4 K	Female
ahmad	ahmaddaabas		63.7 K	Male

Table 3: List of influencers selected for the study

In the UK, after introducing the regulations for influencers and marketers to label the posts as sponsored, some influencers still failed to label the sponsored content correctly, and this was brought to the attention of the respective authorities (Stewart 2017). As a result, in 2017, Instagram has enabled a function that allows labeling the content as sponsored. The label appears right below the username of the influencer stating a “paid – partnership with.”

In the UAE, the regulations stating that an influencer should distinguish between sponsored content and personal as well as rules stipulating that “any UAE-based social media users who take payments in return for promoting brands, goods, and services, must take a license” (Al Kuttat 2018) were introduced by the end of June 2018, a few months after the research was completed.

The content collected from Instagram public accounts has been subject to the following selection criteria:

- 1) It is labeled as sponsored or sponsored partnership (identified by such hash-tags as #ad, #spon, #sp).
- 2) It is dated from August 31, 2017, to March 30, 2018.
- 3) It is marked as located in the respective country of origin of the Influencer.

Data Analysis

Software created to process the sentiment in the pictures includes: *The Face API* produced by Microsoft Azure and the *Sky Biometry API* made by Sky biometry. Both are designed to identify the emotions displayed by the subject in the photograph. Other tools that have been applied to organize and analyze the raw data was Excel and Excel XISTAT.

Correlation analysis of the data is “a method of statistical evaluation used to study the strength of a relationship between two, numerically measured, continuous variables” (Correlation Analysis 2018). It has been carried out to establish a relationship between the selected criteria of the posts generated by the influencers and the types of the activities exhibited by the viewers, such as “likes” and comments.

Findings

Descriptive analyses have revealed the types of posts most commonly displayed by the influencers. In both countries, the sponsored content exhibits many similar tendencies in terms of the photographic aspect. Figure 3 demonstrates that among the analyzed posts, head-and-shoulders portrait, full-body, and American shot (AV) were the dominating types of photos. The facial shot and product display were the least used type of photos. The use of head-and-shoulder portrait photos can be related to the long-known effect that portraits have on the human mind. The human factor in the head-and-shoulders portrait as well as in the selfie brings the personal and intimate element into commercial content (Ehlin 2014) and elicits consumer emotions that lead to greater engagement with brands and products (Kwon and Sung 2011; Tsai and Men 2013).

Incorporating portraits in the sponsored content is not solely a marketing practitioners' initiation. Influencers themselves are known for openly sharing private episodes of their lives and actively displaying portraits (Barker 2016).

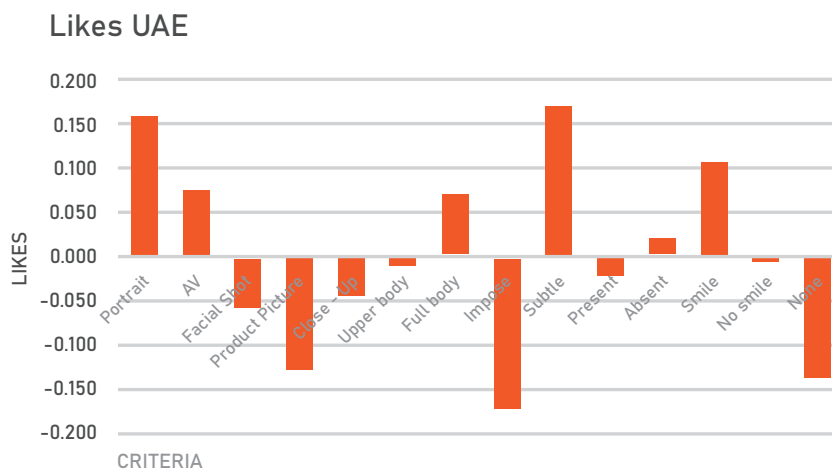


Figure 3: Type of photo used by UK- and UAE-based influencers

Such performance of everyday life or poetization of the mundane evoke interest among viewers as they provide access to the hidden (Villota 2001).

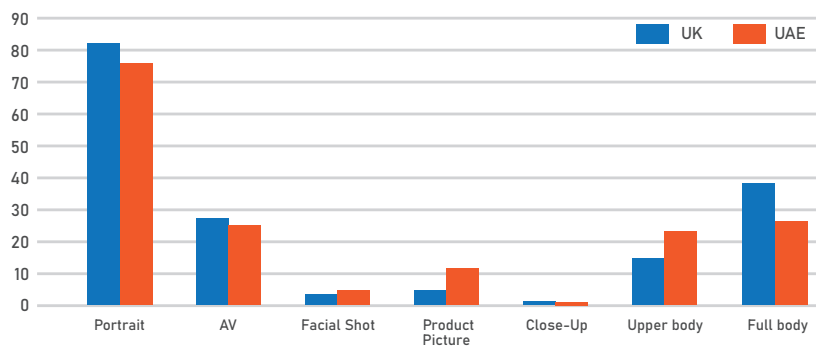


Figure 4: Correlation between likes and criteria used for UK-based influencers

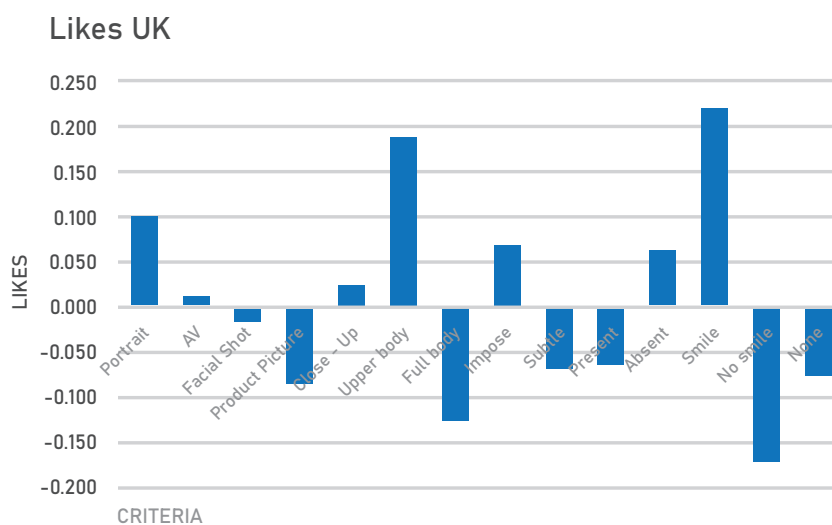


Figure 5: Correlation between likes and criteria used for UAE-based influencers

Correlation analysis has determined relations between variables. The correlation has been found between such variables as interaction with the post (number of likes) and the criteria used to analyze the posts, namely photo frame, sentiment, and product presentation modality. The positive correlation has been established between the number of likes and upper body – from the waist up types and head-and-shoulders portrait, as well as the smiling facial expression of the influencer¹ and the imposing or clear display of the product.

In contrast to the findings of UK-based influencers' posts, the UAE-based influencers' posts analysis has shown that a subtle product display leads to a higher interaction level (number of post likes). Also, a smile and full body picture are linked to a higher number of likes and positive comments.

The study's results indicate that in the UK, upper body – from the waist up and imposed display of the product gain more likes, while in the UAE, head-and-shoulders portraits and subtle display of the product result in a higher number of likes. In both countries, as shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5, exhibiting a smile by the influencer leads to a high likes rate. Therefore, a positive expression remains a powerful, persuasive tool across different cultures.

It is interesting to note that there is a stark difference between the full-body depiction preferences in the UK and the UAE. The audience's preference for full-body pictures in the UAE over the UK denotes that seeing the whole body of the influencer is perceived as more appealing in the UAE than in the UK.

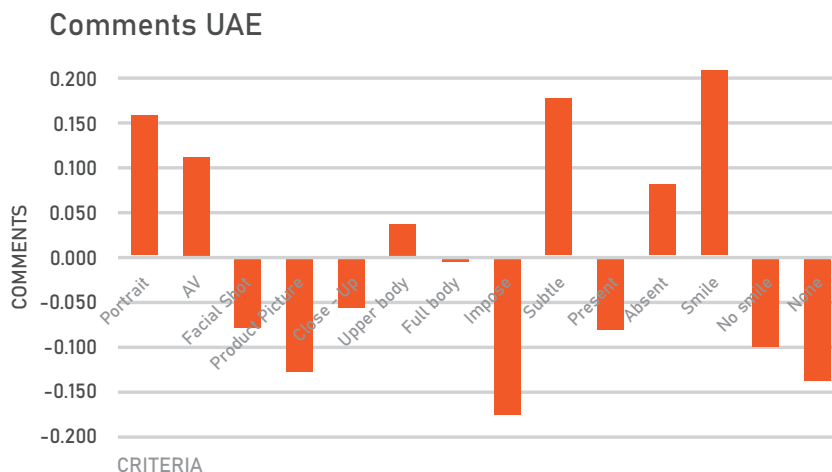


Figure 6: Correlation between comments and criteria for UAE-based influencers

When analyzing the number of comments made by the audience, it becomes evident that in the UAE, head-and-shoulders portrait collects more comments than

1. After analysing the results of sentiment used by the influencers, it was decided to group them into three categories: smile, absence of smile, and neutral as these expressions prevailed across the sample.

other types of photographs. The comments, as well as likes, remain consistently high in terms of sentiment and product placement. Subtle product placement and smiling entice the audience to leave comments. It is believed that comments are more valuable than likes since commenting requires more input from the spectator. The alignment between the high rate of likes and comments and the subtle display of the product and smiling implies that the application of these tactics can serve as powerful visual rhetorical devices for promoting products.

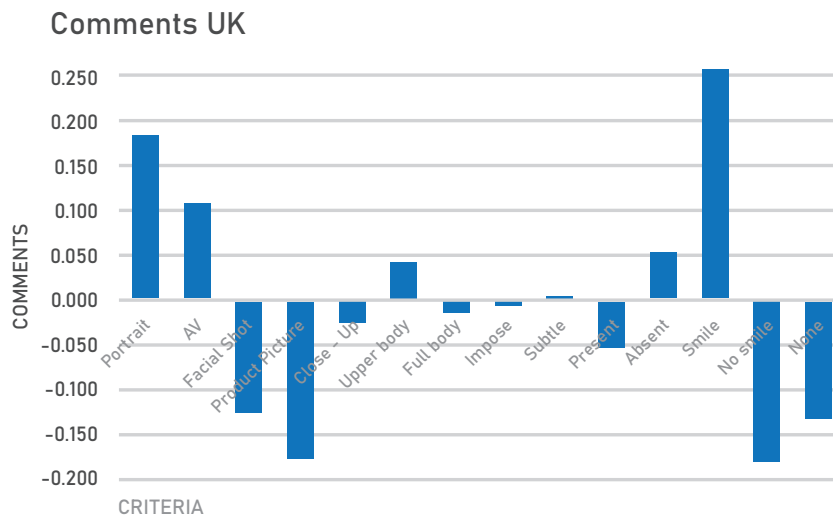


Figure 7: Correlation between comments and criteria for UK influencers

The findings of the analysis indicate that UK-based influencers' posts with the product absent in the photographs have gained more comments in contrast to photographs posted by UAE-based influencers where a subtle product placement enticed people to comment, although the comments made by the audience were more related to the personality of the influencers themselves rather than a product or brand. Therefore, it is difficult to assess with a high precision the effectiveness of this rhetorical device.

Besides, it is evident that the head-and-shoulders portrait and smiling remain effective in inducing the audience to leave comments.

The summary of the findings is presented in the table below (Table 4).

Criteria/Influencer	UAE	UK
Sentiment	Smiling	Smiling
Shot	Head-and-shoulders portrait	Head-and-shoulders portrait
Product Presentation	Subtle	Imposed

Table 4: The summary of the research findings

Discussion

The study findings indicate that such characteristics of UK-based influencers' posts as a head-and-shoulders portrait shot, imposed product presentation, and smiling expression are most effective in collecting likes while featuring head-and-shoulders portrait, subtle product presentation, and smiling expression generates a high number of likes in UAE-based influencers' posts.

The findings of the present research are congruent with the results of the study conducted by other researchers (Otta et al. 1994) who revealed a powerful effect of smiling on viewers' perception across various cultures such as Chinese (Lao 1982), Americans (Reis et al. 1990), Germans, Colombians, Thais, and Zambians (Keating et al. 1981). Smiling is one of the universal emotions among human beings recognizable in different cultures (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989; Ekman and Friesen 1971). Influencers with the smiling facial expression can be found more attractive. For example, in their study, Reis et al. discovered that "that smiling increased rated attractiveness when compared to a non-smiling neutral expression" (1990, 1).

In our attempt to explain high popularity of smiling across different countries, we can refer to the study conducted by Christakis and Fowler, who suspect that human behavior is contagious and spreads through subconscious signals that lead people to consider what is normal behavior by looking at people around them. Contagion may be "deeply subconscious: the spread of good or bad feelings, they say, might be driven partly by 'mirror neurons' in the brain that automatically mimics what we see in the faces of those around us — which is why looking at photographs of smiling people can itself often lift your mood" (Thompson 2009). This theory can shed light on why the posts of smiling influencers received more likes than other types of facial expressions. After all, most people want to be in a good mood (Thompson 2009).

Another inference that can be made from the finding that when influencers in the UK openly showcase the product it leads to an increase in likes is that since the regulations of labeling posts as sponsored content were set last year, the audience has been more responsive to openly advertised products. Thus, influencers in this region can continue advertising brands without having to worry about the negative effect of the imposed product presentation on their audience. Furthermore, the fact that the audience clearly dislikes the posts featuring just the product indicates the importance of the influencers 'goodwill,' 'good moral character,' and 'good sense.' Also, showcasing merely the product lacks the human touch, familiarity, and sentimental appeal.

High-context culture and low-context culture are terms that focus on the extent of the context's effect on the messages. According to Edward Hall, messages exchanged in a high-context culture transmit implicit meanings, while in low-context

cultures, messages carry an explicit meaning, with nothing implied beyond the words used (1989). The UAE culture can be described as a high-context culture, typical of the Arab world, where context plays a significant role and subtle messages are appreciated, while the UK culture is a relatively low-context culture as many Western cultures are. In high-context cultures, a ‘soft sell’ appeal is effective, based on creating emotions and atmosphere through visuals and symbols (Hermeking 2005). The results of the present study indicate that the low-context culture of the UK is mirrored in the posts of UK-based influencers in terms of use of direct appeals for promotional purposes. In high-context culture of UAE-influencers posts, subtle appeals are preferred. Similar correlations have been found within advertising commercials (e.g., Cho, et al. 1999; Cheng 1994; Lin 1993). The unpopularity of a direct product display found in advertisements in Japan and China, known as low-context cultures, are associated with undermining consumers’ intelligence and their ability to make a sound judgment (DiBenedetto et al. 1992).

Although, the head-and-shoulders portrait was equally popular among the audiences across both geographical areas – the UK and the UAE – the full-body display received a significantly higher number of likes in the UAE than in the UK. To find an explanation for such drastic differences in preferences would require more data on psychographic and demographic characteristics of the followers. Looking at the demographics of Instagram users in the Middle East and the UK, it can be speculated that there are fewer female users of social media in the Middle East. Particularly, in the UAE, the population is distributed unevenly in terms of gender: 72 percent of the population is male, and 28 percent are female (UAE Facebook Usage Statistics 2018). Although over the past six years the gender gap among social media users is shrinking, the difference – one woman for every two men – remains evident in the region (Wam 2017), unlike the distribution of UK Instagram users in terms of gender, where forty-four percent are men and fifty-six percent are women (NapoleonCat 2017). It is also known that, in assessing female attractiveness, men attempt to divert stimuli to construct a perception about women. Men derive information about women looking at the silhouette and the entire body rather than the details and parts of the body with a strong focus on hips to potentially extract hip-width and curvature. The hierarchical mapping carried out by researchers suggests that “the visual system primarily uses hip information to compute the waist-to-hip ratio and the body mass index, the crucial factors in determining sexual attractiveness and mate selection” (Bovet 2016, 1). That may explain why in the UAE the full-body pictures receive a high number of likes.

Recommendations

Visual appeals in advertising change from culture to culture. Understanding the differences in the use of visual rhetorical devices within various cultural settings enables marketers and influencers alike to choose the appropriate ones for a given context.

Figure 8 displays a photo populated with elements that lead to a high engagement rate in the UK. The promoted product is a watch; however, the viewer pays more attention to the dog that adds a gentle touch to the entire composition. In this head-and-shoulders portrait, the influencer pulls the attention of the audience from the dog to the watch with the position of her hand. This picture transmits joy since the influencer is smiling.



Figure 8: Engaging product display in the UK



Figure 9: Engaging product display in the UAE

The characteristics of an engaging photo in the UAE can be observed in Figure 9. The contrast between the background and the influencer creates an appealing image. The smiling influencer depicted in full length is promoting an outfit. However, the celebratory mood of the photograph with gleaming lights makes the promotion message quite subtle.

In both photos, the influencers exhibit smiling expressions and set a comfortable atmosphere.

Conclusion

This study draws on the content analysis of the posts created in social media to account for the variety of pictorial strategies in diverse cultural contexts using the examples of UK- and UAE-based influencers' accounts. It captures slight

variations among pictorial elements chosen by the influencers from a palate of rhetorical tools. Although visual rhetoric in social media borrows many techniques from photography, art, and traditional advertising, also lends some of its own nuances.

The results of the study confirm the findings of previous research in the field of visual rhetoric by showcasing the notorious positive effect of the smiling facial expression and the power of portrait to capture the viewer's attention and create a sense of intimacy. The above suggests that no matter the differences in cultural dimensions characterizing the UK and the UAE cultures, the resonant similarities in visual rhetoric are apparent in social media. These findings contribute to the theory of marketing communications, giving direction to advertisers regarding what works and what does not in the context of global markets.

However, at the same time, the frail differences in the preferences of followers of the UAE and the UK Instagram influencers attest to the importance of considering the idiosyncrasies of specific target audiences. The difference in favoring the full body pictures by UAE followers in contrast to the negative attitude of UK followers toward the full-length shots can be explained in terms of the specificity of perceiving the body of the opposite sex by a different gender. However, the differences in attitude towards the subtle and imposing display of the product may have a cultural underpinning. In the UAE culture, characterized as a high-context culture, the subtle display of the product finds a more favorable attitude, while in the UK culture, known as the low-context culture, the open demonstration of the advertised product is more acceptable.

Marketing implications of the study would be significant for advertisers of local and international brands. An investigation of visual rhetoric in social media would help detect persuasive pictorial elements for use in specific sponsored content and, as such, would have prognostic value.

The study contributes to the understanding of visual rhetoric in the global setting by revealing the significance of such factors as culture and gender to improving the effectiveness, relevance, and cultural sensitivity of commercial content.

Future Research and Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. The regulation of labeling posts as sponsored content had not been established in the UAE at the time the research was conducted. If the content of the post did not clearly state the partnership with a brand, the researchers considered the caption written by the influencer, which was resonating with the product or brand displayed in the picture. Besides, selecting just sponsored posts could also affect the study results since the influencer could have boosted the post to gain more engagement.

Recently, in the UAE, it has been announced that paid influencers will have to acquire a media license. The license will enhance the basis of influencer marketing in the country and affect the media industry in general (Dajani 2018). Other researchers could extend the study by analyzing the effects of the newly introduced policy on visual rhetoric by analyzing the influencers' sponsored content before and after the establishment of the new law in the UAE.

Another limitation of the study is the restraint of the software. Even though *Microsoft API* and *Sky Biometry API* are designed to identify the sentiment, in some cases, that was not possible. Objects in the photos and the poses taken by the influencers could affect the accuracy of the results produced by the software. Therefore, in some of the photos, the software was not capable of recognizing the sentiment correctly. Furthermore, part of this limitation is that the software is developed by two different companies. Therefore, the analysis is based on different processors. Consequently, in some cases, the results displayed by one type of software were not matching the results produced by the other. Thus, the researchers had to group the sentiment data provided by the software into categories that would suit the study.

More comprehensive research could establish whether the use of certain visual elements and imagery leads to increased brand awareness, attitude towards the brand, purchase intentions, and, eventually, to increased sales.

Confirming that the same relationship holds for other countries that score differently in terms of cultural dimensions requires conducting independent tests and measures in different cultural contexts.

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