



## Journal of Promotional Communications

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: <http://promotionalcommunications.org/index.php/pc/index>

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To cite this article: Serrano, S. and Ramjaun, T. 2018. Exploring Visual Brand-Related Electronic Word-of-Mouth on Instagram, *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 6 (1), 72-88

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# Shanna Serrano and Tauheed Ramjaun

## Exploring Visual Brand-Related Electronic Word-of-Mouth on Instagram

The aim of this study was to explore the possible drivers of visual brand-related electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on Instagram. While eWOM has been the subject of growing interest in the literature, there has been limited research that has focused solely on the visual aspect of eWOM messages. A qualitative approach was adopted whereby data collection methods involved eight in-depth interviews (including photo elicitation techniques) with regular users of Instagram – a photo-sharing social media platform that has risen in popularity during recent years. This study found that there were both content-focused antecedents (presentation of focal point, authenticity, source attractiveness and colour) and source-focused antecedents (status, online homophily and character narrative) to visual eWOM which could potentially be linked to consumer engagement mediated by normative influence. Implications for brand owners are discussed and recommendations are made as to how brands could better influence consumer engagement on such visually dominant social media platforms.

**Keywords:** Instagram, Word-of-Mouth, Social Media.

To cite this article: Serrano, S. and Ramjaun, T. 2018. Exploring Visual Brand-Related Electronic Word-of-Mouth on Instagram, *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 6 (1), 73-88  
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### INTRODUCTION

Instagram is the fastest growing social media platform globally (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch 2016; Sheldon and Bryant 2016) with more than 400 million monthly active users and more than 80 million photos shared per day (Instagram 2016). Users on average spend 2.5 hours a day on the mobile app (Key Note 2015) and in comparison to other social networking sites (SNS), Instagram achieves the highest proportion of user engagement (Sheldon and Bryant 2016). It has therefore become an increasingly important medium for many brand owners. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of why consumers engage with visual brand-related electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on Instagram. Traditionally, word-of-mouth (WOM) communication is the face-to-face exchange between consumers surrounding the topics of purchase experiences, service experiences and even personal experiences. Yet this was transformed into eWOM following the rapid progression of technology and the

wide adoption of the Internet. With the advent of Web 2.0, SNSs have notably been popular outlets for eWOM message transmission (Kozinets et al. 2010; Wolny and Mueller 2013).

More recently, we have seen a growing popularity of a visual form of eWOM on more visual-based social media platforms such as Instagram. Instagram is a social networking service that enables users to edit and share photos and videos from their smartphone to the app, as well as through other SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter.). A recent industry report indicated that the “growing influence of visual content within the social sphere” (Key Note 2015). The widespread adoption of visual-based SNSs has fueled people’s desire to tell the story of their life experiences through sharing photos (Wolny and Mueller 2013) we argue that this is a relatively new phenomenon and can be referred to as a form of visual eWOM. The influence of this emerging form of communication and its potential effect on consumer engagement (CE) triggered the development of this present study. As it has been suggested that user engagement with brands is a key indicator of purchasing intentions (Chu and Kim 2011; Kim and Johnson 2016), this exploratory study aimed at identifying the possible variables shaping consumer engagement with visual brand related eWOM on Instagram. These preliminary findings could be useful to brands exploring engagement strategies on those emerging visual SNSs and could also inform future research in that area that could test those variables quantitatively.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Word-of-Mouth

One of the earliest definitions of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) in marketing was that proposed by Arndt (1967) where it was described as an essentially oral activity through the interaction of two individuals:

“...oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale” (p.190).

This notion of WOM evoked strong personal relationships between individuals (King et al. 2014) and therefore research around WOM in marketing tended to lean more towards exploring the motivations driving individuals to engage in WOM through person-to-person communication (Dichter 1966; Sundaram et al. 1998). However, with developments in information and communication technologies, the ways in which messages were conveyed and perceived changed the characteristics of WOM. Technological advancements transformed traditional WOM into a more complex computer-mediated phenomenon (King et al. 2014). Hence, the body of research in marketing shifted more recently towards the influence of WOM (Sweeney et al. 2008). Consequently, the notion of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) was introduced in the literature as illustrated by the definition proposed by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004, p. 39):

“...any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”

The influencing factors of eWOM acceptance have received considerable attention in recent marketing studies. For instance, Brown et al. (2007) proposed the concept of

online homophily as an influencer in the evaluation of information which then drives consumers' decision-making behaviour. Online homophily incorporates the notion of shared group interest and group mindset which are based on psychological similarity, rather than congruency in demographic attributes such as age and gender. De Bruyn and Lilien (2008) and Steffes and Burgee (2009) supported these findings, stating eWOM communicated by homophilous sources with similar likes and dislikes are more likely to influence consumers' decision-making behaviour more than heterophilous sources with dissimilar tastes.

Another influencing factor that have been explored in the literature is the notion of tie strength, defined as the intensity of the social relationship between individuals, has been extensively researched in the context of traditional WOM (Sweeney et al., p.347). Expanding on this view, Chu and Kim (2011) explored the how social ties related to eWOM on social media platforms and concluded that tie strength was positively associated with eWOM behaviour. However, Brown et al. (2007) came to diverging conclusions in their study of eWOM within a single online community. They argued that the notion of individual-to-individual tie strength was less relevant in an online context especially where information recipients regarded the information source as a website and not a person.

An antecedent that may be more prevalent in online environments is the concept of status and authority (Subramani and Rajagopalan 2003; Li and Du 2011; Liu et al. 2015). Although online platforms facilitate the transmission of messages, consumers that engage in brand-related conversations have now become the spheres of influence, thus transforming social media from "a platform for information, to a platform of influence" (Hanna et al. 2011, p.272). An unanticipated driver, which arose in Brown et al.'s (2007) research, was the notion of authority, which gave any information from an authority figure more influence. Li and Du (2011) and Liu et al. (2015) also suggested that trusted influencers with high online status and social standing could influence their followers' acceptance of recommendations and purchase decisions. These opinion leaders could be instrumental in creating awareness and conveying benefits through product information, recommendations and giving personal comments to those within their online network who share common interests or have social ties (Subramani and Rajagopalan 2003; Li and Du 2011). However, the majority of existing literature in this area seem to focus on identifying such influencers and opinion leaders online (Booth and Matic 2011; Zhang et al. 2013), rather than the subsequent effects they cause. A notable exception is the study by Kozinets et al. (2010) where the importance of the source's consistency in character narrative in influencing positively consumer reaction and intention was highlighted.

#### eWOM and Consumer Engagement (CE)

Several studies found that eWOM significantly affects consumer engagement (Shau and Muniz 2002; Nambisan and Baron 2007; Algesheimer et al. 2010; Kim and Johnson 2016) though consumer engagement seemed to be interpreted in different ways. For instance, Brodie et al. (2013), in their study within virtual brand communities, found that CE occurred as an interactive process in complex and co-creative environments whereby there could be fluctuating levels of CE intensity over time. The notion of intensity seem to be a central construct in the definition of CE in the academic literature as illustrated by the definition proposed by Vivek et al. (2012, p.133) where

CE is seen as the:

“...intensity of an individual’s participation in and connection with an organisation’s offerings or organisational activities which either the customer or the organisation initiates”

Other researchers have considered CE as a multidimensional construct with three key dimensions: cognitive, affective and behavioural (Hollebeek 2011). This perspective has also been supported by subsequent researchers (e.g. Vivek et al. 2012; Brodie et al. 2013; Dessart et al. 2015). Going further, Van Doorn et al. (2010) focused specifically on the behavioural dimensions and suggested that eWOM in an online context could also be in the form of recommendations, blogging and writing reviews, as well as helping other customers. Furthermore, CE could also include consumer participation in the form of interactive communications and activities (Nambisan and Baron 2007). Similarly, Kabadayi and Price (2014) researched the factors affecting brand engagement behaviour on Facebook and their study only included consumers’ liking and commenting behaviour, but further research could extend the study to include sharing behaviour.

Chu and Kim (2011) conducted a quantitative study on the determinants of CE with eWOM on SNS. Their study identified normative influence and tie strength as key factors in influencing CE intentions. The receivers’ susceptibility to normative influence in eWOM is further supported by Subramani and Rajagopalan (2003) and Kozinets et al. (2010). Normative influence is a mechanism that influences actions that are consequently driven by the recipients’ desire to conform to the expectations of others (Chu and Kim 2011). Furthermore, the direct benefits from recipient’s actions are often a secondary consideration (Subramani and Rajagopalan 2003).

### Visual eWOM

The notion of eWOM in its impact of consumer engagement seemed have so far been studied in conjunction with text-based eWOM messages, a concept viewed as a one dimensional antecedent to consumer behaviour (Lee and Tussyadiah 2010; Lin et al. 2012). With the growing popularity of visual social media platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram where the medium is primarily visual, there is also a need to explore the effects of visual eWOM. One of the first studies that focused on the effects of visual eWOM on consumers’ perception was that of Lin et al. (2012) where they confirmed a positive relationship between visual information, product interest and purchase intention. However, they also suggested that different types of products would need to have different approaches to the use of visual eWOM. For instance, they recommended that products of a utilitarian nature would require more textual information rather than products of a hedonistic nature. While this study focused on the visual aspects of eWOM, it did not manage to isolate the visual stimuli since they were examining blogs, isolating visuals from text would change the meanings of the articles Lin et al. (2012)

However, more recently, the study of Bakhshi et al. (2014) focused on the role of human photos in driving engagement on Instagram. Given the nature of this particular site, they measured engagement through the number of likes and comments made by people exposed to the pictures. The researchers found that the presence of a face picture on the photo considerably influenced consumer engagement, but more surprisingly, the age and gender of the person on the picture did not seem to affect its engagement value Bakhshi et al. (2014). While their study focused on the relationship

between faces and engagement on Instagram, they also recommended that future studies could explore other aspects of visual eWOM on such visually dominated platforms.

### Synthesis

A review of the literature revealed very limited research on visual eWOM and especially studies focusing solely on the visual content of eWOM rather combined with text. Kozinets et al. (2010) argued that it is necessary to investigate eWOM communication in visual form and more recently Bakhshi et al. (2014) also called for more research on various aspects of visual multimedia eWOM. Moreover, the review of current research around WOM suggested that the focus has been more around identifying online influencers rather than the subsequent effects of eWOM communications on such individuals. Key concepts identified from previous literature surrounding WOM, eWOM and CE will therefore be explored in the relatively new context of visual eWOM on Instagram.

### METHODOLOGY

An interpretivist philosophy was adopted for this study as it aims to explore the drivers of visual brand-related eWOM on Instagram. This allowed focus to be placed on users' motives, beliefs and experiences which are complex and subjective (Blumberg et al. 2005). An abductive approach was also used which implied "moving back and forth from data to theory in effect combining deduction and induction" (Suddaby 2006, p. 36) within the parameters set for this study. A mono qualitative data collection method was adopted with in-depth interviews carried out with eight participants aged between 19-29 as this age group accounted for the highest percentage of Instagram usage (Sprout Social 2015). A heterogeneous or maximum variation sampling approach was also adopted to increase the likelihood of findings reflecting differences or different perspectives increasing the representation of the population (Saunders et al. 2012; Creswell 2013).

Data was collected during the period of 12 March 2016 to 8 April 2016. Face-to-face Interviews lasted between 40-70 minutes but produced adequate useful data. Interviews also involved photo-elicitation techniques (Harper 2002, Butler-Kisber 2010). Prior to the interview, participants were instructed to gather examples of brand-related eWOM content from their own Instagram, which then formed a basis of discussion. Respondents were asked to "reflect, explain and comment" on the meanings of the photographs, "the events that are taking place and the emotions they associate with them", thus extracting social abstracts (Bryman and Bell 2015, p.230). This approach personalised the interviews to each participant, which is believed to be a useful tool for analysis (Gilbert 2008). The researcher also presented two different brand-related eWOM examples of the same product to elicit participants' views and opinions of linkages and differences between examples. Images used in this section were the same across all interviews to increase comparability. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked to collate images to help describe their motives and feelings when participating with brand-related eWOM content on Instagram. Photographs formed a "data-generating triangle involving image, respondent and

researcher”, in which the focus lay on the reasons why the photograph was chosen, whilst attaching social and personal meanings behind responses (Bignante 2010; Bryman and Bell 2015, p. 410).

Data was analysed using a thematic coding procedure by “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns and themes within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.79). To categorise the data, thematic codes for this study were created using the prior set research objectives as a guide (Saunders et al. 2012). Some thematic codes had been established through the literature review and others were developed based upon participants’ responses. As suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003) coded themes from primary research were selected based on repetitions, categories, relative importance to respondents and areas of inconsistencies. The following section present the themes generated from the analysis and are presented according to the according to the research objectives set.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Visual Content in Brand-Related eWOM on Instagram and Consumer Engagement Behaviour.

From the interviews conducted in this study it was apparent that for all participants the aspect of ‘visual appeal’ is the most significant antecedent to CE. When asked the reasons for their CE, participant D directly used the phrase “visually appealing” and participant F “aesthetically pleasing”, indicating how important this variable is. This supports the literature review which highlights visual information in eWOM as a key driver of consumers’ attitudes and purchase intention (Lin et al. 2012). In many cases, visual appeal was demonstrated through the colours in a post, the presentation of the product, service or destination, the authenticity of the photo and the physical attractiveness of characters in the post. All participants felt that visual appeal is a fundamental variable to any brand-related eWOM message. If this is a negative variable, it can render all other variables redundant. Identifying the determinants of visual appeal can help the source produce eWOM content that could draw their target audience in, thereby potentially increasing its effectiveness.

### Presentation of Focal Point

Participants commonly reported that the presentation of the product, service or destination made an impact on their assessment of visual appeal. When asked about the appeal of the content, participant B felt that the depth of field of a photo, which is a crisp focus on the focal point and a soft background, makes posts “artistic, without pushing it too much”. Participant H expressed that the layout and presentation of the image influences their reactions, explaining:

“For me to interact with posts, the layout as well as the presentation has to be attractive (...) For example, a nice white background with the thing you’re looking at as the focal point of the photo and also being very naturally placed, I think that’s important.” (Participant H)

Participants suggested that the presentation of the product, service and destination provides a clear point in the post, as pictures that are too busy can be ambiguous. Therefore, the emerging theme of presentation of focal point could be regarded as a variable of visual appeal, thus driving CE.

### Authenticity

The idea of authenticity was not previously anticipated as a variable of visual appeal as existing literature related to eWOM did not associate a link between the concepts. Nevertheless, this notion occurred frequently throughout the participant interviews. Participant C expressed that this is evident in the source's body language in posts:

"Instead of being posey, she's quite natural with her pictures which is I think more inviting sometimes to look at." (Participant C).

Participants commonly expressed that overly staged photos and posting about unrelated products to the sources' experience can portray an inauthentic image. Consequently, this makes participants believe that the source posts brand-related content for their own financial gain. This can lead to adverse reactions such as unfollowing sources. Nevertheless, an authentic looking post can increase visual appeal thus drive CE. Therefore, the authenticity of a brand-related post could be potentially linked to visual appeal. Although these are subjectively assessed within the consumers' minds, the intangible factors of genuineness and experience appear to shape consumers' perception of authenticity.

### Source Attractiveness

Another key theme that arose throughout the research and was frequently mentioned was the notion of source attractiveness. When asked about their engagement behaviour, participants expressed that they are more influenced to participate with a post because of the attractiveness of the source.

"I probably aspire to look like some of these people, like a Victoria Secret model for example. If you see someone, you almost aspire to; I'm not even going to think twice about engaging with that post." (Participant B).

"I go on his profile quite a lot, look at his meal plans, he's obviously eating well because I know he looks good. I kind of aspire to be in that kind of shape so it would make me click through the links that are on a post." (Participant A).

In this context, attractiveness is physical and this variable links with the participants' aspirational goals of how they want to look. This is a dimension that has not been found salient in previous research around eWOM. However, the notion of source attractiveness has been discussed in the celebrity endorsement literature. For instance, Ohanian's (1990) findings in that the attractiveness of the endorser influences the effectiveness of a message. Furthermore, Joseph (1982) argued that physically attractive communicators have positive impact on their associate products.

### Colour

Another theme prevalent in visual appeal is the variable of colour. All participants outlined the influence of colour in brand-related posts to their participating behaviour. Participant C discussed the importance of colour to the assessment of visual appeal as she found dull and dark colours unappealing. She further explained how bright colours are aesthetically pleasing, thus increasing her interest in the product and her aspirations of owning it. Participant H felt that colour was very influential in getting her to engage with the material:

"Bright colours and attractive colours make the image attractive and that is really important. Even if it was something really good but it was an unattractive image, I wouldn't tag someone." (Participant H)

Bright and attractive colours in brand-related posts appear to stimulate emotions of



excitement and enticement toward the focal point of the eWOM content. These findings concur with studies made in the broader marketing context such as Singh's (2006) study on the impact of colour in marketing where he argued that prudent use of colour can positively or negatively influence moods and feelings. In this study, use of colour seems to have a consequence on visual appeal which would drive CE.

### Source to Consumer Engagement Behaviour and Visual Brand-Related eWOM on Instagram.

#### *Online Homophily*

Participants expressed that sharing similarities with the source was important for them to consider brand-related posts. Participant A discussed how he shares similar fitness goals with the Instagram blogger, Shredbundy, as they both take part in weight training. The seeming similarity of interests and personality appears to increase users' ability to relate with the source. The implication of this may be that an increased likelihood that the products and services they are recommending are more compatible to the participant. Therefore, users with similar interests with the source could be more inclined to interact with their posts. This concurred with the findings from Brown et al. (2007) and their explanation of online homophily, focusing on psychological similarity evident in participants' hobbies, interests and sense of style. Throughout the research it was apparent that similarity in aspirations was important in online homophily. Participant D (Male, 19) felt that he interacts with posts from highly-paid individuals on Instagram as they have similar goals of success. Although he is envious of their lavish lifestyle, he views it as motivation, which fuels his participatory actions.

#### *Status*

The sources' perceived status was frequently identified throughout the research as a key driver of CE. Participants would often identify the source's status through the amount of followers the source retains and the vast quantity of likes and comments on their posts. Participant H felt that their huge following and user engagement (likes and comments) reflects expertise in their area and a good reputation and image of them as a blogger. When asked to compare two posts of the same product from two different sources, participant B explained that they would engage more with the post from the source with high status, subsequently increasing the likelihood of their sharing behaviour.

"Image A which has more followers, I would instantly think that that must be a nice restaurant because this person is going there. Say if it was someone that's famous they obviously think it's worthy enough for them to go there and that would make me want to go there" (Participant B).

On the other hand, participants commonly discussed that the source's status should be high to a certain point. Following this point, their engagement behaviour decreases. Participant H expressed that despite the fact that she would engage with high status sources more than low status individuals, she feels that if their status is too high, she is unable to relate with them.

"I think it's because they're quite normal people, similar to me. They're not an A-list celebrity. I don't follow that many A-list celebrities because I feel like they're so far away from what my life is and you can't be aspired or be motivated by them because I'll never ever be close to that." (Participant H).

The research supports Li and Du (2011) and Liu et al.'s (2015) ideas that trusted influencers with high online status and social standing could influence their followers'

acceptance of recommendations and purchase decisions, thus being a driver of CE.

### *Character Narrative*

An essential aspect for several participants was how brand-related posts were perceived to be connected to the source who posted it. Participant E suggested that a direct link would lead them to be more accepting of their recommendations and he would be more inclined to interact with the source's brand-related post.

"If it's someone genuinely recommending something that's related to what they do normally, whether it's something they've been involved with or something that one of their friends has done, or a brand they've actually experienced and they've enjoyed. You can see a direct link between that person and that brand, then that's fine." (Participant E)

These findings support the study of Kozinets et al. (2010) which argues that consistent character narrative impacts on consumers react to and act upon eWOM messages. This is when eWOM messages are consistent with the goals, context and history of the source. Participant G expressed that individuals she follows on Instagram are based on congruent interests. When they post about things related to their narrative, it increases her interest, leading her to research more into the product, service or destination.

### *Normative Influence and Consumer Engagement Behaviour with Visual Brand-Related eWOM Content on Instagram.*

The research revealed that users' susceptibility to normative influence could be potentially linked to CE. In the context of Instagram, participants were affected by normative influence in two ways, being forced to participate or being restricted from participating, thus supporting Subramani and Rajagopalan's (2003) concept of normative influence as a mechanism influencing action. Participants commonly reported that they would engage with posts because they felt like they had to, reinforcing the idea that behaviours linked to normative influence are potentially driven by the recipients' desire to comply. Participant F indicated that their behaviour changes when considering the different sources of posts:

"You kind of have to like your close friends' photos, again with the social faux pas I mentioned earlier. You have to do certain things to certain people on Instagram. If my girlfriend posts a picture up, I have to like it." (Participant F).

Participants explained that frequently, when they engage with posts through liking it, the main reason is to get likes in return, the idea of "like-for-like". The research also supports Subramani and Rajagopalan's (2003) idea that in normative influence, direct benefits from action is often a secondary consideration. The direct benefit in this context is the user gaining more engagement on own posts.

Frequently throughout the interviews, participants mentioned times where they felt like they could not engage in ways they truly wanted to. When asked about their thoughts and feelings when participating with brand-related posts, participant E selected an image of a squirrel hiding behind its tail. This elicited discussion around times where he felt unable to engage in ways that was desired.

"A squirrel that is too shy and timid to engage in a post by someone who he deems cooler than himself. (...) Sometimes where I wouldn't... I would have stuff to say about a post but wouldn't say it because you don't want stick your neck out, so I guess that's where the squirrel comes in." (Participant E).

This finding supports Subramani and Rajagopalan's (2003, p. 305) idea that "the willingness to conform is stronger when behaviour is observable to the influencer and others in the social network". As Instagram is an openly accessible platform, participants are aware that their actions are seen by others. This appears to shape their engagement behaviour due to participants being self-conscious of the opinion of others, thus influencing their decision whether to comment on or share a post overtly or covertly. The research suggested that at times when participants felt unable to overtly interact, they would share posts covertly, through screen grabbing or copying the link of a post; therefore, suggesting the concept of normative influence as a mediating variable to CE.

#### **Influencing Factors most Pertinent to High Consumer Engagement.**

Supporting Vivek et al.'s (2012, p.133) idea that CE is the "intensity of an individual's participation", this study explored the types of activities that could be perceived as highly engaging from the perspective of Instagrammers. It was found that high engagement behaviour could be categorised into three groups of high CE: overt sharing, covert sharing and clicking-through links and further research.

#### *Overt Sharing*

A new concept driven by factors defined above is overt sharing. Overt sharing is a participatory action that can be observed by the source and others in the social network. In the context of this study, overt sharing can be demonstrated through tagging others in posts. Participant E (expressed that he "feels more comfortable" to share posts openly when it already holds a vast quantity of user engagement as a result of the source's high status. The researcher found a strong correlation between this outcome and the source's high status, suggesting this variable needs to be positive to drive overt sharing.

#### *Covert Sharing*

Covert sharing is a participatory action that cannot be observed by the source and others in the social network, demonstrated when users screen-grab or copy the link of a brand-related post to then share through a private message feature within and/or out of the Instagram app. When comparing image A and B (See Figure 1), participants commonly reported that they favoured the visual appeal of image B. However, considering the source's low status, participants would not overtly share the eWOM due to fear of social punishment, driven by the positive variable of normative influence.

**Figure 1. Visual Appeal Comparison**

When considering overtly sharing image B, participant C (Female, 25) expressed feelings of embarrassment; therefore, instead of tagging friends within the post, she would discreetly screenshot the post and send it to others through Whatsapp:

“If I tag friends directly in the post, that’s the most participation because they might then click onto that page and follow them. I feel like that’s the most beneficial to that person’s picture. People that I’ve tagged in, then participated, which has snowballed from my participation.” (Participant C)

Overt sharing encourages the idea of an engagement loop, in which posts already holding high user engagement will generate additional interactions faster, thus raising the profile of the source.

#### Click-through and Further Research

Another key theme prevalent to high CE is click-through and further research. This behaviour involves learning more about the focal point of the post, such as a product, by clicking on accessible links and further research through other means. Participants suggested that these actions are the steps prior to acquiring the product or service in question.

“I would spend quite a bit of time looking at the photo. I would read the caption, any hashtags and comments that are underneath it. I would go on their profile and search for other photos, potentially see what other product they’re promoting. (...) A lot of Insta-celebrities might have link in their bio or something, I would click on that link and it takes you through safari on your phone or I would go on safari to search it. If I’m really keen to purchase it, I would do it that way.” (Participant A)

Unlike overt and covert sharing, click-through and further research is a behaviour that could be considered as private to the user. The research suggests participants are stimulated by visual appeal and persuaded by the positive variables of source influence: status, character narrative and online homophily.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the study was to explore the drivers of visual brand-related electronic word-of-mouth on Instagram. It particular focused on the factors that could potentially influence CE for future research to test. New insights on the contributing factors to the influence of visual eWOM on consumer engagement also emerged in this study. However, there were several limitations identified in this investigation. Firstly, this study was conducted within one single visual social media platform with respondents in a restricted geographical area which could limit the generalisability of the study. Moreover, since this study was of an exploratory nature, a qualitative approach was adopted with a relatively small sample size of Instagram users. As the study was built on qualitative data involving the interpretation of participants' attitudes and perceptions, an element of researcher bias could have influenced interpretation of data. In the future, this study could be replicated with a wider or more diverse sample. Another interesting avenue for further research could involve the exploration of the effect of visual eWOM on consumers' purchase intentions. Furthermore, as there is currently little or no literature regarding visual eWOM as a form of communication, there is a growing need for future research with the rising popularity of visual social media platforms.

### Implications for Brand Owners

Consumer-to-consumer communication on Instagram has significantly impacted many consumer-targeted industries, for example travel, fashion and beauty; thus, it is essential that brands tap into this powerful and highly influential communication platform. This study indicated that the visual appeal of a eWOM message was the most significant antecedent to CE. If this variable is negative, it can render all other variables redundant, thus generating zero engagement. Presentation of focal point, authenticity, source attractiveness and colour were all emergent themes which arose throughout the in-depth interviews and were all identified as desirable dimensions of visual appeal. It is essential that sources post content that is visually appealing without adversely affecting its authenticity. Brands should also associate with sources that are attractive enough to be an aspiration to consumers but also realistic enough to be achievable. Additionally, sources should present products, services or destinations in a post in an artistic yet natural manner to gain consumer interest whilst retaining the post's authenticity.

Numerous antecedents relating to the source were acknowledged. As suggested by existing literature, social tie was added as an antecedent, but after conducting research and analysis, the concept was found to be irrelevant in this study. Nevertheless, status, online homophily and character narrative were all source-based variables identified to influence CE behaviour. Online homophily, where recipients share similarities with the source, proved to be the most dominant source-focused antecedent, with all participants expressing its significance to their CE behaviour.

By identifying the desired source-focused variables, brands could be able to select appropriate individuals for eWOM marketing campaigns on Instagram. As this study highlighted the importance of similar aspirations between recipient and source, brands should tap into this emotional and motivational driver, in order to capture and retain consumers' interests, thus encouraging CE. It is also important to emphasise that

although brands should select sources with high status, their status should not exceed a point where online homophily is implicated. A source with high online status and social standing is not only evident in famous celebrities, it is also evident in influential bloggers. Therefore, it is fundamental for brands to select sources that are ordinary enough for consumers to be able to relate to them.

This study associated high CE behaviour with three types of actions as follows: overt sharing, covert sharing and click-through and further research. Normative influence acts as a mediating variable, determining which type of sharing behaviour consumers engage in, whether it is overt or covert. To encourage overt sharing the source must have high status to minimise the adverse effect of normative influence. It was also found that the behaviour of click-through and further research are the steps consumers take prior to acquiring products, services or destinations; therefore, sources must display easily-accessible links on posts, as well as sufficient information allowing recipients to research the focal point of the post.

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