

# Using Instagram to Engage with (Potential) Consumers: A Study of Forbes Most Valuable Brands' Use of Instagram

Oluseyi Adegbola<sup>1\*</sup>, Sherice Gearhart<sup>1</sup>, and Jacqueline Skarda-Mitchell<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Media & Communication, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX

<sup>2</sup>School of Communication, University of Nebraska at Omaha

\*Corresponding Author: oluseyi.adegbola@ttu.edu

With over 800 million monthly users, Instagram has become one of the most popular social networking sites utilized by individuals and businesses alike. Guided by interactivity theory, the current study identifies connections between the posting behavior of popular brands on Instagram and audience engagement. Instagram posts (N = 710) from brands on the Forbes Most Valuable Brands list were coded for image type and the presence of brand-related and social content. Using an individualized

engagement score for each post, results found audiences were most responsive when images featured products and logos together and when social content appears in captions. Findings of this study are useful to marketing strategists aiming to capitalize on this platform.

*Keywords: Instagram, brand, customer engagement, social media*

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Sixty-nine percent of all U.S. adults use social networking and 56 percent use two or more social media sites (McLeod, 2017). This presents an opportunity for businesses to engage with consumers and increase brand awareness, interest, loyalty, and profit (Brodie et al., 2011; Wirtz et al., 2013), as such, businesses are increasingly investing huge funds in social media advertising. This trend is expected to continue with spending projected to reach \$15 billion in 2018 in the U.S. alone (Shukairy, 2017). Since it has been claimed that consumers do not like the feeling of intrusive marketing, social media can serve as an avenue through which companies invite consumers into their lives rather than utilizing paid advertising (Bóveda-Lambie & Hair, 2012). Social media accounts operated by companies/brands function similarly to other users and aim to provide entertaining, informative, and persuasive information about a brand or product while being minimally invasive.

In spite of trends, it has been suggested that marketing professionals still have limited knowledge about how to maximize the unique features of social media platforms such as Instagram, a photo-sharing site. Instagram is simultaneously one of the fastest growing and most engaging platforms, but is under-utilized for marketing (Williams, 2018).

Stelzner (2014) argues that ‘as more businesses become social, those that best engage will stand out’ (p. 6). However, marketing professionals have questions about how best to connect with consumers (Williams, 2018).

Instagram presents a unique platform for companies to utilize postings for consumer engagement, marketing, and the conversion of viewers into consumers. Also, Instagram has the highest conversion from browser to shopper and registers 10 times the engagement of Facebook and 84 times that of Twitter (Smith, 2018). In spite of this, only 33 percent of marketers make Instagram a high priority (Barnes, Lescault, & Holmes, n.d.). This underutilization is possibly due to lack of adequate knowledge of how to translate these features to increased brand value (Digital Marketing Institute, 2018). While various studies have examined the use of visuals in general advertising or social media marketing, there remains a paucity of research into the characteristics of visual-based social media content as well as how these characteristics drive engagement. In a bid to fill these gaps, the current study presents a content analysis of Instagram posts from accounts associated with companies listed on the Forbes Most Valuable Brands list to determine the post features that are predictive of high audience engagement.

Results of this study will identify the influence of post features, including photography style, presence of brand-related content (i.e., products and logos) in posted images, presence of social content (i.e., hashtags and tags) in posted captions, and the interaction between brand-related and social content on audience engagement. This study will be of benefit to companies on Instagram as well as those who aspire to utilize the platform, marketing professionals and other researchers, who have interest in social media engagement and desire a better understanding of how it functions.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

With the decline of traditional media and phenomenal growth of social media platforms, advertising on social media has experienced a commensurately phenomenal

increase (Carr, 2008; Sterling, 2013; Weissmann, 2014). Consumers are increasingly using social media to search for information and consider social platforms 'a more trustworthy source of information than traditional instruments of marketing communications used by companies' (Kyriacou, 2014, para. 2).

### **Instagram**

Launched in 2018, Instagram is an online mobile photo-sharing, video-sharing and social networking platform (Instagram Stats, 2018). Users can apply filters to photos and videos, and share them via the site. The platform also enables users to connect their account with other social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Flickr, to share their Instagram photos with each of their networks.

Instagram is one of the fastest growing social media networks. Surpassing Twitter's 330 million monthly active users, Instagram currently boasts more than 800 million monthly active users as at September 2017 (Statista, 2018). Since it launched, over 40 billion photos have been posted by Instagram users who, on average, share 95 million photos a day (Aslam, 2018). In regard to user-generated content Apps, Instagram has almost 3 times the users of Reddit, a popular content shared social networking site (Statista, 2018).

Beyond the large amount of content, Instagram users are also a highly engaged group. In fact, users of Instagram have even been found to engage with brands that are not actively on Instagram. For instance, Shea (2013) reports that more than 2.7 million Instagram images were branded with the #Chanel hashtag, while at the time, Chanel did not have an active Instagram account or presence. A robust 78 percent of Instagram users have been found to upload branded images on their accounts and 65 percent of these also tag the affiliated brand, creating a direct link for other users to engage with the brand page (Murphy, 2014). This possibility entails potential multiplier effects for brand engagement through each tag, like or comment.

Jaffray (2015) verifies this with findings suggesting that Instagram is noted by teens as a favorable marketing channel ahead of Twitter and Facebook. Commanding \$75 billion of discretionary spending, they show increased preference for online shopping rather than in store. This positions it as a potential tool for companies to use in drawing attention to their products and promoting engagement and positive consumer action.

Brands are slowly realizing the advertising potential of Instagram. Although the majority of Fortune 500 companies continue to use LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, Instagram is the only platform to consistently grow in brand usage year after year (Nanji, 2017). Only 33% of Fortune 500 companies took advantage of the social media platform in 2015, compared with 45% in 2015 and 53% in 2017. Even with this growth, Instagram remains considerably distant from other platforms in brand utilization, likely due to their limited knowledge about how to exploit the features of the platform for their benefit (Gillet, 2014).

### **Brands on Instagram**

In 2018, Instagram extended advertising opportunities to small and medium-sized brands within the platform (Instagram Business Blog, 2018). All companies can now pay for products and services to appear in photo and video formats on Instagram audience feeds. The social media site claims it produces an average ad recall rate 2.8 times that of normal Nielsen online rates. The Instagram for Business blog also features advertising success stories from big businesses.

However, preliminary research suggests Instagram users disapprove of the increase in advertising on their once ad-free platform. Instagram's previous lower ad structure received a 40% disapproval rating, now six out of ten users are unhappy about the increase (Rogers, 2015).

Still, Instagram provides tools to assist businesses in connecting with their audience on the traditional user account. For example, account insights allow businesses to get a better understanding of their brand awareness through a variety of performance indicators such as number of impressions, reach, and audience information (Instagram Business Blog, 2018). The platform also provides helpful information for businesses such as suggested best practices to help businesses increase interactivity with users. Suggestions range from posting consistently to connecting with the Instagram community to encouraging the posting of compelling content unique to that medium. They also suggest that businesses use their account to tell the story of a brand with authentic content to help build genuine connections with followers. While these best practices are useful, they do not provide hard evidence as to what works for businesses using typical Instagram accounts (Instagram Business Blog, 2018). This study aims to discover what

kind of content is compelling to Instagram users and what characteristics of brand images result in the highest audience engagement.

### **Customer Engagement & Interactivity Theory**

Within a mediated context, interactivity refers to the degree to which interactants, messages, and medium elements are interdependent, and each foster the continuation of exchanges, resulting in increased understanding (Liu & Shrum, 2002). This means that media users, the messages they encounter, and the ways through which they view messages all interact with each other. Such a process may be synchronous or asynchronous, but is contingent on the reciprocity of prior messaging (Bucy, 2004; Rafaeli, 1988). Interactivity theory postulates that message attributes and context are the underlying factors driving reciprocation and ultimately, user engagement (Rafaeli, 1988).

Sundar (2004) theorizes that interactivity should be viewed as “impacting attitudes by way of enhancing user involvement with information” (p. 388). One of the questions relevant to this area of research involves the conditions under which users may utilize the opportunities afforded in online settings to engage with brands (Liu & Shrum, 2002). An approach to answering this question is to examine what message attributes are most likely to elicit user engagement. Interactivity is central to customer engagement with brands online, enabling exchanges which ultimately shape attitudes toward brands (Campbell & Wright, 2008; Islam, 2009; Jones, 2015; Oh & Sundar, 2015).

Given the variety of interactive options increasingly afforded by social networking sites, such as Instagram and utilized by prominent brands, this study is guided by interactivity theory. Interactivity is characterized by active control, two-way communication, and synchronicity (Liu & Shrum, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2000), enabled via features such as links/hyperlinks, tags and hashtags. These in turn enhance engagement via likes, chatting, comments, and other responses (Sundar, Oh, Bellur, Jia, & Kim, 2016). Through these interactive features, users can connect with a brand to create a relationship and form a brand community, which is “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). After connecting with a brand on Instagram, users become both receivers of a brand’s content but also distributors and contributors (Schultz, 2016). As such, the interactive process involves presentation of

content by brands and customer expression of interest/experience, resulting in reciprocal communications which enhance perceived engagement. This type of interaction is advantageous for brands because it allows users to develop a sense of loyalty to the brand and interaction becomes a source of consumer data useful for market research (Wirtz et al., 2013).

Based on their meta-analysis of relevant studies, Brodie et al. (2011) claim that customer engagement fundamentally reflects the various states of a customer/brand relationship as well as how the relationship manifests in interaction between the two. When brand content effectively engages customers in social media, specifically Instagram, it can be seen through likes and comments. This allows the audience to act as co-creators, which gives the content message credibility (Vivek et al., 2012). That is, although the post originates from the brand, the comments and likes also qualify as message content that could lend credibility, while potentially eliminating the negative effect of intrusive advertising.

A key drawback of many studies on customer engagement is their emphasis on theoretical constructs and conceptualization while neglecting to apply it to problems in advertising and related fields. A look at the behavioral component (i.e., actual customer interaction with the brand) can provide a better understanding of context-specific content that drives engagement.

### **Social Content: Hashtags & Tags**

Hashtags are a way to share content with others based on topic and follow the latest trends (Caleffi, 2015). With the '#' symbol, hashtags allow individuals as well as organizations to engage in self-branding on social media by increasing their visibility and fostering discourse about issues through links to related information (Page, 2012). This description does not refer only to Twitter hashtags, but also to hashtags used on other social media platforms such as Instagram. According to Woolf and Lopez (2016), hashtags can 'create engagement, categorize discussions and garner click' (p. 22) which result in further exposure to brand messages. They describe hashtags as getting to the root of the conversation. However, they both add that overuse can be counter-productive and cause audiences to see it as symbolic of brand noise rather than of valuable content, in which case hashtags could even stimulate negative responses.

One potential way of avoiding the pitfalls of wrong hashtag usage is through the use of proprietary hashtags that link directly to the brand and have the potential to go viral (York 2015). Hashtags must focus on linking users to valuable content rather than focusing on click. While studies have analyzed the popularity of hashtag use in social media discourse on social issues (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016), politics (Small, 2011) and health (Donelle & Booth, 2012) among other topics, few have actually examined how effective the use of hashtags are in driving engagement. This study will assess how effective hashtags are in driving engagement.

Tags also perform important functions in social media. On Twitter, tweets are grouped together by subject matter (Marwick & boyd, 2011) such that each tag can link a user to specific content shared within a group. According to Golder and Huberman (2006), tags connect social media users, sources and content together in an ever-expanding circle with the effect of increased exposure.

On Instagram, tags (with the '@' symbol) are used in much the same manner. Tagging performs a 'call to action' function by making it easy for other social media users to get involved with an issue or content (Leimkuehler, 2016), and this is especially applicable to images. In spite of the benefits of tag use, research on the effectiveness of tagging in driving engagement is limited. This study will examine the use of tagging and how it influences audience engagement on Instagram.

### **Brand-Related Content: Products & Logos**

Advertising research suggests that featuring products in commercial messages helps audience recall and liking. In a study comparing audience involvement/engagement with corporate and product advertisements, Kim, Haley, and Koo (2009) found that adverts featuring products were more likely to drive engagement than corporate adverts. Moreover, they conclude that product adverts are more likely to stimulate purchase intention and recommendation. Similarly, Wansink, and Ray (1996) concluded that adverts featuring a product were more likely to be recalled by audiences, especially if the advert depicted the comparative benefit of using one brand over another.

Lee, Kim, and Yu (2015) examined how the use of visual image, product placement in the advert, and consumer self-image interact to influence audience responses. According to them, the product interacts with a number of other elements (such as logos and text) in

the advert to produce a whole effect on the audience, thus, examining products alone may not be effective in identifying what specific element is responsible for positive responses. They found that extensive use of visual elements combined with product feature significantly increased audiences' intentions to purchase; the use of products alone had less effect except in the case of prestige products. However, consumer self-image was found to mediate the effect of adverts with or without the use of products.

The logo is a visual element that is key to the brand's identity, an inherent part of overall marketing strategy that allows customers to connect with the brand (Gillikin, 2016). Schechter (1993) explains that it is only one component of a brand's image, but it operates as a flag, invoking respect for organizations. Managed correctly, a logo can provide marketers with 'a valuable, largely untapped tool in their efforts to deepen customer-brand relationships and enhance firm performance' (Park, Eisingerich, Pol, & Park, 2013, p. 186).

Research has shown that logo design elements such as naturalness, harmoniousness, and complexity are related positively to audience response (Henderson & Cote, 1998; Machado, de Carvalho, Torres, & Costa, 2015). Yet, results of logo frequency in advertising research is conflicting. Analysis of logos in banner ads on websites determined logos to negatively impact click-through rates (Baltas, 2003). However, research has also shown that recognizable logos are preferred over unrecognizable logos (Stafford & Grimes, 2012). Weinberger (2014) attributes this difference to 'mere exposure effect.'

Mere exposure effect describes how exposure to advertising messages is more effective if the audience is unaware of the stimulus to which they are being repeatedly exposed, because they are less able resist it and more likely to accept it if they associate it with a positive emotional sensation (Weinberger, 2014). According to Bolman (2014), logo use performs this function by communicating identity effectively without being too obtrusive. A test of exposure to Apple and IBM logos by Fitzsimons, Chartrand and Fitzsimons (2008) concluded that subjects responded to brand messages without conscious awareness of the influence. This study examines how logo use, product inclusion in adverts and the combination of both function to drive engagement.



## Photography Style

The photography style used in social media adverts may be categorized as commercial photography or domestic photography. Commercial photography is identified as posed images typical of something seen in magazine advertisements, deliberately taken for use as adverts. For instance, photographs classified as commercial typically focus on service or product placement, with the use of superimposed text onto an image and major editing. Domestic photography, on the other hand, focuses mainly on candid images with typically low-quality lighting, little editing and no on-image text. Domestic photography style has recently become more common among advertisers attempting to have the appearance of a candid image that may have been taken by a social media user (Schroeder, 2013). Such images may have the appearance of no post-production editing.

Some research has shown that photography style may influence liking for advertising content and help drive engagement. The importance of photography in advertising is attributed to what Schroeder (2013) terms 'the snapshot's insistence upon lived experience' (p. 1). That is, its depiction of reality. Schroeder and Zwick (2004) have also examined the use of masculine forms in advertising photography and concludes that they communicate various messages depending where and how they are used. They conclude that photos are representations that engage with audiences and communicate aspiration and possibility. Specifically, the use of photography in social media marketing is related with higher engagement irrespective of whether they are amateur or professionally produced images (Murray, 2008). This study also investigates if differences in photography style influence engagement on Instagram and the nature of the effect.

## Hypotheses and Research Questions

As seen in the literature review above, research examining social media in general, and Instagram specifically, remains very limited. In an effort to further understand how qualities of Instagram posts directly relate to audience engagement the following hypothesis and research questions guide this study:

**H1: Audience engagement will not vary significantly between posts featuring commercial and domestic photography.**

**RQ1: Does audience engagement vary depending on the presence of brand-related content (i.e., products and logos) in posted images?**

**RQ2: Does audience engagement vary depending on the presence of social content (i.e., hashtags and tags) in posted captions?**

**RQ3: Does the presence of brand-related image content (i.e., products and logos) social content (i.e., hashtags and tags) in posts interact to predict audience engagement?**

## **METHODS**

### **Sampling Procedure**

Instagram posts were collected from brands on the Forbes 2014 Most Valuable Brands list. This list included 100 brands deemed most valuable based on brand value, revenue and advertising expenditure. A search was conducted to identify the official account for each brand. Brands that did not have an Instagram account, did not have at least 20 posts, and those failing to post within 30 days of when the sample was drawn were eliminated. Further, brands with Instagram accounts for different countries, only the United States account was selected and analysed. As a result, 71 brands were included in the analysis. After accounts were identified, ten post images and their accompanying captions were collected beginning 65 days prior to the collection date in an attempt to gather data that had already levelled out in popularity. Each was screen shot (N = 710) and saved to a database for analysis.

### **Coding Categories**

Using each Instagram post as the unit of analysis, coding categories included photography style, presence of brand-related content, and total engagement.

**Photography style.** Images were coded for the overall style of the photograph. Each image was coded as either: (a) commercial photography, resembling staged images typical of traditional advertising; or (b) domestic photography, commonly seen in un-staged images typical of social media posts and appear to have post-production editing.

**Presence of brand-related content.** Each image was coded to note the presence of clearly visible brand-related content in the form of either: (a) products, identified through depictions of specific items from a particular brand; (b) logos, seen as brand identifiers visible on products or freestanding within the image; (c) both products and logos; or (d) none.

**Presence of social content.** The caption accompanying each post coded to record the presence of social content in form of either: (a) hashtags identified by use of the # symbol before clickable words, phrases, or acronyms used to indicate common topical posts; (b) tagging of other users as indicated by use of the @ symbol positioned before a clickable user name; (c) both hashtags and tagging of other users; or (d) none.

**Total engagement.** The total engagement score was conceptualized as a representation of user engagement, demonstrated through likes and comments, with brand postings. The unique engagement score was calculated for each Instagram post included in analysis. This individualized engagement score was calculated by taking the number of likes for each post and dividing it by the total number of followers, then adding that score to the total number of comments per post divided by the total number of followers. The sum created a 'total engagement score' exclusive to each post. Through the calculation of scores for each post, the playing field between brands with disproportionate followers was levelled. Given the large number of likes and comments seen on some posts, Instagram presents engagement by automatically rounding numbers on some posts. To overcome this obstacle Iconosquare.com, a website with advanced analytics, was used to provide exact like and comment figures on posts. These numbers were used in calculation of the total engagement score.

### **Intercoder Reliability**

Three coders were trained using the codebook and subsequently, randomly generated and coded 10 percent of all posts in order to determine preliminary intercoder reliability. Results revealed low Krippendorff alpha values for photography style (0.70) and logo presence (0.72). Consequent upon a redefinition of content categories and elimination of a rogue coder, a separate, randomly generated amount of 20 posts from the sample. Final Krippendorff's alpha values were photography style (.89), logo presence (1.00), product presence (.89), hashtag presence (1.00), and tag presence (1.00).

## **RESULTS**

H1 predicted audience engagement would not vary between posted images featuring commercial and domestic photography styles. H1 was confirmed. An independent samples

t-test revealed no significant effect of photography style on audience engagement  $t(708) = .01, p = .ns$ .

RQ1 inquired whether audience engagement varied depending on the presence of brand-related content (i.e., products and logos) in posted images. Data analysis revealed a significant main effect of presence of brand-related content in images on audience engagement,  $F(3, 706) = 14.07, p < .001$ . A Duncan post-hoc analysis showed that posted images featuring both a company product and logo in the image ( $M = 2.55, SD = 1.03$ ) had significantly higher audience engagement than did posts featuring product only, logo only, or neither a product or logo ( $M = 1.82, SD = 1.08$ ;  $M = 2.12, SD = 1.25$ ;  $M = 1.88, SD = 1.47$ ; respectively).

RQ2 asked whether audience engagement varied depending on the presence of social content (i.e., hashtags and tags) in posted captions. Data analysis revealed a significant main effect of presence of social content in captions on audience engagement,  $F(3, 706) = 5.86, p = .001$ . A Duncan post-hoc analysis showed that captions featuring hashtags alone received significantly higher audience engagement ( $M = 2.19, SD = 1.17$ ) than did captions tagging other user accounts ( $M = 1.63, SD = 1.25$ ). However, posts with captions featuring both hashtags and tags of other users and those absent of any social content ( $M = 1.82, SD = 1.36$ ;  $M = 1.86, SD = 1.00$ ; respectively) did not differ significantly from either posts tagging other user accounts or captions with hashtags only.

RQ3 asked if the presence of brand-related image content (i.e., products and logos) and social content (i.e., hashtags and tags) in captions interact to predict audience engagement. Data analysis revealed a significant interaction effect between presence of brand-related image content and social content in posts on audience engagement,  $F(9, 694) = 2.00, p < .04$ . As seen in Figure 1, posts with captions featuring hashtags have a dramatic increase in audience engagement when accompanying images feature company products and logos together in the image ( $M = 2.84, SD = .99$ ) compared to when images feature only products, only logos, or are absent of either imagery ( $M = 2.00, SD = 1.34$ ;  $M = 2.00, SD = 1.19$ ;  $M = 1.96, SD = 1.16$ , respectively). Additionally, posts with captions tagging other users have a dramatic increase in audience engagement when accompanying images feature company logos ( $M = 3.12, SD = 1.12$ ) compared to when images feature

products, both products and logos, or are absent of either imagery ( $M = 1.18$ ,  $SD = .48$ ;  $M = 1.65$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $M = 1.39$ ,  $SD = .88$ , respectively).

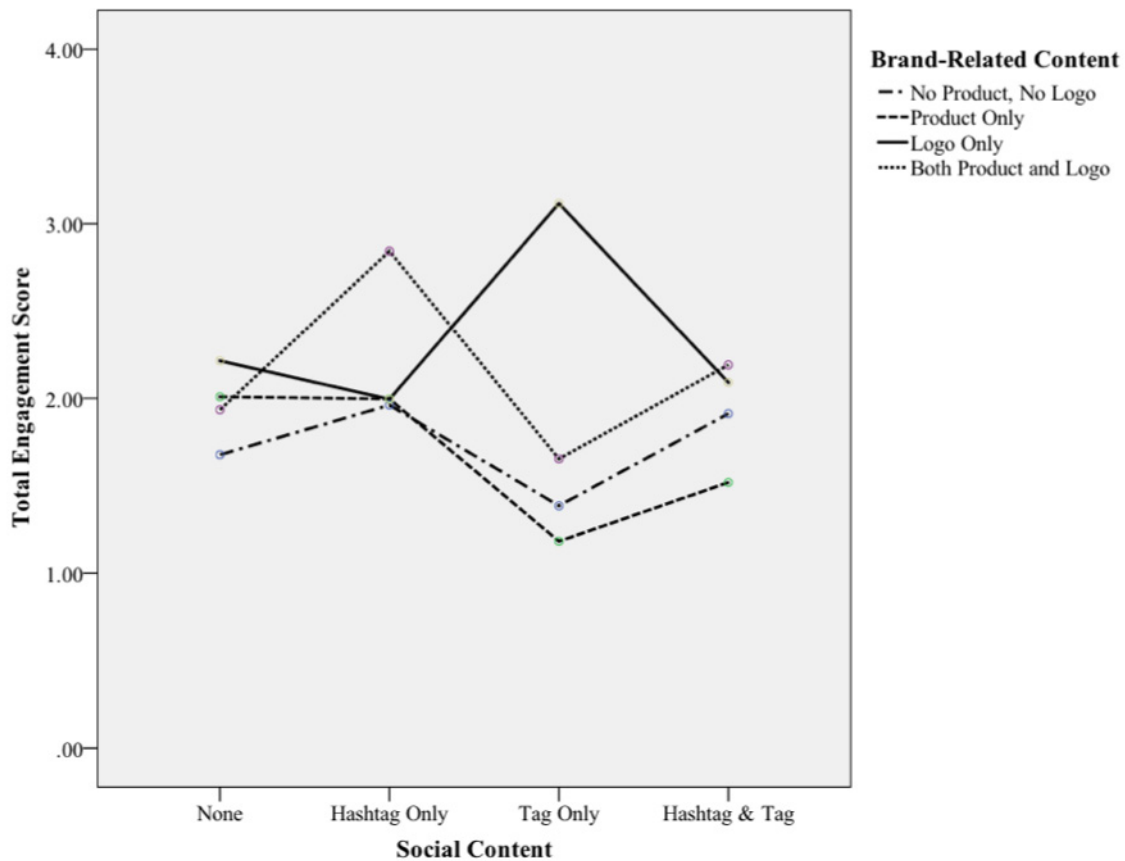


Figure 1. Interaction of brand-related image content (i.e., products and logos) and social content (i.e., hashtags and tags)

However, Instagram posts without any social content in captions remain relatively consistent in their audience engagement when images feature products, logos, both products and logo, or are absent of either imagery. Similarly, posts with captions featuring both forms of social content (i.e., hashtags and tags of other users) also remain relatively consistent in their audience engagement when images feature products, logos, both products and logo, or are absent of either imagery (see Table1).

Table 1

*Interaction of branded content and social content on audience engagement*

	Products <i>M</i> (SD)	Logos <i>M</i> (SD)	Products & Logo <i>M</i> (SD)	No Branded Content
Hashtags	2.00 <sub>b</sub> (1.34)	2.00 <sub>b</sub> (1.19)	2.84 <sub>a</sub> (.99)	1.96 <sub>b</sub> (1.16)
Tags	1.18 <sub>b</sub> (.48)	3.12 <sub>a</sub> (1.12)	1.65 <sub>b</sub> (1.35)	1.39 <sub>b</sub> (.88)
Hashtags & Tags	1.51 <sub>a</sub> (.85)	2.09 <sub>a</sub> (1.08)	2.19 <sub>a</sub> (.96)	1.91 <sub>a</sub> (2.04)
No Social Content	2.01 (1.30)	2.21 (1.42)	1.93 (.85)	1.68 (.75)

*Note:* Mean scores with varying letter subscripts horizontally differ significantly

## DISCUSSION

The overarching goal of this study was to investigate relationships between posted content on Instagram and audience engagement. Examining the Instagram posts from accounts associated with companies listed on the 2014 Forbes Most Valuable Brands list, this study aimed to determine which features actually drive audience engagement. Features examined include photography style, presence of brand-related content (i.e., products and logos) in posted images, presence of social content (i.e., hashtags and tags) in posted captions, and the interaction between brand-related and social content. Overall, results indicate that posts attract vastly different levels of audience engagement dependent upon both image content and caption content. Further, these characters of posts interact in previously unknown ways, demonstrating important ways in which companies can utilize this social media platform. The findings provide important information for brands both currently utilizing and planning to use Instagram as a marketing tool.

According to results, posts featuring either domestic photography or commercial photography did not differ significantly in terms of audience engagement. That is, audiences appear to be equally receptive to traditional forms of advertisements as images typically posted by social media users. Although research has shown that consumers do not like seeing advertisements (Bóveda-Lambie & Hair, 2012), this study confirms previous findings that suggest photos increase social media engagement regardless of the

photo type (Murray, 2008). Therefore, marketers should utilize Instagram as a platform to post their advertising intended for traditional media outlets. This practice will provide brands the opportunity to cross-promote their content in a new media context without paying for 'promoted' posts, which users have been found to dislike (Rogers, 2015).

Results concerning the presence of brand-related content (i.e., products and logos) in Instagram posts suggest products pictured alongside brand logos receive significantly higher audience engagement. The data from this study supports previous claims that representations of actual products and logos together provide better persuasion and are useful in helping viewers relate directly with content (Fitzsimons et al., 2008). Results seen here may indicate that the presentation of a product alone is not enough to engage audiences. Rather, the product requires the additional presence of a branded logo, which may increase the ability of audiences to identify with a brand.

Examination of the presence of social content, seen in the form of hashtags and tagging of other users, in posted captions offered surprising revelations. For example, the captions with hashtags only attained significantly higher audience engagement than those that only tagged other users. The use of hashtags to drive user engagement supports previous findings claiming that the use of hashtags in social media posts has a multiplier effect on audience engagement by creating numerous links to the post (Murphy, 2014; Shea, 2013). Guerrero (2015) notes that this is achieved through encouraging fans to create and share content around a particular hashtag or topic.

Studies have not previously specified whether audience engagement varies dependent upon both image and caption content. In an effort to further understand the nature of this relationship, the interaction between the presence of brand-related image content (i.e., products and logos) social content (i.e., hashtags and tags) was investigated. Overall, results revealed branded logos to be the ultimate driver of audience engagement. Precisely, captions including hashtags posted with images featuring both forms of brand-related image content and captions tagging other users accompanying images featuring company logos experience dramatically higher audience engagement. These findings also support the assumption of interactivity theory that branding tools (e.g., logos) act as affective cues motivating customer engagement. In this case, logos were found to be the key feature responsible for creating an emotional connection with a brand, thus acting as

motivation for engagement. This, in turn, has the potential to reinforce liking, encourage interaction, and possibly influence future purchase decisions. Brands that engage in forming a relationship through social media marketing must understand these motivations, apply them to content creation, and consequently drive engagement.

Not only do the results of this study facilitate better understanding of how these variables interact, they also provide additional insight into the brand logo as a motivator for engagement and consequently, the possibility for increased intent to purchase (Lee et al., 2015). More importantly, they signify a deeper connection the audience has with the brand itself as opposed to its content. This resonance could be a result of the tendency to identify with the uniqueness and esteem the logo contains (Schechter, 1993). It also could be related to the general unobtrusiveness in the nature of a logo (Bolman, 2014) in conjunction with a peripheral exposure to the branding material (Weinberger, 2014). More broadly, this could mean that audiences have a unique pattern of engagement when interacting with brands on social media, indicating a more committed relationship to the brand.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The possibilities for future research on this topic are vast. As a relatively new social media platform, the true nature of comment engagement is yet to be explored. While engagement indicates the level of audience interaction with the brand, a cursory look at Instagram posts suggests these could be places for both positive and negative engagement. Further examination of comments could provide deeper understanding of the nature and dimensions of engagement.

Although beyond the scope of the current study, Instagram posts using celebrity endorsement in images may also impact engagement (Belch & Belch, 2013). Further research on the use of celebrities in Instagram images and its effect on consumer engagement would also be beneficial. Future studies could also utilize advanced metrics, such as number of impressions to further advance understanding of audience engagement. Efforts toward understanding the types of Instagram content that is attractive to audiences, whether this content increases sales, and how such content impacts brand perception are all fruitful endeavors for future exploration.



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### **Online Connections**

To follow Oluseyi Adegbola in social media: @OluseyiAdegbol2