

The Perfect Post: Experiential Posts Increase Consumer Engagement on Social Media

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Abstract

Social media's popularity has grown steadily for both consumers and advertisers through its visual nature and interactive design. To gain interest and engagement, marketers have used a variety of tactics on social media, from more traditionally ad-like material posts to a variety of experiential posts that attempt to capture the lifestyle the brand is attempting to emulate. Past research has proven that consumers talk more about experiences than material objects. This research aims to determine whether experiential posts lead to more consumer engagement with a brand on social media. This is achieved by analyzing the effect of logo inclusion, brand identification, and the experiential nature of posts on measures of post engagement across companies and industries. To determine these factors, data was collected through Instagram posts and a survey. Instagram data was collected across nine industries, including the post image and post engagement through likes and comments. Then, participants rated the Instagram posts on whether they were more "material" or "experiential," visibility of a logo, and the degree to which they identified with the 39 brands. Overall, results show experiential posts lead to increased post engagement. When broken down by industry, two trends emerge. Industries that are experiential in nature see an increase in engagement with more experiential posts, while we found no positive effect on industries that are materialistic in nature. Findings from this research suggest that marketers should decide on the type of posts they are making based on the industry their business is in.

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Introduction

Although media consumption has grown from 5 hours per day to almost 10 hours over the past 70 years, but advertisement awareness has stayed stagnant. With over 3,000 advertising and brand exposures daily, only 153 of these attract consumer's attention for even a second (Media Dynamics, Inc). To break through this clutter, businesses have turned to less traditional forms of advertising, from viral Facebook videos to sponsoring YouTube videos. Even though most companies have a social media presence, with the growing number of platforms it can be difficult to determine where and how to best increase a brand's social media presence. Some companies have seen success with tweets on Twitter going viral, while others have been able to use Instagram to gain a much larger following and higher levels of engagement with their customers. In particular, Instagram is the fastest growing social media network and with 90% of its 700 million users under 35 years old, it has been able to capture the millennial market. Instagram is considered "the best social media platform for customer engagement (DeMers, 2017)" and 53% of users follow and engage with brands on the site.

While companies are still using social media for traditional advertising through product based posts, many of them are turning towards experiential advertising to communicate the lifestyle associated with their brand. Previous research has shown the benefits of experiential consumption (Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009), leading us to wonder if this might translate to benefits and more engagement on social media when material goods are portrayed in experiential ways. As experiential and "lifestyle" marketing become more prevalent in advertising, companies are investing more into these strategies.

With growing investments into social media, brands are starting to question, is the time and money spent on social media worth it? Although it is difficult to quantify the return on

investment on social media posts, Gallup has found that customer engagement is a key link to several measures of a company's success including increased revenue, customer loyalty, and profitability (Adkins and Sorenson, 2014). To get this return on investment though, a brand has to find a way to create high levels of engagement with consumers through their social media platforms.

Our research looks further into these ideas of consumer engagement with a brand, and the potential factors that may affect this engagement. We focus on the factor of post type to determine the degree to which experiential posts have more consumer engagement as compared to traditional material posts. It looks across product categories to identify differences in and between these categories. We collected data through two methods: monitoring Instagram pages of various brands over the course of a month to obtain quantitative statistics on post engagement, and surveying participants about more qualitative elements such as logo visibility, self-brand connection, and how experiential the consumer finds a picture. Findings from this research can help provide businesses in various product categories a clearer direction as to which forms of social media posts they should engage in as well as contribute to the literatures on consumer engagement and social media.

Literature Review

Since social media, and Instagram in particular, is a relatively new area of research, there is relatively little research regarding customer engagement and social media. A few studies on social media engagement have emerged in the past few years to take a deeper look into its importance, such as in-depth interviews on customer brand engagement and its connection with a brand's social presence (Pongpaew, Speece, and Tiangsoongnern, 2017). SocialBaker's (2017) research, which looked at 144 billion engagements on both Instagram and Facebook, provided

data to prove that Instagram has a three to four times higher rate of engagement per capita. Additionally, this study determined that while brands do not perform well on Facebook, they have seen much higher success and engagement rates on Instagram.

While research on these platforms, particularly Instagram, is still being done, engagement has been a research topic for a much longer time period and has become an important topic of marketing research. As stated above, Gallup (Adkins and Sorenson, 2014) has found significant links between customer engagement and business success. Other research has supported this finding, even with early studies based on companies communicating their lifestyles in advertisements to engage consumers more than just demonstrating the product (De Chernatony and Helman, 1999). A “lifestyle” brand is defined in many different ways, but primarily focuses on how “consumers use brands to express and validate their identity” (Berger and Heath, 2007). Although the idea of lifestyle branding has grown in popularity, research has shown that companies may be increasing their competition through this positioning since a wider range of businesses can appeal to the same part of a consumer’s lifestyle (Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal, 2011). Research about interactive brand experiences suggests that consumers prefer to engage with content (Smilansky, 2009), while other work has investigated the different methods companies have chosen to use on social media (Saravanakumar and Suganthalakshmi 2012).

Previous research defines consumer brand engagement as “a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions” (Hollebeek and Brodie 2014). This study looks at how consumer brand engagement is preceded by “involvement” with the brand, while “self-brand connection” is a potential result of engagement. This research was used to identify potential factors to include in our study. To define self-brand connection, we utilized a modified version of Escalas and

Bettman's (2005) self-brand connection scale. This scale is commonly accepted and used in other research on the subject. Escalas and Bettman created a scale with seven statements to determine self-brand connection. We have modified one of these statements to fit our requirements in data collection and analysis.

A vast literature on the material and experiential purchases has shown that there are distinct benefits to experiential purchases over material purchases. Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman (2009) found that more experiential purchases led to greater happiness than material purchases—if they turn out positively—and research from Carter and Gilovich suggests that experiences and experiential content are more meaningful to an individual's identity (2012). Our research aims to connect and expand on these research topics of experientialism versus materialism and consumer engagement, focusing on social media posts and experiential images.

Hypotheses

The goal of this research is to examine what makes a consumer more likely to engage with a company on social media. While there are many external factors that can lead to consumer engagement, this research focuses on the types of multimedia posts a business chooses to post on their brand's Instagram page and the reception these posts received by users on the platform. This research will not look at any other forms of reactions or engagement, such as articles written about a post that a company made or Twitter mentions of that company after a particular post.

One hypothesis in this research is that there is a higher correlation of customer engagement with experiential posts than with material posts. Previous research on other platforms have shown evidence of this correlation in a similar measure, where posts classified as more "vivid"

had a higher correlation of likes and comments on Facebook and Twitter. Vividness was defined as “the richness of a brand post’s formal features; in other words the extent to which a brand post stimulates the different senses” (Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang, 2012). More experiential posts also appeal to different sense as well as feelings than a more material post would. The current research aims to prove this relationship across all industries and looks in-depth at the interactions between engagement and the experiential rating for each industry.

Additionally, this research looks at several other factors that may influence consumer engagement with a brand. We hypothesize that increased visibility of a logo and the more often that a company posts to the platform will both lead to decreased engagement on the platform. While little research was found on the impact of logo visibility, prior research shows that the number of times a company posted on Facebook was negatively related to likes and comments (Touchette, B., Schanski, M., & Lee, S., 2015). We also hypothesize that a higher rate of self-identification with the brand will increase engagement, based on research by Escales and Bettman (2005) and Hollebeek and Brodie (2014).

Methodology

This research required a two part methodology: collection of Instagram data to determine post engagement and an online survey to determine post type and self-brand connection.

To collect Instagram data on customer involvement with posts, we looked at the Instagram pages of 39 businesses daily. These businesses were divided into 9 categories:

1. Restaurants
2. Outdoor
3. Sporting goods
4. Beauty

5. Retail – Department Stores
6. Retail - Superstores
7. Retail – Fashion
8. Automobiles
9. Ice Cream

From each category, four to five companies that regularly use social media were selected. Regular use of social media for this research is defined as companies who post a minimum of one post every 1-7 days on Instagram. This ensured that there was sufficient social media data collected for each company. After selecting 39 companies, their Instagram pages were tracked daily for one month using a web scraper created specifically for this research. During this month, 1,267 Instagram pictures and engagement with them were recorded. To give time for people to react to a post, engagement with each post was recorded 7 days after being posted. For this research, post engagement was quantified by the measures of likes and comments. Total followers for the brand's social media page were additionally noted to determine a baseline for the brand.

After collecting this data, a survey was used to determine post type by looking at whether consumers considered each Instagram post as more of a material post or more of an experiential post, as well as logo visibility and self-identification with a brand (Appendix A). To determine these factors, 339 undergraduate business students ranked 50 random pictures on a seven point scale of completely material to completely experiential. The following definitions were used to help participants determine this:

Material means you can touch the item with your hand and you can keep the object in your possession.

Experiential means that you cannot hold the item in your hand and you experience it over a finite period of time and then it is over.

Participants additionally ranked 50 random pictures on their logo visibility, from not visible at all to very visible. To determine self-brand connection, the survey asked participants to rate their experience with the 39 brands chosen for this research. If participants had used or wanted to use the brand in the future, participants were asked a question about how the brand represented them, adapted from Escales and Bettman's (2005) self-brand connection scale. After both parts of data collection were complete, all data was consolidated for each post and categorized by company and industry.

Data Analysis

The following key variables were created based on established standards (Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie, 2014):

$$\text{Post Engagement} = \frac{(5 * \text{Post Likes} + 10 * \text{Post Comments})}{\text{Brand followers}}$$

$$\text{Post Rate} = \frac{(\text{Total number of posts collected from brand})}{30 \text{ day collection period}}$$

These variables were standardized and survey ratings were averaged for each post, allowing us to look at variables from an individual post level as well as by company or industry.

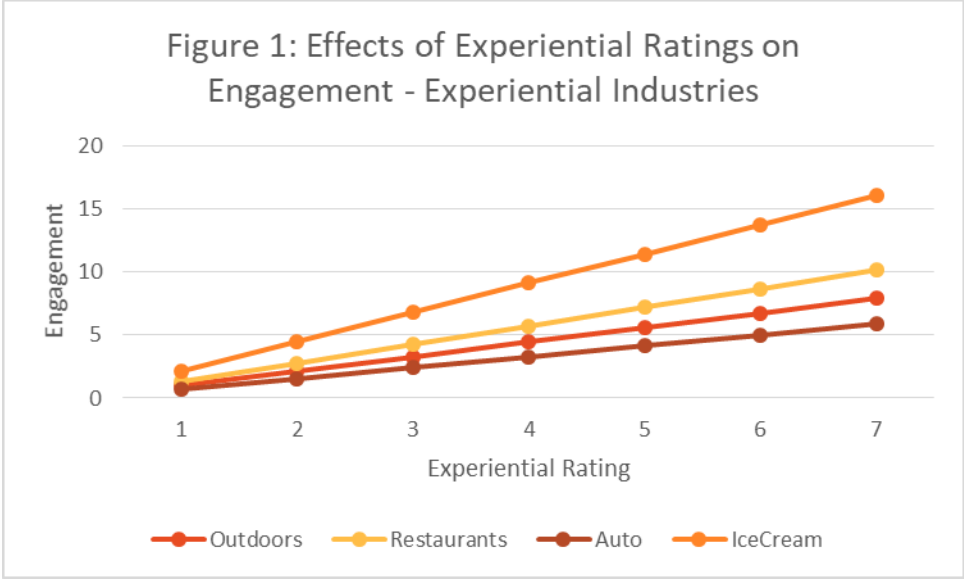
Analysis was first conducted by looking at the overall significance of all factors collected in SPSS Statistics, without segmenting the data by company or industry. To answer the research question of factors associated with post engagement, we used post engagement as the dependent variable and tested the relationship using Pearson's correlation between engagement and the following variables: average experiential rating, average brand identification, average logo visibility, post rate, and brand followers. Since the research focused on the experiential rating of posts, we looked further into the relationship between engagement and experiential rating based on the industry. This analysis included variables for each industry and their interactions with the experiential post variable. We then plotted these interactions for each industry to determine additional trends.

Results

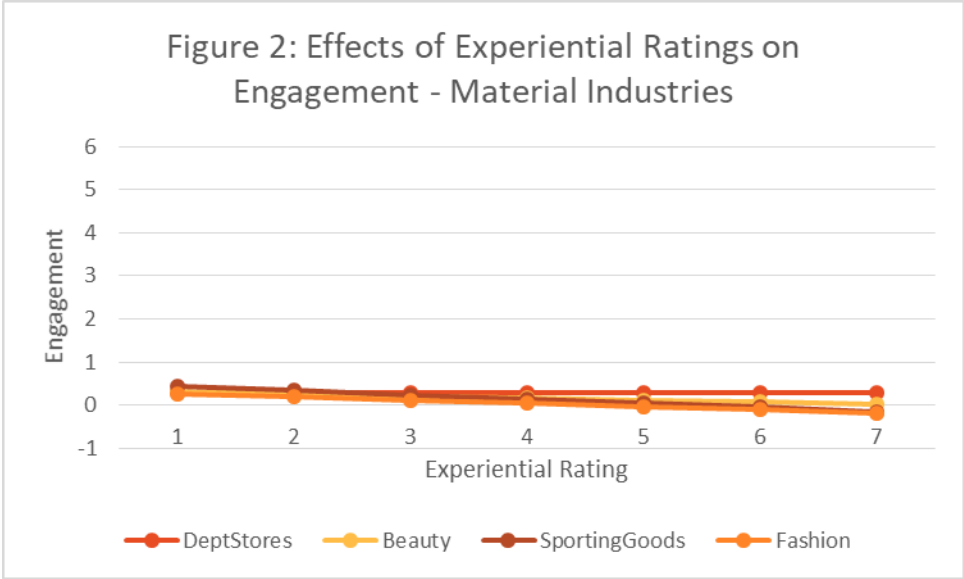
Examining the correlations, we found that the experiential nature of a post had significantly positive correlation with post engagement, indicating that the more experiential the post was perceived to be the more engagement there was ($r = .100, p = .006$). Logo visibility also had positive correlation with post engagement, indicating that the more visible the logo was perceived to be the more engagement there was with a post ($r = .271, p < .001$). Additionally, when companies had a higher post rate ($r = -.168, p < .001$) or more overall followers ($r = -.168, p < .001$), there was significantly less engagement with posts. Brand identification did not have a significant effect on post engagement. Table 1 summarizes results from each factor:

Table 1: Correlations with Post Engagement		
Factor	Pearson Correlation	<i>p</i>-value
Experiential Nature of Post	.100	.006
Company Post Rate on Site	-.168	< .001
Logo Visibility	.271	< .001
Brand Followers	-.168	< .001
<i>Brand Identification</i>	<i>.001</i>	<i>.492</i>

Next, we analyzed whether the effect of the experiential nature of the post on engagement depended on industry. The results showed that the effect of experiential posts on engagement depends on the industry ($F(1,587) = 3.019, p < 0.05$). For industries that are more experiential in nature (Outdoor, Restaurant, Automotive, and Ice Cream) experiential posts led to engagement.



Industries that were more materialistic in nature (Department Stores, Beauty, Fashion, and Sporting Goods) did not see a relationship between experiential rating and post engagement.



Discussion & Conclusion

Overall results proved our hypothesis that experiential posts can increase engagement on social media, but the industry-specific results show that the effect of experiential post on engagement depends on industry. These results expand on the current literature related to consumer engagement, social media marketing, and experiential or “lifestyle” marketing. They prove that, similar to “vivid” and posts on Facebook (Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang, 2012), experiential images on Instagram have a positive effect on engagement to some extent. As brands place an increasing importance on marketing a “lifestyle” instead of just a product to create meaningful interactions with consumers (Elder, 2014), research still hasn’t fully caught up to the effectiveness of this strategy. While research has always been interested in consumer engagement and branding, social media adds an entirely new and more interactive element. Our research validates some of these beliefs and prior research, as well as providing several areas to look into for continued research on the topic.

Managerial Insights

These results indicate that marketers should decide on the type of posts they are making based on the industry their business is in. For industries where their product or service is already considered to be more of an experience, it is best to post more experiential posts. For industries that are more material in nature, we found no positive effect of experiential post on engagement so while there is no harm in posting experiential images, materialistic industries may not see any benefits. Additionally, there are several implications to other factors that were significantly related to engagement. Marketers should ensure that logos are visible in the images they post to increase engagement with the brand. They should also avoid posting too often on the platform, since consumers do not engage as much when the post rate increases.

Limitations

This research had several limitations. Since we did not have participants rate how “experiential” they considered a brand to be by nature, the nature of the industries was determined by the two distinct trends that emerged in the data as well as our understanding of the industries. Additionally, while we originally collected data from both Facebook and Instagram, Facebook did not provide enough image data points to use during the one month collection period. This makes generalizing this research to all social media more difficult, although Instagram is the most commonly used platform for images. Finally, we chose a broad approach of four to five companies from each industry, which means that each company had a significant impact on the industry results. Future research could take a deeper approach by choosing more companies for each industry but less industries overall to determine the effect of this.

Future Research

Based on these findings, one area for future research could look into more materialistic industries to determine what types of post have a positive effect on consumer engagement. Other factors related to post engagement such as logo inclusion, brand followers, and post rate may be good areas for future research to look deeper into on an industry level. In particular, data regarding logo inclusion suggested an opposite effect from our original hypothesis. Further research could be done to determine if this remained true for all industries. Research could also be done looking more in-depth into one industry or by looking at how a brand's perceived image relates to how their posts are perceived. For example, if a brand begins posting content that is not consistent with their company or products but still contains experiential images, would this post still receive higher engagement?

Post type could also be broken down into much more detail. Our research focused broadly on "experiential" images, but subcategories such as activism, contests or sweepstakes, and videos could be added and analyzed from an overall and industry level. Additionally, an important trend in Instagram marketing has begun to emerge where Instagram users with a high number of followers are being paid to be "brand ambassadors" and promoting and endorsing products and brands. There is a multitude of research that could be done with the effect that these post types have on brands and engagement. Since social media and Instagram in particular is such a new area, there is still lots of areas that further research can explore.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey

Welcome to this Marketing Research Study!

We would greatly appreciate it if you complete this study on a computer and NOT on a cellphone or small mobile device. If you are on a mobile device, please come back later when you're on a computer.

***Please note that your extra credit will not be assigned immediately upon completion of the study; it may take a few days (up to a week) for your credit to show up in the system.**

A few tips:

1. **Do NOT stop and restart the survey.** It will time out and not come back to the same spot. If you don't have 30 minutes right now, then come back later when you have the time.
2. **Shut down all your other browsers, email, etc.** Try to just focus on this task and it will go by a lot quicker.
3. Your **extra credit** will show up in a few days after completing the survey.
3. **THANK YOU!** We really appreciate your participation.

Some posts on social media are **more material** in nature and some are **more experiential**. We would like you to rate each post as either more material or more experiential.

Material means you can touch the item with your hand and you can keep the object in your possession.

Experiential means that you cannot hold the item in your hand and you experience it over a finite period of time and then it is over.

Q1: Would you rate a **BOOK** as a more experiential or more material purchase?

- Completely Material1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- A Little of Both4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- Completely Experiential7 (7)

Q2: Would you rate going to a **MOVIE at a theater** as a more experiential or more material purchase?

- Completely Material1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- A Little of Both4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- Completely Experiential7 (7)

Q3: How would you rate the following posts?



- Completely Material1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- A Little of Both4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- Completely Experiential7 (7)

(Repeated for all pictures collected, with participants ranking 50 random images)

Q4: Some posts on social media have logos that are clearly visible in their pictures, while others choose to have small or hidden logos or don't include logos at all. We would like you to rate each

post on how visible the logo is in the picture.



- Logo is NOT Visible at All1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- Logo is VERY Visible7 (7)

(Repeated for all pictures collected, with participants ranking 50 random images)

Q5: For each brand, please indicate whether you've used it in the past and whether you hope to use it in the future. Check all that apply:

	I use (or have used) the brand in the past (1)	I have NOT used the brand in the past (2)	I hope to use the brand in the future (3)	I don't hope to use the brand in the future (4)
Haagen Daz (2)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Halo Top (3)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Talenti (4)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Coldstone Creamery (5)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ben & Jerry's (6)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chevy (7)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Honda (8)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hyundai (9)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Volkswagen (10)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Toyota (11)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(Repeated for all 39 brands, with participants seeing a randomized set)

Q6: Some brands are better than others at reflecting who we are as people, while others are just brands.

How well would say that each brand represents your personality and who you are as a person?

Display This Question:

If For each brand, please indicate whether you've used it in the past and whether you hope to use it... = Ben & Jerry's [I use (or have used) the brand in the past]

Or For each brand, please indicate whether you've used it in the past and whether you hope to use it... = Ben & Jerry's [I hope to use the brand in the future]

Ben & Jerry's

- Does not describe me (1)
- Describes me slightly well (2)
- Describes me moderately well (3)
- Describes me very well (4)
- Describes me extremely well (5)

(Repeated for all brands that participant indicated as a brand they had used or hoped to use in the future)