An Analysis of Influencer Marketing Effectiveness in Luxury Brands Using Eye-Tracking Technology

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the advertising impact of influencers on the promotion of a luxury fashion item and the effect of the presentation style. More specifically, it focuses on the application of eye-tracking technologies to analyze how consumers respond to different presentation strategies used by influencers when promoting a new product in a social media post. We report the results of an experimental study in which a group of participants were exposed to a set of static visual stimuli (i.e., photographs) related to new product launches by luxury fashion brands in the form of influencer promotions on social media. Individual responses were evaluated based on the participant's ability to recall information from the stimuli, as well as their recorded gaze points and fixations, which were tracked to identify areas in which the viewer had a particular interest at a specific time during exposure. Our results show that consumers tend to be more impacted and more likely to remember a luxury item when the product is promoted by influencers who are not looking directly at the camera in their pictures, i.e., not making eye contact with the viewer. In addition, we evaluated the impact of the influencer's popularity and the aesthetic characteristics of the photographs used as stimuli.

Keywords: Brand awareness, Eye-tracking, Influencer marketing

INTRODUCTION

Influencer culture is becoming a core element of the marketing strategy of many luxury fashion brands, which rely on influencers to promote their products, increase their visibility, and expand to other consumer segments. The almost exclusive role of celebrities in the promotion of luxury items is now being shared with individuals who have a certain level of reputation or social influence in digital platforms such as Instagram or Facebook and can generate and engage large followings of people who pay close attention to their posts. According to Kapferer and Bastien (2012), luxury brands should direct their communication to both target and non-target audiences. By doing this, consumers who cannot access or afford these brands can at least recognize them, leading to increase brand recognition.

Influencer marketing in the luxury fashion industry increases consumer's awareness and engagement. A popular influencer may trigger specific semantic associations in the customer's mind, whereas an anonymous endorser may generate fewer mental associations. The audience's attention to the influencer in an ad is likely to lead to interest in the brand and even brand association in the future (Bruce and Young, 1986; Misra and Beatty, 1990). However, influencers may not always have a positive or sufficiently significant impact on the advertised brand, as consumers may only recall the influencer but not the brand itself (Belch and Belch, 2004; Rossiter and Percy, 1987).

Some researchers have studied the impact of a person's face and gaze - towards a promoted product or towards the viewer – on attention (Langton et al., 2008; Theeuwes and Van der Stigchel, 2006). Faces possess the natural ability to capture an individual's attention more rapidly and automatically than other non-social stimuli. Due to its emotional and social significance, faces and gaze behavior can be powerful mechanisms to capture and direct a viewer's visual attention (Vuilleumier and Schwartz, 2001; Palermo and Rhodes, 2007; Bindemann et al., 2005; Langton et al., 2006).

RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the impact of different influencer strategies during the new launch of a luxury fashion brand. We hypothesize that, when exposed to an advertising photograph from an influencer, consumers can recall the luxury product promoted in the photograph more easily when the influencer is not looking directly at the camera (i.e., not making eye contact with the consumer).

METHOD

Our study was conducted with a group of volunteers in Spain and designed in two stages. In the first stage, we developed a screening survey based on the work by O'Cass (2000) and Amatulli et al. (2016) to select the participants for our study. A total of 40 individuals with ages between 18 and 65 were selected. All participants had previous experience in fashion and a high capacity for recognition of luxury fashion brands.

In the second stage, we used a questionnaire and eye-tracking technology (Gazepoint GP3 eye tracker) to study the participants' behavior. To record and analyze eye-tracking data, we used the software OGAMA (2008). The fixation calculation used by OGAMA is based on a dispersion-type algorithm that searches for sequences of points where the subject's gaze is fixed which remain relatively close. Specifically, the values of the fixation parameters used in OGAMA were the maximum distance (in pixels) that a point may vary from the average fixation point and still be considered part of the fixation, and the minimum number of samples that can be considered a fixation, of 20 and 5 gazes, respectively.

Participants completed the study one at a time. Two stimuli were used in our experiment to evaluate the individual's ability to recall luxury items shown in photographs promoted by influencers. Each stimulus was shown
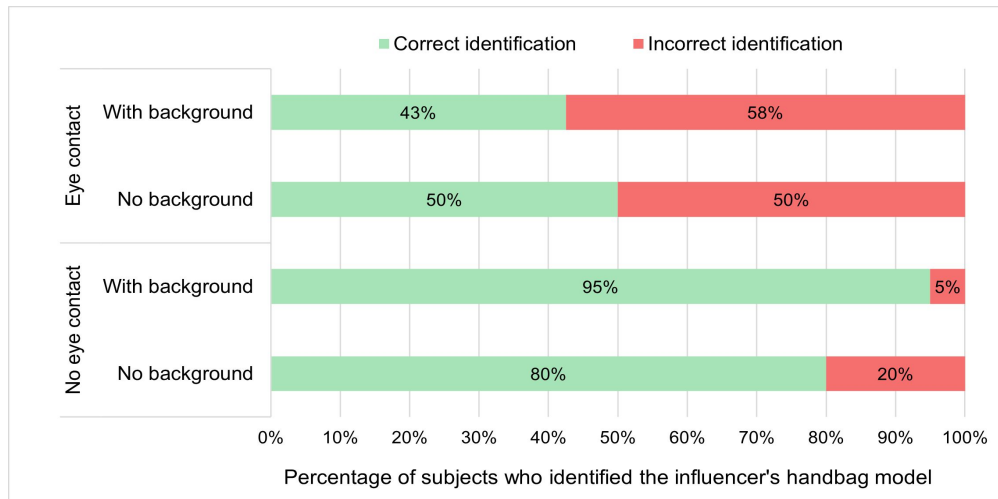
Figure 1: Identification of selected handbag models promoted by influencers.

for 8 seconds (Amatulli et al., 2016). After exposure, the participant was asked to identify the influencer in the photograph and the luxury items they were wearing. Both questions were part of declarative measures based on product recall from a list of 6 luxury handbags of the same brands with similar characteristics, and influencer recall from a list of 4 other influencers (two target and two distractors) and 2 response options such as not recognizing one or both influencers.

The selection of the stimuli was based on the aesthetics and the artistic characteristics of the photograph (particularly the presence of neutral and non-neutral backgrounds) and the influencer's eye contact. Two additional photographs of other influencers with similar characteristics were mixed with the stimuli to randomize the presentation and minimize the influence of previously shown stimuli on the subjects' responses.

The selection of influencers was based on the number of followers. We considered only influencers with more than half a million followers in their Instagram accounts where most of the photographs were promoted by luxury fashion brands. In particular, our study focused on Christian Dior and Louis Vuitton which are leaders in this type of digital marketing.

RESULTS

The results of our study are shown in Figure 1. The luxury items promoted in the images, specifically new models of handbags, were identified more easily by participants when the influencers did not establish visual contact with the camera. For this condition, 95% of participants correctly identified the handbag models for the photograph with a non-neutral background, and 80% for the photograph with a neutral background. In contrast, the existence of visual contact led to a decrease in the ability to identify the correct models: 42.5% for the photographs with background, and 50% for the photograph with a neutral background.

Figure 2: Aggregate heatmap for first stimuli (participants who correctly identified the handbag).

Figure 3: Aggregate heatmap for second stimuli (participants who correctly identified the handbag).

To illustrate the reaction to the exposed stimuli, the fixations of the participants who correctly identified the handbag models are shown through aggregated heat maps in Figures 2 and 3.

We used a McNemar test to compare the identification of the handbag models on a neutral background (see Figure 2 and Table 1). Significant differences were found between the correct identification of the handbag model with and without the influencer's visual contact ($\chi^2(1) = 6$, p = .014). A second McNemar test was used to compare the identification of the handbag models on an urban background (see Figure 3 and Table 2). Significant differences were found between the correct identification of the handbag model with and without the influencer's visual contact $\chi^2(1) = 19.17\ p<.01$).

Table 1. Contingency table for neutral background.

Recognition with visual contact	Recognition without visual contact		
	0	**1**	**Total**
0	2	18	20
1	6	14	20
Total	8	32	40

Table 2. Contingency table for urban background.

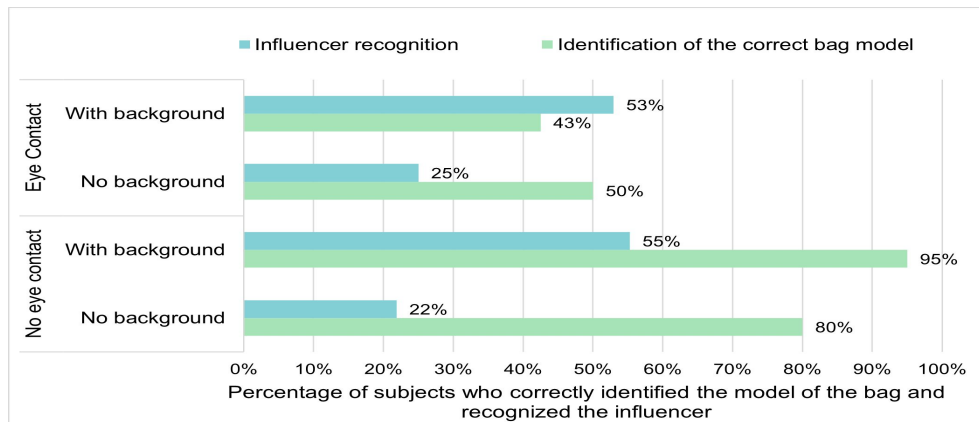| Recognition with visual contact	Recognition without visual contact		
	0	**1**	**Total**
0	1	22	23
1	1	16	17
Total	2	38	40

Figure 4: Relationship between the correct identification of the handbag and the recognition of the influencer by participants.

In addition to the influencers' visual contact, we evaluated two other aspects related to the participants' ability to recall the promoted luxury item: recognition of the influencer and the artistic characteristics of the selected photographs. The relationships between participants who identified the correct model of handbag and recognized the influencer in the photograph are shown in Figure 4. The combinations of the aforementioned effects and their corresponding results in relation to the advertising impact are summarized in Table 3.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of our experimental study confirm the influence of face presence and gaze direction on memorization and agree with previous research by Adil et al. (2018). This phenomenon has implications in advertising where

Table 3. Components affecting the effectiveness of luxury goods promotion.

Condition	Influencer recognition	Background	Advertising impact
With eye contact	High (53%)	Yes	Very low (43%)
	Low (25%)	No	Low (50%)
No eye contact	Low (22%)	No	High (80%)
	High (55%)	Yes	Very high (95%)

the presence of faces can increase marketing impact and attract viewer attention. The eyes (more specifically, gaze direction) are particularly significant as they can direct the viewer's attention. From a marketing standpoint, an photograph is more impactful when the influencer's gaze is directed toward the product and not the viewer. Our findings agree with Droulers and Adil (2015) who reported similar results and concluded that magazine ads that featured a gaze toward a product increased memory performance both for the product and the brand.

The influencer's popularity also has an effect on the viewer's attention to the ad. Eye-tracking results from our study indicated that the number of fixations to the various elements of the ad was significant. The endorser's face received the highest number of fixations and the longest fixation duration. Our method and results are similar to Zahmati et al.'s (2020) who studied the impact of celebrity athlete endorsement on advertising attention when promoting fashion products such as sunglasses.

In the luxury fashion industry, influencer marketing is enabling the transition from exclusive events and celebrity campaigns to promotional strategies that leverage social media platforms to reach wider audiences. Through these platforms, companies can increase brand recognition and consumer engagement. In this regard, the communication strategies based on influencer culture and pioneered by some of the luxury fashion brands such as Christian Dior and Louis Vuitton are more effective when the influencer does not establish direct visual contact with the target audience.

As future work, we are interested in replicating our experiment with a group of participants who are not as familiar with luxury brand products as the participants in this study. The additional data from this test would be used to analyze differences between target and non-target audiences, and to determine whether brand recognition and familiarity have a significant effect on the participants' behavior.

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