



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Persuasion in visual social media

Strategies in, coping with, and impact of brand-related user generated content

Fakkert, M.S.

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Fakkert, M. S. (2025). *Persuasion in visual social media: Strategies in, coping with, and impact of brand-related user generated content*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

MARIE-SELIEN FAKKERT

persuasion in visual social media

STRATEGIES IN,
COPING WITH,
AND IMPACT OF
BRAND-RELATED
USER GENERATED
CONTENT



Persuasion in Visual Social Media:

Strategies in, Coping with, and Impact of
Brand-related User Generated Content

Marie-Selien Fakkert

© Marie-Selien Fakkert

Amsterdam, 2025

Persuasion in Visual Social Media: Strategies in, Coping with, and Impact of Brand-related User Generated Content

ISBN: 978-94-6473-675-5

Cover design: Marie-Selien Fakkert

Layout: Douwe Oppewal

Printed by: Ipskamp Printing, Enschede

This project was partially funded by Stichting Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Commerciële Communicatie (SWOCC) and by the Research Priority Area Communication and its Digital Communication Methods Lab.

Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR)
Department of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam
PO Box 15791
1000 NG Amsterdam
The Netherlands

All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission of the author. The copyrights of published articles have been transferred to the respective journals.

Persuasion in Visual Social Media: Strategies in, Coping with, and Impact of Brand-related User Generated Content

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus prof. dr. ir. P.P.C.C. Verbeek
ten overstaan van een door het
College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel
op woensdag 12 maart 2025, te 10.00 uur

door Marie-Selien Fakkert
geboren te Apeldoorn

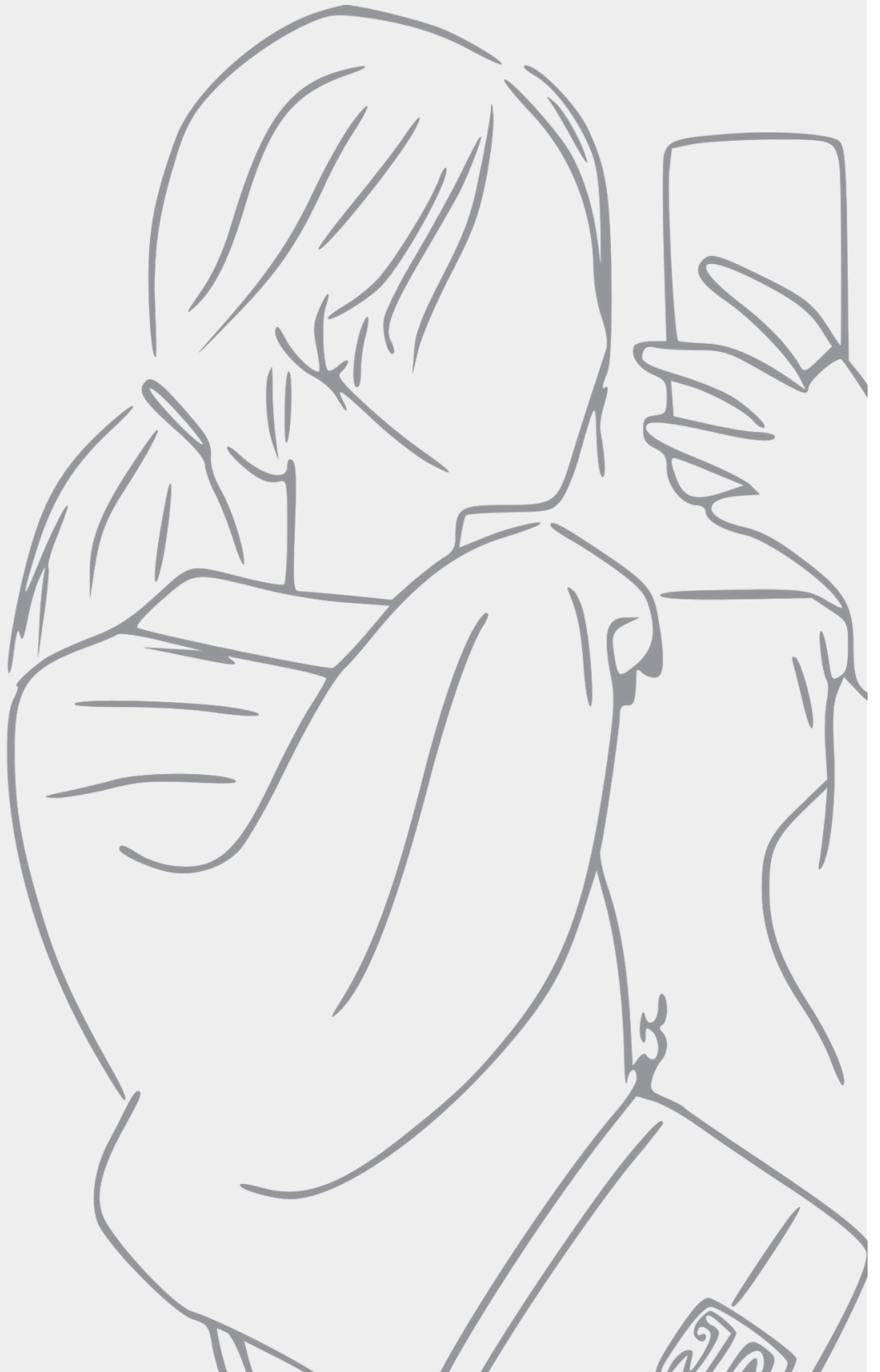
Promotiecommissie

Promotores:	prof. dr. G. van Noort prof. dr. T.B. Araujo	Universiteit van Amsterdam Universiteit van Amsterdam
Copromotores:	dr. J. Strycharz	Universiteit van Amsterdam
Overige leden:	prof. dr. M.L. Antheunis prof. dr. E. Peelen prof. dr. E.G. Smit dr. E.A. van Reijmersdal dr. L.M. Willemsen	Tilburg University Universiteit van Amsterdam Universiteit van Amsterdam Universiteit van Amsterdam Hogeschool Rotterdam

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragwetenschappen

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	Dissertation Overview	7
Chapter 2	Persuasive Strategies in Brand-related Posts from Brands versus Users in Visual Social Media and their Impact on Engagement	31
Chapter 3	From Friends to Brands: Consumers' Coping with Persuasive Attempts in Brand-Related User Generated Content in Visual Social Media	53
Chapter 4	Inspirators and Wannabes: the Impact of Persuasive Strategies through Perceived Motivations on the Recognition of Persuasive Attempts in Visual Br-UGC	77
References		103
Appendices		115
Summary		127
Nederlandse Samenvatting		133
Author Contributions		140
Dankwoord		141
About the Author		144



1

Dissertation Overview

Dissertation Overview

Introduction

In 2024, users across the globe used social media for 143 minutes per day in average (Statista, 2024a). Initially, social media platforms were dominated by textual content, with users engaging to stay informed about current events and connect with friends (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). However, in recent years, there has been a notable shift in this trend. The practice of sharing updates through text, which was once the norm, is now undergoing a rapid evolution towards visual content (Nanne, Antheunis, & van Noort, 2023). Platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok have led the way in this regard, with the sharing of images, videos, and memes with friends becoming a common occurrence (Statista, 2024c). This shift to visual-centric platforms reflects broader changes in how consumers interact with social media. In the present era, visual content, including reels and viral memes, has become pervasive in all aspects of online social interaction. This represents an important shift away from the text-centric era (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Nanne et al., 2023).

Brands have recognized this shift and have increasingly focused on visual social media, integrating visual content into their online strategies (Valentini, Romenti, Murtarelli, & Pizzetti, 2018; Willemsen, Mazerant, Kamphuis, & van der Veen, 2019; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Moreno, Tench, & Vercic, 2017). In turn, consumers follow these brands to stay updated, engage with their content (Johnson, Potocki, & Veldhuis, 2019; Rietveld, Mazloom, Van Dolen, & Worrying, 2016; Valentini et al., 2018), and actively participate in brand-related conversations and promotions by creating their own visual posts related to brands (Bakhshi, Shamma, & Gilbert, 2014; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Nanne, 2022). For example, 70% of the hashtags used on Instagram are brand-related (Nanne, Antheunis, & van Noort, 2021). This dual engagement, where brands publish visual content to attract and interact with users, and users in turn create and share their own branded visual content, has substantially increased the visibility and reach of brand-related posts across visual social media platforms.

Brand-related content created by social media users is also referred to as Brand-related User Generated Content (Br-UGC). Visual Br-UGC is characterized by several differentiating aspects. First, it consists of visual elements such as images or videos, which differentiate it from textual Br-UGC that primarily comprises text-based posts (e.g.,

posts on X). The visual content captures the viewer's attention, often accompanied by a caption or embedded text that supports the message conveyed by the visual. Research in advertising has shown that visuals can be more persuasive than words (Childers & Houston, 1984; Lutz & Lutz, 1977; Shepard, 1967), and social media users often prefer images over written content (Olapic, 2016). However, the exact persuasive impact of visual Br-UGC is not yet fully understood.

Second, visual Br-UGC incorporates at least one brand into the content by tagging it (e.g., @Nike, @McDonalds) or by prominently displaying the brand's products or logo (see Figure 1 for examples). Whether intentional or unintentional, both types of Br-UGC posts can have persuasive consequences for viewers (Mayrhofer, Matthes, Einwiller, & Naderer, 2020; Nanne et al., 2023). The effectiveness of these brand integrations within visual content remains a subject of ongoing research, highlighting a knowledge gap in understanding their precise impact on consumer attitudes and behaviors.

Third, Br-UGC contains strategies to convince consumers of the value of the product or brand advertised, i.e., persuasive strategies. Advertising literature demonstrates that brands and influencers employ various persuasive strategies to influence their audiences, including emotional and functional strategies (Golan & Zaidner, 2008; Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, & Kannan, 2016; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). While advertising literature has extensively examined the persuasive strategies employed by brands and their effects on consumers, it remains unclear whether consumers also use persuasive strategies similar to brands. If they do, it is essential to identify which persuasive strategies are employed by consumers and understand the impact these strategies have on other consumers. This uncertainty underscores the need for further exploration into how persuasive strategies manifest within visual Br-UGC and their implications for consumer behavior.

Finally, it is notable that a distinguishing feature of Br-UGC that may have a substantial influence on consumer behavior is its creation by friends or acquaintances (Nanne, 2022). This is a characteristic that has yet to be extensively investigated. Theory (i.e., Friestad & Wright, 1994) and empirical research suggests that persuasive messages coming from friends could enhance its persuasive effect on viewers (Mayrhofer et al., 2020), however this has not been extensively empirically tested so far for Br-UGC. This dissertation considers these four distinguishing features, which have the potential to influence the processing of content and the outcomes of persuasion in a substantial manner.

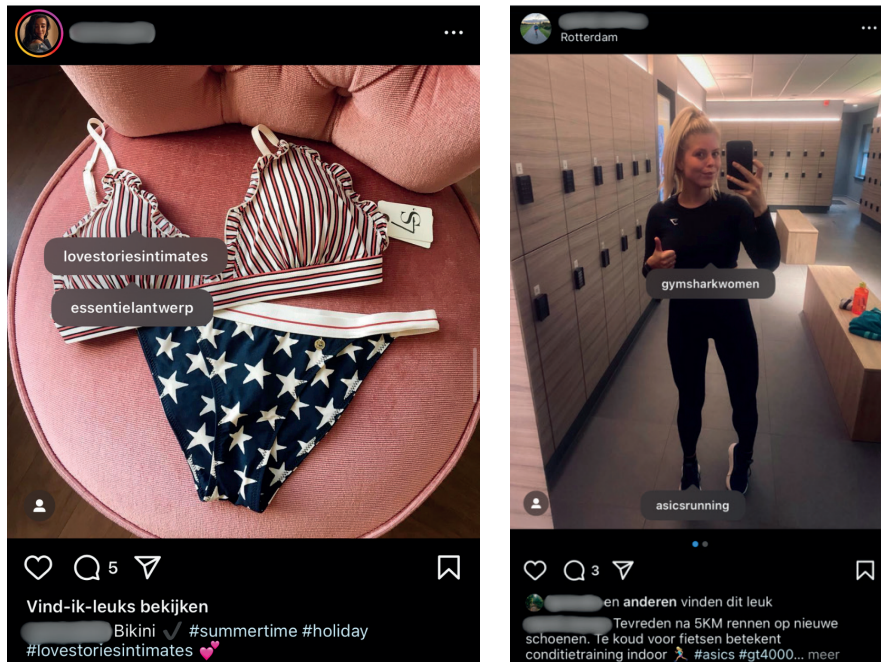


Figure 1. Examples of Br-UGC posts

Knowledge Gaps and General Research Aims

While visual Br-UGC is a phenomenon with several distinctive features that have the potential for a strong persuasive impact as outlined above, it remains relatively under-researched, leaving significant knowledge gaps.

First, previous research has delved into Br-UGC on social media, analyzing content aspects such as visuals and information density without systematically addressing visual perceptions or persuasive strategies like emotional and informational appeals (Bakhshi et al., 2014; Presi, Maehle, & Kleppe, 2016). Most studies examining user engagement with brand-related posts have concentrated on textual elements, particularly Electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM). The literature on eWOM and User Generated Content (UGC) suggests that users are motivated by a desire to assist or influence others (Amblee & Bui, 2011; Chen & Kirmani, 2015; Dhar & Chang, 2009; Farace, van Laer, de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 2017; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Liu, Dzyabura, & Mizik, 2017; Park & Lee, 2008). Despite this, it remains unclear whether these findings extend to visual social media and whether users employ similar persuasive strategies as brands in this context. Thus, the first aim of this dissertation is to explore the type of persuasive strategies users employ on visual social media.

Second, Br-UGC differs from other brand-related content on visual social media as it is created by regular social media users. This content created by friends, peers, or family

members, may be perceived as more trustworthy and influential than content directly from brands and influencers, which could influence how it is perceived and processed (De Jans, Van de Sompel, De Veirman, & Hudders, 2020; Mayrhofer et al., 2020; van Noort, Antheunis, & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Understanding how consumers cope with persuasive attempts within Br-UGC, especially that its coming from familiar sources, is crucial for understanding its persuasive potential. For example, a post from a close friend who has just completed a marathon wearing and tagging Nike running shoes in the image can be more persuasive than a sponsored post by the Nike brand promoting the same running shoes. Consequently, further investigation is required into how consumers cope with Br-UGC from friends in visual social media. Thus, the second aim of this dissertation is to highlight the importance of understanding consumers' coping with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC, particularly from familiar sources, and to elucidate its persuasive potential.

Third, while prior research has indicated that consumers' perceptions of the motivations of posters to create brand-related content vary based on the sender's sincerity (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000) and trustworthiness (Boerman & Kruijkemeier, 2016; Main, Dahl, & Darke, 2007), there is a notable gap in understanding how these perceptions impact the recognition of persuasive intent in Br-UGC. Previous studies have shown that consumers may struggle to identify persuasive intent based on the perceived motivations of the sender (Binder, Stubenvoll, Hirsch, & Matthes, 2022; Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012; van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, Sminck, van Noort, & Buijzen, 2017). To address this gap and explore how perceived motivations influence coping with persuasive attempts, this dissertation adopts the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which will be explained later on, to examine how these perceived motivations lead to different levels of recognition of persuasive attempts. In doing so, the third aim is to investigate how perceived motivations of posters of Br-UGC play a role in recognizing the persuasive attempts in Br-UGC content.

Finally, as the prevalence of Br-UGC in visual social media continues to grow, there remains a significant knowledge gap concerning whether consumers can cope with persuasive attempts and strategies in this content. In particular, the current state of knowledge does not permit an understanding of the impact of the persuasive nature of Br-UGC on consumer behavior and decision-making. Considering these uncertainties, this dissertation seeks to explain the role of persuasive attempts and strategies in Br-UGC in the consumer coping process. This dissertation employs a holistic approach, examining the strategies, coping with, and the impact of Br-UGC on recognition of persuasive attempts, individually and in interaction with one another. Consequently, this dissertation will reveal the persuasive strategies employed by consumers, the way consumers cope with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC, and the extent to which the recognition of these persuasive attempts is influenced by the perceived motivations of Br-UGC posters. Therefore, the final aim of this dissertation is to provide insights into how persuasive attempts and strategies in Br-UGC impact consumer behavior and decision-making, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics.

Theoretical Embedding

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) developed by Friestad and Wright (1994) provides a theoretical lens through which this dissertation is theorized and through which the knowledge gaps discussed above are addressed. The PKM offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the processes involved in persuasion. The model explains how individuals develop and use knowledge about persuasion to interpret, evaluate, and respond to persuasive attempts. The PKM consists of three main components influencing coping: persuasion knowledge, agent knowledge, and topic knowledge. For the purposes of this dissertation, the primary focus is on persuasion knowledge and agent knowledge. While topic knowledge represents an important component of the PKM, it is not directly relevant to the specific research questions and objectives addressed in this study. Accordingly, it will not be addressed further in this dissertation.

Coping involves the recognition of a persuasive attempt, an understanding of its intent, and the formation of an evaluative attitude (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The PKM elucidates the way consumers cope with persuasive attempts, underscoring the relevance of persuasion knowledge and agent knowledge in this process (Friestad & Wright, 1994). However, coping with Br-UGC presents unique challenges. Consumers may not perceive fellow social media users as persuasive agents, especially when content comes from friends or acquaintances, which may result in reduced activation of persuasion knowledge (Mayrhofer et al., 2020).

Among the propositions of the PKM, two types of knowledge are of special relevance to this dissertation: persuasion knowledge and agent knowledge. Persuasion knowledge refers to the understanding that consumers develop over time about the tactics and strategies used in persuasive messages, which helps them recognize and cope with these attempts. This knowledge enables consumers to cope with persuasive attempts as it helps them identify the intentions and strategies employed by the persuaders (Boerman et al., 2012; Friestad & Wright, 1994). Socialization is a pivotal aspect of this process, as individuals acquire knowledge through their own experiences and by observing and discussing persuasive communication with others (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012).

Furthermore, agent knowledge refers to what consumers know about the source of the persuasive attempt, including the source's motives and tactics (Friestad & Wright, 1994). In the context of visual social media, the pervasiveness of brands enables the emergence of a novel mode of socialization. Users engage with both their peers and brands, which serve as learning agents. It is important for consumers to have agent knowledge to understand the underlying intentions of the agent (i.e., poster) of Br-UGC to effectively cope with it. Consumers must be able to distinguish between posts that are genuinely enthusiastic about a brand and those that are driven by a desire for social recognition and personal branding. This understanding affects the way in which the content is processed and evaluated. When consumers are aware of the commercial

intent behind a post, they are more likely to cope and activate their persuasion knowledge (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, & Dima, 2018; Friestad & Wright, 1994). Consequently, the PKM emphasizes the significance of agent knowledge and perceived motivations of content creators in influencing consumer responses to Br-UGC.

Overall, the PKM provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the dynamics of persuasion in visual social media. By examining these elements, this dissertation aims to offer valuable insights into the persuasive strategies employed in Br-UGC, the coping processes of consumers, and the impact of perceived motivations on the recognition of persuasive attempts.

Chapter Overview

To address the research questions, three comprehensive studies have been conducted, which will be presented in three chapters¹. The studies will facilitate a more in-depth understanding of Br-UGC in visual social media by offering insights into persuasive strategies, coping with Br-UGC, and the impact of persuasive strategies and perceived motivations on the recognition of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC.

Chapter 2. Persuasive Strategies in Brand-related Posts from Brands versus Users in Visual Social Media and their Impact on Engagement

To gain an in-depth understanding of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC, it is essential to first examine the persuasive strategies employed in Br-UGC. On visual social media platforms, both brands and consumers actively create brand-related content. While academic research has begun to examine visual social media content, focusing on characteristics such as brands depicted in images and consumer selfies (e.g., Nanne et al., 2023; Valentini et al., 2018), knowledge about the persuasive strategies employed by both brands and consumers remains limited. In particular, advertising literature demonstrates that brands employ various persuasive strategies to influence their audiences (Golan & Zaidner, 2008; Kumar et al., 2016; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016) However, this is not the case for consumers. Research on Br-UGC (Bakhshi et al., 2014; Nanne et al., 2023; Presi et al., 2016) has primarily focused on visual content and information density but has not conducted a comprehensive examination of visual perceptions, such as the presence of persuasive strategies.

1 Each chapter was submitted to a scientific journal in accordance with the specific requirements of the respective publication. Moreover, selected chapters were presented at academic conferences, where they underwent peer review and were subsequently refined based on feedback from scholars in the field. Apart from updates to references, particularly those that were online sources or unpublished at the time of writing but have since been published, the chapters remain unchanged from their original (submitted) journal articles. Furthermore, the formatting was modified to align with the APA style (7th edition). Consequently, variations in wording, subheadings, and chapter lengths are evident. It is also inevitable that some repetition will occur in the explanation of theoretical foundations across different chapters.

To identify persuasive strategies, I depart from the concepts of creative and message strategies. In line with Fennis (2008), Ashley and Tuten (2015), and Tafesse and Wien (2018), I define persuasive strategies as *the techniques employed to convince consumers of the value of the message position, i.e., the product being advertised, and focus on messages positioned towards a product*. An understanding of these strategies is fundamental for the analysis of the impact of distinctive strategies. Researchers have proposed different typologies of persuasive strategies. At the most basic level, persuasive strategies can be distinguished as being primarily emotional or functional (Aaker & Norris, 1982), also in line with consumers' shopping motivations: hedonic (emotional, enjoyment) versus utilitarian (functional; Anderson, Knight, Pookulangara, & Josiam, 2014). In addition to differentiating between emotional and functional strategies, persuasive strategies can be divided into a more comprehensive set. Chapter 2 thus builds upon the works of Tafesse and Wien (2018) and Gavilanes and colleagues (2018) to create a comprehensive set of persuasive strategies, including functional appeal, emotional appeal, deal appeal, informative appeal, social cause appeal, entertaining appeal, celebrity endorsement appeal, and call-to-action appeal.

To ascertain whether users are motivated to employ persuasive strategies in their Br-UGC posts in visual social media in a manner comparable to brands, I draw upon the extant literature on eWOM and UGC, suggesting that users are motivated to help or persuade others (Amblee & Bui, 2011; Dhar & Chang, 2009; Farace et al., 2017; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Liu et al., 2017; Park & Lee, 2008). However, these findings focus on user motivations for creating possible persuasive content rather than adoption of specific persuasive strategies. Additionally, it remains unclear whether users on visual social media adopt similar persuasive strategies as brands do in this context. To examine this, I apply socialization theory (Wang et al., 2012) and the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994). With the omnipresence of brands in social media, communication between brands and users can be seen as a new form of socialization. Social media enables socialization among peers and between brands and users (Wang et al., 2012). In this context, socialization refers to the process by which users learn skills, knowledge, and attitudes by observing others or various media, including social media (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Wang et al., 2012). The PKM theorizes how persuasion knowledge works through socialization, suggesting that receivers learn to deal with persuasive messages by recognizing the persuasive intentions and strategies in messages (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Brands and influencers on social media serve as learning agents for users, just as peers and family members do (Wang et al., 2012). Consumers, surrounded by brands on social media feeds, can learn from the applied persuasive strategies and adopt them for their own posts. Thus, based on persuasion knowledge and the socialization process, I expect an overlap between the persuasive strategies adopted by brands and those used by users.

However, based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Muntinga et al., 2011), which explains why users engage with social media, one might expect the use of different persuasive strategies for users and brands. Several studies have demonstrated that users apply social media in their daily lives for social interaction, identity formation, entertainment, information acquisition, and economic reward (e.g., Muntinga et al., 2011; Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017; Tafesse, 2014). This may prompt the use of other persuasive strategies than those employed by brands in visual social media. Chapter 2 benchmarks the persuasive strategies that users employ in their Br-UGC against those employed by brands and analyzes the effect of these strategies on engagement. Therefore, the first research question is:

RQ1. Which persuasives strategies are used by brands and consumers in visual social media, and how do these strategies affect engagement?

Chapter 2 addresses the research gap regarding the use of persuasive strategies by consumers compared to those used by brands on visual social media platforms and investigates whether consumers adopt similar strategies. Consequently, this study examines the strategies utilized by brands, the extent to which users employ similar strategies in their Br-UGC posts, and the impact of these strategies on engagement. A content analysis was conducted to identify the persuasive strategies employed by both brands and users in 2,721 Instagram posts across four industries and 48 brands.

Chapter 3. From Friends to Brands: Consumers' Coping with Persuasive Attempts in Br-UGC in Visual Social Media

How consumers cope with persuasive attempts in visual Br-UGC is an important yet under-researched topic in our understanding of the impact of the pervasiveness of Br-UGC. In Chapter 3, I aim to gain insight into their recognition, understanding and the formation of evaluative attitudes towards persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. This chapter builds upon the work of previous scholars who have explored consumers' familiarity and coping with brand-related content and persuasive attempts from brands (Chen, 2018; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). To this end, the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) is employed, which postulates that coping mechanisms are initiated when consumers perceive certain content as a persuasive attempt and are aware that they are being influenced, which may result in a more critical evaluation of the persuasive message. The process of coping with persuasive attempts can be divided into three stages: first, recognizing the attempt; second, understanding it; and third, developing an evaluative attitude (Boerman et al., 2018; Lee, Kim, Ham, & Seok, 2022).

To cope with persuasive attempts, consumers need Persuasion Knowledge (PK) and Agent Knowledge (AK). PK is the understanding that enables consumers to recognize,

analyze, interpret, evaluate, and remember persuasive attempts as well as to select and execute coping strategies (Friestad & Wright, 1994), including how to resist the attempt. For example, PK could be the understanding that a particular sponsored Instagram post by a brand or influencer is a form of advertising rather than a regular Instagram post (Boerman, 2020; Pozharliev, Rossi, & De Angelis, 2022). AK involves consumers being aware that the source of a message has a persuasive intent, leading them to classify the message as a persuasive attempt and activate coping mechanisms. The agent 'represents whomever a target identifies as being responsible for designing and constructing a persuasive attempt' (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Mayrhofer et al., 2020). For brand posts on Instagram, the source is recognizable in the username (e.g., the brand name) or the indication that the post is sponsored, stated above the image. However, recognizing persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts can be challenging because consumers may not see the posters – often their friends or acquaintances – as persuasive agents (Mayrhofer et al., 2020).

In the second stage of coping, consumers need to understand why fellow users create Br-UGC. Previous research has identified personal identity, integration, and social interaction as major motivations for creating Br-UGC (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). Many consumers post content showing brands to express their connection to a brand's image and popularity, as well as their inclusion in the social group that uses the brand (Muntinga et al., 2011). For instance, brand selfies are a common way to portray oneself with a brand (Hartmann, Heitmann, Schamp, & Netzer, 2021; Nanne et al., 2021). Our research seeks to explore the extent to which consumers understand the use of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts.

The third stage in coping with persuasive attempts involves forming an evaluative attitude, also known as attitudinal PK, which encompasses critical attitudes and emotions like skepticism and disapproval towards persuasive messages (Boerman et al., 2012; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). This attitudinal PK plays a central role in the evaluation of persuasive attempts (van Reijmersdal, Brussee, Evans, & Wojdyski, 2023). Such evaluation is a crucial facet of coping. The evaluative attitude includes three elements: skepticism, fairness and liking (Lee et al., 2022). However, when consumers might not recognize and understand the persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts from their peers, it might be challenging to form an evaluative attitude towards the Br-UGC posts to consequently apply coping strategies.

Hence, it remains uncertain whether consumers' attitudes towards Br-UGC posts from fellow social media users are based on the coping mechanism route. Therefore, the second research question is:

RQ2. How do consumers cope with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC in visual social media?

Chapter 3 addresses the gap in understanding how consumers cope with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC from fellow users in visual social media platforms. In contrast to earlier research, which employed experimental methodologies utilizing mock posts, this study employs a qualitative approach, examining participants' actual social media feeds in a more realistic context. A total of 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Instagram users to investigate the coping process employed by them in response to Br-UGC from other social media users.

Chapter 4. Inspirators and Wannabes: The Impact of Persuasive Strategies through Perceived Motivations on the Recognition of Persuasive Attempts in Visual Br-UGC

Chapter 4 investigates how the use of different persuasive strategies and the perceived motivations for posting Br-UGC can influence the recognition of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. This chapter is based on dual information processing models (the Heuristic-Systematic Model, HSM; (Todorov, Chaiken, & Henderson, 2002) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, ELM; (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)) and the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994). It is hypothesized that different persuasive strategies result in different perceived motivations of the poster, leading to varying levels of recognition of persuasive attempts.

In Chapter 4, emotional and functional strategies are included as common persuasive strategies employed by consumers (Fakkert, Araujo, Strycharz, & van Noort, 2022). The most frequently used persuasive strategy by consumers is emotional appeal, defined as content that focuses on the psychological and social needs of the audience, evoking feelings and emotions related to the brand or product (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Chwialkowska, 2019). This is followed by functional appeal, defined as content that explains the benefits and usage of a product (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Chwialkowska, 2019). It is currently unclear how well consumers can recognize these strategies.

The difficulty in recognizing PA in Br-UGC might be attributed to the way such content is processed by the consumer. In line with the propositions by the HSM and the ELM of the dual-processing of information, Chapter 4 proposes that Br-UGC containing emotional appeal messages may be processed via the peripheral route, whereas functional appeal messages are thought to appeal to rational processing and are processed via the elaborate route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Todorov et al., 2002).

The different ways in which emotional and functional appeals are processed – and as such, recognized by consumers as persuasive attempts – may be explained by how consumers perceived the motivations of the posters of visual Br-UGC. Chapter 4 builds on the findings of Chapter 3, which demonstrated that the perceived motivations of the poster to inspire others and about personal branding play a pivotal role in the evaluation of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts. Chapter 4 examines how these perceived motivations may influence the recognition of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. Drawing

from the propositions by the PKM regarding agent knowledge, Chapter 4 considers that, due to the varying degrees of agent knowledge, consumers may encounter difficulties in recognizing the persuasive attempt in Br-UGC depending on the motivation they perceive. In the light of the aforementioned considerations, the third research question is as follows:

RQ3. How do different persuasive strategies (emotional vs. functional) in Br-UGC posts impact the recognition of persuasive attempts, and to what extent is this effect mediated by perceived motivations, specifically those related to inspire others and personal branding?

Chapter 4 addresses the gap in recognition of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC and how this is affected by persuasive strategies through perceived motivations of posters. Crucial findings in Chapter 2 and 3 are that consumers use different types of persuasive strategies in their Br-UGC and that consumers often perceive it as organic content from fellow social media users, rather than as a persuasive attempt. This chapter examines specifically the impact of various persuasive strategies in Br-UGC on the recognition of persuasive attempts and how this effect is mediated by perceived motivations. To this end, Chapter 4 employed a between-subject experiment with a sample size of 633 participants. The experiment included two conditions (persuasive strategy: emotional vs. functional) and two mediators (perceived motivation to inspire others and perceived motivation for personal branding). For a visual representation of the research questions, please refer to Figure 2 below, which illustrates the use of persuasive strategies, coping with Br-UGC, and the recognition of persuasive attempts.

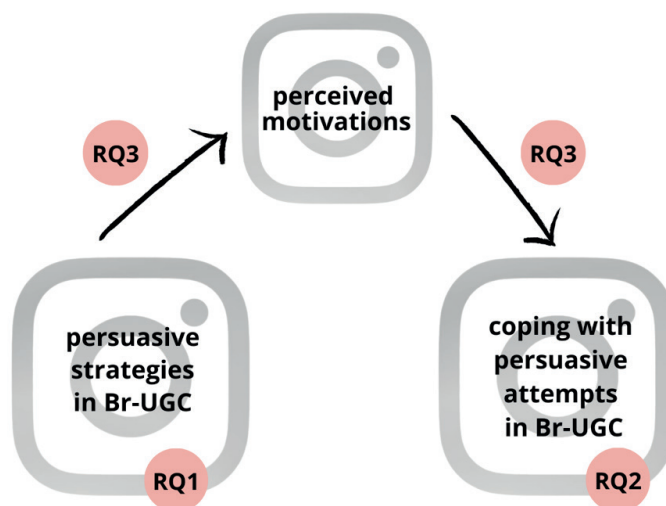


Figure 2. Visual Overview of the Research Questions.

Main Conclusions

This dissertation examines the use and impact of persuasive strategies, how consumers cope with Br-UGC, and how these strategies through perceived motivations impact the recognition of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. To address this aim, three empirical studies were conducted, as outlined in Chapters 2 through 4. Seven key conclusions can be drawn from these studies, which address significant research gaps in the advertising literature concerning persuasive strategies, perceived motivations, and coping with Br-UGC in visual social media.

1. Brands and users differ in their usage of persuasive strategies. The results of the content analysis in Chapter 2 show that brands predominantly use functional strategies in their social media posts, focusing on functional appeals, while users employ more emotional strategies, with emotional appeals being the most common. This indicates a divergence in the persuasive strategies between brands and users, suggesting that users do not fully mimic brand strategies in their Br-UGC.

2. The impact of persuasive strategies on user engagement differs depending on the source of the post (brand or user). In Chapter 2, the results show that the effectiveness of persuasive strategies on engagement, such as likes and comments, varies depending on the source of the post. Brands' functional strategies generally increase engagement, particularly functional appeals, while users' emotional strategies have mixed effects. For instance, emotional appeals do not significantly influence likes, but do influence comments.

3. Consumers are generally able to cope with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC, but not always. The results of the interview study in Chapter 3 demonstrate that participants could cope with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC to a certain extent. They were mostly able to recognize these attempts when brands were tagged in the post or brand logos were clearly visible in the images. In other circumstances, however, the persuasive attempt was not so promptly recognized. Furthermore, participants exhibited an understanding of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts, effectively differentiating between persuasive and non-persuasive motivations of the poster, such as identifying brand support or personal branding as inherently persuasive. Lastly, the evaluative attitudes towards the persuasive attempts in the Br-UGC posts varied widely, ranging from positive responses, like feeling inspired, to negative reactions, such as being annoyed by what they perceived as wannabe influencers.

4. The relationship between the consumer and the source of the post is relevant to the recognition and evaluation of a persuasive attempt. The interviews in Chapter 3 further revealed that the relationship strength between the consumer and the poster impacts the recognition and evaluation of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. Strong ties often led to participants overlooking persuasive intentions, resulting in more favorable attitudes towards the posts without coping mechanisms being activated. Participants

indicated that they do not anticipate brands to be present in posts from friends or fellow consumers. Instead, they expect such persuasion from influencers and brands.

5. Perceived motivations of the poster influence how consumers cope with Br-UGC. The interviews in Chapter 3 revealed that the perceived motivations behind Br-UGC posts, especially when posters were perceived as posting due to personal branding motivations or to inspire others, play a crucial role in how consumers evaluate and respond to these posts. Personal branding motivations tended to elicit more negative reactions among participants compared to motivations perceived as supportive or altruistic, which were valued more positively.

6. Functional strategies, compared to emotional strategies, lead to consumers having stronger perceptions of the Br-UGC poster having personal branding and inspiration as motivations. The findings of the experiment in Chapter 4 indicate that functional strategies in Br-UGC lead to consumers perceiving that a poster has a motivation for posting Br-UGC, whether this is personal branding or to inspire. This is particularly noteworthy since I expected that functional strategies would influence perceptions about the personal branding motivation, but not on the perceived motivation to inspire others. The argument for this effect on personal branding was that functional strategies induce elaborate processing of the Br-UGC: functional strategies resemble brand or influencer content that focuses on products, and as such, Br-UGC with this type of strategy would lead consumers to have stronger perceptions that the poster has a personal branding motivation. This aligns with the concept of agent knowledge, where viewers recognize the intent to build an online (personal) brand. However, the effect of functional strategies on perceptions that the poster has the motivation to inspire others was unexpected, suggesting that functional strategies might inherently trigger agent knowledge, thereby enhancing the perceived strength of any motivation the poster of Br-UGC might have. Further research should delve into this phenomenon to better understand the underlying mechanisms.

7. Functional strategies in Br-UGC, as compared to emotional strategies, lead to higher recognition of persuasive attempts, which is explained by the perceived motivations of the poster. Br-UGC containing functional strategies leads to a higher recognition of persuasive attempts among consumers than content with emotional strategies. This may be partly explained by the nature of these strategies. Functional strategies resemble branded and influencer content that explicitly promotes products. The findings show that the persuasive attempt of these strategies is more recognizable, and that the consumers' perceptions of the motives of the poster explain this effect. In contrast, emotional strategies often focus on people, facial expressions, and storytelling, with the brand being tagged subtle and the product not being the central focus. The findings show that persuasive attempts of these strategies are harder to recognize. Importantly, the findings outlined in Conclusion 6 also explain this difference: consumers are more aware about the poster motivations for Br-UGC containing functional strategies

(compared to emotional) and, the stronger these perceptions about the poster's motivation – both for inspiring others and for personal branding –, the more recognizable the persuasive attempt becomes. These findings underscore the importance of consumers' perceived motivations of Br-UGC posters in understanding why Br-UGC is persuasive.

Discussion

Overall, the studies presented in this dissertation shed light on how the use and impact of persuasive strategies and perceived motivations influence how consumers cope with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. The key findings advance advertising research by contributing to the body of knowledge on the use of persuasive strategies in Br-UGC, consumer coping with Br-UGC as informed by the PKM, and the (role of) perceived motivations of Br-UGC posters.

Enhancing the Application of the Persuasion Knowledge Model

The PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how consumers develop and use knowledge about persuasion to interpret, evaluate, and respond to persuasive attempts. This dissertation highlights the importance of persuasion knowledge and agent knowledge in consumers' coping with Br-UGC. The findings demonstrate that while consumers can recognize and understand persuasive attempts, the effectiveness of their coping mechanisms is influenced by the source of the content and the perceived motivations behind it.

Specifically, this dissertation contributes to the application of the PKM in the context of visual Br-UGC. Our research indicates that while the PKM provides a foundational understanding, its direct application to Br-UGC is limited. The interview study in Chapter 3 demonstrated that tie strength is more influential than the perceived motivation of the poster of the Br-UGC post. It is suggested that a strong tie between individuals can cause them to overlook the perceived motivation or persuasive intention, resulting in a consumer that does not follow the coping route of recognizing, understanding the intention, and forming an evaluative attitude. This can prevent the activation of persuasion knowledge, and agent knowledge may not always be present, especially when it is not expected from friends (Boerman & Kruijemeier, 2016; Mayrhofer et al., 2020). While agent knowledge (i.e., intentions of the poster of Br-UGC) and persuasion knowledge (i.e. regarding the persuasive strategies in Br-UGC) are separate knowledge structures that predict coping in the model, this dissertation suggests that these knowledge structures may not act independently in the context of visual Br-UGC. More specifically, our findings extend the application of the PKM in the Br-UGC context by highlighting the importance of interpersonal ties (i.e., ties with the agent), which can interfere the coping process as

described in the PKM. These ties can influence both persuasion and agent knowledge, making it difficult for consumers to independently activate and apply these knowledge structures.

The findings presented in Chapter 4 illustrate the complex interrelationship between these elements, demonstrating how they interact to influence the recognition of persuasive attempts. In doing so, it integrates the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) with dual processing models (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Todorov et al., 2002) to explain how different persuasive strategies in Br-UGC are processed and impact the recognition of persuasive attempts. This provides a nuanced understanding of the processes involved in recognizing persuasive content. Furthermore, the dissertation underscores the importance of considering the poster's motivations in understanding how consumers process and evaluate Br-UGC by introducing perceived motivations as a mediator. This introduces a novel perspective to the PKM, indicating that perceived motivations (i.e., of the agent) influence the activation of persuasion knowledge and the recognition of persuasive attempts.

Enhancing Insights on Persuasive Strategies in Visual Br-UGC

This dissertation is among the first to highlight a clear difference in the use of persuasive strategies in visual Br-UGC, noting that users employ different strategies than brands. Users, as compared to brands, employ more emotional strategies. This finding is partly in line with empirical research on contents of Br-UGC, but did not compare these with strategies in content from brands. For example, according to the literature, consumers are inclined to share their personal experiences and emotions related to brands in their social media posts (Muntinga et al., 2011; Nanne, 2022). Also, Campbell and Kirmani (2000) indicate that while social media users apply both functional and emotional strategies, the emotional context provided by users adds a layer of relatability and authenticity to the content, which is crucial for engagement on social media platforms. The frequent use of emotional strategies by posters of Br-UGC may be explained in light of uses and gratifications studies (Muntinga et al., 2011; Nanne et al., 2023; Phua et al., 2017; Tafesse, 2014), which show that social media users employ these strategies for social interaction and identity formation.

While users employing persuasive strategies that are different from those typically used by brands is in line with previous empirical research, it was not expected based on social learning theory, which suggests that consumers learn from brands in terms of how to post branded content. Contrary to social learning theory, rather than engaging in social learning from brands, it seems that users tend to prioritize the construction of an online identity that aligns with their own uses and gratifications. Therefore, the findings of this dissertation suggest that the construction of an ideal online image through Br-UGC may be of greater importance for posters than the act of persuasion itself.

Reassessing Br-UGC Perceptions

This dissertation contributes to the literature on Br-UGC by highlighting the diverse perceptions of and consumer coping with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC in visual social media. Previous research has overlooked these aspects by focusing on consumer behavior following the coping process, but ignoring the first necessary step in coping, i.e., the perception of persuasive attempts (Mayrhofer et al., 2020; Nanne et al., 2023). The findings in Chapter 3 reveal important differences in how participants perceive or even define Br-UGC. Some participants believe that brands should be tagged in Br-UGC, while others believe that tagging is primarily the domain of influencers due to their paid partnerships. Notably, in Chapter 3, participants observed that their friends are no longer tagging brands, but instead displaying them within the image, making it harder to recognize persuasive attempts. This raises the question of whether I need to rethink the definition of Br-UGC, which has traditionally been defined as content in which social media users share their brand experiences (Bakhshi et al., 2014; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). The way these experiences are shared is critical to understanding consumer perceptions of Br-UGC. In this dissertation, social media users incorporated brands by tagging, using the brand name in the location of the post, or displaying brand logos, each of which may affect consumers' perceptions of branded content and brand experiences differently.

Highlighting the Persuasiveness of Br-UGC in Visual Social Media

The context of visual social media highlights the considerable impact that brands and influencers have on consumers (Boerman, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Sharma, 2023). Social media influencers play a pivotal role in understanding the mechanisms of persuasion on these platforms. The majority of these influencers use persuasive strategies that are primarily informative and functional, which are closely aligned with the brands they represent (Sharma, 2023). Influencers' social status and persuasiveness suggest that they may be more effective than brands in communicating persuasive messages, as consumers often perceive influencers as more relatable and trustworthy, increasing the impact of their posts (e.g., Boerman, 2020; Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021).

However, the findings in the dissertation indicate that Br-UGC does not consistently activate consumers' persuasion knowledge and may, in fact, be more persuasive than both influencers and brands. This suggests that consumers might not be fully aware of the persuasive intentions behind Br-UGC, leading to a lower resistance to the message. Consequently, Br-UGC can blend more seamlessly into the consumer's social media feed, appearing more organic and authentic. Brands might benefit from encouraging and leveraging Br-UGC. By promoting authentic user generated content, brands can use the persuasive potential of seemingly non-commercial content, potentially leading to higher engagement and influence consumer behavior.

Enhancing Insights in Perceived Motivations of Br-UGC

Understanding the perceived motivations of Br-UGC is essential to unraveling how consumers interact with and respond to this content. Previous research has focused on the motivations of posters of Br-UGC (e.g., Nanne, 2022), focusing on the sender side of persuasive messages, but how these motivations are perceived by recipients of Br-UGC, the receivers of persuasive messages, remained understudied. This dissertation shows that consumers who receive Br-UGC perceive the motivations of creators for a variety of reasons, including supporting small businesses, personal branding, and social interaction. The perceived motivation behind a post significantly influences recognition of persuasive attempts. As the findings in Chapter 3 show, posts motivated by personal branding are perceived negatively, while those motivated by supporting a small business or to inspire others are perceived positively. This suggests that authenticity and perceived altruism play a critical role in how Br-UGC is received.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the results in Chapter 4 show that the use of emotional strategies, compared to functional strategies, does not result in a stronger perception of motivation to inspire others. Although the perceived motivation to inspire others is not increased by using emotional strategies, these strategies do lead to higher recognition of persuasive attempts. The perceived motivations for personal branding and inspire others are both more likely to evoke perceptions of persuasive attempt, which partly aligns with existing literature on influencer marketing (e.g., De Veirman et al., 2017). Marketers should consider how these motivations and with that persuasive intentions are perceived when designing campaigns and promoting UGC, as leveraging authentic and altruistic motivations can increase consumer engagement and brand loyalty.

Additionally, the dissertation highlights the importance of considering the perceived motivations of the poster in understanding how consumers process and evaluate Br-UGC by introducing perceived motivations as a mediator. While previous research has considered tie strength as a moderating factor in the effects on consumer responses (e.g., Nanne et al., 2023), perceived motivations remained unexplored. Our findings reveal that perceived motivations of the sender are integral to recognizing persuasive attempts in Br-UGC content. When comparing this finding from Chapter 4 to the outcomes of the interview study in Chapter 3, it is interesting to note that participants mentioned they recognized persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts from friends, but did not always respond accordingly. They liked a post because it was from their friend, even if they did not evaluate the perceived motivations positively. In terms of the use of functional strategies, Chapter 3 shows that this is perceived as personal branding and wannabe influencer behavior. Chapter 4 extends this finding by demonstrating that consumers perceive that posters of functional strategies (compared to emotional strategies) as having a personal branding motivation, as well as an inspiration for others. Furthermore, it reveals that both

perceived motivations lead to higher recognition of persuasive attempts. Eventually, this dissertation shows that perceived motivations can act as a relevant mediator, influencing how consumers activate their persuasion knowledge and recognize persuasive attempts.

Understanding Br-UGC Through a Multi-Methodological Framework

This dissertation employs a robust methodological framework, including a content analysis, a qualitative interview study, and an experimental design, to examine persuasive strategies in, coping with, and the impact of strategies and perceived motivations on recognition of persuasive attempts in visual Br-UGC. By integrating these different methods, the research adopts a holistic approach that allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena in this dissertation.

The content analysis provides a quantitative foundation by systematically categorizing and quantifying the types of persuasive strategies employed in Br-UGC compared to brands' content. This was complemented by qualitative interviews that provided in-depth insights into participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and coping related to Br-UGC. These interviews allowed for the exploration of nuanced perspectives. While previous studies have primarily focused on quantitative analyses of the effects of Br-UGC on consumer attitudes and behavior (Mayrhofer et al., 2020; Nanne et al., 2023) our qualitative approach to understanding how consumers perceive and recognize Br-UGC in their social media feeds is novel. Finally, the experimental design allowed for a controlled examination of the effects of different persuasive strategies, and subsequent perceived motivations, on the recognition of persuasive attempts. This methodological combination allowed for the exploration of nuanced perspectives often lacking in purely quantitative research. This approach ensures that the research addresses the complexity of social media interactions and provides rich, actionable insights for both academic understanding and practical application.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this dissertation provides valuable insights, it has certain limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, our samples were limited to Instagram users between the ages of 18 and 40, which may not be representative of all social media users. Future studies may consider a more diverse sample to increase generalizability, particularly focusing on younger age groups who may have less developed persuasion knowledge and may be more susceptible to persuasive influences (Hudders et al., 2017). Furthermore, our participants were medium to heavy Instagram users, but I did not consider their motivations for posting Br-UGC or personality traits that favor, for example, personal branding motivations. Participants who are more outgoing and interested in presenting an idealized

version of themselves online may be more likely to prefer posts that feature hedonic brands and personal branding (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). In future research, it would be valuable to explore how perceived motivations vary across different personality traits.

Second, the studies in this dissertation focused on visual Br-UGC on Instagram. Future research should examine persuasive strategies across different social media platforms and content formats, including Instagram Reels and TikTok, where content is consumed even faster (Statista, 2024c). Understanding how these platforms and the different levels of attention to content influence consumer behavior can provide deeper insights into persuasive Br-UGC strategies.

While the previous suggestions focused on addressing specific limitations, it is equally important to explore promising directions that arise from the findings in this dissertation. These directions can pave the way for more comprehensive and innovative research towards Br-UGC in visual social media.

A first suggestion for future research would be to examine a greater range of persuasive strategies, with a particular focus on interactional strategies and those designed to promote events. Although the study in Chapter 4 compared functional and emotional strategies, social media is fundamentally an interactive medium, which brands frequently employ in their marketing activities to interact with their possible consumers (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Chwialkowska, 2019). As detailed in Chapter 3, the interview study revealed that participants frequently tagged brands in their attempts to win tickets to festivals and other events, indicating the use of interactional strategies. Further research could concentrate on these interactional strategies, as they are closely aligned with consumers' motivations for using social media, such as interacting with friends and brands (Muntinga et al., 2011; Nanne et al., 2023). A study into how consumers identify and respond to persuasive attempts within these interactional contexts could provide a more nuanced understanding of the efficacy of such strategies and inform the development of more engaging and authentic marketing practices.

Second, future research could compare perceived motivations with actual motivations to identify potential discrepancies and understand their implications on consumer trust and engagement. As Nanne (2022) demonstrated, consumers often use brands as subtle cues to express their ideal online identity. Other motivations include social interaction, aesthetics (i.e., the visual appeal of the content), and empowerment. Comparing these motivations with the perceived motivations identified in this dissertation, such as personal branding and the desire to inspire others, could reveal whether actual motivations are accurately perceived by the receivers of Br-UGC. This comparative analysis could provide valuable insights for marketers, helping them design more authentic and effective Br-UGC campaigns that resonate more deeply with their audience.

Finally, future research could encompass the investigation of actual coping strategies that emerge from coping with Br-UGC resulting in consumer behavior like the purchasing of products based on friends' promotions. The present study was empirically oriented and focused on the initial step in the coping process, namely, the recognition of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. In Chapter 3, I undertook a comprehensive examination of the coping process, employing a qualitative approach with the objective of gaining insight into the cognitive processes underlying consumer coping with Br-UGC. Nevertheless, the complete coping process has yet to be subjected to experimental testing within this context. Further research could investigate the subsequent stages of the coping process and the role of evaluative attitudes in determining specific coping strategies. Additionally, it would be beneficial to examine the impact of these strategies on consumer behavior in the context of visual social media.

Finally, the findings show that brands and persuasive attempts in Br-UGC were not always recognized but were positively evaluated. This is consistent with a study by Chen (2018), who found that Br-UGC posts from friends that featured friends using a product, brand-related hashtags, or planned marketing activities were more positively received and served as strong purchase motivators. This highlights the need for further research into the role of tie strength in influencing consumer coping, particularly in the first aspect of coping, recognition. It is important to understand the impact of tie strength on consumer attitudes toward persuasive peer content. This is essential for the development of guidelines and regulations that ensure transparent and ethical marketing practices in social media environments.

Implications for Social Media Marketing and Consumer Protection

The findings from the studies in this dissertation provide valuable insight for brands seeking to engage consumers through effective content marketing strategies. Based on my findings, I suggest several practical implications for increasing the impact of Br-UGC on consumer responses. Furthermore, I discuss implications for regulators to protect consumers from potentially misleading persuasive attempts in Br-UGC.

First, this dissertation highlights the importance of understanding which persuasive strategies are most effective. Practitioners can use these findings to identify effective persuasive strategies in brand posts (functional and social cause) and in Br-UGC (informative, social cause, and emotional). This knowledge can inspire brands to share the right type of Br-UGC in their social media content. It is critical for brand managers to avoid incorporating 'wrong fit' persuasive strategies, as these can irritate consumers, leading to negative consequences such as unfollows and negative impact on long-term sales.

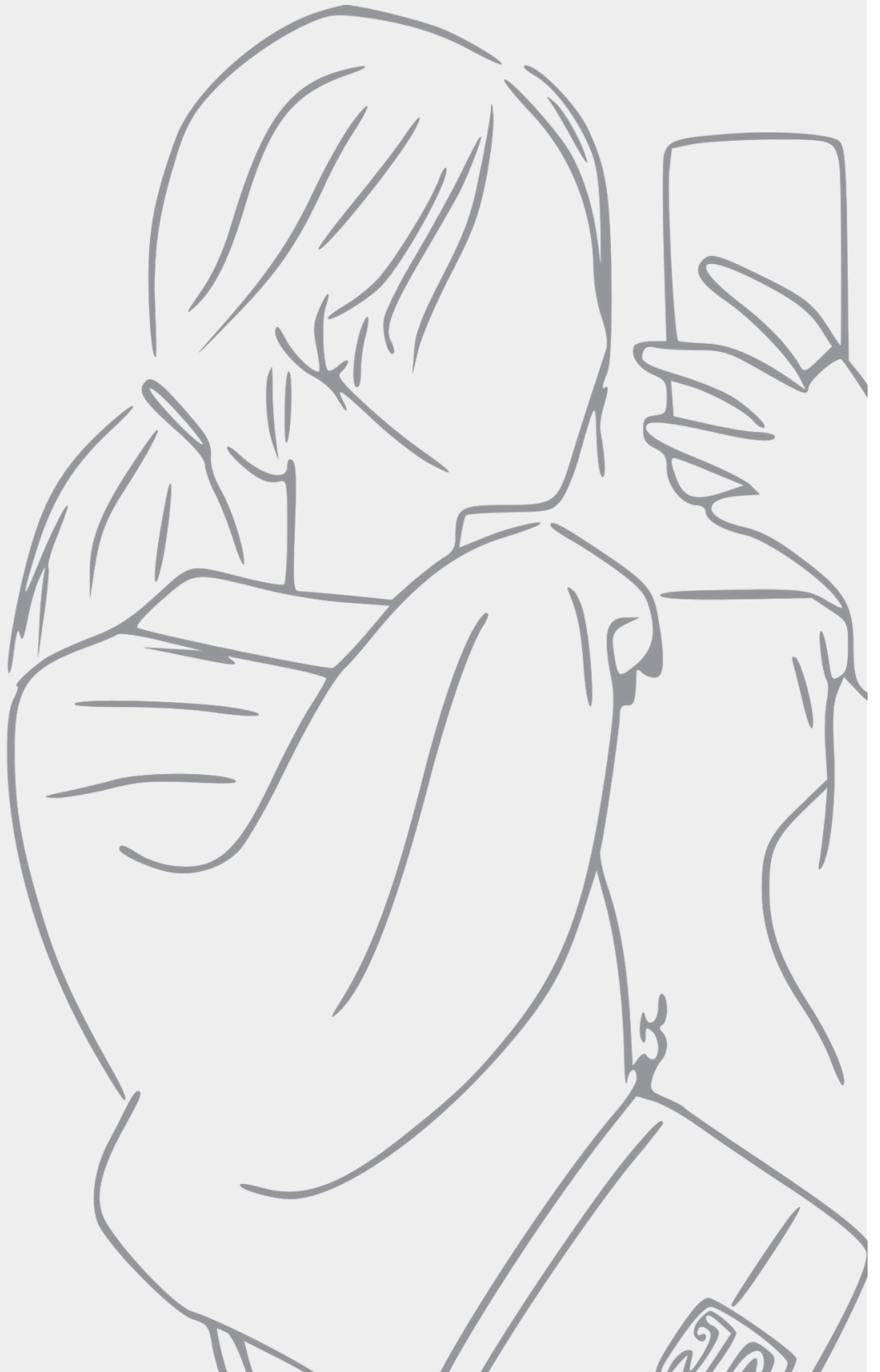
Second, brands should recognize that interactional strategies, such as call-to-action posts asking their followers to 'do' something, may not be effective in increasing audience engagement in visual social media. Users often perceive these posts as primarily informative rather than entertaining, which reduces their willingness to engage. Instead, brands may find it more effective to explain the benefits of their products, demonstrate how to use them, and post content related to social causes to show audiences that they care about others. These persuasive strategies remain the most effective in engaging consumers.

Third, functional strategies in Br-UGC, can increase recognition of persuasive attempts. However, emotional appeal strategies can build brand affinity and trust without obviously signaling persuasive intentions of the poster. Marketers should consider selectively reposting Br-UGC with emotional appeals to foster genuine connections with audiences. Blending functional strategies with authentic user experiences and testimonials can balance perceived motivations.

Fourth, the results provide marketers with insights into how consumers perceive Br-UGC posts. Interviews revealed that tagging brands is often associated with wannabe influencers, which can irritate consumers and negatively impact brand perception. Instead, brands are more appreciated when they appear in images and are tagged at the location of a story or post. Social media marketers should check locations on Instagram, rather than '@tags' to find Br-UGC for their brand.

Finally, the findings in this dissertation also provide valuable insights for regulators in light of consumer protection. In the interviews conducted for the study presented in Chapter 3, participants acknowledged the occurrence of a phenomenon in which they observed their friends sharing Br-UGC, despite initially denying that their friends engaged in such behavior. This suggests that consumers may not always be aware of the brands that are featured in the content that is posted by their peers on social media. It is therefore crucial to enhance consumer awareness of Br-UGC. It may be advisable for regulators to consider mandating that social media platforms automatically highlight the presence of a brand in a post and attach a distinct tag to such posts. In contrast to influencers, who typically utilize tags such as 'sponsored' or 'partnership' to indicate the branded nature of their content, ordinary users are not expected to identify their posts as such. It is therefore essential that regulators ensure that the responsibility of safeguarding social media users from unwanted persuasive influences is assigned to the platforms themselves.





2

Persuasive Strategies in Brand-related Posts from Brands versus Users in Visual Social Media and their Impact on Engagement

This chapter is submitted for publication as:

Fakkert, M. S., Araujo, T.B., Strycharz, J., & van Noort, G. (2022). Persuasive Strategies in Brand-related Posts from Brands versus Users in Visual Social Media and Their Impact on Engagement. *Submitted for publication.*

An earlier version of this chapter was presented at:

The 72nd Annual International Communication Association Conference, May 26-29, 2022, Paris, France.

Abstract

With the popularity of visual social media, both brands and social media users are actively creating brand-related content, including Brand-related User Generated Content (Br-UGC). Existing research has examined persuasive strategies employed by brands in advertising and social media, but the extent to which users employ persuasive strategies in Br-UGC has not been explored. This study explores how we are persuaded online by examining (a) which persuasive strategies are used by brands, (b) to what extent users apply the same strategies in their visual Br-UGC posts, and (c) how these strategies affect engagement. A content analysis was conducted to identify persuasive strategies of brands and users in 2721 Instagram posts across four industries and 48 brands. The results show that brands and users differ in their strategies: brands use mainly functional strategies while users use more emotional strategies. Also, engagement effects of strategies are partially different for brands and users. For both brands and users, only functional strategies have a positive effect on likes. However, only for Br-UGC functional and emotional strategies have positive effects on comments. This could be an indicator that, next to which type of persuasive strategy used in a brand-related post, source (brand vs. user) is a powerful driver for engagement.

Keywords: visual social media, persuasive strategies, consumer engagement, brand-related content, content analysis

Introduction

Social media platforms that focus on visual content (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok) have become tremendously popular in the past few years (Statista, 2019a). This worldwide embracing of visual social media platforms puts an emphasis on visual content, compared to textual content, in social media (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Nanne, Antheunis, & van Noort, 2021), and it is why brands moved to these visual social media and focus on visual content in their online strategies (Valentini et al., 2018; Willemsen et al., 2019; Zerfass et al., 2017). Likewise, users follow these brands to keep up with their favorite brands (Statista, 2019b), engage with that content (Johnson, Potocki, & Veldhuis, 2019; Rietveld, van Dolen, Mazloom, & Worrying, 2020; Statista, 2020; Valentini et al., 2018), and create Brand-related User Generated Content (Br-UGC) themselves (e.g., Bakhshi, Shamma, & Gilbert, 2014; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014), while using the platform to share ‘snapshots’ of everyday moments (Klostermann, Plumeyer, Böger, & Decker, 2018). This results in an enormous increase of the posting of and exposure to visual brand-related posts.

The current emphasis on visual brand-related content in social media might fundamentally change how consumers engage with and are persuaded by online content. After all, images can be more persuasive than words, as has been demonstrated in the past in advertising research (Childers & Houston, 1984; Lutz & Lutz, 1977; Shepard, 1967) and social media users even prefer images above written content (Olapic, 2016). Accordingly, the use of visuals influences the processing of content, and thereby the persuasion outcomes as well (MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991). Considering the increasingly pervasive presence of images in social media, the current study aims to better understand the role of persuasive strategies in brand-related visual content in the persuasion process. As such, we respond to several calls for research on content characteristics of visual content in other social media platforms than Facebook (Schreiner, Fischer, & Riedl, 2019; Voorveld, 2019) and on the effects of visual content in social media (Mazerant, Willemsen, Neijens, & van Noort, 2021).

Even though academic research has begun to explore visual social media content for characteristics of visuals (e.g., brands portrayed in images, selfies from consumers; e.g., Valentini et al., 2018), knowledge about how persuasive strategies (including functional and emotional strategies) are used in visual social media by brands and users, or with what effects, remains limited. A few studies examined how brands adopt persuasive strategies in visual posts and their effects on social media engagement (Chwialkowska, 2019; Rietveld et al., 2020; Tafesse & Wien, 2018), however the results of these studies are inconclusive. Hence, our study fills three critical gaps in advertising theory and research when it comes to persuasive strategies in brand-related content in visual social media.

First, previous research in the domain of advertising suggested that visuals impact persuasion outcomes through affect transfer, classical conditioning, and peripheral processing (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006). For instance, research in the domain of

social media demonstrated that different visual content characteristics (such as faces and color) differ in their impact on consumers (Bakhshi et al., 2014). To be able to understand the role of persuasive strategies in brand-related posts in the persuasion process, it is necessary to gain knowledge about this content. Our study examines visual content in brand-related posts by conducting a content analysis of brand-related posts in visual social media. For this purpose, we focus on elements related to the brand (e.g., presence of products and logos in images), the poster (brand and user) and the persuasive strategy in the post.

Second, we know from advertising literature that brands use various kinds of persuasive strategies (i.e., strategies to convince consumers of the value of the product or brand advertised) to influence their audiences, including emotional and functional strategies (Golan & Zaidner, 2008; Kumar et al., 2016; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). To illustrate, Nike's request for followers to post images of their new Nike sneakers with the hashtag #mynewnikes in the caption of an Instagram post is an example of a functional strategy. (i.e., call-to-action). Prior studies focused on brands' use of persuasive strategies in social media (including informative-, entertaining-, emotional-, functional appeals, celebrity endorsers) and its effects on engagement (e.g., Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Gavilanes, Flatten, & Brettel, 2018; Rietveld et al., 2020; Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2019; Tafesse, 2014; Tafesse & Wien, 2018). However, these studies only examined a limited set of persuasive strategies. As we have not seen a complete comparison of persuasive strategies, it is hard to draw conclusions about the use and effectiveness of persuasive strategies used by brands. Therefore, our study focuses on a broad set of strategies in brand-related posts to compare the use of strategies and its effect on user engagement.

Third, for users, Br-UGC posts in visual social media have been analyzed (Bakhshi et al., 2014; Presi et al., 2016), focusing on what is pictured and on the information density but not in a systematic way and neglecting visual perceptions (e.g., presence of persuasive strategies like emotional appeal or informative appeal). So far, previous literature that have focused on Br-UGC and the impact on engagement mainly considered textual content: Electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) and User Generated Content (UGC) literature have shown that users have a desire to help or persuade others (Amblee & Bui, 2011; Dhar & Chang, 2009; Farace, van Laer, de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 2017; Liu, Dzyabura, & Mizik, 2017; 3; Park & Lee, 2008; Chen & Kirmani, 2015; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Hwang & Zhang, 2018). However, whether these findings translate to visual social media, and whether users adopt similar persuasive strategies as brands do in such media is unknown. Therefore, our study examines whether and which strategies are applied by users.

In sum, this study fills these gaps by, first, examining which persuasive strategies brands use in visual social media, second, to what extent users adopt the strategies used by brands, and, third, how this influences engagement. In doing so, we build upon the

theoretical foundations from advertising and social media literature, and combine these with socialization theory and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). Literature on persuasive strategies in visual advertising serves as a starting point to understand to what extent users adopt the same strategies as brands do.

Theoretical Framework

Brands' Persuasive Strategies in Visual Social Media

With the incorporation of social media into our daily lives, brands recognize that building closer relationships with their customers and engaging with them in branded content in social media is their main priority (Chwialkowska, 2019). For that reason, branding via social media is an important component of a brands' marketing activities. This can strengthen the consumer-brand relationship, help marketers discover common themes in consumer reactions, and convince consumers to engage with online content (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Therefore, it is essential for brands to be permanently visible in social media. However, what strategies do brands employ to persuade and engage their followers in social media?

To answer this question, we first need to determine what persuasive strategies are and how they appear in visual social media, which can be challenging. In advertising literature, various terms are used to indicate how messages are created to convince people. In addition to the term persuasive strategies, terms such as message strategies, message appeals and creative strategies are frequently used. To make it even more complex, there is little conceptual alignment (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Fennis, 2008; Gavilanes et al., 2018; Tafesse & Wien, 2018). In general, message strategies refer to strategic decisions (e.g., discounts, a social cause, unique selling proposition) in the message applied to convince other users of the value of the message position, i.e., the product or brand advertised (Fennis, 2008), while creative strategies refer to the message strategies including the executional factors (how the message is designed to reach the audience: e.g., colors in ads, actors in campaigns; Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Laskey, Day, & Crask, 1989). These factors are more a notion of design rather than focus on what is said in the message. To define persuasive strategies, we depart from the concepts of creative and message strategies. In line with Fennis (2008), Ashley and Tuten (2015) and Tafesse and Wien (2018) we define them *as the strategies applied to convince consumers of the value of the message position, i.e., the product advertised and focus on messages positioned towards a product.*

Researchers have suggested different typologies of persuasive strategies. Many studies have evaluated typologies based on psychological and brand outcomes associated with persuasive appeals (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Frazer, 1983; Laskey et al., 1989). At the most basic level, persuasive strategies can be distinguished as being primarily

emotional (transformational), and functional (informative; Aaker & Norris, 1982), or based on consumers' shopping motivations: hedonic (emotional, enjoyment) versus utilitarian (functional; Anderson et al., 2014). Furthermore, there are different ways to process brand messages. Laskey et al. (1989) state that transformational (emotional) messages are processed based on the psychological characteristics of the audience, while informative (functional) messages are thought to be processed rationally.

Next to differentiating on the two dimensions of emotional and functional, persuasive strategies can also be divided into a different set of strategies based on the interactional dimension (Tafesse & Wien, 2018), relevant for social media focusing on social interaction. Furthermore, Gavilanes and Flatten (2018) derived seven persuasive strategies specifically for social media advertising. They distinguished: new product announcement, current product display, sweepstakes & contests, sales, customer feedback, infotainment, and organization branding. For this study on strategies in visual social media, we build upon the studies of Tafesse and Wien (2018), and Gavilanes and Flatten (2018) in composing a complete set of persuasive strategies. Therefore, the following persuasive strategies are included: functional appeal, emotional appeal, deal appeal, informative, social cause, entertaining, celebrity endorsement, and call-to-action. Table 1 gives an overview of the theoretical definitions of the persuasive strategies in this study.

Table 1. Theoretical Definitions of Persuasive Strategies

Persuasive strategies	Theoretical definitions	Authors
Functional appeal	refers to content including information on how a product can be used, and what the benefits of the product are	Ashley & Tuten (2015); Chwialkowska, (2019)
Emotional appeal	focuses on the psychological/social needs, how it will make people feel and emotions that are evoked by the brand or product	Ashley & Tuten (2015); Chwialkowska (2019)
Deal appeal	refers to the content including information on the deal and involves information on promotions and discounts	Ashley & Tuten (2015); Chwialkowska (2019); Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004)
Informative	refers to useful information, but is not related to the brand or its product	Chwialkowska (2019); Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton (2011)
Social cause	refers to a social or environmental cause in relation to the brand or its products	Ashley & Tuten (2015)
Entertaining	refers to humorous content or content that is fun to watch	Chwialkowska, (2019); Lin & Lu (2011)
Celebrity endorsement	refers to the use of a spokesperson, celebrity or famous influencer, who is used to promote the brand or products of the brand	Ashley & Tuten (2015); Lou & Yuan (2019)
Contest / call-to-action	refers to encouraging to participate in a contest or to take action in another way, for example by clicking / signing up / liking / commenting / go to a website	Ashley & Tuten (2015); Chwialkowska (2019)

Engagement with Brand-related Content

In examining the use of persuasive strategies on social media, past research has identified various types of such strategies and their effect on engagement. For example, Ashley and Tuten (2015) discovered that most brand-related posts employ functional appeals, whereas messages that use experiential, image, and exclusivity appeals have the greatest impact on engagement. Their study also confirmed the importance of frequent updates and incentives for participation. However, other studies indicate that functional strategies have a positive effect on clicks, likes and comments (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Gavilanes et al., 2018; Tran, He, Zhang, & Sun, 2016).

In relation to emotional strategies, previous studies have shown that the effects of the entertainment strategy on engagement are not conclusive, as De Vries and colleagues (2012) found a negative effect on likes and comments, while other studies show a positive effect on engagement (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Tafesse, 2014). With regard to the use of emotional strategies, previous studies found positive effects on engagement (De Keyzer, Dens, & De Pelsmacker, 2015; Rietveld et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2012). Furthermore, a study by Rietveld and colleagues (2020) found that visual emotional and informative appeals in brand-generated Instagram posts influence consumer engagement. In particular, the study demonstrates that informative appeals do not drive customer engagement except for informative brand-related appeals. Additionally, Tafesse and Wien (2018) concluded that an emotional strategy is the most powerful driver for user engagement, while no significant difference is observed between the functional and the interactional strategies. Furthermore, complementing the functional and interactional strategies with the emotional strategy evidently enhances their effectiveness. All the above considered, research demonstrates that while functional strategies are still used the most by brands, both emotional and functional strategies have effect on generating engagement, albeit to varying degrees.

In conclusion, due to the inconsistency of previous findings, the results of studies examining the impact of persuasive strategies on engagement remain inconclusive. Consequently, the following research question is proposed:

(RQ1) Which persuasives strategies are used by brands in visual social media, and how do these strategies affect engagement?

Users' Persuasive Strategies in Visual Social Media

To examine whether users apply persuasive strategies in their Br-UGC in visual social media just like brands we build upon eWOM and UGC research and theory. Br-UGC posts on social media capture users' consumption experiences. Users are proactive promoters of conversations about the visual narratives they see on their social media feed (Farace et al., 2017). Additionally, users post selfies and images with brands tagged in it (Hartmann, Heitmann, Schamp, & Netzer, 2021; Nanne, Antheunis, & van Noort, 2021; Presi et al., 2016).

More specifically, Nanne and colleagues (2023) recently found that consumers use brands as subtle cues to express their online identity, consumers do this in brand selfies (consumer pictured with the brand / product of the brand) as well as in posts where only the brand is visible. Thus, research suggests that brands are important for users in their visual posts, but it remains unknown which strategies are employed by users in their Br-UGC.

To examine which strategies users employ, we apply socialization theory and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994). With the omnipresence of brands in social media communication between brands and users in social media can be considered as a new form of socialization. Social media enables socialization between peers in communities, but also between brands and users (Wang et al., 2012). Socialization in this context refers to the process by which users learn skills, knowledge, and attitudes by observing others or various media, including social media (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Wang et al., 2012). Friestad and Wright (1994) theorize how persuasion knowledge works by the process of socialization. The PKM hypothesizes that receivers learn how to deal with persuasive messages by recognizing the persuasive intentions and the persuasive strategies in messages. Consumers learn how to recognize this by a process of socialization through their own experience with advertisements from brands and through others explaining persuasive communication to them (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Since brands are pervasive in social media, we assume that brands and influencers serve as learning agents for users just as much as, for instance, peers and family members (Wang et al., 2012). Surrounded by brands on a social media feed, a user can learn from the applied persuasive strategies and adopt the strategies for his or her own posts. Based on persuasion knowledge and more specifically, the socialization process we therefore expect overlap between the persuasive strategies adopted by brands and the use of those strategies by users.

With regard to engagement, a number of studies have indicated that, in accordance with the principle of social proof, Br-UGC posts from other users on social media have a positive effect on engagement. (Amblee & Bui, 2011; De Veirman et al., 2017; Dhar & Chang, 2009; Liu et al., 2017; Munnukka, Uusitalo, & Toivonen, 2016; Park & Lee, 2008) and therefore Br-UGC posts could have a strong persuasive effect on other users. So far, a persuasive intention of users discovered in eWOM literature is 'concern for others', implicating the genuine desire to help a friend or relative to make a better purchase decision (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Additionally, Chen and colleagues (2015) found that consumers post negative or positive brand-related content in a strategic way, with the intention to connect with or persuade others on brand-related platforms.

However, based on uses and gratifications research about why consumers use social media, one may expect different effects of persuasive strategies for users and brands. Several studies have demonstrated that users apply social media in their daily lives for social interaction, identity formation, entertainment, information acquisition and economic reward (e.g., Muntinga et al., 2011; Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017; Tafesse, 2014). This

might motivate applying other persuasive strategies than brands use in visual social media. Moreover, other studies shed light on why specific strategies may not be applied by users. This is because they are more preoccupied with portraying themselves in a favorable light and building an image on social media than with influencing others. (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2017; Fox, Bacile, Nakhata, & Weible, 2018; Muntinga et al., 2011). It would be illogical to employ functional strategies if the objective is to persuade others of one's 'coolness'. In such a case, emotional strategies would be a more appropriate choice. Eventually, while theory suggests that users might apply the same persuasive strategies as brands do in visual social media, there is no sufficient empirical support for this. For that reason, we propose the following question to be examined in our study:

(RQ2) To what extent do users employ the same persuasive strategies as brands do in visual social media, and how does this affect engagement?

Method

To answer the research questions, we performed a content analysis to detect persuasive strategies in brand-related Instagram posts from users and brands from 48 different brands over four industry segments and relate this analysis to engagement metrics. Different persuasive strategies can be incorporated in one post at the same time, as a post consists of an image and a caption and is often interactional (Tafesse & Wien, 2018). Like a regular advertisement, the caption is supporting or clarifying the visual or the caption can represent a different strategy than the image. Therefore, both the image and the caption are included in our study on persuasive strategies in visual social media posts.

Brand Selection

A set of brands was selected from the NetBase 'Global Love List 2019' (NetBase, 2019) for two important reasons. First, the brands on the list receive the most attention on social media according to NetBase, thus allowing this study to find enough brand-related posts from the brands on Instagram considering the large-scale approach of the study. Second, the list contains 88 brands and was compiled on the basis of statistics about the number of mentions, posts, impressions, engagement and their Net Sentiment Score (Netbase, 2019). From this list, we selected only brands that sell physical products, which could be visually noticeable in an image. Service and platform brands were therefore excluded (e.g., Google, Spotify and Instagram itself), as their products are difficult to be represented in images (Nanne et al., 2020). The final sample was composed of 48 brands across four different industries (Automotive, Food & Beverage, Technology, Consumer Goods) to ensure generalizability for all the brands.

Data Collection

The data being collected for this study is constituted of Instagram posts for each of the 48 selected brands. A scraper (Instaloader, 2019) was used in May 2020 to collect the brand-related Instagram posts from brands and users, in which the brands are tagged – including their images, captions, and comments. We refer to this as brand-related posts. Only brand-related posts from brands and users with the brand tagged (e.g., @cocacola, @nike) were included in the study. Brand-related posts with brand hashtags (e.g., #ikea #nike) were excluded since hashtags are used a lot in posts that not refer to the brand per se (Abidin, 2016). Eventually, 129,878 posts have been collected with the scraper.

The posts in the dataset were subjected to a stratified random sampling method, with brand and post type (brand or user) as strata to guarantee equal group sizes. First, we selected a random subsample (n=30,866) of 500 posts per type per brand. This subsample was used on further steps for language and influencer detection, and ultimately generated the final sample of about 30 posts per post type per brand. Second, non-English posts (n=6,070) were removed based on the language detected for the caption. Third, posts from influencers were removed from the sample since the current study only included brand-related posts from brands itself and ‘regular’ users. Influencers could have a commercial relation with the brands (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2018; De Veirman & Hudders, 2019; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019) and are not considered to be regular users. Therefore, posts from users with over 5,000 followers were removed (n=2,500) because those users can already be considered to be micro-influencers (Boerman, 2020). Finally, we also had those posts without user information removed (n=211). This procedure resulted in a final sample of 2,721 unique posts. The final sample of brands can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages of the Brands in Brand and User Posts

	Brand posts (N=1418)		User posts (N=1303)	
	n	%	n	%
Consumer Goods				
Adidas	13	0.9	33	2.5
Chanel	33	2.3	33	2.5
Dior	33	2.3	33	2.5
Emporio Armani	30	2.1	30	2.3
Gucci	33	2.3	33	2.5
H&M	33	2.3	0	0
Home Depot	30	2.1	0	0
IKEA	30	2.1	25	1.9
Lego	33	2.3	33	2.5
l’Oreal Paris	33	2.3	33	2.5
Louis Vuitton	23	1.6	0	0
Net-a-Porter	23	1.6	8	0.6
Nike	33	2.3	33	2.5
Prada	30	2.1	30	2.3
Target	30	2.1	30	2.3

Topshop	30	2.1	30	2.3
Woolworths	30	2.1	30	2.3
YSL	24	1.7	30	2.3
Zappos	30	2.1	30	2.3
ZARA	30	2.1	18	1.4
Food & Beverage				
Burger King	30	2.1	30	2.3
Chick-fil-a	30	2.1	30	2.3
Coca Cola	33	2.3	33	2.5
Ferrero Rocher	17	1.2	33	2.5
KFC	33	2.3	33	2.5
McDonalds	33	2.3	26	2.0
Nestlé	22	1.6	30	2.3
Pepsi	30	2.1	14	1.1
Red Bull	33	2.3	33	2.5
Starbucks	33	2.3	33	2.5
Taco Bell	30	2.1	30	2.3
Wendy's	30	2.1	30	2.3
Tech				
Apple	33	2.3	33	2.5
HTC	30	2.1	30	2.3
LG	33	2.3	33	2.5
Nikon	33	2.3	33	2.5
Nintendo	33	2.3	12	0.9
Samsung	33	2.3	33	2.5
Sony	23	1.6	33	2.5
Automotive				
Audi	33	2.3	33	2.5
BMW	30	2.1	30	2.3
Chevrolet	33	2.3	33	2.5
Ferrari	33	2.3	33	2.5
Ford	12	0.8	30	2.3
Land Rover	30	2.1	30	2.3
Lexus	30	2.1	30	2.3
Mercedes Benz	28	2.0	30	2.3
Porsche	33	2.3	33	2.5

Codebook Development

For the development of the codebook, we operationalized persuasive strategies in line with Chwialkowska's (2019) constructs representing persuasive strategies in brand posts. This resulted in the construction of the coding scheme, which constitutes a set of measures in the form of a codebook. Table 3 shows the operationalization of the persuasive strategies with accompanying examples to explain how this is integrated in brand-related posts. For this study, the variables covering the persuasive strategies were coded as dummy variables: '1' when the image contains a strategy and '0' when it did not. We did the same for the captions: '1' when the caption contains a strategy and '0' when it did not. This dichotomous coding is in line with previous content analyses in studies showing that inter-coder agreement can be significantly raised when dichotomous coding decisions are employed (Chwialkowska, 2019; De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). See Appendix A for the complete training and codebook.

Table 3. Operationalizations and Examples of Persuasive Strategies

Persuasive strategies	Operationalization	Example
Functional appeal	Post mentions in caption and/or shows in image ...functionality-related information, including product features and/or benefits and/or information on how a product can be used.	A post from L'Oréal where the image of a post shows how a face mask is applied to the face. The caption mentions the benefits of using the product for your skin.
Emotional appeal	Post mentions in caption and/or shows in image ...emotions (feelings such as happiness, love, fear, anger, or hatred) are evoked by the products of the brand or by the brand itself.	A post from Red Bull where the image shows a man who is looking in the camera. He shows emotions by looking like a cool guy (no smile, eyes straight at the camera). The caption refers to the emotion you can aspire anything you want to become by saying: 'no matter where you come from or what your background is, you can aspire to be anything'.
Deal appeal	Post mentions in caption and/or shows in image ...information on a deal, it involves information on promotions, special offer, and price, or discounts.	A post from Chevrolet offering employee discount now temporary to everyone, not only to employees.
Informative	Post mentions in caption and/or shows in image ...content that Provides useful information not related to the brand or its products.	A post from retailer Topshop shows information about COVID'19 with a quote 'Happiness isn't cancelled'. The brand encourages followers to stay home and stay calm.
Social cause	Post mentions in caption and/or shows in image ...social or environmental cause in relation to the brand or its products.	A post from L'Oréal explaining how they support victims of sexual harassment in public spaces by financing international research to help reduce sexual harassment.
Entertaining	Post mentions in caption and/or shows in image ...humorous or funny information / content.	A post from KFC where you can use a dating simulator with a KFC cartoon, this post serves to entertain followers.
Celebrity endorsement	Post mentions in caption and/or shows in image ...a celebrity or famous influencer, who is used to promote the brand or products of the brand.	A post from Chanel reporting about an award show with a red-carpet photo of famous actress and ambassador of the brand wearing a Chanel dress.
Contest / call-to-action	The caption and/or image of the post ...is encouraging to participate in a contest or to take action in another way, for example by clicking / signing up / liking / commenting / go to a website.	A post from Land Rover where followers are invited to use a filter on their selfies and share that photo with the brands' account by tagging the brand in the photo.

Coding Procedure

To examine the eight persuasive strategies in the brand-related posts of brands and users we used a manual coding method. The codebook was developed in several sessions with coders and coder training to come to a reliable codebook. The initial stage of the study

involved the examination of 20 posts by two coders. This process was designed to validate the efficacy of the codebook and to ascertain the coders' comprehensive grasp of the persuasive strategies under investigation. In addition to the first codebook test, a second test study of 24 posts was conducted on MTurk to test the improved codebook and make sure the coding tool and the coding flow works. However, the inter-coder reliability of this test study with crowd coding showed remarkably low inter-coder reliability scores. These strategies appeared to be too implicit to code in this manner. It was impossible to recognize the definition of a strategy in an image or caption. For that reason, we improved the codebook by asking several questions representing the presence of a persuasive strategy in the image and the caption of the posts. Thereafter, another two test studies were conducted by three student-assistant coders. The coders were trained through a process of evaluation conducted by the first author over the course of three sessions. During these sessions, the coders engaged in the coding of example posts, and the identification and discussion of inconsistencies and issues were undertaken. Additionally, the coders did separate coding of the Instagram posts per industry, because of industry specific characteristics of the post. It was necessary to give several examples of posts and brands. During the coding process, 5% of the posts ($n=138$) were coded by all coders to assess for inter-coder reliability between the coders. After this, the entire sample was coded. See Table 4 for the Krippendorff Alpha scores of the coders.

Measurements

Persuasive Strategies. The independent variables in our study are dichotomous (1='present'; 0='not present') and defined by the coded persuasive strategies. The individual questions measuring the presence of a persuasive strategy in an image and caption were added up and computed into a persuasive strategy per post and thereafter were made into dichotomous persuasive strategies variables afterwards. We grouped the persuasive strategies in functional strategies (functional appeal, informative, deal appeal, call-to-action, social cause) and emotional strategies (emotional appeal, celebrity endorsement, entertaining; Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Casaló et al., 2017; Chwialkowska, 2019) by adding up the strategies and having them recoded into a dichotomous functional and dichotomous emotional strategy variable it was possible to 1) answer our research questions on a strategy level and 2) explore on a more general level which type of strategies appear in the brand-related posts.

Engagement. We operationalized engagement in terms of likes and comments. Whereas engagement can be quantified in several ways, we used two essential elements of content on Instagram that are indicators for engagement, specifically *likes* and *comments*, in line with Bakshi and colleagues (2014) and Rietveld and colleagues (2020). The number of likes indicate to which extent the content is attractive to users and the number of comments measures the level of conversation on the platform (Bakshi et al., 2014; *likes* ($M=28,594.7$, $SD=63,819.66$; $\min=0$; $\max=802,579$) and *comments* ($M=187.77$, $SD=555.10$; $\min=0$; $\max=12,948$).

Table 4. Inter Coder Reliability Scores of the Coders

Questions representing the persuasive strategies	Krippendorff's α (<i>n</i> =138 posts)
Functional appeal caption	
q1_caption_Does the caption mention a product (could also be in a hashtag)	.74
q2_caption_Does the caption mention product features, benefits of the product, and/ or how it can be used	.66
Functional appeal image	
q1_image Does the image show a prominent brand name/logo	.81
q2_image Does the image show a prominent product of the brand	.86
q3_image Does the image show a person using the product	.70
q4_image Does the image show product features, benefits of the product, and/ or how it can be used?	.86
Informative caption	
q6_caption Does the caption mention useful information NOT related to the products _b	.81 _b
Informative appeal image	
q8_image Does the image show useful information, NOT related to the product(s)	.77
Deal appeal caption	
q5_caption Does the caption mention information about a deal and/or promotions and/or special prices and/or a discount _b	.60 _{a,b}
Deal appeal image	
q7_image Does the image show information about a deal and/or promotions and/ or special prices and/or a discount	.60 _a
Call-to-action caption	
q3_caption Does the caption encourage to take action, such as click on a link, like / comment on the post, check a profile, see stories, visit website? Or asks a question?	.82
Call-to-action image	
q5_image Does the image encourage to take action, such as click on a link, like the post, check a profile, see stories, visit website, ask a question?	.82
Emotional appeal caption	
y1_caption Does the caption mention (or tags) a person	.94
y3_caption Does the caption use emoji's (sad face, happy face, fire emoji, a heart sign or any emoji referring to a mood/emotion would be an expression of emotion)	.94
y4_caption Does the caption mention words expressing emotions (happy, sad, anger, hate and so on)	.75
Emotional appeal image	
y1_image Does the image show a person	.92
y3_image Do people in the image show emotions (feelings such as happiness, love, fear, anger, or hatred)	.87
Entertaining caption	
y5_caption Is the caption entertaining or intended to be funny?	.75
Entertaining image	
y4_image Is the image entertaining or intended to be funny	.72
Celebrity caption	
y2_caption Does the caption mention (or tags) a famous person (celebrity)	.87

Celebrity image	
y2_image Does the image show a famous person (celebrity)	.72
Social cause caption	
q4_caption Does the caption mention a 'good cause' (e.g., philanthropic, environmental, social)	.49 _a
Social cause image	
q6_image Does the image show a 'good cause' (e.g., philanthropic, environmental, social)	.7

Note. _a Sample size is very small. This causes a low Krippendorff's Alpha when one coding score is not agreed upon; not representative. _b variables q5_caption and q6_caption were coded in an additional round of coding, because the Krippendorff's Alpha scores were not sufficient in the first round. The informed Krippendorff's Alpha's are from the additional round of coding for these variables.

Control Variables. In the present study, we used two major control variables to adjust for the impact of platform reach and a brand's activity on the platform. First, number of followers indicates the reach of the posts. The more followers, the more people can see the post and there is probably a higher chance of receiving likes and comments (Bakhshi et al., 2014). Second, we controlled for brand, since brands from specific industries have products which lend themselves better than other brands or industries for posting on visual social media. The brands were added as dummy variables into our regression models.

Results

Use of Persuasive Strategies in Brand and User Posts

To answer the research questions, we employed crosstabs with Chi-squared values and quasi-Poisson regression models. We performed crosstabs for the eight persuasive strategies, the sets of strategies (functional and emotional) and the post types (brand and user posts) with Chi-squared scores to see whether the persuasive strategies differ significantly per post type. Table 5 shows the frequencies and percentages of the strategies in the Instagram posts. In general, functional strategies appear significantly more in brand posts (n=1,253; 88.4%) than in user posts (n=735; 56.4%) and emotional strategies are significantly more often used in user posts (n=696; 53.4%) than in brand posts (n=558; 39.4%). More specifically, in brand posts functional appeal is the most used strategy (n=1,122; 79.1%). Second, the call-to-action strategy (n=474; 33.4%), and third, emotional appeal (n=312; 22%). For user posts, emotional appeal (n=653; 50.1%) is the most used strategy, followed by functional appeal (n=643; 49.3%) and entertaining strategy (n=384; 29.5%). Both brands and users employ functional appeal often, but users apply emotional strategies more than brands do. Thus, the results show that 1) brands and users only partially use the same strategies in their posts and 2) that there are differences in the extent to which they use the strategies.

Table 5. Frequencies and percentages of persuasive strategies in brand and user posts on Instagram

	<i>brand posts</i> (N=1418)		<i>user posts</i> (N=1303)		χ^2
	n	%	n	%	
Functional strategies	1253	88.4	735	56.4	352.31***
Functional appeal	1122	79.1	643	49.3	264.20***
Informative	115	8.1	34	2.6	39.70***
Deal appeal	40	2.8	24	1.8	2.82 ($p=.092$)
Call-to-action	474	33.4	221	17.0	96.81***
Social cause	58	4.1	10	0.8	30.77***
Emotional strategies	558	39.4	696	53.4	54.06***
Emotional appeal	312	22.0	653	50.1	234.48***
Celebrity endorsement	285	20.1	74	5.7	123.28***
Entertaining	147	10.4	384	29.5	157.78***

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Effects of Persuasive Strategies in Brand and User Posts on Likes

As the dependent variables (likes and comments) were unnormal distributed count data and to handle an overdispersion problem, we opted for quasi-Poisson models. This follows recommendations by Gardner and colleagues (1995) and Ver Hoef and Boveng (2007). To assess the significance of overdispersion, we adopted the approach outlined by Cameron and Trivedi (1990) and ran dispersion tests for our data. When the results of the dispersion test were marginally significant, we also checked the residual deviance and the degrees of freedom to check for overdispersion.

The quasi-Poisson regression model for brand posts with the number of likes on a post as dependent variable and the eight persuasive strategies as independent variables with brand and number of followers as control variables has a good fit. The results indicate that the number of likes increase when functional appeal ($\beta = .22, p < .001$) or a social cause strategy ($\beta = .40, p < .001$) is applied in a brand post. On the other hand, the number of likes decrease when an informative strategy ($\beta = -.39, p < .001$) or a call-to-action strategy ($\beta = -.10, p < .05$) is applied. For all these effects other independent variables are assumed to be held constant.

Second, the quasi-Poisson regression model for user posts with the number of likes on a post as dependent variable and the eight persuasive strategies as independent variables with brand and number of followers as control variables has a good fit. The results indicate that the number of likes increase when an informative strategy ($\beta = .35, p < .05$) is applied in a user post. On the other hand, the number of likes decrease when an entertaining strategy ($\beta = -.23, p < .05$) is applied. For all these effects other independent

variables are assumed to be held constant. Table 6 shows the results of the four quasi-Poisson regression analyses for brand and user posts on likes.

Table 6. Quasi-Poisson Regressions for Examining Likes of Persuasive Strategies in Brand and User Posts

Parameters	brand posts (N=1418)				user posts (N=1303)			
	estimate	SE	t	Pr(>t)	estimate	SE	t	Pr(>t)
Constant	0.72	4.74	0.15	.880	3.42	0.37	9.15	.000***
Functional strategies								
Functional appeal	0.22	0.06	3.78	.000***	0.00	0.06	0.01	.991
Informative	-0.39	0.09	-4.33	.000***	0.35	0.14	2.50	.013*
Deal appeal	-0.01	0.20	-0.05	.958	-0.47	0.34	-1.37	.171
Call-to-action	-0.10	0.05	-2.12	.035*	0.09	0.10	0.87	.383
Social cause	0.40	0.12	3.43	.001***	0.11	0.41	0.26	.795
Emotional strategies								
Emotional appeal	0.10	0.06	1.60	.110	0.11	0.08	1.40	.161
Celebrity endorsement	-0.10	0.05	-1.82	.069	-0.15	0.14	-1.07	.284
Entertaining	0.06	0.08	0.72	.473	-0.23	0.10	-2.19	.029*
χ^2	90,438,585***							118,579***

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Effects of Persuasive Strategies in Brand and User Posts on Comments

The quasi-Poisson regression model for brand posts with the number of comments on a post as dependent variable and the eight persuasive strategies as independent variables with brand and number of followers as control variables has a good fit. The results indicate that the number of comments only decrease when celebrity endorsement as strategy ($\beta = -2.11, p < .05$) is applied in a brand post. For the other persuasive strategies, none of the effects are significant.

Second, the quasi-Poisson regression model for user posts with the number of comments on a post as dependent variable and the eight persuasive strategies as independent variables with brand and number of followers as control variables has a good fit. The results indicate that the number of comments increase when a social cause strategy ($\beta = .80, p < .05$) or an emotional strategy ($\beta = .29, p < .01$) is applied in a user post. Conversely, the number of comments decrease when a functional strategy ($\beta = -.31, p < .001$) is applied. For all these effects other independent variables are assumed to be held constant. Table 7 shows the results of the four quasi-Poisson regression analyses for brand and user posts on comments.

Table 7. Quasi-Poisson Regressions for Examining Comments of Persuasive Strategies in Brand and User Posts

Parameters	brand posts (N=1418)				user posts (N=1303)				
	estimate	SE	t	Pr(>t)	estimate	SE	t	Pr(>t)	
Constant	-0.04	12.94	-0.00	.998	1.59	0.35	4.59	.000***	
Functional strategies									
Functional appeal	0.04	0.10	0.39	.700	-0.31	0.09	-3.36	.000***	
Informative	-0.24	0.18	-1.36	.173	-0.05	0.31	-0.16	.877	
Deal appeal	-0.04	0.25	-0.16	.870	0.20	0.41	0.48	.629	
Call-to-action	0.07	0.09	0.77	.444	-0.15	0.14	-1.04	.297	
Social cause	0.19	0.24	0.77	.439	0.80	0.39	2.07	.039*	
Emotional strategies									
Emotional appeal	0.20	0.10	1.94	.053	0.29	0.09	3.18	.002**	
Celebrity endorsement	-0.25	0.12	-2.11	.035*	-0.13	0.18	-0.74	.462	
Entertaining	0.05	0.13	0.36	.720	-0.22	0.13	-1.78	.076	
χ^2								407,478***	7,668***

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of this paper was to increase our understanding of how we are persuaded in visual social media since it was unknown which persuasive strategies brands use in their posts and whether and which persuasive strategies are applied by users in their brand-related posts and how this translates into engagement. Based on a content analysis of 2721 Instagram posts across four industries and 48 brands, we conclude the following.

Brands use More Functional than Emotional Strategies in their Posts

First, the findings from our study imply that brands use mainly functional strategies in their posts, where functional appeal is the most common used strategy followed by call-to-action. In addition, brands do use an emotional strategy regularly, namely emotional appeal. Our results are in line with a content analysis study towards creative strategies in social media content of Ashley and Tuten (2015), in which they uncovered that most of the brand posts involve functional appeals. This paper emphasizes that in brand posts functional appeal is the most used strategy and brands are keen on explaining product features and brand characteristics in visual social media. Follow-up research is recommended to gain insights into the question which strategies are used by other type of brands, since our sample of selected brands (most loved brands on Instagram) may be

considered a somewhat homogeneous group as it includes brands with a large reach on social media and large marketing budgets. Even though the brands included in our sample are from eight different industries, which increases the generalizability of our findings, future research should still validate the extent to which our findings are generalizable for smaller, or less famous brands who might apply different persuasive strategies.

Users do not Follow Brands in Using Persuasive Strategies in Br-UGC Posts

Second, the results show that there is a difference in the use of persuasive strategies in brand posts and Br-UGC posts. More specifically, users use more emotional strategies in their Br-UGC posts than brands do in their posts. Though, for Br-UGC almost only emotional appeal is used among the emotional strategies, while functional appeal is the second most used strategy. Hence, our results show that users only employ the same strategies as brands to a limited extent. Therefore, we cannot conclude that users follow brands completely in applying persuasive strategies in their Br-UGC posts. Br-UGC posts do have in common with brands that they both use functional appeal.

Since our study only compared brands and users, it would be interesting to see what is commonly used by social media influencers. A recent study by Sharma (2023) shows that influencers mainly use functional strategies in their social media videos in which they explain product features and enhanced details of products and services they promote. This emphasizes the results of our study in which brands also mainly use functional strategies in their visual social media posts. Brands and influencers are in that sense quite similar in the type of persuasive strategies used. It is recommended that future research considers the current societal status of influencers. They could be more persuasive than brands, consumers look up to influencers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lee & Watkins, 2016; van Reijmersdal et al., 2020) and might be more open to persuasive messages coming from them. Conscious of this, a follow-up study could include influencers to give a more complete impression of the use of persuasive strategies and could test persuasive effects of brands, influencers, and 'regular' users.

Prior research already indicated that there is at least one persuasive intention known for users, namely; 'concern for others', implying the desire to help a friend or relative make a better purchase decision (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The frequent use of functional appeal in Br-UGC posts is in line with this; users post Br-UGC in which they show features of products to inform and help their friends with figuring out what to buy and where. Also, it could be the case that through socialization with brands, where brands and influencers serve as learning agents for consumers (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Wang et al., 2012), consumers adopt persuasive strategies in their Br-UGC content. Our study validates this by showing that users apply functional strategies like brands and influencers do, which contributes to the existing eWOM literature. On the other hand, the frequent use of emotional appeal by users might be explained in the light of uses and gratifications studies (Muntinga et al., 2011; Nanne et

al., 2023; Phua et al., 2017; Tafesse, 2014), where users apply these strategies in social media for social interaction and identity formation. Building a good online image might be more important than persuading others, therefore emotional appeal posts with posing, smiling, and good atmosphere images might be more important to consumers. Follow-up research is recommended to gain insights into the different motivations of consumers in Br-UGC posts and explore how persuasive their intentions are.

The Effects of Persuasive Strategies on Likes Differ Depending on the Source

Third, our study provided evidence that persuasive strategies have different effects on likes depending on the source of the post – brand or user. More specifically, the results show that brands use functional strategies more often than emotional strategies, and these functional strategies have the most impact on engagement with the posts. Our results are in line with prior studies who found that functional strategies have a positive effect on likes (De Vries et al., 2012; Gavilanes et al., 2018). However, not all functional strategies have a positive effect: our results show that only functional appeal and social cause have a positive effect on likes, while the call-to-action strategy used by brands has a negative effect on likes. This is contradictory to what Ashley and Tuten (2015) emphasized, namely that it is important to use call-to-action strategies to gain engagement with the brands' audience. Moreover, our results are also contradicting the results of Tafesse and Wien (2018) who indicated that emotional strategies are the most powerful indicator for engagement in brand posts. More empirical research is desirable to test the effectiveness of different persuasive strategies, in different social media platforms, and on different forms of engagement, not only likes and comments, but also saving posts and forwarding it via Direct Messages to friends.

Another pivotal finding regarding the relation between strategies and engagement is, that users use emotional strategies more often, and that these strategies (i.e., entertaining) have a negative effect on likes while emotional appeal has no significant influence. Moreover, from the functional strategies, only informative appeal has a positive effect on likes. This is contradictory with the results of Rietveld et al. (2020) who revealed that informational appeal does not drive engagement in Br-UGC posts. Since we see different effects for type of poster (brands vs. users), it could be an indicator that, next to the type of persuasive strategy used in a brand-related post, the type of poster (brand vs. user) is a powerful driver for engagement. Follow-up research is recommended to gain insights into how the effectiveness of persuasive strategies vary depending on the type of poster.

The Effects of Persuasive Strategies on Comments Differ Depending on the Source

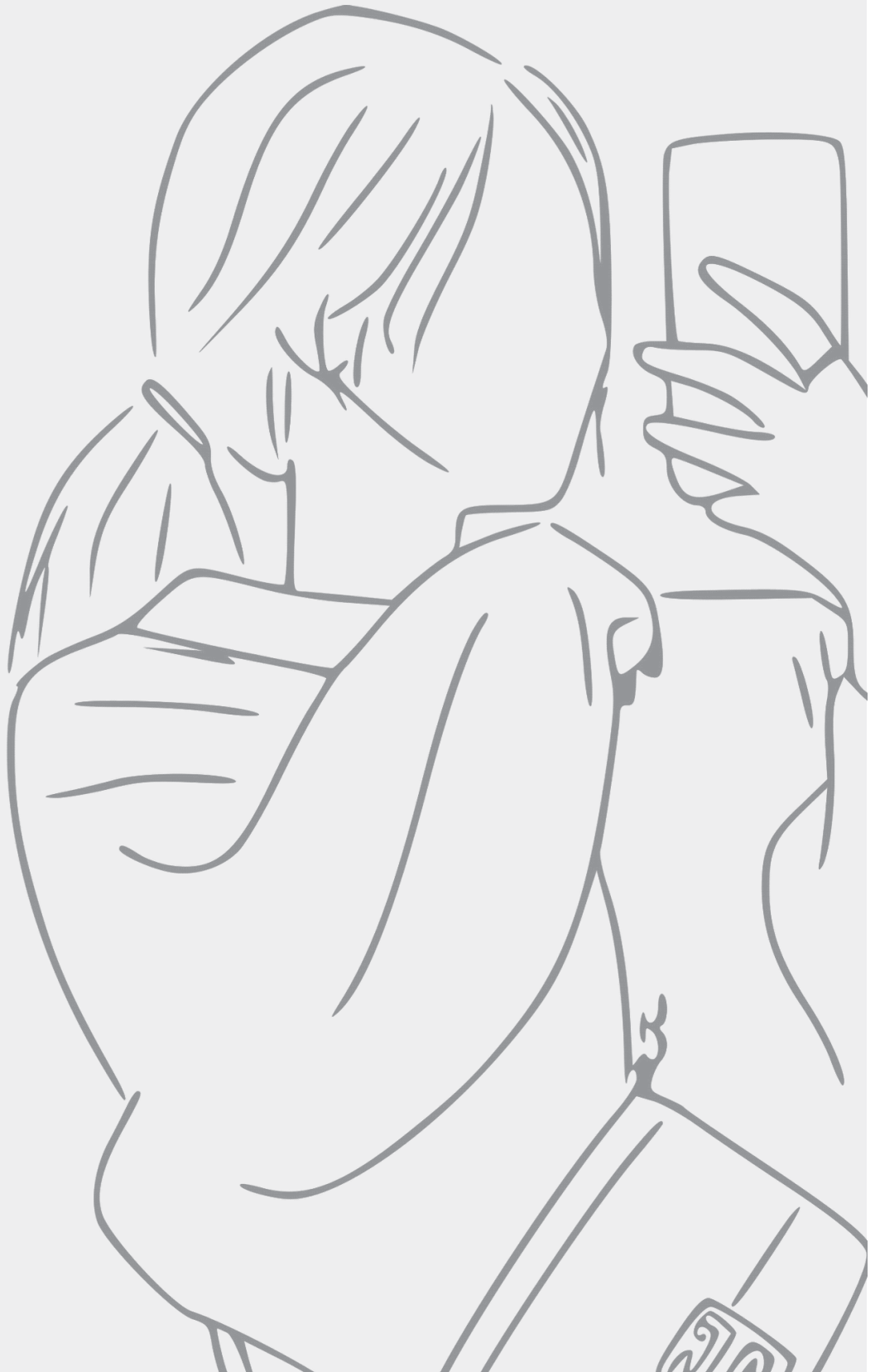
Fourth, this study demonstrated that brand posts and user posts have different effects on comments as well. More specifically, while certain persuasive strategies had a significant influence on the number of comments that a Br-UGC post receives, the same was not

found for brand posts. For users both a functional (social cause) and an emotional (emotional appeal) strategy have positive effects on comments on the posts, while in brand posts none of the strategies has a positive effect on comments. Prior research (Sharma, 2023) indicated that influencers post specifically for their community and with that functional strategies have a positive effect on engagement. This community sense might also explain why consumers respond, in terms of comments, more to Br-UGC posts than to brand posts. The posts of other social media users who one follows are all part of their community. This makes it easier to comment on friends' posts and only like brand posts instead of commenting on it. More specifically, commenting on social cause posts and / or posts with emotional appeal in Br-UGC posts might invite consumers to support the cause as well, or show appreciation in terms of comments. Those comments could also be emoji's with heart, love or festive symbols. Further research should examine what type of comments consumers post towards other Br-UGC posts.

Managerial Implications

The insights of this study give marketers and brands inspiration for engaging consumers with a successful content marketing strategy. Based on the findings, we suggest two implications for enhancing the effects of brand posts and Br-UGC posts on consumer responses. First, with our study as a steppingstone to gain more insight in using persuasive strategies, practitioners have an impression of which persuasive strategies (functional and social cause) are most engaging in brand posts. Second, our study gives them an impression of effective strategies (informative, social cause and emotional) in Br-UGC posts. This could inspire them which type of Br-UGC posts could be shared in their own social media content. It is important for brand managers not to incorporate 'wrong fit' persuasive strategies because Instagram posts incorporated with these strategies can cause irritation with consumers and cause them to unfollow brands and have a negative impact on, for instance, long-term sales.

Next, it is important for brands to understand that interactional strategies (in our study 'call-to-action') are not a solution to increase engagement with the audience in visual social media. An explanation for this could be that users consider these posts from brands as mainly informative and not entertaining, and do not feel the need to engage with that content. It might be more effective for brands to explain benefits of their products or show how products of the brand can be used, and finally to post more content in visual social media related to a social cause, showing the audience that you care about others.



3

From Friends to Brands: Consumers' Coping with Persuasive Attempts in Brand- Related User Generated Content in Visual Social Media

This chapter is submitted for publication as:

Fakkert, M.S., Strycharz, J., Araujo, T.B., & van Noort, G. (2024). Consumers' Coping with Persuasive Strategies in Brand-Related User Posts in Visual Social Media: a Qualitative Approach, and pre-registered with the Open Science Framework, https://osf.io/a83mz/?view_only=473e40cfde184ec0bf1b015121f795ec
Submitted for publication.

An earlier version of this chapter was presented at:

the International Conference on Research in Advertising, European Advertising Academy, June 28-30, 2023, Bordeaux, France.

Abstract

Consumers are frequently exposed to persuasive attempts from fellow users on visual social media. How consumers cope with such Brand-related User Generated Content (Br-UGC) remains underresearched. This study examines consumers' coping with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC in visual social media. Following the Persuasion Knowledge Model, we define coping as: recognizing and understanding the persuasive attempt and developing an evaluative attitude towards it. This study adopts a qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interviews. Our findings demonstrate that participants exhibited an understanding of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts. They distinguished between persuasive and non-persuasive motivations of posters. Posts with brands tagged in them were consistently perceived as carrying persuasive intent. The perceived motivations of posters were found to be an important factor in determining evaluative attitudes. When posters' motivations were self-expressive and non-persuasive, the posts were evaluated more positively. Furthermore, tie strength was an important factor in coping with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts. These findings have implications for our understanding of persuasion in visual social media where consumers engage with brand-related content.

Keywords: Brand-related User Generated Content; visual social media; qualitative research; Persuasion Knowledge Model

Introduction

In visual social media, consumers are continuously exposed to brand-related content, not only from brands but also from their friends. For instance, 70% of the hashtags used in Instagram posts are related to brands (Nanne, Antheunis, & van Noort, 2021). This highlights that on such platforms social media users are surrounded with brand-related content from both brands, (Shukla, Cakici, & Khalifa, 2024; Valentini et al., 2018; Willemsen et al., 2019), and fellow users, who share their brand experiences through Brand-related User Generated Content (Br-UGC; e.g., Bakhshi, Shamma, & Gilbert, 2014; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). These 'friends', similar to brands, are known to employ a variety of persuasive strategies in their social media posts (Fakkert et al., 2022) However, the persuasive potential and potential unwanted effects of Br-UGC on consumers' coping ability remain unclear.

The phenomenon of Br-UGC has received considerable attention in marketing research. It is praised as a highly beneficial covert marketing tool for brands that blend seamlessly into social media content. However, regulators express concerns that consumers may not recognize it as persuasive (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). At the same time, from a theoretical perspective these concerns can be endorsed, because theory states that it is crucial for consumers to recognize persuasive attempts as it is the first step in the coping process to facilitate critical processing of the information (Friestad & Wright, 1994). It is currently unclear whether consumers perceive a Br-UGC post from a fellow social media user as persuasive and how they further cope with it.

The concept of coping with persuasive attempts is of central importance to this study, as it plays a crucial role in protecting consumers against unintended persuasion. More specifically, the process of coping as investigated in the current study precedes the application of coping strategies such as skepticism, avoidance, counter-arguing, and seeking additional information and subsequent consumer behavior. In this study, the term *coping* is used to refer to how consumers' process persuasive attempts. This encompasses their ability to recognize, understand, and evaluate persuasive attempts effectively, which involves cognitive processing (Friestad & Wright, 1994). In contrast, the term *coping strategies* is used to refer to the deliberate actions that consumers take in response to persuasive content as a result of their coping process (Boerman et al., 2018). For example, when presented with a sponsored post that promotes a product, consumers first need to recognize, understand, and evaluate the persuasive attempt in the post and subsequently may employ coping strategies such as seeking additional information from alternative sources or comparing alternative brands before forming an opinion.

Research suggests that doubts exist regarding the activation of the coping process when consumers are confronted with Br-UGC. According to Mayrhofer and colleagues (2020), persuasive attempts from brands on social media trigger users' persuasion knowledge, while Br-UGC has persuasive effects without triggering persuasion

knowledge, making it challenging for consumers to employ coping strategies when exposed to Br-UGC. Consumers may encounter persuasive attempts from fellow consumers, potentially leading to unintended persuasive effects if coping is not activated. Understanding how consumers cope with Br-UGC in visual social media is crucial, as previous research indicates the presence of persuasive strategies in brand-related posts from fellow users (Fakkert et al., 2022). However, it remains uncertain how consumers cope with such content, and, subsequently, whether they may become vulnerable to persuasive attempts. This underscores the vulnerability of consumers when they do not cope with persuasive attempts. Furthermore, previous studies have mostly been conducted in experimental settings, often using mock brands and fake user posts (e.g., Mayrhofer et al., 2020; Nanne et al., 2021). In contrast, we have adopted a qualitative approach and examine participants' own social media feeds in a more realistic setting. We chose this approach explicitly because little is known about coping with Br-UGC, and we aim to make an important methodological contribution in doing so.

The objective of this study is to gain insight into how consumers cope with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. Specifically, the study aims to understand: (1) the extent to which consumers recognize persuasive attempts in Br-UGC, (2) the extent to which consumers understand those persuasive attempts, and (3) the formation of evaluative attitudes towards those persuasive attempts. Thereby, we extend the work of previous scholars who have explored consumers' familiarity and coping with brand-related content and persuasive attempts from brands (Chen, 2018; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). To this end, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994) is used, which proposes that coping is activated when consumers perceive certain content as a persuasive attempt and are aware that they are being influenced, which might lead to a more critical evaluation of the persuasive message. Coping with persuasive attempts involves three steps: recognizing the attempt and understanding it (together this is conceptual persuasion knowledge; Boerman, van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, & Dima, 2018; Lee, Kim, Ham, & Seok, 2022), and developing an evaluative attitude (i.e., attitudinal persuasion knowledge; Lee et al., 2022). Therefore, we believe that the best starting point to learn more about how consumers cope with Br-UGC is through a qualitative and open conversation with them. In summary, we seek to answer the following research question:

How do consumers cope with persuasive attempts in brand-related user posts on visual social media?²

2 The research questions have been pre-registered prior to data collection, https://osf.io/a83mz/?view_only=473e40cfde184ec0bf1b015121f795ec

Theoretical Background

In order to explore consumers' coping in terms of recognition, understanding, and evaluation of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC, we first consider persuasive attempts in Br-UGC and the application of persuasion knowledge to be able to cope with Br-UGC in general.

Persuasive Attempts in Br-UGC

Persuasive attempts in Br-UGC encompass two lines of research. The first is explaining the persuasive effects of content characteristics of Br-UGC, and the second is examining consumers' motivations to post Br-UGC. In the context of the first, for example, the presence of the poster in images and the role of facial expressions have been shown to affect engagement and brand attitude (Hartmann, Heitmann, Schamp, & Netzer, 2021; Nanne et al., 2021). Along these lines, research into Br-UGC has shown the effectiveness of 'brand selfies'—images portraying consumers alongside the brand—primarily on visual social media platforms such as Instagram. (Hartmann et al., 2021; Rietveld et al., 2020).

In relation to the second line of research, several attempts have been made to examine consumers' motivations to post Br-UGC. For example, a study by Nanne and colleagues (2023) about consumers' motivations to post visual Br-UGC revealed that consumers use brands as subtle cue to express their (ideal) online identity. Other important motivations they found are social interaction, aesthetics (i.e., whether the picture is beautiful), and empowerment. This study demonstrates that there are diverse motivations for posting Br-UGC. It can be reasonably assumed that, regardless of the underlying motivations, posts can be perceived as persuasive or not. Even if a post is intended to be persuasive, it is uncertain whether consumers will recognize it as such. It is possible that the post will be perceived as persuasive, or it may not. Conversely, a post that is not intended to be persuasive can still be perceived as such. It is reasonable to assume that it is not always the case that motives, and perceived motivations align. While research has explored the persuasive effects and (persuasive) motivations behind Br-UGC, a critical gap remains in how consumers cope with this content, highlighting the need for further research, especially in understanding persuasive attempts of Br-UGC, a gap that the PKM can potentially help address.

Application of Persuasion Knowledge to Cope with Br-UGC

According to the PKM, coping implies that consumers are resourceful and able to choose coping strategies from their own repertoire, mirroring how brands choose persuasive strategies. The model emphasizes that people must be aware of a persuasive attempt before they can activate persuasion knowledge (PK). PK refers to consumers' general understanding of the motives and strategies regarding persuasion (Boerman & de Vries, 2023; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Wright, Friestad, & Boush, 2005). PK grows throughout life

and develops as consumers are exposed to persuasive attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Wright et al., 2005). Once a persuasive attempt is recognized, individuals can retrieve and apply their PK to cope with the attempt and consequently apply coping strategies. This cognitive process highlights the link between coping and PK, as PK provides the necessary understanding and skills to recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and respond to specific persuasive attempts. This understanding enables them to consequently select and implement effective coping strategies (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

In the literature a distinction is made between conceptual and attitudinal PK (Boerman et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2022). Researchers have argued that PK should not only focus on the cognitive aspects of PK, but should also consider its attitudinal aspect. Conceptual PK is the cognitive dimension that includes recognition of advertising, its source and audience, and understanding the persuasive intent, sales intent, and tactics of advertising (Boerman et al., 2012). For example, it can help consumers understand that a particular sponsored Instagram post by a brand or influencer is a form of advertising and not a regular Instagram post (Boerman, 2020; Pozharliev et al., 2022). As a result, consumers are able to understand the persuasive intent of the message and apply coping strategies (Boerman et al., 2012). Consumers also use attitudinal PK to process a message (Lee et al., 2022). Attitudinal PK includes attitudinal mechanisms that can be effective in dealing with advertising. The attitudinal dimension includes critical attitudes, such as skepticism and dislike, that are applied to a particular persuasive attempt. In other words, it includes critical feelings about honesty, trustworthiness, and credibility. When consumers recognize the persuasive attempt, they may realize that the poster of the content is not neutral and is trying to persuade. This awareness may make the consumer more critical of the branded content (Boerman et al., 2012).

On visual social media however, consumers' PK may not be applied, which would undermine the coping process, when they encounter Br-UGC posts in their social media feeds for two main reasons. First, consumers might not always perceive fellow social media users as persuasive agents (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). Second, they may be distracted by the content of the post itself, especially when it comes from a friend (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). As a result, they are not able to apply their PK, and coping with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC might not be triggered, leading consumers to refrain from using coping strategies. Despite its importance, empirical research on this phenomenon remains scarce. This study aims to explore how consumers cope with Br-UGC posts by applying the psychological process outlined in the PKM, which includes three critical components: (RQ1) recognizing the persuasive attempt, (RQ2) understanding the persuasive attempt (Boerman et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2022), and (RQ3) developing an evaluative attitude toward the persuasive attempt (Lee et al., 2022).

Recognition of a Persuasive Attempt in Br-UGC

Consumers must first recognize the persuasive intent in specific content to engage in a critical assessment of the persuasive attempt (e.g., Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2014; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). Disclosure of brand-related content from brands and influencers helps consumers to recognize the persuasive nature of such content, so that consumers can distinguish between commercial and non-commercial content (e.g., Boerman et al., 2018; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). However, we suggest that recognizing a persuasive intent is challenging for Br-UGC due to the source of the message being a fellow social media user. An important element for recognizing a persuasive attempt is agent knowledge, and this might be difficult in the context of Br-UGC. More specifically, agent knowledge consists of the consumer being aware that the source of a message has a commercial character and, thus, a persuasive intention. This knowledge should lead consumers to classify a message as a persuasive attempt and consequently activate coping. The agent 'represents whomever a target identifies as being responsible for designing and constructing a persuasive attempt' (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Mayrhofer et al., 2020). For Instagram brand posts, the source of the post is recognizable in the username (e.g., the brand name) or in the name of the sponsor in sponsored posts which is stated above the image of the post. This allows the user to recognize that a post contains a persuasive attempt. However, when consumers see Br-UGC posts from fellow social media users, they might see the poster of the content not as a persuasive agent, because they do not consider fellow social media users (e.g., friends, acquaintances, family) as persuasive agents like brands or influencers (Mayrhofer et al., 2020).

Such lack of recognition of the persuasive agent can have severe consequences. If consumers fail to identify the persuasive agent, they may be more susceptible to unintended persuasion, potentially altering their attitudes and behaviors without their conscious awareness. This could lead to unintentional purchases or changes in brand perception. If the persuasive agent is not recognized (e.g., when the post is shared by a fellow user), consumers may not be able to recognize the persuasive attempt in Br-UGC. For instance, when a friend posts an image in which she is celebrating her birthday and tags the brand of the champagne bottle she is holding in her hand, or a family member posts an image with a tag of the sports brand of his running outfit. The presence of brands might go unnoticed as consumers do not see the posters as persuasive agents and overlook the persuasive attempt in the context. Hence, the recognition of persuasive attempt and activation of the coping process may not be as straightforward as for other types of persuasive branded-related content. Therefore, the first stage of coping, recognition, is difficult for Br-UGC posts (e.g., Mayrhofer et al., 2020). Thus, we first examine whether consumers are able to recognize persuasive attempts in posts from fellow social media users. This brings us to our first sub research question:

(RQ1) To what extent do consumers recognize the persuasive attempt in Br-UGC posts from fellow social media users?

Understanding of a Persuasive Attempt in Br-UGC

In the psychological process of coping within the PKM, understanding the persuasive attempt is a necessary element in forming an evaluative attitude towards it (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Together with recognizing the persuasive attempt, understanding the persuasive attempt forms conceptual PK (Boerman et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2022). Previous studies have shown that the activation and use of conceptual PK precedes attitudinal PK and, accordingly, that consumers need to understand that certain content has a persuasive intent to critically evaluate this persuasive attempt (e.g., Boerman et al., 2014; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). These studies examined understanding of persuasive intentions in brand-related content for brands, however, not for Br-UGC content. More specifically, for consumers it is easier to understand that the intentions from brands have a persuasive nature (e.g., selling products, promote a brand), than when Br-UGC posts come from their friends or family (e.g., convince followers to buy a sports brand they wear in a post, or convince friends to share a post and with that support a local upcoming brand). Therefore, it is crucial for consumers to understand the persuasive intentions and motivations of the poster.

To understand a persuasive attempt, users need to understand why fellow users contribute and create Br-UGC. Past research has identified personal identity, integration, and social interaction as major motivations for creating Br-UGC (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011; Nanne et al., 2023). Many consumers post content showing brands to express their connection to a brands' image and popularity as well as their inclusion in the social group that uses the brand (Muntinga et al., 2011). For instance, 'Brand-selfies' are a common way to portray yourself with the brand (Hartmann et al., 2021; Nanne et al., 2021). Furthermore, qualitative studies (Chen, 2018; Nanne, 2022) revealed that Instagram is considered as a platform to highlight consumers' personal style and display the 'cool' aspect of their identities and that consumers use brands as subtle cues to express their (ideal) online identity. The visual nature and the function of filters make Instagram a perfect place for consumers to express themselves. As opposed to traditional advertising, consumers do not have an interest in selling the product, but rather want to interact with fellow consumers or share product experiences (Muntinga et al., 2011). Moreover, competing in a brand' contest by sharing brand-related content is common as well. Ashley and Tuten (2015) found that 26 out of 28 brands in their study invited consumers to share content. This leads to circulation of branded information within consumers' own social networks. In brief, these studies examined the intentions and motivations of consumers to post Br-UGC. However, research did not investigate how consumers perceive motivations of posters. It can be reasonably assumed that, regardless of the motivations behind them, posts can be perceived as persuasive or not. A post that is not

intended to be persuasive may still be perceived as such. It is reasonable to assume that it is not always the case that motives, and perceived motivations align.

Also, while previous research has demonstrated that persuasive strategies are used in Br-UGC, including emotional, functional, and informative strategies, to persuade other social media users (Fakkert et al., 2022), research is yet to explore the extent to which consumers can understand that what they see in the Br-UGC of their social media peers - such as persuasive strategies - are persuasive attempts. If consumers do not identify their friends as persuasive agents, unlike brands, would they be able to understand their persuasive intentions? This lack of protection against persuasion is highly undesirable as it prevents consumers from making informed decisions (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). This leads us to our second research question:

(RQ2) To what extent do consumers understand the persuasive attempt in Br-UGC posts from fellow consumers?

Evaluative Attitude towards a Persuasive Attempt in Br-UGC

After recognizing and understanding the persuasive attempt, it is necessary to consequently form an evaluative attitude to effectively cope with it (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The evaluative attitude (attitudinal PK) involves the affective dimension, encompassing critical attitudes and emotions such as skepticism and disapproval towards persuasive messages (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). This attitudinal PK plays a central role in the evaluation of persuasive attempts (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2023). Such evaluation is a crucial facet of coping.

The evaluative attitude includes three elements: skepticism, fairness and liking (Lee et al., 2022). In advertising, when considering the evaluative attitude, skepticism, can be defined as consumers' general distrust and disbelief in advertising (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Consumers are increasingly skeptical about advertising when they possess more conceptual PK, which enables them to recognize and understand the persuasive intent behind such messages. Furthermore, fairness refers to consumers' perception of fairness about why media show advertising (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The more consumers recognize and understand the persuasive intent, the more likely they are to perceive the fairness of a certain persuasive attempt, which in turn increases the likelihood of positive responses to advertising, such as an increase in click-through rates in keyword search ads and a decrease in resistance against covert sponsorships (Lee et al., 2022). However, when consumers do not recognize and understand the persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts from their peers, it might be challenging to form an evaluative attitude towards the Br-UGC posts to consequently apply coping strategies (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). Hence, it remains uncertain whether consumers' form an evaluative attitude towards Br-UGC posts from fellow social media users. Therefore, our third sub-research question is:

(RQ3) To what extent do consumers develop an 'evaluative attitude' towards the persuasive attempt in Br-UGC posts from fellow social media users?

Method

To match the exploratory character of this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Instagram users to explore consumers coping with Br-UGC from fellow social media users. We chose Instagram as a visual social media platform for our study, as it is one of the most popular platforms (Statista, 2024c). Instagram enables users to share a range of content, including images or videos accompanied by captions, through posts or stories. This content may pertain to daily activities, holidays, shopping excursions, and other topics (Instagram, 2022). In addition, since it has become such an important marketing tool, brands are very present through their own brand posts, advertising, and collaborations with social media influencers (De Veirman et al., 2017), as well as through Br-UGC (Omnicores, 2021).

Participants

The study required the participation of individuals who were active users of Instagram and fell within the age range of 18 to 35 years. This age group was selected due to their high level of engagement with Instagram (Statista, 2024b). Participants had to have recently experienced brand-related posts from users on Instagram. The initial recruitment of participants was conducted through the network of one of the researchers. Subsequently, snowball sampling was employed, whereby multiple participants were requested to identify other potential participants. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the participants exhibited the characteristics typically associated with the average Instagram user (Van Selm & Helberger, 2019).

To establish the ideal number of participants, the principle of data saturation was applied. Data collection stopped when no new topics that would add to the current results appeared (Van Selm & Helberger, 2019). The data obtained from the interviews was subjected to preliminary analysis through the use of memos. This analysis led to the conclusion that the point of saturation had been reached with a total of 23 interviews. In total, 23 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.09$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 5.21$, 73.9% women) took part in the research. Participants received a 10 Euro gift voucher for an online shop for their participation.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers. Prior to each interview, the participants were informed of the study's purpose and given the option to withdraw from the research at any time and to remain anonymous should they so desire. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 45 minutes on average. An interview guide with a topic list was developed to facilitate a logical and fluent conversation. Consequently, the interview guide included additional questions aimed at the conversation flow (see Appendix B for the interview guide). Furthermore, the interview started with general

questions about participants' experiences with Br-UGC posts from fellow users and their Instagram use. The second part of the interview focused on the recognition, understanding and attitude towards Br-UGC. In this second part, the interviewer asked the participants to scroll through their Instagram feed to search for examples of Br-UGC posts. It was part of the design of this study that participants needed to recognize a Br-UGC post as such. The experiences with these examples were extensively discussed. To cover a variety of persuasive attempts, the posts covered three persuasive strategies identified by Fakkert and colleagues (2022). If a certain strategy was not included in the posts from interviewee's own timeline, they were shown example posts from this category prepared by the researchers. On average, four examples were discussed with each interviewee. The interviews concluded with some general questions about participants' social media use.

Finally, during data collection and initial analyses, the interview guide was adapted. For example, after a few interviews, the research team decided to remove an initial explanation about what Br-UGC posts are to make sure participants were not influenced by our definition of Br-UGC. The interviews were conducted in January and February 2023, automatically transcribed, and subsequently reviewed by a research assistant for correctness.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using a retroductive approach, which is a recognized method of analysis in social science studies (Meyer & Lunney, 2013). The lead author initially coded a sample of the interviews, identifying prominent topics that appeared inductively. Subsequently, the four authors met to review the inductive codes and agreed on shared definitions of each code based on established terms from advertising literature, such as recognition and understanding of persuasive attempts, and evaluative attitude towards a persuasive attempt. Finally, the remaining interviews were coded according to the established codebook.

The analysis of the interviews was conducted in two stages. Initially, the transcripts were read, and open codes were assigned to pieces of data. Examples of such codes include 'hard to find brand-related posts in feed,' 'brand clearly visible in image,' and 'like this post to support my friend.' In this stage, initial categories were defined. During the process of open coding, the lead author created several memos to describe how codes from different transcripts were linked to each other. Additionally, the lead author reflected on the initial results. In the second step, the lead author used the initial codes and memos to assign focused codes. The initial codes were grouped into the main insights from the topic list using the aforementioned codes, which included recognition, understanding, developing an evaluative attitude, and reactions to Br-UGC posts. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the study was pre-registered to enhance transparency and rigor in the research process.

Results

Awareness of Br-UGC

Before the recognition of persuasive attempts is discussed, the definition of what participants considered as Br-UGC is important. During the interviews, we observed a transition from unconscious to conscious perception of Br-UGC. At the start of the interview, several participants expressed thoughts that their friends do not post Br-UGC. They thought instantly about brands and influencers, but not about their own friends. As participant 12 (female, 34) pointed out: "I don't think I consciously perceive that from the people I just follow, so to speak, because they are my friends. Certainly, when you talk about influencers and brands and then we are much more aware of that and with my friends, let's say normal people in that sense, I am not very aware of that." Though, this was hard to caption in quotes. It was something the interviewer noticed between the lines while participants searched their feed for examples, the 'umms' and the thinking out loud made clear that not all participants knew their friends post Br-UGC. As participant 13 (female, 35) articulated: "No, no, that doesn't necessarily make it easy to find those posts of my friends passing by. Yeah, oh I didn't see that one coming." However, later in the interviews, participants were able to easily find examples of friends posting Br-UGC posts. We believe that the process of becoming aware of Br-UGC occurred during the interviews, requiring a gradual progression from a general to a specific level of discussion. During the interviews, participants presented in total 120 posts to the interviewer, considering them as Br-UGC posts. These posts covered examples where brands were either tagged (in image, caption and/or location) or visibly featured in the accompanying images.

Throughout the interviews, it became evident that participants hold different interpretations of what constituted a Br-UGC post shared by fellow consumers. For some participants, a post was considered brand-related if the brand, including its logo or product, was prominently displayed in the image. As participant 2 (male, 27) articulated: "I think I'm seeing something like a brand post when I see it's all about that brand in the image. So, for example, a beer can, sometimes people post a picture of a drink or a party, and then you see some drinks." Other participants mentioned that the visibility of a restaurant name was also seen as brand-related. Furthermore, participant 7 (female, 34) explained: "Now that we are talking about it, it becomes a brand post, because when it is tagged and people click on it or don't even click on it, then something is activated again. And of course that is actually just advertising. Which does something in someone's head, because then you recognize it again later, when you hear it again or see it again, or they have been there too. So actually yes, if the name is in a post or in the location or in a hashtag then it is already brand advertising". These quotes showed that a brand does not necessarily have to be tagged in the post to be considered a Br-UGC post.

Conversely, other participants emphasized the necessity of tagging the brand in the post (image or caption). Participant 17 (female, 20) explained how she sees brand-related

by stating: "Something is brand-related when someone is promoting something. In that case, a brand needs to be tagged in the post. When someone tags a bracelet or clothing, I think that is more brand-related than when someone tags a restaurant where he or she is having dinner." Other participants stated that tagging a brand gives the content something extra.

In general, participants agreed that the brand should be prominent in the post or story, they differ about the brand necessarily being tagged or not, some participants mentioned that tagging brands is for influencers because of their paid partnerships and that nowadays their friends do not tag brands anymore, but only show it in the image of a post.

Recognition of Persuasive Attempt

RQ1 examined to what extent consumers recognize the persuasive attempt in Br-UGC posts from fellow social media users. To address this question, participants were asked whether they recognized the presence of a brand in a Br-UGC post. Subsequently, the awareness and recognition of brands mentioned by participants during the interviews were analyzed. For every example Br-UGC post shown by the participants the interviewer asked the participants to describe what the post looks like, where they saw a brand in the post and whether the participants considered the post as brand-related. The latter question was included because not all participants perceive a Br-UGC post as inherently persuasive. For instance, participant 22 (male, 22) articulated: "Sometimes you see a watch brand in a post, or clothing brands sometimes when it is really prominently displayed, but then I think it is without a persuasive intention, so to speak, not to influence people." Several participants mentioned that the brand or product's visibility in the image was not necessarily a deliberate persuasive attempt, but rather an incidental occurrence of the brand's presence in the post, lacking any intentional emphasis on the brand. As participant 5 (female, 27) specified: "Suppose someone posts about McDonald's and has 10,000 followers, then I see it as brand-related, but if a friend of mine with 400 followers posts the same post because she really likes the photo, and the box is somewhere in the background. Then it's more by accident." This highlighted the complex nature of Br-UGC posts, where users might notice the brand, but not recognize the persuasive attempt.

Easy vs. Hard to Recognize Persuasive Attempt

We distinguished between easy and difficult recognition of persuasive attempts by participants. When participants stated that it was easy to recognize Br-UGC posts they most of the times recognized products of the brand or a logo of the brand in the post and with that the persuasive attempt. As participant 5 (female, 27) formulated: "Yes and the fact that she uses a shoe in her caption and has a photo of a Nike shoe makes me pay more attention to the shoe." Next to recognizing Br-UGC posts first, recognition of the persuasive attempt is mentioned as well. As participant 20 (female, 25) explained

how she recognized the persuasive attempt since the brand is tagged and visible in a post in every single way: “No, oh yes! In his location he tagged the store in Paris. Yes, so you see Jacquemus very clearly and in his caption, he tagged Jacquemus, so it is kind of clear three times that okay, it is really about that brand.” These quotes underlined that participants did recognize persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts.

On the other hand, when participants explained that it was hard to recognize a persuasive attempt, they mentioned several reasons for not recognizing it. First, a reason for not recognizing persuasive attempt in a post was that participants were distracted by the overall content of the post. For example, participant 17 (female, 20) explained that she was not conscious of a brand, stating: “I don’t really think about it, yes, I am not aware of it, so, in a post I see that a restaurant is tagged or a jewelry brand, and then I am not really aware of the fact, oh a brand is being tagged here.” The second reason for not recognizing a persuasive attempt was the fact that a brand or product was subtle or sneaky included in the post. Participant 9 (female, 27) explained: “Yes, so that’s the Jimmy Choo department. Yes, Jimmy Choo, no, but of course it’s not done prominently. It’s natural, they’re a bit smarter these days. Like, subtly letting you know I’m there.” These quotes showed that by the subtleness of how the brand was incorporated in a post, it was harder to recognize the persuasive attempt in it.

Tagging vs. Non-Tagging

We observed differences in how brands were incorporated into the posts, which can be broadly classified into tagged and non-tagged. In the tagged category, participants presented the interviewer with instances where brands were tagged in stories, tagged within the image of a post, tagged in the caption, tagged in the post’s location, and/or accompanied by a shopping link. If a brand was not directly tagged, it was still prominently displayed in the image itself, whether through products, brand name, or logo. Participant 8 (female, 34) explained how she saw brands being tagged in the images of posts: “I also have a friend who often visits Starbucks or such a company and then posts a photo of that type of coffee, with a Starbucks tag.” For tags in location, participant 6 (male, 30) described, “Well, my friends don’t really do that, except for tagging restaurants.” Many participants stated that locations were most of the times tagged for restaurants or ‘cool places’ (e.g., a famous gym).

On the other hand, participants explained that a tag was not necessary when a brand or logo was clearly visible. Participant 7 (female, 34) explained that she recognized the products in a post to recognize the persuasive attempt: “Yes, these are all body lotions, uh creams, which she advertises in the bathroom, because then you have the complete beauty experience of course, in front of a large mirror.” These are all examples where a brand tag was not necessary to recognize the persuasive attempt in the post.

When: Often vs. Infrequently

Finally, we roughly distinguished the extent to which participants recognized Br-UGC posts in general and persuasive attempts in often and infrequently. When participants experienced Br-UGC posts from fellow consumers in their feed infrequently, they mentioned as an important reason that it is less common now compared to the past. As participant 2 (male, 27) stated: "Less recently, in the past, a few years ago, much more, I think. But I also notice that fewer people are active on Instagram, less brand related posts, especially people who are influencers, they do tag brands, but outside of that I don't see it often actually, while it was like five years ago, I think, then everyone did it." On the other hand, participant 9 (female, 27) explained how easy it was to find Br-UGC posts by stating: "No, that's not difficult at all, I fill in those names and everything comes out. Let's see which one we are going to get." This showed the differences in participants in how easy it was to find Br-UGC posts in their feeds and consequently there were fewer persuasive attempts in their timeline when less Br-UGC posts were present.

In general, when participants were able to recognize persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts, either the brands were tagged in the post or products of a brand, or the logo was clearly visible in the image of a post. When participants were not able to recognize a persuasive attempt, they were most of the times distracted by the overall content of the post and / or the brand was subtle incorporated in the post. Participants explained that they did not expect brands when looking at posts from friends or fellow consumers, they expected persuasion from influencers and brands, not from friends. This implicates that a persuasive attempt in that case would not be acknowledged either.

Understanding of Persuasive Attempt

RQ2 examined the extent to which consumers understand the persuasive attempt in Br-UGC posts by other social media users. This question was answered by analysing how participants understood the (persuasive) motivations of fellow consumers to create a Br-UGC post. During the interviews, for each example Br-UGC post shown by the participants, the interviewer asked why the participants thought the poster had included a brand in the post. In addition, based on the participants' answers, we analysed whether they also understood that a persuasive attempt had been made by posting such content. First, the participant's understandings of the motivations of the posters are discussed.

Perceived Motivations

The different perceived motivations for posting Br-UGC came from grouping codes. We categorised these into support, self-expression, personal branding, and relational motivations. Appendix C presents a table with an overview of the motivations supported by quotes from the interviewees. First, support includes motivations such as brand loyalty, supporting a small or new business (most often from someone they know), or supporting a good cause.

Second, self-expressive motivations were about giving others an impression of your life and included motivations such as showing off or showing your socio-economic status, express taste or class, sharing your location, showing happiness with purchased products, showing good life (life's highlights), or sharing fun / entertaining your followers. The motivations to show off / show socio-economic status looked familiar with showing good life, but there was a difference in how this was perceived by participants. The presentation of highlights was perceived in a positive light by participants, whereas the act of showing off was evaluated more negatively.

Relational motivations: the third motivation category, with the sole motivator included here being 'inspire others'. This motivation was perceived in a positive light. Participants indicated that a poster's only goal was to inspire their friends and followers with valuable insights or products that they found appealing and wished to share to others. This was not motivated by any self-interest on the part of the poster.

The fourth set of motivations all related to personal branding. These were motivations about how a poster wants to present themselves and are about the image of the poster, the poster as a brand. This category included motivations such as wannabe influencer, 'obviously show the brand but pretend it's casual' or aesthetics. The term wannabe influencer was used by participants to describe Br-UGC posters who aspire to become influencers and begin to act in a manner consistent with that of an influencer in the creation of their Br-UGC content. In addition, with 'obviously show the brand, but pretend its casual' participants explained that the poster tries to incorporate a brand very subtly, but it was perceived as obvious in the image, the camera was set so that a brand of, for example, a handbag is visible, but subtle. The term 'aesthetics' was used to describe posts that were created with the intention of creating a visually appealing feed. The style of the image must be consistent with the other content on a poster's feed.

Finally, the fifth category of motivations included interactional motivations. These were explained as wanting to interact with others, friends, followers. These motivations included: posting a question for followers (e.g., should I have a beer or wine with my dinner?), complaining (tagging a brand to draw attention to e.g., bad service), or taking part in a competition (tagging a brand and friends to win e.g., festival tickets).

Understanding Persuasion

In addition to exploring participants' perceived motivations for posting Br-UGC, we sought to discover their comprehension of the persuasive nature of such posts. By analyzing participants' responses, we determined whether they understood the underlying motivations driving these attempts. We used the perceived motivations to understand the persuasive attempt in the post (see Appendix C). Our analysis revealed that participants associated persuasive attempts with motivations categorized as support, relational and personal branding. In more detail, the participants indicated

that they believe the purpose of the posters of Br-UGC is to persuade their followers to support a brand, a local company, or to purchase products from a specific brand.

Furthermore, for the relational motivation to inspire others, participants articulated that posters of Br-UGC often use brands in their content to recommend products and services to fellow users. For instance, someone is very happy with his new type of running shoes and wants to recommend this brand to his friends. Conversely, participants also recognized that self-expressive motivations, such as sharing happiness about a new product or revealing a location, did not necessarily involve a persuasive intention of the poster, but that the poster had a non-persuasive motivation. To illustrate, the sharing of a location where someone is having lunch may be intended to provide followers with an update on the poster's whereabouts at a specific point in time.

Moreover, interactional motivations such as questions to followers, complaints and participation in contests were perceived differently in terms of persuasive attempt. In particular, participants indicated that a question directed to followers is not perceived as a persuasive attempt, but rather as an attempt to obtain information, such as product recommendations from other social media users. On the other hand, complaints were mostly about poor service from brands, and participants articulate that in this case, a poster wants to persuade the brand to do something about it. In this sense, the attempt to persuade was directed at the brand and not at the followers. Similarly, in the context of competitions, the objective of the poster is to be selected as the winner by the brand and subsequently awarded free products or a gift voucher.

Additionally, several participants highlighted the distinction between tagging a brand and not tagging a brand (only visible in the image). They considered a tagged brand in a post as a deliberate persuasive attempt, with the poster having specific intentions, such as seeking fame or being reposted by the brand. On the other hand, simply featuring a brand in the image was not perceived as inherently persuasive. As participant 12 (female, 34) explained: "The brand is in the image, but there is no ambition to be influential, or this brand is in the image more by accident." Furthermore, when participants understood the persuasive attempt of a post, they identified various targets for the persuasion, including the brand, followers, or friends. For example, a participant indicated that they would tag a brand with the intention of being reposted on the brand's social media feed, with the goal of attracting a larger following.

In conclusion, our findings demonstrated that participants exhibited an understanding of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts. They effectively distinguished between persuasive and non-persuasive motivations, identifying support, relational, and personal branding motivations as inherently persuasive. Furthermore, participants made a clear differentiation between posts featuring tagged brands and those without tags. Tagged brands were consistently perceived as carrying persuasive attempt.

Developing an Evaluative Attitude

RQ3 examined to what extent consumers develop an evaluative attitude towards the persuasive attempt in Br-UGC posts from fellow social media users. To explore this question, we analysed the different opinions participants had towards the persuasive attempt in the Br-UGC posts created by their peers. In each interview, the participants were asked by the interviewer how they felt about the incorporation of a brand into the Br-UGC posts they had viewed. Analysis of the participants' responses revealed that their evaluations were related to the poster, the brand, the content, and the design of the Br-UGC post.

First, several elements of the poster contributed to the formation of an evaluative attitude towards the persuasive message. These included the strength of the tie between the poster and the recipient (for example, whether they were a close friend, family member or acquaintance) and the motivations of the poster. In terms of the tie strength, several participants explained that they held a positive attitude towards the persuasive attempt in a post to support their friend or family member. The fact that the post was brand-related was not an important factor; the strength of the tie was of greater consequence. For instance, participant 8 (female, 34) articulated: "Maybe just out of politeness of "oh, well done, nice of you", but not because I am interested in it or feel a connection with this post." When a poster is not such a close friend or family, participants were more inclined to look more critically at the content of the Br-UGC post. As participant 4 (female, 28) stated: "It depends on how close they are. Otherwise, I don't care much. If she is close: look, support and like. If someone is further away and that person is wearing a nice outfit, then positive. Or shared interest in the post. I would scroll past football." Furthermore, the motivations of the poster were an important factor in forming a positive or negative evaluation towards the persuasive attempt. More specifically, when a poster had a show-off, or wannabe influencer motivation, it was perceived negative (annoying, arrogant, stay humble). As participant 17 (female, 20) explained it: "I think it is wannabe all over: why are you posting this, you are not an influencer. If you want to go to Barcelona, you might think: oh nice hotel. Weird that you post this." While if the motivation of a poster is to inspire others, it is perceived more positive by participants.

Second, the content and design of the Br-UGC post affected how participants evaluated the persuasive attempt. Some participants expressed that if the content of the post is inspiring to them, they had a positive attitude towards the persuasive attempt and liked the fact that they were inspired by their peers. This related to the perceived relational motivation of the poster to inspire others and was consequently positively evaluated. As participant 1 (female, 26) articulated: "Well, for example, if it is for a nice shop where someone you know has been or someone went to eat somewhere, then I like it, because then it is a kind of inspiration." Furthermore, participants evaluated a persuasive attempt positively when they considered it reasonable, making sense in the context of the post, the brand matches with the content of the post. Participant 17

(female, 20) explained this as such: "Yeah, I think that's actually quite normal. I'm not surprised at all, when you're sitting somewhere, add the name or tag where you are, that's quite normal in the Instagram world." Next to expressing an understanding for the persuasive attempt, several participants explained that when the content appeals to them in terms of a shared interest (e.g., the same gym they go to or they both like designer handbags), they evaluated the persuasive attempt positively as well. In terms of design of a Br-UGC post, pretty images and aesthetics were a relevant factor in evaluating the persuasive attempt positively, while poor quality of the image reflected negatively on the evaluation of the persuasive attempt.

Third, the fact that the post was brand-related was also an important factor in evaluation of the persuasive attempt. In the interviews, several participants revealed that they would have evaluated the persuasion more positively when the brand was left out, or not tagged. Participants thought it was overdone or unnecessary to tag a brand in the post. This was underlined by participants who explained that they like authenticity and tagging a brand makes it less authentic. Eventually, this translated into a negative evaluation of the persuasive attempt. As participant 19 (female, 27) articulated: "I am anti tagging brands. I just really like it when someone is completely themselves. But I love, for example, my colleague has such a wonderful wardrobe of her own, without tagging brands, I think, great."

Finally, the brand itself played an important factor in the evaluation of the persuasive attempts. Participants explained that if they like the brand or the products of the brand, they held a more positive attitude towards the persuasive attempt in the post, and conversely, when the brand/product did not meet their interests, they tended to be neutral, not necessarily negative towards the persuasive attempt. More specific, as participant 20 (female, 25) explained how the outfit in the post appealed: "I think this looks cool. And maybe that is because I do indeed subconsciously think: oh, what a nice spencer this is, or uh, those Nike Airforce are so cool, that is possible." It also happened that a participant had a positive opinion of the brand, but a negative attitude towards the way the Br-UGC post was created. Despite a positive evaluation of the brand, the persuasive attempt was rated negatively due to the way the post was created.

In conclusion, the results indicated that consumers were able to form an evaluative attitude toward persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts. These attitudes ranged from positive, such as feeling inspired, to negative, such as being annoyed by a wannabe influencer. The perceived motivations of the poster of the Br-UGC posts were found to be an important factor in determining evaluative attitudes. When the motivation of the poster was perceived to be self-expressive and non-persuasive, the posts were evaluated more positively. Nevertheless, supporting a new or small business was also evaluated positively, such as when supporting a friend. Conversely, persuasive motivations such as personal branding combined with brand tagging (not just the brand being visible in the image) were negatively evaluated and perceived as wannabe influencer motivations.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine how consumers cope with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC on visual social media. The study specifically aimed to investigate whether consumers can recognize, understand, and evaluate persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts. To this end, interviews were conducted with social media users. The findings highlight the transition 'from friends to brands', emphasizing how consumers navigate persuasive content from friends, who blur the lines between personal sharing and brand promotion. The study yielded several important findings.

First, it was found that participants were frequently distracted by the overall content of the post or by the subtle incorporation of the brand when they were unable to recognize a persuasive attempt. The participants indicated that they do not anticipate brands to be present in posts from friends or fellow consumers. Instead, they anticipate that influencers and brands will employ persuasive tactics. However, when asked directly during the interviews, participants acknowledged that they do recognize such attempts but tend to downplay or dismiss them by stating that "this doesn't happen". This implies that a persuasive attempt from friends would not be acknowledged. As a result, PK is not activated, and consumers are unable to cope with conceptual PK and eventually attitudinal PK. This statement is in line with previous research, such as the study conducted by Mayrhofer and colleagues (2020). Their study found that Br-UGC, which was also seen as covert advertisement, significantly decreased persuasion knowledge activation. As a result, coping was not activated, leading to a reduction in negative affect towards the post and ultimately resulting in a higher purchase intention. More specifically, consumers' coping is not activated to resist persuasive attempts when the source of the persuasive attempt is a fellow social media user. This is in line with the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which posits that agent knowledge is crucial information to trigger persuasion knowledge. Inability to recognize persuasive messages from other social media users poses a risk and may result in unwanted persuasion. Therefore, empowering consumers to protect themselves from unwanted persuasion is a relevant concern for regulators. This will be discussed in our practical implications.

Second, with regard to the coping process, the findings demonstrated that participants were able to recognize persuasive attempts after taking a closer look and becoming more aware of the Br-UGC content during the interview. They were mostly able to recognize these attempts in Br-UGC posts when brands were tagged in the post or brand logos were clearly visible in the images. However, in other circumstances, such as when a product of the brand was shown in the image or a product was mentioned in the caption, the persuasive attempt was not so promptly recognized. Furthermore, participants exhibited an understanding of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts, effectively differentiating between persuasive and non-persuasive motivations of the poster, identifying support and personal branding motivations as inherently persuasive. Additionally, our research provides an overview of the

evaluative attitudes that consumers form towards Br-UGC posts from other social media users. These attitudes ranged from positive, such as feeling inspired, to negative, such as being annoyed by a wannabe influencer. Importantly, these attitudes were heavily related to the perceived motivations of the poster of the Br-UGC posts. However, the evaluative attitudes were not only related to the perceived motivations participants had, but also to their level of brand liking, the content and design of the Br-UGC posts, and the nature of their relationship with the poster.

Third, another important finding was the relative importance of the relationship with the poster of the Br-UGC post (tie strength). In many instances, we observed that a strong tie between individuals would lead participants to overlook the perceived motivation or persuasive intention, resulting in a positive attitude towards the posts. The positive attitude observed in this study was not the result of participants following the coping route of first recognizing and understanding the persuasive attempt before forming an evaluative attitude. This was true even when brands were tagged in the post. This finding aligns with earlier studies that have highlighted tie strength as a key social relationship variable influencing online brand-related communication. (e.g., Kitirattarkarn, Araujo, & Neijens, 2018; Nanne et al., 2021; van Noort, Antheunis, & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Additionally, Chen (2018) found that Br-UGC posts originating from friends, which featured friends using a product, brand-related hashtags, or planned marketing activities, were more favorably received and served as strong purchase motivators. This underscores the need for further investigation into the role of tie strength in influencing consumers' coping. It is of great importance to gain an understanding of the impact of tie strength on consumer attitudes towards persuasive content from fellow consumers. This is essential for the development of guidelines and regulations that ensure transparent and ethical marketing practices in social media environments.

Finally, participants showed an understanding of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts. They were able to distinguish between persuasive and non-persuasive motivations, identifying support and personal branding motivations as inherently persuasive. Personal branding, in particular, is often motivated by the desire to express one's personality and construct a favorable image of oneself, as found in research by Nanne and colleagues (2023) and Lee and Johnson (2022). According to Nanne and colleagues (2023), Br-UGC is used to present an 'ideal self' through images in a post, just like consumers who actively engage in comparisons with influencers' as an ideal self (Shehzala, Jaiswal, Vemireddy, & Angeli, 2024). The brand is used to express a certain status or as an expression of who consumers are. Additionally, support of a brand and brand loyalty are perceived as persuasive motivations. This is consistent with the study of Muntinga and colleagues (2011), who found that empowering a brand is an important motivation for posting Br-UGC. This is often the case for small emerging brands, as was found in our study. Participants explained that they post Br-UGC to help a friend's business grow or support a small, local brand.

However, evaluative attitudes differ depending on perceived motivations. When personal branding was perceived as the motivation, the evaluations towards the post and the poster tended to be more negative than when the perceived motivation was to support a small business. This suggests that consumers may perceive personal branding motivations as self-serving or inauthentic, resulting in less favorable attitudes. Conversely, supporting a small business is perceived as a caring act, leading to more positive attitudes. This contrast illustrates the complex ways in which perceived motivations can influence consumer attitudes. Further research is necessary to explain the processes by which these perceptions are formed. Furthermore, an understanding of these dynamics can assist policymakers in the creation of guidelines that encourage transparency in Br-UGC, ultimately benefiting both consumers and brands.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is an exploratory and qualitative study that aims to understand how consumers cope with Br-UGC in visual social media. Therefore, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the effect of these Br-UGC posts on consumer engagement and attitudes. It is impossible to establish a causal relationship based on interviews alone. Extending this study with a quantitative approach would be relevant to test how consumers respond to different types of Br-UGC posts, including those from fellow consumers with varying tie strengths and motivations for posting Br-UGC. This would allow us to verify whether the differences in recognition and understanding that arose in the interviews impact the processing of persuasive messages.

Another potential limitation of our study is the sample of participants. While we selected individuals who are medium to heavy users of Instagram, we did not differentiate based on their motivations for posting Br-UGC themselves or on certain personality traits that may be more favorable to personal branding. Participants who are more outgoing and interested in presenting an idealized version of themselves online may be more likely to prefer posts featuring hedonic brands and personal branding (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). It would be valuable to explore how perceived motivations vary across different personality traits in future research.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

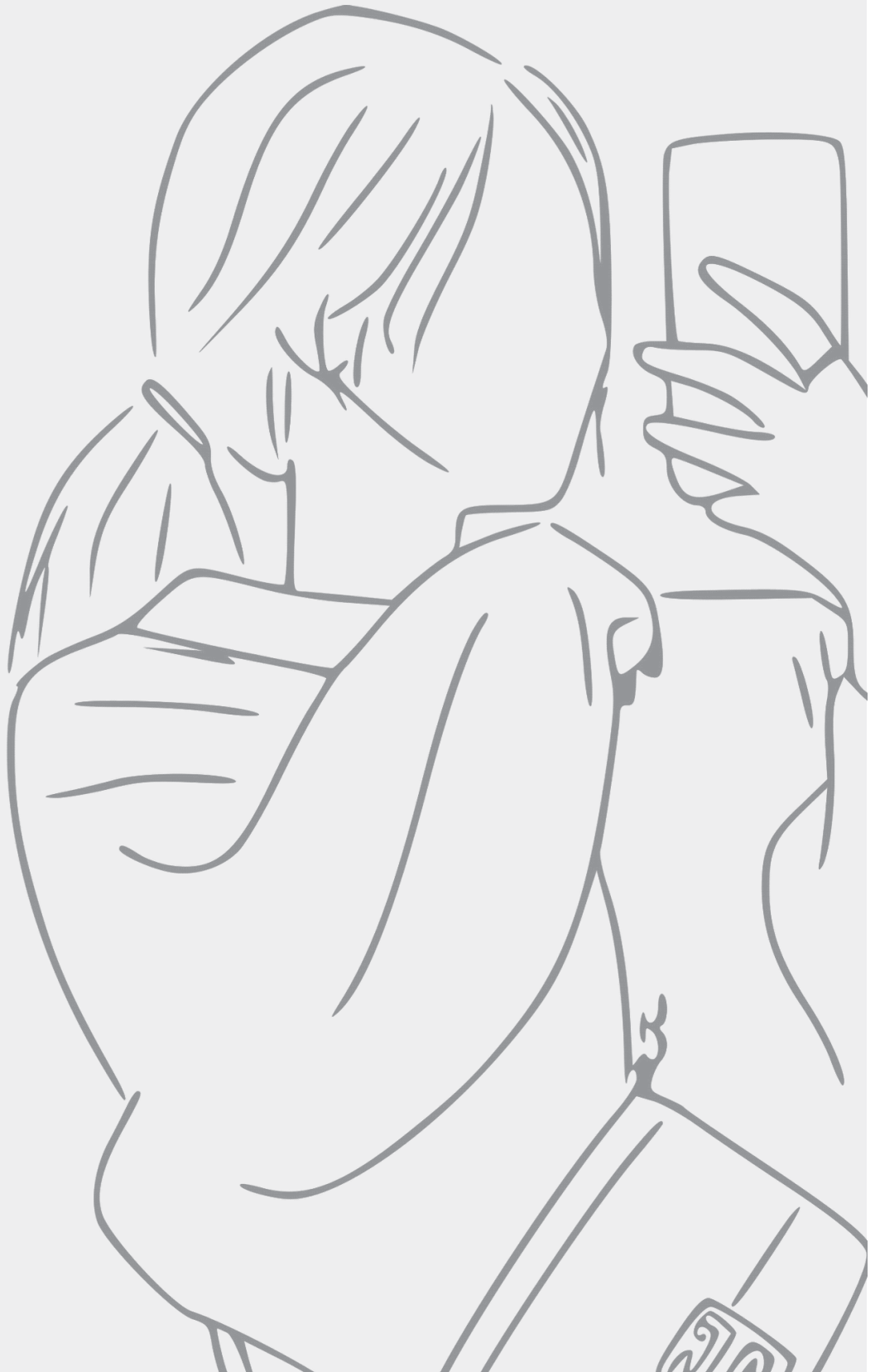
The findings of our study have both theoretical and practical implications. Specifically, this study contributes to the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) in the context of visual Br-UGC. Our research indicates that while the PKM provides a foundational understanding, its direct application to Br-UGC is limited. Our exploratory study demonstrated that tie strength with the poster and perceived motivation of the poster are important factors that may undermine the application of persuasion knowledge and with that coping with the persuasive attempt. Some of our interviews suggest that a strong tie with the poster may lead the consumer to overlook the poster's perceived motivation or persuasive

intention, resulting in a consumer that does not follow the coping route of recognizing, understanding the intention, and forming an evaluative attitude. This can prevent the activation of persuasion knowledge, and agent knowledge may not always be present, especially when it is not expected from friends. As such, our findings extend the PKM in the Br-UGC context, by highlighting the importance of interpersonal ties, which can override the coping process as described in the PKM.

Our study also contributes to the literature on Br-UGC. Until now, there has been little attention paid to coping with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC in visual social media. Our findings demonstrate that Br-UGC is perceived differently among participants. As such, some agree that the brand should be tagged in a post, while others believe that tagging brands is only for influencers due to their paid partnerships. Participants mentioned that nowadays their friends do not tag brands anymore, but only show them in the image. Should we reconsider our definition of Br-UGC since its perception varies among consumers? Br-UGC is defined as content in which social media users share their brand experiences (Bakhshi et al., 2014; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). However, the way in which these experiences are shared is relevant to how consumers perceive Br-UGC. There are various ways to incorporate a brand into visual social media content. In our study, participants shared brands by tagging them, placing the brand name in the location of their post, or displaying brand logos. These methods may have different impacts on how consumers experience brands.

On a practical level, this study provides marketers with insights into how consumers perceive Br-UGC posts in their social media feeds. It is important to note that consumers mentioned in interviews that tagging brands is often done by wannabe influencers, which can irritate consumers. Negative perceptions of the post and poster can also transfer to the brand (Howard & Gengler, 2001). Therefore, it is important that brands learn how to respond to this. Furthermore, participants noted that tagging brands is not as common as it used to be. Instead, they believe it is more appreciated to display brands in images and tag them in the location of a story or post. Social media marketers may find it more relevant to check locations on Instagram rather than '@tags' to find Br-UGC for their brand.

Additionally, during the interviews, participants became aware of a process happening where they noticed their friends posting Br-UGC, despite initially stating that their friends would not post such content. This suggests that consumers may not be aware of the brands present in the content of their friends and fellow social media users. Therefore, it is important to empower consumers. Regulators could require social media platforms to automatically indicate whether a brand is present in a post and give those posts a recognizable tag. Consumers cannot be expected to indicate that their post contains a brand, as is the case with influencers who include tags like 'sponsored' or 'partnership'. Therefore, regulators should ensure that the platforms take responsibility for protecting their users from undesirable persuasion effects.



4

Inspirators and Wannabes: The Impact of Persuasive Strategies through Perceived Motivations on the Recognition of Persuasive Attempts in Visual Br-UGC

This chapter is submitted for publication as:

Fakkert, M.S., Strycharz, J., Araujo, T.B., & van Noort, G. (2024). Inspirators and Wannabes: the Impact of Persuasive Strategies through Perceived Motivations on the Recognition of Persuasive Attempts in Visual Br-UGC. *Submitted for publication.*

Acknowledgment: I would like to thank Xin Gao for his invaluable assistance with the data analysis.

Abstract

In the context of visual social media, consumers are exposed to a considerable amount of Brand-related User Generated Content (Br-UGC) shared by their peers, which may frequently go unnoticed as being branded. Previous research showed that these Br-UGC posts employ various persuasive strategies, and the motivations of creators for posting this content are perceived differently. This study suggests that this affects the recognition of persuasive attempts, which is essential for consumers to cope with persuasive messages. Specifically, this study examines the impact of different persuasive strategies (emotional vs. functional), through perceived motivations (personal branding and inspire others) on the recognition of persuasive attempts in visual Br-UGC. A between-subject experimental design revealed that functional strategies (compared to emotional strategies) in Br-UGC are associated with stronger perceived motivations for both personal branding and inspire others, leading to heightened recognition of persuasive attempts. Conversely, emotional strategies decrease the perceived motivation to inspire others, which contrary to expectations, leads to heightened recognition of persuasive attempts. These findings provide marketers with actionable insights regarding the strategic management and curation of Br-UGC. Moreover, our findings highlight the necessity of consumer protection measures to empower consumers to safeguard themselves from unwanted persuasive influences and provide recommendations for regulatory bodies.

Keywords: Visual Social Media, Brand-related User Generated Content, Persuasion Knowledge Model, Dual Processing Models

Introduction

On visual social media, consumers are exposed to brand-related User Generated Content (Br-UGC) shared by their peers, which employs various persuasive strategies (Fakkert et al., 2022). It is unclear whether consumers can recognize the persuasive attempts in this content, which is necessary to cope with persuasive messages (Friestad & Wright, 1994). This gap in understanding is a crucial area for further investigation, given that previous research has primarily focused on brand attitudes. The current study aims to address this gap by examining the recognition of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. Based on dual information processing models (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Todorov et al., 2002) and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994), it argues that different persuasive strategies result in different perceived motivations of the poster, leading to varying levels of recognition of persuasive attempt.

The phenomenon of Br-UGC has received considerable attention in advertising research. It is positioned as a covert marketing tool that seamlessly integrates into social media content. For this reason, regulatory bodies have voiced concerns over consumers' potential failure to recognize its persuasive nature (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). Furthermore, the constant stream of new information on social media poses a difficulty for consumers who, limited by their cognitive capacity (Lang, 2000), may struggle to process Br-UGC and hence might not be able to recognize its persuasive nature. For example, Mayrhofer and colleagues (2020) found that branded content on social media triggers users' persuasion knowledge (PK), while Br-UGC employs persuasive effects without activating the same knowledge. For consumers, it is crucial to be able to recognize persuasive content and process information effectively (Friestad & Wright, 1994), as it is a necessary first step to critical evaluation of such an attempt (e.g., Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2014; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016, 2020). This study aims to investigate how consumers recognize persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts, as recognition is the initial step towards protecting themselves against potential persuasion.

In investigating the recognition of persuasive attempts, it is important to consider that consumers create their Br-UGC differently, adopting different types of persuasive strategies. The use of persuasive strategies, defined as strategies to persuade consumers of brand value (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Fakkert et al., 2022; Fennis, 2008; Tafesse & Wien, 2018), is well documented in advertising literature, for brands in traditional media (Frazer, 1983; Laskey et al., 1989), in social media (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Fakkert et al., 2022; Tafesse & Wien, 2018), and also for influencers (Sharma, 2023). Importantly, recent research indicates that such strategies are not exclusive to brands and influencers; they are also employed by other social media content creators. In a content analysis, Fakkert and colleagues (2022) compared the persuasive strategies used by consumers in Br-UGC with those used by brands in visual social media. The results demonstrated that emotional appeal (i.e., content that focuses on the psychological and social needs of the audience,

evoking feelings and emotions related to the brand or product (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Chwialkowska, 2019) was the most used persuasive strategy of Br-UGC posters, followed by functional appeal, which explains the benefits and usage of a product (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Chwialkowska, 2019). Given the evidence that consumers embed persuasive strategies in the Br-UGC they create, the aim of the present study is to investigate how these persuasive strategies – namely emotional and functional strategies – influence the recognition of persuasive attempt.

This study suggests that these persuasive strategies determine how people perceive the motive for posting Br-UGC, which subsequently explains the recognition of persuasive attempt. Such perceived motivations of fellow social media users differ. A recent qualitative study indicated that two prominent perceived motivations are the motive to inspire others and the motive of personal branding (Fakkert, Strycharz, Araujo, & van Noort, 2023), and might also differently relate to perceptions of the persuasive intentions of the poster. The present study employs processing theories, specifically the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM; Todorov et al., 2002) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), to explain how different persuasive strategies influence the perceived motivations of personal branding and to inspire others. The argument is that strategies which focus on functional aspects encourage a more rational and elaborate decision-making process among consumers, which in turn leads them to perceive the poster as motivated by personal branding (Fakkert et al., 2023). Additionally, it is argued that emotional appeals may result in peripheral processing. When consumers are exposed to emotions displayed by others, they may experience a corresponding change in their own emotional state due to automatic mimicry and synchronization (Lee & Theokary, 2021). In posts with emotional appeals, posters often provide inspiration for restaurants, brands, and products subtly integrated into the post (Fakkert et al., 2023), leading receivers to perceive the poster's motivation as a genuine desire to inspire others. The aim is therefore to empirically test to what extent different persuasive strategies initiate different perceived motivations.

Furthermore, the study adopts the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) to explain how perceived motivations (personal branding and inspire others) may result in different levels of recognition of persuasive attempts. More specifically, it argues that agent knowledge affects the evaluation of perceived motivations of the poster. Indeed previous empirical studies demonstrated that consumers may struggle to recognize persuasive intentions of posters based on perceived motivations of the agent (Binder et al., 2022; Boerman et al., 2012; van Reijmersdal et al., 2017). Also, in a recent qualitative study conducted by Fakkert and colleagues (2023), it was found that the perceived motivations of the poster play a crucial role in the evaluation of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts and in the affective reactions towards the content. The study revealed that a relational perceived motivation, such as 'inspire others,' was seen as a less persuasive strategy to persuade others and evaluated positively. In contrast, a personal branding motivation,

such as wannabe influencer, was seen as a more persuasive strategy to influence others, yet was evaluated negatively. This difference in perception may explain why emotional strategies, which are often posted with the motivation to inspire others (Fakkert et al., 2023), are received more favorably than functional strategies, which are more focused on products and are often perceived to be posted with a personal branding motivation (Fakkert et al., 2023). Thus, although not causally tested, it seems as if the perceived motivation for a strategy influences its recognition, with 'inspire others' being perceived as sincere and trustworthy, while personal branding is not. This is consistent with prior research that has shown that consumers' perceptions differ depending on the sender's sincerity (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000) and trustworthiness (Boerman & Kruike-meier, 2016; Main et al., 2007). This study aims to empirically test whether these different perceived motivations influence the degree to which persuasive attempts are recognized.

In response to a recent call from the field (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020), this study focuses on recognizing persuasive attempts in Br-UGC in visual social media. More specifically, in an experimental study, we manipulate the persuasive strategy (i.e., emotional vs. functional) in Br-UGC posts to investigate the underlying processes of perceived motivations of the poster as induced by the persuasive strategies in Br-UGC and its impact on recognition of the persuasive attempt. In conclusion, based on information processing theory and the PKM, the aim of the study is to deepen our understanding of how persuasive strategies through perceived motivations of posters influence consumers' ability to recognize persuasive attempts in visual Br-UGC. To accomplish this, we examine the following research question: Do different persuasive strategies (emotional vs. functional) in Br-UGC posts impact the recognition of persuasive attempts, and to what extent is this effect mediated by perceived motivations, specifically those related to inspire others and personal branding?

Theoretical Framework

Effects of Persuasive Strategies on Perceived Motivations

To investigate the role of persuasive strategies in recognizing persuasive attempts in Br-UGC, we first determine what they are and how they appear in visual social media. This study employs a framework of creative and message strategies (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Fennis, 2008) to define persuasive strategies. Message strategies encompass strategic decisions aimed at persuading consumers about the value of the message position, such as discounts, advocacy for social causes, or unique selling propositions associated with the advertised product or brand (Fakkert et al., 2022; Fennis, 2008). Conversely, creative strategies pertain to the executional elements of the message, including design choices and the use of actors in advertising campaigns. In line with Fennis (2008), Ashley and Tuten (2015), Tafesse and Wien (2018) and Fakkert and colleagues (2022) we define persuasive

strategies as *strategies used to persuade consumers of the value of the advertised product and to emphasize messages that promote it*. Advertising literature indicates that brands use different type of persuasive strategies to influence their audiences. Various scholars have proposed different classifications of persuasive strategies, often evaluating them based on their psychological and brand-related effects (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Fakkert et al., 2022; Frazer, 1983; Laskey et al., 1989). These typologies commonly differentiate between emotional (transformational) and functional (informative) strategies (Aaker & Norris, 1982), or based on consumers' motivations for shopping: hedonic (emotional, enjoyment) versus utilitarian (functional; Anderson, Knight, Pookulangara, & Josiam, 2014).

The examination of persuasive strategies extends further as different actors use different strategies in their social media posts. More specifically, Sharma and colleagues (2023) conducted a study that found that influencers tend to use more functional strategies, while celebrities tend to use more emotional strategies in their branded social media content. It is not only brands and influencers who employ persuasive strategies in their social media content, consumers apply them as well in their Br-UGC posts (Fakkert et al., 2022). Consequently, consumers are exposed to brand-related content from brands (Valentini et al., 2018; Willemsen et al., 2019) and fellow consumers who share their brand experiences through Br-UGC (Bakhshi, Shamma, & Gilbert, 2014; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Nanne, Antheunis, & van Noort, 2023). This overload of content on social media platforms has led to a notable challenge: high information density (Omnicores, 2021). This constant stream of new information poses a difficulty for consumers who, limited by their cognitive capacity (Lang, 2000), may struggle to process Br-UGC.

How consumers process different persuasive strategies in Br-UGC can be explained by two information processing models: the HSM (Todorov et al., 2002) and the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). These models propose two routes for processing information: an elaborate (systematic) route that involves conscious evaluation and a peripheral (heuristic) route that relies on simple cues (Nanne, 2022). The choice between these routes depends on factors that influence an individual's motivation or ability to process the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Wagner & Petty, 2011). Systematic processing involves comprehensive analysis, while heuristic processing relies on shortcuts (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020). In line with these two mechanisms for processing information, functional strategies are thought to appeal to rational processing (elaborate route), while emotional strategies are believed to engage psychological aspects of the audience (peripheral route; Laskey et al., 1989).

First, a functional strategy involves content that explains the benefits and usage of a product (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Chwialkowska, 2019). In the context of visual social media, a post can display information related to functionality, such as product features, benefits, and instructions (Fakkert et al., 2022). The use of functional appeal in a Br-UGC post prompts consumers to consider the product benefits for themselves. For example, they may wonder if the shampoo being used would make their hair shinier or motivate consumers

to use a certain brand in a recipe that someone is sharing. Consequently, a strategy that focuses on functional aspects encourages a more rational and elaborate decision-making process among consumers as in line with the two mechanisms for processing information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Todorov et al., 2002). More specifically, the ELM has been widely used in empirical studies about how consumers evaluate information or the credibility of messages (Lee & Theokary, 2021). In this context, arguments can positively influence consumers' perceptions of product-related information. When consumers are exposed to product information (i.e., a functional strategy), then information processing happens systematically. Moreover, when consumers are exposed to a post containing more than one product cue (i.e., when argument quality is strong), they are more likely to engage in systematic thinking about the relevance of each argument (Lee & Theokary, 2021; Pozharliev et al., 2022).

The systematic processing of a post – triggered more strongly by a functional strategy than by an emotional strategy – may result in consumers perceiving that the poster has personal branding as the motivation for creating the post. This is because personal branding, as identified in earlier studies, is a motivation defined as a reason for consumers to post Br-UGC to associate themselves with a brand and shape their online image (Muntinga et al., 2011). When showing product features or explaining product benefits, the poster is providing detailed, rational information similar to the approach used by brands and influencers in their advertising strategies (Tafesse & Wien, 2018). This type of content emphasizes the poster's knowledge and affiliation with the brand, which aligns with personal branding motives. The detailed and informative nature of functional appeals signals to consumers that the poster is trying to establish credibility and expertise, traits commonly associated with personal branding (Fakkert et al., 2023). As such, we expect that the higher level of systematic processing triggered by functional strategies will spill-over to the considerations about the motivations of the poster and, as a consequence, consumers will be likely to perceive the poster as being motivated by personal branding. Consequently, the following hypothesis is put forth:

H1a: the use of a functional strategy results in a stronger perceived motivation of personal branding compared to an emotional strategy in visual Br-UGC.

Second, the emotional strategy focuses on the psychological and social needs of the audience, evoking feelings of happiness (Nanne et al., 2023), emotions related to the brand or product (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Chwialkowska, 2019), and often feature people with displayed facial expressions (Fakkert et al., 2023). Emotions such as happiness, love, fear, anger, or hatred are used as a strategy by the brand or its products in a visual social media post (Fakkert et al., 2022). Furthermore, facial expressions represent a crucial aspect of the emotional strategy and play an important role in the peripheral route to persuasion, as consumers are automatically drawn to images with a face in them (Young & Bruce,

2011). For example, an image with a smiling mother holding her happy baby and looking in the camera while a clothing brand is tagged in the baby's outfit. The evaluation of such messages may be guided mostly by the poster's initial attitude or displayed emotions (Lee & Theokary, 2021; Pozharliev et al., 2022).

Emotional strategies may trigger peripheral processing. One potential explanation given in the literature is that emotional appeals tend to elicit positive emotional responses, which may reduce the capacity for critical thinking. When consumers are exposed to others displaying certain emotions, viewers can experience a change in their own emotional state due to automatic mimicry and synchronization of emotional states, known as emotional contagion (Lee & Theokary, 2021). Once consumers engage in mimicking behavior, they experience the emotion itself (Breugst, Domurath, Patzelt, & Klaukien, 2012). The aroused emotions in consumers are then associated with feelings such as joy and an affective state towards the message, resulting in less critical thinking (Lee & Theokary, 2021). Berg and colleagues (2015) also conclude that smile appeal in a message reduces consumers' capacity to make informed choices.

This study suggests that this lack of critical thinking increases the likelihood that consumers will perceive the motivation of the poster as genuine and sincere, rather than as personal branding. This is because these posts often provide followers with inspiration or tips for restaurants, brands, or products subtly integrated into the content (Fakkert et al., 2023). This, combined with an emotional strategy that leads to less critical thinking, may lead to these posts being seen purely as altruistically inspiring and without a persuasive intent by the poster. This aligns with the findings of Nanne (2022) and Muntinga and colleagues (2011), who identified social interaction and integration as key motivations for creating Br-UGC. Also, when users post Br-UGC with emotional strategies, it is perceived as more authentic and sincere than from brands (Fakkert et al., 2023; Mayrhofer et al., 2020), and emotional strategy posts are associated with sincere and authentic inspiration and are perceived as less persuasive in nature (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Consequently, based on theory and previous empirical studies, the current study suggests that less critical processing triggered by an emotional strategy spills-over to the considerations about the perceived motivation of the poster, and results in stronger perceptions of inspiring others with Br-UGC. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2a: the use of an emotional strategy results in a stronger perceived motivation to inspire others compared to a functional strategy in visual Br-UGC.

Effects of Perceived Motivations on Recognition of Persuasive Attempts

To explain how perceived motivations play a role in recognizing persuasive attempts, we build on a study by Fakkert and colleagues (2023) who revealed that perceived motivations of the sender play a crucial role in the evaluation of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts,

and we apply the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Specifically, as suggested by the PKM, agent knowledge plays a role in how the perceived motivation of the poster results in evaluation of persuasive intentions of posters of Br-UGC. In fact, due to agent knowledge, or lack thereof, users may have difficulties recognizing the persuasive attempt in Br-UGC depending on the motivation they perceive. Agent knowledge consists of consumers' beliefs about the traits, competences and intentions of the message source, including beliefs or awareness about whether the message source has a commercial nature and, therefore, a persuasive intent. This awareness should prompt consumers to categorize the message as a persuasive attempt and activate coping (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

According to Friestad and Wright (1994) and Mayrhofer and colleagues (2020), the agent represents whoever the target identifies as responsible for designing and constructing a persuasive attempt. When consumers see Br-UGC posts from fellow social media users, they may not perceive the content poster as a persuasive agent who acts on persuasive/commercial motives (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). This is because they do not consider fellow social media users, such as friends, acquaintances, or family, as persuasive agents like brands or influencers (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). As such, the persuasive intentions of the poster may therefore be related to their motivations for sharing Br-UGC. In other words, when consumers have more agent knowledge, they are more likely to recognize the persuasive attempt and attribute the motivation to personal branding. Conversely, lower agent knowledge leads consumers to perceive motivations such as genuinely inspiring others. This implies that when consumers see posts from friends as non-persuasive, it aligns with their perception of the sender's motivation being sincere and not commercially driven, which in turn results in differences in the capability to recognize persuasive attempts.

When a social media user perceives that Br-UGC is posted with personal branding motivations, in the eyes of the social media user the poster is acting in an aligned manner with brands and influencers by showing product features or product benefits (Fakkert et al., 2023). Consequently, we posit that agent knowledge about influencer behavior facilitates consumers' recognition of the persuasive attempt in the Br-UGC post. In more specific terms, consumer awareness of the commercial character of a message's source is essential for recognizing a persuasive agent and subsequently a persuasive attempt coming from the agent (e.g., Boerman et al., 2012; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). In this regard, the fellow social media user is more easily identifiable as a persuasive agent and consequently the persuasive attempt might be more recognizable. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1b: The stronger the perceived motivation of personal branding, the higher the recognition of the persuasive attempt in visual Br-UGC.

When a consumer perceives that Br-UGC is posted with the intention to sincerely inspire others, it is evaluated in a positive manner (Fakkert et al., 2023). In accordance with previous research, it has been demonstrated that a consumer's perception of the sender's sincerity (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000) and trustworthiness (Boerman & Kruijemeier, 2016; Main et al., 2007) can be based on consumers' PK, indicating that with greater sincerity and trustworthiness, PK is less activated, implying that consumers are less likely to recognize the persuasive intent behind the message. Consequently, the stronger the consumer's perception of the poster as motivated to inspire others, the less they will recognize the persuasive attempt in the post. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2b: The stronger the perceived motivation to inspire others, the lower the recognition of the persuasive attempt in visual Br-UGC.

For the full conceptual model see Figure 1.

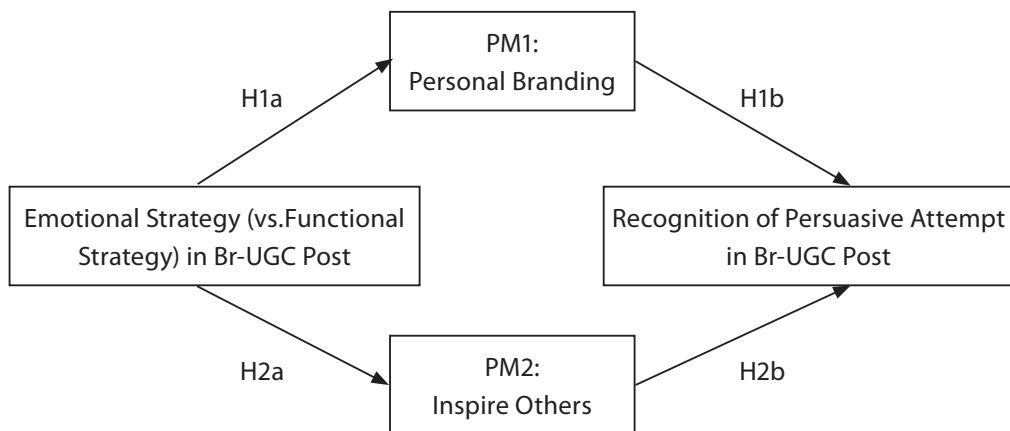


Figure 1. Visual Representation of the Hypothesized Model.

Method

Design

This study employed a between-subject experiment with two conditions (persuasive strategy: emotional vs. functional) and two mediators (perceived motivation to inspire others and perceived motivation of personal branding). The study was approved by the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Amsterdam.

Stimulus Development

To establish the stimulus materials and create Instagram posts with emotional and functional strategies, the definitions of emotional and functional strategies (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Chwialkowska, 2019; Fakkert et al., 2022) served as a starting point, together with actual examples of Br-UGC posts presented by participants in the study of Fakkert and colleagues (2023). First, example posts coming from a database from a previous study were drawn. Both the image and the caption were manipulated for different products/brands. For posts with an emotional strategy, this resulted in a caption containing words or emojis referencing emotions (e.g., happy to see my dear friend, my happy baby, cuteness overload), accompanied by an image of people displaying emotions, such as smiling. Regarding the functional strategy, this resulted in a neutral caption describing product features or how to use the product, accompanied by an image displaying a product of the tagged brand (e.g., a product shot). It should be noted that, in accordance with the findings of Fakkert and colleagues (2023), we specifically chose not to display people in the image of functional appeal posts, as many examples of Br-UGC posts with functional appeal demonstrated the absence of the poster of the content in the image. Second, to create the actual stimulus materials, we used these example posts as prompts for Midjourney, an AI image generator tool, which should be optimal for manipulating images as stimulus material (Van Berlo, Campbell, & Voorveld, 2024). However, this was not possible for all the example posts, as the AI tool encountered difficulties in accurately creating multiple people in the conditions we requested (e.g., showing people with too many fingers, strange looking coffee cups in hands, different faces with the same mouth and nose). Consequently, most of the Br-UGC posts were manually manipulated by requesting volunteers to pose with specific products, photographing them and edited into Instagram posts with Canva (an online editing tool). In the end, stimulus materials for nine brands were created and resulted in a total of 18 posts. For posts with functional strategies, one post was generated with Midjourney, while the others were manipulated manually. For emotional strategies, two images were created with Midjourney, while the others were manually created. To create a unified and consistent approach across all stimulus posts, we developed two posts per brand, one with a functional strategy and one with an emotional strategy in it, using the same Instagram account name and the same product of the brand for both the posts. Figure 2 provides illustrative examples of the stimulus material.

To provide a representative sample of brands, we included actual brands in the stimulus posts from different industries (tech, automotive, food & beverage, consumer goods) that are commonly used on Instagram and sell physical products. Our selection was based on the Netbase Global love list (Netbase, 2019) and Fakkert and colleagues (2022). Moreover, the account names of the Br-UGC posts were fictitious, no actual Instagram accounts were used. Furthermore, the number of likes and comments the post

received was not included in the post to prevent these numbers from influencing the results (Nanne et al., 2023).

After the Br-UGC posts were created, we administered a pre-test to ensure that all posts conveyed the intended strategies (i.e., emotional, or functional). The posts were presented in a randomized order to the participants. A total of 107 participants ($M_{age} = 26.02$, $SD = 5.40$, 57% women, 42% men, 1% they/them) from Panelclix (an online survey and market research platform) were included in the pre-test. All individuals registered in the panel and between the ages of 18 and 35, with an Instagram account, were eligible to participate in the study. The participants were asked to indicate for each post to what extent they thought a functional (focused on the benefits, features, or usage of a product) or an emotional (focused on expressing and evoking emotions) persuasive strategy was applied in the Br-UGC posts. More specifically, they were asked to what extent they agreed with each of the following statements (shown in a randomized order): 'This post focuses on the product features'; 'This post focuses on the benefits of using the product in the post'; 'This post focuses on how to use the product'; 'This post evokes feelings (e.g., happiness, anger, sadness) with you'; 'This post evokes emotions with you'; 'This post include people who show their emotions' (answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = totally disagree, 7 = totally agree; Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Chwialkowska, 2019; Fakkert et al., 2022).

A paired t-test revealed that for the Apple post with an emotional strategy, the mean score for the emotional strategy ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.44$) was significantly higher than for the functional strategy ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.77$; $t(106) = 5.66$, $p < .001$). For the Apple post with a functional strategy, the mean score for the emotional strategy ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.57$) was significantly lower than for the functional strategy ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.51$; $t(106) = -10.40$, $p < .001$).

For the BMW post with an emotional strategy, the mean score for the emotional strategy ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.44$) was significantly higher than for the functional strategy ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.73$; $t(106) = 9.05$, $p < .001$). For the BMW post with a functional strategy, the mean score for the emotional strategy ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.68$) was significantly lower than for the functional strategy ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.68$; $t(106) = -4.74$, $p < .001$).

For the IKEA post with an emotional strategy, the mean score for the emotional strategy ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.35$) was significantly higher than for the functional strategy ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.74$; $t(106) = 3.87$, $p < .001$). For the IKEA post with a functional strategy, the mean score for the emotional strategy ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.56$) was significantly lower than for the functional strategy ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.43$; $t(106) = -11.63$, $p < .001$).

Finally, for the Nike post with an emotional strategy, the mean score for the emotional strategy ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.29$) was significantly higher than for the functional strategy ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.77$; $t(106) = 4.30$, $p < .001$). For the Nike post with a functional strategy, the mean score for the emotional strategy ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.60$) was significantly lower than for the functional strategy ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.66$; $t(106) = -8.55$, $p < .001$). These results

suggest that participants could distinguish between emotional and functional strategies in the Apple, BMW, IKEA, and Nike posts, and the posts effectively conveyed the intended persuasive strategies. However, for the brands Chanel, McDonald's, Moët & Chandon, Starbucks, and Zara, the differences were not significant, indicating that participants could not distinguish between emotional and functional strategies in these posts. Consequently, these brands were excluded from the main study.

Among the brands with significant results, Apple, BMW, IKEA, and Nike were selected for the main study to enhance generalizability by including a diverse range of brands. Minor adjustments were made to some captions to ensure the clarity of the strategies. Functional captions were slightly revised to describe the functionality of the product in the image, avoiding emotionally loaded words or references to the poster's opinions. For example, the caption for the BMW functional strategy post, "happy with my car at the carwash," was revised to focus solely on the car's functionality. Emotional captions were revised to only mention emotions related to the person and not the product. For example, the IKEA emotional caption that referred to the product was revised to focus on emotions. All other posts were also checked and adjusted accordingly.

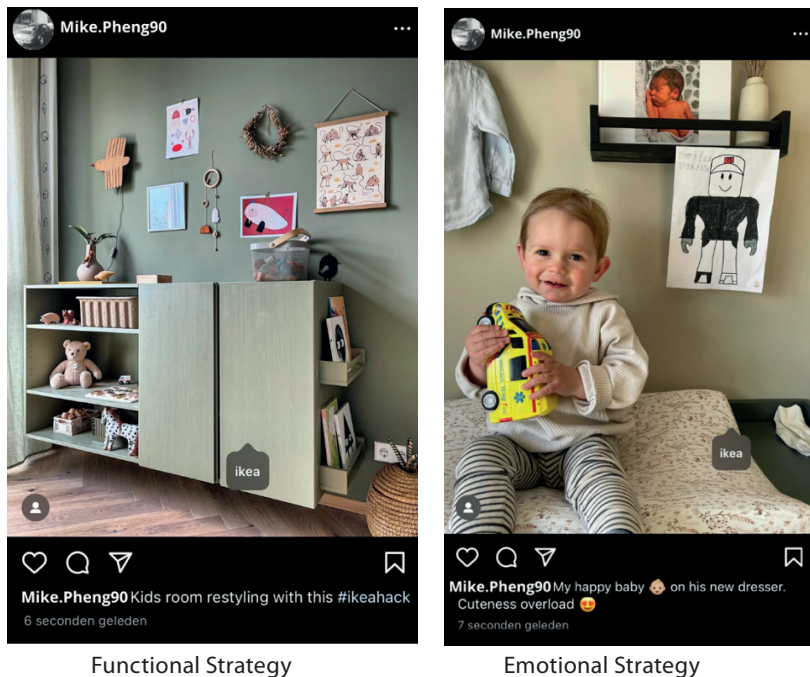


Figure 2. Examples of stimuli.

Participants

To obtain a sample reflective of the target population, we employed the services of PanelClix. All individuals registered in this panel and between the ages of 18 and 35, with an Instagram account, were eligible to participate in the study. This age group was selected due to its status as a demographic of heavy Instagram users (Statista, 2024b). The sample size was determined through a power analysis for mediation effects, following the guidelines of Fritz and MacKinnon (2007) and utilizing the G*Power software (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). This analysis indicated that a minimum of 74 participants per condition was necessary to achieve adequate statistical power. The final sample consisted of 633 participants between 18 and 40 years old ($M = 27.22$, $SD = 4.90$). The sample was 37.7% female, 60.5% male, 1.6% non-binary, and 0.2% preferred not to answer. The majority of participants (53%) reported following 100-500 accounts on Instagram, followed by 22% who reported following 1-100 accounts, 19% who reported following 500-1000 accounts, and 5% who reported following 1000-5000 accounts. Only 0.2% reported following more than 5000 accounts. When asked how much time they spent on Instagram, 14% answered a few times per week, 22% indicated less than 30 minutes per day, 44% indicated 30-60 minutes per day, 16% indicated 60-120 minutes per day, and 4% indicated more than 120 minutes per day. Additionally, participants were divided into eight conditions, with each group assigned to either an emotional or functional strategy for one of the four brands: Apple, BMW, IKEA, and Nike. Each condition had approximately 77 to 82 participants. A one-way ANOVA was performed to control for differences between the conditions. No significant differences were observed between the conditions with regard to age ($F(7, 625) = 1.805$, $p = .083$), Instagram usage ($F(7, 625) = 0.928$, $p = .484$), or the number of accounts followed ($F(7, 625) = 0.859$, $p = .539$).

Procedure

Prior to the start of the experiment, participants were informed about the study and asked to provide active consent. The information provided to participants initially fully disclosed what they could expect during the survey without specifically mentioning the aim of the study. Each participant saw one Instagram post corresponding to their assigned condition. They were instructed to imagine they were scrolling through their Instagram feed and to carefully examine the upcoming post as if they were seeing it on their own account. The survey began by showing the Br-UGC post. Subsequently, participants answered questions about the dependent variable (recognition of persuasive attempt; see Measures) in response to the Br-UGC post. During the survey, the stimulus post remained on the screen, offering participants the opportunity to review the stimulus. Once they had completed the questions relating to the stimulus, a second set of questions about their attitudes towards the brands (as a control variable) and demographic characteristics was presented. At this point, the stimulus was no longer present. After the experiment, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, provided with contact

information of one of the researchers, and thanked for their participation. Participants were compensated with a nominal financial incentive for their participation.

Measures

Perceived Motivation

The scales used to assess perceived motivations were self-constructed and based on previous studies (Boerman & de Vries, 2023; Fakkert et al., 2023). Therefore, a factor analysis was conducted to validate their structure. The results of the factor analysis demonstrated that all items exhibited sufficient factor loadings, indicating that the items loaded on the respective components in a reliable manner. For the perceived motivation to inspire others, the items loaded on a single factor with an eigenvalue of 2.25 and a total explained variance of 28%. Similarly, for the perceived motivation of personal branding, the items also loaded on a single factor with an eigenvalue of 2.28 and a total explained variance of 29%. To measure the perceived motivations for posting the Br-UGC post, participants were asked to indicate their agreement with several statements about the motivations of the poster on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree. With regard to the perceived motivation to inspire others, participants responded to the following statements: 'inspire other people', 'give recommendations / tips', 'inspire others to discover new things', and 'make other people enthusiastic' ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.32$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .826$; Boerman & de Vries, 2023; Fakkert et al., 2023). For the perceived motivation of personal branding, participants responded to the following statements: 'become an influencer', 'obtain more followers', 'receive attention from brands and followers', and 'actively build a personal brand on Instagram' ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.39$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .834$; Fakkert et al., 2023).

Recognition of Persuasive Attempt

We measured participants' recognition of persuasive attempts in a Br-UGC post based on measuring persuasion knowledge, specifically, the understanding of persuasive intent (Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012). This is a validated scale for assessing persuasion knowledge. Participants were asked to indicate how much they agree with the following statements (answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = totally disagree, 7 = totally agree): 'The aim of this post is to influence the opinion of others'; 'The aim of this post is to make other people like certain products'. The mean score of these two statements was used as a measure for recognition of the persuasive attempt ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.55$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .780$).

Manipulation Check

To test whether participants correctly perceived the different persuasive strategies, we incorporated a manipulation check. This was particularly important as we slightly adapted

our stimulus materials based on the pre-test results to ensure clarity in distinguishing between emotional and functional strategies. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements measuring functional and emotional strategies, similar to those used in the pre-test to maintain consistency. The results show that participants correctly perceived the intended persuasive strategies after the adjustments, thereby validating our manipulation check. For each brand, the mean scores for perceived functional and emotional strategies were compared using paired sample t-tests. The results indicate that participants perceived the intended differences between the emotional and functional strategies across all brands, with significant differences observed in the expected direction. For Apple, the emotional strategy ($M = 4.30, SD = 1.21$) was significantly higher than the functional strategy ($M = 3.65, SD = 1.64$) for the emotional strategy condition ($t(77) = -3.48, p < .001$), while the emotional strategy ($M = 3.11, SD = 1.52$) was significantly lower than the functional strategy ($M = 4.23, SD = 1.42$) for the functional strategy condition ($t(79) = 6.10, p < .001$). For BMW, the emotional strategy ($M = 4.47, SD = 1.16$) was higher than the functional strategy ($M = 3.08, SD = 1.49$) for the emotional strategy condition ($t(77) = -6.71, p < .001$), and the emotional strategy ($M = 3.10, SD = 1.39$) was lower than the functional strategy ($M = 4.26, SD = 1.29$) for the functional strategy condition ($t(79) = 6.78, p < .001$). Similarly, for IKEA, the emotional strategy ($M = 4.28, SD = 1.37$) was higher than the functional strategy ($M = 2.96, SD = 1.56$) for the emotional strategy condition ($t(77) = -6.93, p < .001$), while the emotional strategy ($M = 3.20, SD = 1.56$) was lower than the functional strategy ($M = 4.70, SD = 1.31$) for the functional strategy condition ($t(81) = 7.77, p < .001$). Finally, for Nike, the emotional strategy ($M = 4.26, SD = 1.15$) was higher than the functional strategy ($M = 3.10, SD = 1.58$) for the emotional strategy condition ($t(79) = -5.63, p < .001$), and the emotional strategy ($M = 3.18, SD = 1.40$) was lower than the functional strategy ($M = 4.28, SD = 1.22$) for the functional strategy condition ($t(76) = 6.25, p < .001$). These results suggest that the posts effectively conveyed the intended persuasive strategies.

Brand Attitude

In addition to the outcome variables, brand attitude was measured as a control variable, given that existing brands were used. The attitude scale of Spears and Singh (2004) was employed, comprising five differential scales (e.g., not appealing – appealing) answered on a 7-point scale. For Apple, the brand attitude had a mean of 3.76 ($SD = 1.25$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .941$). For BMW, the brand attitude had a mean of 3.63 ($SD = 1.24$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .941$). For IKEA, the brand attitude had a mean of 4.17 ($SD = 1.42$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .936$). For Nike, the brand attitude had a mean of 4.05 ($SD = 1.37$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .941$).

Results

To assess the potential presence of common method bias in the dataset, Harman's One-Factor Test was conducted. An exploratory factor analysis with a single factor was conducted on all items. The single factor accounted for 35.2% of the total variance, which is below the threshold of 50% typically used to indicate substantial common method bias. These results indicate that common method bias is unlikely to be a significant concern in this study.

To test the hypotheses, we performed a mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro for R (Hayes, 2022, Model 4). The model included 5,000 bootstrap samples to estimate the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. The persuasive strategies were dummy coded (Emotional Strategy = 1 vs. Functional Strategy = 0) and identified as the independent variable, with Perceived Motivations: Inspire Others and Personal Branding as mediators, and Recognition of Persuasive Attempt as the dependent variable. The variables Brand and Brand Attitude were included as covariates.

As demonstrated by the mediation model (see Figure 3), the emotional strategy significantly affected recognition of persuasive attempt compared to the functional strategy, both indirectly through the perceived motivations of personal branding and inspire others. Specifically, the total effect of the emotional strategy on recognition of persuasive attempt was negative and significant ($b = -1.07, p < .001$), indicating that the emotional strategy resulted in lower recognition of persuasive attempts compared to the functional strategy.

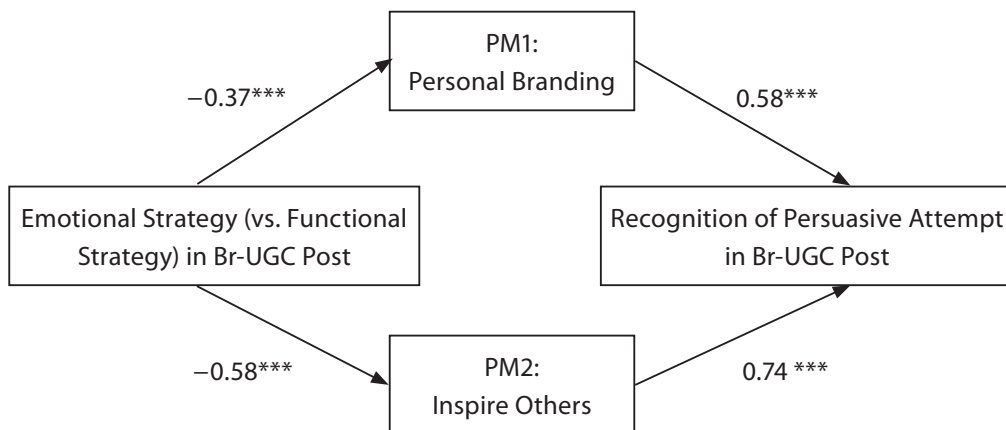


Figure 3. Mediation Model: Effect of Emotional Strategy (vs. Functional Strategy) on Recognizing Persuasive Attempt through the Perceived Motivations of Personal Branding and Inspire Others.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that this effect is mediated by both the perceived motivations of personal branding and inspire others. The emotional strategy led to a weaker perceived motivation of personal branding compared to the functional strategy ($b = -0.37$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$), supporting H1a, suggesting that the use of a functional strategy in visual Br-UGC results in a stronger perceived motivation of personal branding compared to an emotional strategy. Furthermore, a stronger perceived motivation of personal branding resulted in higher recognition of the persuasive attempt ($b = 0.58$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$), supporting H1b. This implies that a stronger perceived motivation of personal branding leads to a higher recognition of persuasive attempts. The results of the indirect effects analysis confirmed the significance of the negative indirect path between emotional strategy (compared to the functional strategy) and recognition of persuasive attempt through the perceived motivation of personal branding (indirect effect = -0.20 , boot $SE = 0.05$, BCI $[-0.29, -0.10]$). In other words, the presence of a functional strategy (compared to an emotional strategy) increases the perceived motivation of personal branding, which consequently increases the recognition of persuasive attempt.

Moreover, the emotional strategy was negatively related to the perceived motivation of inspire others compared to the functional strategy ($b = -0.58$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$), rejecting H2a. This implies that an emotional strategy in Br-UGC posts decreases the perceived motivation to inspire others compared to a functional strategy. Moreover, a stronger perceived motivation to inspire others resulted in a higher recognition of the persuasive attempt ($b = 0.74$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$), rejecting H2b. This implies that the stronger the perceived motivation to inspire others, the higher the recognition of the persuasive attempt in visual Br-UGC. The results of the indirect effects analysis confirmed the significance of the negative indirect path between emotional strategy (compared to the functional strategy) and the recognition of persuasive attempt through the perceived motivation to inspire others (indirect effect = -0.27 , boot $SE = 0.06$, BCI $[-0.40, -0.16]$). In other words, the presence of a functional strategy (compared to an emotional strategy) increases the perceived the motivation to inspire others, which consequently increases the recognition of persuasive attempts. See Table 1 for the results of the mediation model.

Furthermore, as a robustness check, we ran the model separately for the four brands in our study (see Appendix D for the results of the mediation models per brand). When examining the results per brand, H1a was not significant for Apple ($b = -0.20$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = .145$) and BMW ($b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = .602$), while for Nike, H1a was rejected, indicating that the use of a functional strategy led to a weaker perceived motivation of personal branding compared to the use of an emotional strategy ($b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = .038$). For Ikea, H1a was supported, indicating that a functional strategy led to a stronger perceived motivation of personal branding compared to an emotional strategy ($b = -0.92$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$). The other hypotheses per brand were consistent with the total model. These findings suggest that while the overall pattern holds across brands, there are brand-

specific variations in how functional strategies impact the perceived motivation of personal branding.

Table 1. Results of the Mediation model: Effect of Emotional Strategy (vs. Functional Strategy) on Recognizing Persuasive Attempt through the Perceived Motivations of Personal Branding and Inspire Others.

Path	Effect	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Total Effect	Emotional Strategy → Recognition of PA	-1.07	0.11	-10.12	<.001	[-1.259, -0.844]
Direct Effect	Emotional Strategy → Recognition of PA	-0.58	0.09	-6.79	<.001	[-0.753, -0.415]
Indirect Effect (PM: Personal Branding)	Emotional Strategy → PM: Personal Branding → Recognition of PA	-0.2	0.05	-4.12	<.001	[-0.291, -0.103]
Indirect Effect (PM: Inspire Others)	Emotional Strategy → PM: Inspire Others → Recognition of PA	-0.27	0.06	-4.48	<.001	[-0.395, -0.160]
PM: Personal Branding	Emotional Strategy → PM: Personal Branding	-0.37	0.08	-4.87	<.001	[-0.515, -0.218]
PM: Inspire Others	Emotional Strategy → PM: Inspire Others	-0.58	0.09	-6.79	<.001	[-0.753, -0.415]
PM: Personal Branding → Recognition of PA	PM: Personal Branding → Recognition of PA	0.58	0.04	12.89	<.001	[0.490, 0.667]
PM: Inspire Others → Recognition of PA	PM: Inspire Others → Recognition of PA	0.74	0.04	16.88	<.001	[0.658, 0.831]

Note. The results were controlled for brand and brand attitude, but these results are not included in the table.

Discussion

In the context of visual social media, consumers are exposed to a large amount of Br-UGC shared by their peers, which may go unnoticed. Those Br-UGC posts employ various persuasive strategies (Fakkert et al., 2022) and the motivations for posting this content are perceived differently (Fakkert et al., 2023). The ability to recognize persuasive attempts is essential for consumers to cope with persuasive messages (Friestad & Wright, 1994). However, the question whether consumers can effectively recognize these persuasive attempts in Br-UGC remained under researched. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the impact of different persuasive strategies (emotional vs. functional) in visual Br-UGC on the recognition of persuasive attempts, and to examine if perceived motivations (personal branding and inspire others) explain this effect.

Importantly, the results show that functional strategies in Br-UGC are associated with stronger perceived motivations compared to emotional strategies for both personal

branding and inspire others. Functional strategies are typically more straightforward and product-focused, which seems to activate agent knowledge, through critical processing, and prompting consumers to think critically about the motivations of the poster of Br-UGC. Moreover, the beliefs about the motivations of the poster of Br-UGC, that is personal branding and inspiring others, subsequently have a positive influence on the recognition of persuasive attempts.

This conclusion is consistent with the idea that functional strategies, potentially due to enhanced critical processing, lead consumers to contemplate the persuasive intentions of a content creator's posting behavior. When focusing on the posters' motivations, consumers seem to become more aware of the persuasive attempt in Br-UGC. This finding underscores the importance of understanding the role of agent knowledge in recognizing persuasive messages and suggests that functional strategies enhance consumers' ability to recognize persuasive attempts, regardless of the perceived underlying motivation of the poster of Br-UGC.

Findings and Implications

The findings contribute to the existing body of literature in several substantial ways. First, our study demonstrates that functional strategies employed in Br-UGC result in a higher recognition of persuasive attempts. This is consistent with previous research and provides support for the applicability of dual processing models to our study. In particular, the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the HSM (Todorov et al., 2002) provide frameworks for understanding how consumers process functional persuasive strategies. More specifically, when product features are displayed or product benefits are shown in a functional strategy post, the poster's behavior is similar to that of other persuasive agents, such as brands and influencers, who employ persuasive messages (Fakkert et al., 2023). Moreover, the results of this study provide insights in the potential mechanism for this effect by showing that the perceived motivations of personal branding and inspire others are more strongly activated by functional strategies than emotional strategies and the stronger these motivations are, the more likely someone is to recognize the persuasive attempt in Br-UGC. This finding is in line with the studies of Pozharliev and colleagues (2022) and Lee and Theokary (2021), who found that when consumers are exposed to product information, systematic information processing occurs. More specifically, when consumers encounter a post containing at least one product cue (i.e., when argument quality is strong), they are more likely to engage in systematic thinking about the relevance of each argument.

Second, the results indicate that emotional strategies are less likely to be identified as persuasive attempts, yet this is not explained by the perceived motivations of the poster. This finding aligns with the expectation that emotional strategies are less likely to be recognized (Berg et al., 2015; Lee & Theokary, 2021), most likely as they induce less critical thinking. Contrary to expectations however, emotional strategies do not induce stronger

perceptions of the poster's motive of altruistically inspiring others. This observation calls for further examination, and future research should be directed towards clarifying this matter. In future research it is important to consider additional perceived motivations of the poster of Br-UGC, as the current study only compared the perceived motivations of personal branding and to inspire others.

Third, our results demonstrate that the use of an emotional strategy does not strengthen the perceived motivation to inspire others compared to the use of a functional strategy. This is contrary to the expectations of this study, given that emotional strategies in Br-UGC often have sincere intentions to inspire (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Fakkert et al., 2023). In particular, the study conducted by Fakkert and colleagues (2023) demonstrated that posters of Br-UGC frequently provide followers with inspiration for restaurants, brands, and products that are subtly integrated into their post with emotional strategies. However, the results of our experimental study do not support the hypothesis that emotional strategies are stronger perceived as to inspire others than functional strategies. This finding may be attributed to the fact that, in the experiment, across the persuasive strategy conditions the brands were visually identified with an @brand tag within the image of the post, which could make the content appear less authentic and sincere and more aligned with branded content in which brands are prominently tagged.

Fourth, the results show that the more someone perceived the motivation of the poster to inspire others, the higher the chance of recognizing the persuasive attempt in the post. This finding is contrary to prior research indicating that sincerity and trustworthiness are linked to inspirational intentions. These intentions, in turn, result in less persuasion knowledge and consequently less critical processing of the content (Boerman & Kruikemeier, 2016; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Main et al., 2007). This aligns with the PKM's proposition that lower activation of persuasion knowledge occurs when the source is perceived as genuine and trustworthy (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Based on this, we expected a lower recognition of persuasive attempts. However, our findings did not support this assertion, indicating that a stronger perceived motivation to inspire leads to a higher recognition of persuasive attempts.

Fifth, our finding that a stronger perceived motivation of personal branding leads to higher recognition of persuasive attempt is consistent with prior PKM research. In particular, our finding contributes to the relevance of consumer awareness of the commercial character of a message's source is essential for recognizing a persuasive agent and subsequently a persuasive attempt coming from the agent (Boerman et al., 2012; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). In this regard, the fellow social media user is more easily identifiable as a persuasive agent and with that also the recognition of a persuasive attempt. Furthermore, this aligns with the existing literature on influencer marketing, which suggests that motivations related to personal branding are more likely to result in the recognition of persuasive attempts (De Veirman et al., 2017; Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021; Sharma, 2023). The present study demonstrates that personal branding

motivations are not exclusive to influencers but also pertain to the domain of Br-UGC literature. Furthermore, it is shown that a stronger perceived motivation to inspire others is associated with higher recognition of persuasive attempts. Consequently, incorporating additional perceived motivations would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding and enable comparisons between Br-UGC and influencer content.

Finally, the results of the robustness check per brand demonstrate differences across brands. The separate models show that the use of functional strategy (compared to an emotional strategy) only led to stronger perceived motivations of personal branding for IKEA, for Nike the results were opposite: indicating a weaker perceived motivation of personal branding. The opposite effect for Nike could be explained by the fact that the functional post of Nike consisted of an image with a selection of footwear for a night out, which might have not been perceived as personal branding, since it considered a sincere choice about a sneaker versus a high heel shoe. The differences between brands could indicate that for certain brands, functional strategies may be perceived as less aligned with personal branding. This indicates that brand-specific characteristics may influence the persuasiveness of specific persuasive strategies.

Methodological Contributions

This study employed a robust experimental design with validated manipulation checks to ensure clarity in distinguishing between emotional and functional persuasive strategies. As proposed by Van Berlo and colleagues (2024), the use of AI-generated images would be preferable to manually created mock images by researchers. Notably, while AI image generation was employed, only three realistic images were successfully created, in contrast to 15 manually created stimulus images. This underscores the challenges and potential limitations of current AI technology in generating realistic social media content, while also emphasizing the importance of combining traditional methods with innovative approaches. Ultimately, the integration of AI-generated and manually created stimuli enhances the reliability and generalizability of our findings. Furthermore, the study involved an online experiment using mock Instagram posts that were highly realistic, created through fake accounts. This strategy permitted the creation of an authentic social media environment, thereby enhancing the validity of the experiment. A comprehensive pre-test was conducted to ensure that participants could clearly differentiate between the persuasive strategies, thus enhancing the internal validity of the results.

Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, this study makes several important contributions. Previous research on the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) has not linked persuasive strategies, perceived motivations, and agent knowledge. Our study intertwines these elements, demonstrating how they interact to influence the recognition of persuasive attempts. It integrates the PKM with dual

processing models (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Todorov et al., 2002) to explain how different persuasive strategies in Br-UGC impact recognition of persuasive attempts. Although not all findings were entirely consistent with expectations, this integration offers a nuanced understanding of the cognitive processes involved in recognizing persuasive content.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of considering posters' motivations in understanding how consumers process and evaluate Br-UGC by introducing perceived motivations as a mediator. This introduces a novel perspective to the PKM, indicating that perceived motivations influence the activation of persuasion knowledge and the recognition of persuasive attempts. Fakkert and colleagues (2023) proposed that perceived motivations play a crucial role in recognizing persuasive attempts. Their findings revealed that posters' perceived motivations are integral to evaluating persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts. Specifically, as suggested by the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994), agent knowledge—understanding who the agent is and what their motivations might be—plays a crucial role in how the perceived motivation of the poster affects the recognition of persuasive attempt in Br-UGC. This study supports this idea by showing that both motivations, whether perceived as personal branding or inspire others, lead to higher recognition of the persuasive attempt, though the degree and nature of this recognition differ.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While the study offers valuable insights, its limitations suggest directions for future research. The sample was limited to Instagram users aged 18-40, which may not be representative of all social media users. It would be beneficial for future research to consider a more diverse sample in order to enhance the generalizability of the findings. This is particularly important when studying younger age groups, who may have less developed persuasion and agent knowledge, understanding of persuasion techniques and may also be more susceptible to such influences (Hudders et al., 2017). Furthermore, the study concentrated on visual Br-UGC on Instagram. Consequently, future research should investigate the influence of persuasive strategies across diverse social media platforms and content formats, including short video formats on the highly popular TikTok.

A further limitation of this study is that all brands were tagged visibly in the images, which may have influenced the perceptions of the participants. The in-image brand tags may have conveyed a sense of personal branding motivations or made the posts appear more like advertisements, in line with influencer content. This phenomenon was observed in emotional strategy posts, which might have led participants to perceive these posts as more functional and advertisement-like. In the context of a typical Instagram timeline, brand tags may be more discreetly integrated into posts. The strategies employed in the posts may have been perceived as more functional and less emotional.

Practical Implications

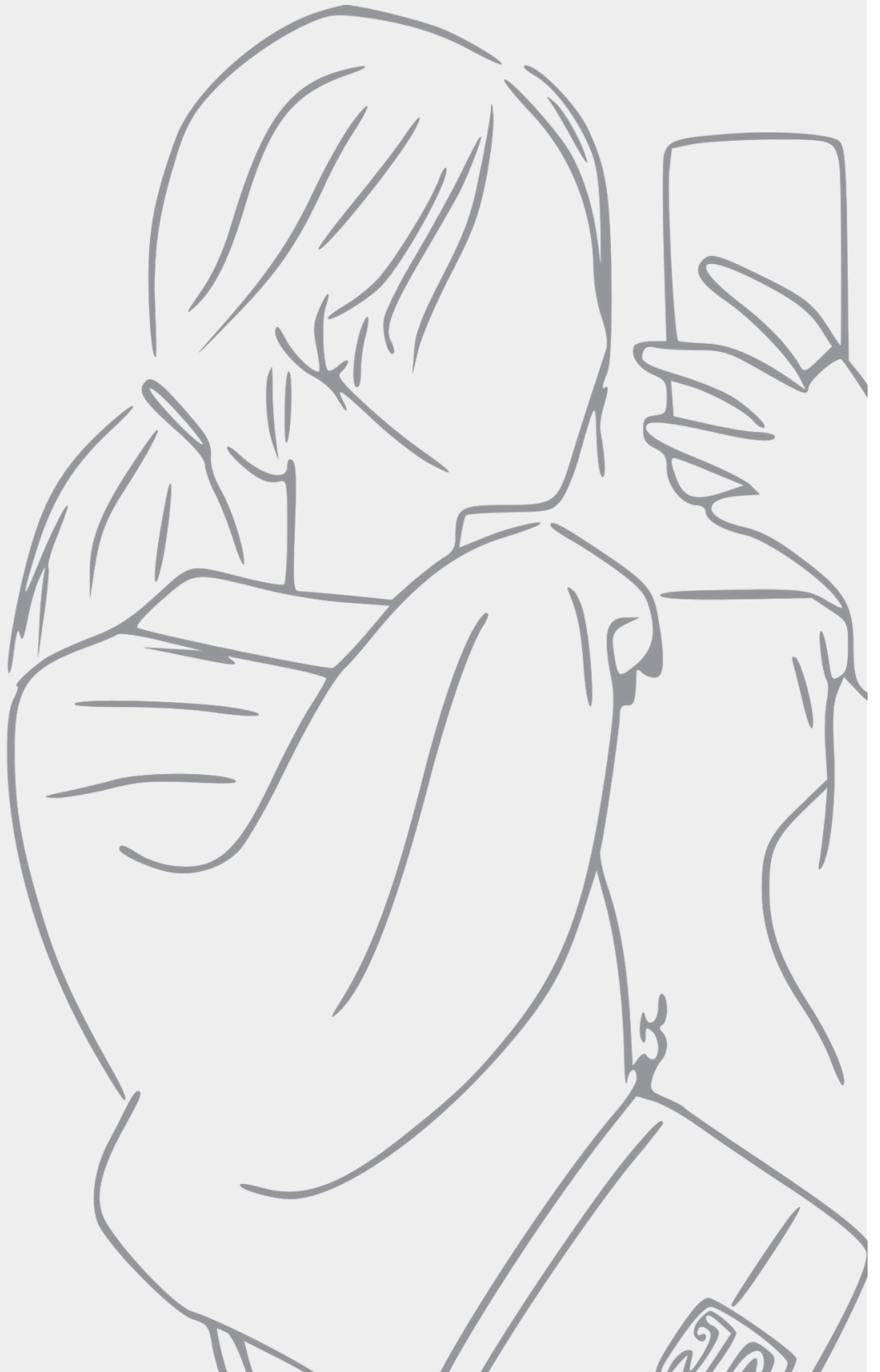
From a practical perspective, this study provides actionable insights for marketing professionals. Functional strategies in Br-UGC are more likely to be associated with personal branding than emotional strategies and can effectively enhance the recognition of persuasive attempts. However, when attempting to inspire and engage consumers on an emotional and more unconscious level, marketers should be aware that such functional strategies may enhance the recognition of persuasive attempts compared to the use of emotional strategies. This indicates that emotional strategies can be more effective than functional strategies in building brand affinity and trust without inciting critical processing of the content as persuasive.

Given our results, marketers should consider the following strategies when responding to Br-UGC. First, marketers may selectively repost or share Br-UGC that employs emotional appeal strategies, particularly when the brand is subtly integrated. This approach can enhance brand affinity without overtly signaling persuasive intent, thus fostering a more genuine connection with the audience. Second, when functional strategies are used in Br-UGC content and used by brands, marketers should be aware that these posts may be perceived as attempts to persuade consumers. To mitigate this, content with functional strategies can be blended with authentic user experiences and testimonials to balance the perceived motivations. Third, the practice of tagging and brand integration is an important consideration in the context of Br-UGC. It is important to consider the context and presentation of brands that have been tagged in consumer posts. Ultimately, by strategically managing and curating Br-UGC, marketers can leverage Br-UGC to build stronger, more authentic relationships with their audience while effectively navigating the nuances of perceived motivations consumers may have.

In addition to the implications for marketing, there are important considerations regarding consumer protection. As the study demonstrates the importance of recognizing persuasive attempts for consumer protection and the ability to cope with commercial messages, regulatory concerns about transparency and consumer awareness (as mentioned in the introduction) are validated. This suggests that consumer protection agencies should promote the clear labelling of persuasive content and provide support for educational initiatives that assist consumers in identifying persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. This could empower consumers to make well-informed decisions. Furthermore, it may be advisable for regulators to consider mandating that social media platforms automatically highlight the presence of a brand in a Br-UGC post and attach a distinct tag to such posts to increase consumer awareness. In contrast to influencers, who are obliged to mark the branded nature of their content, consumers are not expected to identify their content as such. It is thus important that regulators ensure that the social media platforms take responsibility of safeguarding consumers from unwanted persuasive messages.

Conclusion

This study offers valuable theoretical and practical insights into the role of persuasive strategies and perceived motivations in recognizing persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. By integrating insights from the PKM and dual processing models, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the cognitive processes underlying consumer responses to Br-UGC. Future research should build on these findings to further explore the complex interplay of persuasive strategies, perceived motivations, and consumer behavior in social media contexts.



References

- Aaker, D., & Norris, D. (1982). Characteristics of TV commercials perceived as informative. *Journal of Advertising Research*, (22), 22–34.
- Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with Influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia*, 161(1), 86–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16665177>
- Amblee, N., & Bui, T. (2011). Harnessing the Influence of Social Proof in Online Shopping: The Effect of Electronic Long Tail View project Social Proof and EWOM View project. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 16(2), 91–113. <https://doi.org/10.2307/23106395>
- Anderson, K. C., Knight, D. K., Pookulangara, S., & Josiam, B. (2014). Influence of hedonic and utilitarian motivations on retailer loyalty and purchase intention: A facebook perspective. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 21(5), 773–779. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2014.05.007>
- Ashley, C., & Tuten, T. (2015). Creative Strategies in Social MediaMarketing: An Exploratory Study of Branded Social Content and ConsumerEngagement. *Psychology & Marketing*, 32(January 2015), 15–27. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar>
- Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G., & Guidry Moulard, J. (2018). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of Business Research*, 117(July), 557–569. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.008>
- Bakhshi, S., Shamma, D. A., & Gilbert, E. (2014). Faces engage us: Photos with faces attract more likes and comments on instagram. *Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - Proceedings*, (June), 965–974. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2556288.2557403>
- Berg, H., Söderlund, M., & Lindström, A. (2015). Spreading joy: examining the effects of smiling models on consumer joy and attitudes. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 32(6), 459–469. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-03-2015-1356>
- Binder, A., Stubenvoll, M., Hirsch, M., & Matthes, J. (2022). Why Am I Getting This Ad? How the Degree of Targeting Disclosures and Political Fit Affect Persuasion Knowledge, Party Evaluation, and Online Privacy Behaviors. *Journal of Advertising*, 51(2), 206–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.2015727>
- Boerman, S. C. (2020). The effects of the standardized instagram disclosure for micro- and meso-influencers. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 103(May 2019), 199–207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.09.015>
- Boerman, S. C., & de Vries, D. A. (2023). If you have it, do not flaunt it: Effects of fitfluencer images and captions on exercise intention. *Tijdschrift Voor Communicatiewetenschap*, 51(3), 261–283. <https://doi.org/10.5117/TCW2023.3.003.BOER>
- Boerman, S. C., & Kruijemeier, S. (2016). Consumer responses to promoted tweets sent by brands and political parties. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 65, 285–294. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.08.033>
- Boerman, S. C., van Reijmersdal, E. A., & Neijens, P. C. (2012). Sponsorship Disclosure: Effects of Duration on Persuasion Knowledge and Brand Responses. *Journal of Communication*, 62(6), 1047–1064. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01677.x>

- Boerman, S. C., van Reijmersdal, E. A., & Neijens, P. C. (2014). Effects of sponsorship disclosure timing on the processing of sponsored content: A study on the effectiveness of European disclosure regulations. *Psychology & Marketing*, 31(3), 214–224. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20688>
- Boerman, S. C., van Reijmersdal, E. A., Rozendaal, E., & Dima, A. L. (2018). Development of the Persuasion Knowledge Scales of Sponsored Content (PKS-SC). *International Journal of Advertising*, 37(5), 671–697. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2018.1470485>
- Boerman, S. C., Willemsen, L. M., & Van Der Aa, E. P. (2017). “This Post Is Sponsored”: Effects of Sponsorship Disclosure on Persuasion Knowledge and Electronic Word of Mouth in the Context of Facebook. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 38, 82–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2016.12.002>
- Breugst, N., Domurath, A., Patzelt, H., & Klaukien, A. (2012). Perceptions of Entrepreneurial Passion and Employees’ Commitment to Entrepreneurial Ventures. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 36(1), 171–192. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2011.00491.x>
- Bulmer, S., & Buchanan-Oliver, M. (2006). Visual rhetoric and global advertising imagery. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 12(1), 49–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527260500289142>
- Cameron, A. C., & Trivedi, P. K. (1990). Regression-based Tests for Overdispersion in the Poisson Model. *Journal of Econometrics*, 46, 347–364.
- Campbell, M. C., & Kirmani, A. (2000). Consumers’ use of persuasion knowledge: The effects of accessibility and cognitive capacity on perceptions of an influence agent. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(1), 69–83. <https://doi.org/10.1086/314309>
- Casaló, L. V., Flavián, C., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2017). Understanding Consumer Interaction on Instagram: The Role of Satisfaction, Hedonism, and Content Characteristics. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 20(6), 369–375. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0360>
- Chen, H. (2018). College-Aged Young Consumers’ Perceptions of Social Media Marketing: The Story of Instagram. *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising*, 39(1), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10641734.2017.1372321>
- Chen, Y. J., & Kirmani, A. (2015). Posting strategically: The consumer as an online media planner. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(4), 609–621. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2015.02.003>
- Childers, T. L., & Houston, M. J. (1984). Conditions for a picture-superiority effect on consumer memory. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 11(2), 643–654.
- Chwialkowska, A. (2019). The Effectiveness of Brand- and Customer-Centric Content Strategies at Generating Shares, ‘Likes’, and Comments. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 25(2), 270–300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2018.1443307>
- Cvijikj, I., & Michahelles, F. (2013). Online engagement factors on Facebook brand pages. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 3(4), 843–861. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-013-0098-8>
- De Jans, S., Van de Sompel, D., De Veirman, M., & Hudders, L. (2020). #Sponsored! How the recognition of sponsoring on Instagram posts affects adolescents’ brand evaluations through source evaluations. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 109(June 2019), 106342. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106342>

- De Keyzer, F., Dens, N., & De Pelsmacker, P. (2015). Is this for me? How Consumers Respond to Personalized Advertising on Social Network Sites. *Journal of Interactive Advertising, 15*(2), 124–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2015.1082450>
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising, 36*(5), 798–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035>
- De Veirman, M., & Hudders, L. (2019). Disclosing sponsored Instagram posts: the role of material connection with the brand and message-sidedness when disclosing covert advertising. *International Journal of Advertising, 0*(0), 1–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1575108>
- De Vries, L., Gensler, S., & Leeflang, P. S. H. (2012). Popularity of Brand Posts on Brand Fan Pages: An Investigation of the Effects of Social Media Marketing. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 26*(2), 83–91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2012.01.003>
- Dhar, V., & Chang, E. A. (2009). Does Chatter Matter? The Impact of User-Generated Content on Music Sales. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 23*(4), 300–307. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2009.07.004>
- Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. *Computers in Human Behavior, 68*, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.009>
- Djafarova, E., & Trofimenko, O. (2019). 'Instafamous'—credibility and self-presentation of micro-celebrities on social media. *Information Communication and Society, 22*(10), 1432–1446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1438491>
- Fakkert, M. S., Araujo, T. B., Strycharz, J., & van Noort, G. (2022). Persuasive Strategies in Brand-Related Posts from Brands versus Users on Visual Social Media and Their Impact on Engagement. *The 72nd Annual International Communication Association Conference*, paper presentation. Paris, France.
- Fakkert, M. S., Strycharz, J., Araujo, T. B., & van Noort, G. (2023). Consumers' Coping with Persuasive Strategies in Brand-Related User Posts on Visual Social Media: a Qualitative Approach. *International Conference on Research in Advertising, European Advertising Academy, Bordeaux, France*. paper presentation. Bordeaux, France.
- Farace, S., van Laer, T., de Ruyter, K., & Wetzels, M. (2017). Assessing the effect of narrative transportation, portrayed action, and photographic style on the likelihood to comment on posted selfies. *European Journal of Marketing, 51*(11–12), 1961–1979. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-03-2016-0158>
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A.-G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G*Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods, 39*(2), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193146>
- Fennis, B. M. (2008). *Advertising as Persuasion*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405186407.wbieca026>
- Fox, A. K., Bacile, T. J., Nakhata, C., & Weible, A. (2018). Selfie-marketing: exploring narcissism and self-concept in visual user-generated content on social media. *Journal of Consumer Marketing, 35*(1), 11–21. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-03-2016-1752>

- Frazer, C. F. (1983). Creative strategy: A management perspective. *Journal of Advertising*, 12(4), 36–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1983.10672861>
- Friestad, M., & Wright, P. (1994). The Persuasion Knowledge Model: How People Cope with Persuasion Attempts. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209380>
- Fritz, M. S., & MacKinnon, D. P. (2007). Required Sample Size to Detect the Mediated Effect. *Psychological Science*, 18(3), 233–239. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01882.x>
- Gardner, W., Mulvey, E. P., & Shaw, E. C. (1995). Regression analysis of counts and rates[20].pdf. *Quantitative Methods in Psychology*, 118(3), 392–404.
- Gavilanes, J. M., Flatten, T. C., & Brettel, M. (2018). Content Strategies for Digital Consumer Engagement in Social Networks: Why Advertising Is an Antecedent of Engagement. *Journal of Advertising*, 47(1), 4–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2017.1405751>
- Golan, G. J., & Zaidner, L. (2008). Creative strategies in viral advertising: An application of Taylor's six-segment message strategy wheel. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(4), 959–972. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2008.00426.x>
- Hartmann, J., Heitmann, M., Schamp, C., & Netzer, O. (2021). The Power of Brand Selfies. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 58(6), 1159–1177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222437211037258>
- Hayes, A. F. (2022). *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis*, (Third Edit). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet? *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(1), 38–52. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.10073>
- Hollenbeck, C. R., & Kaikati, A. M. (2012). Consumers' use of brands to reflect their actual and ideal selves on Facebook. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 29(4), 395–405. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2012.06.002>
- Howard, D. J., & Gengler, C. (2001). Emotional contagion effects on product attitudes. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28(2), 189–201. <https://doi.org/10.1086/322897>
- Hudders, L., De Jans, S., & De Veirman, M. (2021). The commercialization of social media stars: a literature review and conceptual framework on the strategic use of social media influencers. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(3), 327–375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1836925>
- Hudders, L., De Pauw, P., Cauberghe, V., Panic, K., Zarouali, B., & Rozendaal, E. (2017). Shedding New Light on How Advertising Literacy Can Affect Children's Processing of Embedded Advertising Formats: A Future Research Agenda. *Journal of Advertising*, 46(2), 333–349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2016.1269303>
- Hwang, K., & Zhang, Q. (2018). Influence of parasocial relationship between digital celebrities and their followers on followers' purchase and electronic word-of-mouth intentions, and persuasion knowledge. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 87(May), 155–173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.05.029>
- Instagram. (2022). About us. Retrieved from <https://about.instagram.com/about-us>

- Instaloader. (2019). Retrieved from <https://instaloader.github.io/index.html>
- Jiménez-Castillo, D., & Sánchez-Fernández, R. (2019). The role of digital influencers in brand recommendation: Examining their impact on engagement, expected value and purchase intention. *International Journal of Information Management*, 49(July), 366–376. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2019.07.009>
- Johnson, B. K., Potocki, B., & Veldhuis, J. (2019). Is That My Friend or an Advert? The Effectiveness of Instagram Native Advertisements Posing as Social Posts. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 24(3), 108–125. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmz003>
- Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. New York: The Free Press.
- Kitirattarkarn, G. P., Araujo, T., & Neijens, P. (2018). Cultural differences in motivation for consumers' online brand-related activities on Facebook. *Communications*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2018-2017>
- Klostermann, J., Plumeyer, A., Böger, D., & Decker, R. (2018). Extracting brand information from social networks: Integrating image, text, and social tagging data. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 35(4), 538–556. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2018.08.002>
- Kumar, A., Bezawada, R., Rishika, R., Janakiraman, R., & Kannan, P. K. (2016). From social to sale: The effects of firm-generated content in social media on customer behavior. *Journal of Marketing*, 80(1), 7–25. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.14.0249>
- Lang, A. (2000). The Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing. *Journal of Communication*, 50(1), 46–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2000.tb02833.x>
- Laskey, H. A., Day, E., & Crask, M. R. (1989). Typology of Main Message Strategies for Television Commercials Creative strategy deals with what is advertisement as well. *Journal of Advertising*, 18(1), 36–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1989.10673141>
- Lee, J. E., & Watkins, B. (2016). YouTube vloggers' influence on consumer luxury brand perceptions and intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(12), 5753–5760. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.04.171>
- Lee, J., Kim, S., Ham, C. D., & Seok, A. (2022). Avoidance and Acceptance of Native Advertising on Social Media: Applications of Consumer Social Intelligence, Persuasion Knowledge, and the Typology of Consumer Responses. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 22(2), 141–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2022.2065389>
- Lee, M. T., & Theokary, C. (2021). The superstar social media influencer: Exploiting linguistic style and emotional contagion over content? *Journal of Business Research*, 132(November 2020), 860–871. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.11.014>
- Lee, S. S., & Johnson, B. K. (2022). Are they being authentic? The effects of self-disclosure and message sidedness on sponsored post effectiveness. *International Journal of Advertising*, 41(1), 30–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1986257>
- Lin, K. Y., & Lu, H. P. (2011). Why people use social networking sites: An empirical study integrating network externalities and motivation theory. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(3), 1152–1161. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.12.009>

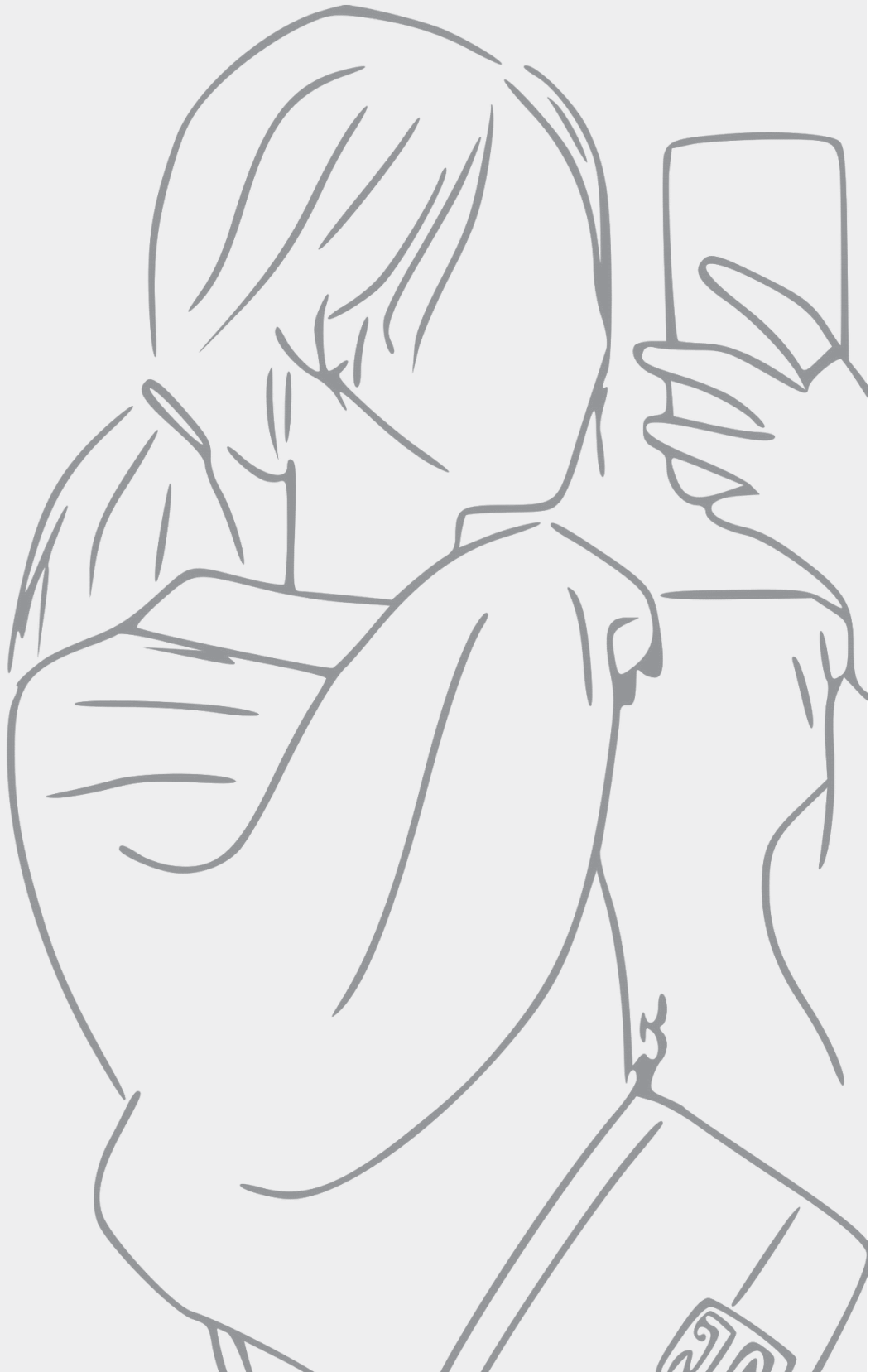
- Liu, L., Dzyabura, D., & Mizik, N. (2017). Visual Listening In: Extracting Brand Image Portrayed on Social Media. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1–46. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2978805>
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>
- Lutz, K., & Lutz, R. J. (1977). The Effects of Interactive Imagery on Learning: Application to Advertising. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 62(4), 493–498.
- MacInnis, D. J., Moorman, C., & Jaworski, B. J. (1991). Enhancing and Measuring Consumers' Motivation, Opportunity, and Ability to Process Brand Information from Ads. *Journal of Marketing*, 55(4), 32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1251955>
- Main, K. J., Dahl, D. W., & Darke, P. R. (2007). Deliberative and Automatic Bases of Suspicion: Empirical Evidence of the Sinister Attribution Error. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 17(1), 59–69. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1701_9
- Mayrhofer, M., Matthes, J., Einwiller, S., & Naderer, B. (2020). User generated content presenting brands on social media increases young adults' purchase intention. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(1), 166–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1596447>
- Mazerant, K., Willemsen, L. M., Neijens, P. C., & van Noort, G. (2021). Spot-On Creativity: Creativity Biases and Their Differential Effects on Consumer Responses in (Non-)Real-Time Marketing. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 53, 15–31. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2020.06.004>
- McQuarrie, E. F., & Phillips, B. J. (2005). Indirect persuasion in advertising: How consumers process metaphors presented in pictures and words. *Journal of Advertising*, 34(2), 7–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2005.10639188>
- Meyer, S. B., & Lunnay, B. (2013). The application of abductive and retroductive inference for the design and analysis of theory-driven sociological research. *Sociological Research Online*, 18(1), 86–96. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2819>
- Munar, A. M., & Jacobsen, J. K. S. (2014). Motivations for sharing tourism experiences through social media. *Tourism Management*, 43, 46–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.01.012>
- Munnukka, J., Uusitalo, O., & Toivonen, H. (2016). Credibility of a peer endorser and advertising effectiveness. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 33(3), 182–192. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-11-2014-1221>
- Muntinga, D. G., Moorman, M., & Smit, E. G. (2011). Introducing COBRAs: Exploring motivations for Brand-Related social media use. *International Journal of Advertising*, 30(1), 13–46. <https://doi.org/10.2501/IJA-30-1-013-046>
- Nanne, A. (2022). *Social Drivers of Visual Brand-Related User Generated Content: Creation, Content, and Consequences*. Tilburg University.
- Nanne, A. J., Antheunis, M. L., & van Noort, G. (2023). Using a Photo-Elicitation Procedure to Examine Consumers' Motivations to Post Visual Brand-Related User-Generated Content. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 24(1), 13–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2023.2282967>

- Nanne, A. J., Antheunis, M. L., van der Lee, C. G., Postma, E. O., Wubben, S., & van Noort, G. (2020). The Use of Computer Vision to Analyze Brand-Related User Generated Image Content. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 50*(May), 156–167. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2019.09.003>
- Nanne, A. J., Antheunis, M. L., & van Noort, G. (2021). The role of facial expression and tie strength in sender presence effects on consumers' brand responses towards visual brand-related user generated content. *Computers in Human Behavior, 117*(November 2020), 106628. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106628>
- Netbase. (2019). Brand Passion Report 2019: Top Loved Brands. *NetbaseQuid, 39*. Retrieved from <https://www.netbase.com/blog/brand-passion-report/>
- Obermiller, C., & Spangenberg, E. R. (1998). Development of a scale to measure consumer skepticism toward advertising. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 7*(2), 159–186. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp0702_03
- Olapic. (2016). *Consumer Trust: Keeping it Real*.
- Omnicores. (2021). Instagram by the numbers: Stats, demographics, & fun facts.
- Park, D. H., & Lee, J. (2008). eWOM overload and its effect on consumer behavioral intention depending on consumer involvement. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications, 7*(4), 386–398. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.elerap.2007.11.004>
- Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). *The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion* (L. B. T.-A. in E. S. P. Berkowitz, Ed.). [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60214-2](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60214-2)
- Phua, J., Jin, S. V., & Kim, J. (2017). Gratifications of using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat to follow brands: The moderating effect of social comparison, trust, tie strength, and network homophily on brand identification, brand engagement, brand commitment, and membership intention. *Telematics and Informatics, 34*(1), 412–424. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2016.06.004>
- Pozharliev, R., Rossi, D., & De Angelis, M. (2022). Consumers' self-reported and brain responses to advertising post on Instagram: the effect of number of followers and argument quality. *European Journal of Marketing, 56*(3), 922–948. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-09-2020-0719>
- Presi, C., Maehle, N., & Kleppe, I. A. (2016). Brand selfies: consumer experiences and marketplace conversations. *European Journal of Marketing, 50*(9–10), 1814–1834. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-07-2015-0492>
- Rietveld, R., Mazloom, M., Van Dolen, W., & Worrying, M. (2016). Visual electronic Word of Mouth : a multimodal brand approach and case study. *Paper presented at EMAC 2016, Oslo, Norway*.
- Rietveld, R., van Dolen, W., Mazloom, M., & Worrying, M. (2020). What You Feel, Is What You Like Influence of Message Appeals on Customer Engagement on Instagram. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 49*, 20–53. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2019.06.003>
- Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2019). Celebrity vs. Influencer endorsements in advertising: the role of identification, credibility, and Product-Endorser fit. *International Journal of Advertising, 0*(0), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1634898>

- Schreiner, M., Fischer, T., & Riedl, R. (2019). Impact of content characteristics and emotion on behavioral engagement in social media: literature review and research agenda. *Electronic Commerce Research*, *0123456789*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10660-019-09353-8>
- Sharma, D. (2023). How not who: Message strategies adopted by celebrities v/s social media influencers. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, *00(00)*, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2023.2220326>
- Shehzala, Jaiswal, A. K., Vemireddy, V., & Angeli, F. (2024). Social media “stars” vs “the ordinary” me: influencer marketing and the role of self-discrepancies, perceived homophily, authenticity, self-acceptance and mindfulness. *European Journal of Marketing*, *58(2)*, 590–631. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-02-2023-0141>
- Shepard, R. N. (1967). Recognition memory for words, sentences, and pictures. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, *6(1)*, 156–163. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371\(67\)80067-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371(67)80067-7)
- Shukla, P., Cakici, N. M., & Khalifa, D. (2024). Should luxury brands display their logos prominently? Implications for brand authenticity, coolness and behavioral intentions. *European Journal of Marketing*, *58(1)*, 290–312. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-01-2022-0038>
- Spears, N., & Singh, S. N. (2004). Measuring Attitude toward the Brand and Purchase Intentions. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, *26(2)*, 53–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10641734.2004.10505164>
- Statista. (2019a). Retrieved April 28, 2020, from a website: <https://www.statista.com/topics/1882/instagram/>
- Statista. (2019b). Retrieved April 28, 2020, from b website: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/>
- Statista. (2020). Retrieved April 28, 2020, from b website: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/578364/countries-with-most-instagram-users/>
- Statista. (2024a). Daily time spent on social networking by internet users worldwide from 2012 to 2024. Retrieved June 14, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/433871/daily-social-media-usage-worldwide/#:~:text=How much time do people,minutes in the previous year.>
- Statista. (2024b). Distribution of Instagram users in the United States as of January 2024, by age group. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/398166/us-instagram-user-age-distribution/>
- Statista. (2024c). Most popular social networks worldwide as of April 2024. Retrieved May 8, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>
- Tafesse, W. (2014). Content strategies and audience response on Facebook brand pages. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, *32(4)*, 413–435. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02634501011078138>
- Tafesse, W., & Wien, A. (2018). Using message strategy to drive consumer behavioral engagement on social media. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *35(3)*, 241–253. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-08-2016-1905>

- Taylor, D. G., Lewin, J. E., & Strutton, D. (2011). Friends, fans, and followers: Do ads work on social networks? How gender and age shape receptivity. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 51(1), 258–275. <https://doi.org/10.2501/JAR-51-1-258-275>
- Todorov, A., Chaiken, S., & Henderson, M. D. (2002). *The Persuasion Handbook: Developments in Theory and Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412976046>
- Tran, K., He, X., Zhang, L., & Sun, J. (2016). Rich Image Captioning in the Wild. *IEEE Computer Society Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition Workshops*, 434–441. <https://doi.org/10.1109/CVPRW.2016.61>
- Tutaj, K., & van Reijmersdal, E. A. (2012). Effects of online advertising format and persuasion knowledge on audience reactions. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 18(1), 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2011.620765>
- Valentini, C., Romenti, S., Murtarelli, G., & Pizzetti, M. (2018). Digital visual engagement: influencing purchase intentions on Instagram. *Journal of Communication Management*, 22(4), 362–381. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-01-2018-0005>
- Van Berlo, Z. M. C., Campbell, C., & Voorveld, H. A. M. (2024). The MADE Framework: Best Practices for Creating Effective Experimental Stimuli Using Generative AI. *Journal of Advertising*, 53(5), 732–753. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2024.2397777>
- Van Noort, G., Antheunis, M. L., & van Reijmersdal, E. A. (2012). Social connections and the persuasiveness of viral campaigns in social network sites: Persuasive intent as the underlying mechanism. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 18(1), 39–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2011.620764>
- Van Reijmersdal, E. A., Brussee, E., Evans, N., & Wojdyski, B. W. (2023). Disclosure-Driven Recognition of Native Advertising: A Test of Two Competing Mechanisms. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 23(2), 85–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2022.2146991>
- Van Reijmersdal, E. A., Franssen, M. L., van Noort, G., Oprea, S. J., Vandeberg, L., Reusch, S., & Boerman, S. C. (2016). Effects of Disclosing Sponsored Content in Blogs: How the Use of Resistance Strategies Mediates Effects on Persuasion. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 60(12), 1458–1474. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764216660141>
- Van Reijmersdal, E. A., Rozendaal, E., Hudders, L., Vanwesenbeeck, I., Cauberghe, V., & Berlo, Z. M. C. Van. (2020). Effects of Disclosing Influencer Marketing in Videos : An Eye Tracking Study Among Children in Early Adolescence. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 49, 94–106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2019.09.001>
- Van Reijmersdal, E. A., Rozendaal, E., Smink, N., van Noort, G., & Buijzen, M. (2017). Processes and effects of targeted online advertising among children. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(3), 396–414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2016.1196904>
- Van Selm, M., & Helberger, N. (2019). Talking to People II: Qualitative Interviews. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Methods for Media Policy Research*. (pp. 161–177).
- Ver Hoef, J. M., & Boveng, P. L. (2007). Quasi-Poisson Vs. Negative Binomial Regression: How Should We Model Overdispersed Count Data? *Ecology*, 88(11), 2766–2772.
- Voorveld, H. A. M. (2019). Brand Communication in Social Media: A Research Agenda. *Journal of Advertising*, 48(1), 14–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2019.1588808>

- Wagner, B. C., & Petty, R. E. (2011). The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion: Thoughtful and non-thoughtful social influence. In *Theories in social psychology*. (pp. 96–116). Hoboken, NJ, US: Wiley Blackwell.
- Wang, X., Yu, C., & Wei, Y. (2012). Social Media Peer Communication and Impacts on Purchase Intentions: A Consumer Socialization Framework. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 26*(4), 198–208. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2011.11.004>
- Willemsen, L. M., Mazerant, K., Kamphuis, A. L., & van der Veen, G. (2019). Let's Get Real (Time)! The potential of real-time marketing to catalyze the sharing of brand messages. *International Journal of Advertising, 37*(5), 828–848. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2018.1485214>
- Wojdyski, B. W., & Evans, N. J. (2016). Going Native: Effects of Disclosure Position and Language on the Recognition and Evaluation of Online Native Advertising. *Journal of Advertising, 45*(2), 157–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2015.1115380>
- Wojdyski, B. W., & Evans, N. J. (2020). The Covert Advertising Recognition and Effects (CARE) model: Processes of persuasion in native advertising and other masked formats. *International Journal of Advertising, 39*(1), 4–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1658438>
- Wright, P., Friestad, M., & Boush, D. M. (2005). Development of Marketplace Persuasion Knowledge in Children; Adolescents; and Young Adults. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 24*(2), 222–233. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1509/jppm.2005.24.2.222>
- Young, A. W., & Bruce, V. (2011). Understanding person perception. *British Journal of Psychology, 102*(4), 959–974. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.2011.02045.x>
- Zerfass, A., Verhoeven, P., Moreno, A., Tench, R., & Vercic, D. (2017). *How Strategic Communication Deals with The Challenges of Visualisation, Social Bots and Hypermodernity. Results of a Survey in 50 Countries. No Title*. Brussels: Quadriga Media Berlin.



Appendices

Appendix A. Training and Codebook per type of strategy (functional / emotional)

Chapter 2. Persuasive Strategies in Brand-Related Posts from Brands versus Users on Visual Social Media and their Impact on Engagement

Training brands Instagram – FUNCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Welcome and thank you for helping us code persuasive strategies in Instagram posts!

This study conducted by The University of Amsterdam is about persuasive strategies in brand-related posts on Instagram and the impact on user engagement. We conduct a content analysis about which strategies brands apply in their posts and which strategies ‘regular’ users apply in brand-related posts.

You are about to code brand-related Instagram posts from consumer goods / tech / automotive / food & beverage brands and from regular users with brands tagged in their posts. The training exists of some explanation, examples of Instagram posts and some comprehension coding.

The actual coding task exists of answering questions about possible strategies used in the image and in the caption. The coding task starts after finishing the training. Keep in mind that there are comprehension checks in the actual coding part, so make sure you don’t skip the training, otherwise you risk not being paid.

What do we mean with a ‘brand-related post’?

- an Instagram post by a brand (company)
- or an Instagram post by a user with the brand tagged (e.g., @nike, @bmw) in image and/or caption of the post
- the post contains brand-related information (e.g., showing a logo, brand name, product and/or only by tagging the brand)

In the coding task you will see Instagram posts with images and captions from brands and from users. We’ll ask questions about the image and caption separately. You can answer the questions only with Yes, present (1) / No, not present (0). It is possible that you answer ‘Yes (1)’ on multiple questions.

When you start the coding task, you will receive the following questions per post (image and caption separately):

Image	Caption
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does the image show a brand name/logo? - Does the image show a product of the brand? - Does the image show a person using the product? - Does the image show product features, benefits of the product, and/ or how it can be used? - Does the image encourage to take action, such as click on a link, like /comment on the post, check a profile, see stories, visit website? Or asks a question? - Does the image show a 'good cause' (e.g., philanthropic, environmental, social)? - Does the image show information about a deal and/or promotions and/or special prices and/or a discount? - Does the image show useful information, not related to the product(s)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does the caption mention a product (could also be in a hashtag)? - Does the caption mention product features, benefits of the product, and/ or how it can be used? - Does the caption encourage to take action, such as click on a link, like /comment on the post, check a profile, see stories, visit website? Or asks a question? - Does the caption mention a 'good cause' (e.g., philanthropic, environmental, social)? - Does the caption mention information about a deal and/or promotions and/or special prices and/or a discount? - Does the caption mention useful information, not related to the product(s)?

Important coding rules:

1. Take the questions 'literally', so for example when asked for emotions in words in the caption... make sure to spot them literally. It is not about how you feel or what emotions are evoked with you as coder/reader, but it must be clearly visible in the image and/or in the caption. So, take all the questions literally!
2. The questions in the coding file always refer to the (tagged) brand of the post (column A in Excel coding file), so no other brands visible in image or mentioned in caption.
3. Question about products always refer to products of the particular (tagged) brand (column A in Excel).
4. If you are in doubt about answering a question (yes or no): always choose the 'no' option.
5. In the excel file for filling out the coding use the following answers:
Yes = write down 1
No = write down 0
6. Always judge the image and the caption separately. So only look at the caption and don't use the image to help understand the question about the caption and the other way around.

Training brands Instagram – EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

Welcome and thank you for helping us code persuasive strategies in Instagram posts!

This study conducted by the University of Amsterdam is about persuasive strategies in brand-related posts on Instagram and the impact on user engagement. We conduct a content analysis about which strategies brands apply in their posts and which strategies ‘regular’ users apply in brand-related posts.

You are about to code brand-related Instagram posts from consumer goods / tech / automotive / food & beverage brands and from regular users with brands tagged in their posts. The training exists of some explanation, examples of Instagram posts and some comprehension coding.

The actual coding task exists of answering questions about possible strategies used in the image and in the caption. The coding task starts after finishing the training. Keep in mind that there are comprehension checks in the actual coding part, so make sure you don’t skip the training, otherwise you risk not being paid.

What do we mean with a ‘brand-related post’?

- an Instagram post by a brand (company)
- or an Instagram post by a user with the brand tagged (e.g., @nike, @bmw) in image and/or caption of the post
- the post contains brand-related information (e.g., showing a logo, brand name, product and/or only by tagging the brand)

In the coding task you will see Instagram posts with images and captions from brands and from users. We’ll ask questions about the image and caption separately. You can answer the questions only with Yes, present (1) / No, not present (0). It is possible that you answer ‘Yes (1)’ on multiple questions.

When you start the coding task, you will receive the following questions per post (image and caption separately):

Image	Caption
- Does the image show a person?	- Does the caption mention (or tags) a person?
- Does the image show a famous person (celebrity)?	- Does the caption mention (or tags) a famous person (celebrity)?
- Do people in the image show emotions (feelings such as happiness, love, fear, anger, or hatred)?	- Does the caption use emoji's (sad face, happy face, fire emoji, a heart sign or any emoji referring to a mood/emotion would be an expression of emotion)?
- Is the image entertaining or intended to be funny?	- Does the caption mention words expressing emotions? (happy, sad, anger, hate and so on)
	- Is the caption entertaining or intended to be funny?

Important coding rules:

1. Take the questions 'literally', so when asked for emotions in words in the caption... make sure to spot them literally. It is not about how you feel or what emotions are evoked with you as coder/reader, but it must be clearly visible in the image and/or in the caption. So, take it literally!
2. The questions in the coding file always refer to the (tagged) brand of the post (column A in Excel coding file), so no other brands visible in image or mentioned in caption.
3. Question about products always refer to products of the particular (tagged) brand (column A in Excel).
4. If you are in doubt about answering a question (yes or no): always choose the 'no' option.
5. In the excel file for filling out the coding use the following answers:
Yes = write down 1
No = write down 0
6. Always judge the image and the caption separately. So only look at the caption and don't use the image to help understand the question about the caption and the other way around.



Appendix B. Interview guide

Chapter 3. From Friends to Brands: Consumers' Coping with Persuasive Attempts in Brand-Related User-Generated Content in Visual Social Media

Introduction

Short keywords: Only interested in user posts, so this research is not about influencers and brands.

1. Experiences with brand-related posts from users

1. Do you ever see a post or a story from regular users with a brand in it? Yes / No
2. What do you notice about such a branded post?
3. How do you recognize a post with a brand in it? [focal question]
4. When do you consider a post to be brand related?
(logo, brand name in image, tag, hashtag, caption/image)
5. Do you ever see friends doing that in your timeline?
(not being influencers or brands; partly overlaps with question 1, but leave it to make sure it is covered)
6. What kind of thoughts and feelings do you have with that? [focal question]
7. Do you ever like such a post? Yes / No
 - a. Why, why not?
 - b. How is the brand incorporated in that post?
8. Do you ever post something on Instagram with a brand tagged in a post?
 - a. Why/why not?
9. When do you consider someone an influencer?
(what do you base that on: number of followers ... or ...)
10. If people on your timeline post brand-related posts, do you also know these people outside of Instagram? (friend, acquaintance, neighbour, colleague or ... or only from instagram)
11. What do you mainly use instagram for?
(time to kill, inspiration, contact, or .. or ...)
12. What do you especially see passing by from your friends?

2. Recognize (RQ1) / Understand (RQ2) / Evaluate (RQ3) [focal questions for the study]

View your own timeline and ask questions about it (max 20 minutes)

1. Can you show an example of a branded post in your own timeline?
 - A. What do you see in the post?
Where do you see the brand in this post? [focal question]
Do you consider this a brand related post?
 - B. Why do you think this person included a brand in the post? [focal question]
 - C. what do you think about there being a brand in this post? [focal question]
 - D. Is the post about the brand or coincidence? Subconscious?
 - E. what do you think of the post? Would you like, save, comment on such a post or perhaps buy a product from this brand? Show INTERACTION
 - F. do you also know this user in real life (outside of Instagram)?
2. Do you see the posts you show more often on your timeline? Or what do the tagged posts usually look like?
3. Do you ever see giveaways with users? Or that they ask to respond to something or they participate themselves ?

3. Example Interviewer Posts [only use when lack of examples participant – back-up]

We just saw some posts on your timeline. I've also collected a few more examples of tagged posts. Answer the questions below for each set of examples.

- A. Where do you see the brand in this post? [focal question]
- B. Why do you think this person included a brand in the post? [focal question]
- C. what do you think about there being a brand in this post? [focal question]
- D. what do you think of the post? Would you like, save, comment on such a post or perhaps buy a product from this brand?
- E. Is it similar to something you also see on your timeline? / Do you sometimes see this with your friends?

4. General social media questions:

1. Which social media do you use?
 2. What is your favorite social medium?
 3. How do you use Instagram the most (scroll through posts, reels, stories)
WHY ?
 4. Do you always go to your timeline or more to 'explore'?
 5. What type of people do you follow on instagram mainly (friends, influencers, acquaintances, celebs, brands)
 6. How many followers do you think most of the regular users you follow have?
- Finally, is there anything else I haven't asked that you think is important to discuss?

A

Appendix C. Motivations Table

Chapter 3. From Friends to Brands: Consumers' Coping with Persuasive Attempts in Brand-Related User-Generated Content in Visual Social Media

Motivations		Supporting quotes	Relation to persuasive attempt
Support	Support small / new business	"I suspect that he or the organizer personally knows him and wants to, uhm, yes, what do you call that? Support. Or that he, uhm, the fighters, well, he is here in some way, directly or indirectly, he is involved in this." Participant 13, (female, 35)	Considered to be a persuasive attempt
	Brand loyalty	"That he simply has a product and is happy with the store's service." Participant 6 (male, 30)	Considered to be a persuasive attempt
	Support good cause	"I sometimes think it's nice that people have a certain passion for their brand, because they may not yet know the whole world, but for example they are on a mission to make the world more sustainable, for example I... the clothing indeed returns 5 percent, for example. to a good cause. I like that and I also enjoy discovering new brands." Participant 10 (male, 27)	Considered to be a persuasive attempt
Self-expression	Show off, show socio-economic status	"Fine that my friends do it, and it is fun to share with others. For instance: high end restaurants: they consciously consider sharing this, to show that they can afford to eat there. Great fun, if they like it and great exposure for those brands and they don't have to do anything for it." Participant 19 (female, 27)	Non-persuasive motivation
	Express taste, classiness	"Yes, I think that was done very consciously, to show that you possess that or something like "look at me, wearing this shoe in this cool environment". I don't think she would have done this with a Zeeman shoe, no, but she would have done this with a Nike shoe. Yes, so she is aware of fashion and the brand on the shoe." Participant 5 (female, 27)	Non-persuasive motivation
	Share location	"Then if it was just a nice photo, I would still just post it and tag the restaurant, because then it's just a fun/nice photo that I want to show. I don't really care about putting the name of the restaurant in the spotlight, negatively or positively. I just want to show that I'm doing something fun or that I'm somewhere, which I just want to let you know." Participant 7 (female, 34)	Non-persuasive motivation
	Express happiness with products	"I think he did this because he was happy with it. He thought it looked Instagrammable." Participant 16 (female, 35)	Non-persuasive motivation

	Show good life (highlight in life)	"I really enjoy posting everything, because it seems like a kind of photo diary for myself, with highlights of things that I really like. Yes, but I won't post negative messages on Instagram, so it's actually just look at the highlights of my life." Participant 5 (female, 27)	Non-persuasive motivation
	Share fun / entertaining	"Yes, so if someone makes it funny and also shows the downside of motherhood. Yes, then, oh, it really sucks sometimes, yes, and then we can just laugh about it." Participant 9 (female, 27)	Non-persuasive motivation
Relational	Inspire others	"Because this a comfy brand. He likes to share that. He like to inspire his friend and support the brand. He wants to send more engagement to the brand." Participant 16 (female, 35)	Considered to be a persuasive attempt
Personal branding	Wannabe influencer	"I think she had an agreement about this post or the brand is from one of her friends. It could also be the case that she is just a wannabe influencer. Or she likes to help grow the reach of the brand and meanwhile she likes to have a nice Insta feed herself with this post." Participant 8 (female, 34)	Considered to be a persuasive attempt
	Obviously show brand, but pretend it is casual	"If the brand is clearly in the picture and not tagged, that is different compared to what an influencer does. Some people do forcefully tag the brand. For certain brands: people want to wear it and show it and be proud but pretend that they don't want to show it. They do it subtle. Casual, but secretly obvious. Consciously in the picture! People also do it the other way around: they don't think it's a cool brand and deliberately leave it out of the picture." Participant 19 (female, 27)	Considered to be a persuasive attempt
	Aesthetics	"Then also that it is just a beautiful photo for her feed. Oh I've been here and I'm just posting this." Participant 17 (female, 20)	Considered to be a persuasive attempt
Interactional	Question for followers	"I think he just really likes the shoes on this one, so he would like to know, from where are they?, so that yes, he will hopefully get a response via Instagram. So it is, the question for information to find these shoes." Participant 10 (male, 27)	Non-persuasive motivation
	Complain	"To really complain about PostNL, I know she was very frustrated. This is not the first post, so to speak, that is about PostNL." Participant 13 (female, 35)	Considered to be a persuasive attempt
	Competition	"I think it is less contemporary, it was done much more before. But either my group of friends is getting older, that's also possible. But I see that happen sometimes. But then they are mainly about photo shoots that you can win or clothing, vouchers and things like that and it is mainly women who share that." Participant 18 (female, 35)	Considered to be a persuasive attempt

Appendix D. Results Mediation Model Table per Brand

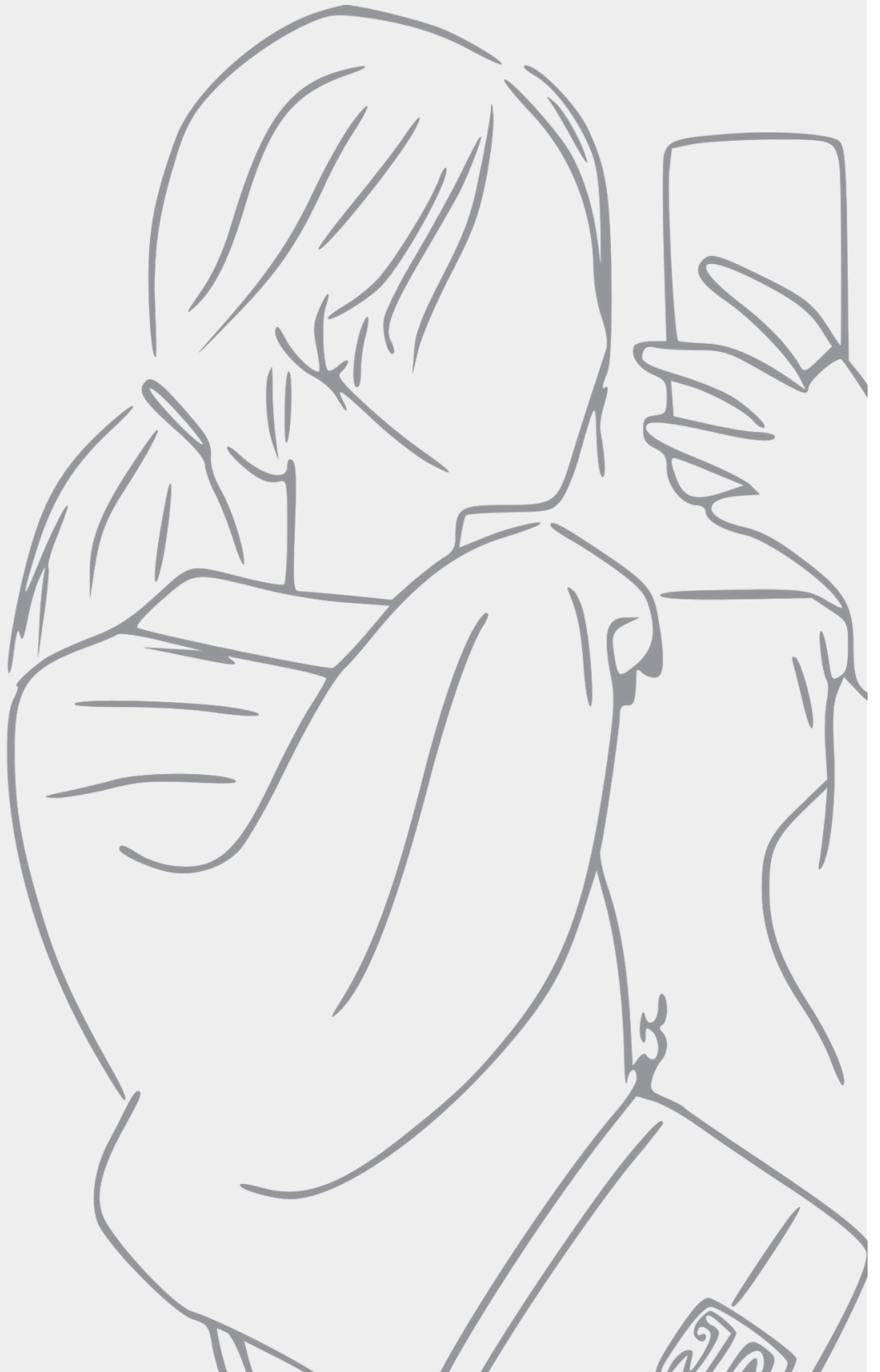
Chapter 4. Inspirators and Wannabes: the Impact of Persuasive Strategies through Perceived Motivations on the Recognition of Persuasive Attempts in Visual Br-UGC.

Results Mediation Model Table per Brand: Effect of Emotional Strategy (vs. Functional Strategy) on Recognizing Persuasive Attempt through the two Perceived Motivations of Personal Branding and Inspire Others

Brand	Path	Effect	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
Apple	Path A1	Emotional Strategy → PM: Personal Branding	-0.20	0.14	-1.46	.145	-0.477	0.071
Apple	Path A2	Emotional Strategy → PM: inspire others	-0.73	0.15	-4.80	.000	-1.028	-0.429
Apple	Path B1	PM: Personal Branding → Recognition of PA	0.66	0.08	7.76	.000	0.491	0.827
Apple	Path B2	PM: inspire others → Recognition of PA	0.76	0.09	8.26	.000	0.584	0.951
Apple	Total Effect	Emotional Strategy → Recognition of PA	-0.69	0.22	-3.17	.002	-1.120	-0.260
Apple	Direct Effect	Emotional Strategy → Recognition of PA	-0.06	0.17	-0.32	.753	-0.396	0.287
Apple	Indirect Effect 1	Emotional Strategy → PM: Personal Branding → Recognition of PA	-0.48	0.12			-0.731	-0.258
Apple	Indirect Effect 2	Emotional Strategy → PM: inspire others → Recognition of PA	-0.16	0.11			-0.363	0.055
BMW	Path A1	Emotional Strategy → PM: Personal Branding	0.07	0.14	0.52	.602	-0.206	0.354
BMW	Path A2	Emotional Strategy → PM: inspire others	-0.99	0.17	-5.67	.000	-1.332	-0.643
BMW	Path B1	PM: Personal Branding → Recognition of PA	0.65	0.10	6.57	.000	0.452	0.841
BMW	Path B2	PM: inspire others → Recognition of PA	0.62	0.10	6.27	.000	0.425	0.816
BMW	Total Effect	Emotional Strategy → Recognition of PA	-1.06	0.21	-5.02	.000	-1.477	-0.644
BMW	Direct Effect	Emotional Strategy → Recognition of PA	-0.99	0.17	-5.67	.000	-1.332	-0.643
BMW	Indirect Effect 1	Emotional Strategy → PM: Personal Branding → Recognition of PA	0.05	0.09			-0.140	0.230
BMW	Indirect Effect 2	Emotional Strategy → PM: inspire others → Recognition of PA	-0.12	0.09			-0.328	0.051

Brand	Path	Effect	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
IKEA	Path A1	Emotional Strategy → PM: Personal Branding	-0.92	0.13	-7.22	.000	-1.176	-0.670
IKEA	Path A2	Emotional Strategy → PM: inspire others	-0.76	0.18	-4.21	.000	-1.119	-0.404
IKEA	Path B1	PM: Personal Branding → Recognition of PA	0.49	0.10	5.03	.000	0.299	0.688
IKEA	Path B2	PM: inspire others → Recognition of PA	0.77	0.07	10.34	.000	0.619	0.912
IKEA	Total Effect	Emotional Strategy → Recognition of PA	-1.12	0.21	-5.33	.000	-1.528	-0.702
IKEA	Direct Effect	Emotional Strategy → Recognition of PA	-0.76	0.18	-4.21	.000	-1.119	-0.404
IKEA	Indirect Effect 1	Emotional Strategy → PM: Personal Branding → Recognition of PA	-0.46	0.12			-0.705	-0.240
IKEA	Indirect Effect 2	Emotional Strategy → PM: inspire others → Recognition of PA	0.10	0.13			-0.149	0.352
Nike	Path A1	Emotional Strategy → PM: Personal Branding	0.31	0.15	2.09	.038	0.017	0.600
Nike	Path A2	Emotional Strategy → PM: inspire others	-0.49	0.20	-2.39	.018	-0.888	-0.084
Nike	Path B1	PM: Personal Branding → Recognition of PA	0.55	0.10	5.67	.000	0.359	0.742
Nike	Path B2	PM: inspire others → Recognition of PA	0.80	0.10	8.15	.000	0.609	0.999
Nike	Total Effect	Emotional Strategy → Recognition of PA	-1.22	0.21	-5.77	.000	-1.643	-0.805
Nike	Direct Effect	Emotional Strategy → Recognition of PA	-0.49	0.20	-2.39	.018	-0.888	-0.084
Nike	Indirect Effect 1	Emotional Strategy → PM: Personal Branding → Recognition of PA	0.17	0.08			0.011	0.344
Nike	Indirect Effect 2	Emotional Strategy → PM: inspire others → Recognition of PA	-0.91	0.19			-1.317	-0.555

A



Summary

In recent years, there has been a transformation in how social media platforms are used by consumers and brands alike. Visual content, including images, videos, and memes, now pervades every aspect of online social interaction, marking an important departure from the text-centric era. This shift is particularly evident on platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok, which have pioneered the use of visual media. Brands have recognized this transition and increasingly integrated visual content into their online strategies to engage consumers. This dissertation explores the dynamics of this shift, focusing specifically on visual Brand-related User Generated Content (Br-UGC), which encompasses visual content created by social media users that features or mentions brands.

Despite the growing prevalence of Br-UGC, there remain significant knowledge gaps in understanding its persuasive potential and impact. First, while research has explored content aspects like visuals and information density in Br-UGC, it has not systematically addressed visual perceptions or persuasive strategies such as emotional and informational appeals. Second, Br-UGC, may be perceived as more trustworthy and influential than content from brands or influencers, yet how consumers cope with such persuasive attempts, particularly from familiar sources, remains under-researched. Third, there's a gap in understanding how perceived motivations of Br-UGC posters, such as personal branding and inspire others, affect the recognition of persuasive attempts. This dissertation aims to explore these areas by (1) examining the strategies employed in Br-UGC compared to those from brands, (2) how consumers cope with Br-UGC, and (3) how persuasive strategies influence the recognition and impact of these strategies through perceived motivations on the recognition of persuasive attempts.

Main Conclusions

This dissertation examines the use and impact of persuasive strategies, how consumers cope with Br-UGC, and how these strategies through perceived motivations impact the recognition of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. Seven key conclusions can be drawn, which address significant research gaps in the advertising literature concerning persuasive strategies, perceived motivations, and coping with Br-UGC in visual social media.

1. Brands and users differ in their usage of persuasive strategies. The results of the content analysis in Chapter 2 show that brands predominantly use functional strategies in their social media posts, focusing on functional appeals, while users employ more emotional strategies, with emotional appeals being the most common. This indicates a divergence in the persuasive strategies between brands and users, suggesting that users do not fully mimic brand strategies in their Br-UGC.

2. The impact of persuasive strategies on user engagement differs depending on the source of the post (brand or user). In Chapter 2, the results show that the effectiveness of persuasive strategies on engagement, such as likes and comments, varies depending on the source of the post. Brands' functional strategies generally

increase engagement, particularly functional appeals, while users' emotional strategies have mixed effects. For instance, emotional appeals do not significantly influence likes, but do influence comments.

3. Consumers are generally able to cope with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC, but not always. The results of the interview study in Chapter 3 demonstrate that participants could cope with persuasive attempts in Br-UGC to a certain extent. They were mostly able to recognize these attempts when brands were tagged in the post or brand logos were clearly visible in the images. In other circumstances, however, the persuasive attempt was not so promptly recognized. Furthermore, participants exhibited an understanding of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC posts, effectively differentiating between persuasive and non-persuasive motivations of the poster, such as identifying brand support or personal branding as inherently persuasive. Lastly, the evaluative attitudes towards the persuasive attempts in the Br-UGC posts varied widely, ranging from positive responses, like feeling inspired, to negative reactions, such as being annoyed by what they perceived as wannabe influencers.

4. The relationship between the consumer and the source of the post is relevant to the recognition and evaluation of a persuasive attempt. The interviews in Chapter 3 further revealed that the relationship strength between the consumer and the poster impacts the recognition and evaluation of persuasive attempts in Br-UGC. Strong ties often led to participants overlooking persuasive intentions, resulting in more favorable attitudes towards the posts without coping mechanisms being activated. Participants indicated that they do not anticipate brands to be present in posts from friends or fellow consumers. Instead, they expect such persuasion from influencers and brands.

5. Perceived motivations of the poster influence how consumers cope with Br-UGC. The interviews in Chapter 3 revealed that the perceived motivations behind Br-UGC posts, especially when posters were perceived as posting due to personal branding motivations or to inspire others, play a crucial role in how consumers evaluate and respond to these posts. Personal branding motivations tended to elicit more negative reactions among participants compared to motivations perceived as supportive or altruistic, which were valued more positively.

6. Functional strategies, compared to emotional strategies, lead to consumers having stronger perceptions of the Br-UGC poster having personal branding and inspiration as motivations. The findings of the experiment in Chapter 4 indicate that functional strategies in Br-UGC lead to consumers perceiving that a poster has a motivation for posting Br-UGC, whether this is personal branding or to inspire. This is particularly noteworthy since we expected that functional strategies would influence perceptions about the personal branding motivation, but not on the perceived motivation to inspire others. The argument for this effect on personal branding was that functional strategies induce elaborate processing of the Br-UGC: functional strategies resemble brand or influencer content that focuses on products, and as such, Br-UGC with

this type of strategy would lead consumers to have stronger perceptions that the poster has a personal branding motivation. This aligns with the concept of agent knowledge, where viewers recognize the intent to build an online (personal) brand. However, the effect of functional strategies on perceptions that the poster has the motivation to inspire others was unexpected, suggesting that functional strategies might inherently trigger agent knowledge, thereby enhancing the perceived strength of any motivation the poster of Br-UGC might have. Further research should delve into this phenomenon to better understand the underlying mechanisms.

7. Functional strategies in Br-UGC, as compared to emotional strategies, lead to higher recognition of persuasive attempts, which is explained by the perceived motivations of the poster. Br-UGC containing functional strategies leads to a higher recognition of persuasive attempts among consumers than content with emotional strategies. This may be partly explained by the nature of these strategies. Functional strategies resemble branded and influencer content that explicitly promotes products. The findings show that the persuasive attempt of these strategies is more recognizable, and that the consumers' perceptions of the motives of the poster explain this effect. In contrast, emotional strategies often focus on people, facial expressions, and storytelling, with the brand being tagged subtle and the product not being the central focus. The findings show that persuasive attempts of these strategies are harder to recognize. Importantly, the findings outlined in Conclusion 6 also explain this difference: consumers are more aware about the poster motivations for Br-UGC containing functional strategies (compared to emotional) and, the stronger these perceptions about the poster's motivation – both for inspiring others and for personal branding –, the more recognizable the persuasive attempt becomes. These findings underscore the importance of consumers' perceived motivations of Br-UGC posters in understanding why Br-UGC is persuasive.

Practical Implications

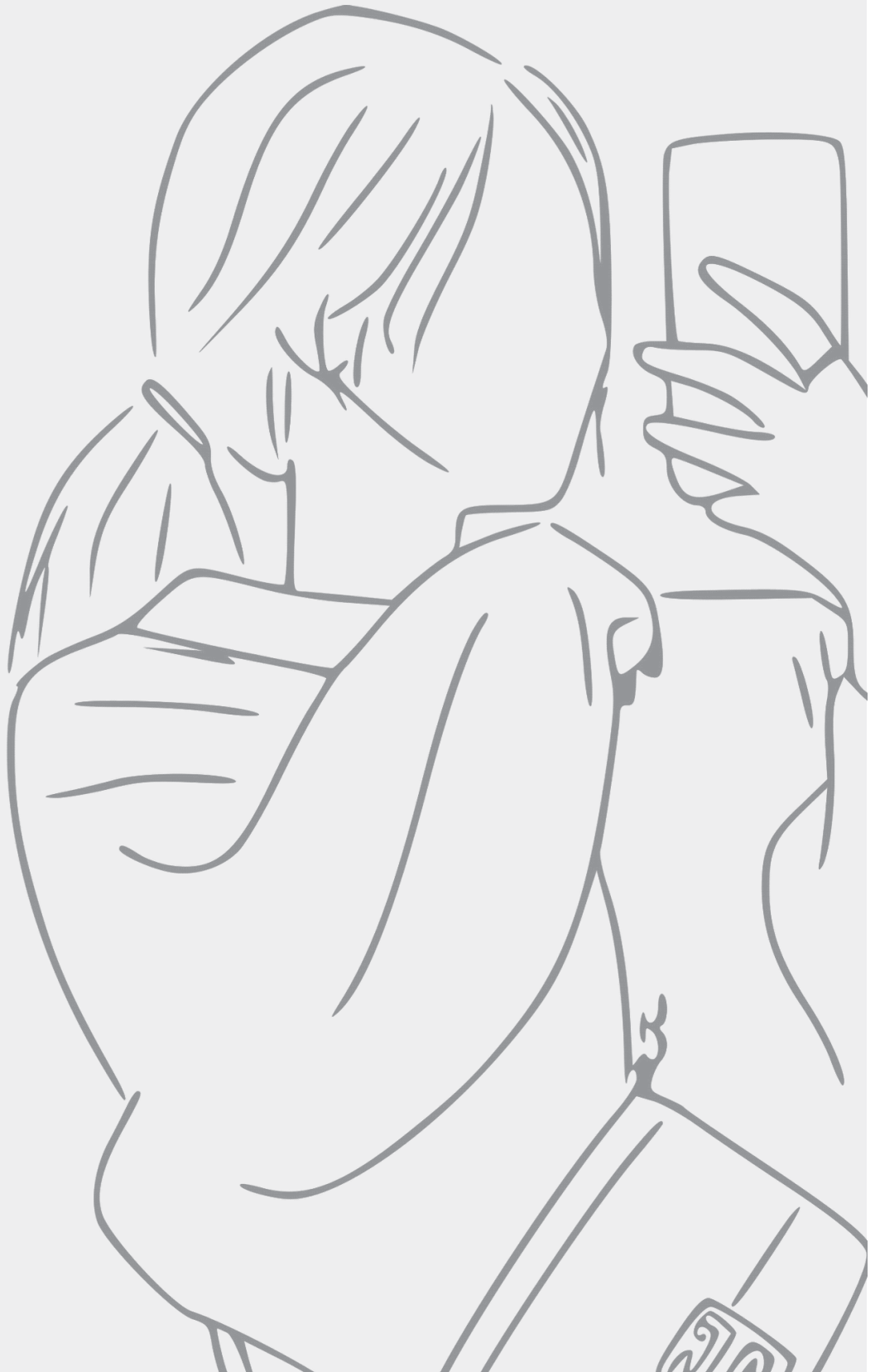
The findings of this dissertation present several practical implications for both brands and regulators. For brands' own brand-related content, it is crucial to focus on functional and social cause appeals within their posts. By reposting Br-UGC with informative, social cause, and emotional strategies, brands can enhance consumer engagement significantly. Interactional strategies such as call-to-action posts may not be as effective in boosting engagement; instead, brands should demonstrate product benefits and associate with social causes to achieve better results in their own branded content.

Additionally, brands should selectively repost Br-UGC that employs emotional appeals to foster genuine connections with their audience. By blending functional strategies with authentic user experiences, brands can effectively balance perceived motivations, which can lead to more positive consumer responses. Encouraging consumers to feature brands

in images or as location tags rather than through direct tags can also be beneficial, as direct tags are sometimes perceived negatively by consumers.

From a regulatory perspective, transparency measures are vital. Regulators should consider mandating the automatic indication of brand presence in social media posts to enhance transparency and protect consumers from subtle persuasive attempts. This would hold social media platforms accountable for their marketing practices and ensure ethical standards are maintained. Enhancing transparency in this way helps protect consumers and ensures that brands operate with greater responsibility in their advertising efforts.

Overall, the dissertation contributes to advertising research by improving the understanding of persuasive strategies in Br-UGC, consumers' coping with persuasive attempts, and the perceived motivations of Br-UGC posters. These insights are valuable for both academic research and practical applications in social media marketing. The insights provide new avenues for future research to explore various aspects of Br-UGC further, thereby enhancing the understanding and application of social media marketing strategies in an evolving digital landscape.



Nederlandse Samenvatting

In de afgelopen jaren heeft een transformatie plaatsgevonden in de manier waarop sociale mediaplatforms worden gebruikt door zowel consumenten als merken. Visuele content, zoals afbeeldingen, video's en memes, is nu zichtbaar aanwezig in alle aspecten van online sociale interactie. Dit markeert een belangrijke verschuiving ten opzichte van het eerdere tekstgeoriënteerde tijdperk. Deze trend is vooral zichtbaar op platforms zoals Snapchat, Instagram en TikTok, die voorop lopen in het gebruik van visuele content. Merken hebben deze overgang omarmd. Ze integreren steeds meer visuele content in hun onlinestrategieën om consumenten te betrekken. Dit proefschrift onderzoekt de dynamiek van deze verschuiving, met een specifieke focus op visuele merkgerelateerde User Generated Content (UGC) — visuele content gecreëerd door sociale mediagebruikers waarin merken worden getoond of genoemd.

Ondanks de toenemende aanwezigheid van merkgerelateerde UGC blijft een aanzienlijke kenniskloof bestaan in het begrijpen van het overtuigingspotentieel en de impact ervan. Ten eerste, hoewel eerder onderzoek zich heeft gericht op kenmerken van de content - zoals visuele elementen en de hoeveelheid informatie in merkgerelateerde UGC - zijn visuele percepties of overtuigingsstrategieën niet systematisch onderzocht. Denk hierbij aan emotionele en informatieve strategieën. Ten tweede kan merkgerelateerde UGC als betrouwbaarder en invloedrijker worden ervaren dan content van merken zelf of influencers. Echter, hoe consumenten omgaan met dergelijke overtuigingspogingen, vooral wanneer deze afkomstig zijn van bekende gebruikers, is nog onvoldoende bestudeerd. Ten derde ontbreekt het inzicht in hoe de waargenomen motivaties van merkgerelateerde UGC-posters, zoals persoonlijke branding en het inspireren van anderen, de herkenning van overtuigingspogingen beïnvloeden. Dit proefschrift richt zich op het dichten van deze kenniskloof door (1) strategieën in merkgerelateerde UGC te vergelijken met die van merken, (2) te analyseren hoe consumenten omgaan met merkgerelateerde UGC en (3) te onderzoeken hoe overtuigingsstrategieën de herkenning en impact beïnvloeden door de rol van waargenomen motivaties op de herkenning van overtuigingspogingen te bestuderen.

Belangrijkste conclusies

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt het gebruik en de impact van overtuigingsstrategieën, hoe consumenten omgaan met merkgerelateerde UGC, en hoe deze strategieën, door waargenomen motivaties, de herkenning van overtuigingspogingen in merkgerelateerde UGC beïnvloeden. Uit het onderzoek kunnen zeven belangrijke conclusies worden getrokken die aanzienlijke kennishiaten blootleggen in de reclametheorie, met betrekking tot overtuigingsstrategieën, waargenomen motivaties en de manier waarop consumenten omgaan met merkgerelateerde UGC op visuele sociale media.

1. Merken en gebruikers verschillen in hun gebruik van overtuigingsstrategieën.

De inhoudsanalyse in Hoofdstuk 2 laat zien dat merken voornamelijk functionele strategieën toepassen in hun social media-posts, waarbij de nadruk ligt op de functionele

kenmerken van producten of het merk. Gebruikers daarentegen hanteren vaker emotionele strategieën, gericht op het oproepen van emoties. Dit duidt op een duidelijk verschil in overtuigingsstrategieën tussen merken en gebruikers. Het suggereert ook dat gebruikers de strategieën van merken niet volledig kopiëren in hun merkgerelateerde UGC.

2. De impact van overtuigingsstrategieën op gebruikersbetrokkenheid verschilt afhankelijk van wie het post (merk of gebruiker). De resultaten in Hoofdstuk 2 laten zien dat de effectiviteit van overtuigingsstrategieën op betrokkenheid, zoals *likes* en *comments*, verschilt afhankelijk van wie het post. Functionele strategieën van merken vergroten over het algemeen de betrokkenheid, terwijl emotionele strategieën van gebruikers gemengde effecten hebben. Emotionele strategieën beïnvloeden bijvoorbeeld niet significant de *likes*, maar wel de *comments*.

3. Consumenten kunnen omgaan met overtuigingspogingen in merkgerelateerde UGC, maar dit is niet altijd het geval. De resultaten van de interviewstudie in Hoofdstuk 3 tonen aan dat deelnemers tot op zekere hoogte in staat zijn om overtuigingspogingen in merkgerelateerde UGC te herkennen. Deze herkenning was vooral duidelijk wanneer merken werden getagd in de post of wanneer merklogo's zichtbaar waren in de afbeeldingen. In andere gevallen werden de overtuigingspogingen echter minder snel opgemerkt. Daarnaast gaven deelnemers blijk van inzicht in overtuigingspogingen in merkgerelateerde UGC-posts, waarbij ze effectief onderscheid maakten tussen overtuigende en niet-overtuigende motivaties van de poster, zoals het ondersteunen van een merk of persoonlijke branding, wat zij als typisch overtuigend beschouwden. Ten slotte varieerden de kritische reacties op deze overtuigingspogingen sterk, variërend van positieve reacties - zoals geïnspireerd raken - tot negatieve reacties, zoals irritatie over wat zij zagen als wannabe influencers.

4. De relatie tussen de consument en degene die het post is relevant voor de herkenning en evaluatie van een overtuigingspoging. De interviews in Hoofdstuk 3 tonen verder aan dat de sterkte van de relatie tussen de consument en de poster van invloed is op het herkennen en evalueren van overtuigingspogingen in merkgerelateerde UGC. Sterke banden leidden er vaak toe dat deelnemers de overtuigende bedoelingen over het hoofd zagen, wat resulteerde in meer positieve houdingen ten opzichte van de posts zonder dat *coping*-mechanismen werden geactiveerd. Deelnemers gaven aan dat ze niet verwachten dat merken aanwezig zijn in posts van vrienden of medegebruikers. In plaats daarvan verwachten ze dergelijke overtuiging van influencers en merken.

5. Waargenomen motivaties van de poster beïnvloeden hoe consumenten omgaan met merkgerelateerde UGC. De interviews in Hoofdstuk 3 laten zien dat de waargenomen motivaties achter merkgerelateerde UGC-posts een cruciale rol spelen in hoe consumenten deze posts evalueren en erop reageren, vooral wanneer posters worden gezien als gemotiveerd door persoonlijke branding of de wens om anderen te inspireren. Over het algemeen leidden persoonlijke branding motivaties bij de



deelnemers tot meer negatieve reacties, terwijl motivaties die als ondersteunend of altruïstisch werden ervaren, juist positiever werden beoordeeld.

6. Functionele strategieën leiden, in vergelijking met emotionele strategieën, tot sterkere percepties bij consumenten dat de poster van merkgerelateerde UGC gemotiveerd is door persoonlijke branding en het inspireren van anderen.

De resultaten van het experiment in Hoofdstuk 4 laten zien dat functionele strategieën ertoe bijdragen dat consumenten waarnemen dat een poster een motivatie heeft om merkgerelateerde UGC te plaatsen, ongeacht of dit nu voortkomt uit persoonlijke branding of de wens om anderen te inspireren. Dit resultaat is opvallend, omdat we oorspronkelijk verwachtten dat functionele strategieën vooral percepties rond persoonlijke branding zouden versterken, maar niet de motivatie om anderen te inspireren. De reden hiervoor is dat functionele strategieën diepgaande verwerking van de merkgerelateerde UGC stimuleren: ze lijken namelijk op merk- of influencer content die gericht is op producten. Hierdoor zouden dergelijke strategieën consumenten ertoe aanzetten te geloven dat de poster gemotiveerd is door persoonlijke branding. Dit sluit aan bij het concept van *agent knowledge*, waarbij consumenten de intentie herkennen om een online (persoonlijk) merk op te bouwen. Het effect van functionele strategieën op de perceptie dat een poster anderen wil inspireren, was echter onverwacht. Dit suggereert dat functionele strategieën mogelijk inherent *agent knowledge* oproepen. Dit versterkt de waargenomen intensiteit van elke motivatie die een poster van merkgerelateerde UGC kan hebben. Verder onderzoek is nodig om dit fenomeen beter te begrijpen en de onderliggende mechanismen te verkennen.

7. Functionele strategieën in merkgerelateerde UGC leiden, in vergelijking met emotionele strategieën, tot een sterkere herkenning van overtuigingspogingen, wat verklaard kan worden door de waargenomen motivaties van de poster.

Merkgerelateerde UGC met functionele strategieën leidt tot een sterkere herkenning van overtuigingspogingen bij consumenten dan content met emotionele strategieën. Dit kan gedeeltelijk worden verklaard door de aard van deze strategieën. Functionele strategieën lijken op merk- en influencer content die expliciet producten promoot. De bevindingen tonen aan dat de overtuigingspoging van deze strategieën beter herkenbaar is, en dat de percepties van consumenten over de motieven van de poster dit effect verklaren. Daarentegen richten emotionele strategieën zich vaak op mensen, gezichtsuitdrukkingen en storytelling, waarbij het merk subtiel wordt getagd en het product niet centraal staat. De bevindingen tonen aan dat overtuigingspogingen van deze strategieën moeilijker te herkennen zijn. Belangrijk is dat de bevindingen in Conclusie 6 ook dit verschil verklaren: consumenten zijn zich meer bewust van de motivaties van de poster voor merkgerelateerde UGC met functionele strategieën (vergeleken met emotionele), en hoe sterker deze percepties over de motivatie van de poster – zowel voor het inspireren van anderen als voor persoonlijke branding –, des te herkenbaarder de overtuigingspoging

wordt. Deze bevindingen benadrukken het belang van de waargenomen motivaties van merkgerelateerde UGC-posters in het begrijpen waarom merkgerelateerde UGC overtuigend is.

Praktische implicaties

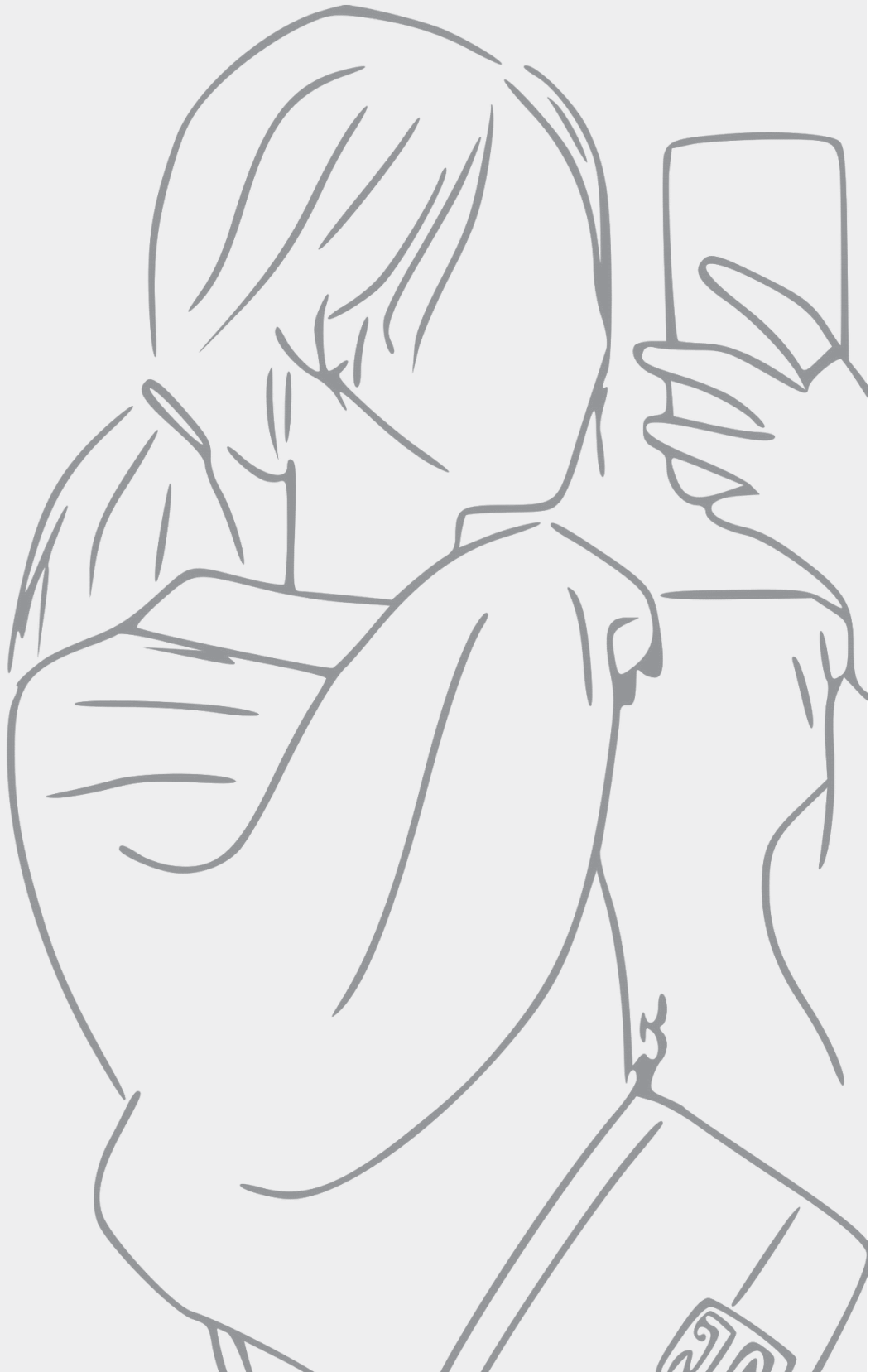
De bevindingen van dit proefschrift bieden verschillende praktische implicaties voor zowel merken als toezichhouders. Voor merken is het cruciaal om in hun eigen merkgerelateerde content te focussen op functionele en sociale doelen in hun posts. Door merkgerelateerde UGC met informatieve, sociale en emotionele strategieën te reposten, kunnen merken de betrokkenheid van consumenten aanzienlijk verhogen. Interactie strategieën zoals call-to-action-posts zijn mogelijk minder effectief in het verhogen van betrokkenheid; in plaats daarvan zouden merken productvoordelen moeten laten zien en zich moeten associëren met sociale doelen om betere resultaten te bereiken in hun eigen merkcontent.

Daarnaast zouden merken selectief merkgerelateerde UGC moeten reposten waarin emotionele strategieën gebruikt worden om authentieke verbindingen met hun publiek te bevorderen. Door functionele strategieën te mengen met authentieke gebruikerservaringen, kunnen merken effectief een balans vinden in waargenomen motivaties, wat kan leiden tot positievere reacties van consumenten. Het aanmoedigen van consumenten om merken in afbeeldingen of als locatie-tags te noemen in plaats van directe tags kan ook nuttig zijn, aangezien directe tags soms negatief worden ontvangen door consumenten.

Vanuit een regulerend perspectief zijn transparantiemaatregelen van cruciaal belang. Toezichhouders zouden kunnen overwegen om de automatische aanduiding van merkaanwezigheid in social media-posts verplicht te stellen om de transparantie te vergroten en consumenten te beschermen tegen subtiele overtuigingspogingen. Dit zou sociale mediaplatforms verantwoordelijk maken voor hun marketingpraktijken en ervoor zorgen dat ethische normen worden nageleefd. Het verhogen van transparantie op deze manier draagt niet alleen bij aan de bescherming van consumenten, maar dwingt merken ook om meer verantwoordelijkheid te nemen in hun reclame-inspanningen.

Dit proefschrift levert een belangrijke bijdrage aan de reclametheorie door het begrip van overtuigingsstrategieën in merkgerelateerde UGC te verdiepen, het vermogen van consumenten in het omgaan met overtuigingspogingen te onderzoeken en de waargenomen motivaties van UGC-posters beter te doorgronden. Deze inzichten zijn waardevol voor zowel academisch onderzoek als praktische toepassingen in sociale media marketing. Ze openen nieuwe mogelijkheden voor toekomstig onderzoek naar verschillende aspecten van merkgerelateerde UGC, wat bijdraagt aan een beter begrip en effectievere toepassing van sociale media marketingstrategieën in een voortdurend evoluerend digitaal landschap.





Author Contributions
Dankwoord
About the Author

Author Contributions

Chapter 2. Persuasive Strategies in Brand-related Posts from Brands versus Users on Visual Social Media and Their Impact on Engagement.

Marie-Selien Fakkert (MF), Theo B. Araujo (TA), Joanna Strycharz (JS), Guda van Noort (GvN)
Conceptualization: MF, TA, GvN. Methodology: MF, TA, JS, GvN. Data Collection: MF, TA.
Writing (original draft preparation): MF. Writing (review and editing): MF, TA, JS, GvN.

Chapter 3. From Friends to Brands: Consumers' Coping with Persuasive Attempts in Brand-Related User Generated Content in Visual Social Media

Marie-Selien Fakkert (MF), Joanna Strycharz (JS), Theo B. Araujo (TA), Guda van Noort (GvN)
Conceptualization: MF, JS, TA, GvN. Methodology: MF, JS, TA, GvN. Data Collection: MF.
Writing (original draft preparation): MF. Writing (review and editing): MF, JS, TA, GvN.

Chapter 4. Inspirators and Wannabes: The Impact of Persuasive Strategies through Perceived Motivations on the Recognition of Persuasive Attempts in Visual Br-UGC

Marie-Selien Fakkert (MF), Joanna Strycharz (JS), Theo B. Araujo (TA), Guda van Noort (GvN), Xin Gao (XG)
Conceptualization: MF, JS, TA, GvN. Methodology: MF, JS, TA, GvN. Stimulus Development: MF, JS, TA, GvN. Data Collection: MF. Data Analysis: MF, XG (consultancy).
Writing (original draft preparation): MF. Writing (review and editing): MF, JS, TA, GvN.

Dankwoord

In de zomer van 2019 vond ik dat het tijd was voor een nieuwe uitdaging. Ik merkte dat ik een nieuwe impuls nodig had en dat ik mijn hoofd weer écht aan het werk wilde zetten. Het was hét moment om te promoveren. Dit was iets wat ik al jaren wilde, maar steeds voor me uitschoof met het excuus: 'later, als ik meer tijd heb'. Toen ik de PhD-positie bij ASCoR voorbij zag komen, besloot ik: ik ga ervoor! Ik schreef een voorstel – ondanks dat ik geen idee had wat iets als 'machine vision' precies inhield, en tot mijn grote blijdschap werd ik aangenomen voor de PhD-positie. Het avontuur kon beginnen!

En wat een avontuur is het geweest – vol hoogte- en dieptepunten, waarvan ik al wist: dit hoort erbij. Ik wist dat er momenten zouden zijn waarop ik spijt zou hebben, maar dat maakte het niet minder uitdagend. Deze reis heeft me niet alleen veel geleerd over mijn vakgebied, maar ook over mezelf. Ik ontdekte hoe belangrijk het voor me is om nieuwe dingen te leren en hoezeer ik geniet van het proces van nieuwe dingen ontdekken en begrijpen. Tegelijkertijd leerde ik mijn eigen grenzen kennen – en soms ook overschrijden. Ik ontdekte hoever ik kon gaan, hoe ik met onzekerheden en tegenslagen kon omgaan, en hoe ik steeds weer nieuwe kracht vond om door te gaan. Nu is het zover: het proefschrift is af. Ik heb het gedaan! Ik ben ontzettend trots en dankbaar dat het is gelukt en wil graag de mensen bedanken die me gedurende deze periode hebben gesteund.

Allereerst wil ik mijn promotieteam bedanken: Guda, Theo en Joanna. Jullie begeleiding en expertise hebben mij scherp gehouden en geïnspireerd. Jullie gaven me de ruimte om dit project echt eigen te maken, door mij zelfstandig keuzes te laten maken. Dit was waardevol, maar soms ook spannend. Guda, jij stelde tijdens het proces de grote vragen over beïnvloeding op sociale media en het grotere geheel. Je wist complexe kwesties altijd praktisch en helder te maken, wat mij hielp om zelf eenvoudiger te denken. Theo, jouw steun bij de technische uitdagingen van mijn eerste paper was onmisbaar. Van jou heb ik veel geleerd – wie had ooit gedacht dat ik Pythoncode zou schrijven? Ook in de laatste fase was je er altijd, met optimisme en duidelijke stappen die het overzicht terugbrachten als ik het even niet meer zag zitten. Joanna, jij kwam later in het traject als mijn dagelijkse begeleider, maar je hulp was cruciaal. Je stond altijd klaar voor mijn praktische vragen, verbeterde mijn schrijven en gaf me praktische hulp bij presentaties en journal submissions. Dank voor jullie vertrouwen, begeleiding en steun!

Graag wil ik Marjolijn Antheunis, Ed Peelen, Edith Smit, Eva van Reijmersdal en Lotte Willemsen bedanken voor hun tijd en inzet bij het beoordelen van dit proefschrift. Ik waardeer het enorm dat jullie bereid waren deel uit te maken van de promotiecommissie. Het is een grote eer om jullie als opponenten te hebben bij de verdediging van dit proefschrift. Jullie deskundigheid en kritische blik zijn van grote waarde, en ik ben dankbaar voor jullie bijdrage aan dit proces.

Ed, bedankt voor een van de leukste onderdelen van mijn promotietraject: samen vier jaar lang het vak Topic Content Marketing geven. Dit was echt de perfecte afwisseling met het intensieve werk aan mijn proefschrift. Je hebt me veel vertrouwen en vrijheid gegeven bij het herontwerpen van ons vak, en ik heb ontzettend veel van jou geleerd over het geven van inspirerende colleges, vol met verhalen uit de praktijk. Ik heb genoten van onze samenwerking. Dankzij deze ervaring heb ik ontdekt hoe inspirerend en waardevol ik het vind om onderwijs te geven. Heel erg bedankt voor deze bijzondere samenwerking!

Annemarie, heel veel dank voor jouw adviezen, co-work sessies, de fijne change-of-scenery in Enschede en het meedenken bij mijn vele vragen. Komala, dankjewel voor de fijne gesprekken tijdens onze telefoontjes en hondenuitlaatsessies – het was fijn om mijn PhD- en moederleed te delen met iemand die in hetzelfde schuitje zat. Bruce, dankjewel voor de uitnodiging om in Zweden, een gastcollege te geven over mijn onderzoek – zonder twijfel een van de hoogtepunten van mijn PhD-periode. Dank jullie wel!

Een speciaal dankwoord aan SWOCC voor de financiële steun van dit project en de inspirerende samenwerking gedurende mijn PhD. In het bijzonder Joost, Anna, Cher en Fairouz, bedankt voor de leuke samenwerkingen, zoals de workshop over social media strategieën voor merken en de SWOCC-publicatie voor professionals naar aanleiding van mijn proefschrift.

Mijn familie wil ik ook graag bedanken, in het bijzonder Menkelien, die niet alleen veel heeft opgepast, maar ook een rustige werkplek bood in de weekenden wanneer ik die het hardst nodig had en mij altijd heeft gesupport. Odile, jouw bijspringen na schooltijd met taxiën en oppassen gaven me net dat beetje extra ruimte om deadlines te kunnen halen. Raoul en Ruben, mijn paranimfen: het is geweldig om jullie naast me te hebben staan tijdens dit bijzondere moment. Dank voor jullie steun en betrokkenheid!

Lieve Philippe en Yves, jullie hebben me laten zien wat echt belangrijk is in het leven. Jullie enthousiasme en nieuwsgierigheid hebben me gemotiveerd en geleerd om grenzen te stellen en tijd te maken voor wat ertoe doet. Ik hoop jullie te laten zien dat doorzetten, vertrouwen hebben en je hart volgen echt loont. En ja, ik hoop dat jullie ook genoten hebben van de vele uitstapjes naar Monkeytown – de indoorspeeltuin, waar ik met mijn laptop en noise-cancelling AirPods werkte aan mijn proefschrift terwijl jullie losgingen. Allerliefste jongens, ik gun jullie de wereld en geniet er nu enorm van dat mijn proefschrift af is, zodat we weer meer tijd hebben voor leuke dingen samen.

En als laatste, Jan-Willem, mijn steun en toeverlaat. Tja, een vriendin die besluit te promoveren... good luck with that! Vanaf het begin heb je me onvoorwaardelijk gesteund en daarvoor ben ik je intens dankbaar. Je stond altijd voor me klaar – of het nu ging om het lezen van papers, oefenen van presentaties, of me redden uit een Excelcrisis. Je vertrouwen in mij, je geduld en je motiverende woorden hebben me door moeilijke momenten heen geholpen. En niet te vergeten: jij stond klaar met champagne om belangrijke hoogtepunten samen te vieren. Jij bent een onmisbaar deel van deze prestatie. Dankjewel, lief!

Marie-Selien Fakkert
Maart, 2025

About the Author

Marie-Selien Fakkert (1986) is a Dutch communication scientist specializing in persuasive communication and digital media. Her PhD research at the University of Amsterdam focused on the strategies, coping mechanisms, and impact of brand-related user generated content in visual social media. With a strong interest in behavior change and societal challenges, her work bridges the gap between academia and practice, leveraging computational, quantitative and qualitative methods to translate data into actionable insights. Marie-Selien holds a Research Master in Communication Science (MSc) from the University of Amsterdam, where she gained expertise in advanced research methodologies and data analytics. Her career spans academia, consultancy, and industry, including roles as Marketing and Sales Manager and consultant in sustainable branding. She has also lectured extensively in courses such as Content Marketing and Experimentation, inspiring the next generation of communication professionals. Throughout her career, Marie-Selien has combined her academic expertise with real-world applications, contributing to workshops and consultancy projects for organizations ranging from government institutions to professional associations.

