



Visual Brand Communication on Instagram: A study on consumer engagement.

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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>The world we live in today is increasingly cluttered with information, whether the source of it is television, newspapers or online media. It is therefore becoming more important for companies to stand out amid all the noise. In recent years, technology has introduced new platforms in which companies can communicate and interact with their intended audiences, social media being the lead star. Of these newer social media platforms, image sharing services such as Instagram have found huge success and attracted a large following. Instagram is a free, visual content sharing social network, focused on the taking and sharing of photos with friends and followers within a mobile application. It has recently surpassed 300 million users, which points to the growing appeal and use of visual social media.</p> <p>As consumers move toward new social media platforms, brands must follow and learn to communicate in these new contexts. To gain that engagement, however, brands need to understand what kind of content drives user engagement. The subject areas of visual communication, brand communication in social media as well as social media itself have been researched on their own, but their combined effect, visual brand communication on consumer engagement, has not been researched in the context of Instagram. The study will explore visual brand communication applied to a visual social media platform to understand what type of visual brand communication users want to engage with and why.</p> <p>The theoretical framework presents Visual communication and Social media in more detail, with a focus on brand communication on social media and a presentation on Instagram. Engagement within this context is also discussed, with the different forms being liking, commenting, sharing, following and lurking.</p> <p>The empirical study consisted of 10 in-depth interviews with urban female users between the ages of 20 and 30 in Finland. The findings indicate that the preferred kind of visual brand communication to engage with is content that personally engages the user and thus evokes an emotional response. Content that engages personally and evokes emotions drives higher engagement and possibly also encourages lurkers to engage visibly.</p>	
Keywords: Brand communication, Engagement, Instagram, Social media, Visual communication	

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1 INTRODUCTION

The world we live in today is getting more and more cluttered with information, whether the source of it is television, newspapers or online media. Consumers are constantly being targeted with ads and other brand communications trying to grab their attention (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden 2011; Solis 2011). Reversely it is therefore becoming increasingly important for companies to stand out amid all the noise. Getting recognized can however be a difficult task. In recent years, technology has introduced new platforms in which companies can communicate and interact with their intended audiences, social media being the lead star. Within social media there are numerous platforms to choose from, of which Facebook and Twitter are well established, but others are emerging and establishing a place for themselves in the mix and changing the traditions of marketing (Walter & Gioglio 2014).

Of these newer social media platforms, image sharing services such as Instagram have found huge success and attracted a large following (Fortune 2014). The concept is simple; sharing images with friends and other followers adding minimal or no text to the posts. Instagram has recently surpassed 300 million users which is more than Twitter has (Adweek 2014), which points to the growing appeal and use of visual social media. The fact that consumers are gravitating toward visual platforms (Forbes 2014c) is something companies should not ignore, and many brands have created accounts and found success using the platform (FastCompany 2014; Walter & Gioglio 2014). In fact, a recent study by Simply Measured (2015) shows that 86% of the world's leading brands are present on Instagram.

There are numerous factors behind the success of Instagram. It has offered a different platform from those already available, and kept it simple and focused on its core concept; image sharing (ReadWrite 2012). On top of that, it has tapped into the world of visual communication, where pictures tell the story and users can share their everyday lives in images (Instagram 2015; ReadWrite 2012; Walter & Gioglio 2014). Visual communication is by no means a new concept, but it is truly seeing a rise in popularity as well as being utilized in new contexts with the help of services such as Instagram (ReadWrite 2012).

As the saying goes, a picture tells more than a thousand words, and it is therefore no wonder that the use of visuals in brand communication is on the rise. Images add more to a brand story than text alone, as it gives the message a background and frame, and

elicits emotions in the viewer (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Forbes 2014c; Jamieson 2007), plus the content is understood much faster by the consumer than using text alone (Content Marketing Institute 2014; Jamieson 2007). The effect of images posted on Instagram contribute to a larger brand story, which is created in combination with other brand activities outside of Instagram (Walter & Gioglio 2014). Companies can post pictures of their products as with any other platform, but on Instagram brands tend to post more personal photos, such as behind the scenes-shots, funny photos from their offices or shots of their products being used in an everyday setting (Crimson Hexagon 2014; Walter & Gioglio 2014). These types of photos are in keeping with what other Instagram users would upload so they fit in seamlessly in the flow of the newsfeed, but offer consumers a broader story about the brand and its values (Crimson Hexagon 2014; Forbes 2014; Walter & Gioglio 2014).

Brands who want to benefit from the use of Instagram in their brand communication need to first understand the platform in which they are active (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Many companies are familiar and comfortable using Facebook and Twitter, however Instagram is less focused on interpersonal communication and connecting with others, and more on content (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Instagram focuses on sharing images that capture a moment in a user's life and communicating a story (Instagram 2015). This characteristic means that brands need to adapt to the platform in order to fit in and be seen, which can be a challenging undertaking (Peters et.al. 2013). Brands naturally want users to engage with the brand's content on social media to gain awareness and reach (Kohli, Suri & Kapoor 2015), and therefore it is essential to also understand what kind of brand content users want to see and engage with.

Furthermore, the simplicity of the concept, clean outlook and visual focus of the social media platform has attracted millions of users and created a solid position in the image sharing market. Brands have naturally followed suit, although not to the large extent as with Twitter and Facebook as of yet. An interesting tendency with brand posts on Instagram is that they tell more of a story about the brand, give more of a personal touch or show a behind the scenes -glimpse into the brands' everyday lives, but often do not attempt to explicitly advertise (Walter & Gioglio 2014). The approach is different and more creative than usual brand communication. Naturally each brand has its own approach, but this study will provide insights for research and business alike about what kind of visual brand communication users prefer to engage with on Instagram and why.

1.1 Research Problem

Many businesses are still struggling to figure out Instagram, perhaps because they are unsure about how to navigate and integrate the platform into their existing pool of social media (FastCompany 2014). Research has however shown that companies marketing on Instagram have had noticeably higher success in consumer engagement, with 58 times higher engagement per follower than that which they get on Facebook, for example (Forrester 2014). As consumers move toward new social media platforms, brands must follow and learn to communicate in these new contexts (Walter & Gioglio 2014).

To gain that engagement, however, brands need to understand what kind of content drives user engagement (Walter & Gioglio 2014). Other studies have looked into the factors regarding consumer engagement, both within social media communication and in general (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric & Ilic 2011; Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie 2014; Solis 2011) but no all-encompassing strategy for success has been identified (Hollebeek et.al. 2014), especially in the context of Instagram. Hollebeek et.al.'s (2014) study, a continuation of that of Brodie et.al. (2011), produced a consumer brand engagement conceptualization and 10-item measurement scale, tested with Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and does provide a good basis from which to measure consumer brand engagement, but does not explain why certain content is preferable over other.

Winqvist (2014), as an exception, approaches the problem through analyzing the visual content of three airlines to determine factors for post popularity on Instagram, and proposes a modified model of that created by de Vries, Gensler and Leeflang (2012) which is adapted to Instagram. This study, however, focuses on observable, measureable user behavior in terms of likes and comments within the airlines' accounts, but does not provide an understanding as to why users engaged as they did.

The subject areas of visual communication (eg. Fahmy et.al. 2014; Jamieson 2007 & Smith et.al. 2005), brand communication in social media (Kohli, Suri & Kapoor 2015; Walter & Gioglio 2014) as well as social media itself (eg. de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Peters et.al. 2013) have been researched on their own, but their combined effect, visual brand communication on consumer engagement, has not to the best knowledge of the author been researched in the context of Instagram, with the exception of Winqvist's study (2014). With the constantly changing world of social media and other communication channels, it is no wonder that research is having

a hard time staying on top of trends that professionals are still learning to navigate. Instagram and other similar social media platforms are offering a new way to communicate and reach audiences in a faster, more personal manner than before (Walter & Gioglio 2014). Bearing all of this in mind, this study will explore visual brand communication applied to a widely used social media platform to understand what type of visual brand communication users prefer to engage with and why.

1.2 Aim of the study

Visual social medias such as Instagram are offering a platform in which social media, visual communication and brand communication are being combined, and to represent the research phenomenon the term visual brand communication will be used throughout the study. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1) What kind of visual brand communication do users prefer to engage with on Instagram?

and

2) Why?

The purpose of this study is therefore to explore what kind of visual brand communication Instagram users prefer to engage with and why. To answer the research question in-depth individual interviews will be conducted.

To the best knowledge of the author, no study has been done explicitly researching the effect of visual brand communication on consumers and their engagement preferences regarding this kind of communication on Instagram. As Instagram grows in popularity among users and brands alike (Simply Measured 2015) it is important to understand what kind of visual brand communication drives users to engage with brands' content on the social media platform, and why.

1.3 Delimitations

Because of the chosen focus, this study is limited to exploring visual brand communication on Instagram. The research will focus on examining what kind of visual brand communication users prefer to engage with on the platform, and furthermore understanding the reasons why. Research using visual content analysis on Instagram to

measure post popularity has been done previously (Winqvist 2014), however this study aims to understand the users' point of view.

Social media today as a concept includes different platforms, all of which have varying characteristics which would make the study context too wide. Therefore this study aims to only explore the visual setting set by Instagram and user engagement with visual brand communication within it. This study will not try and link the levels of user engagement to user purchase intentions or other follow-through activities, but aims at understanding what makes users engage with a brand in the first place in terms of 'likes', commenting, sharing and following a brand and its posts.

Finally, engagement will not be discussed or explored in offline-contexts or within other disciplines, as have been summarized in eg. Brodie et.al. (2011) and Hollebeek et.al. (2014).

1.4 Key concepts

The key concepts in this study are as follows:

Brand - "Unique design, sign, symbol, words, or a combination of these, employed in creating an image that identifies a product and differentiates it from its competitors." (BusinessDictionary 2015a). In the text brands are discussed as those doing the communicating.

Brand Communication - "The combination of activities that influence customers' opinions of a company and its products" (Cambridge Dictionaries Online 2015).

Engagement- In this study engagement will refer to users' engagement with brand posts on Instagram, and is measured in the amount of likes, comments, shares and followers brands receive. (Simply Measured 2015). Lurking will also be considered as a form of engagement, despite its lack of measurable activity (Chen & Chang 2013; Crawford 2011; Heinonen 2009 & Schneider et.al. 2012).

Instagram - Instagram is a visual content sharing social network, focused on the taking and sharing of photos with friends on the mainly mobile application. The application is free to use, and owned by Facebook.

"Instagram is a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures. Snap a photo with your mobile phone, then choose a filter to transform the

image into a memory to keep around forever. We're building Instagram to allow you to experience moments in your friends' lives through pictures as they happen. We imagine a world more connected through photos." (Instagram 2015)

Social media - "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Haenlein & Kaplan 2010:61)

Users - In this study the term 'users' will refer to people who use Instagram.

Visual Communication - "The expression of ideas and information using visual forms or aids[...]. Presentations may also include photographs, charts, graphs, and diagrams to enforce or demonstrate ideas or data" (BusinessDictionary 2015b).

1.5 Structure of the study

The first chapter of this study will present the study subject and establish the research problem and aim of the study. Furthermore, an overview of key concepts is provided.

In chapter 2 visual communication will be presented in more detail, followed by a discussion on social media, with a focus on Instagram, in chapter 3. Within the subject of social media we will also cover brand communication within a social media context, user engagement as it relates to social media as well as briefly discuss simplicity as a concept within communication.

Chapter 4 presents the methodology applied in this study. First the choice of research method is presented and its validity in answering the research question is argued for. The empirical part of this study will be carried out through in-depth individual interviews with 10 urban, female Instagram users each, within the ages of 20-30 in Finland.

In chapter 5 the findings of the study will be presented along with quotes from the interviews to illustrate key findings. Finally, in chapter 6 the conclusions drawn from the study are discussed, the theoretical and managerial implications are presented, and finally the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are provided.

2 VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Due to the visual element of Instagram, it is necessary to explore visual communications in more detail to gain an understanding of how images work and how they affect the viewer. In this chapter visual communication will be approached through discussing the interpretation of images in section 2.1. and image composition in chapter 2.2., in order to gain an understanding on the constructs that make up images. To clarify these somewhat complex constructs related to image composition and interpretation, a simple model is presented in Figure 2.

Aesthetics and their importance in visual communications is discussed in chapter 2.3. with a presentation on the aesthetic experience (Jamieson 2007) that is often connected to images. Finally, in chapter 2.4. visual literacy is discussed which presents the notion that people can become more adept at interpreting images and the messages embedded within them.

2.1 Interpretation of images

Visual communication is studied in many fields of research such as communication, psychology, art and science to mention a few (Smith, Moriarty, Kenney & Barbatsis 2005) as it as a phenomena spans many different disciplines. Visual communication can affect a person both affectively (emotionally) or cognitively (logically), and may even stimulate both reactions in the viewer simultaneously (Sojka & Giese 2006). Visual communication is in essence information conveyed to a recipient through images, where the creator of the image has created and framed an image subject specifically to communicate something through a chosen medium, which the viewer of the image then interprets and understands through personal filters which are made up of personal experiences, cultural and social backgrounds as well as attitudes (Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al 2005).

It has been scientifically studied that the left and right hemispheres of the brain have different ways of dealing with information, where the left is more logical, analytical and verbal and the right side is more visual and affective (Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al. 2005). Although both sides are utilized by all people, one side will be more dominant depending on the type of information that a person is presented with (Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al. 2005).

Most people are inclined to process and remember information either more visually or more verbally depending on personal cognitive processes, however there are people who seem to respond best to a mix of the two (Fahmy, Bock & Wanta 2014). Therefore, the effect of visual messages on consumer behavior, attitude and recall is largely connected to individuals' personal inclinations (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Smith et.al. 2005). This means that visual communication is not necessarily equally effective for everyone, and in all contexts, which may be useful for brands to keep in mind when creating visual brand messages.

The left hemisphere processes information more sequentially and step by step, whereas the right hemisphere takes in the information more holistically and instantaneously (Jamieson 2007). Illustrating this point, Jamieson (2007) refers to road signs that must be interpreted and comprehended very quickly in order for a driver to act accordingly, and adds that the right side of the brain manages to process information in almost a tenth of a second and thus much faster than the left side. In using images as a tool for brand communication, the immediacy in visual comprehension means consumers can process brand messages much faster visually than through textual approaches (Jamieson 2007).

Moreover, viewing purely visual advertisements may affect viewers perceptions and attitudes toward a brand, and lead them to turning the visual information into beliefs about a brand (Mitchell & Olson 1981). Although this speaks to the influence that images can have, the only certain consequence is that consumers have formed opinions and beliefs about a brand, but it does not guarantee or specify what those are. Taking this point into consideration, for the visual brand communication to be effective for the brand, consumers must be able to interpret the image and draw the intended conclusions from it.

Perception is also considered to be a creative process where the viewer associates the content to various ideas and concepts, but also relates to the image itself and its creator (Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al. 2005). But each viewer will interpret the same image in different ways, not necessarily with great variation, but nevertheless its meaning to each viewer will be established individually (Jamieson 2007). For brands communicating using visuals this implies that the message they encode the image with will not necessarily translate through as intended to each user. Therefore again the importance of examining users' reactions and engagement with various visual content is crucial in determining what works best within a specific target group. Furthermore

the importance for brands to understand and know their target users is apparent; without knowing the users' preferences and attitudes they cannot necessarily communicate content that will be understood correctly by the users.

Having said that, and although there are no agreed upon rules or guidebooks on how to interpret or create visual communication, somehow due to natural interpretations and those arising from cultural or social backgrounds viewers are usually able to pick out intended meanings from images in ads and art (Jamieson 2007; Walter & Gioglio 2014). Denotation and connotation play their parts in the interpretation and consequent understanding of images, where the former refers to images that have a more or less explicitly interpretable message, and the latter refers to the implicit connections made in the mind of the viewer (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Jamieson 2007). In terms of Instagram brand posts, for example Nike may post an image of someone running in the woods and wearing all Nike products, with the a photo caption "Just do it". The denoted aspect to the image would be the products, the running and brand slogan, whereas the connoted aspects - where the image content takes the viewer's mind - may include being part of a community (Nike), an upcoming marathon, or wanting to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

With a following of over 12 million users, Nike has been successful in the art of visual communication on Instagram, combining both the products with a lifestyle and story (Walter & Gioglio 2014). To illustrate the above discussion in the context of Instagram, below are screenshots taken from Nike's official account in February 2015.

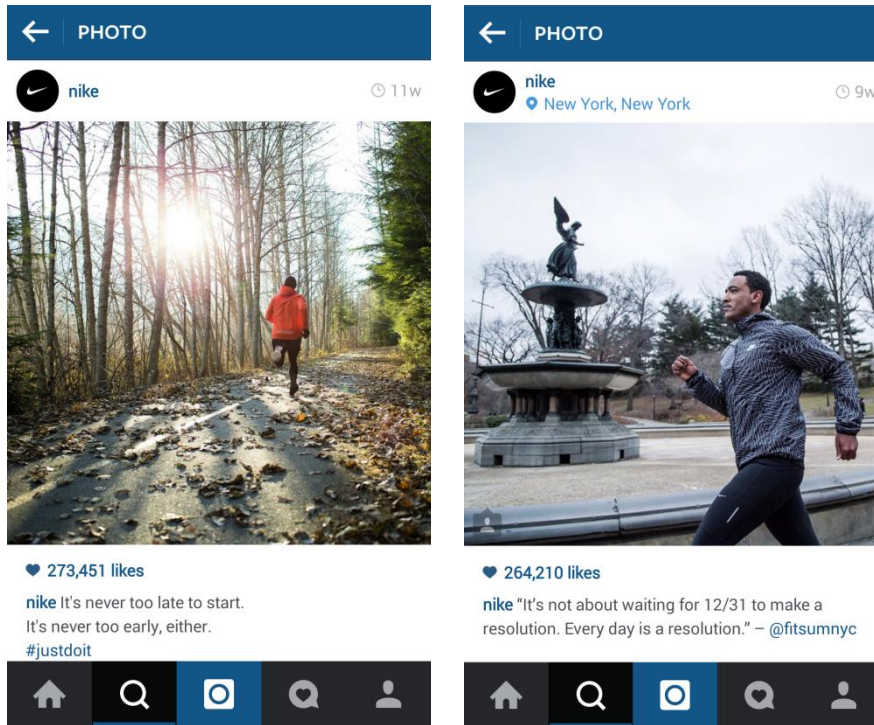


Figure 1 Screenshots from Nike's official Instagram feed (@nike).

Framing the product to a usage situation or in use by a user seems to furthermore enhance brand and product recall (Rossiter 1982). Connotations in a viewer's mind means that brands can never be entirely certain how their post will be received by a user, and what thoughts and feeling may be evoked (Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al. 2005). However, images that evoke such connected thoughts, called high imagery visuals by Rossiter (1982) are nonetheless recommended in branding as those lead to more senses being activated when viewing the image and consequently to better brand recall. Similarly, Lin, Lu & Wu (2012:22) report in their study about the effects of visual information on eWOM that "imagery evoked by visuals offers a sensory stimulus" and highlighting benefits of product use will stimulate more senses than only highlighting the functional uses. Furthermore, they conclude that experience and search-hedonic products and services (eg. clothing and fine cuisine) especially benefit from use of visuals in communicating as they help visualize to the consumer how the product can and should be used (Lin et.al. 2012).

As the discussion of image perception above illustrates, the phenomenon is not as straight-forward and easily defined as one might think. However in terms of visual brand communication, understanding how visuals affect viewers, and how their interpretation is individually and culturally bound is relevant. That implies that no image will be universally interpreted the same way by all viewers, however cultural and

societal norms create a framework with the help of which intended image meaning can be correctly interpreted.

2.2 Image composition

When an image is created the creator tries to infuse the image with ideas, creativity and a message that hopefully will be understood by the viewer as the creator intended it to be (Smith et.al. 2005). The composition of the image itself is crucial; besides the material choices, colors and layout play a large role in the communication effect (Jamieson 2007). Framing is often discussed in visual communication, and refers to how an image is framed, for example what the photographer chooses to include in the photo or which images are chosen for an article (Fahmy et.al. 2014).

The chosen framing helps steer the way that a viewer interprets and understands the image by including certain aspects and excluding others (Jamieson 2007). However, the interpretation of an image is further shaped by the existing frames of understanding and knowledge within the viewer, thus adding another layer to the effect of framing (Jamieson 2007). Finally, Jamieson (2007) emphasizes the importance of social and cultural frames that are learned and internalized throughout our lives, and which provide a frame from which, and within which, we view images.

As the eye can only look one way at a time, it also focuses on one main area at a time with the background becoming of less importance (Jamieson 2007). Motivation steers the eye and determines what it will focus on, the choice of which may have its roots in cultural upbringing, interests or novel concepts (Jamieson 2007; Rossiter 1982). In imagery, when a composition of an image is clean and clutter-free the eye concentrates on the main subject of the image instead of its attention being drawn to multiple things, and the viewer is more aware of what he sees and why (Jamieson 2007).

Reversely, when an image is filled with seemingly irrelevant subject matter and background 'noise' the eye reads it as being more natural and mimicking real life and surroundings (Jamieson 2007). The viewer might then subconsciously interpret them as being un-coded and more relatable (Jamieson 2007; Rossiter 1982). The concept of product framing into usage situations applies here as well as the image becomes more relatable (Rossiter 1982) There is moreover support for combining familiar imagery with novelty factors in order to enhance the attention-holding capabilities of the image, which has greater effects on long-time memory (Rossiter 1982; Smith et.al. 2005).

Solely using novelty as an attention-grabbing technique does not mean viewers spend time viewing the image after the initial attention (Rossiter 1982). For brands creating visuals for brand communication purposes the composition of the image therefore plays a large role, depending on the desired outcome and user reaction.

Images are furthermore framed by the choice of platform in which they are chosen to be displayed (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Jamieson 2007). Each platform comes with its benefits and restrictions, and the creator needs to choose a medium that will communicate the intended message as well as possible and in a manner that the target viewer can understand (Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al. 2005). The choice of medium must also be considered carefully as the context in which the image is communicated also affects its meaning to viewers and how it is perceived (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Jamieson 2007). For instance, an image posted on Instagram and an image printed in a newspaper evoke different responses due to the different platforms.

Studies have additionally shown that when viewing news pages, readers notice photographs in order of size, from largest to smallest (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Rossiter 1982). Larger image size has also been attributed to more positive consumer attitudes towards a brand and higher recollection (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Rossiter 1982). Instagram however requires all photos to be cropped into the same size, which means no image will take prominence over others. Moreover, there is no way to make sure a certain post will appear first in a user's feed as Instagram does not use programs that tailor user content based on users' interests and trending content within their peers, such as the Edgerank algorithm used by Facebook does (Mashable 2013; Walter & Gioglio 2014). With this aspect of visual communication eliminated within the scope of Instagram, the content of each post becomes that much more important.

Having said that, according to Rossiter (1982) presenting images before text is beneficial for recognition and recall and allows the image to tell the accompanying story. This point is relevant when studying Instagram, as the image is always displayed before the caption or comments related to it. This might imply that using high imagery visuals (Rossiter 1982) on Instagram would receive better attention and recall by users, and be more effective than, for example, on Facebook where the image is placed between the image caption and possible comments.

These two sections have discussed the effects of images on perception and interpretation, as well as the effect that the image composition itself holds. Below, the

concepts discussed above have been summarized into a simplified model to help illustrate the sometimes complicated concept of visual communication.

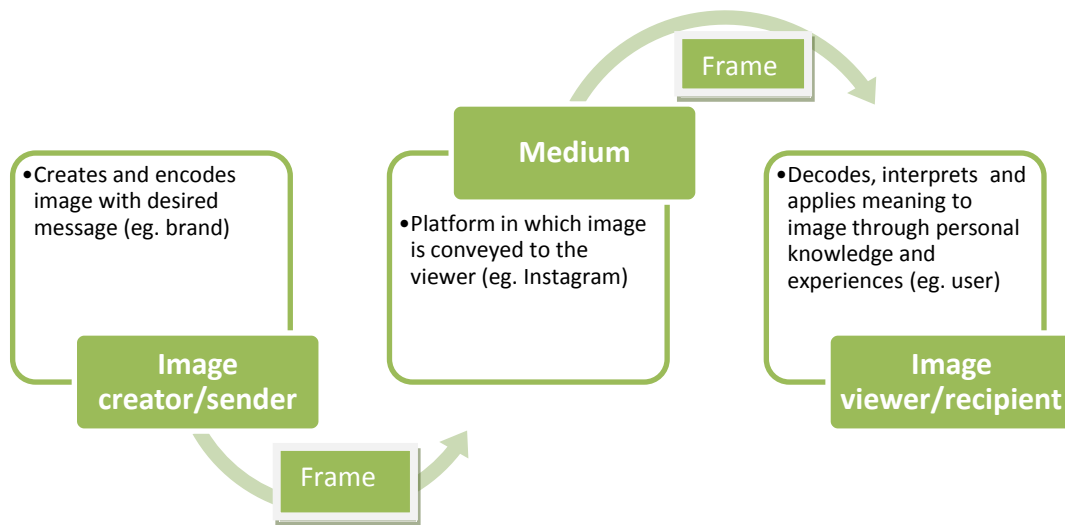


Figure 2 Simplified overview of the essential components of visual communication (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al. 2005).

2.3 Aesthetics

In comparison with textual communication, visual communication and images require a certain level of inspection and focus that text does not (Jamieson 2007). As discussed above, visuals act as a catalyst for thoughts and associations brought up by the image; that is, the image directs the viewer to associate with things outside of the frame of the image (Jamieson 2007). At the same time, however, the aesthetic aspect of images require that the image itself be analyzed for what it is and not for what it stands for, which often evokes more of an emotional response in viewers (Jamieson 2007). The image itself, as a work of art, should not be underestimated in the context of visual communication.

Visuals are more adept at communicating and evoking emotions than text, and thus also evoking motivation (Rossiter 1982). Jamieson (2007) also discusses the importance of individuals' interests and motivations to gain and keep attention for an image. As discussed, images can be purely denotative, like traffic signs where the interest is merely functional, or the image can act as a symbol, and have connotative and denotative meanings whose combination evokes interest, or images can act solely as art, where the interest lies in its aesthetics (Jamieson 2007).

Jamieson (2007:85) says "Aesthetics resides in the viewer not in the image; the image, one could say, is the prompt, the viewer is the respondent". What is judged as aesthetically pleasing differs from person to person, as the notion is shaped by personal, subconscious preferences as well as cultural influence (Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al. 2005). An individual responds by perceiving and structuring the stimuli received into patterns that are compared with existing connections and relations, which in turn may evoke feelings of, for example, order or disorder or pleasure or pain (Jamieson 2007). This response requires the individual to find relationships between what is seen and what is familiar from before, to establish some pattern or order in the visual (Jamieson 2007).

The person's perception of an image and the mental form it takes in the mind is central to how aesthetics are felt (Jamieson 2007). This process, experienced mostly on subconscious levels, and the feelings evoked by it, leads to what Jamieson (2007) regards as the aesthetic experience. The complex process of analyzing image aesthetics highlights the deep subjective nature of the phenomenon (Jamieson 2007), which in the context of this study means that what kind of visual brand content users prefer to engage with on Instagram will vary from one individual to another, although some generalizable aspects will likely arise from the study, as discussed above with the cultural and societal frameworks with respect to interpretation.

Also regarding aesthetics, the medium in which the image is created and displayed adds limitations to how far the creator of the image can go. As discussed, Instagram crops all images to the same size and offers the same amount of filters to all users for editing, which limits the display possibilities of the image. However, as Jamieson (2007) also points out, limitations created by the medium at the same time allow and call for creativity in order to stand out. When the image is thoughtfully created to convey some meaning or message, as well as aesthetically well thought out, chances are it will engage more viewers and capture their attention and consequently their interest (Jamieson 2007; Walter & Gioglio 2014).

Again here it is important that the sender and receiver of the message have a common set of codes to understand one another, although in aesthetic terms this is less explicit, such as language, but rather refers to a common preference and appreciation toward visuals (Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al. 2005). Jamieson (2007) further discusses that as aesthetics are of a perceptual nature, it also can be looked at from the point of perceptual skills, or in this case aesthetic skills. It essentially means that people can

become more aware and learn to look for relationships and significant aspects within images, thus adding to the information that that person can find in an image (Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al. 2005). Aesthetics do not usually result in physical responses, such as stopping at a red light in traffic, but rather lead to mental and emotional responses that are much harder to observe (Jamieson 2007), but arguably leave a more lasting impact than purely symbolic imagery does.

2.4 Visual literacy

An interesting point regarding visual brand communication raised by R. Craig (1999, as cited in Fahmy et.al. 2014:86) is that using visual advertising to communicate and make product claims makes it much harder to examine the truth of those claims and call brands out on exaggeration. As an image does not explicitly state anything, but rather allows the viewers to draw their own conclusions, visual brand communication may provide brands with an opportunity to say much more about their product or service than would otherwise be possible.

In this vein the concept of visual literacy becomes relevant, meaning how well people can critically 'read' an image and interpret its meaning (Fahmy et.al. 2014). What visual literacy exactly entails and how it is learned is not entirely agreed upon in academia, but images are nonetheless influential in ways that text is not (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Rossiter 1982). Seeing an image instantaneously conveys an idea, concept or subject to the person viewing it (Jamieson 2007), at the same time evoking emotional responses and triggering imagination before logical reasoning (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Smith et.al. 2005). Being able to 'read' the image for the codes it consists of, as added by its creator, makes for a more visually literate consumer. Fahmy et.al. (2014:90) sum up the importance of this well in the following quote: "Understanding the nature of images, how they convey meaning, how they can present arguments, and yes, how they can be enjoyed, is no longer the province of elite art critics. It is knowledge critical to all occupants of the contemporary media environment".

Visuals are used in advertising both online and in traditional media quite extensively (Fahmy et.al. 2014) and although it can be agreed upon that visuals do have an effect, it is interesting that not much is known about visual communication effects on consumers in an interactive setting. Furthermore, on a more general note, visual communication as a concept lacks a certain organization, which makes it harder to find

universally applicable theoretical models and methodologies, as researchers have taken various approaches in their studies (Fahmy et.al. 2014).

As much as visuals are part of our everyday lives in newspapers, television, the internet and certainly social media, there are however many aspects still unexplored and unknown about the field. Especially as it comes to online and social media settings, visual effects on consumers' behavior need more research (Fahmy et.al. 2014). With this in mind, this study sets out to explore what kind of visual brand content users prefer to engage with on Instagram, a highly visual social media platform, to hopefully shed some light on these issues from a consumer perspective.

3 SOCIAL MEDIA

In the following chapter social media including its different forms will be presented in general, and Instagram will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.2. A brief look at other popular visual platforms is added to underscore the growing importance of visual communication in social media. Brand communication in social media is discussed in chapter 3.3. and the challenges and opportunities that it provides are presented. Engagement within social media and Instagram is furthermore presented in chapter 3.4. Finally, a brief overlook at simplicity as a concept will be presented.

3.1 Social media background

To discuss social media, the definition by Haenlein & Kaplan (2010:61) will be used: "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content." The quote illustrates well what sets social media apart from other content on the internet, which is the fact that on these platforms the users both consume and create the content. Connecting and communicating with friends, family and companies is easier than ever before, and using social media has become a natural part of everyday life. Social media have established their presence, and are accessible almost anywhere with the help of laptops, tablets, smart phones and naturally, an internet connection.

A recent study by Global Web Index (WeAreSocial 2015a) presents interesting figures about the use of social media. Adult users of social media have on average 5.54 accounts on various social platforms, of which they actively use 2.82. Furthermore, the study shows that 16-24 year olds have the largest number of accounts, but users within the age group 25-34 years old are the most active and engaged in their social media use (WeAreSocial 2015a). Finally, an important figure to note is the that daily internet usage over various devices reached 6.15 hours a day, of which time spent on social medias amounted to 1.72 hours a day (WeAreSocial 2015a). What these numbers show is the growing importance of social media in our everyday lives, and as such the opportunity it presents for brands is evident.

Peters, Chen, Kaplan, Ognibeni and Pauwels (2013) present a framework for understanding social media consisting of four essential elements: motives, content, network structure as well as social roles and interactions. Relating to all elements are

actors, who are active on the platform and create and share content, and all of these components play a role in making social media work the way it does (Peters et.al. 2013).

Motives refer to the reasons behind why users of social media engage with the platforms in the first place. Seraj (2012) defines intellectual, social and cultural value as three factors that motivate users to engage with online communities. Lin & Lu (2011) further add enjoyment as one factor, derived from the use of social media itself. Intellectual value refers to the content co-created and consumed in the community and the perceived value the user attaches to it (Lin & Lu 2011; Peters et.al. 2013; Seraj 2012). Social value comes from the connections and networks made with other users when interacting and sharing content online, and cultural value refers to the cultural norms and habits that are established in an online community that guide the behaviors and intentions of the users (Peters et.al. 2013; Seraj 2012).

The content component in the framework describes what kind of content can be found on social media and are summarized into three aspects; content quality, content valence and content volume (Peters et.al. 2012). Content quality describes the characteristics of the content, what type of narratives are used and as well as what the content's purpose is (Peters et.al. 2013). Content valence refers to the emotions that the content communicates and content volume means the amount of content that is produced by a user or within a social media platform (Peters et.al. 2013).

Network structure is presented as consisting of size, connections, distributions and segmentation (Peters et.al. 2013), and are considered more valuable the more users are active within it (Solis 2011). Finally, social roles and interactions play out simultaneously across the three previously described components, where interactions are defined as "a dynamic, changing sequence of social actions and communication between individuals or among groups" (Peters et.al. 2013:288) and social roles are shaped within the network structure and through users' creation of similar content consistently over time (Peters et.al. 2013).

3.2 Social media platforms

When it comes to brand communication on social media, there are different ways for brands to participate. Each social media platform seems to have its own unique way of

functioning, which means brand behavior and communication in them must be adapted accordingly.

Blogs offer users and companies an outlet in which they create personal or professional (often text-based) content and control the design of the platform on which it is shared (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Blogs are good for keeping interested parties up to date with news, whether personal or business related, and commenting offers a level of interactivity between the publisher and the reader (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).

Content communities on the other hand are used mainly to share various types of content and are less focused on the connectivity, interactivity and creation of online profiles as social networking sites and blogs are (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Instagram would be considered a content-based community, as its core concept is the sharing of images, on the go, with friends and followers. The focus is not on the user's profile or with connecting with other users, as it is with for example LinkedIn or Facebook, but simply to share and enjoy the visual content on the platform. The sharing of images is the main focus and purpose of the service.

Social networking sites as Facebook and LinkedIn mentioned above, are on the other hand useful for creating brand pages and profiles that consumers can follow and interact with (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). These pages generally require users to follow the brand or 'like' their page to see updates. Brand pages allow companies to share news and information with users directly, engage in conversation and react to feedback and comments from consumers (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo 2004; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).

3.3 Instagram

Instagram is a free, visual content sharing social network, focused on the taking and sharing of photos with friends within a mobile application. The photos are cropped into a universal size, and can be edited by for example adding filters to create different effects. The posted photo appears in the feed of the users who follow the poster, in a reverse chronological order with the newest photo displayed on top. The sharer can tag other users in the photos, tag the place where the photo is taken, and write a caption for the photo which can include hashtags and mentions (marked with "#" and "@", respectively) to share the photo and categorize the content. (SimplyMeasured 2015; Walter & Giolgio 2014)

To illustrate the characteristics described above, some screenshots taken from Benefit Cosmetics' Instagram account in February 2015 will be shown below. The examples also show how some brands are communicating and connecting with users on the platform by re-graming users' photos, discussing with them directly in comments and running contests.

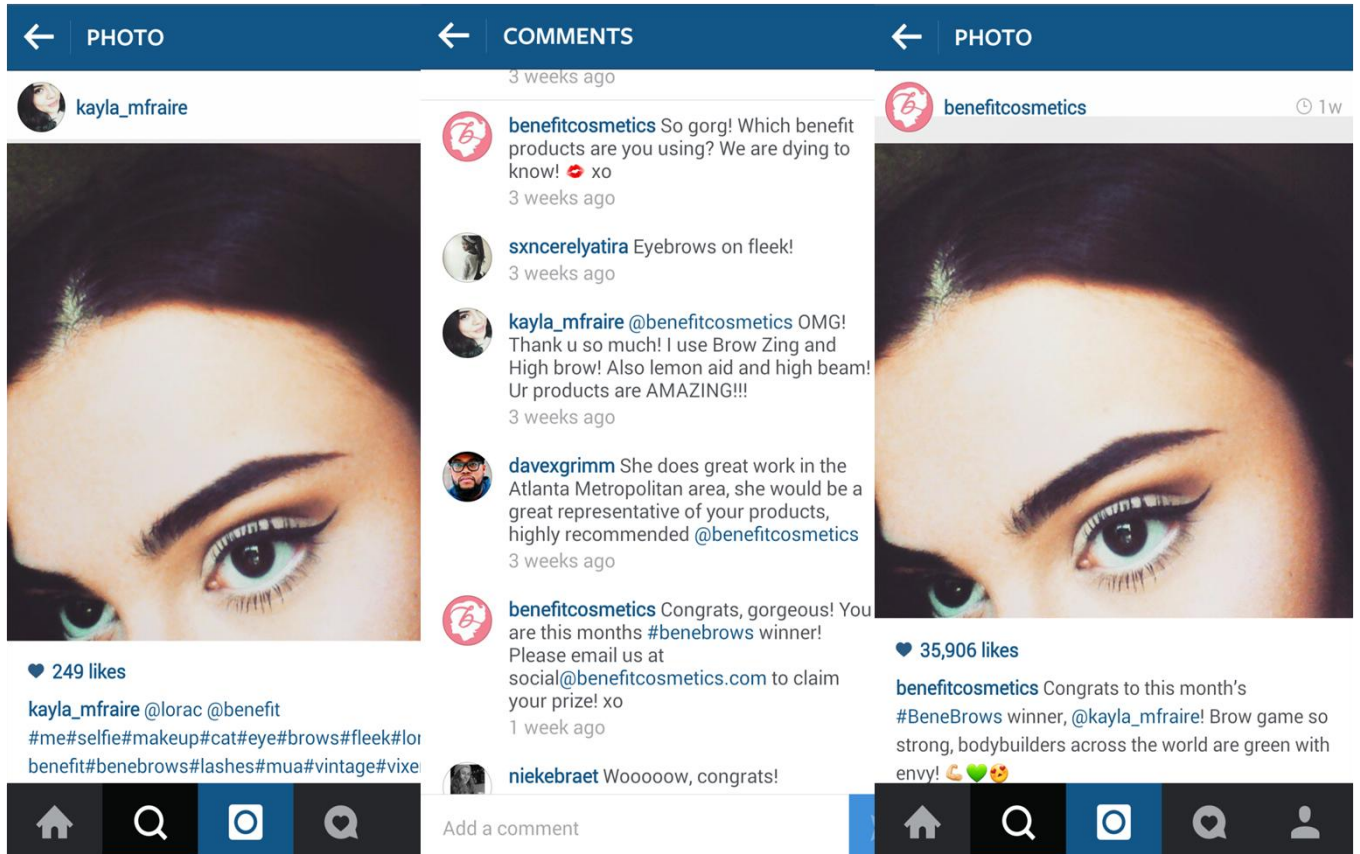


Figure 3 Screenshots from Benefit Cosmetics' Instagram feed (@benefitcosmetics).

There are 70 million photos uploaded to Instagram every day, as well as 2,5 billion 'likes' registered by over 300 million active users (SimplyMeasured 2015). In the study made by SimplyMeasured (2015) it was concluded that post captions were generally kept to a length of 141 characters, perhaps influenced by Twitter, and that caption content is far more important than caption length, a point that Instagram also emphasizes (Instagram 2015c).

But more important than the captions are naturally the photos themselves, the "root of user interest on this visual network" (SimplyMeasured 2015:10). And as the average

user engagement per post increased with 83% from 2013, the value and impact of visual content is noteworthy (SimplyMeasured 2015). As the table above shows, Instagram has grown in the number of members and active users in the last year (2014), with a 32% increase in members and 47% more engaged users (WeAreSocial 2015a), which points to its added importance in a brand's social media portfolio.

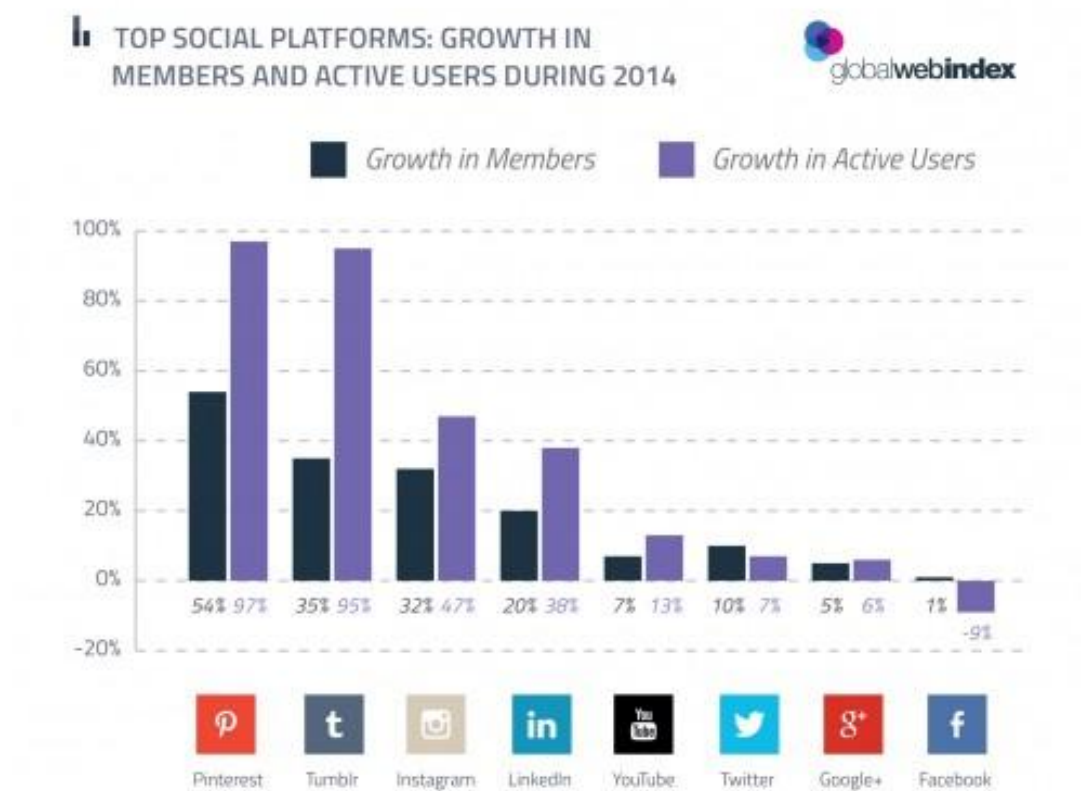


Figure 4 Top Social Platforms by growth in members and active users 2014 (WeAreSocial 2015a)

Video content on Instagram has also increased, and is driving engagement although not quite at the levels that images do (L2 2014; Walter & Gioglio 2014). Videos up to 15 seconds in length can also be posted, and will automatically start playing when scrolled by (L2 2014). Videos are especially useful in telling a brand story, as movement and sound add an extra element to the communication (Walter & Gioglio 2014). Although video content is increasing on Instagram and offer another unique method through which brands can reach users and communicate brand messages, this study will mainly discuss visual communication theory as it pertains to images. However, as part of the aim of this study is to find out what kind of visual brand content users prefer to engage with on Instagram, video content will not be excluded from the study and may well emerge as an important factor in the results.

An aspect to Instagram that differentiates it from other social media platforms is that the service was initially only created for mobile use (Walter & Gioglio 2014) and only later adapted to the web as well. As Instagram presents on its own webpage, "We love taking photos. We always assumed taking interesting photos required a big bulky camera and a couple years of art school. But as mobile phone cameras got better and better, we decided to challenge that assumption" (Instagram 2015b). Founder Kevin Systrom has expressed that although the service has been taken online, moving forward Instagram is still primarily a mobile service (Tech Crunch 2012). This fits with the basic premise of Instagram, which is to capture moments of the everyday life and share those with friends (Instagram 2015). Further on the point of the importance of the mobile, Steve Parker while discussing Facebook, summarizes it well by saying "Mobile is the seamless link between a content creation device (i.e. the camera) and a communication device" (Media Week 2015a). Instagram combines both, creating a platform with unique and new possibilities.

The mobile nature of the application allows for pictures to be taken and shared anywhere and anytime, and reversely for users to consume and engage with others on the go (Hanna et.al. 2011; Walter & Gioglio 2014). It also means that brands can reach users anywhere and anytime relatively easily and quickly. From a brand perspective, tapping into this media can therefore reap many benefits as long as the brand's presence fits into the overall aesthetics and feel of the service (Peters et.al. 2013).

As discussed in the introduction, Instagram allows brands to show a more personal side of themselves and post behind-the-scenes images that may not directly showcase their product or service but nevertheless say something about the brand, its values and sense of humor (Crimson Hexagon 2014; Walter & Gioglio 2014). In doing so, brands allow for a broader brand story to be told which personalizes the brand in the eyes of the user making it more personable and approachable (Walter & Gioglio 2014), and making communications between user and brand easier (Kohli et.al. 2015; Peters et.al. 2013; Walter & Gioglio 2014).

Within the past year Instagram has started exploring with advertising on its platform, starting within the US market with a select few brands (Instagram 2014a). Advertisement has been added to the UK, Canada and Australia markets as well in late 2014 (Instagram 2014b). The posts so far have been co-designed with Instagram's creative team to fit the overall look of Instagram, and have required approval from the CEO Kevin Systrom (Media Week 2015b). How this development will affect users'

engagement with brands and the platform itself, if at all, remains to be seen. Furthermore, whether Instagram will employ similar algorithms as its owner Facebook has, that sort through and prioritize posts for users may also be a possibility in the future. However, for the time being and for the purposes of this study, non-advertorial post content displayed in a chronological order is the context in which the research phenomenon will be studied.

Pinterest

Another visual social media platform worth mentioning is Pinterest. As the table above shows, Pinterest is the fastest growing social platform in terms of active users and new members (WeAreSocial 2015a), and is also a service focused on visual content sharing. Pinterest allows users to 'pin' and save photos and images to boards that are created and categorized by each user according to various topics of interest, such as fashion and travel for example (Gilbert, Bakhshi, Chang & Terveen 2013). Users can follow other users, like, comment and 're-pin' other users' pictures, and clicking on an image leads to the original web source of the pinned image (Gilbert et.al. 2013). The idea of Pinterest is to act as a source of inspiration to users, and "to help people discover the things they love" (Evan Sharp, as cited in Wired 2014a) through pinning images of interest from anywhere on the internet or from the user's own news feed (Wired 2014a).

The click-through rates and accompanying revenues from Pinterest are noticeably higher than through Facebook for example, which makes Pinterest an interesting platform for brands to use (Gilbert et.al. 2013; L2 The Daily 2014). The platform has also grown markedly in mobile use, which makes up 75% of total use as of 2014 (Wired 2014a). The growth in mobile use points to the added interest in visual content, and that users are adapting to pinning and sourcing inspiration on the go more than before (Wired 2014a). What sets Pinterest apart from Instagram, is that the visual content on Pinterest is not for the most part (although it can be) created by the users, but rather found online or in the news feed. Where Instagram encourages users to become photographers and capture everyday moments and create content to share with others on the platform, Pinterest is more focused on collecting ideas and visual inspiration for future use. However different in purpose the two platforms are, there is no denying that the importance of visuals seems to be on the rise amongst social media users (WeAreSocial 2015a).

Tumblr

Tumblr is also a noteworthy social media platform that, as can be seen in the table above, is second to Pinterest in growth in number of members and active users (WeAreSocial 2015a). Tumblr is a micro-blogging site with over 226.8 million blogs and 105.9 million blog posts (Tumblr 2015), of which 92% consist of photos and text (Chang, Tang, Inagaki & Liu 2014). Besides photo- and text based content, users can upload for example videos, links, audio and chats (Chang et.al. 2014). Although Tumblr is not explicitly created as a visual content sharing platform, visuals make up 78.1% of all blog posts (Chang et.al. 2014). Tumblr allows users to follow each other and re-blog other users' content easily, and content can be categorized using hashtags (#) and mentions (@), giving Tumblr a social network aspect to it (Chang et.al. 2014).

As opposed to Pinterest, but similarly to Instagram, Tumblr is a user-created content sharing platform with an emphasis on visual content. However, with Tumblr a user can create and share almost any kind of content, whereas Instagram is solely focused on images and video, and is mainly a mobile application. To conclude, the same point can be made as with Pinterest, that visuals seem to play an increasingly important role in social media creation and consumption preferences.

3.4 Brand communication in social media

Social media and the various platforms discussed above offer brands multiple new ways to communicate with their target groups. The nature of social media means that traditional forms of brand communication are not always applicable, and brands need to adapt accordingly.

For brand communication to be successful on social media the brand needs to understand which social media to be active in (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Furthermore, the target consumers need to be present in the same social media space and they need to be willing to receive brand messages through that platform (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). A cross-platform presence is also possible in order to reach as many consumers as possible, and the varying nature of each platform, as discussed above, means different approaches might be necessary (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).

But in order for any communications efforts to be effective, the brand needs to first establish and define its brand personality (Solis 2011). The goals of being present and

communicating in social medias need to be clear to the brand for messages to come across as intended, and to create a consistency in the communication (Solis 2011). Especially if cross-platform communication is adopted, the core brand values and a clear strategy need to be established so that users understand what the brand stands for, and so that confusing and inconsistent online behavior can be avoided (Solis 2011).

The type of direct communication brought about by social media and the internet highlights the changes in brand communication. As Peters et.al. (2012:282) summarize well, "a social medium is, by definition, multi-way, immediate, and contingent". Brand communication is no longer one-way from brand to consumer, but works continuously and in a dialogue-manner between brands and consumers (Peters et.al. 2013; Solis 2011). Brands have a medium through which they can reach consumers more easily and react to feedback instantly. (Peters et.al. 2013; Solis 2011).

One of the more prominent elements to social media and its role in brand communication is the limited amount of control that brands ultimately have over their brand messages (Kohli et.al. 2015; Peters et.al. 2013; Solis 2011). The messages are received by followers of the brand but are only shared if the brand, its perceived motives and the shared content align with the recipients' values, motives and interests (Peters et.al. 2013). Only then might the message be shared further to others in the recipients' network, but perhaps altered from its original shape, something brands have no control over (Kohli et.al. 2015; Peters et.al. 2013). Therefore it is important to identify key users; even if the brand has numerous followers the brand message won't necessarily reach beyond its own group of followers to second or third parties if the brand's followers are not prone to sharing as well as being influential within their own social networks (Peters et.al. 2013; Stephen Lee 2015).

When communicating in social media, brands need to keep in mind that the content needs to fit the medium. Brands are like any other user on social media, meaning that they do not have a special or authoritative standing among other users (Peters et.al. 2013). Messages, whether conversational or advertorial in nature, are displayed in a similar manner as all other posts and updates, and whether the message gets noticed depends purely on the content of the post (Peters et.al. 2013). Furthermore, that means that brands need to understand what content fits in and how much interactivity is acceptable and wanted by other users (Peters et.al. 2013). The loss of control over brand messages, as discussed above, also means that when problems arise or users have questions or feedback, the brand needs to be present to engage in conversation

because users will talk about a brand regardless of its presence (Peters et.al. 2013; Solis 2011).

Research has been done about the reasons why people choose to follow a brand on social media. As de Vries, Gensler & Leeftang (2012) point out, users who follow a brand on social media tend to be more committed and receptive toward brand news and information. In fact, over 50% of users on social media follow a brand (de Vries et.al. 2012). But the level of receptiveness is directly linked to the motivation that a user has for following a brand; if they follow because they genuinely like the brand they will be more receptive, but if they follow in the hopes of winning prizes or receiving free gifts, as 52% of Twitter brand-followers do (TwitterUK 2014), the value of those engagements are questionable (Hanna et.al. 2011; Lee 2015).

Elaborating on this point, Peters et.al. (2013) further maintain that having perhaps a smaller number of followers may be more valuable, if those followers are truly engaged with the brand in which case any brand communication will be heard and repeated with greater effect than if the follower base is made up largely of 'leftover' likes from previous campaigns, for example where users are encouraged to 'like' or follow a brand to enter a competition (Peters et.al. 2013).

The same point was raised by communications consultant Stephen Lee from the communications company Miltton in a presentation at Hanken School of Economics (5.2.2015), where he said that in that case the act of following is only serving the motive of personal gain, but does not mean that the follower is necessarily interested in the brand and its offerings on any other level, rendering this type of user essentially unaffected by any communications effort made by brands. This will also misrepresent the true effect of a social media account if only 'likes' and followers are counted, but their engagement level with the brand and its content is not measured.

In a study researching brand post popularity on fan pages in social media, de Vries, Gensler and Leeftang (2012) have identified a few factors that affect the amount of likes and comments that a post generates. Vividness of a post relates to how stimulating the post is to the different senses, for example using bright colors, pictures or adding video to the post (de Vries et.al. 2012). Interactivity on the other hand refers to how well the post activates users to comment or like the brand post (de Vries et.al. 2012). With regards to the content of the posts, de Vries et.al. (2012) have looked at how informative or entertaining a brand post is, whether relevant to the brand or not.

Finally, comment valence refers to the occurrence of positive, neutral or negative comments on a brand post (de Vries et.al. 2012). The authors conclude, similarly to Peters et.al. (2013) and Lee (2015), that there are differences in engagement levels, where commenting is a more engaged activity than simply liking (de Vries et.al. 2012). Furthermore, they conclude that users seem to encourage each other; the more positive comments a post receives, the more attractive it is to other users, therefore generating more interest in the post and inviting more 'likes' (de Vries et.al. 2011). Brodie et.al. (2011) furthermore express customer engagement as existing on a continuum ranging between non-engaged to highly engaged with regard to an interactive experience, where the level of engagement is affected by multiple factors including previous encounters and personal needs and interests.

3.5 Engagement

Engagement in this study is understood as users liking, commenting, sharing or following a brand and its posts on Instagram. Lurking as a form of engagement will also be included in this study, and is discussed in more detail below. Before any of those activities take place, however, the user must first pay attention to the content that the brands are posting. As brought up in the introduction, society today is cluttered with information whatever its source may be, and attracting that attention to brand communication may be difficult (Hanna et.al. 2011; Solis 2011). The content of the brand communication becomes crucial in this aspect, and needs to contain some hook in order to incite further action in terms of content engagement (Solis 2011; Walter & Gioglio 2014).

These aforementioned actions are measureable and often the only metrics looked at when measuring the success of brands' social media activities (Peters et.al. 2012). Although these are very strong indicators of successful posts and what content is ranking higher than others (Walter & Gioglio 2014), brands rarely take the time to understand why certain content is driving more engagement.

As communications consultant Stephen Lee from the communications company Miltton discussed in a presentation at Hanken School of Economics (5.2.2015), companies are present in many social medias, but are not always utilizing the data gathered from these platforms to their advantage. Gathered information may suggest certain content is faring better within brand groups than others, but companies are not always analyzing this information to adjust their output accordingly, or not adapting

their content to each platform. Brands need to understand what content users are engaging with in order to stay relevant in their minds, and to build relationships with them, which will have positive effects in terms of word of mouth, brand advocacy and attitudes towards brands (Lee 5.2.2015). With time, a relationship between the brand and the user will form, which is immeasurable in value (Lee 5.2.2015; Peters et.al. 2012).

Lee's presentation (5.2.2015) highlighted the relevance and importance of understanding what content users prefer to engage with and why. When brands understand what their users want, they can produce valuable content that users will engage with (Walter & Gioglio 2014). Having data and analytics of previous post success and user engagement will help brands optimize their content, reducing the chances of ineffective or disliked posts being uploaded (Walter & Gioglio 2014).

Those users who engage the most are identified as influencers (Peters et.al. 2012) or ambassadors (Lee 5.2.2015) and their actions and words are listened to and respected within their online community. Social media users generally do not use social media because they want to engage with brands, instead they want to share and consume content with their friends and peers (Lin & Lu 2011; WeAreSocial 2015b). Therefore finding the users who will share the brand content with their peers is important (Solis 2011).

In their article Brodie et.al. (2011) have defined and presented five fundamental propositions for customer engagement as well as created a general definition for the concept based on those propositions:

"Customer engagement (CE) is a *psychological state* that occurs by virtue of *interactive, cocreative customer experiences* with a *focal agent/object* (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships. It occurs under a specific set of context-dependent conditions generating differing CE levels; and exists as a *dynamic, iterative process* within service relationships that *cocreate value*. CE plays a *central role* in a nomological network governing service relationships in which other relational concepts (e.g., involvement, loyalty) are antecedents and/or consequences in iterative CE processes. It is a *multidimensional concept* subject to a context- and/or stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral dimensions."

Of the fundamental propositions that Brodie et.al. (2011:260) discuss, especially interesting are the concepts that customer engagement "has been expressed to encompass various context- and/or stakeholder-specific combinations of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions" and "the nature of CE as an individual, context-dependent concept, which may be observed at different levels of intensity and/or complexity, at different points in time". Furthermore, customer engagement cannot be

viewed separately from the context in which it takes place, meaning that it is affected by the social, cultural and political factors that relate to, and shape it (Vibert & Shields 2003, as cited in Brodie et.al. 2011:260). Customer engagement levels are also shaped by an individual's personality, mood and need for cognition, of which the latter, in simple terms, refers to the extent to which an individual enjoys the act of thinking and engages in the activity (Cacioppo & Petty 1982). These factors bring out a more personal aspect to engagement that could be likened to the concept of framing as discussed in the chapter about visual communication. As a visual is interpreted and understood through the frames of one's experiences and cultural and social background (Jamieson 2007) also engagement will be affected by similar factors that shape the levels of engagement experienced by an individual (Brodie et.al. 2011).

de Vries et.al. (2012), Lee (2015 and Peters et.al. (2013) also discuss different levels of engagement on social media, where a 'like' is less valuable than commenting on, or sharing a post are. Peters et.al. (2013) further argue that the true value of a brand message is actually the ultimate reach it receives, as discussed above, meaning that the higher the level of user engagement with the brand (ie. sharing) the further the reach of the message. In addition to the reach of a message or image and the initial attention and awareness it receives, brands need to create lasting and continuing attention via engagement (Hanna et.al. 2011; Rossiter 1982; Solis 2011).

As Instagram does not provide the user with a 'share' option, sharing as a form of engagement is somewhat complicated to define in this context. As the news feed does not show other users' activities, as on for example Facebook, sharing an image through tagging another user or mentioning them in a comment is often the only way that reach can be achieved. Additionally a user can take a screenshot of an image on Instagram and re-post it on their own account. This is not uncommon practice among brands who want to highlight their products or services in use by other consumers, but the only way to know the source of the original image is if the brand mentions the user in the caption (See p.19 for example of this in screenshots from Benefit Cosmetics' account). In terms of this study, all of the methods for sharing mentioned above will be considered as 'sharing' content. Given the arguably higher involvement required to share through screenshot and re-posting content, it could be argued that this level of sharing would be much more valuable than simply liking and commenting on an image due to the relatively larger amount of effort required.

Measuring engagement and the success of brand communications in social media can however be complex. As mentioned, the sheer number of followers does not automatically mean that each user is highly engaged with the brand or genuinely even interested in its offerings. It is however a good place to start measuring, but other aspects need to be included as well. For example, it is highly relevant to look at the change in user engagement over a period of time; are there more followers, more commenting or sharing on the brand's account (Peters et.al. 2013)? Furthermore, Peters et.al. (2013) suggest measuring how many brand mentions per follower the brand receives, as well as interactions within the group of followers. All of these points of measurement will lead to a fairly accurate look on the success of the brand's social media presence, although naturally as social media changes the measurements might also evolve over time (Peters et.al. 2013).

In fact, one important aspect of user behavior that cannot be measured through likes, comments, shares or following is what is commonly referred to as lurking (Chen & Chang 2013; Crawford 2009; Heinonen 2011; Schneider, von Krogh & Jäger 2012). Lurking is the activity of observing or watching content online, but not engaging with it in a measurable or visible manner (Chen & Chang 2013; Crawford 2009; Heinonen 2011; Schneider et.al. 2012). There can be several reasons behind lurking behavior, for example feelings of shyness to openly contribute to a discussion, lack of time to contribute, wanting to stay anonymous or considering the amount of content (ie. comments) to be too large or small to get involved with (Schneider et.al 2012). A large amount of online community members do not engage with content in a visible way but rather consume the content created by others, and are therefore often a somewhat neglected group when for example considering the success of a brand's online activity (Crawford 2009; Heinonen 2011; Schneider et.al. 2012). Without measurable or visible engagement with content it is thought that lurkers are not paying attention to the content and as such are not affected by it either (Chen & Chang 2013; Crawford 2009; Schneider et.al. 2012).

However, Chen & Chang (2013) argue that lurkers in fact actively engage with content in the background in form of information-gathering, and may eventually 'evolve' to post in an online community once they feel like they have enough knowledge and can contribute to the discussion. This points to lurkers being quite engaged with online content, but that their engagement rarely manifests in a measureable activity (Chen & Chang 2013). In a similar vein Crawford (2009:528) argues that the term lurker should

be replaced with 'listening', as the term lurking has "connotations of a sense of threat, ambiguity and concealment". As with Chen & Chang (2013), Crawford (2009) also considers lurkers to have an active role, although in the background, and that 'listening' would be more descriptive of this state of active engagement with content and receptiveness that lurkers have. The lurkers in this sense also act as an audience to the content contribution and creation of brands and of other users, listening and paying attention to what is being said (Crawford 2009).

Lurking can also be approached from the perspective of curiosity, in which the user's curiosity is raised by content, subsequently affecting how much attention is paid to the content (Schneider et.al. 2012). Curiosity toward content can be considered a manifestation of a need to gather more information about a subject, by which a user may seek pleasure from learning something new, or to reduce anxiety caused by a lack of knowledge (Schneider et.al. 2012). Whatever the reasons behind the curiosity, the lurker is engaging with the content to fill a need, and the content is therefore not being ignored as is often assumed with lurkers. Schneider et.al. (2012) also argue that the need for information may result in the lurker posting content themselves if content observation is not enough, similarly to what Chen & Chang (2013) discuss. Both studies highlight the fact that lurkers are indeed actively engaging and considering the content that they are consuming, which implies that although user engagement with brand content cannot always be measured, it nonetheless has an effect.

Similarly, Heinonen (2009) found that the majority of the respondents in her study only consumed online content but did not visibly engage with it. In addition to seeking information, entertainment seeking was found to be another purpose for online content consumption (Heinonen 2009). The entertainment aspect was found to contribute to a sense of inspiration received from the consumed content (eg. food blogs) or to a sense of entertainment derived from the content itself, for example by observing others' discussions or watching videos on YouTube (Heinonen 2009). As the lurkers in this sense get something out of the content, whether it is information or entertainment, they by definition are not ignoring the content but are engaging with it.

In the context of this study the term engagement needs to be extended to include the concept of lurking. As users in online contexts do not always visibly engage with content, but engage with it nonetheless, these users could be argued to have equally important information regarding the kind of visual brand communication they prefer to engage with on Instagram and why. In conclusion, engagement in the context of

Instagram can be seen as quite multi-faceted and ranging from fairly straight-forward actions as liking and commenting, to more effort-requiring activities such as sharing as well as rather complex concepts of engagement through lurking. Given the varied nature and levels of engagement discussed here, it becomes further interesting to ask users to discuss these concepts and their preferences themselves through interviews.

Simplicity

From visual communication and social media, Instagram in particular, arise an interesting aspect of simplicity, which could be considered as an underlying theme connecting the chapters above. Although the above discussions highlight the levels of complexity and intricacies that make up the process of visual interpretation and comprehension and social media strategies, as a method of communication visuals are nonetheless less cluttered and more easily and quickly internalized than textual communication. When a brand creates its image with well thought out image composition, framing and subject matter to best relay the intended message to the user, the simplicity brought forth by visual brand communication should not be ignored. Therefore, a brief look at simplicity as a concept in both business and communications, and the growing emphasis that it is receiving, will be discussed next.

Research is showing that too much complexity adds to consumers' feelings of angst, indecisiveness and after-purchase regret, as being offered too many options or communicated too much information often leads to no decision being made at all (Freeman & Spenner 2012). Businesses are simplifying their product ranges, websites and their online shopping procedures to make consumer decision processes easier, and the concept is being adapted into communications as well (Forbes 2014b). Communications agencies and professionals (eg. Siegel+Gale 2014; Carmine Gallo 2013) are actively promoting and utilizing simplicity in their work, and make compelling cases for the concept. The use of Instagram and visual brand communication could be seen as being a part of a move towards simplification.

In the key concepts simplicity has been defined as "the quality of being easy to understand or use; the state or quality of being plain or not fancy or complicated; something that is simple or ordinary but enjoyable (Merriam-Webster 2015)". As discussed in the chapter about visual communication, image comprehension is much faster than textual comprehension (Jamieson 2007). In support of that, Davey Alba (Wired 2014b) posits that Instagram's success over Twitter may be due the simplicity of

reading news in form of visual communication in the feed, which as such offers a more clutter-free approach to handling and displaying large amounts of data. Furthermore, Instagram also suggests keeping post captions short and relevant in order to not "detract from the simplicity of the post" (Instagram 2015c). This suggests that Instagram has understood and integrated simplicity into its activities.

However, contrary to how it sounds, simplicity is not always so simple to accomplish. To create a perfect message in just a few words, or in a single all-encompassing image, takes creativity and focus - as Steve Jobs, arguably one of the masters of simplicity, once said: "That's been one of my mantras -- focus and simplicity. Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it's worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains" (Business Week 1998). This quote illustrates well the previously discussed topics, where both visual communication and social media strategies require planning, knowledge and focus to be executed well but can in return be highly beneficial for brands, when the outcome is clear and simple.

Following this logic, the marketing consulting firm Siegel+Gale has created a Global Brand Simplicity Index which is "[...] an annual study which evaluates the state, significance, and impact of simplicity on brands" (Siegel+Gale 2014). Some of the companies topping this index each year are brands such as Amazon, Google and Apple (Siegel+Gale 2014) - brands that stay true to their core concept. From the report it is clear that those companies that have embraced simplicity in their brand activities are reaping the benefits both in terms of consumers satisfaction and profits (Siegel+Gale 2014). This highlights the effect that simplicity has on brand performance, and utilizing this concept in communications may therefore be a logical step. The role of simplicity in communications is clear, and visual communication as well as social media platforms such as Instagram are offering unique and simple solutions to this problem (Walter & Gioglio 2014).

3.6 Summary of the theoretical framework

In this section of the study visual communication, social media with a focus on brand communication within it, as well as Instagram as a visual content sharing social media have been presented.

Chapter 2 presented visual communication which can be a somewhat complex concept, but ultimately effective as a method of communication when planned well. Images can be both connotative and denotative (Jamieson 2007) which affects how they are interpreted. Framing is also an important aspect to visual communications, as the images are framed by the image creator but also viewed and interpreted through personal frames of the viewer, again affecting the interpretation of the image (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Jamieson 2007). In the context of Instagram visual communication becomes a very important factor due to the platform's mainly visual content, presenting brands with both opportunities and challenges.

Instagram itself as a social media differs in some key ways from social networking sites, namely through the visual focus, mobile nature and emphasis on content sharing as opposed to network creation, as presented in chapter 3.3. Additionally, in chapter 3.5 engagement was presented in context of social media, and lurking was included as an important form of engagement. Furthermore the complex concept of 'sharing' on Instagram was presented, and the different levels of engagement discussed. Finally, a brief look at simplicity as a factor in branding and communication was presented.

In the following section the methodology part of this study will be presented to explain how the empirical part of the study will be carried out.

4 METHODOLOGY

In this section the methodology of the study will be presented. To answer the research question, a qualitative approach has been chosen. The aim of this study is to find out the kind of visual brand communication that users prefer to engage with on Instagram and the reasons why, and therefore in-depth interviews were chosen and will be discussed in chapter 4.1. The sample and sampling methods are presented in 4.2. with a respondent overview in Table 1.

The interview process and guide are explained in chapter 4.3. and the interview guides can be found in Appendices 1-3. How the data was analyzed is presented in chapter 4.4. and finally an overview of the quality of the data and the steps taken to strengthen the quality is presented in chapter 4.5.

4.1 Semi-structured in-depth interviews

The method that is chosen for conducting this study, and consequently to answer the research question, will be semi-structured in-depth interviews. In order to answer the research question it is important to let the respondents give answers in their own words as they subjectively perceive the topic, which would be limited - if not impossible - using fixed-answer questionnaires (Silverman 2011). Therefore semi-structured interviews are chosen to allow the respondents the space to formulate their own opinions. An interview guide will be used to help guide the interview along, and to make sure that no important topics are left uncovered (Patton 2002).

Individual, semi-structured interviews are chosen to learn first-hand from users what kind of visual brand communication users prefer to engage with on Instagram and why. In order to understand the reasons for their behavior and opinions, interviews need to be conducted as it is not possible to "observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions" (Patton 2002:341). The underlying belief in choosing this method is that through discussion and asking open-ended questions, it is possible for the respondents to explain their behavior and point of view regarding the phenomenon (Patton 2002).

To study the chosen topic, there are other methods that could be applicable. Focus group interviews could be used to gather multiple Instagram users together and allow for a group discussion through which the information would emerge (Patton 2002; Silverman 2011). Focus groups are interviews conducted with a small group of

participants with similar characteristics regarding a specific topic that they have knowledge about (Patton 2002). Focus group interviews are particularly useful when the researcher wants to know more about peoples' experiences and opinions, and especially why people think or feel a specific way about a topic, and the meaning and significance of a phenomenon (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Kitzinger 1995).

Focus group interviews are however not always the most appropriate choice of interview, and depends largely on the topic of the study. Especially in cases where the research topic is sensitive, personal or perhaps of a medical nature, people may not want to reveal too much information in front of other people. (Kitzinger 1995). Although Instagram should not be a very sensitive subject per se, there may however be aspects to the social media behavior of users that certain respondents would not be comfortable vocalizing in a larger group setting - following or engaging with certain brands or celebrities for example. It was found that some respondents indeed seemed somewhat embarrassed to disclose the brands that they follow, and how they engage with the brand content. It can be speculated that some of the information would not have been disclosed in a group setting. The one-on-one nature of the chosen interview method allowed for a more comfortable and less stressful environment for the respondent to explore their own behavior and preferences, and a good rapport between the respondent and interviewer further helped create a safe environment to share information (Silverman 2011).

Another useful approach to study the research phenomenon would be conducting observations. In observations the researcher observes the subjects of study in their natural surroundings and gathers information by taking notes and analyzing the behavior of the subjects, and sometimes following up the observation with interviews (Silverman 2011). The advantage of conducting observations is that the researcher gets to witness the actual behavior and steps taken by the subjects within a certain context, however it is sometimes argued that the mere presence of the researcher will affect and change the behavior of the observed (Silverman 2011). Furthermore, observations are exploratory by nature and often produce theories on the go, which need to be further tested in the field to be able to draw valid conclusions and avoid focusing on irrelevant, but seemingly important aspects in subject behavior (Silverman 2011). With this in mind, it serves the purposes of this study to allow people to reflect and comment on their own Instagram use in terms of brand engagement, and allowing them to bring up

what they consider to be important to them and visually more preferable with regards to content.

In her study, Winqvist (2014) argues that interviewing users about their preferences about images posted on Instagram may lead to skewed, or untruthful responses due to the unnatural setting of the interview combined with users' self-awareness of voicing opinions (Patton 2002). However, visual content analysis - although very effective and indeed independent of the effect of users - can still not answer the question of *why* users choose to engage with certain visual brand communication over others as well as hearing it straight from those to whom it is aimed at. As subjective as each users' experience and opinions may be, the terms used to describe personal points of view may well reveal new angles as well as uncover common traits in the interviewees opinions (Patton 2002).

Therefore it is valuable to conduct in-depth interviews to dig deeper into the thought-processes of the target users. This study aims to add to the existing research about Instagram and complement the study made by Winqvist (2014) and others, and offer a more well-rounded understanding on consumer engagement with visual brand communication within Instagram.

4.2 Sample

Purposeful sampling, which consists of choosing "[i]nformation-rich cases [...] from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton 2002:46), is useful to gather information-rich respondents to interview. To sample the interviewees, the following purposeful sampling methods will be used.

Homogenous sampling involves studying a certain group with similar characteristics in more depth and detail (Kitzinger 1995; Patton 2002). In this study, the homogenous sample will be urban, female Instagram users in Finland between the ages of 20-30. Research shows that the majority of Instagram users are female and under the age of 35, and mainly focused in urban areas (Business Insider 2014), and therefore the choice of a quite specific demographic is warranted.

As the sample criteria are quite specific, additionally criterion sampling will be used to find relevant respondents for the study. Criterion sampling entails finding and

interviewing respondents that fit a certain pre-established criterion of interest (Patton 2002). The pre-determined criterion in this study is that participants naturally need to have an active Instagram account, and also should follow at least one brand. The choice of brand is not of importance to the study, because the purpose is to establish on a general level what visual brand content users engage with on Instagram and why.

Finally, snowball sampling will be used to reach further information-rich cases through existing informants, by asking them for a referral to other persons they know with knowledge relevant to the study (Patton 2002).

The final number of respondents chosen for this study was 10, all of whom fit the sampling criteria described above. The table below shows an overview of the respondents.

Table 1 Overview of respondents

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Interview duration</i>
F1	29	Retail	Helsinki	30:47
F2	21	Student	Turku	20:46
F3	28	Student	Helsinki	44:08
F4	25	Marketing	Helsinki	29:00
F5	25	Media sales	Helsinki	28:37
F6	25	Student	Helsinki	32:23
F7	24	Retail	Helsinki	38:08
F8	25	Student	Vaasa	35:18
F9	29	Public Relations	Helsinki	35:22
F10	28	Student	Turku	1:00:39

4.3 Interview process and guide

The majority of the respondents were from Helsinki and are full-time students, however four work full time. The age range of the respondents varied between 21 and 29. The interviews were conducted in late March and April of 2015 either in the respondents' homes, the author's home or in a public place such as a café or in school. Three of the interviews were conducted via Skype, where both respondent and interviewer were in the privacy and quiet of their respective homes. Some interviews naturally moved towards a more conversational style and others followed the interview guide more closely in structure. The length of the interviews also depended on the respondent; some answered very concisely and assertively whereas others were more talkative and pondering. However, as the interview process progressed the interview techniques, and probing in particular, were also improved on the interviewers part, leading to more in-depth discussions.

Each interview covered all the topics presented in the interview guide and probing was used to delve deeper into some topics or to further clarify a point made by a respondent (Patton 2002). To further steer the thought process of each respondent towards Instagram, and to make it easier for them to verbalize their thoughts, they were allowed and encouraged to have Instagram open during the interview. It was found to be helpful for many as they could point out certain examples, and in some cases it even helped them bring up new points of their own as they scrolled through the newsfeed. Others only used Instagram in the beginning of the interview and set it aside as the conversation progressed.

The interviews were conducted in Finnish and Swedish to allow the respondents to answer in their own language, and as such also to avoid potential problems due to language barriers. The role of the interviewer was kept as neutral and objective as possible, but some affirmative gestures and words of acknowledgment were offered to the respondents to encourage them on. This seemed natural to do to help the interviews along, and is also in line with Patton's (2002:366) suggestion to " [...] convey to them that their knowledge, expertise, experiences, attitudes, and feelings are important".

Furthermore, each interview was recorded on the interviewer's mobile phone and transcribed to ensure that no piece of information was forgotten or overlooked. Additionally, notes were taken during the interview to get down any ideas that came to mind during the conversations. (Patton 2002)

Interview guide

It is common for the researcher to have a set of questions, or topics for discussion in order to make sure the conversation stays on topic, but also that no relevant question is left unaddressed (Kitzinger 1995; Patton 2002). If the discussion halts, is side railing or something needs clarification, it is important that the interviewer steps in and steers the interview back on track (Kitzinger 1995; Patton 2002). A semi-structured interview guide covering the most important questions and topics was created for the interviews, to ensure that all interviews covered the same subjects and that nothing was left out.

As discussed above, it is useful to have a set of questions to help steer and control the interview, and to make sure no topic is left uncovered (Patton 2002). As part of the research question in this study is finding out *why* users prefer certain visual brand content and engage with that, the method in which the questions are asked are important. Patton (2002) in fact suggests going around asking *why* directly and instead asking participants to describe their choices, as he warns that *why*-questions easily can receive short, superficial answers. Reasons behind a certain behavior or opinion often consist of a number of complex factors, and multiple questions may be needed so that the person begins explaining as many factors as possible (Patton 2002). To work around this problem a number of descriptive questions, such as what the first things they notice are when they scroll through their newsfeed. As the respondents got more comfortable talking, probing questions including *why*-questions were added.

The interview guide starts with a descriptive question which allowed the respondent to ease into the topic and reflect on her Instagram use. A few general questions about their Instagram use were added, such as why they use the service and for how long they have used it, to give a bit of background to the user profile (Patton 2002). The interview guide then focuses more on what brands the users follow and why. Opinion and values questions (Patton 2002) regarding the images themselves were added, to let the respondents describe what kind of visual brand communication they prefer to see and why. These questions were aimed at discovering what kind of image composition or aesthetical aspects respondents look for in visual brand communication, for example.

Finally, questions about engagement with brand content on Instagram were introduced, which could be considered being both opinion and values, as well as feeling questions (Patton 2002). The purpose was to gauge how each respondent engages with brands, why a certain behavior is prevalent and how they feel about brand engagement

on Instagram in general. Another important factor that was covered was the question about lurking behavior and whether or not images without visible engagement have an effect of respondents, and how. At the end of the interview the respondents were asked to summarize their most important reasons for engaging with brand posts on Instagram and they were also asked if they wanted to add anything to the discussion (Patton 2002).

The interview guide was first created in English, and Finnish and Swedish versions were created from the original by the author. The results of the interviews will be presented in the following chapter and the interview guides can be found in Appendices 1-3.

4.4 Analysis of the data

Each interview was recorded and transcribed in order to not lose any piece of information that emerged during the interviews. Once all the interviews were transcribed, an initial categorization was made of the patterns that emerged in the interviews, from which more overall abstractions could be made (Spiggle 1994).

The first step in the content analysis process was to read through the transcripts and pick out similarities that emerged from the texts by color-coding them (Patton 2002). Each category had its own heading and color in a separate file used for analysis, and the interview texts were organized under them. Some passages fit under multiple categories and others were found, after careful consideration, to be irrelevant to the study or too revealing of the respondent's identity, and were consequently removed from the file (Patton 2002). The results were compared and studied carefully before being assigned to a specific category, and once the initial categorization was made the categories themselves were compared to find similarities that could be combined into larger abstracts (Spiggle 1994). The transcripts were re-read and rearranged many times under these categories until the final themes were abstracted, which are presented in the next chapter. The research question also provided a way to group and present the results, further providing a similar structure that was used in the theoretical framework.

As the research approach and interview questions were based on, and created from previous theory, this part of the process can be looked at as being deductive (Patton 2002). However, as there is no previous studies made on user preferences regarding

engagement with visual brand communication on Instagram, and the platform itself differs from other social medias, an inductive element to the study could be found (Patton 2002). The analysis of the data and categorization was inductive, as there were no pre-defined model or theory to compare the data to. With that said, an overall abductive approach is taken in the analysis of the data (Patton 2002).

4.5 Quality of the research

Wallendorf and Belk (1989) have presented five criteria to help judge the trustworthiness of a study. Being thorough when conducting research and taking steps to ensure the quality and trustworthiness throughout the process is crucial for valid and reliable findings and conclusions (Wallendorf & Belk 1989). The article is written from a participant-observation and ethnographical point of view, however the criteria can be useful also in a qualitative interview setting to assess the quality of the study, and each point is explained as it relates to this research. The five criteria of trustworthiness (Wallendorf & Belk 1989) and how they have been addressed in this study are presented below.

Credibility

Credibility refers to how well that which has been studied is reflected in the results and conclusions, and is usually enhanced through prolonged engagement with the study subjects, persistent observation, triangulation across sources and methods as well as member checks and audits (Wallendorf & Belk 1989).

Given the timeframe for this study, prolonged engagement and persistent observation could not be performed. However, snowball sampling was used to achieve a varied pool of respondents from different cities and ages within the sampling criteria, and the use of semi-structured interviews with respondents familiar with Instagram provided information rich data. Furthermore, each interview covered the same topics to make sure all the topics were discussed by all the respondents. Having taken these measures, the findings are found to be credible and relate well to the studied phenomenon.

Transferability

Transferability means to what extent the findings can be used in other contexts and with other respondents in future studies, and triangulation across different sites and

seeking limiting exceptions are suggested to use for increased transferability (Wallendorf & Belk 1989).

The research phenomenon was only studied within Finland with urban, female users which means that while the transferability may hold within the limitations set for this study, wider scale and international transferability cannot be guaranteed. Neither triangulation nor seeking limiting exceptions were possible given the scope of the study, however they could help describe how well the findings would work in other groups or contexts (Wallendorf & Belk 1989).

Dependability

Dependability looks at whether the exact study can be repeated and the same results acquired by other researchers in the same or similar context (Wallendorf & Belk 1989).

In this case dependability cannot be confirmed by repeating the same study with the same respondents over time, as suggested by Wallendorf & Belk (1989). Given the topic of the study and the nature of social media use, it can be assumed, as the results also suggest, that users' behavior might change with time and prolonged use of Instagram. The respondents reported a noticeable change in their Instagram use and behavior since using it for the first time, which is why dependability cannot be confirmed in this study.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings actually represent the respondent's thoughts, opinions and points of views, and not those of the researcher (Wallendorf & Belk 1989).

Given the time constraints of the study and the fact that it was conducted individually, triangulation across methods and researchers, as is suggested by Wallendorf & Belk (1989) was not possible in this context. However, the interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the process of creating the interview guide as well as how the analysis was carried out is explained in the methodology-section for transparency. To illustrate findings, direct quotes are also provided in the Findings-section.

Integrity

Integrity refers to the extent to which the information gathered from respondents is true and valid, and not affected by fear, intimidation or lies to improve image. To avoid these issues it is suggested to perform triangulation across methods, sources and researchers, have prolonged engagement, good interview technique, keeping all respondents' information confidential as well as conducting researcher self-analysis and introspection. (Wallendorf & Belk 1989)

Triangulation and prolonged engagement in this case were, as described above, not possible within the scope of this study. Self-analysis was not conducted to the extent that Wallendorf & Belk (1989) suggest, but a certain self-awareness and sense of role as interviewer was kept in mind throughout data collection. The respondents were assured of their anonymity before the interviews, and their information has been kept confidential in the analysis process also. Therefore fear of recognition should not have played a part in the responses given during the interviews. Neither were any attempts at image improvement detected; quite oppositely the respondents were honest and appeared comfortable in the interview settings, and were very open about their Instagram use. Some struggled to describe why they engage the way they do, as they had not thought about it before in detail, but were asked to summarize their reasons at the end of the interviews and ultimately seemed content with their given answers.

As good interviewing skills, Wallendorf & Belk (1989) suggest, among other things, probing, trying alternative approaches, as well as using self-revelation can be useful techniques. Probing was naturally used to uncover more detailed answers and to clarify statements, and the respondents were asked to summarize their main, and most important points in their own words at the end of the interviews (Patton 2002). An example of an alternative approach was allowing the respondents to scroll through Instagram during the interviews for added support. Self-revelation was used only when needed, or when it felt appropriate and in support of what the respondent was saying. By employing these techniques during the interview, the respondents seemed to feel more comfortable and forthcoming, enhancing the integrity of the study.

5 FINDINGS

In this section the findings of the study will be presented. The main elements in the findings are **visual brand communication**, presented in chapter 5.1., and **engagement**, presented in chapter 5.2., under which different, connected themes have been presented. To illustrate findings, direct quotes from the interviews will be presented. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and Swedish, and the quotes have been translated into English by the author. The contents of each, and their relevance to this study, will be discussed in connection to the quotes. Conclusions and a discussion of the study will further be presented in the following chapter.

5.1 Visual brand communication

Visual brand communication was discussed in depth and from various angles in the interviews, and the kinds of visual brand communication preferred by respondents varied depending on the topic. Overall there was no specific kind of visual brand communication that was preferred by all respondents, but some aspects emerged as preferable by all respondents and others divided the group more or less in half. The following aspects to visual brand communication were characteristics that were preferred by all respondents or by a vast majority.

Colorful images

The preference for colorful images was expressed by the majority of the respondents. Colorful images were said to stand out from the newsfeed and be more interesting than more muted tones, and as such capture the interest of the viewer much better.

"[...] And with colorful images it's that they- in my opinion they have a bigger kind of impact, like especially if they are well executed then there I, like, enjoy watching colorful pictures and get some inspiration from it. (F8)"

"Yeah, the more color-more colorful and more detailed the photo but still simple for example a packaging is, the more interested I am. I'm always interested in all bright and flashy colors. Patterns. (F5)."

"The images are definitely the first thing I notice, and maybe how they are like framed and how it looks, what colors there are etc. (F6)"

Framing

Another important aspect to image preferences was the framing or composition of photos. Nearly all respondents said that they wanted to see images with well-thought out composition, where the message was clear but presented in an interesting and different manner.

"So, like I also just said, I don't think you should just post a photo of only a product, but then again if you look at this picture from Glitter so here there's a picture of just products. *But* there's still some kind of story behind I think, they are like displayed on a wooden background, it's not just that boring white background and that already gives a small feeling that it's different. (F6)"

"Well.. well a perfect one would be-like a nice photo taken in nature. But like, that the composition is in order and, what's it called, like the framing, that it's like easy to see the image. Like if- if you- if there's, let's say, some shoe that's the main thing then that it's not placed somewhere in the bottom corner on the left but is really there-- that the framing is in order too, yeah. (F7)"

"Now there are just these random pictures of some shoes that are like poorly framed actually, and somewhat unfocused. Like, they're not especially attractive as images in my opinion[...] Because this is poorly framed, the lighting is ugly, there's nothing.. this is just like, they just wanted to post any picture. And I think the photos that they put in their Instagram feed need to be well thought out, beautiful, they need to be interesting-- maybe like if-if those shoes were on the same table with like some set that they would match well with, but it has to be executed in an interesting manner [...] (F2)"

Aesthetics

As discussed in the chapter about visual communication, what is considered to be aesthetically pleasing varies between people (Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al. 2005). This also seems to be something that is quite difficult for people to express and give an example of, but is something that is rather just instantly felt.

"Right. It's-it is usually so that-- rarely there's something like 'well maybe I like this', it's not like- same with magazine advertisements too, it's not like you start thinking 'well there's something here that I like, something I don't', I mean the overall feeling comes right away, whether it's yes or no, like it's not.. it rarely happens that a photo you didn't like earlier, then all of a sudden it's really good, or like.. the first feeling you get, that's usually the correct one. (F10)"

Furthermore, all the respondents described image preference also in terms of what they feel like they get out of the images. For example, a sense of inspiration was mentioned by all of the respondents.

"Yeah it was-- umm Nike Woman's this 'If you only have mornings, make it mornings', there's like a photo taken from a cave where the girl is there on the outside and is doing like a high kick. Yeah so that was like inspiring, because I was looking at it just before I had to go workout and I didn't really feel like going, and then I was like 'damn I'm going to go workout' [laughs]! (F8)"

"[...] But it's mainly maybe that the photos give me like a certain feeling and inspiration. (F10)"

Moreover, many of the respondents also mentioned that they want to get a good feeling from the images, and perhaps seek some sort of escape through the images. The concepts of inspiration and good feeling were furthermore mainly connected to images with a natural composition rather than purely product focused ones.

"A good feeling and... a sense of inspiration. I mean, I feel like I need to get like a good feeling from it. I don't like a photo I don't like [laughs]! (F7)"

"The most important reason I guess is that I want to- I'm looking for inspiration. I look for images that make me happy and put me in a good mood and that maybe take me away from this everyday routine of sitting in school and sitting at work. If you see something that looks fun, then you get a feeling like, I also want to do that, or I also want to look like that or I also want my apartment to look like that [...]. (F6)"

Tips and ideas are also aspects that many respondents look for in Instagram images.

"Fashion, yeah. And then-- actually, one more thing that came to mind is that they often have for example quite nice travel suggestions, so if they've been somewhere on a trip then you get really good ideas, like, well about the destination, if there are any events, restaurant suggestions, things like that.. (F9)"

The above aspects were characteristics about visual brand communication that the respondents more or less agreed upon, whereas the following factors divided opinion.

Natural composition vs. product focus

Closely related to image composition was also the preference for a natural feel to images. For some it meant that images should not seem too posed and planned, and for others it meant that clothing and shoes, for example, should be worn by people in the images.

"The more everyday the better, I think. Or like photos that aren't so-- that don't look like you've stood there with a professional photographer for a half hour and planned, but more like photos that are like genuine and have been taken in the moment more. (F4)"

"Something that's like fun, that it's a little different. It's not just a-a picture of some product for example. If I think from-If I follow for example a company, then I don't just want to see a photo of a shoe or a shirt, I want to see that shoe or that shirt on a person that gives inspiration. (F6)"

For some respondents, on the other hand, it was more important that the product was the main focus in the picture or video.

"Yeah I know that, because, I'm-I'm in sales and marketing so I'm interested in what I get for the money more than that [the picture] looks nice. (F5)"

"[...] Nike has some new shoe, what is it, Air or something, and [my friend who works for Nike] has a photo on Instagram that he's like really nicely edited and he's holding the shoe in front of him so that you can clearly see the shoe and then some of the background. (F2)"

The above quote also shows that the respondent still appreciated the composition of the photo, although the main importance was that the product was clearly presented.

Videos

The video feature is relatively new on Instagram, and also divided the opinions of the respondents. Some disliked the shortness of the videos or felt like they interrupted the flow of scrolling through the newsfeed, whereas others considered them useful to show clothing in use or to learn new workout moves, for example.

"I think it's quite fun, but the-in my opinion it's bad that the video is so short. It could be even longer, because it's 15 seconds now and it basically- I feel like it ends kind of midway-- not like a minute, but at least maybe 30 seconds. Because then there are people- I mean I don't want to watch a video if it's many minutes long either, but then the 15 seconds is a little- like you just get into it and then the video stops like it hit a wall [...] (F1)"

"You get more out of them than from one picture. If you, um, for example look at clothing advertisements, having the person move in the dress, or outfit, like you see how it fits from different angles. (F5)"

One respondent said that it depends on what the purpose of the video is. If it shows a fitness move then a video would be useful, whereas for inspirational purposes a video is too literal and does not leave room for personal interpretation.

"[...] Because in some way-- yeah, it's probably that you can draw your own conclusions, it becomes like... it says too much if it's a video. Could be. But it's also different, completely different depending on why you follow that brand. Because if you follow that brand to get inspired, then maybe you don't want to see the videos, but if you want to see-follow it to get like ideas about something, then maybe it's relevant in a completely different way with videos. Because if I follow a brand to get workout ideas, then a video is much better than an image. Because then I want to learn something from it, and it's a completely different thing. But if I only want to be inspired, then a picture is much better. (F4)"

Brand communication

The respondents were asked about what brands they follow on Instagram and why, and the conversation was steered toward a stronger brand communication focus from a more general image preference discussion. One of the sampling criteria was that the respondents needed to follow at least one brand, and the brands varied from more traditional brands, such as Nike, to personal brands, such as bloggers. Although certain aspects to brand communication opinions and preferences on Instagram overlap with some of the general visual preferences discussed above, it was found that the respondents have strong opinions regarding the kind of visual brand communication they want to see on Instagram.

Instagram as a communication tool

In general the respondents like brand communication on Instagram, as it offers a unique way for brands to communicate. Furthermore, the respondents have chosen to follow brands on Instagram meaning that certain acceptance of brand presence on Instagram must already be present.

"Somehow I feel like Instagram is a little more like, intimate. That companies can post pictures of behind the scenes. It's- I haven't seen that in traditional media or on Facebook. I guess that's the-what's so lovely about Instagram that they-they have like the opportunity to create that environment. (F6)"

"Yeah, yeah. Because it's that there is so much happening behind the scenes that the consumers don't know about. Instagram is perhaps a way for companies to show, show in a visual way what their strategy is all about and who they really are. (F6)"

"Well maybe [brand communication] has become more similar in all I think, all medias.. but it's more personal on Instagram somehow. Often that which you post on other places is perhaps more, kind of, official things, but then on Instagram it's more kind of.. it's like, meant to be kind of behind the scenes and things that you don't.. there it's also ok to put up pictures that aren't taken with a really good camera or that are, like, perfectly arranged. Whereas in other places it's maybe not ok. It's, like, more ok to be less kind of planned, more like spontaneous things maybe. It doesn't even require that someone would have to plan so much and you can quite.. just react quite quickly, I think. (F4)"

As can be seen in the quotes above, some respondents found that Instagram offers a more personal channel that allows brands to show more of their personality and aspects to the business that do not quite fit on other media channels. Knowing more about a company on a perceivably more personal level seemed to be important to some of the respondents.

Post content

The above seemed to go hand in hand with image preference and with what they get out of the pictures, as those who wanted more clear and product focused images did not seem to care for brand posts that are more about the brand story and less about the product offering.

"Yeah it's the product- it's the product offering that interests me. Because I'm a buyer. It's the product offering that, like, interests me [...]. (F5)"

For many, however, the brand posts need to be somehow interesting and captivating to spark, and retain, interest. Similarly here, when discussing brand post content, factors such as inspiration and getting a good feeling from the brand post become relevant.

"Of-of course that [the brand is] interesting and that it also posts the images there and that they're not all the same, yeah and that they inspire me. If I don't- If I notice then after a while

that I've never 'liked' any of its photos, then I stop following it. But... so yeah-I mean it has to be- that's maybe the most important thing to me that it posts interesting images often. (F7)"

"Well there-it varies a lot there, there are also the kind where it's just a product. Then they have a lot of those, like, where a person is running with Nike clothing on, and then there's, like, some text, something like this-- that there are, like, images that inspire and evoke emotion and not like where the clothes are the main focus. (F8)"

As with image preference in general, it was found that respondents require the same standard from brands as with any other user. When users choose to follow brands they prefer brand content that fits in with the rest of the newsfeed. As one respondent replied in connection to videos, it also largely depends on what reason the user has for following a brand, whether it is for informational or inspirational reasons. Regardless of the preference for the kind of brand communication, all the respondents still had requirements for the visual outlook of the post.

Post frequency

An interesting factor that for some respondents affects the overall opinion of brand communication on Instagram is post frequency. If the brand posts too often, or too rarely, the overall interest wanes for the brand.

"Um.. well maybe like the thing that most affects me is if they share really often, maybe there should be some like- what I would change is that the post frequency would be less frequent. But of course, some brands need to keep up the pace. But.. and then of course the content in the sense that.. if I feel like it's really similar, that there would be some, some new angle maybe. (F9)"

"[...] It's not a photo album, after all, like you don't need to post five photos of the same thing, I think you should choose one that is the best that kind of reflects the moment or the thing and not that there are like five different photos of the same thing. Because then- then you're kind of like 'oh well none of these then, I lost interest', so the frequency is probably the biggest reason sometimes why I don't 'like'. (F10)"

Variation

Variation in brand post content was also preferred, in order to keep the brand's newsfeed interesting to follow.

"It's good if they mix it up with something else, or, like, if we take Gina Tricot as an example, they post quite a lot of things that are new and this is now going to come to the stores, but if it were only that then you would get tired of it. So the fact that there occasionally are more of the kind of behind the scenes pictures, what they're planning and stuff, and then also someone who is wearing their clothes, like a blogger. So that's what keeps it from being the same all the time, and instead there's a pretty big variation there. If there was only an image of a garment every time, then you wouldn't follow for very long. (F4)"

As with the discussion about post frequency above, it was found that users want a wide array of posts to look at to keep up the interest toward the brand's communications.

"[...] Braver to test things, because I think-- I feel like you can't really do anything too wrong as a company on Instagram. Ok yeah you can post a few pictures that maybe don't get as many 'likes', but it's really not the end of the world. You need to be brave with trying, and maybe letting someone-someone within the company who is used to Instagram test different things and see what happens. Try posting some photos and see how people react to it. But I really don't think companies have much to lose with it.. (F6)"

The above quote also brings up variation, in the sense that companies should be brave and dare try new things and different approaches with their communication on Instagram.

5.2 Engagement

In this section each type of engagement that was specified earlier in this study will be presented along with discussion. Additional findings that emerged from the interviews are presented at the end of this section.

In general, engaging with brand posts did not seem to be something that came naturally, or felt comfortable to most of the respondents. Where some of the respondents mentioned that 'liking' a brand image is fairly normal for them, nearly no one commented or shared brand posts. In fact, lurking emerged as the most common form of engagement with brand posts. Regarding engagement with brand posts on Instagram, many of the aspects discussed above in connection to visual communication and brand communication on Instagram, apply here as well. The results and analysis will be presented by each type of engagement activity.

Liking

Of the observable forms of engagement, liking was definitely the most common for the respondents. For some it does not require much to like a photo, whereas others found that the image needs to be somehow special to make them visibly engage.

"Yeah, yeah. It's- maybe it goes kind of along that scale, where 'liking' is kind of the most natural way of acting for me, and then commenting quite rarely and then- well, with sharing a photo, there-there it's maybe easier for me share for example foreign celebrities' photos than someone Finnish. (F9)"

"I mean I 'like', I don't.. I don't consider in any way that I couldn't 'like' a certain picture, I- if I like something, then I 'like' it. For-for me, it's not.. like, Instagram to me is not, like, you know, something where I would need to think about what I 'like', who I follow, so.. (F7)"

"Could be if there was like a really good post or something, that it like maybe takes a stand for some positive thing or it like celebrates an anniversary or something, it's a nice-nice image and such, then I could 'like' it. Otherwise I don't see that I would. (F8)"

In some instances the respondents said that the 'like' felt irrelevant in general, or because brands already attract so many 'likes' from other users. Some found that the 'like' is essentially worthless in that context.

"If I think of a, like, classic, basic brand like Apple or Coca-Cola or something like this, then somehow.. there are like 445.000 people who like [the images], and I'm like.. no, like-- I like my friends' photos that fifteen people have 'liked' and then I feel like the 'like' has some sort of.. 'Yay', you know 'I saw your picture!', like there it just kind of drowns in the masses and it doesn't- because in my opinion the 'like' doesn't have any worth. Or the comment, because there are like a million other comments [...] (F3)"

"[...] But I don't know why I'm not so active with liking them, somehow I just don't see any added value in doing it. Instead you just follow them passively, kind of like reading a magazine or something". (F4)"

On the other hand, one respondent found that in some instances it can be easier to like a brand post than perhaps an acquaintance's, as the like disappears into the masses, pointing to a certain desire for anonymity.

"Brand posts? I don't know.. for me it's maybe the other way around, that.. I mean like if it's my good friend than of course it's easy, but if it's like a co-worker then maybe it's not as easy to 'like' that than it is with the brand thing, because it already has so many 'likes' so then maybe not everyone will see that I 'liked' it [laughs]. (F1)"

The above quote also brings up a quite common theme amongst the respondents, which is that most were concerned with other users being able to see their engagement activity. Although Instagram does not display other users' activity on the front page like for instance Facebook does, it is still possible to find others' activities. A sense of anonymity in engagement with posts, brand or otherwise, seemed to be of importance.

"Well it's perhaps one reason why I don't 'like' everything, because first of all it's visible there. It's- when it's visible there on the page, that 'oh [respondent] has 'liked' these and these photos', then of course it kind of, like- people of course see what I 'like', so-- well ok, obviously I don't follow people there that I feel I couldn't show that I like, I wouldn't follow that person if I like felt some shame over it, or like had shame over 'liking' this photo, of course I wouldn't follow people like that. But like somehow it maybe affects that it kind of becomes visible there, that-that I've 'liked' and of course there you can always see that like 9 photos have been liked, so then it's-- because some have- of course when you start scrolling through the feed you 'like' as many as you 'like', and then you put it away. I think it would be ano-or if the 'likes' didn't kind of become visible, then maybe you would press it more easily, but I don't know why, but I guess-guess it's also in some way the reason for it." (F10)

"Yes. And I've also, maybe why I don't 'like' so much because many see - I don't do it, but others do, on Instagram you can see what those who you follow have 'liked' [...] so maybe it's also for me that.. so it's not like 'yeah why has she 'liked' that and hahah' even if basically.. it doesn't matter. But even so, of course everyone-well I don't know if everyone, but like I don't want everyone to maybe see if I, let's say, 'like' some guy without a shirt on [laughs]! (F1)"

One respondent mentioned post frequency also as a factor in whether or not she 'likes' a brand post.

"[...] I actually don't know-I can't explain why I don't always like them, but I guess it's that.. especially if-- It also affects if a person posts many posts after another, like many companies

might do or some celebrities post many, and when there are more than for example two, then at least I'm not going to-- even if they're all really nice, I'm not going to 'like' them all, I mean I usually choose one which then gets my vote! But like, I'm not going to, like everything *like like like*, but it's more kind of- then I just choose one.. (F10)"

As brought up by Peters et.al. (2013), content volume makes up an important part of the overall content aspect of social media. In this context it is rather with regard to a specific user than the overall content shared on Instagram - on one hand some respondents enjoyed scrolling the newsfeed that shows friends of friends' photos to get see more content, but on the other hand too much content from one user can be too much and in the worst case numb the user to future content.

Commenting

Commenting was a much less common practice among the respondents. In general, it seemed that the respondents did not want to verbally communicate anything to brands.

"Well I've never really been the kind of person that would comment on any, like, social media discussions. Actually I've probably- I've never done that. (F7)"

"No. No, I don't ever comment on photos, anything-anything from brands, like I-I don't ever leave any comments. I always just 'like' if I like something, otherwise I don't like react [...] (F5)"

Some respondents mentioned that the only reason why they have commented in the past, or could imagine doing so in the future, would be to tag a friend in the comment section to share the photo with them. In this case, although the user is leaving a comment, it could be argued that the communication is aimed more at the friend than the brand itself. Therefore, the value of the comment to the brand is in itself perhaps not much, however, from the point of view of reach and sharing it is a positive thing.

"Noo, I don't comment. The only thing that I could maybe comment is tagging someone there so they see the image, like 'here are the shoes you've been talking about', but I don't- I don't comment anything about like- like any comments about the shoes or so. (F7)"

"Mm.. I don't know if I would directly comment on a post just to comment something to the company, because I feel like the comment gets lost in the masses anyway. Then it could maybe be commenting to show a friend like 'look they have this' (F6)"

"Somehow you just think, it feels kind of random that you would just post on a blogger's- it kind of feels like it goes to waste somehow, the comment. Although maybe it doesn't. (F4)"

The above comment again brings up the discussion of 'getting lost in the masses', which was also mentioned in connection to 'liking'. For some, a large amount of comments is discouraging and pointless, as any potential message is likely to never be read by the brand.

"Like I just see it as being so pointless, because I know I'll never get any feedback to my question or comment [...] (F10)"

"[...] To the company itself I would unlikely ever write a comment, unless there are only a few comments there. If I have something that I like want to say, 'thanks for this, it made me really happy'. Because then I'd know that I would get a response from the company, but if I only post the comment and know that there are a thousand similar ones and I'll never get an answer to it, then I'd probably just be more disappointed. (F6)"

Reversely, one respondent mentioned that commenting on a brand post with only a few comments would be more difficult for her, as the brand would most likely actually read it and perhaps even reply. The importance of anonymity is greater in this case.

"[...] But with smaller Finnish-- unless it's something I specifically want to show my support for or like spread the word, which could be with like ethical brands, that I kind of want to promote it further myself. But otherwise the threshold is higher because I think that the amount of comments is low enough, that they will actually see my comment. If you know what I mean. (F3)"

Whereas with 'liking' the publicity of the engagement was mainly a concern within the respondents' own peers, with commenting it seemed like most were more concerned with the brand, or poster of the image, seeing the comment.

Sharing

Sharing was also not found to be a common form of engagement with brand posts on Instagram. As was mentioned also in the theoretical framework, sharing is not as easy to do on Instagram as it is on Facebook for example, however there are a few ways to go about it. Many respondents mentioned that they tag a friend in the comments to share the image with them. Although the reach is not as great as when for example re-posting a brand post, the image is nonetheless reaching one more user that might otherwise not have come in contact with it.

"Well it could be something like- if there like was something that I've been wanting and I find it, then I could do so that I comment my friend's name there, so that they see it and so on, like, 'look this is what I meant, how cool' and so on. But, more rarely. (F8)"

"Well it really depends on what it is. Like if it's, let's say, a funny video or some happy coincidence, then I usually umm mark my friend's name there and-so that my friend sees what it is and then some comment. So I continue the comment chain of two thousand people. (F5)"

However, two of the respondents said that they had taken a screenshot of a brand post to share it on their own feed.

"Yeah, screenshotted yeah. I don't think I've ever done so, that I would've, well let's say on a blogger's post, commented a friend's name or so. (F9)"

"I took a screenshot of it. [...] And then I cropped the photo and posted it. (F7)"

The comment above was actually from an example of a competition that the respondent had participated in, where sharing the brand post was part of the rules. In general however, competition brand posts like that were not preferred by the respondents.

"Well somehow.. it doesn't necessarily lower its value for me, but at least it doesn't add to it. And quite rarely there's been-- I remember like-like I get a lot of those 'like and share' posts on Facebook, and on Instagram there haven't been many, I've-I've never gotten like an urge 'man I have to have this product'. More like goddamnit again someone's posting these, like, images. So if it works with the same principal on Instagram, then like no. (F3)"

"Well I wouldn't participate in them, somehow I just feel like it's pointless or.. I don't know who actually wins anything. But it doesn't really bother me if others post, just as long as it's not too much.. yeah. I wouldn't participate but.. it also depends on what the content of the image is. (F2)"

Naturally competition posts may attract some users but generally speaking this form of brand posts were not appreciated and are seen as fishing for user engagement.

Following

All of the respondents naturally already followed at least one brand to fill the sampling criteria, but some general comments about following brands were given during the interviews.

"In general I, like.. On Instagram when I follow someone.. other than my friend, they need to be funny or then they need to have like really nice photos. (F2)"

"Exactly, it's that it's like 'oh that's so nice, such a nice brand' and then you start to look at what pictures they have and 'ah ok I could follow this' or you know.. you don't really think too much about it [...]. (F8)"

"Like I don't- I don't really follow any unnecessary accounts but-or maybe I show the interest to myself-myself just by following it, I don't really have to 'like' it to get what I want out of it. (F7)"

Some respondents also discussed unfollowing brands on Instagram, mainly if the post content or frequency was not what they had expected when they first started following.

"[...] If I then after while notice that I've never 'liked' any of this person's photos, then I stop following them. But.. Like yeah-I mean it has to- that's probably the most important to me that they post interesting pictures often (F7)"

"I follow relatively few, I remove them pretty often, I make so to speak a mis- misstep, I choose a wrong kind of brand. I might follow, then I'm not interested at all and then I remove it [...]. (F5)"

Interestingly, two of the respondents also mentioned that they follow a brand that they have never, or said that they will never, purchase from. For example, one respondent truly enjoys following Red Bull's Instagram account, but does not actually like energy drinks.

"Well Red Bull is a pretty good example, I don't drink Red Bull at all, I don't like the drink itself, but they have really fun pictures. There are colors here, it's like people who are outside doing sports and working out, it's climbing and slalom and it's-it's a lot that's going on, and then you get kind of a free feeling somehow, that you also-you also want to be there. I think they've succeeded really well [...] (F6)"

"[...]Well in that sense maybe also Urban Outfitters, I've-I've never bought anything from there, and I won't because it's so expensive, but just the pictures, they're really inspiring, they give you ideas, so for that reason too. (F7)"

Lurking

Lurking seemed to be the most common way for the respondents to engage with brand content on Instagram. As discussed in the theoretical section, a lurker is often highly engaged with content and follows closely what others do, but for one reason or another does not step forward themselves.

"It is, and I actually do that a lot, I just scroll. But I always, I always do look at each photo that I follow, or at least I try.(F7)"

"It-it kind of describes people too, you know. Like the kind of person who doesn't really take.. doesn't want to take too much space for themselves or yell around among people anyway, that's the kind of person that doesn't um yell out to start off with. I mean the kind-- what I'm trying to say is, if there's a group of people, and then there are the kind who yell a lot and their voices can be heard all the time, they are also the people on Instagram that go and comment on every picture, all the events, everything-everything that goes on there. And they have to be loud all the time, and- which is really irritating even though there it gets lost in the masses. But then there are those people who like to follow from the sidelines and take space for themselves only once it's given to them, yeah, like me. (F5)"

"Well it is, it is maybe lurking a little bit anyway. You don't wa-you're still interested in what's going on, but still you don't react to it in any way. But you still want to know what each person is doing, so that-otherwise you wouldn't go and scroll through the feed. (F1)"

Many respondents however said that they feel that they get something out of brand images that they don't visibly engage with. For example, some mentioned that inspiration was one of the main things that they want to get out of images when scrolling through Instagram, and that images they don't engage with have an effect on them.

"They do, absolutely. They probably often have a stronger effect than those that I would react to, for some reason. Or like, they're the reason why you have Instagram in the first place and why you use it so actively, or like, look at it so actively, follow. So yes, they do have an effect. (F4)"

"[...]But it's perhaps mainly that the pictures give me some kind of feeling and inspiration, so- so it's not always necessarily that I'm interested, that doesn't always translate over to the company, because it won't necessarily ever know that I would be interested because I'm a little-I can be a little bit of an invisible Instascroller sometimes, so.. (F10)"

The comments above speak to the prevalence of lurking behavior as well as the importance that such behavior has in terms of engagement with visual content, regardless of its visibility to brands.

Change in use

This question was asked in order to establish whether the respondents' Instagram use has changed since they first started using it. Except for one respondent who relatively recently started using Instagram, all of the respondents reported a noticeable change in their use of the service over time.

"I mean, it's changed a lot. I do use it a lot, and the other day I actually checked how many photos I have, and there are over 700. And I mean there's, what, 365 days a year so basically it's like a photo a day. So in that way it's... I use it a lot. (F7)"

"It has, a lot. Like in the beginning it was really-more like following just friends. And I may have checked what photos they posted there, and then probably now last Fall I started following some other people too and other pages, like that. (F8)"

"[Laughs] Yeah it escalated to this point pretty quickly, that I'm always with my phone in my hand and like, doing it. It's kind of in my opinion replaced Facebook, like in-in kind of my own social media use.(F3)"

These results are relevant in that they highlight the change in use over time as the users get more accustomed to Instagram. In the context of engagement with brand posts, it could be argued that those not used to engaging with brand posts now may very well find it more natural with time.

Timing and mood

Timing was mentioned by one of the respondents to be relevant to her lurking behavior. The difference between visibly engaging or lurking can be due to timing and what mood the user is in.

"I mean yeah, it depends sometimes- and sometimes it might be that I'm at a lecture and I'm looking at Insta, and then um-and- it's also that you're not maybe concentrating at looking at the images but then sometimes there are situations where you want to go through the same feeds again, just because like you didn't have time to really get into it, if-if you like remember that there was something worth looking at again, but of course there isn't always. I mean- this is also so funny how quickly you can 'like' a photo, like it doesn't require much from you to move your finger the other direction-- like-so it's not like.. this is also hard to somehow explain what it then depends on that you don't always 'like', like is it being in a hurry or that you don't just always care. (F10)"

"But it's also always depending on what shows up here [on Instagram] and what in that moment is something that like fits the mood that-that you have. So it's really mainly dependent on that, like I often scroll and go through what's come up during the night first thing in the morning before I get out of bed, a little bit groggy looking at them like umm.. But- so it really depends on the point in time and like what the mood is in that moment, what gets you interested. Or like what kind it is, it affects it. (F10)"

In these cases it is not that the user is not interested in the visual brand content, but rather that the timing or her mood affects how involved she is in the scrolling process on Instagram.

Personal engagement

Personal engagement emerged as a very important factor for many of the respondents regarding their engagement behavior with brand content on Instagram. For many, the content of the image has to somehow personally engage the respondent in order for them to visibly engage with the content. This was explained as content that somehow directly relates to the respondents, either a brand that announces its arrival to Finland or content that reflects the respondent's values in some way.

"Probably, you take it more personally than if it were anything else, like, it's the same with identifying with it in some way, I think. It's about-- if there's a big blogger or something that would post something about Finland, if it were someone, you know, world famous, and then all of a sudden they would post that they're in Helsinki, you know, or something. Like 'oh what a nice place I found in Helsinki', then you would-- it's also a situation where you might 'like' it just because you identify with it in a completely different way than if it was, you know, that they post about some café in Barcelona where they found something nice. Like, then it's a completely different thing somehow. But it's also a bit that you support the cause. (F4)"

"Well because the-the newsfeed is, like, nice photos from weddings and unknown people and that just doesn't really fit my interests. Let's say, if they- if all of their photos were somehow, like, connected to my place, if they were all connected to Suomenlinna's party venues, then I probably would have started following them. So it was just maybe that-that the scale is so wide, that it doesn't really relate to me, like, otherwise. (F3)"

Furthermore, as evidenced by the quote below, for some respondents the act of liking an image was likened to giving it their vote or showing their support. Especially in context of personally engaging content, the 'liking' itself was found to have a stronger meaning.

"[...] Well probably because they are, like, pleasant in my opinion, close to my values, you know. And um.. I don't know, maybe I can somehow affect it somehow by voicing my opinion. (F1)"

For many, this was also expressed in a desire for brand posts to have some personal touch or ties to the respondents. The preference for this kind of posts also affects their engagement with the post. It is interesting to see that many users want personalized content in order to engage with the post in some visible manner.

"Yeah, it probably goes like that, subconsciously or not subconsciously it affects that it feels like [the brand is] kind of closer, closer. That it's not just like distant and posts the same kind of pictures and isn't in any contact with the customers, doesn't like show the respect. (F8)"

"Mm.. I was just thinking that-that, if a brand posts something which hits really, like, close to home- let's say that it's some foreign brand, that I'm following, whichever big brand, and it posts something Finland-related, then I would be kind of 'Yay shout out', and I probably would put something like 'woop woop' or 'like' it. Because it would make it like special for me. Like I would feel that it's close to me, the image. Otherwise- because otherwise they're just like product photos and no matter how beautiful or what kind of interior design, like, no, I don't have any need to comment anything. (F3)"

Personal engagement with visual brand content seems to be an important factor affecting whether or not a user will visibly engage with content. If the main engagement

activity is lurking, then personally engaging with content could very well pull that engagement into a more visible form as expressed for example by F3 above.

In the following chapter the findings of the study will be discussed and conclusions will be presented, along with the theoretical and managerial implications.

6 CONCLUSION

In this section of the study the conclusions and discussion regarding the findings will be presented and reflected to the theoretical framework presented in chapter 2. The main elements that were drawn from the findings were **Visual brand communication** and **Engagement**. The Visual brand communication chapter 6.1., will cover image preferences as found in this study, and present a discussion on the aesthetic experience in connection to imagery. Furthermore, videos and brand communication on Instagram will be discussed. In the Engagement chapter 6.2. of the conclusions, a discussion of engagement with visual brand communication on Instagram will be presented. As discussed earlier, the types of engagement that are considered in this study are liking, commenting, sharing, following and lurking. The findings regarding each type will be presented, along with a discussion about *personal engagement* which emerged as a key finding in this study.

Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications of this study will be presented in chapter 6.3 and 6.4, respectively, and the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are presented in chapter 6.5.

6.1 Visual brand communication on Instagram

The findings from the empirical study show that visual brand communication, in general, is an enjoyable form of communication to users. Instagram offers brands a more personal approach to communication, which was found to be appreciated by many users. The context of this study required that the interview respondents already follow one or more brands, and it seemed that brand communication has found a permanent place in their respective newsfeeds. Whether the brands are followed for practical reasons, such as receiving information about promotions, or simply for the enjoyment of aesthetically pleasing images, it seems that visual brand communication can be a very effective form of communication when done properly. In the following sections, the findings of this study will be analyzed in more detail to outline what kind of visual brand communication users prefer to engage with and why.

Images

In order to establish what kind of visual brand communication users prefer to engage with and why, it was important to first gain an understanding on what kind of images

the users prefer in general. As images and their interpretation are highly subjective (Jamieson 2007), the range in image preference was found to vary in this study and no one kind of visual was collectively preferred. With that said, some commonalities were established, such as colorful images, the importance of framing as well as receiving inspiration, a good feeling and tips from the brand content.

Aesthetic experience

The aesthetics of images, as discussed before, are an important factor regarding visual preference. Images are not only a platform through which to communicate a message, but are also in themselves art (Jamieson 2007). The aesthetic experience that images stimulate takes shape on a subconscious level and evokes emotions in the viewer as he or she analyzes the image and the constructs within it, comparing them to familiar patterns that are shaped from personal experience and background (Jamieson 2007). As such, what is aesthetically pleasing is not only highly subjective but also determined as an instant, emotional reaction to an image. In this study, it was found that the sense of getting something out of an image was important to all of the respondents. As images can evoke emotions (Rossiter 1982) and have both denotative and connotative meaning (Fahmy et.al. 2004; Jamieson 2007), whether or not a user likes an image is instantly felt, which was also expressed by one respondent who said "[...] the first feeling you get, that's usually the correct one."

Of the things that users said they want to get out of the images they see on Instagram, were a sense of inspiration and a good feeling. These concepts are purely connotative results from viewing images, and as such seem to evoke a higher sense of engagement with the images. The sense of being inspired was also closely related to getting tips from brand content, and for many a combination of both could be received from an image. For example, viewing a blogger's outfit picture taken on a sunny street in the south of France, could both evoke an instant sense of inspiration sparked by the combination of preferable colors, framing, location and an outfit that speaks to the users own sense of style. In fact, the concept of being inspired and getting a good feeling from an image were highly connected to images that were naturally framed, meaning that they are displayed in-use or in a more natural setting than purely showing the product front and center of an image.

Another factor that was brought up by one respondent, was a sense of escapism when viewing inspiring images. Not only can images inspire and give a good feeling, but also

spark the imagination to mentally transfer the user momentarily to, for example, an exotic location shown in an image. This supports Lin et.al.'s (2012) finding that using visuals helps individuals visualize how a product can be used. The connotative powers of images are thus significant in that a brand image can evoke such strong emotions and reactions in users by simply viewing an image. It could therefore be argued that images with such an effect are more memorable and may enhance product or brand recall and even affect the brand perception favorably, as argued by Rossiter (1982) and Lin et.al. (2012).

Colorful images

How users interpret visual brand communication is also dependent on the individual, but some factors were found to be common preferences with all respondents. The fact that many of the respondents reacted to colorful images points to the importance of the aesthetics of visuals (Jamieson 2007; Walter & Gioglio 2014). Colors were found to be attention grabbing and more pleasurable to view, which Winqvist (2014) also noted in her study, adding that colorful images may grab attention better than more muted tones but do not in themselves automatically lead to any visible engagement. This statement can also be applied here, as the colorful nature of images were found to be a preferential characteristic of brand visuals, but not a guarantee for any action on the users part. However, it could be argued that if the image manages to capture the interest of the user, then other aspects of the image will be more closely observed which then may engage the user enough to lead to a visible form of engagement with the image.

Framing

A factor that was furthermore found to be important concerning the visual aspect of brand communication on Instagram, was the framing of images. It is important that the message of the image is clear to the user, meaning that the image is well thought out in terms of how the product is framed into the picture. Poorly executed framing will not keep the attention of the user for long, especially if it is surrounded by more visually pleasing photos in the newsfeed. As discussed earlier, framing is not limited to the composition of the image as created by the brand, but is also interpreted by the viewer through individual frames that are shaped by personal experiences as well as by social and cultural background (Jamieson 2007). These frames also give this discussion a subjective nature that affects what each user considers to be a well-framed brand

image. However, as pointed out in the previous discussion about framing, societal and cultural norms create a larger, collective frame that more or less assures a similar interpretation of visual messages within a group with similar background (Jamieson 2007).

Although most of the respondents spoke of the importance of image framing, what is preferable in terms of framing varied depending on the individual. As mentioned above, the most important aspect was that the message of the image is easily understood, but there were differences in what was considered good framing. As Rossiter (1982) stated, framing a product into a usage situation will enhance brand and product recall, as it plays on the connotative responses in the mind of the viewer (Jamieson 2007; Lin et.al. 2012). Images that were framed into use (see p.9 for Nike example), however, were not preferred by all users. As illustrated in the Findings chapter, some users rather prefer more denotative, product-focused images in order to see what the brand is offering, and are not very interested in the aesthetic aspects of the images. Perhaps this could be attributed to the left or right brain hemisphere dominance of users as well as their need for aesthetic pleasure (Fahmy et.al. 2014; Jamieson 2007; Smith et.al. 2005). The concept in this study is mainly discussed in terms of textual versus visual communication, but it could be extended to that when viewing visual brand communication, those users with a left hemisphere dominance prefer more of a straight forward visual message than their more visually inclined counterparts.

For brands communicating on Instagram framing is an important factor not to be overlooked. Whether the users are more attracted to naturally framed, in-use images or a more clutter-free approach, the main importance is that the framing regardless must be thoughtfully executed in order for the intended brand message to be clear. Factoring in the more aesthetic aspect of color use, it can be concluded that colorful images would be helpful in attracting attention and standing out in the newsfeed. Furthermore, thoughtful framing of the brand message, or product, should be included to ensure that the users not only view the image, but interpret the message as it is intended. Finally, the aesthetic experience created by images is a powerful component in visual communication, that can either play to the benefit of a brand or fail due to the uncontrollable nature of the concept. Having said that, the more the brand knows its target users the more confidently it can create images that speak to the aesthetic senses

and frameworks of the intended audience, thus increasing the odds of strong, favorable reactions to visual brand communication.

Videos

Videos on Instagram were found to be a divisive issue. For some, they brought an added value to the service and brand communication within it, whereas some found it to be distracting and pointless. The video feature on Instagram is gaining momentum and driving engagement (L2 2014), but seems to currently still be finding its place among users. Walter & Gioglio (2014) mention that videos are useful in telling a brand story, given the extra element of sound and movement lacking from still imagery. It was found that these factors were valued by those who enjoyed the video feature, as they help demonstrate more clearly how, for instance, a dress moves when worn or how a fitness move should be done correctly. In fact, videos were mentioned often when respondents mentioned that they enjoy getting tips from visual brand communication.

Those who on the other hand did not enjoy videos, stated that they were a distraction in the newsfeed or were poorly executed so the storyline remained unclear. As the video feature is currently 15 seconds long (L2 2014), many of the respondents felt that brands do not know how to use that time to best tell their story. Some respondents thought that the limited time should inspire brands to get creative, whereas others thought that the time limit should be increased. Perhaps the video function will become more popular with time as users get used to the feature, and also as brands get more adept at creating content in video form. In conclusion, the videos can potentially benefit the brand and its message, again, if well executed and fitting to the format provided by Instagram.

Brand communication

In general, brand communication on Instagram seemed to be welcomed by the respondents. Many of the respondents considered brand communication on Instagram to have a more personal feel than other communications channels, as the service allows brands to show a more personal side of their business. This perceived transparency and openness from the brands was found to be important to the respondents, as it gave them a sense of knowing the brands on a more personal level. As Walter & Gioglio (2014) also discuss, this perceived closeness to brands makes the brand seem more

approachable to users, which in turn will bring the user closer to the brand and arguably become more perceptive to brand communications.

Post content

The preference for brand post content seemed to depend on whether or not the user in question was more interested in product-focused images or images where the product is placed in a more natural setting. Some users were not interested in the storytelling properties of visual brand communication, whereas others require more captivating and interesting content. As one respondent replied in connection to videos, it also largely depends on what reason the user has for following a brand. If it is more functional and to keep oneself updated on product offerings, perhaps the image does not need to evoke much emotion. But if the person is seeking ideas and inspiration, the emotional, connotative part (Jamieson 2007) becomes far more important.

Nevertheless the preference for the kind of brand communication, all the respondents still had requirements for the visual outlook of the post. As with image preference in general, it follows that the respondents require the same standard from brands as with any other user, as Peters et.al. (2013) also point out. Furthermore in agreement with Peters et.al. (2013), this study also found that brand content needs to fit in with the rest of Instagram and that the visual content is ultimately what sparks interest in users. Following brands and subjecting oneself to brand communication is so far entirely voluntary on Instagram, and when users choose to follow brands, naturally brand content that fits in with the rest of the newsfeed will be preferred. Overall, this suggests that putting effort into the image creation first hand would be more important than perhaps the actual message in order to attract and keep followers. Furthermore, posts that offer variation and offer something new keep up the interest in the brand's newsfeed. This builds on Solis's (2011) recommendation that brands have a clear communications strategy with their social media communications, in order to establish a brand personality on social media and create consistency in communications. With a consistent communications strategy in place, the brand can then experiment with varying visual content to express their personality and attract attention and interest in the brand offering.

Some suggestions relating to post content that were expressed by the respondents were **content variation** and **post frequency**. It was found that users preferred variation in brand post content, where one day a brand could post a clean, product-focused

image if the next post was, for instance, a behind-the-scenes shot from the brand's offices. Especially as there are many users who have different preferences regarding visual brand communication on Instagram, as can be seen in this study also, it can be beneficial for brands to keep the newsfeed varied enough to cater to most preferences. Moreover, it was found that in addition to varied content users would like companies to be a bit daring to try new approaches in their visual communication. Even if some images drive less engagement, there is variation and a visible effort on the company's side to try new things and offer interesting content to users.

In a similar vein, post frequency also affects users' interest in a brand's Instagram activity. It was found that if brand posts were few and far apart, or reversely too frequent, the result was a waning overall interest in the brand and its offerings. This presents another aspect to keep in mind when brands create their social media strategies (Solis 2011), in that users do not only pay attention to *what* is being posted, but how *often* brands communicate. How active a brand chooses to be should be determined by feedback from users and the overall norms of the chosen platform, in this case Instagram (Peters et.al. 2013). With too much content being posted the brand message can drown in the sheer volume of content, and with infrequent posts the brand risks being forgotten or considered irrelevant by users.

To sum up, there were aspects to visual communication that divided opinions and some that users agreed upon. In general, colorful images visuals that spark inspiration and give a good feeling were factors that were found to be important to users in visual brand communication. The question of image framing depended on the user, where some preferred more product-focused images and others more natural, in-use imagery. Similarly videos divided opinion, partly due to its novel nature, but also depending on what the brand was showcasing with the clip and how well executed it was. As with framing, video preference was partly affected by the reasons why a user follows a certain brand, but could also be argued to be an effect of left or right brain dominance. Finally, brand communication on Instagram was found to give users a more personal connection to brands, and post content and frequency were found to greatly affect how interesting and valuable a brand's visual communication is in the long term.

6.2 Engagement

In this study engagement with visual brand communication was found to vary depending on the respondent, however the behavior patterns were largely the same for

the entire sample. User engagement with brand content can be a valuable determination on the success of a brand's communications efforts, and should be analyzed in order to establish what kind of brand content is preferred by users and consequently optimize future content (Lee 2015; Walter & Gioglio 2014). Visible engagement was not as prevalent among the respondents, although certain forms were found to be fairly common. But far more common in terms of engagement behavior, was the concept of lurking. A discussion on each engagement type will be presented below according to the findings of this study.

Liking

Of the observable forms of user engagement, 'liking' was found to be the most common form. de Vries et.al. (2012), Lee (2015 and Peters et.al. (2013) discuss different levels of engagement on social media, and conclude that 'liking' is less valuable than other forms of engagement due to its relatively low level of required effort on the users' part. In this study it was found that many users found 'liking' to be an easy form of giving their vote to a brand message, and not something that they needed to think too much about. However, it was found that even on this seemingly low level of engagement some users still were hesitant to 'like' an image because it would disappear into the large amount of 'likes' already given to a brand image. This would suggest that the act of 'liking' is still important form of engagement for some respondents, and 'liking' an image where the 'like' would not necessarily be noticed was found to be pointless. This goes against the argument above that 'liking' is a low level of engagement, as so many demonstrated that a definitive thought process takes place before 'liking' an image.

In connection to this, it was found that a certain concern that other users would see what images a respondent has 'liked' or commented on further guided the engagement behavior of some respondents. A want for anonymity in the engagement behavior was found with some users, as they mentioned that they do not 'like' everything because they do not want other users in their peers to see their 'liking' activity. Although 'liking' is a fairly low level form of engagement and the most common form of visible engagement found in this study, the findings suggest that users are aware of their actions and in some cases hold back on engaging with brand images in order to preserve their anonymity. Wanting to retain a sense of anonymity is also connected to lurking behavior (Schneider et.al 2012), which will be discussed further in a following section, but interestingly seems to be a form of engagement behavior that each respondent displayed to some degree. One respondent also highlighted that she will not

'like' all images when she scrolls through her newsfeed, but will rather pick and choose the best ones to 'like', in order to avoid an extensive 'liking' history that others can see. In summary, 'liking' is an easy form of user engagement as well as fairly common, but is preceded by a thought process concerned with wanting to preserve anonymity but also maintaining control over one's own image on Instagram.

Commenting and sharing

In this section both commenting and sharing as forms of engagement will be presented. As discussed earlier, Instagram does not as such enable content sharing, and tagging or mentioning another user in the comments is the easiest way to share an image. Some apps have been created to make sharing easier, but for the purposes of this study it was decided that commenting and sharing will be presented together due to their overlapping nature.

Commenting on brand images was found to be quite uncommon, as most users had never engaged with brand content in this form. It was found that directly communicating to a brand felt unnatural to many, especially if the image already has thousands of other comments and the likelihood of receiving a response was marginal. In fact, it was mentioned that if a user were to leave a comment aimed at the brand it would feel disappointing if the brand did not answer. In contrast, one respondent mentioned that fewer comments would be more of a threshold as the brand might actually see the comment and respond, which further supports the want to keep some anonymity on Instagram. Whereas with 'liking' the publicity of the engagement was mainly a concern within the respondents' own peers, with commenting it seemed like most were more concerned with the brand, or poster of the image, seeing the comment. Perhaps this could be due to the fact that commenting as communication is more direct and personal than 'liking'. Although some do not comment because they feel like it would go to waste and never get read or receive a reply, and others were more concerned that it would, it could be argued that commenting is considered a more personal and direct form of communication with the brand, therefore creating a higher threshold for users.

Although most users did not comment directly to brands, many of the respondents did say that they would sometimes tag a friend's name in the comment field in order to share the image. This sort of engagement does further the reach of the brand message (Peters et.al. 2013), but was found to only occur if the content somehow personally

related to either the user or the friend, or if it was exceptionally entertaining. As this action combines both the elements of commenting and sharing, the nature of this kind of engagement can be confusing. However, as the comment in this case is aimed at another user and not the brand who posted the image, it can be argued that it falls more under the category of sharing.

Regardless of the low amount of commenting to brand images, the reach of the brand message should be considered valuable to brands due to the word of mouth effect created through this kind of direct sharing. Another alternative would be for the user to repost the image with a screenshot for all followers to see, but it could be argued that this form of word of mouth - although garnering a greater amount of reach in numbers - is less personal and direct than when a user mentions a friend in the comment section. As Peters et.al. (2013) point out, it is important to look at the quality of the user engagement and not only the quantity, as smaller numbers may in fact hold higher power of reach and effect if the users mentioned in the comments are chosen because the sharer considers the content to be of interest to them.

One type of post that is common practice to encourage 'liking' and commenting is competition posts, where for example a user is urged to repost a brand image to win a prize. As discussed earlier, this method is not always the most appropriate or profitable as 'likes' and shares gathered during a campaign rarely mirror a true sense of engagement that a user feels toward a brand (Hanna et.al. 2011; Lee 2015; Peters et.al. 2013). Arguably, the brand does get added visibility and reach during the campaign, but as some respondents stated, these kinds of posts may just cause irritation in other users rather than spark interest in the brand, which ultimately could be argued to negate the effect of the reach.

Following

Following brands on Instagram was a prerequisite for the respondents to be interviewed for this study, but it was also found that following brands was quite a common practice. Many at first stated that they only follow a few brands, but upon closer inspection found that they actually follow quite a few brands ranging from bloggers to more traditional brands. de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang (2012) state that those users who follow brands are more receptive toward brand messages than other users and although starting to follow a brand was found to be an easy form of engagement, it seems that users have certain criteria that need to be met in order to

keep following the brand. For instance, post content naturally plays an important part but it was also found that post frequency matters, and can affect whether or not a user chooses to continue following a brand.

Interestingly, a few respondents mentioned following brands that they do not, or will not, purchase from, but whose images are so appealing and inspiring that they follow them regardless. This again speaks to the connotative power of imagery, and that the aesthetic experience may often be sought after first hand (Jamieson 2007) even if the brand's offerings are not of interest to the user. On one hand, having users follow a brand purely because the account is interesting and inspiring should be considered a success, but on the other hand it raises the question of what kind of value this type of follower brings to the brand. Essentially it depends on what the brand is looking to achieve with their Instagram account. Many users may also be paying customers, but even if they are not it could be argued that they have a fairly positive image of the brand, which in itself is also valuable. These users may share the images with their friends, who then might be interested in the brand's offerings. In conclusion, the aesthetic factor plays a very important part in the initial choice to follow a brand as well as the choice to keep following it. Also in this case the sense of inspiration and good feeling due to the connotative response to imagery directly relates to what brands are followed, even when the product offering as such is not appealing to the user.

Lurking

As a form of user engagement, lurking was found to be the most common kind. Many respondents stated that this was their typical form of behavior on Instagram, but that the images still have an effect even if there is no visible or measureable form of engagement. Lurkers are not necessarily, as is often thought, ignoring content on Instagram even though there is no visible footprint left behind, but may be gathering information, inspiration or tips and ideas from brand content (Chen & Chang 2013; Crawford 2009; Heinonen 2011; Schneider et.al. 2012). As Heinonen (2009) found in her study, a sense of entertainment or inspiration can be received from the content even without visible engagement, and this was found to be true also in this study. Many users reported that they got inspiration and ideas from posts that they did not visibly engage with, which underscores the fact that lurking does require some level of activation and awareness on the user's part.

In connection to this, it was found that **timing and mood** can affect user behavior on Instagram. If the user is tired or busy when scrolling through the news feed, the engagement may never evolve past lurking. Perhaps this describes what is usually associated with lurking behavior, that they are not paying attention to the content and as such are not affected by it either (Chen & Chang 2013; Crawford 2009; Schneider et.al. 2012). However, as one respondent mentioned, sometimes she will re-check older parts of her newsfeed if she remembers that there was something interesting. This behavior suggests that users may still engage with content on some level which manifests in recollection of content and a reviewing of certain images. The visual brand content has been attention grabbing enough to warrant a revisit, which takes effort on the users part, and as such demonstrates that they have indeed paid attention to the content and been affected by it.

Most respondents furthermore mentioned a **change in use** since they first started using Instagram. Most users posted very little own content and mainly lurked, but have since evolved to being more active in their use of the service, and increasing their visible engagement with content. As users get more comfortable with the visual platform the threshold gets lower to engage with content or post more of their own photos. It could therefore be speculated that with time these respondents may also move from a dominantly lurking behavior to more visible forms of engagement with visual brand content in the future.

In summary, it can be concluded that lurking as a form of engagement is prevalent and effective, despite its covert nature. Brand images that are viewed while lurking may still have a lasting effect on the user, and therefore the true effect of a brand's visual brand communication on Instagram cannot be measured by visible forms of engagement. Furthermore, timing, mood and how long the users have used Instagram seem to affect the behavior further.

Personal engagement

As a key finding this study suggests that personal engagement with visual brand communication will in most cases result in visible engagement behavior with the content. A sense of good feeling and inspiration were reported by all respondents as primary aspects they want to get out of an image, pointing to the importance of the aesthetic experience and connotative powers associated with an image (Jamieson 2007; Rossiter 1982). Inspiring content could furthermore be argued as being

personally engaging, as the viewing of an image starts a connotative process that activates an emotional response (Jamieson 2007), which in turn gives a sense of inspiration and a good feeling. As discussed above, this type of inspiring content does not always lead to visible engagement with the image, but has an effect nonetheless which should not be ignored or considered less valuable than 'liking' or commenting. As one respondent stated, brands may never know that she actually is interested in their offering because she is more of an observer than an action-taker on Instagram.

Building on this, having a personal connection to the post content, for example one's country being mentioned in a global brand's post, evokes a personal level of engagement and emotion which was found to encourage visible engagement even in those users whose primary behavior is lurking. As Brodie et.al. (2011) highlight, engagement is shaped, among other factors, by the social, cultural and political context in which it is presented as well as the social and cultural frames of the user. Furthermore, the user's mood and personality will affect the level of engagement (Brodie et.al. 2011), and this study further suggests that timing also plays an important role in the phenomena. When a brand image contains a message that relates directly to a user's own personal experiences, culture or background, this study suggests, in agreement with Brodie et.al. (2011), that user engagement with visual brand content will be much stronger.

In the context of Instagram, and in response to the research question, this study suggests that users prefer to engage with visual brand communication that personally engages them on some level, as it evokes a much stronger emotional reaction. This study further suggests that the more personally engaging the content is, the more likely it is that the user will visibly engage with the brand image to show support for, or share the content with other users, thus possibly elevating the behavior from lurking to taking action.

In a similar manner as with visual interpretation, where each person will interpret an image differently and establish meaning based on personal experiences and social and cultural frames (Jamieson 2007), what is personally engaging will naturally vary from person to person. But as was discussed earlier, the same cultural and social backgrounds that may on one hand complicate interpretation, will also on the other hand ensure more or less similar interpretation within groups with similar background (Jamieson 2007; Walter &Gioglio 2014), giving brands who know their target users a fairly good idea of what visual content will personally engage a certain group.

6.3 Theoretical implications

The findings of this study suggest that users prefer to engage with visual brand communication on Instagram that personally engages them on some level. The study underscores the importance of the aesthetic and connotative aspects to imagery (Jamieson 2007; Rossiter 1982) which have a much stronger emotional effect on users than highly denotative and product-focused images do. Images that inspire and give a good feeling to users were found to be important aspects to visual brand communication on Instagram, and were mentioned by all of the respondents. The findings contribute to the visual communication field, but places the phenomena in a visual social media context where brands do not get a special standing (Peters et.al. 2013) but rather must stand out and engage users through creative and carefully thought out visual communication.

Visible engagement as a measure of a brand's social media efforts is a good start (Lee 5.2.2015; Peters et.al. 2012), however this study supports the notion that lurking should be taken into account in the overall assessment (Chen & Chang 2013; Crawford 2009; Heinonen 2011; Schneider, von Krogh & Jäger 2012). Although it is harder to determine the effect of visual brand communication on lurkers, engagement spans much further than simply 'liking' an image and may manifest in many different ways.

Visual communication was found to be a welcome form of branding which offers brands an opportunity to be creative while communicating their message in a compact and clutter-free format. Moreover, brand communication is quite welcomed on personal social media accounts, despite it not being the primary reason for users to use social media (Lin & Lu 2011; WeAreSocial 2015b). However, users have criteria regarding brand post content and frequency that must be met in order to keep following the brand. As Peters et.al. (2013) and Solis (2011) note, brand communication is a two-way conversation between brand and consumer, and visual communication offers a new way of communicating brand messages to consumers in a manner that is becoming increasingly more popular (SimplyMeasured 2015).

6.4 Managerial implications

This study suggests that Instagram indeed can be a lucrative platform for brand communication when done properly. Brands who have researched their target users, know what they want and what kind of content has engaged them before (Kaplan &

Haenlein 2010; Lee 2015; Walter & Gioglio 2014) will have a better chance at creating and communicating visual messages that will personally engage users, thus evoking emotional responses and increasing the effect of the message and its ultimate reach. With engagement behavior in this case becoming of a more visible form, more users will see the image and perhaps engage with it themselves, creating another tier of reach. Definitive behavioral predictions are difficult to make, however the findings suggest that the more personally engaging and thus emotionally effective the visual brand communication is, the more likely users will want to engage with the content.

As for what kind of visual brand communication users prefer to engage with and why, it is important that the content is personally engaging to users, which could for example mean that a multi-national brand announcing its arrival in Finland, thus engaging the Finnish audience on a personal level, or displaying products in use to utilise the connotative associations that incite emotional reactions in users, for example Nike posting a photo of a runner during a marathon. The latter example would be much more personally engaging to a user who also ran the same marathon, thus instantly creating a personal connection with the image. The aesthetic experience (Jamieson 2007) can furthermore be powerful, and requires planning to be well executed in order to drive engagement. In this study for example, some aspects that emerged as important from an aesthetic point of view were color use and framing to create images that are interesting, colorful yet convey the brand message in a creative manner.

As mentioned above, research on previous brand posts and user engagement is crucial to gauge what visual content is preferred by each user group, and the importance of analyzing the available feedback and data is important (Lee 2015; Peters et.al. 2013). But because one factor that was mentioned by respondents as important was varying posts and daring to try new things through trial and error, while staying true to the brand personality (Solis 2011), brands need to accept that not all posts will successfully drive engagement. Trying different approaches based on the data that is available and customizing them to the target users in mind, and adjusting future visual communication based on feedback seems to also be a good approach for brands communicating on Instagram.

6.5 Limitations and future research

The current study on user engagement with visual brand communication was conducted on an all female sample in Finland, which makes wider generalizations

impossible to make based on the findings. However, the sampling choice was based on the fact that they represent the main user group of Instagram. In future research it could be interesting to study whether similar findings hold for a male sample, and what, if any, are the differences in gender groups. Furthermore, a Finnish user may well differ from, for example, an American user, and therefore it would be useful to investigate what effect cultural and societal backgrounds have on engagement behavior on Instagram.

Another factor that was outside the scope of this study were the effects that personally engaging visual brand communications may have in terms of follow-through activities. It may be that the more personally and emotionally engaged the user is with the brand content, the more likely they are to visit the brand's website and even purchase their products, and it would be valuable to research these effects.

Each respondent in this study had experience with the service, providing valuable information regarding this specific user group within this nationality. Furthermore, it should be noted that the age range of 20-30 year olds also may affect the outcome of this study, and future research may want to focus on another age group.

Another limitation to this study is the fact that Instagram currently is exploring with advertising on the platform on a few select markets, with plans to eventually expand it worldwide (Instagram 2014a; Instagram 2014b). How, and if, this addition to the visual platform will affect users' engagement preferences and behavior should be researched once advertising is present in all markets.

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APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW GUIDE ENGLISH

- What are the first things you pay attention to when you scroll through your newsfeed? (Content first or who posted it? Something else?)
- Can you describe why these ^^ capture your attention?
- What attracts you to use Instagram?
- How long have you used Instagram?
- How often do you post something?
- What brand(s) are you following?
- Can you explain why you started following this/these brand(s)?
- What kind of brand posts do you prefer to see on Instagram? (products, in-use, behind the scenes..)
- Can you give me an example of a recent post that you for some reason remember well, and why?
- How did you act? ^^
- How do you most commonly interact with brand posts on Instagram? (Lurking, likes, comments, sharing, following..)
- Is that (^^) dependent on the post content and how?
- In general, what are your thoughts about engaging with brands on Instagram?
- Do you consider posts that you don't interact with to have an effect on you? How? (Memory, actions..)
- What is your opinion on videos on Instagram? (Especially brand videos)
- Can you summarize the most important reasons for you to engage with brand posts on Instagram?
- Would you like to add anything to the discussion before we end?

APPENDIX 2 INTERVIEW GUIDE FINNISH

- Mitkä ovat ensimmäiset asiat joihin kiinnität huomiota selatessasi newsfeediäsi? (Sisältö ensin, kuvan lataaja vai jokin muu?)
- Osaatko kuvailla miksi juuri nämä ^^ kiinnittävät huomiosi?
- Mikä Instagramissa vetoaa sinuun?
- Kauanko olet käyttänyt Instagramia?
- Kuinka usein itse postaat jotain?
- Mitä brändejä seuraat?
- Osaatko selittää miksi aloit seurata juuri näitä/tätä brändejä/brändiä?
- Minkälaisia brändipostauksia haluat mieluiten nähdä? (tuotteita, käyttötilanteita, behind the scenes..)
- Osaatko antaa esimerkin äskettäisestä postauksesta, jonka jostain syystä muistat hyvin, ja miksi?
- Miten reagoit ja toimit? ^^
- Miten useimmiten reagoit ja toimit brändipostausten kanssa Instagramissa/miten osallistut? (lurking, tykkäys, kommentointi, jakaminen tai seuraaminen)
- Riippuuko se käytös postauksen sisällöstä? Miten?
- Yleisesti, mitä ajattelet osallistumisesta brändien kanssa Instagramissa ?
- Koetko, että postauksilla, joiden kanssa et toimi aktiivisesti, olevan vaikutusta sinuun? Miten? (Muisti, käyttäytyminen..)
- Mikä on mielipiteesi videoista Instagramissa? (Etenkin brändivideot)
- Tiivistätkö vielä loppuun tärkeimmän syyn, mitkä ovat tärkeimmät syyt siihen, että osallistut brändipostauksiin ja vuorovaikutukseen brändien kanssa?
- Haluaisitko vielä lisätä jotain keskusteluun ennen kuin lopetamme?

APPENDIX 3 INTERVIEW GUIDE SWEDISH

- Vilka är de första sakerna du lägger märke till när du går igenom din newsfeed? (Innehållet eller den som lagt upp bilden, eller något annat?)
- Kan du beskriva varför just dessa ^^ väcker intresse hos dej?
- Vad är det hos Instagram som lockar dej till att använda det?
- Hur länge har du använt Instagram?
- Hur ofta lägger du själv upp bilder?
- Vilka brand följer du?
- Kan du förklara varför du började följa just dessa/detta brand?
- Hurdana brand posts föredrar du att se på Instagram? (produkter, i användning, bakom kulisserna..)
- Kan du ge ett exempel på en nylig post som du av någon anledning minns väl? Varför?
- Hur agerade du? ^^
- Hur brukar du mest vanligen engagera dej med brand posts på Instagram? (lurking, gilla, kommentera, dela eller följa)
- Beror det beteendet på postinnehållet? Hur?
- I allmänhet, vad tänker du om att engagera sej med brand på Instagram?
- Anser du att sådant brandinnehåll med vilket du inte engagerar dej med synligt också har en effekt på dej? Hur? (Minne, handlingar..)
- Vad är din åsikt om videon på Instagram? (Speciellt brandvideon)
- Kan du ännu sammanfatta de viktigaste orsakerna till att du engagerar dej med brand posts på Instagram?
- Har du något som du ännu vill tillägga till diskussionen innan vi slutar?