

Decoding Sponsored Ads: Investigating the Role of Visual Literacy in Shaping Consumer Perception and Purchase Intent on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This research paper intends to analyze the changing nature of digital marketing with a more specific relation to the effect of Instagram advertisements in influencing consumer reactions. It explores the effects of visual literacy and disclosure related to consumer perception, trust, and purchase intention of sponsored Instagram ads that help advance the existing knowledge of visual persuasion in online communication.

Methodology: The quantitative research design was adopted with the help of the structured survey serving 201 active Instagram users aged 17 to 50 years. To measure the variables, such as visual literacy, consumer perception, and trust in paid advertisement and purchase intent, valid measurement scales were used in the study. Statistical tests were done to determine how these variables relate.

Findings: The findings indicate that those who have developed a greater degree of visual literacy are able to form a higher ability to evaluate the content of Instagram ads critically. This increased assessive capacity has a positive effect on their attitude towards advertisements and the purchasing interest. In addition, open disclosure systems were also discovered to build consumer trust and participation in sponsored content.

Conclusion: The research offers theoretical explanations of the realm of visual persuasion, and knowledge of persuasion, which accentuate the role of visual literacy in the success of advertisement. In practice, the results point to the importance of marketers focusing on the visually consistent and clearly exposed ad copy to promote consumer confidence and prompt buying behavior on social media applications like Instagram.

Keywords: Visual Literacy, Consumer Perception, Purchase Intent, Instagram Advertisement, Persuasion Knowledge, Social Media Marketing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the invention of the digital media, there are new changes and opportunities in the realm of marketing. When social media is employed and employed properly, it may be seen that marketing under the social media will definitely save marketing expenses in the long run. Development of social media marketing was aimed at creating a relationship with the customers and also creating awareness to the potential customers. By fostering interactive communication, social media enables brands to build stronger relationships with their audiences, ultimately driving purchasing decisions and increasing sales (Dave Chaffey, 2017). With technological advancements and the growing potential of social media, its role in the digital marketing landscape has become indispensable. Entrepreneurs need to improve and bring about changes in various marketing systems (Gusti Noorlitaria Achmad, August 2024) Switching from traditional to digital marketing systems is one of the best and most effective decisions for businesses to promote their products and services.

Purchase interest is something that arises from a stimulus that comes from seeing a particular product, after which the desire to buy and own it arises (Philip Kotler, 2013) One of the stages in decision making. Purchase interest refers to the respondent's tendency to act before a purchasing decision is made. Purchase interest itself can be identified into four indicators, the first is transactional interest which is a form of consumer interest which is expressed as a tendency to buy a product. Second, referential interest is a form of consumer behavior to refer products to others. The third is preferential interest, namely a form of consumer interest that makes a product of interest a prioritized product. And the fourth is exploratory interest, which is a form of consumer interest to explore the product to be purchased by looking for information about the product. Consumer purchasing interest can generally be influenced by information obtained through content from social media. In this modern era, everyone uses the Internet, coupled with the advancement of the Internet, accompanied by rapid technological developments, which support the economic revolution. It is no wonder that the technology that supports this makes everything easier and more practical. The most obvious business change is the type of communication that leads to the use of social media. The push from social media and the increasing number of devices that support digital media have led to the simultaneous growth of digital marketing.

Instagram is a sterling example of this change and is now central to the adoption of the way brands communicate with their audiences (Yanping Zhang, October 2020) recent estimates have indicated that by 2024, Instagram will be generating \$71 billion in advertising revenue worldwide because of advances in the field of AI targeting and the monetization of Reels. This remarkable rise is an indicator of the high penetration of Instagram and undermines the fact that it has a huge marketing potential, compelling marketers to spend a lot in social media marketing. These are feed ads, carousel ads, story ads, collection ads and explore ads that can have images as well as videos. Although the Instagram Ads may look like a typical post, they are characterized by the promotions being clearly labeled as sponsored, which suggests their commercial character. The ads are integrated into the user feed, stories, and explore page without the disruption of the regular content presentation format. Instagram Ads are the universal ones, as they use images, videos, carousels (several images), and collections (interactive product displays).

Visual literacy is essential because it is the ability to scrutinize the visuals carefully with a lot of curiosity, skepticism and analytical skills and to be able to comprehend what the intended purpose of sponsored ads is, As the platform of Instagram is highly image-driven, with reliance on the aesthetics, storytelling, and design principles to attract consumer attention. Visual literacy gives the power to the consumer, as opposed to consumers being subject to the influence of advertisements. It will make them look beyond the marketing gimmicks, fathom how images affect the psyche and make corresponding purchases out of reasoning as opposed to impulse.

The main purpose of this research is to investigate the influence of instagram sponsored ads on purchase decisions of consumers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of visual literacy was crystallized by John Debes (1968, 1969, 1970), “Visual literacy refers to a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing at the same time he has and integrates other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, and/or symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication”.

Currently, the common individual frequents different communication media. Each individual is subjected to advertising messages, presented through various media formats. On the Internet, ads can be considered even more annoying than in traditional media; this is the case, for instance, of the massive and uninvited advertisements delivered through spam. (Francisco, 2014)

The present-day levels of advertising density can illuminate the ever-shrinking efficacy of advertising. In situations of high density, there are too many brands in one medium competing for the attention of the consumers, the users of said medium. Under these circumstances, there is a high chance that the users of the medium’s attention will worsen, which, in turn, might generate non-desirable effects on memory, attitude or behaviors towards the ad, the advertised product or the medium in which the ad appears. (Francisco, 2014)

From a psychological point of view, behavior and intention are influenced by attitudes towards the ad and brand, although, fundamentally, they are the trigger that unleashes the user’s mechanisms for advertising consumption. Awareness of the decisive parameters of advertising efficacy, and how to handle them, is of growing significance because of brand’s large investment in online advertising in recent years (Tom and Brown, 1993).

Visual persuasion also is influenced by cultural variability in the global marketplace. Indicatively, as in the case with recent papers, culturally congruent imagery improves the advertising credibility, and incongruent images can estrange consumers. This implies that advertisers need to find a middle ground between cultural-specific symbols and universal visual attractions like expressions of emotions to achieve the greatest level of persuasion.

The use of images in advertisement is not a new issue in the research of communication and marketing over the past few decades. The foundation was laid by (Messaris, 1997) who contended that images in advertising are not only illustrative but they serve as persuasive medium that plays on the human senses, emotions and the creation of a cultural meaning. He highlighted three essential processes that include the implicitness of visual arguments, realism of photographic representation and the associative power of imagery. These lessons made visual persuasion a special and effective type of influence in contrast to the verbal rhetoric.

Later research has increased the insight into the persuasiveness of advertising images. The suggested typology of visual rhetoric (Phillips, 2004) shows that advertising pictures tend to use metaphor, juxtaposition, and hyperbole to attract viewers both on the cognitive and affective levels. In their structure, they emphasize that the visual persuasion system works with interpretive work, inviting the consumer to de-read between meanings, making it more memorable and brand attached. Studies based on attention have also made contributions to the body of literature (Pieters and Wedel, 2004) It has been demonstrated that visual features of advertising especially human faces and salient pictorials are more effective in capturing and transferring attention than text features hence a big contribution to the brand recall.

Visual persuasion has become even more important in the digital age. Social media such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are image based and video-based, and thus have a greater persuasive power of the

image. According to (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019) the authors emphasize that the visual aesthetics of influencer marketing are a strong predictor of consumer engagement. Likewise, brand visual consistency in the social media uplifts the consumer attitude and intention to purchase and visual consistency is significant in online persuasion.

Visual persuasion is also influenced by cultural context. Since culturally consistent visual images increase credibility, but incongruent images might decrease persuasiveness. This is consistent with the cross-cultural advertising studies that indicate that the universal visual appeals like emotional displays should be in many ways localized to reflect cultural expectations and requirements. Collectively, the literature confirms the fact that visuals in advertisement are not the periphery of persuasive message but the main elements of communication processes (Messaris, 1997) the basic knowledge has not lost its significance but the digital and globalized media has enlarged the area of visual persuasion with the elements of visual rhetoric, attention studies, online aesthetics and cross cultural relations.

Visual advertising persuasion capitalizes on the capacity of audiences, in their capacities to perceive, decode, learn with, think with, and communicate through images which are the same competencies that comprise visual literacy. In (Avgerinou and Pettersson, 2016) "Toward a Cohesive Theory of Visual Literacy" the authors have summarized decades of work into five interconnected elements, namely, visual perception, visual language, visual learning, visual thinking, and visual communication. This complex system describes how viewers convert pictorial input to meaning and action and provides a theoretical link between the perception of images and their persuasiveness in marketing situations.

The initial advertising studies converted these competencies into persuasion processes (Messaris, 1997) Argued that advertising images persuade implicitly: photographs carry a realism that lowers counter-arguing, while visual associations cue emotions and cultural meanings that can bypass conscious scrutiny. This positions images as more than illustration, they become arguments the audience *experiences* rather than *reads*. Phillips and McQuarrie extended this by mapping how visual rhetorical figures (e.g., metaphor, juxtaposition, hyperbole) invite interpretive effort, increasing memorability and attitude strength when audiences "solve" the picture's meaning. Together these works show that visual persuasion operates through implicitness, affect, and rhetorical structure (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004).

The eye-tracking survey on 1,300+ ads revealed pictorial contents capture the first attention regardless of size, whereas text-based ads capture attention in direct proportion to its surface area; the attention subsequently shifts between brand, picture, and copy in expected patterns to determine recall and decision (Pieters & Wedel, 2004) their findings are empirical in nature why potent imagery is usually the entry point to the ad processing, which is in tandem with the pillars of perception and communication of visual literacy.

These dynamics are enhanced by the social-digital marketplace. Influencer advertisement depends on thoughtfully created pictures to create an indication of authenticity, status, and para-social intimacy by transforming persuasion not into product-related arguments but adopting a picture of life. This field has been synthesized by a comprehensive review of this field by Hudders and colleagues that demonstrates that visual presentation and disclosure influence credibility, attention and brand outcomes across platforms. Their model is consistent with the visual literacy concepts of visual communication and visual language, explaining how image codes unique to the platform (filters, angles, and aesthetics) mediate persuasion (Hudders et al., 2021).

In addition to brand-created images, user-generated photographs (UGPs) have taken over as the determinants of the conclusions about products and services. The recent research also reveals that the visual information (e.g., breadth/depth of the presented cues) and aesthetic appearance of UGPs have a strong influence on the perceived helpfulness of a review- an effective pathway to persuasion in platform situations. These results further the two-dimensional aspects of visual learning and visual thinking: viewers do not merely view images but they can derive quality, risk, and suitability based on the image they see.

Visual persuasion is further mediated by cultural context. The literature of international advertising also shows that cultural congruence increases believability and attitudes, and incongruent images may also work against the advertiser unless effectively positioned (e.g. as genuinely foreign). It is a direct use of the visual literacy focus on learned visual codes: meaning that is extracted is reliant on the culturally shared schemas that define the way symbols, setting and people are interpreted (Cui et al., 2012).

More recent streams narrow down on what kind of images to be persuasive. Digital experimental findings indicate that visual salience (e.g., conspicuous product images) can counteract skepticism when an audience realizes that the communication is a commercial, which means that high-profile presentation can be used to alleviate ad-recognition punishment, which is a hallmark of social media. Very much connected to it, new studies in advertising suggest that portrayed movement can increase perceived active motion and persuasive force presumably through the activation of bodily perception routes described in the perception aspect of visual literacy. The study aims to understand how the women previously mentioned experienced this effect alongside the advancement of their careers, their engagement, and the ways in which they adapted to these changes. The question the study intends to answer is how the women above employed this effect and their career development, how they were engaged and how they had to cope with the changing circumstances.

The findings of the research on sponsorship disclosure in social and native advertising all point to a similar mechanism, which is that disclosures lead to the mobilization of consumer persuasion knowledge that may redefine downstream consequences, including credibility, attitudes, and electronic word of mouth (eWOM). In an established study sample on Facebook, (Willemsen, 2017) demonstrate that a label of Sponsored leads to a hierarchical process, especially in cases where the source is a celebrity, and not just a brand page: advertising knowledge (conceptual persuasion) - increased distrust/critical belief (attitudinal persuasion knowledge) reduced intention to like, share, or comment (eWOM). The celebrity condition is important in that motivations are not as transparent as with brands and therefore the disclosure is a better signal that leads to persuasion coping. These results provide an empirical positioning of disclosure to eWOM chain in influencer situations.

Across channels, disclosure parameters, its wording, placement, and duration, shape whether recognition actually occurs and how strongly it affects evaluations. In native advertising, wording that explicitly signals “advertising” or “sponsored,” and mid/bottom placement that audiences actually notice, increase ad recognition; recognition, in turn, often depresses brand and publisher evaluations. Television and online experiments similarly show that longer and clearer disclosures more reliably activate both conceptual and attitudinal persuasion knowledge, sometimes reducing brand attitudes or memory benefits that the covert format might otherwise yield. Together, these studies clarify that disclosure is not a mere formality: its design features are causal levers for recognition and resistance (Boerman et al., 2013).

One of the social media that can be used as a medium to promote products is Instagram. It is an internet-based service as well as a social network for sharing stories via digital images. (Rudianto, 2024) Through Instagram, products or services are offered through advertisements on the Instagram feature, so that potential consumers can see the types of goods or services offered. Instagram ads are a form of service that allows its users to create advertisements on Instagram feeds and Instagram stories. Instagram ads use a targeting system that allows users to obtain specific user and targeting information, such as location, age, gender, hobbies, interests and others. Instagram ads provide several variations of various ad formats such as images, videos, carousels, and Instagram stories.

Instagram ads invite its users to increase engagement with invitation buttons such as follow, visit the user's website, or download the application on Instagram ads. The character of Instagram makes it one of the social media that is widely used as a marketing communication platform. Among them, Instagram stands out due to its unique focus on visual content. This aligns perfectly with human psychology, as we are naturally drawn to images and videos. With this possibility, companies invest a lot of money in Instagram to develop multiple and captivating promotion programs. The social media of Instagram with

its visual features is a business opportunity to provide a range of promotional styles to businesses (Edy, et al., 2024).

Increasingly, the visual persuasion of social-media is characterized by platform and source effects. In Instagram, in particular, the revelation of a material relationship normally intensifies ad awareness and distrust, which may reduce the credibility of the influencer and brand orientations. It is possible to note that the effects can be buffered by message-sidedness: two-sided messages (considering the pros and cons) weaken the negative credibility route that disclosure triggers, which indicates that executional decisions can adjust the cost of persuasion once the recognition has been made. Veirman and Hudders (2019) *Disclosing sponsored Instagram Posts: The effect of material connection with the brand and message-sidedness in disclosing covert advertising*.

The chain of disclosure-recognition-evaluation goes further than the influence and blogs to the extent of embedded forms. Syntheses that have high sample sizes and multi-studies show that people are more likely to be aware of the disclosure when they report that they remember seeing the disclosure, are more likely to recognize the content as paid, and remember the sponsor but at the cost of increased skepticism, less positive attitudes, and reduced purchase intentions. The same tendencies are observed with the teens in the televised brand-placement situations: disclosures are known to stimulate the knowledge of persuasion and may suppress the persuasive effects, which highlights the fact that the mechanism is age and media-generalized (Reijmersdal, et al., 2016).

Inventory Inventory Tallying the literature places disclosure with the sword in two hands. To regulators and platforms, labels positioning well and clearly move the policy objective of recognizability. To advertisers, disclosures may undermine the strategic benefits of native formats by triggering persuasion knowledge and resistance, especially when a potentially authentic source (e.g. a celebrity or an influencer) is disclosed as commercial. However, the new findings on moderators (e.g., type of source, message-sidedness, disclosure clarity/duration, and platform conventions) further indicate that there are still design options that would allow reducing the negative impact and still ensure transparency. In sum, Boerman et al.'s Facebook experiment fits a robust cross-media pattern: disclosure efficacy in activating recognition is high when ambiguity about intent is high; once recognition occurs, visual/social persuasion loses some of its "native" lift and eWOM intentions decline. Wojdyski & Evans, (2016) *Going Native: Effects of Disclosure Position and Language on the Recognition and Evaluation of Online Native Advertising*

2.1 Disclosure and Persuasion Knowledge

1) Core mechanism: disclosure → recognition → evaluation

A large body of work shows that when influencer posts are clearly marked as advertising, audiences are more likely to recognize persuasive intent; that recognition often shifts evaluations of both the post and brand (sometimes negatively). In a Facebook context, a "Sponsored" label activated conceptual persuasion knowledge and reduced eWOM intentions especially for celebrity endorsers demonstrating the basic PKM sequence (recognition → skepticism → lower engagement) (Willemsen, & Aa, 2017).

Extending this logic to native formats, the *CARE model* (Covert Advertising Recognition and Effects) formalizes two pathways to recognition: top-down (disclosures) and bottom-up (context cues). Recognition is a gatekeeper variable: when users identify content as advertising, effects on attitudes depend on what they think about the information and the way it's presented (Wojdyski & Evans, 2019).

2) Instagram-specific Cues: What Audiences Actually Notice

On Instagram, eye-tracking and experiments show that users pay most attention to brand tags in images and the "Paid partnership" label, and the least to #ad which many viewers overlook. Disclosures and brand presence raise ad recognition; influencer type matters too (e.g., "professional" influencer vs. peer-

like). These results confirm CARE's dual pathway: disclosures (top-down) and brand/context signals (bottom-up) both trigger recognition (Boerman & Müller, 2022).

3) Wording, Placement, and Message Design

Outside Instagram, disclosure wording and position reliably influence recognition: terms like "advertising/sponsored" and mid/bottom placements are noticed more and tend to produce more negative brand/publisher evaluations when recognition occurs. While not platform-identical, these effects generalize to IG's feed/Stories where label clarity and prominence still matter. (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016) On Instagram itself, material-connection disclosures (e.g., "in partnership with ...") increase ad recognition and can depress brand attitudes; however, two-sided messages (acknowledging pros/cons) and strong product-influencer fit can buffer those downsides. (Veirman & Hudders, 2018)

4) Audience Factors: Age, Usage Intensity, and Followers' Relationships

Among adolescents, recognizing a post as sponsored changes source evaluations and downstream brand outcomes; interestingly, influencer posts can drive liking more than brand posts, but brand posts may heighten awareness, underscoring that who speaks matters once sponsorship is recognized. Usage intensity also moderates effects: in a field-based experiment with a real influencer and followers, heavy Instagram users rated the trustworthiness of the influencer and credibility of the post higher when #ad was present, whereas light users showed no such benefit evidence that disclosure can help under certain audience conditions (Saternus & Hinz, 2022).

5) Outcomes beyond Recognition: Credibility, Engagement, Purchase Intent

Influencer credibility (fit, authenticity, homophily) strongly shapes attitudes and behavioral responses; ad recognition can reduce perceived credibility, but good fit mitigates that hit. Meta- and large-sample studies have also indicated that, despite the fact that on average sponsored posts gain lower engagement, proper disclosure does not below engagement even more, hence the idea that transparency can Tags: performance, execution (fit, message quality) when strong (Liu & Zheng, 2024).

6) Integrating the Evidence: Design Principles

Across Instagram studies, effective disclosure strategy balances clarity (to meet policy and avoid deception) with executional choices that preserve persuasion:

- Use prominent, platform-native labels (e.g., *Paid partnership*) rather than relying solely on #ad, which draws less attention.
- Pair disclosure with high influencer-product congruence and credible messaging to sustain influencer/brand attitudes post-recognition.
- Consider audience composition: heavy users may respond positively to clear tags like #ad (trust/credibility), while lighter users may not; tailor formats accordingly. (Saternus & Hinz, 2022)

A growing strand of empirical aesthetics treats large-scale social media behavior as naturally occurring judgments of appeal. Thömmes and Hübner formalize this by proposing the Image Aesthetic Appeal (IAA) score, computed from Instagram Like data after discounting confounds of time and audience growth. Using 15,073 photographs across nine professional accounts (architecture, dance, and landscape), they show that IAA correlates with experimental liking and reflects known aesthetic regularities (e.g., curvature and visual balance effects). Importantly, they validate IAA against lab ratings and explain when the metric is most appropriate (large, monothematic accounts; comparisons within rather than across accounts). This positions Likes, not as raw counts, but as normalized, exposure-adjusted indicators of perceived aesthetic quality (Thömmes & Hübner, 2022).

This behavioral approach dovetails with processing-fluency theory, which holds that stimuli processed more easily are evaluated more positively. Classic work shows that symmetry, prototypically, figure–ground contrast, and repetition enhance fluency and, thereby, aesthetic pleasure; social metrics like Likes should, in principle, track these features when they make images easier to parse and enjoy. Thus, fluency theory provides a cognitive mechanism by which composition or style can elevate IAA. Evidence from domain-specific Instagram studies supports the link between compositional features and engagement. For architectural photos, balance and curvature predict higher like rates mirroring lab-based aesthetic findings and suggesting that certain low-level features generalize from controlled settings to complex, real-world images. Thömmes and Hübner’s 2018 work is an early proof-of-concept that paved the way for the broader IAA framework (Thömmes & Hübner, 2022).

Crucially, shared taste varies by domain, which constrains generalization. People agree more on the appeal of faces and landscapes than on architecture or artworks; consequently, a behavior-based aesthetic signal like IAA will be stronger and less noisy in domains with higher shared taste. This helps explain why Thömmes & Hübner reported tighter IAA–liking alignment for landscapes and dance than for architecture and why cross-genre comparisons should be made cautiously (Vessel et al., 2018).

2.2 Research Hypotheses

H1: There is a positive relationship between visual literacy and consumer perception of Instagram sponsored ads.

(SPSS: Pearson correlation/regression between the visual literacy scale and perception scale)

H2: Consumers with higher visual literacy show greater purchase intent compared to consumers with lower visual literacy.

(SPSS: Independent Samples t-test or regression using visual literacy as predictor and purchase intent as outcome)

H3: Positive consumer perception of Instagram sponsored ads is significantly associated with higher purchase intent.

(SPSS: Correlation or regression between perception scores and purchase intent scores)

H4: Trust in sponsored ads mediates the relationship between visual literacy and purchase intent.

(SPSS: Mediation analysis using PROCESS macro or regression steps)

H5: Demographic factors (age, gender, education level, and daily Instagram usage) significantly moderate the effect of visual literacy on purchase intent.

(SPSS: ANOVA or regression with interaction terms)

3. METHODOLOGY

In this section, the research design participants, measures, data collection procedures and data analysis techniques employed in this study are addressed. The objective of the research was to study how visual literacy contributes to consumer perception and purchase intention with sponsored posts on Instagram. The participants included in the study were 201 Instagram users that were surveyed using a convenient sampling technique. Active Instagram users that have seen paid advertisements on the platform were selected to participate in the study. The sample was comprised of persons between the age of 17 and 50 ($M = 21.78$, $SD = 5.27$). The level of education among the sample was divided into secondary education and postgraduate and most of the respondents indicated that they had a bachelor’s degree. The sample was evenly balanced with regards to sex. The participants on average spent 1-3 hours a day on Instagram (mean = 2.52, standard deviation = 1.01) which is an indicator of a digitally engaged population that will respond to paid advertisements.

The questionnaire tool was composed of some of the standardised scales that were modified to suit the circumstances of the Instagram advertising. Everything was rated according to a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 strongly agree). Internal consistency was measured through reliability analysis that revealed that the common scale has a strong internal consistency with a coefficient of Cronbachs alpha of 0.840 with 9 items.

3.1 Scale Computation

Visual literacy: It was engaged by the factors that attract the capability of the participants to identify the visual cues in advertisements, interpret them, and evaluate them such as sponsored posts, colour application, critical analysis of the image purpose, recognising persuasive methods, and distinguishing between paid and organic posts.

Consumer Perception: The perception regarding advertisements was measured according to credibility of advertisement, trust in the influencers, and professional design influence. Certain indicators were beliefs concerning the genuineness of influencers in the paid content, the influence of being explicitly labeled, the effect of professional and aesthetically pleasing advertisements, how the look of an ad impacts the person on the brand.

Purchase Intent: This variable was triggered in four dimensions, that is, mutual interest (the tendency to buy), referral interest (the tendency to recommend products to other people), preferential interest (preferred products), and exploratory interest (researching about a particular product).

Confidence in paid advertisements: It was assessed with the help of those factors associated with the integrity, genuineness, and openness of advertisements.

Demographic information: Age, level of education and time spent on Instagram was gathered to analyze the profile of the participants and find out what effects may be possible.

3.2 Procedure

The survey was carried out through the Internet employing Google Forms. Those who replied were guaranteed anonymity and privacy. It was totally up to the individual to take part or not, and no personal information could be identified from the respondents. Data was gathered over a time frame of three months and the number of valid responses needed for the study, which was 201, was reached.

3.3 Data Analysis and Results

The data were examined with SPSS (version 29), where further mediation and moderation analyses were done with the help of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022). For all demographic and study variables, descriptive statistics (means, SDs, frequencies) were computed.

3.4 Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was carried out to ensure the internal consistency of the measurement scales. The Cronbach's alpha reliability test was conducted on all items measuring consumer perception and purchase intention. The items included statements such as: "I believe what influencers say about products in paid posts," "clearly marked ads reduce my trust in the content," "professionally and visually appealing ads improve my perception," etc. These items together formed a consumer perception scale, which showed high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84, indicating that the items consistently measured the same underlying construct.

3.5 Reliability

Table 1: Case Processing Summary

Case Processing Summary		N	%
Cases	Valid	201	100.0
	Excluded ^a	0	.0
	Total	201	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Table 2: Reliability analysis to ensure the internal consistency of the measurement scales

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.840	9

4. RESULTS

4.1 Testing Normality

Normality testing (Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests) was conducted to guide the choice of parametric or non-parametric analyses.

Table 3: Normality testing (Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests)

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
VisualLiteracy	.055	199	.200*	.986	199	.046
ConsumerPerception	.098	199	.000	.978	199	.003

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Visual Literacy

Kolmogorov-Smirnov Sig. = .200 (> .05)

Shapiro-Wilk Sig. = .046 (< .05)

Sample size (n ≈ 200)

Looking at .200 on K-S and only slightly below .05 on Shapiro-Wilk, Visual Literacy is approximately normal (acceptable for Pearson).

Consumer Perception

- Kolmogorov-Smirnov Sig. = .000 (< .05)
- Shapiro-Wilk Sig. = .003 (< .05)

Both are significant → reject normality.

This variable (consumer perception) is not normally distributed (it's skewed).

Since one variable is normal (Visual Literacy) but the other (Consumer Perception) is skewed, instead of Pearson correlation, we used Spearman's Rank Correlation to test our hypothesis.

CORRELATION

Table 4: Spearman's Rank Correlation

Correlations	1	2
Spearman's rho Visual Literacy	Correlation Coefficient	1
Consumer Perception	Correlation Coefficient	.401**
		1

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Spearman correlation indicated a moderate, positive association between visual literacy and consumer perception, $\rho(199) = .401$, $p < .001$. In short, higher visual literacy was associated with more favourable perceptions of Instagram-sponsored ads.

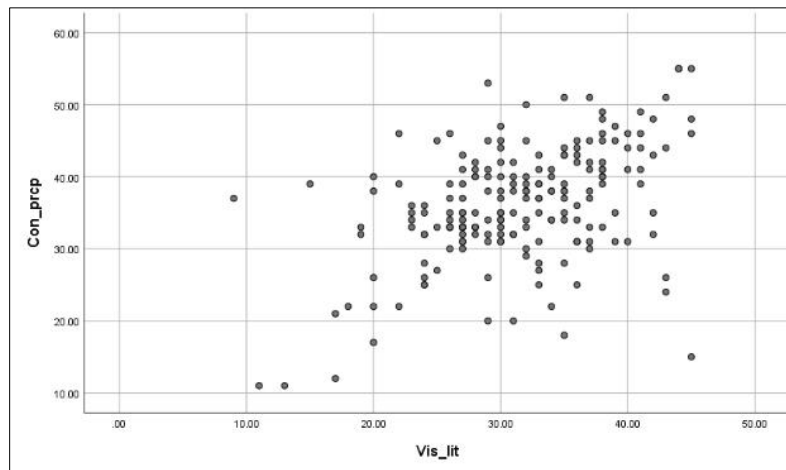


Figure 1: Scatterplot showing the positive association between visual literacy and consumer perception of Instagram sponsored ads, with regression line fitted.

Correlation is the relationship between two continuous variables. A scatterplot showed each participant as a point, indicating the direction (positive or negative) and the strength (spread) of the relationship.

H2: Consumers with higher visual literacy show greater purchase intent compared to consumers with lower visual literacy.

Participants were split into low and high visual-literacy groups (binned as in the analysis plan). An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare purchase intent between the two groups. Levene’s test indicated equal variances ($p = .940$), so the equal-variances row was used.

Table 5: T-test

Group Statistics	Visual Literacy (Binned)	N	M	S.D.	Std. Error Mean
Purchase Intent	1	102	9.3529	3.14862	.31176
	2	99	11.1010	3.00508	.30202

Table 6: Independent Samples Test

Dependent Variable	Assumptions	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
Purchase Intent	Equal variances assumed	.006	.940	-4.024	199	.000	-1.74807	.43437	[-2.60462, -.89152]
Purchase Intent	Equal variances not assumed			-4.027	198.945	.000	-1.74807	.43406	[-2.60403, -.89211]

To compare purchase intent between participants with low and high visual literacy an independent samples t-test was conducted. Results indicated that high visual literacy ($M = 11.10$, $SD = 3.01$) reported a significant increase in purchase intent than those with low visual literacy ($M = 9.35$, $SD = 3.15$), $t(199) = -4.02$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-2.60, -0.89]. Cohen’s $d = 0.57$ showed a moderate-to-large effect size, which is a standard for an independent-samples t-test. The value of $d = 0.57$ that Cohen gives means that

there is a significant difference in purchase intention in the two groups. These findings confirm the hypothesis, which postulates that higher visual literacy correlates with high purchase intent.

Visual literacy is an important aspect of consumer decision-making. The more capable people were to analyze and interpret visual information, the more they would convey purchase intention when they were exposed to Instagram advertisements as compared to those with low visual literacy.

H3: Positive consumer perception of Instagram sponsored ads is significantly associated with higher purchase intent.

Both variables are continuous, hence appropriate for Pearson correlation; a Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted.

Independent variable (IV): Consumer perception (Con_prpc) of Instagram sponsored ads

Dependent variable (DV): Purchase Intent (Prch_int). Both are continuous variables.

Table 7: Consumer perception of Instagram sponsored ads and purchase intent

		1	2
Con_prpc	Pearson Correlation	1	
Prch_int	Pearson Correlation	.840**	1

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between consumer perception of Instagram sponsored ads and purchase intent. Results showed a strong positive correlation, $r(197) = .84$, $p < .001$. The results indicated that consumers with more approving perceptions of Instagram sponsored ads were significantly likely to report higher purchase intent.

H4: Trust in sponsored ads mediates the relationship between visual literacy and purchase intent.

A mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether trust in sponsored ads mediated the relationship between visual literacy and purchase intent by using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022)

Table 8: Mediation Analysis of Trust in Sponsored Ads in the Relationship Between Visual Literacy and Purchase Intent (N = 201)

Path	B	SE	t	p	95% CI (LL, UL)
a path: Visual Literacy → Trust	0.033	0.011	3.00	.003	0.011, 0.054
b path: Trust → Purchase Intent (controlling for Visual Literacy)	0.403	0.201	2.00	.047	0.006, 0.800
c' path: Visual Literacy → Purchase Intent (direct effect)	0.141	0.032	4.44	< .001	0.078, 0.203
Indirect effect (a × b)	0.013	0.009	—	—	−0.001, 0.031

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval. Indirect effect based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. c' = direct effect after including mediation

Results indicated that visual literacy significantly predicted trust (a path: B = 0.033, SE = 0.011, $t = 3.00$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [0.011, 0.054]). The results indicated that trust significantly predicted purchase intent when controlling for visual literacy (b path: B = 0.403, SE = 0.201, $t = 2.00$, $p = .047$, 95% CI [0.006, 0.800]).

The direct effect of visual literacy on purchase intent remained strong and significant (c' path: B = 0.141, SE = 0.032, $t = 4.44$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.078, 0.203]). The indirect effect of visual literacy on purchase intent through trust was small and nonsignificant (B = 0.013, SE = 0.009, 95% CI [−0.002, 0.031]), as the confidence interval included zero.

Altogether, these findings suggested that trust partially explains the relationship; the direct pathway from visual literacy to purchase intent remains dominant.

Figure 1: Mediation Model

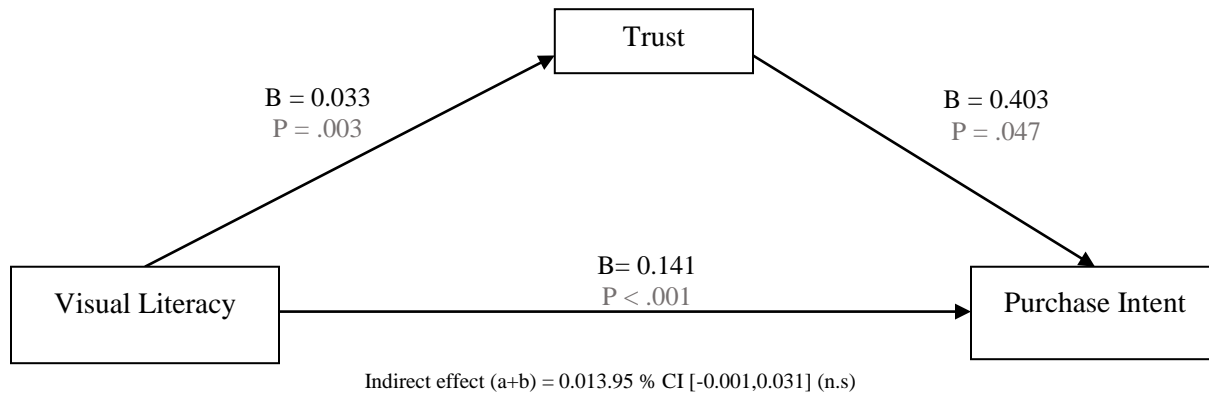


Fig 2: Mediation Model of trust in sponsored ads in the relationship between visual literacy and purchase intent

Mediation model testing the role of trust in sponsored ads in the relationship between visual literacy and purchase intent (N = 201). Path coefficients are unstandardized regression weights. Indirect effect was nonsignificant (95% CI includes zero).

H5: Moderation analyses (PROCESS Model 1) examined whether demographic variables (age, education, and Instagram usage) moderated the effect of visual literacy on purchase intent.

Table 9: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Vis_lit	201	9.00	45.00	31.2736	6.84103

Centring Age, Education and Insta Time

Table10: Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Moderators Before and After Centring (N = 201)

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Cantered Mean	Centered SD
Age (years)	201	17	50	21.78	5.27	0.00	5.27
Education (1–4)	201	1	4	2.96	0.56	—	—
Instagram Time (1–4)	200	1	4	2.52	1.01	0.00	1.01

Note. Education was coded categorically (1 = High school, 2 = Intermediate, 3 = Bachelor, 4 = Master). Instagram Time was coded ordinally (1 = “<1 hr/day,” 2 = “1–2 hrs/day,” 3 = “2–3 hrs/day,” 4 = “>3 hrs/day”). Centred variables (Age_c, Insta_c) have a mean of approximately zero and preserve the original SD.

Descriptive statistics for age, education, and Instagram usage shown in Table X indicate that Participants were mainly young adults ($M = 21.78$, $SD = 5.27$, range = 17–50) with some older contributors. Education levels were clustered around the bachelor’s degree ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.56$, on a 1–4 scale), mainly suggesting a relatively homogeneous group in terms of education. Instagram usage was between one and three hours per day ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.01$).

For moderation analyses, age and Instagram time were mean-centred before entry into PROCESS (Model 1; Hayes, 2022). As expected, centring shifted the variable means to approximately zero ($M \approx 0$), while

leaving the variability unchanged (e.g., Age_c $SD = 5.27$, Insta_c $SD = 1.01$). This transformation makes it easier to interpret the coefficients of the regressions; it guarantees that the primary impacts of the predictors denote impacts when the moderators have their mean values.

Moderation Testing

Moderation was tested using PROCESS Model 1 separately for each moderator (age, Instagram usage, and educational attainment).

Age (moderator)

Table 11: Moderation of Effect of Visual Literacy on Purchase Intent by Age (PROCESS Model 1)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI (LL, UL)
Constant	10.24	0.20	50.04	< .001	[9.83, 10.64]
Visual Literacy (Vis_c)	0.14	0.03	4.80	< .001	[0.08, 0.20]
Age (Age_c)	0.15	0.04	3.73	< .001	[0.07, 0.22]
Vis_c \times Age_c	-0.02	0.01	-2.42	.016	[-0.03, -0.00]

Note. $R^2 = .19$, $F(3, 197) = 15.35$, $p < .001$. Conditional effects suggest a stronger visual literacy effect for younger participants.

The model was significant, $R^2 = .19$, $F(3, 197) = 15.35$, $p < .001$. Visual literacy (centred) predicted purchase intent ($B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). Age (centred) also had a positive main effect ($B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$). The interaction $Vis_c \times Age_c$ was significant and negative ($B = -0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .016$), indicating that the positive effect of visual literacy on purchase intent decreases slightly with increasing age. Simple slopes indicated the effect was stronger for younger participants (e.g., slope ≈ 0.19 at low age) and weaker but still significant for older participants (≈ 0.11). In short, **age moderated** the visual literacy \rightarrow purchase intent relationship.

Simple slopes of the relationship between visual literacy and purchase intent

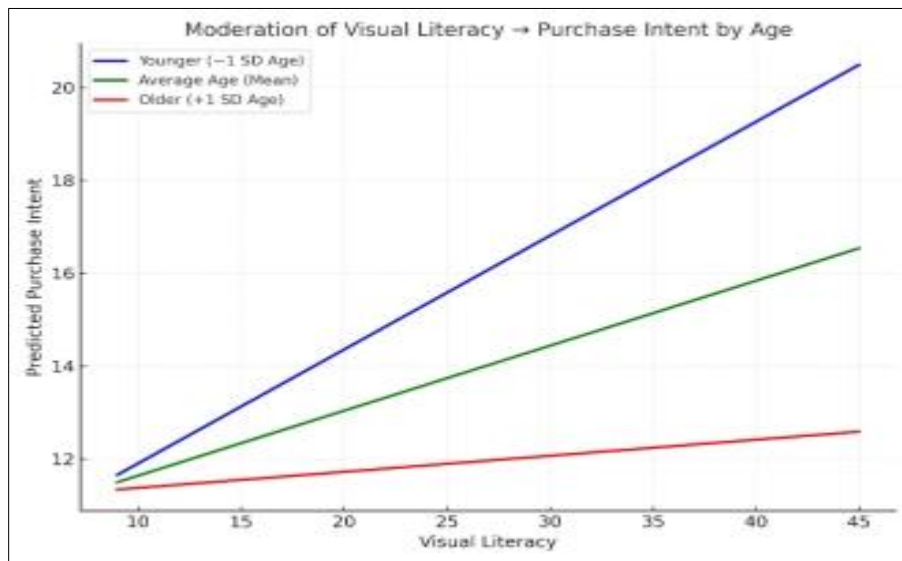


Figure 3: Simple slopes of the relationship between visual literacy and purchase intent at low ($-1 SD$), mean, and high ($+1 SD$) levels of age.

As shown, visual literacy positively predicted purchase intent across all age groups, but the effect was stronger among younger participants and weaker among older participants. Specifically, at $-1 SD$ of age (younger), the slope of visual literacy on purchase intent was steeper, while at $+1 SD$ of age (older), the

slope was shallower, indicating that the influence of visual literacy on purchase intent diminishes slightly with increasing age.

Instagram Usage (Moderator)

Table 12: Moderation of the Effect of Visual Literacy on Purchase Intent by Instagram Usage

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI (LL, UL)
Constant	10.24	0.22	47.06	< .001	[9.81, 10.67]
Visual Literacy (Vis_c)	0.15	0.03	4.52	< .001	[0.08, 0.21]
Instagram Usage (Insta_c)	0.17	0.22	0.77	.442	[-0.26, 0.59]
Vis_c × Insta_c	-0.02	0.03	-0.54	.590	[-0.08, 0.04]

Note. $R^2 = .11$, $F(3, 196) = 8.28$, $p < .001$. Interaction non-significant.

The overall model was significant, $R^2 = .11$, $F(3, 196) = 8.28$, $p < .001$. Visual literacy (Vis_c) predicted purchase intent ($B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). Instagram usage (Insta_c) did not predict purchase intent ($B = 0.17$, $SE = 0.22$, $p = .442$), and the interaction term (Vis_c × Insta_c) was non-significant ($B = -0.02$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .590$). Thus, Instagram usage did not moderate the relationship.

Educational Attainment (Moderator)

Table 13: Moderation of Effect of Visual Literacy on Purchase Intent by Educational Attainment

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI (LL, UL)
Constant	6.13	1.12	5.48	< .001	[3.93, 8.34]
Visual Literacy (Vis_c)	0.09	0.16	0.56	.575	[-0.23, 0.41]
Educational Attainment (Edu_Bach)	1.38	0.37	3.71	< .001	[0.65, 2.11]
Vis_c × Edu_Bach	0.02	0.05	0.39	.696	[-0.09, 0.13]

Note. $R^2 = .17$, $F(3, 197) = 13.37$, $p < .001$. Interaction non-significant.

The model was significant, $R^2 = .17$, $F(3, 197) = 13.37$, $p < .001$. Educational attainment (dummy: bachelor's = 1) predicted higher purchase intent ($B = 1.38$, $SE = 0.37$, $p < .001$). The interaction Vis_c × Edu_Bach was non-significant ($B = 0.02$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .696$), indicating that **education did not moderate** the visual literacy → purchase intent relationship (visual literacy's effect was stable across education groups).

5. DISCUSSION

In each of the three moderation models investigated, only age was found to be a significant moderator of the relationship between purchase intention and visual literacy. More precisely, the positive influence of visual literacy on purchase intention was strongest in younger participants and decreased, although remained significant, with age". This suggests that younger consumers are more likely to develop purchase intent depending on visuals of Instagram ads.

On the other hand, Instagram usage frequency did not have a significant moderating influence on the effect of visual literacy. Despite the fact that Instagram is a very visual medium, the findings suggest that spending more or less time on the app does not change the purchase intent with respect to visual literacy. This suggests that being able to decode visual information cognitively is relevant regardless of exposure to the platform.

Equally, educational level was not a significant moderator. Although students with a bachelor's degree showed overall higher purchase intention than those without, visual literacy–purchase intention relationship did not vary by level of education. This means that the visual literacy induces consumer behavior in a consistent manner at all levels of education.

Together, these findings underline the idea that although visual literacy can be a potent predictor of purchase intentions, the impact of the former is most conditioned by age, rather than by media use

(Instagram) or level of formal education. This favors the usefulness of demographic life-stage in forecasting the success of visual communication techniques.

5.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of the study are useful in comprehending the consumer behaviour in the digital era. They use the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and defend other models since they propose that visual literacy can assist individuals to comprehend persuasive communications better. Moreover, they support the AIDA model since the Instagram advertisements are meant to visually provide consumers with the steps of attention, interest, desire, and action. This research plays an important role in incorporating scenario literacy in purchase intention models thus fills the gap in the literature on social media marketing. Practically speaking, such remarks are priceless to the marketers and advertisers. Instagram is a visual platform; thus, marketers should concentrate on aesthetics, composition, and quality of good images when developing sponsored ads. The advertising must be made so that people can notice it, with the advertisement being grounded on the state of their visual culture, and not solely in the fact that the advertisement is seen. The concept of age targeting is that advertising campaigns can be more appropriately applied to various age groups and younger groups will be more responsive to more complicated visual messages. The point is that advertisements must not only be realistic, but also pretty and amusing to make people desire to purchase something. Trust is also essential, and it is not everything that counts. There are also numerous communication tools that are visually appealing and are available in Instagram, including photos, videos, and carousels.

Thus, concisely, visual culture is viewed as an effective and a strong indicator on Instagram in regards to consumer perception and intention to purchase, and its effect is the most age-sensitive. Businesses operating in this visual digital reality must invest in both visually advanced and strategically aimed advertisement to stimulate the critical thinking about images in order to make people engage with it and purchase it.

5.2 Limitations

The researchers used a convenience approach in selecting 201 users of Instagram. Although this method is feasible, it might restrict the generalization of the results, because the sample is not necessarily the complete representation of the total number of Instagram users or of the consumers in general. The sample size was composed mostly of young adults (mean age of 21.78 years) with the education level mainly bachelor's degree meaning that the group was relatively homogenous in terms of education. The result of this demographic profile can result in the inability to directly transfer the findings to older groups and those with radically dissimilar educational backgrounds. This is especially important considering that age was also suggested to be an important moderator of the visual literacy versus purchase intent relationship, indicating that the success of the visual communication strategies depends on the demographic life stage. Another variable that was not significantly reflected in the data is gender because nearly 96% of the population was represented as females, and only 4% of them were males who participated in the survey.

The online questionnaire was used to gather data by using Google Forms. Self-reported data may be vulnerable to biases, including recall bias or misinterpretation of survey questions even though confidentiality and privacy are guaranteed. The online option also requires the participants to have access to internet and be digital literate, which might lock out some members of the population.

Particularly, the study is based on Instagram sponsored ads. Though Instagram is a very visual and powerful platform, the specificities of its functionality (use of various types of ads (images, videos, carousels, collections), the label sponsored) imply that the conclusions that can be made might not be applicable directly to other social media that have different visual dynamics or to the traditional advertising media. The research took place over three months, which could have implications on the long-term applicability of certain of the findings.

Consumer Perception variable was discovered not to be normally distributed in the sample. Whereas the researchers adequately considered this by employing the Spearman Rank Correlation of the hypothesis at hand, this attribute is indicative of an underlying variability or skew in the perceived ads by the consumers in this particular sample, which may oblige interpretations in an oblique manner.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The study examined the most important role of visual literacy in shaping consumer sentiment and purchase intention with sponsored posts on the platform that is extremely powerful as an online advertising tool, Instagram. The findings will significantly contribute to the existing perspective on visual complexity in marketing on social media, particularly on short-term, interactive, and visually-intensive media platforms, i.e. Instagram. The hypotheses of the study were tested using a quantitative research method on 201 users of Instagram, and their results provided valuable suggestions to marketers and advertisers in terms of the different aspects of these relationships. The research has developed rather a considerable number of meaningful correlations. A moderate, positive correlation was developed between visual literacy and consumer attitude towards Instagram sponsored commercials. This suggests that those with greater ability to identify visual cues, dissect planning and composition, and decode persuasive tactics in commercials have more positive perceptions. The capability to decode and critically analyze visual material is essential.

Consumers with increased visual literacy had a considerably higher buying intent than those with low visual literacy. This identifies visual literacy as a major driver of consumer purchasing decision, whereby individuals better skilled at breaking down visual components are likely to report buying intent following exposure to Instagram adverts.

We found a strong positive relationship between positive consumer attitudes towards Instagram sponsored ads and purchase intention. This would imply that if consumers think positively about sponsored ads, likely because of such things as professional appearance or perceived sincerity of influencer, then their intention to buy dramatically increases.

While visual literacy had a substantial indirect effect on trust, and trust indirectly predicted purchase intent, the statistical non-significance of the indirect effect of visual literacy on purchase intent via trust was determined.

This implies that even if trust plays a role in the decision-making process of purchase intent, the underlying capacity to comprehend visuals is of fundamental importance. Among the demographic variables examined, age was the most influential moderator of the relationship between visual literacy and purchase intent. The positive influence of visual literacy on purchase intent was more pronounced with younger subjects and declined moderately with advancing age.

However, educational background or Instagram usage did not show any significant moderation effect on this association, suggesting that the effect of visual literacy on purchase intent is general across various levels of formal education and platform usage.

6.1 Recommendations for the Future Research

The given study is a good baseline, but there are a number of gaps that require additional research. To begin with, the audience reach must be extended to other highly populated and interactive platforms such as Tik Tok, YouTube, or Pinterest, in addition to Instagram. This will facilitate the existence of meaningful comparisons on the impact that visual literacy has on consumer behaviour in various digital settings. Second, it is limited to the present sample - predominantly of young people with a similar educational background, which reduces the generalizability. The future study will have to incorporate participants of different ages, education and geographical areas particularly because age was a prominent moderator in this study.

The next work should also be aimed at the trust in the platform, trust in the brand, and trust in influencers. Besides trust, other aspects like advertising relevancy, brand loyalty or authenticity are becoming more significant. The shortcomings of self-report surveys can be addressed by the use of longitudinal and behavioral methods such as eye tracking, click rates, or purchase data. Lastly, it could be interesting to find out why education and use of Instagram did not have any effect on the findings, and test particular aspects of visual design complexity, colour, or semiotic meaning.

6.2 Practical Recommendations for Marketers

The findings can also offer useful information to advertisers. The visual images produced are needed to be of high quality and of a strategic production because the consumers who are more responsive are the visually literate. The campaigns need to be designed based on age group: younger people can be served more by detailed visuals and storytelling, whereas older people can be served by more simple and straightforward designs. Ease of use in terms of transparency and clarity should be given preference to ensure that visual components give the impression of value without appearing as a tool to manipulate the audience. The various advertisement formats provided by Instagram to capture a visual storytelling can be used to capture consumers during the decision making process which will eventually develop trust and purchase intention.

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Conflict of Interest

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