We met online but we didn't click!

Design variations of sponsored posts in social media advertising: effects of text position and call to action button on persuasiveness

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Abstract

Online businesses are among the most frequent users of social media advertising (SMA) because it provides a quick and easy exposure to targeted audiences. However, the problem is that often people do not click on the posts. Previous research has shown that there is a need for a design framework for well-structured sponsored posts. The goal of this study is to explore how two design variations affect purchase intentions and attitudes towards sponsored posts. The first variation concerned the position of the advertisement text in relation to the illustration: integrated in the image, or put separately in the caption. The second variation referred to an interactive *call to action button*. It could be either absent or present, and if present, it was represented by one of three texts which expressed with increasing directness the level of action appeal: *learn more, visit website, shop now.*

The study employed a 2 (text position: *image, caption*) by 4 (call to action button: *no button, learn more, shop now, visit website*) mixed design where text position was a between-subjects factor and call to action button a within-subjects factor. The design varied two other factors systematically over participants, thus controlling for their effect: message appeal (*soft sell, hard sell*) and type of commodity (*product, service*). Participants (n=193) were exposed to Instagram sponsored posts advertising products and services from a fictitious brand. Text on image (integrated presentation) appeared to score better on attitude and purchase intentions than text in caption (separated presentation) but this effect was intensified by an interaction of text position with call to action button. The effect of text position did not depend on the spatial relation to the illustration, but rather on that to the call to action button. If the text preceded the button, it could contain an explicit, direct urge to click, but if the text followed the button, it was better to leave the button out. Finally, this paper suggests design guidelines for communication practitioners and online marketers in the field of SMA.

Keywords: social media advertising, native advertising, spatial contiguity, integrated/ separated presentation, purchase intention, ad persuasiveness, ad attitude

1. Introduction

1.1 Relevance of the study for online businesses

When the start-up agency *NL Hires*[1], based in Utrecht, first launched their social media ad campaign in 2015, they were overwhelmed by how difficult it was to attract visitors to their website. The challenge was achieving successful conversion of potential customers. They had engaging content such as job application tips, interesting candidate stories and high-profile job offers in the field of engineering. However, according to *NL Hires* management, their sponsored posts on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram delivered poor to average conversion rates and a limited number of new visitors to their website. People did not click.

Mareck (2014) argues that marketing communicators find it increasingly more difficult to get a brand message across to the customers, similarly to Holland Hires' attempt. The example above provides motivation and ground to investigate how brands can effectively design a compelling, action focused and informative social media post to entice customers to click on it and get to know more about the service.

1.2 Objective of the study

Given the difficulties online businesses face when trying to design a sponsored post on social media in terms of visual display and textual content, this paper aims to explore the main effects of a post's design elements. A literature review showed that studies discussing a universal framework for the design of sponsored posts on social media sites (SMS) are scarce. Therefore, this paper aims to add to existing research in the field of visual display design in the context of social media advertising.

More specifically, this paper investigates the effects of a call to action button and text position on ad persuasiveness (ad attitude, purchase intention and click intention) within an Instagram sponsored post. Ad persuasiveness and ad effectiveness are, thus, interchangeable concepts here. The design elements and experimental factors are further discussed in this chapter.

The following chapter discusses relevant concepts such as social media advertising (SMA), native advertising, types of message appeals in advertisements, the theory of spatial

[1] The real name of the recruiting agency was changed for the purpose of this paper.

contiguity and other design principles of visual-spatial displays. Furthermore, the experimental factors (text position and call to action button) and outcome variables (ad attitude and purchase intention) are explained and a comprehensive definition for each of them is given. Further in the paper, the methods, results and conclusion are presented to give a comprehensive description of the outcomes. Finally, the results are discussed in relation with other research within the field.

1.3 Characteristics of native advertising and social media advertising

Native advertising (NA)

Brands try various ways to engage their audience in a more natural way than done in traditional and offline advertising. With the establishment of online marketing, customers have the unique opportunity to react to the ad instantly by clicking on it and being redirected to the company's website. For that purpose, companies implement social media advertising to sell their products or services. They use *native advertising* (NA) which reflects the way paid ads are presented in a social media environment. Campbell and Marks (2015) define native advertising as in-stream marketing communication implemented into the social media newsfeed. Native advertising increases relevance for the viewers and blends within the surrounding content to avoid message disruption (Campbell & Marks, 2015). The authors examined a corpus of case studies to identify key characteristics of NA among which are (1) offering engaging and relevant content, (2) being honest about what brands are selling and (3) balancing between keeping consumers interested; enticing ad clicks or driving sales.

In addition, Manic (2015) describes NA as a new creative way for brands and promoters to engage audiences and drive revenue, e.g. blogger and vlogger endorsements. However, the author found out that there is lack of both clarification and a widely accepted conceptual and design framework to use this approach (Manic, 2015). In general, native advertising is argued to be a successful online communication tactic when it is designed to persuade the viewer in a trustworthy way (Campbell & Marks, 2015).

Social media advertising (SMA)

Native advertising is reflected more specifically in *social media advertising* (SMA) as it refers to social media sites where native advertising is best suited. According to Alhabash, Mundel and Hussain (2017) SMA can be defined as any piece of online content published with the goal

to persuade or enable users to click, share and engage with the content. There are three types of SMA advertisements – sponsored, owned (organic) and earned (Hurrle & Postatny, 2015). Sponsored ads are particularly of interest to the purpose of this study. They are offered by social media sites (SMS) such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter where brands pay to have their content exposed to target consumers.

The main effects of SMA are characterized as incidental effects, engagement effects and user-generated content (UGC) effects (Alhabash et al. 2017). Incidental effects refer to the time or amount of exposure cycles viewers are exposed to a sponsored post whilst scrolling through their organic newsfeed. Sponsored posts are found to get primarily incidental exposure due to the clutter of news and information (Phan & Vanhuele, 1997). However, a study by Alhabash, McAlister, Kim, Lou, Cunningham, Quilliam and Richards (2016) shows that despite the brief exposure, SMA sponsored posts do not pass unnoticed and can strongly influence brand attitude, recall and purchase intentions. A study by Lin and (2008) on the effects of ad types in online advertising also revealed that exposure times have an impact on the effectiveness of ads. Engagement effects are the second characteristic of SMA and research reveals a relationship between the behavioural intentions to like, comment and share on the one hand and the attitudes towards the ad on the other. Engaging with the SMA content means that users are willing to click and to be introduced to the brand or product, either in the same or a different online platform. The engagement effects are indicators of behavioural change in intentions and are considered a strong pointer for actual behaviour (Alhabash et al. 2017). Thirdly, the UGC effects represent user-generated content related to a brand or product and service that viewers engage with online. All the effects explained above characterize the function and opportunities of SMA and how it can facilitate behavioural change in purchase intentions.

Apart from SMA, definitions for various SMA representations are given by the Cambridge Business English Dictionary. An *advertisement* can be defined as "a picture, short film, or a piece of text that is used to persuade people to buy a product or a service". However, in the context of SMA a more appropriate term is a *display ad*: "a colourful ad that is designed to attract attention". In terms of the abovementioned engagement effects of SMA, an important characteristic of a display ad is interactivity. Users must understand that the display is in some way interactive and that function is explicitly shown, e.g. to like, share or click (Kukka, Oja, Kostakos, Goncalves & Ojala, 2013).

In addition, displayed ads in SMA in the form of sponsored posts fall under the category of *interactive marketing*. Interactive marketing can be defined as a method of online marketing

where viewers are shown products and services on their social media platforms based on previous Internet search. Barwise and Farley (2005) found that 48 percent of the companies they studied used paid web advertisements, including sponsored search engine searches. In general, the advantages of SMA and display ads drive marketing communication professionals to continuously use them within an integrated communication strategy.

1.4 Text and text position in visual displays

The previous paragraphs discussed the characteristics of SMA in terms of persuasiveness and effectiveness. The following part illustrates some of the principles of ads regarding visuals and text, and how they can affect attitudes towards the ad, recall and persuasiveness. Offline and online advertisements include both textual and visual representations. Previous research has established that verbal rhetorical figures and visual imagery in advertising are linked together within a common framework of "mode of representation" and "visual scenarios" (Gkiozepas & Hogg, 2011).

In a broader sense, those visual scenarios are also present in other communication mediums such as comics. Particularly in learning, comics can be a powerful teaching tool because the combination of visual images and words facilitates the development of students' visual literacy (Mayer, 1989). This outcome is reflected in the *multimedia effect* which is defined as the result of learning with words and images instead of text only (Mayer, 2002). In addition, visual images and text reinforce each other when integrated within the same comic strip or advertisement. A study on semantic structures in a sequence of comics by Cohn (2010) showed that images do not carry the same meaning without the text around them and interpretations may vary depending on the narrative. The cognitive theory of multimedia learning also argues that learners perform higher when exposed to text-and-image presentations (Mayer, 2002).

In these examples the combination between text and image is discussed in the context of learning and comics, however, this paper is more interested in exploring the effects of text and image in SMA advertisements on ad persuasiveness. Contrary to the arguments discussed above, there are occasions when both modes of representation yield unexpected attitudes towards the ad. Scott (1994) revealed that viewers can make inferences about the product or service based on the image only without any relevant information provided. In addition, those ads were as positively evaluated as the ones that included both image and copy text.

Theory of Spatial Contiguity

Having established the importance of verbal and imagery representations in advertisements and other communication mediums, the discussion continuous with the cognitive processing of text and images and more specifically, the text position surrounding the image. Previous literature has emphasized the importance of text placement and how it influences the multimedia effect (Mayer, 2002).

The text can be positioned within the same frame of the image and object or in a different frame, to signify that this piece of text corresponds to the image; and it also serves instructional purposes (Mayer, 1989). This factor refers to the principle of *spatial contiguity* which has been previously researched in the context of multimedia learning, systematic thinking and reading of information (Mayer, 1989; Holsanova, Holmberg & Holmqvist, 2008). The spatial contiguity effect occurs when the information is identical for picture and text but shown either in a separated presentation or in an integrated presentation (see Figure 1). A study on information graphics and bottom-up understanding of spatial layouts found that integrated visual formats are more likely to attract viewers' initial attention and sustain their interest, than separated formats (Holsanova et al., 2008). This is the case because readers treat the separated format as two independent presentations of (1) text and (2) illustration and interpret them as two information sources. This does not facilitate memory offload, reading time and comprehension. It also takes more time to process than an integrated presentation where text and illustration are positioned near each other.

The outcomes of studies on separate and integrated presentations also correspond to the central tenet of the dual-coding theory: the dual-channel assumption. The dual-coding theory defined by Pavio (1971) states that there are two ways people could expand on learned material: verbal associations and visual imagery. According to this theory, both visual and verbal information is used to represent information. The two types of information are processed differently and in different parts of the brain, which creates two separate representations (codes) of the information. The two mental codes can be used when recalling information: when asked to recall the information/stimulus, a person can retrieve either the words or the image individually, or both at the same time. The ability to code information in two ways increases the chance of recall, compared to information that was only coded in one way (visual or textual). It increases the capacity of the working memory when more than one modality (verbal and visual) is present (Mayer, 2001).

In two experiments comparing integrated and separated presentations (Mayer, 1989; Moreno & Mayer, 1999) the authors found that in five out of five occasions integrated

presentation yielded a better performance in comprehension and learning than separated presentation which is also aligned with the cognitive theory of multimedia effects. This outcome is based on the principle of spatial contiguity and shows that students learned better when the text and image were placed physically closer rather than far from each other on the page or frame (Mayer, 2002). According to the cognitive theory of multimedia learning an integrated presentation facilitates working memory offload better than a separated presentation of image and text.

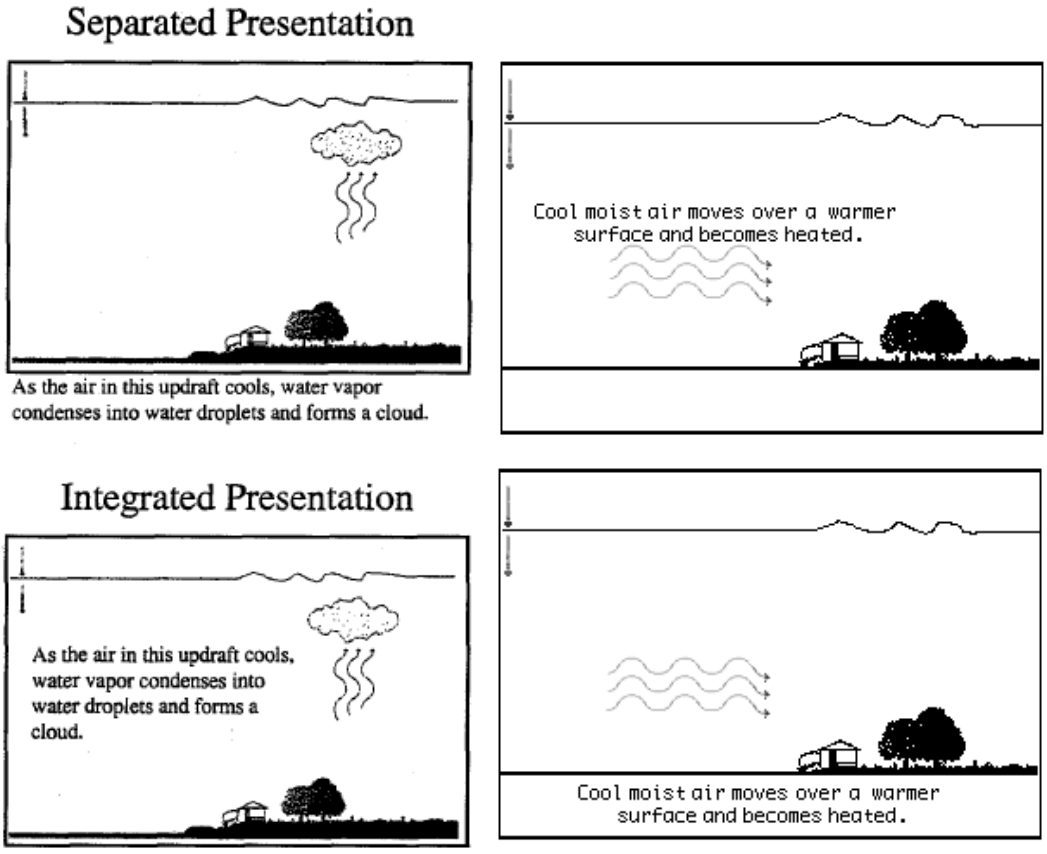


Figure 1. Selected frames of separated and integrated presentations and adapted from previous experiments on students' learning and cognition (Moreno & Mayer, 1999; 2000)

Principle of proximity

An integrated format is also related to the Gestalt[2] principle of proximity, associated with Gestalt psychology of object perception. Grouping objects by proximity creates the abstract

[2] *Gestalt (German) – shape, form, figure.* The Gestalt psychology emerged in the 20th century and aimed to explain the laws of human perception within a world of self-organizing objects and phenomena.

meaning that things are conceptually closer and associated with each other (Tsversky, 2011). The principle of proximity states that objects that are located close to each other are perceived as being associated and belonging to one group (Wertheimer, 1923). This law of perceptual organization can also be referred to as the spatial contiguity principle: when interpreted as one object, the text and image in an ad will be more likely to attract and maintain readers' attention.

Online environment

In terms of text position in SMS (e.g., Instagram), an integrated format refers to texts positioned on the image of the post, whereas a separated format applies for texts written in the caption of the social media post (see Chapter 2, Frame 1).

1.5 Visual signals to entice interaction: call to action buttons

Apart from text position in display ads, the second design factor that concerns the current study is the call to action button. The button has become a popular element in the design of sponsored posts to help consumers navigate directly to a brand's website or online platform. According to Kukka, Oja, Kostakos, Goncalves & Ojala, 2013, the call to action button is relevant in the field of marketing communication because it conveys a valuable action to the consumer. The authors investigated how different types of visual elements and visual signals enticed interaction on public ad displays. They found out that the most effective visual signal to yield the highest number of clicks was coloured animated text "touch me".

Call to action buttons are also part of the characteristic of web banners and pop-ups. A study on click through rates of banner ads analysed different banner parameters such as size, colour, animation length, exposure time and keywords, and found that the design must be user-oriented and based on set of components for designing optimized banners (Hai, Zhao & Nagurney, 2010). Furthermore, the analysis included some of the more popular keywords that make users click: *sale, holiday, 20 % off.* Another study on the form and content of banners offers a more comprehensive definition of the keywords used on call to action buttons. An analysis of over 300 banner ads showed that the imperative and exclamatory tone of voice is the most widely used because it urges and incites customers to click (Alaman, 2003). For example, the author found that words such as *click here* and *go*! emphasize even more the need for action.

For this experiment, the choice of the button texts is motivated by their pragmatic dimensions. The way the button texts are understood and realized is not the same for each

button because the words imply different intentions and actions, as suggested in the previous paragraph. In addition, the wording is based on existing call to action buttons in social media sponsored posts. *Learn more* offers a general invitation to explore potentially relevant for the consumer information; *visit website* is a more concrete proposition and points to an action that benefits the consumer in some way; *shop now* is the most intrusive and direct one which implies the strongest intentions, to purchase a product or service. All three textual representations belong to a persuasion curve of intentions where consumers are invited to: (1) get more information, (2) get to know the brand/product, and (3) purchase the product.

All the characteristics of a call to action button and the context it is being applied to show the relevance of this design element on a sponsored post. To summarize, the button is a visual signal to entice interaction and serves as a navigation tool from one channel to another.

1.6 Controls: message appeals and type of commodity

Having discussed the main experimental design factors that constitute an SMA sponsored post, the next paragraphs explain the definition and role of message appeal and type of commodity as control variables. It is controlled for appeal and commodity by means of experimental design where they are equally distributed in all conditions (see Chapter 2) to ensure external validity. Effects of message appeal and commodity on persuasiveness are not evaluated in the analysis, but because they are included in each condition as controls, the findings can be generalized to the field of SMA and advertising.

1.6.1 Message appeal

Information processing concepts and the relationship between customers and advertisements have received considerable attention in consumer behavior research (Puto & Wells, 1984). How people perceive information can vastly depend on the advertising strategy. One advertising strategy is to communicate a message with a certain appeal with the goal to affect consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions. Message appeals are applied depending on cultural perception and product type. Previous studies show that these message appeals have an impact on ad attitude and purchase intention (Okazaki, Mueller & Taylor, 2010). Therefore, they are considered possible moderators on the relationship between the design elements and ad persuasiveness. The appeals can be categorized in two ways: appeals that are grounded on information and reason, and those that are based on emotion and intrinsic experience.

Information versus Emotion in advertising

Okazaki et al. (2010) found that message appeal concepts such as transformational/ informational or rational/ emotional have similar characteristics as soft/ hard sell. To begin with, definitions of these concepts are further given in this part to provide a deeper understanding of the construct of soft versus hard sell.

The translation of informational and experiential elements to consumers is achieved through the application of rational and emotional message strategies. The rational appeal emphasizes the rational thinking process which enables consumers to realize the functional properties of a product or a service; whereas emotional appeals "target the psychological, social and symbolic needs" (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008; Leonidou & Leonidou, 2009). A study on emotional versus rational appeals in newspaper advertising showed that rational appeals are used in ads to focus on tangible and traceable benefits such as quality or physical features (Leonidou & Leonidou, 2009). On the other hand, the emotional appeals were found in ads which provoked challenges and curiosity (Leonidou & Leonidou, 2009).

Transformational and informational ads share similar characteristics with rational and emotional appeals. An informational ad shows factual and verifiable information that describes the merits of the advertised product or service (Puto & Wells, 1984; Laskey, Seaton & Nicholls, 1994) and provides meaningful facts to the consumer (Cutler, Thomas & Rao, 2000). A transformational appeal associates the experience using the advertised product or service with a different set of psychological characteristics that we would not normally attribute to a product or service (Puto & Wells, 1984). The transformational approach has a psychological element to it because it attempts to trigger an emotional appeal within the consumer (Laskey et al., 1994, Cutler et al., 2000).

Hard sell and Soft sell

The essence of informational/transformational and rational/emotional message strategies is fully captured by the more general juxtaposition of hard versus soft sell appeals. Soft sell is an abstract, indirect advertising approach to convey an atmosphere of human sentiment through a story (Mueller, 1987). The focus of hard sell is direct selling, instead of sharing an emotion or experience. Hard sell ads show product name, product features or a competitive advantage over other products (Mueller, 1987). Christian, Zdenek and Lucie (2014) define soft sell as entertaining, visually-oriented, emotional and abstract, and hard sell is described as concrete, feature-centered, instructive and informative.

In another study exploring the application of message appeals in Japanese and U.S. advertisements, Okazaki et al. (2010) attribute specific characteristics to soft sell: *feeling* (e.g. imaginative), *implicitness* (e.g. appealing) and *image* (e.g. entertaining). Hard sell is defined by *thinking* (e.g. rational), *explicitness* (e.g. persuasion) and *fact* (e.g. informative). The authors found that although differences were not very large, soft sell scored higher on believability and irritation. In addition, Muleller (1987) showed that soft sell was used four times more often than hard sell in Japanese advertisements, for example. As mentioned previously, the message appeals depend on the cultural specifications but this paper does not take this aspect into consideration.

1.6.2 Commodity

Products and services are conceptually different in terms of promotion, marketing and advertising. A study by Abernethy and Butler (1992) analyzed advertising strategies applied to two types of commodity – a product or a service. They found that both products and services have different effects on ad persuasiveness and purchase intention. In addition, they revealed that service ads contain less information than product ads, particularly due to lack of explicit mention of price, components and availability information. Product ads on the other hand, contain more tangible information about product components, price and performance/quality.

1.7 Intended effects: attitudes and intentions

Types of responses in persuasion

This study explores how design variations affect ad persuasiveness in terms of attitudes towards the ad and purchase intentions. To begin with, attitudes present "an evaluative integration of cognition and affects" concerning an object (Crano & Prislin, 2006). These attitudes indicate a certain cognitive response, for example, towards a display ad, and have implications for attitude-behavior consistency and change (Holland, Meertens & Vugt 2002).

Greenwald (1968) defines the basis of cognitive reactions to persuasion. The author discusses persuasive communication effectiveness in the context of cognitive reactions theory and learning theory. Based on previous literature, there are four types of responses in persuasive communication that indicate an effect: cognitive, affective, evaluative and persuasive responses. Cognitive responses can be based on the respondent's own knowledge, on the message contents or other factors unrelated to communication (Breckler & Wiggins, 1991). The affective response refers to the motivational and emotional effects triggered by an

attitude object, whereas evaluative responses refer to thoughts, beliefs and judgements about an object (Breckler & Wiggins, 1991). The authors found that the initial response to persuasive communication is the affective one, and there is a positive correlation between cognitive responses and post-communication attitude change. Finally, the persuasive effects occur when respondents can reject or accept the persuasion by relating the new information to existing attitudes, beliefs, emotions (Greenwald, 1968; Harmon & Coney, 1982).

Intended behavior

Crano and Prislin (2006) suggest that attitudes guide behavior through deliberate or automatic intentions. In addition, Gollwizer (1999) described a way to reveal realistic intentions by developing a so-called "plan for engaging in intended behavior". The author refers to this model as *implementation intentions* where people make decisions about behavioral change in advance, for instance, in respect to purchase intentions.

Attitude toward the ad

Attitudes toward the ad can be understood through the abovementioned cognitive responses (McKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Consumers view an ad and translate their perceptions into affective, evaluative, cognitive or persuasive effects. An attitude towards the ad is defined as a "predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertisement during a particular exposure occasion" (Lutz, 1985; McKenzie & Lutz, 1989). A popular attitude measurement is the semantic differential scale *good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant* and *favorable/unfavorable*. However, in this study a more elaborate measurement scale is chosen to evaluate the design factors in a sponsored SMA post and it contains the following ad appreciations: *informative, appealing, well-ordered, and easy to read*.

Purchase intentions

Purchase intentions are defined as a consumer's intention or interest to buy the product or service. In the context of SMA and e-commerce, online purchase rates of products and services are higher among consumers with more positive intentions to buy (Shaouf, Lü & Li, 2016). Spears and Singh (2014) define purchase intentions as "an individual's conscious plan to make an effort to purchase a brand".

1.8 Research questions and hypotheses

Based on the discussion in the previous sections four research questions have been formulated (Fig. 2).

RQ1: Are the texts on *a call to action* button appreciated differently?
RQ2: Does text position (*on image, in caption*) affect ad attitude and purchase intention?
RQ3: Does the presence of a *call to action* button affect ad attitude and purchase intentions?
RQ4: Does the specific text in a *call to action* button (*learn more, visit website, shop now*) affect ad attitude and purchase intention?

The study is for the larger part an exploratory one. Only for the third research question a specific hypothesis has been formulated.

H1: Ads with a *call to action* button have a more positive effect on ad attitude and purchase intention than ads with no button.

Figure 2 depicts the conceptual model graphically. It specifies the relations between the experimental and control factors and the outcome variables.

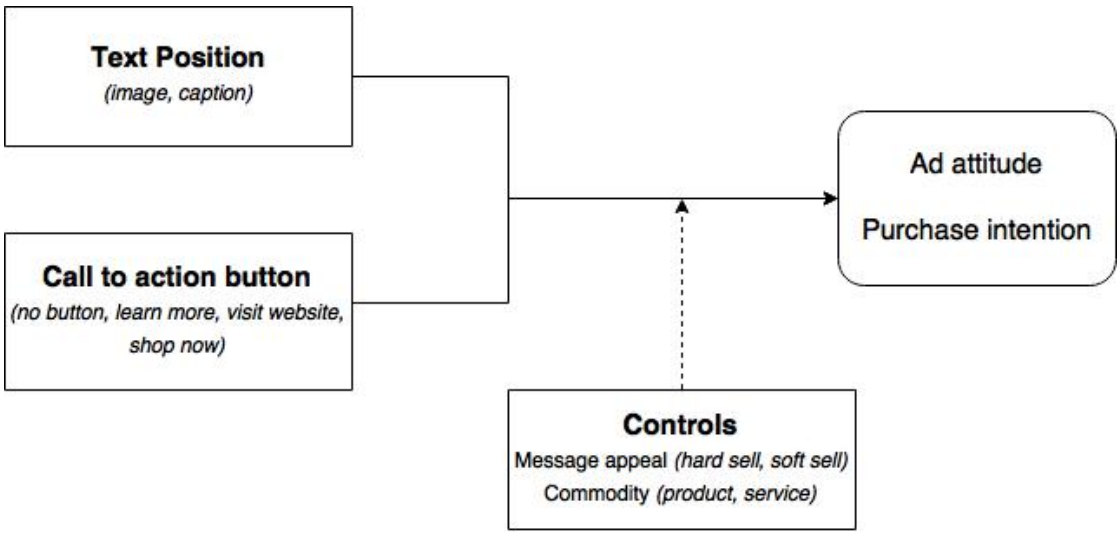


Figure 2. *Conceptual model underlying the experimental study*

2. Method

2.1 Design of the study

The design of the experiment employs a 2 (text position: *on image, in caption*) by 4 (call to action button: no button, *visit website, learn more, shop now*) mixed subjects design with two control variables: message appeal (*hard, soft*) and type of commodity (*product, service*). Text position is a between subject factor, and call to action button, message appeal and commodity are within subject factors. Dependent measures include attitude towards ad and purchase intention.

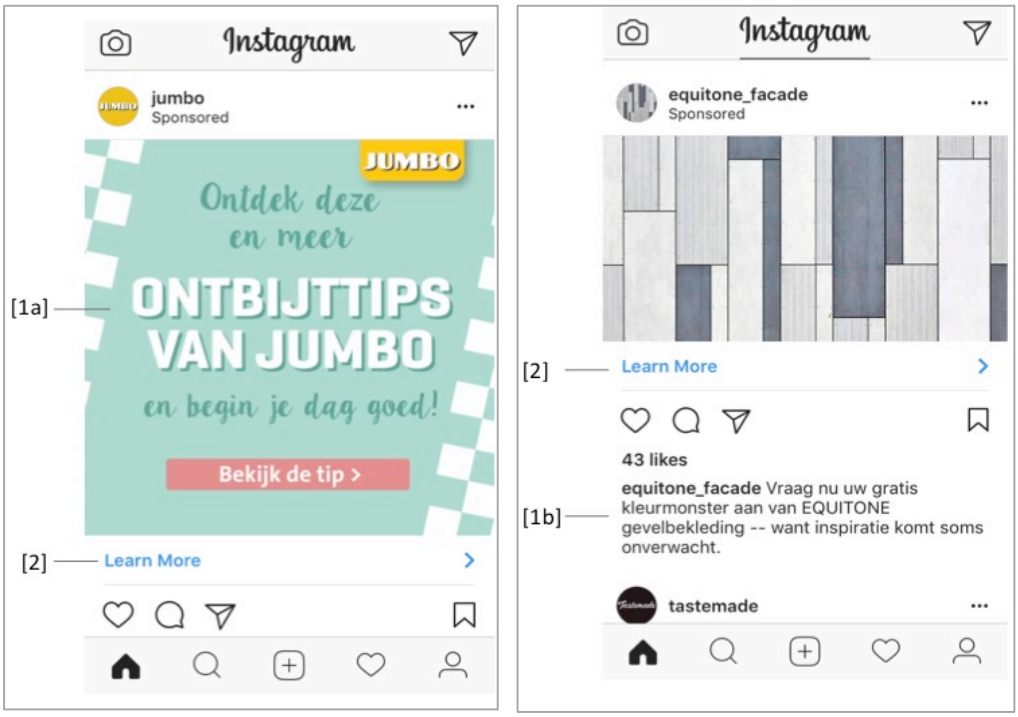
2.2 Materials

Materials are created specifically for this experiment, using photo-editing software. The store "Mobile Arena", its logo and its presence on Instagram are fictitious. The experimental and control factors are described below.

2.2.1 Origin of material

The experimental materials were modelled after examples of real Instagram paid ads. The examples differ with regard to text position and presence of a call to action button. In Frame 1 the left ad (Jumbo) has the text positioned on the image, whereas in the right ad (Equitone Facade) the text is placed in the caption. Both examples include a call to action button (*learn more*).

Frame 1 Two examples of an Instagram sponsored advertisement ([1a] refers to text on image; [1b] to text in caption; [2] to call to action button)

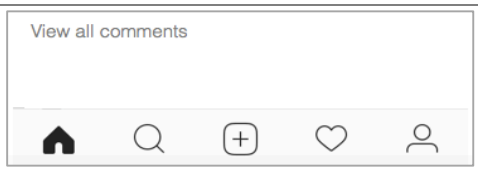


2.2.2 Design of the experimental material

Frame 2 illustrates the building blocks of an Instagram sponsored post. The common elements that both product and service ads share are a header with the Instagram logo, company logo and user name, a "likes" block and a footer to navigate users through the application. The manipulated elements are *photo*, *call to action button* and *caption*.

Frame 2 Basic structure of an Instagram sponsored post

Header	Instagram
Logo and user name	mobile_arena Sponsored
	Photo
	Call to action button
Likes	43 likes
	Caption

Footer	

2.2.3 Experimental variations

To design the experimental texts versions, content choices regarding type of commodity and message appeal were made. Both factors are included as control factors. These factors were systematically varied in combination with text position and call to action button. This method added to the generalizability of the results.

Message appeal

Message appeal had two levels - hard and soft sell. The hard sell approach was presented in the form of technical parameters associated with the product or service. The soft sell text did not mention any technical specifications, but rather provided a more abstract picture of the attributes and merits of the product or service. Table 1 shows how the message appeals were constructed for both hard sell and soft sell.

Table 1 For both products and their sub-categories the content of the message appeals

		Hard-sell	Soft-sell
Product	Camera specifications	19 MP camera and LED flash	Capture moments with a lens as good as your eyes.
	Memory specifications	64 GB internal memory and 4 RAM	A personal assistant to store all your memories.
Service	Speed internet	10 GB mobile internet at 225 MB/s speed in 4G	Be super fast - fly with the new network.
	Internet + calls	12 GB Internet + 100 min international calls in 4G	Stay in touch with your loved ones all around the world.

Type of commodity

Type of the commodity has two levels: *product* and *service*. Products were divided into two sub-categories: camera specifications of a phone and memory storage; and the service was categorized as internet speed and international calls. In the statistical analyses, the two product

categories were considered equivalent and taken as one product. The same goes for the two service categories.

Text position

Text was positioned either on the image of the Instagram post or in the caption below the picture. The text in both conditions (on image, in caption) was informationally equivalent for each product or service. The font, size and length of the sentences were also identical. The text position on the image refers to an integrated visual presentation, whereas the text in the caption refers to a separated visual presentation.

Frame 3 Experimental variations: text on image

3a	
3b	

Frame 4 Experimental variations: text in caption

4a	**mobile_arena** Capture moments with a lens as good as your eyes **mobile_arena** 64 GB internal memory and 4 GB RAM **mobile_arena** Be super fast – fly with the new network **mobile_arena** 12 GB Internet + 100 international calls in 4G

4b	**mobile_arena** 19 MP rear camera and LED flash **mobile_arena** A personal assistant to store all your memories **mobile_arena** 10 GB mobile internet at 225 MB/s speed at 4G **mobile_arena** Stay in touch with your loved ones all around the world

Call to action button and button text

Four types of call to action buttons were used as experimental design factors: no button, "visit website", "learn more" and "shop now" (Fig 3).

Figure 3. Call to action buttons

2.3 Instruments

Demographics

Respondents were asked for their age, gender, level of education and nationality (see (1)). Level of English skills was assessed with three items on a 7-point *disagree/agree* scale (see (2)).

(1) What is your age?
What is your gender?
What is your nationality?
What is the highest level of education you have completed?

(2) I am fluent in speaking/ reading English
I need subtitles when watching English movies

Online preferences

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they used social media platforms (see (3)). They scored frequency in terms of *never, sometimes* or *regularly*.

(3) I use Facebook/ Instagram/ Linked In

Attitude towards ad

The attitude towards the ad was measured with four items with responses on a 7-point *disagree/agree* scale (see (4)).

(4) This post is informative/ attractive/ well-ordered/ easy to read

Purchase intention

Purchase intention was measured with 4 items on a 7-point *disagree/agree* scale (see (5)). Items ranged from rather informal to far more obliging, from *feel invited* to *would like to have*.

(5) I feel invited to click for further information
I would like to have more information
If I had the chance, I would try this product
If I need it, I would like to have this product

Order task: preference for specific call to action buttons

Respondents were asked to order the three call to action buttons according to their preference: 1 = "most inviting to click", 3 = "least inviting to click" (see (6)).

(6) Shop now/ Learn more / Visit website

2.4 Sample description

In total 252 persons started the online experiment but eventually 59 dropped out of it. The final number of participants who completed this experiment, was 193, 141 women (73.1 %) and 52 men (26.9 %). Their age ranged from 17 to 63 years (M=26.6, SD=6.79). The sample consisted of 69 native Bulgarians (35.8 %), 55 native Dutch (28.5 %) and 69 persons born elsewhere, for example, USA, Canada, Aruba, Spain, Russia, Portugal, and Germany (35.8 %).

The highest level of education that participants had completed prior to taking the survey was bachelor degree (60.1 %), followed by master's degree (25.4 %), high school graduates (14.0 %) and primary education (0.5 %).

Table 2 presents from three perspectives the self-attributed proficiency in English in relation with Nationality. The scores did not show an effect of Nationality (F(1,190)=1.63, p=.22).

Table 2 Proficiency in English in relation with Nationality (scores range from 1 to 7, standard deviation between brackets)

	Bulgarian (n=69)	Dutch (n=55)	Others (n=69)
I am fluent in speaking English	6.10 (1.32)	5.91 (0.95)	6.43 (1.11)
I am fluent in reading English	6.36 (0.97)	6.33 (0.69)	6.55 (0.95)
I need subtitles when I watch movies in English	2.26 (1.87)	2.38 (1.11)	2.25 (1.84)

Participants' online behaviour and social media preferences were also evaluated. 178 (92.2 %) used Facebook regularly, 138 (71.5 %) did so with Instagram; LinkedIn was used far less often; the majority (n=104, 53.9 %) used LinkedIn 'sometimes'.

2.5 Procedure

The survey was distributed on social media via Facebook and Instagram. The survey was open to respondents of all age groups and nationalities. Before conducting the experiment, participants were introduced to the aim and topic of the study. After that, they were asked to fill in their age, gender, and nationality and to give a self-assessment of their English language skills. The following introduction text presented them with a scenario and asked them to imagine they were the new social media manager for a fictitious telecommunications provider called Mobile Arena.

Participants were exposed to four trials containing four Instagram sponsored ads. Each participant could only be exposed to posts where text was positioned according to only one of the conditions: either on the image or in the caption (see frames 3 and 4).

Each respondent was presented four posts – two of a product and two of a service (see frames 3a and 3b; 4a and 4b). In addition, two posts were written with hard sell and two posts were written with soft sell message appeal. All four 'call to action' buttons were systematically varied in combination with the message appeal and type of commodity, so participants could see all four types of buttons. After a series of 16 respondents, all methodological possibilities were exhausted and the survey assigned the trials randomly again.

Each post was shown for six seconds to make exposure ecologically valid (i.e., when users scroll through social media, they are exposed to a post for a limited time). Then respondents were automatically redirected to the questions following up the experimental material. After the four trials have passed, participants were asked to rank the call to action buttons from "most inviting" to "least inviting".

At the end of the survey respondents were asked to indicate how often they use the social media platforms Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.

2.6 Statistical analyses

Descriptive statistics were performed to give more information about the sample (age, nationality, English skills).

Friedman's test was used to check the three call to action buttons (visit website, learn more, shop now) for systematic differences in terms of preference.

In addition, to measure ad attitude and purchase intentions, a repeated measures ANOVA test was used. Each aspect of attitude towards the ad (*informative, appealing, well ordered, easy to read*) and each aspect of purchase intentions (*invited to click, have more information, try this product, have this product*) was evaluated separately with a mixed design repeated measures ANOVA where call to action button (*no button, learn more, visit website, shop now*) was entered as the within-factor, and text position (*in caption, on image*) as the between-factor was. If an effect turned out to be statistically significant, pairwise comparisons were made using the Bonferroni criterion.

3. Results

This chapter presents the results of this experiment. To begin with, the outcomes from the ordering task are presented to show what participants prefer in terms of the call to action buttons. Then results are presented for the main experimental design factors – text position and call to action button; how do they affect attitudes towards the ad and purchase intentions?

3.1 Preference for call to action button

The *call to action buttons* were not equally preferred, χ^2 (2) = 100.64, p <.001. Most inviting to click on was the button *learn more* (M=1.52, SD=.71); a bit less inviting was *visit website* (M=1.94, SD=.73); least inviting was *shop now* (M=2.54, SD=.68). These results show that button texts with an intrusive and imperative tone of voice are less preferred in a social media advertisement than indirect and subtly inviting texts. However, since respondents were asked to evaluate their choice outside of the context of social media site, their preference is not interpreted as effectiveness of the text on the buttons. Yet, these results are indicative of potential differences between the call to action buttons. Given this outcome, further relevant effects of text position and call to action button on persuasiveness, as well as their interaction effects, are evaluated and described.

3.2 Effects of text position and call to action button on attitude towards the ad and purchase intentions

3.2.1 Effects on attitude towards the ad

Table 3 presents the ad appreciations in relation with text position and call to action button. *Informative* showed an effect of text position (F(1,191)=4.30, p=.04, η^2=.022; all other aspects: F<1.48, p>.23) and of call to action button (F(3,573)=3.08, p=.03, η^2=. 016; all other F's<1.34, p's>.26) as well as an interaction between both factors (F(2,663)= 14.126, p<.001, η^2=. 069; all other aspects: F's<2.29, p>.07).

To analyse this interaction, split analysis was conducted. Figure 4 depicts the interaction. There was an effect of call to action button for both text positions: text on image (F(2,568)=8.49, p<.001, η^2=.086) and text in caption (F(2,638)=6.98, p<.001, η^2=.065). But as the visualization of the interaction shows, differences go in completely different directions.

The differences follow clearly from the pairwise comparisons. When text was positioned on the image, *visit website* (*M*=4.57) scored higher than *learn more* (*M*=4.01, *p*=.04) and *no button* (*M*=3.64, *p*<.001); *shop now* (*M*=4.57) scored higher than *no button* (*M*=3.64, *p*<.001). When text was positioned in the caption, *shop now* (*M*=3.34) scored lower than *learn more* (*M*= 4.19, *p*<.001), *visit website* (*M*= 3.78, *p*=.02) and *no button* (*M*= 4.16, *p*<.001).

Table 3 Ad appreciations in relation with *text position* and *call to action button* (score ranges from 1 to 7)

	Text position		Call to action button			
	Image	Caption	No button	Learn more	Visit website	Shop now
Informative	4.20	3.87	3.90	4.10	4.17	3.96
Attractive	4.04	3.84	3.99	3.89	4.00	3.89
Well ordered	4.23	4.13	4.11	4.20	4.19	4.22
Easy to read	4.99	5.04	4.98	4.83	5.15	5.11

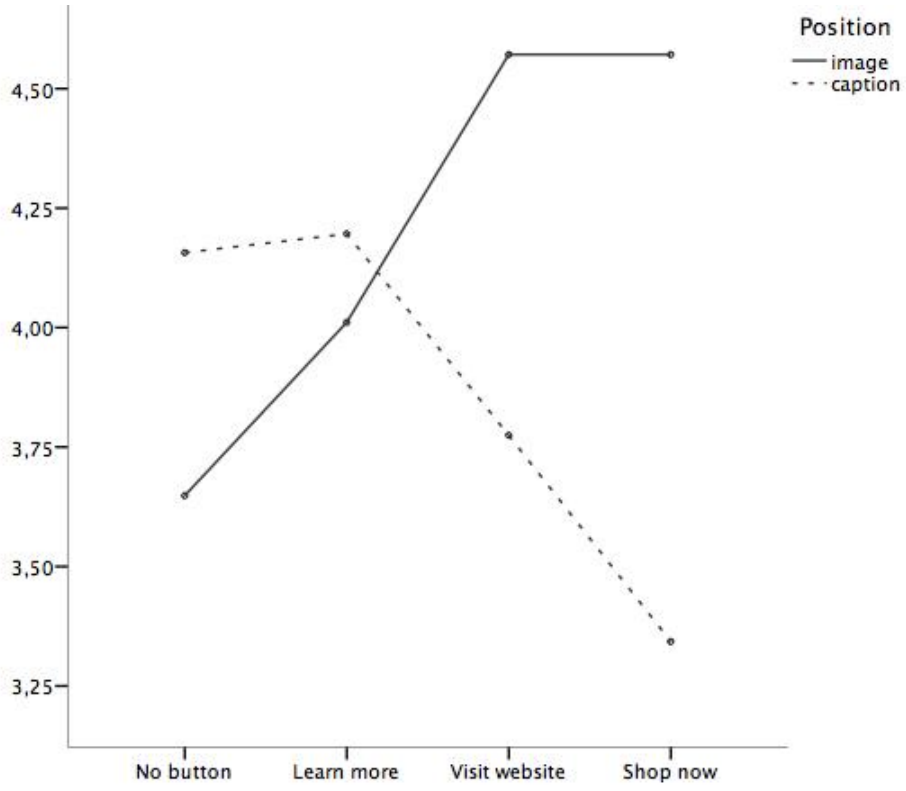


Figure 4. For 'informative' the interaction between text position and type of button

3.2.2 Effects on purchase intentions

Table 4 presents the scores for purchase intentions in relation with text position and call to action button. There were no main effects of text position (all F's<1.78, p>.18) and call to action button (all F's< 1.01, p>.39) on purchase intentions. *"I feel invited to click"* showed an interaction between text position and call to action button (F(3,573)=4.16, p=.006, η^2=.021; all other aspects: F<1.78, p>.15).

To further analyse the interaction, split analysis was conducted. Figure 5 presents this interaction graphically. Split analysis for text position showed that the effect of call to action button had to be attributed to text on image (F(3, 270)= 3.22, p=.023, η^2=.035; text on caption: F(3,303)=1.38, p=.25). Pairwise comparisons for text on image showed that *visit website* (M=4.01) scored higher than no button (M=3.62, p=.009) and *learn more* (M=3.87, p=.028), and that *shop now* (M=3.86) scored higher than no button (M=3.62, p=.034).

Table 4 Purchase intentions in relation to *text position* and *call to action button* (scores ranges from 1 to 7)

	Text position		Call to action button			
	Image	Caption	No button	Learn more	Visit website	Shop now
Invited to click	3.88	3.66	3.65	3.76	3.82	3.85
Have more information	4.36	4.33	4.39	4.23	4.44	4.32
Try this product	4.09	3.92	4.02	4.03	4.09	3.89
Have this product	4.19	4.12	4.18	4.12	4.19	4.11

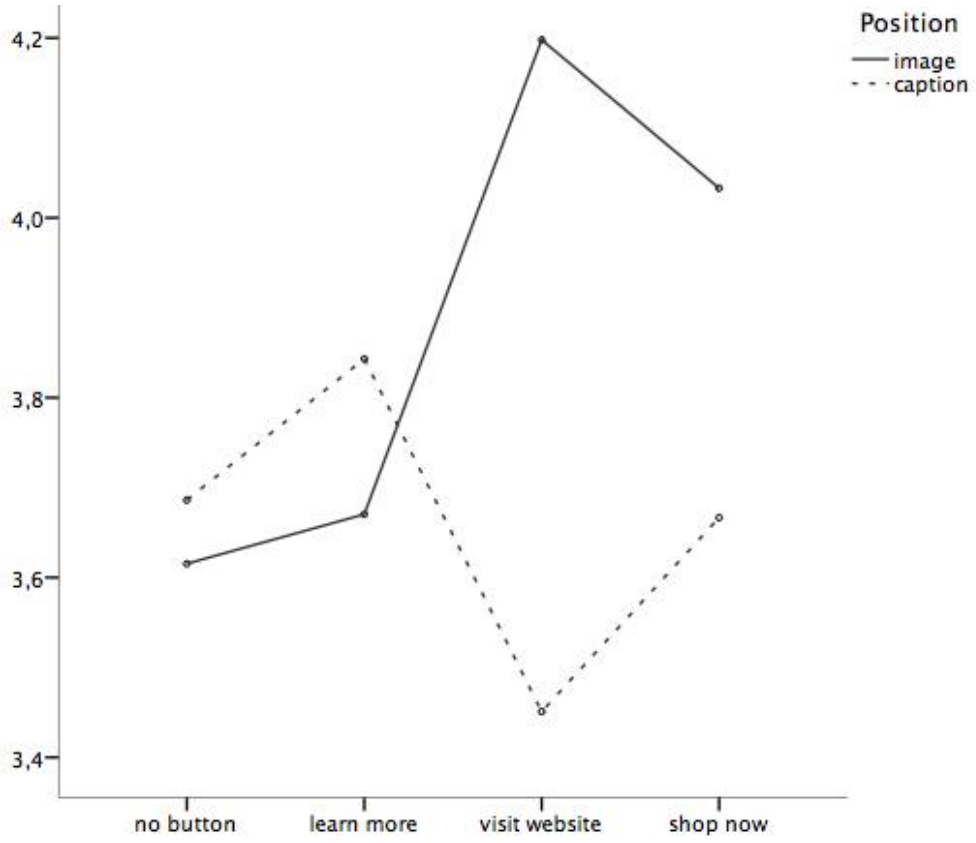


Figure 5. For 'I feel invited to click' the interaction between text position and call to action button

After having presented the main results, the following chapter lays out all conclusions and discusses possible reasons behind the outcomes.

4. Discussion

4.1 Conclusions

This study focuses on the design of SMA posts and more specifically, on the use and application of text position and call to action buttons in sponsored posts. The online experiment tested how participants react towards different design variations in terms of their attitude towards the ad and purchase intentions.

According to the findings, people have different preferences for the call to action buttons depending on the button text. The ordering task showed that participants were more likely to click on a post with *learn more* and *visit website* than *shop now*. In other words, the less intrusive the text on the button, the more preferred the button was.

Generally, people found the sponsored posts more informative and more inviting to click based on the interaction between text position and the call to action button. These interaction effects concerned one aspect of the attitude towards the ad (*the extent to which people found the post informative*) and one of the purchase intentions (*the extent to which people felt invited to click on the post*). Furthermore, the effects of the call to action buttons went in different directions for text on image and text in caption. Integrated presentation (text on image) scored higher for *visit website*, *shop now* and *learn more* compared to *no button*. In the latter case, it was better to have a separated presentation (text in caption). The only hypothesis was supported: having a button results in more positive ad attitudes and purchase intentions than having *no button* at all.

From the abovementioned summary of findings, two main insights can be derived:

1) the position of the ad text depends on the position of the call to action button. Their interaction is what makes a sponsored post effective. Text position has more effect on attitude and purchase intention especially when combined with the position and text of the call to action button (Fig. 6). Particularly, people have higher ad appreciations and purchase intentions if they are presented the text first (text on image) and then the action (call to action button *shop now, visit website or learn more*);

2) a second conclusion relates to the preferences for buttons. Since the analysis of the experimental results showed different scores for all three call to action buttons, it can be concluded that appreciation for a certain button is not predictive of its effectiveness.

Following the conclusive argument from 1), call to action buttons are effective in persuading consumers to click only if presented in combination with text position and not in isolated circumstances.

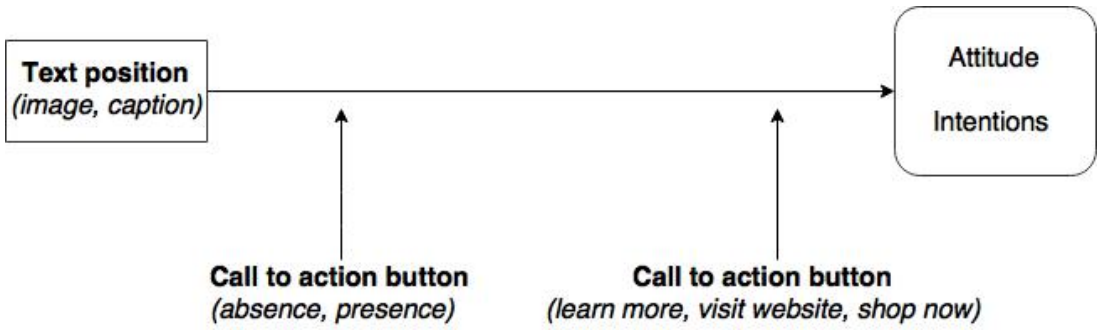


Figure 6. Conceptual model according to results

4.2 Visual and verbal rhetoric in the context of advertising and persuasion

The study is relevant not only for online businesses that want to advertise on social media sites but also for the general field of design in advertising. The design of visual displays in advertisements is initially what attracts and sustains attention. The combination between pictorial and text are key ad elements which capture and transfer the attention of consumers. The *text* comprises all textual representation and the *pictorial* element is all non-verbal visual cues. However, in most cases, due to capacity limitations consumers usually focus on one of the elements while the other two attain less of the attention. In terms of display ads, printed ads or sponsored posts the challenge of sustaining consumers' attention is one that has been focused on in previous marketing and psychology research. In a fast-paced online environment such as SMS's like Facebook and Instagram sponsored posts must follow a conceptual and design framework to compensate for the limited exposure time and users' lack of attention.

It is also known that information processing from different communication sources such as image and text, involves viewers to interact with the visual display in several complex ways. This might be a challenge for SMA marketers who try to integrate many visual elements into one dynamic, interactive display. For example, display comprehension refers to a combination of bottom-up and top-down cognitive processing. Heagarty (2011) describes a comprehensive inference model of factors which help viewers understand a visual display. Adapted from her model, the bottom-up features represent the external display (*what we see*).

Viewers interpret internally the external representation and visual cues as salient and task-relevant (shape, size and colour). The top-down stimuli refer to the goals, attention and domain (previous) knowledge that viewers utilize to understand the processes in a visual display. In the context of advertising, top-down features could entail, for example, brand familiarity, product involvement or source credibility.

So how do social media users perceive the information they see from brands in sponsored posts? They perceive it as the information they receive from any other user or Instagram sender. Bottom-up features interact with top-down elements to create an encoded message. The only difference with sponsored posts is that they are not organic; they have not been recommended by means of WoM (word-of mouth communication), but are rather a result of an algorithm. Sponsored posts also utilize the *call to action button* that additionally entices consumer-brand interactions. Consumers should decide whether the visual representation is an appealing incentive to stay focused on the post for more than the average incidental exposure time. It can be concluded that SMA is challenging in the sense that the structural organization of text, image and visual signals is key to ensuring viewers stay engaged. As a result, users' attitude towards sponsored posts and their purchase intentions are also affected.

4.3 Interaction between text position and call to action button in SMA

The conceptual framework of this study was based on a theoretical background and previous research. A discussion of the results and some implications are discussed in this section.

Text position

The main finding was that text position affects attitude towards the ad. For the main effect or for interaction with a type of button, text on image (integrated presentation) was found to score higher than text in caption (separated presentation). Although the results are explicit only for the *informative* attitude and ambiguous for the others, this outcome provides an insight into the design of sponsored posts. In his research on meaningful instructions Mayer (1989) found that labeled illustrations (a visual-spatial display with textual instructions next to it) enhance participants' focus attention on explanative information and help organize the information better than only verbal presentation. One interpretation on the findings of the current design study is that text in image on a sponsored social media post works better for attracting attention, because customers read the ad text and expect to be informed how they can reach the brand or

product. To be perceived as informative, a sponsored post should include the text before the action (text in image) followed by a visual signal (call to action button) which specifies the way to reach the company. This is indeed a relevant finding because it reveals an unexpected outcome: text position does not relate to the image in the sponsored ad as much as to the position and text of the call to action button that follows (or precedes).

As discussed in chapter 1.4, the cognitive theory of multimedia effects states that an integrated presentation facilitates learning and recall. However, according to the information delivery theory, an opposite argument claims that people should perform equally when exposed to an integrated as well as a separated presentation. Moreover, Mayer (2002) explains that the information theory loosely supports the idea that separated presentation yields higher scores among participants because they are essentially exposed to twice as much information as an integrated display. Therefore, separated presentation should be somewhat easier to perceive in terms of structure and content. They should also be perceived as more informative. The results of the current study state that there are indeed differences between text on image and text in caption but they are not definitive for all aspects of attitudes and intentions. Another explanation is that participants may evaluate text on image as more informative than text in caption simply because they are given the information straight away, in the same time and space.

Call to action button

The call to action button was the other design factor which yielded different ad appreciation and intention scores between *no button* and the three other buttons. The ranking task at the end of the experiment showed that participants had different appreciation for the three call to action buttons. For example, the least favored button *shop now* is the one that implies more of an imperative tone of voice. It is the most assertive and commanding one amongst all variations. This result is surprising because previous research on action buttons and clicking appeals claims that the imperative and exclamatory text framing are most likely to evoke a positive reaction towards the ad (Alaman, 2003). The reason behind this outcome might be that the other two buttons are less intrusive and invite people to first explore rather than go and buy products immediately. In the context of social media and native advertising, this approach is more applicable since users and potential consumers generally perceive sponsored posts as something that is not part of their personal "social news feed". Therefore, the less aggressive the copy text on the button, the more likely they are to click. However, as mentioned earlier, preference for a button is not predictive of effectiveness especially presented on its own. A

button's text is relevant only if combined with text position, either on image or caption. Contrary to the outcomes of the ordering task, the experimental results revealed that *shop now* was, in fact, more favoured than the three buttons especially when paired with ad text positioned beforehand (in the image).

In addition, the scores for buttons are also reflected in the purchase intentions and follow similar pattern as in the ad appreciations. It was found that call to action button interacting with text on image scored higher for the purchase intention "I feel invited to click" perhaps because presence of a call to action button affects respondents' intention to click compared to the absence of one.

Controls: message appeal, commodity and international background

The external validity and reliability of this study were ensured by including all relevant elements of an ad within the experimental design. A typical example of a display ad or an SMA post entails either a product or a service (type of commodity), and the ad text is presented with a certain message appeal (soft or hard sell). Furthermore, the sample of respondents was largely international and equally skilled to speak or understand English. Having been controlled for all these aspects, this study revealed outcomes that can be generalized to the population, and serve as a foundation for practical advice toward brands and communication professionals.7

Limitations and other factors affecting attitude and intentions

This research was executed as part of a master thesis on design in SMA posts. However, with the establishment and development of Web 3.0, social media are constantly changing and evolving. The layout and structure of a sponsored post today might differ from a sponsored post in the next five years. It is relevant to expand this design framework for both SMA and the general web advertising. The changing nature of social media is among the main challenges for a design study such as the current one.

Other possible constraints could be limited time and resources to investigate all confounding factors influencing the attitude and purchase intentions towards sponsored posts in SMS. In addition, considerations about the sample size and country of origin could have been a limitation. A larger sample with more geographically diverse participants could help avoid any bias in the results.

In terms of future research, other factors such as brand and product familiarity, attitude towards the brand, source credibility and consumer profile could be taken into consideration. These factors refer to the top-down features mentioned in the cognitive model of information

processing. Brand and product familiarity are related to domain knowledge which helps viewers make inferences about the visual display (Hegarty, 2011). Another study found prior knowledge and consumer profile to be moderating factors on the intention to click. Gauzente (2010) showed that previous experience with the brand and knowledge of the sponsored links affected consumer's decision making process: Internet users with positive previous experiences were more likely to click on the sponsored link. The author also argued that consumer profile, particularly of Internet browsers and e-shoppers, could also influence attitude and purchase intentions.

In addition, source credibility could be evaluated: is there a difference between different social media platforms for carrying out native advertising methods and to what extent do people deem those platforms trustworthy and relatable?

Furthermore, a comprehensive eye-tracking experiment on the design of sponsored posts would reveal phenomena that were not detected in the current experimental study. A possible topic for such a project could combine integrated and separated presentation, including different text-on-image positions (top, bottom, left/right). Mayer (2002) claims that transfer of information is facilitated when the visual display includes both integrated and separated presentations.

4.4 Practical implications and advice for brands

The results of this study are related to the field of social media advertising and communication design. The number of brands using SMA in Instagram and Facebook is rapidly growing therefore a general framework on the structure and design was needed. As mentioned, social media are constantly evolving and the structure of posts could change depending on the technological advances. However, it is advisable for brands to fully utilize the options given by social media to design, distribute and reach audiences.

This implies that: (1) the call to action button is one of the most essential elements of a sponsored post because the end-result of an ad is to evoke an action from the consumer; (2) text positioned on image would lead to more positive attitude towards the product and to higher purchase and click intentions than text positioned in caption; (3) combining both elements is important to attract viewers' attention and persuade them to click. A relevant takeaway for communication professionals is the advice to first present their core message (integrated

presentation) and then give consumers the option to "act" in the form of a call to action button. In addition, they should utilize a more direct appeal, such as the *shop now* button.

Furthermore, a new button text was used in this experiment, *"visit website"*. Currently, the button is not implemented within social media platforms. The results showed that this button was strongly favoured, therefore, it is suggested that *visit website* is introduced to social media sites and chosen by brands who advertise there. Finally, all these recommendations can be a foundation to answer the question – why don't people click?

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Appendix

1. Introduction text to online survey

Dear participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this online survey! Your input is important and I appreciate it very much.

This survey is part of a research I conduct for my Master thesis at Tilburg University. You will be asked questions in regard to Instagram sponsored advertising.

It will take approximately 5 minutes.

The collected data will be analyzed only for the purpose of this study. The survey is confidential and your answers will be anonymous.

Thank you! If you have any questions, please send them to

Iva Krasteva

Tilburg School of Humanities
Department for Communication and Information Sciences

2. Introduction text to experimental task

Imagine you are working for the company Mobile Arena. They sell mobile phones and services. You take care of their social media and online sales. Your task is to check their posts on social media.

You will see 4 Instagram sponsored posts and we ask you to answer the questions that follow each post.

You will see each Instagram post for 6 seconds.