

Words Meet Photos:*

When and Why Visual Content Increases Review Helpfulness

Gizem Ceylan¹, Kristin Diehl¹, and Davide Proserpio¹

¹University of Southern California

Is visual-verbal word-of-mouth more persuasive? If so, do consumers find communication more helpful when photos and text convey similar or different information? This paper examines the effect of photo-text similarity on review helpfulness and its underlying drivers. Using a dataset of 6.8M reviews including 3.3M photos from Yelp and applying state-of-the-art machine learning algorithms, we quantify the similarity of the content between text and photos. We find that it is not only the mere presence of a photo that increases helpfulness but also the similarity between the photo content and the review text. We replicate our main findings and examine the underlying drivers in two laboratory experiments. When the photos and text convey similar (vs. dissimilar) information, consumers find the review more helpful because 1) the information in the review becomes easier to process, and 2) quality inferences of the focal attribute are heightened. However, greater similarity 3) limits the total amount of information conveyed, reducing helpfulness. We find that drivers (1) and (2) outweigh (3). Therefore, the totality of these three distinct processes allows greater photo-text similarity to heighten persuasion. These findings provide novel insights into the persuasiveness of visual-verbal word-of-mouth and its underlying psychological drivers.

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 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3876-9312>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gizem Ceylan, Marketing Department, Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California, 3670 Trousdale Pkwy, Los Angeles, CA, 90089. Email: Gizem.ceylan.phd@marshall.usc.edu