

Human Image vs. Human Illustration in Social Media Advertising

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Type of manuscript: Extended abstract

Keywords: Human Image; Human Illustration; Customer Attitude; Purchase Intention; Social Media Advertising.

Extended abstract

Advertisers spare no effort to design attractive and reliable ads (Schnurr et al., 2017; Aribarg & Schwartz, 2020), in order to increase positive attitudes towards the ad and brand, hence enhance purchase intentions and buying behavior (Sharma et al., 2021).

Visual elements are crucial to the effectiveness of advertising (Bashirzadeh et al., 2022), and the presence of human depictions in these visuals enrich the desirable outcomes from ads (Li & Xie, 2020). In social media context, both representations of human images and illustrations are used (Heiser et al., 2008), however, it remains unclear which of these two types is more effective in generating positive behavioural responses, therefore, increasing firm-beneficial outcomes. Based on the above discussion, this study seeks to answer the following questions in social media advertising context:

- Which advertising type (human image vs. human illustration) produces higher levels of (a) interest, (b) enjoyment, (c) attractiveness, and (d) trustworthiness?
- How each one of these ad-triggered responses impact on attitudes towards the ad and brand, and purchase intention?

Figure 1 summarizes our research model and the proposed relations. To test the model, two experiments and one ad-based survey have been implemented. The experiments were used to demonstrate that the presence of a human image in social media ads triggers more interest and credibility (attractiveness and trustworthiness), while having the ads with human illustration produces higher levels of enjoyment. The two experiments also examined the mediating role of (a) interest, (b) enjoyment, (c) attractiveness, and (d) trustworthiness in the relationship between advertising type on the one side, and attitudes towards the ad and brand on the other.

The ad-based survey was conducted to reveal how the studied antecedents influence attitude types (towards the ad and brand), and how they contribute to increase the purchase intention. In the three studies, data were collected from real shoppers of a Portuguese online retail platform that provides delivery services on behalf of several brands including one of the most famous Portuguese supermarket chains. This retail platform relies on social media ads in communicating with current and potential customers.

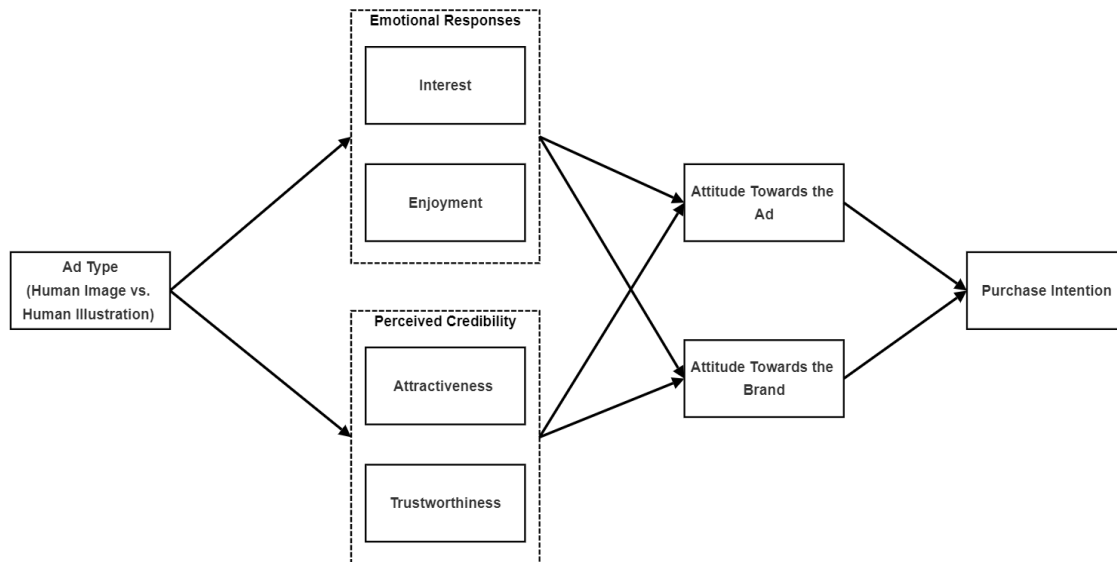


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

To test the proposed hypotheses, for the experiments, we used a series of t-tests, which allow the comparison between the two conditions being tested (Human Image and Human Illustration). While for the survey, we employed Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Our findings demonstrate that the presence of a Human Image in a social media ad triggers more interest and credibility compared to the presence of a Human Illustration, while the latter produces higher levels of enjoyment. However, the results also reveal that only interest and trustworthiness will enhance purchase intention; the first directly, and the latter directly and indirectly via the attitude towards the brand. Based on the findings, we discuss the theoretical contributions and provide managerial implications on how to design more effective social media ads. This includes suggesting the use of human images when purchase intention is the most desirable behavioral response, and the use of human illustrations when enjoying the customers is the desired result.

Acknowledgments: The first author is funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (through project UIDB/00731/2020).

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